



A Systematic Review of Strategies to Promote Successful Reunification and to Reduce Re-entry to Care for Abused, Neglected, and Unruly Children

Executive Summary of the Final Report
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Executive Summary

In 2003 the Children's Bureau (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) completed the first Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) to assess each state's outcomes for children and families served by their child welfare system and to monitor the state's ability to deliver services to families. During that review, Ohio was judged to be out of compliance on six outcome measures. Two of these are the focus of this report. The first focuses on the percentage of children who were successfully reunified with their parents within 12 months of out-of-home placement and the second measure addressed the percentage of children who re-entered out-of-home care within 12 months of reunification. Too few children were being reunified in a timely manner and too many were returning to placement after reunification.

This systematic review was completed to provide an analysis of the available empirical evidence on services to increase successful family reunification and on strategies to reduce re-entry to care. The search questions guiding the retrieval of relevant literature can be summarized as follows.

1. What interventions or "promising practices" appear to result in a) increasing successful family reunification and b) reducing re-entry to out-of-home care for abused, neglected, or unruly youth/children?
2. What factors are associated with successful family reunification and what factors are associated with re-entry to care?
3. What research is needed to develop more effective interventions for successful family reunification and to reduce re-entry to care following reunification?

The search of published and unpublished materials satisfying the inclusion criteria produced 800 articles for the initial review. Ultimately, 71 empirical articles (6 were of experimental or quasi-experimental studies) met all the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. To supplement the systematic review of the experimental and quasi-experimental studies, empirical literature such as correlational and qualitative research, and non-empirical, conceptual articles were also reviewed for relevant themes and variables for future research.

The limited number of rigorous research studies (experimental or quasi-experimental research) on reunification and re-entry to care made it impossible to draw definitive conclusions

on the effectiveness of existing reunification programs. However, an analysis of the entirety of the available empirical research identified numerous program models and factors that are associated with successful family reunification.

Some of the critical components of services to support successful reunification and to reduce re-entry include:

1. Pre-reunification Services

- Assess parental ambivalence about the reunification and reunification readiness similar to that included in the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale for Reunification (NCFAS-R) and address issues that are identified.
- Prepare a detailed service plan for families.
- Actively engage parents and involve parents in case planning; arrange regular contact between the parents and the child.
- Schedule regular home visits for the child.
- Identify family needs and match them with available community services prior to reunification.
- Provide parenting skills training to prepare parents to deal with behavioral difficulties exhibited by their child.
- Develop training programs for workers on how to engage parents.
- Work collaboratively with parents, children, kinship caregivers, and foster parents to prepare for reunification.

2. Reunification Services

- Offer intensive, in-home services (described earlier) with low worker to family ratios.
- Match services to client-identified needs for individualized programming.
- Offer multi-component services to address the complex issues presented by family reunification. These would include mental health services for the parents and children, stress management support, concrete services (housing, financial, job, transportation), substance abuse programs, counseling, and homemaker assistance.
- Anticipate family issues and provide preventive services based on pre-reunification assessments of family strengths and needs. Services should be in place at the time of reunification to prevent the need for re-entry to care.
- Provide special health care services for children with health needs such as respite care, nurses and aides, and social supports.
- Provide concrete services in an effort to minimize family stresses.
- Offer different services for families with children in care due to neglect than for families with children in care due to other types of abuse or dependency.

3. Reducing Re-entry to Care

- Use assessment tools, such as NCFAS-R, to determine the appropriateness of reunification and the best timing for reunification.
- Identify family factors that have been correlated with re-entry and provide specialized services. For example, develop programs for older youth who are reunifying as well as for parents with infants and young children.
- Introduce cognitive-behavior programs to deal with child behavior problems and train parents in the use of behavioral parenting methods.
- Maintain reunification services for at least 12 months after reunification.

4. Special Considerations for Unruly Children

- Work with courts to create expedited review processes.
- Deal with parental ambivalence about reunification with unruly child. Assist them in increasing ability to effectively manage the child's disruptive behaviors.
- Provide services similar to the Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care program in Oregon and work with parents and foster parents to implement a consistent behavior management program.

The review of existing research revealed a number of important gaps in the research. Some of the areas needing further research include:

- The role of fathers and methods to engage them in the reunification process
- Strategies to address the special needs of families dealing with unruly children and youth
- Rigorous evaluative research on reunification programs to establish causal links between program participation and successful reunification

The report concludes with suggestions for ways to use the best available evidence on reunification and re-entry to address these issues in Ohio.