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## REUNIFICATION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS: PATTERNS, INTERVENTIONS AND OUTCOMES

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### Aims and Research Design

The research aimed to investigate the patterns and outcomes of return home, the factors associated with successful returns and children's and parents' experiences of reunification. The study employed a prospective design to examine the outcomes of reunification through a two-year follow-up of a consecutive sample of 180 looked after children, aged 0-14, who were all returned home to parent/s during a one-year period (excluding children returned within 6 weeks). The sample was drawn from six local authorities and data collection was by means of an initial case file review during 2004-2005, followed by interviews with a sub-sample of 34 parents, 19 children and 22 social workers. At return 30% of the children were under 5, 21% 5-10 and half (49%) aged 10-14.

### Key Findings

#### Before Return

##### *Planning, Assessment and Service Provision*

The children who were voluntarily accommodated (60%) were significantly older than those who returned on Supervision, Interim or Care Orders. Assessment was linked to service provision and to return stability, but two fifths of the children returned to a parent without any in-depth assessment. Specialist professionals saw a third of the children and almost half of the parents before children returned and social workers conducted direct work with a fifth of the parents and children. Where no work was provided for any family member (23%), problems tended to persist into the return. A few young people (6%) absconded home or were removed soon after placement by parents dissatisfied with care; children whose initial plan was 'return home' (41%) were mostly accommodated and returned within 6 months. Younger children with a plan of 'time-limited assessment' (45%) were generally on Care Orders and took twice as long to get home. A few children (8%) returned to their parents, after an average of three years in care, because permanence plans outside the birth family had not eventuated.

## ***The Children's Pathways Home***

Whilst improvements in the family situation, or more rarely the child's behaviour, were the primary reason for half of the planned returns, pressures from the parent, child, placement or court accounted for over a quarter. Moreover, pressures for reunification were evident in three quarters of all the cases. When *children* pressed for reunification or their return was accelerated because of placement or other problems (often connected with difficult child behaviours and sometimes with absconding home) there were more return breakdowns. There was preparation for a third of the returns and a third of the children had been consulted about the return. There were significantly fewer return breakdowns when adequate preparation for return had been made and when care givers worked closely with the parents and/or children to bring about change and remained available after reunification (a fifth of cases). In practice, in only 26% of the cases had all the problems for the children and their parents been addressed prior to reunion. Often, issues which had the potential to jeopardise the success of the returns, remained unresolved or hidden (especially parental drug or alcohol problems or relationships with violent partners).

The Returns

### ***Household Composition***

There were fewer return disruptions when children moved to the other parent (10%) (who generally had fewer problems) or when there was a change in the parent's partner (26%).

### ***Services***

Over two fifths of the parents and children (aged 4+) received specialist services during the returns. Families with children on Care or Supervision Orders received the most support. Returns were significantly more stable when specialist help for the parent or child was provided, when reunification work by the social worker was proactive and purposeful and when other services, such as day care, were provided. Support from schools was also seen as important. There were many gaps in the services to support return, most notably insufficient assistance with behaviour management (especially in dealing with behaviourally challenging adolescents) and a lack of help for parents with substance misuse problems. As a result, some parents were caring for very disruptive or emotionally troubled children without any assistance.

## ***The Progress of the Returns***

Recurrence rates for substance misuse and associated issues (eg. financial difficulties and social isolation) were high. Almost half of the children (46%) were abused or neglected during the return, which was half the proportion of children maltreated prior to entering care (91%). Children of substance misusing parents were at high risk of being abused or neglected (78%); and a few (16%) children remained at home despite ongoing maltreatment. Difficult child behaviours were more likely to recur during return than be resolved.

By the end of the two-year follow-up period, almost half (47%) of the returns had broken down and it was of concern to note that a third of the ongoing returns appeared to be of poor quality. Many children (62%) were then returned home again and half of these returns also failed. In total, two-thirds (64%) of the children experienced at least one failed return and a third had oscillated in and out of care twice or more. After reunification, a third of the children were not close to either parent and a considerable number said, in interview, that they found things difficult at home, felt sad, confused or angry, yet a third had confided in no-one. They found oscillating between home and care a very negative experience.

### ***Factors Associated with Return Stability***

Return stability was associated with thorough assessment, conditions having been set, addressing all the problems that had led to care, providing adequate preparation for the return and good monitoring of children before and during return. These factors were most in evidence when children returned on Care Orders. Informal support was important, especially for the adolescent returns, whilst parental ambivalence, social isolation or previous failed returns were related to return breakdown. Children over the age of 10 and those with previous difficult behaviour had more return disruptions. Outcomes varied widely by local authority, particularly for the older children.

### ***Different Local Authority Policies and Practice***

There was considerable variation in the priority and resources given to reunification by the different authorities in the study and the return breakdown rates in our local authorities varied widely from a high of 75% of returns to a low of 32% (excluding those with small numbers);

similarly, success (or quality) rates varied from a high of 64% to a low of 10%. It appears then that different practices in different authorities lead to different outcomes. Local authority variations in practice were particularly apparent in relation to the outcomes for the *older* children, where practice appears to be especially variable across authorities.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

- Returns subject to scrutiny by the courts had high levels of assessment, monitoring and service and were more likely to succeed. A more structured approach to returns for accommodated children, combined with parenting support and behaviour management is needed.
  - There is a need for more targeted work with young people with behavioural and emotional problems during their placements and also more consistency in arranging tailored support and intervention packages for young people and their parents to help to make these returns work. The use of respite care and marshalling informal support for parents and young people might play an important part in maintaining some of these returns.
  - It would be useful if individual local authorities reviewed their reunification practice, especially with accommodated children, given the variation in success rates across the six authorities. The value of skilled and purposeful social work reunification practice requires recognition within authorities.
  - The concerns that had led to care had often not been addressed. Assessment and case planning need to specify from the outset what needs to change, over what timescales (having regard to children's developmental needs) before return is possible and how this is to be supported and monitored. The consequences and contingency plans if changes are not achieved need to be spelled out. Using written contracts which agree clear goals with parents and which are regularly reviewed can be useful, alongside the provision of tailored services addressing parents' and children's difficulties.
- More focus is needed on preparation for return. There are likely to be benefits if foster carers and residential workers could be more involved in preparing children and in providing follow-up support to them and to their parents after reunification. This is an area of practice that might usefully be further developed.
  - Reunification practice in cases where parents misuse alcohol or drugs needs to be reviewed, to introduce clear expectations that parents will be required to address their substance misuse before children are returned to them and that their use of substances will be closely monitored and reviewed before and during return. In addition, more access to treatment for parental substance misuse problems is required alongside more training for practitioners in how to work with substance misusing parents - substance misuse was related to higher levels of abuse and neglect, poor parenting and domestic violence during return.
  - Standards during the return need to be agreed and regularly reviewed with action being taken when children's quality of life at home becomes unsatisfactory or when they oscillate between home and care. Not taking such action involves considerable 'costs' to the well-being and future prospects of the children concerned.
  - Overall, reunification needs to be given greater priority on the policy agenda of government and local authorities and more focus in social work education and practice.

## **Additional Information**

The full report of the research will be published in book form by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Further information about this research can be obtained from Isabella Craig, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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*The views expressed in this summary are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.*