



Caseworkers' insights and experiences with successful reunification

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ABSTRACT

The decision to reunify children with their birth parents is one of the most significant decisions that caseworkers have to make in the child welfare arena. These decisions can dramatically affect the lives of children and families. Therefore, it is essential to understand reunification from the caseworkers' perspectives. The current study presents findings from a survey of child welfare caseworkers' experiences with reunifications and focuses on practices and key factors at the casework practice and at the system-environment level to assist in achieving successful reunification. The survey includes a series of statements related to successful reunification and open-ended questions. A sample of 284 caseworkers completed an online survey about their experience with reunification. Descriptive and thematic analyses were performed to analyze the caseworkers' responses. Almost all the caseworkers believed that the most important factors to ensure successful reunification is child safety, as well providing services and support to the birth family. Thematic analysis reveals several practices and key factors to assist in achieving successful reunification, including: the child's and the parents' willingness and readiness to reunify, successfully addressing the initial issues that led to separation, the child and the parents participation in the process, a quality relationship between the caseworker and the birth family, and the importance of providing services and support. However, caseworkers highlight some barriers regarding their work with substance abuse and mental health families, caseload size and the agency's requirement for lengthy documentation and paperwork. The study suggests supporting the need for caseworkers to find strategies to engage in a collaborative effort with the birth parents to work toward reunification, as well providing and allocating more resources, services, and funding to the child welfare system will help to promote reunification.

1. Introduction

One of the main goals of the child welfare system is to reduce the amount of time a child is in foster care before reunification, without increasing the likelihood of reentry into the system. Reunification is the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their birth families, and it is the preferred permanency plan for children in care. Reunification is considered to be timely if it occurs both in less than 12 months from the date of entry into foster care and without increasing reentry (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (ACYF, ACF), 2014; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). In 2014, many children (69%, national median) discharged to reunification were reunified in a timely manner (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (ACYF, ACF), 2014).

Federal child welfare statutes specify family reunification as the first choice for permanency. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA, 1997) requires timely permanency

planning for children and emphasizes that the child's safety is the paramount concern. The federal policy also requires that state agencies make "reasonable efforts" to help parents address the problems that led to the removal of their child.

The decision to reunify children with their birth parents is one of the most significant decisions that caseworkers have to make in the child welfare arena. These decisions can dramatically affect the lives of children and families (Biehal, Sinclair, & Wade, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to understand reunification from the caseworkers' perspectives and to explore how caseworkers can assist in achieving successful reunification. The current study presents findings from a survey of child welfare caseworkers' experiences with reunifications and focuses on practices and key factors at the casework practice and at the system-environment level to assist in achieving successful reunification.

2. Literature review

According to ecological developmental theory, a child develops within a series of multiple, nested social systems beginning with direct

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interaction with the family and extending through indirect influence from the community, society, and cultural traditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979). Landers and Danes (2016) explained that: “as ecological systems theory applies to families in child welfare, children and parents are seen as embedded within the parent-child dyad, within the family system as a whole, within their child welfare case, within the child welfare system, within their particular cultural and social context, within their neighborhood and surrounding community” (p.139). Similarly, the reunification process includes multiple levels and reflects an interaction between the individuals (child, parents, family) and varying systems (caseworkers, agencies, communities, and court systems) (Akin, 2011).

Many previous studies have examined characteristics of the child, parent, or family (Farmer & Wijedasa, 2012; Grant et al., 2011; Landers & Danes, 2016; Murphy & Fairtlough, 2015), and placement episode (Akin, 2011; D'Andrade, 2009) as predictors of successful reunification. While caseworkers may have no impact on the child and family characteristics, they can be deeply involved with the birth parents and can employ various practices to promote successful reunification (Berrick, Cohen, & Anthony, 2011; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

2.1. The caseworker's responsibilities toward reunification

As families make progress toward reunification, caseworkers have to use their knowledge of the case and the assessment tools available to them to assess the family's needs and strengths. The caseworkers have to assess the child's safety and the family's capacity to provide a safe environment to the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). They have to involve the family members in the case planning process (Cole & Caron, 2010), to arrange child–parent–family visits (D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012), to engage with the family by taking an active role in the process (Àngels-Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea, 2015; Cheng, 2010), to provide appropriate support services to meet the child and family needs (Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, & Austin, 2013), and to promote collaboration between the agency, court, and service providers (D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012).

Reunification is a process that includes careful preparation, intervention, and follow-up care (Ankersmit, 2016). A high level of motivation (Keddell, 2011) and an effective collaboration between the child, the birth parents, the caseworkers, and other service providers, can assist in promoting successful reunification (Cole & Caron, 2010).

The following literature review summarizes findings of quantitative and qualitative studies. The review presents practices and key factors that have been found to assist in successful reunification and primarily focuses on the casework practice and on the system level.

2.2. Key factors at the casework practice level

2.2.1. The caseworker's ability to work together with the birth parents in an open and honest working relationship

Studies indicated that one of the keys for successful reunification is the caseworker's engagement with and establishing of an open and honest relationship with the birth parents (Cole & Caron, 2010; Yatchmenoff, 2005). In a longitudinal study, Cheng (2010) examined how caseworker's engagement with families affected reunification for 411 children who had spent at least 3 years in foster care. The study was based on the National Survey of Children and Adolescent Well-Being. The caseworker engagement with family was measured by the: “degree to which, in his or her own estimation, a caseworker effectively engaged a caregiver's active, positive participation in the helping process. This measure constituted the social worker's total score for 3 interview items: ‘How confident are you that you have been able to maintain good relationships with members of this family?’; ‘How confident are you that you helped this child and family get the services they need?’; and ‘How confident are you that you have assisted this family in achieving the goals they identified?’” (p. 1313). Findings indicated that an exit to

reunification was positively associated with the caseworker engagement with family. In an analysis of 305 closed cases the findings suggested that intense work and co-operation between the caseworker and the birth family was one of the strongest association with the family reunification (Lopez, DelValle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013).

Similarly, findings from qualitative studies also support the importance of the relationship between the caseworker and the birth parents. In Cole and Caron's (2010) study with 12 social workers, researchers found that being able to work together with the parents in an open and honest working relationship made a difference between successful and unsuccessful reunification. Talbot (2008) conducted a qualitative study with 12 Master's level social work practitioners who had experience with successfully reunified families in child welfare practice. Establishing a trusting relationship with the birth parents was an important component in the reunification process. More support for this finding can be found in the studies of Keddell (2011) and Saint-Jacques, Drapeau, Lessard, and Beaudoin (2006). An effective relationship motivates the birth parents to cooperate with other service providers and to receive more support (Ankersmit, 2016; Yampolskaya, Armstrong, Strozier, & Swanke, 2017; Yatchmenoff, 2005).

2.2.2. Assessment, case planning, and the parents' participation

Caseworkers are required to assess the needs and the strengths of children and families. One of the caseworker's responsibilities is to develop a case planning with the birth parents that addresses the initial issues that led to removal and to ensure that the child can be reunified with them safely (Cole & Caron, 2010). A case planning typically includes requirements such as attending agency meetings, attending parenting classes, addressing alcohol and substance abuse issues, making child support payments, and planning child's visitation (Coakley, 2013).

Parental involvement in child welfare cases affects the likelihood of a successful reunification. A study of 60 foster care cases was conducted to examine the influence of father involvement on children's permanency outcomes. When fathers were involved, their children have shorter lengths of stay in foster care and they were more likely to be reunited with their birth family (Coakley, 2013). Also, Leathers (2002) found that mothers' involvement in case reviews and activities increased the odds for reunification. Qualitative studies also support the importance of the parents' participation in multiple services as making the difference between successful and unsuccessful reunification (Cole & Caron, 2010; Talbot, 2008).

2.2.3. Children's regular visits with parents and siblings

Frequent and regular parent–child visits help children and parents maintain continuity of their relationships, improve relationships, and help them prepare to reunite. Regular parental visits for children in foster care are associated with increased rates of reunification (Carnochan et al., 2013; Chambers, Brocato, Fatemi, & Rodriguez, 2016). Visits should be used to build and to practice parental capacity, as well as to give the caseworkers opportunities to assess family progress (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Talbot (2008) highlighted the importance of frequent in-home visits of the birth parents by the caseworker as ongoing intervention that enable the caseworker to assess the family and assist in successful reunification.

2.3. Key factors at the system and the environment level

2.3.1. Services delivery

Research indicates that receipt and use of services by the birth family is a major component in successful reunification (Cheng & Li, 2012; Murphy & Fairtlough, 2015). Foster children are much more likely to achieve permanency when their birth families receive services that match their actual family needs (Cheng, 2010). Targeted services might include concrete services as housing services and cash assistance (Cheng & Li, 2012), substance abuse treatment (Choi & Ryan, 2007),

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