

Child Welfare Information Brief

Family Reunification

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Introduction

Family reunification is the process of bringing together children and families when their children have been temporarily placed in out-of-home care. The goal is to help each child and family achieve and maintain an optimal level of connection, from full re-entry to other forms of contact, such as visiting, that affirm the child's membership in the family.¹

Reunification practice is guided by the knowledge that children form deep and lasting connections to their families and that separation from family is always traumatic. Timely reunification recognizes that a child's sense of time is far different than that of an adult—for young children a few days or weeks feel like an eternity—and honors the child's need to stay connected to family, as well as to be safe and develop secure attachments.

Background

The goal of the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) is to reunify children with their parents whenever safely possible. In FFY 2021, 50% of all exits from custody in Maine were to reunification while 44% were to adoption or permanency guardianship. This is in line with the national average for reunification which hovers around 50%. Maine's current rate of reunification is a significant increase from Federal Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018 when 45% and 43% of exits were to reunification.²

While children are in custody, OCFS has a statutory obligation to place them with family members whenever possible. National data indicates on average nationwide around 35% of children in state custody are placed with relatives. Maine exceeds the national average with 41% of children in care placed in kinship care.²

Reunification is a central tenet of permanency planning, a concept that evolved in the 1970's when it was observed that too many children were adrift in foster care. Children and youth were experiencing multiple placements, and limited work was being done with families to resolve the problems that brought them

Family Stories and Reunification Resources

Youth Connections to Family
[New York Times Article](#)

How Two Maine Moms Reunified
[Bangor Daily News Article](#)

Being Gina
[Institute for Family Video](#)

National Association of Social Workers (NASW) [Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare](#)

Child Welfare Information Gateway
[Reunifying Families](#)

Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States
[Out-of-Home Services](#)

Reunification really starts at assessment. Caseworkers and service providers need to have ongoing conversations with parents and identify what's really going on for the family. What brought child welfare into their lives may not be the underlying issue.

– Family Service Provider

to the attention of the child welfare system.³ Of particular concern was the number of children and youth in care who had lost touch with their birth families for years, sometimes for a lifetime, and often felt alone as they approached adulthood. At the same time, some families had improved their situations and could have resumed parenting if they had been given the opportunity.

Permanency planning is intended to limit entry into, and time spent in, out-of-home care. Rooted in the philosophy that children have a right to be part of a permanent family, permanency planning focuses first on supporting and

strengthening families to prevent unnecessary removal. As noted by Maine's OCFS:

"...the evidence overwhelmingly shows that removing a child from their home has the potential to inflict harm or trauma. In addition, there is little research to support the belief that, in general, children who enter state custody are safer than they would be if they had remained in the home with efforts undertaken to address safety concerns. There are numerous scholarly articles regarding the potential harm of removal."⁴

If safe reunification is not possible after diligent efforts have been made and relevant treatment and supportive services provided, alternate permanency plans must be made and implemented. The goal is to ensure that children and youth who are not able to fully reunify with family still experience continuity of relationships through kinship guardianship, open adoption, and other permanent family arrangements that provide a sense of community and belonging.

Federal law codifies the importance of preventing unnecessary placement and reunifying children with their families, first in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980), later in the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), and most recently in the Families First Prevention and Services Act (2018). As a result, laws in all states and territories require child welfare agencies to make reasonable efforts to safely keep the child with their family, and to safely reunify if the child has already been removed, with their family.

People want to be good parents. Sometimes you don't realize how much attention is being pulled away from being the parent you want to be. Maybe you've had mental health issues your whole life and you've been okay but now it flares up and you're a single mom and it's unmanageable. – Kinship Caregiver

Challenges

Families who come to the attention of child welfare are facing many complex challenges—poverty, lack of housing, food insecurity, as well as mental health and substance use issues. These challenges have been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 on families and communities. Almost half (47%) of Maine families assessed by child protective services in 2020 were single parent households experiencing economic stressors.⁵ In 2020, the risk factors for maltreatment with the greatest prevalence were neglect, domestic violence, and drug/alcohol use.⁵ Notably, findings of neglect and emotional abuse were most often associated with parental substance use.⁵ Reunification may take longer in cases where these issues are present and some parents are unable to meaningfully engage in services in a time frame that ensures safety and permanency for their children. In those cases, alternate permanency plans must be pursued for the children. While such challenges lead to difficult conditions for many Maine families, with help, many parents can and do make needed change and reunify successfully with their children.

Role of the Legal System

The legal system, including the courts, Guardians ad Litem, and attorneys who represent parents, play a critical role in the child welfare system, particularly as it relates to reunification. A court order is required to remove a child from the care and custody of their parent(s). From that point forward, the case is subject to regular monitoring by the courts, including approval for a trial home placement and/or reunification. Guardians ad Litem represent the best interest of children in child protection proceedings. Most parents in child protection proceedings have court-appointed counsel who represent their interests, including advocating for reunification and appropriate services to enable reunification. While OCFS is responsible for leading the reunification process, court approval is required to reunify a family. Parents' attorneys, department attorneys, and Guardians ad Litem each play an important role in the court process and are vital to ensuring child safety, permanency, and wellbeing and an informed, due process for their families.

Best Practice

When children must be removed from homes due to safety concerns, the first goal is to reunite them with their families as soon as safely possible. This begins with a comprehensive family assessment documenting child and family strengths, needs, and challenges, and the development of a service plan outlining what the family will do and how the agency and others will assist the family in addressing the concerns.⁷ Additional elements of effective practice include:

Listen to people who have been through it. Challenge your assumptions.

– Reunified Parent

- Well-trained and supported staff who have sufficient time to engage families, build helping relationships based on mutual trust and respect, and tailor interventions to each family's circumstances and cultural connections
- Clear policy guidelines and an agency culture that values reunification practice
- Regular and frequent visits among family members and with the worker
- A range of supportive services that address family needs including home visiting, housing, child care, food and employment assistance, and parenting education
- Access to intensive services including family-centered mental health services, substance use disorder treatment, in-home training, and family therapy
- Resource families and individuals with lived experience, such as [Parent Partners](#), who can support parents and children as they work to acquire new skills and gain family stability
- Meaningful inclusion of the family and youth in planning and decision-making
- Trained and attentive court professionals who prioritize child welfare cases, including competent representation for parents by court-appointed counsel and for children by Guardians ad Litem
- Purposeful collaboration among the agencies—both public and private—that serve children and families, including interagency protocols that minimize cross-system barriers and streamline communication

Research and the experiences of children and families have shown that children grow best in their own families.⁴ When children are not safe, we must do everything we can to strengthen their families to ensure their safety. When children must be separated from their families, we should strive to safely reunify them. State funding, policy, legislative and administrative efforts must focus on ensuring best practice, delivering services that prevent unnecessary child removal, and encouraging safe and timely reunification.

References

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- ¹ Pine, B.A.; Warsh, R.; and Maluccio, A.N., eds. Together Again: Family Reunification in Foster Care, Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1993, 6.
- ² Maine DHHS, OCFS, [Child Welfare Annual Report 2021](#)
- ³ Greenblatt, S.B.; and Day, P. Renewing Our Commitment to Permanency for Children: Wingspread Conference Summary Report, Washington DC: Child Welfare League of America, 2000, 5.
- ⁴ Maine DHHS, OCFS, Response to the Maine Child Welfare Ombudsman’s 2021 Annual Report, December 30, 2021. References cited: Trivedi, S. (2019). “The Harm of Child Removal.” New York University Review of Law & Social Change 43, 523. Shankaran, V., Church, C. and Mitchell, M. (2019). “A Cure Worse Than the Disease? The Impact of Removal on Children and Their Families.” Marq. L. Rev. 102(4), 1163-94.
- ⁵ Maine DHHS, OCFS, [Child Welfare Annual Report 2020](#).
- ⁶ [Maine Fact Sheet for Grandfamilies](#), Retrieved December 2021.
- ⁷ Family-Centered Reunification in Child Welfare: A Review of Best Practices (2021), National Quality Improvement Center on Family-Centered Reunification. www.qicfamilyreunification.org.

The information in this brief was compiled by the Maine Child Welfare Action Network, a group of organizations and individuals who are deeply committed to the safety and well-being of all children, youth, and families in Maine.

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