Issues relating to reunification

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When a child is removed from the care of their parents and placed in out-of-home care, the primary service goal is typically to reunify the child with their natural parents (Tsang, Leibowitz, Spence, & Scott, 2005). Consequently, in the first instance, the department will attempt to engage all parties (including the child, the child's natural parents, and the child's current carer/s) in meaningful contact, with a view to assisting families to change and enable the child to safely return to his or her family. Where reunification is not possible, more permanent, consistent and stable alternative care options may be pursued to support and provide for the child's safety and developmental, emotional and physical needs. One of the most difficult decisions for practitioners in this field is deciding when and if it is in a child's best interests to be returned to their parents after being removed. Given the philosophical approach to practice that gives preference to family reunification, issues related to reunification are an important area of research in Australia.

Aim

In this paper, we aim to:

- summarise what we know from Australian research about the issues relating to reunification;
- assess the quality of the evidence base; and
- identify future research needs.

For each of the studies identified, a review was conducted describing the study's aim, methodology and key findings, and identifying any particular strengths or limitations that would affect whether the study findings could be generalised to a wider context. In this paper, the findings from this review are summarised to provide an overall picture of the Australian evidence base on issues relating to reunification. For a detailed description of each individual study review, see the tables in the Appendix.

What research was reviewed?

Eight Australian research studies on the issues relating to reunification that were completed between 1996 and 2006 and were publicly available, were reviewed. (For more information on how Australian research was identified, see Bromfield & Osborn, 2007. For papers on other topic areas, go to www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/menu.html#research.)

These studies have been grouped into three sub-themes:

- factors associated with reunification;
- family contact for children in care; and
- experiences of parents of children in care.

Factors associated with reunification

Given the emphasis in policy and practice on achieving reunification, it is crucial to understand those factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of a child being reunified with their natural families. Such information would allow practitioners to identify those children and families most suitable for reunification and to focus efforts on those factors that may increase the likelihood of the child returning home and decrease the amount of time the child spends in care.

The studies

Only two of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on the factors associated with reunification. They were:

1. Barber, Delfabbro, and Cooper (2000), "Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Children in Out-of-Home Care" (see Appendix, page 2).
2   Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2003), "Predictors of Short-Term Reunification in South Australian Substitute Care" (see Appendix, page 4).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding the factors associated with reunification?

There were only two Australian studies on factors associated with reunification, both of which were based on the sample of children in the South Australian Longitudinal Study. This study has been identified previously as having a rigorous methodology and findings that can thus be generalised to other groups (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007). However, a single sample does not constitute a sufficient evidence base on which to base policy or practice decisions. Barber et al. (2000) further cautioned that findings from the analysis of differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the sample may not be able to be used for generalisations, given the differences in group sizes and the small sample of Aboriginal children studied.

What do we know about the factors associated with reunification?

Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2003) examined the factors that contribute to short-term reunification in South Australian foster care. Children whose parents had some form of incapacity (e.g., physical or mental illness) were significantly more likely to be reunified with their parents than other children. It is not clear from the research why parental capacity was associated with reunification—perhaps parental incapacity is able to be redressed through the provision of appropriate supports, thus enabling children to safely return home. However, findings also indicated that for children living in rural areas, Aboriginal children and those children who were victims of neglect, reunification was significantly less likely to occur. The results revealed that 60% of reunifications could be predicted based on three factors: ethnicity, neglect and parental incapacity.

> **60% of reunifications can be predicted based on three factors: ethnicity, neglect and parental incapacity.**

Delfabbro and colleagues (2003) proposed that further understanding of predictors of reunification in substitute care may allow for an understanding of what factors contribute to successful reunification and the potential allocation of time and resources for those cases that are least likely to achieve reunification. Through the analysis of individual cases, the authors found that in more than 40% of cases children were reunified due to their mothers' improved ability to cope.

> **In 40% of cases, children are reunified due to their mothers' improved ability to cope.**

In another study, Barber, Delfabbro, and Cooper (2000) aimed to examine the differences and similarities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in care. The sample comprised 38 Aboriginal and 198 non-Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. Significant differences were found between the children. Findings indicated that Aboriginal children from Adelaide metropolitan areas and non-Aboriginal children from rural areas in South Australia experienced the longest periods of time in alternative care. Based on their findings, Barber and colleagues recommended a greater focus on family reunification for these particular groups of children.

> **Aboriginal children from metropolitan areas and non-Aboriginal children from rural areas experience the longest periods of time in alternative care.**

What future research is needed regarding the factors associated with reunification?

Further research is needed to identify those factors that increase the likelihood of a child being reunified with their natural families and decrease the amount of time spent in care. Research of this nature is urgently needed to be carried out in jurisdictions other than South Australia. Although the South Australian Longitudinal Study was methodologically rigorous, South Australia's population is largely situated in the metropolitan area and immediate surroundings. Further research is required to investigate factors associated with reunification in other states and territories, with different geographies and population distributions. Further research is also required that compares Indigenous and non-Indigenous services that coordinate family contact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in placements and that controls for the distance between the locations of the children's families and their placements. Longitudinal methodologies are also required, as these would enable researchers to investigate not only those children who are more likely to be returned home, but also the characteristics of children who do and do not have further contact with child protection services following reunification.

Family contact for children in care

Family contact is an important aspect of case planning for children in out-of-home care, and has long been viewed as one of the key factors linked with reunification. For example, under the Looking After Children framework, children whose case plan goal is reunification have frequent family contact, while children whose case plan goal is permanent placement in out-of-home care have increasingly less frequent family contact.

The studies

Three of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on family contact. They were:
1. Ainsworth and Maluccio (2002), "Siblings in Out-of-Home Care: Time to Rethink?" (see Appendix, page 1).
2. Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2002), "Children Entering Out-of-Home-Care in South Australia: Baseline Analyses for a 3-Year Longitudinal Study" (see Appendix, page 3).
3. Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2003), "Predictors of Short-Term Reunification in South Australian Substitute Care" (see Appendix, page 4).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding family contact for children in care?

Two of the three studies drew on data from the first phase of the South Australian Longitudinal Study (Delfabbro et al., 2002, 2003). As stated previously, while this study was methodologically rigorous, a single sample does not constitute a sufficient evidence base on which to make policy and practice decisions. The third study was a critical analysis rather than a piece of primary

research. Ainsworth and Maluccio (2002) identified some critical issues for sibling placement in Australia. However, they do not yet constitute an adequate evidence base.

What do we know about family contact for children in care?

What types of children have contact?

In their research concerning the role of parental contact, Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2002) identified that non-Aboriginal children were more likely to have family contact compared with children from an Aboriginal background. Children from metropolitan areas were more likely to receive indirect/telephone contact from their parents than rural children. These findings may be related to the higher costs of long-distance calls. Findings also showed that children who scored higher on a measure of hyperactivity were less likely to receive family contact.

> **Family contact is less likely for children from rural areas, children of Aboriginal background, and children who score higher on a measure of hyperactivity.**

Is family contact associated with reunification?

Using data from the South Australian Longitudinal Study, with a sample of 235 South Australian foster children entering care over a 12-month period (May 1998 – April 1999), Delfabbro et al. (2002) found that at least one form of regular parental contact (for example, telephone/indirect contact) was positively associated with family reunification and negatively associated with the amount of time a child remains in care.

> **At least one form of regular parental contact can increase the likelihood of family reunification and decrease the amount of time a child remains in care.**

In a further study, Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2003) examined the factors that contribute to short-term reunification in South Australian foster care. The study specifically looked at the first four months of care, as previous research showed children who are in frequent contact with their parents in the earlier months of placement have a higher probability of being reunified with their families. The analyses revealed that non-Aboriginal children and those placed because of parental incapacity were significantly more likely to go home compared with neglected children and Aboriginal children.

Does family contact have a positive or negative impact on children in care?

Delfabbro et al. (2002) reported that the majority of caseworkers regarded family contact positively, but that a significant minority (approximately 15% to 20%) believed that it was not beneficial and had a negative impact on the parent–child relationship.

> **The majority of caseworkers regard family contact positively.**

Delfabbro and colleagues (2002) argued that the relationship between variations in family contact and other outcomes is not straightforward. The relationship between the level of family contact and reunification appears correlational rather than causative. Children who are in frequent contact with their parents are more likely to go home. However, it is very likely that both contact and reunification owe their connection to other factors. These factors may include children being better adjusted and/or having a good relationship with their parents and so tending to remain in contact and being more likely to go home. Limitations identified by the authors suggest that the family contact measures used in this research may not have been sufficiently refined to assess the complexity of family contact arrangements, and the study period may not have been long enough to observe changes in family relationships.

> **It is very likely that both contact and reunification owe their connection to other factors. For example, children who are better adjusted or have a good relationship with their parents tend to remain in contact and are more likely to go home.**

Sibling placement

Thus far in this paper, discussion of family contact has centred on contact between children in care and their parents. However, family contact may also refer to contact between children in care and their siblings or members of their extended family. In addition to increasing the likelihood of reunification, family contact is thought to have a positive impact on the sense of identity and connection that children in care have. One mechanism for maintaining children's family networks while in care is to place sibling groups who have been removed from their families together. There has been no primary research investigating the issue of sibling placement in Australia. However, Ainsworth and Maluccio (2002) did complete a critical analysis from an Australian perspective of UK and US research concerning sibling placement.

Broadly, international research shows that keeping siblings together has a number of benefits: it confirms the child's membership of the family, maintains sibling ties, is important for family connectedness and wellbeing, promotes social skills, and can provide a source of emotional and social support. The international research also identifies circumstances where siblings should be placed separately; for example where violence, emotional abuse and/or sibling incest is present (Ainsworth & Maluccio, 2002). There are some issues related to sibling placement that require further exploration, such as identifying who is a sibling where de facto relationships and remarriage has resulted in blended families. Another identified difficulty for welfare agencies is the practical problem of placing sibling groups of three or more.

Ainsworth and Maluccio (2002) indicated that placement of siblings together is encouraged at both the practice and legislation level in the UK and the US, whereas it has not yet been thoroughly addressed in Australian state and territory legislation.

> **Sibling placement has been formally encouraged in legislation in the US and UK. In Australia, sibling placement has not been adequately addressed in Australian legislation.**

There is a lack of data in Australian state and territory child care and protection agency reports regarding information about whether a child has a sibling in care and whether they are placed together or separately. The lack of data may have contributed to limited attention being given to the importance of sibling placement. Ainsworth and Maluccio (2002) indicated that it is time to rethink Australian out-of-home care for sibling groups and provide a new service structure to accommodate sibling placements.

> **There is a lack of Australian data regarding the placement of sibling groups, which may have contributed to the limited attention given to this issue in Australia.**

What future research is needed regarding family contact for children in care?

It appears that regular family contact can increase the likelihood of a child being reunified and decrease the length of time a child spends in care. However, the relationship between the level of family contact and reunification appears correlational rather than causative and it is very likely that both contact and reunification owe their connection to other factors (such as the existing parent–child relationship). Further research is needed to untangle the issues of contact and reunification to determine those conditions under which family contact is to be encouraged, either because it increases the likelihood of reunification or improves the outcomes for the child. In order to inform policy and practice, research is also needed to identify the conditions under which family contact may be detrimental to the child. The issue of sibling placement has received very little attention in Australia, and research is needed in this area.

Experiences of parents of children in care

There has been limited research concerning the natural parents of children in out-of-home care, both here in Australia and internationally. Although the experiences of parents may not be directly related to reunification, children and young people in care do frequently return to their families of origin through formal reunification procedures, or informally after leaving care as young adults. Attention to the experiences of parents may better equip them to make personal changes to better equip them for the role of carer.

The studies

Five of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on the experiences of parents of children in care:

1. Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2003), "Predictors of Short-Term Reunification in South Australian Substitute Care" (see Appendix, page 4).
2. Fernandez (1996), *Significant Harm: Unravelling Child Protection Decisions and Substitute Care Careers of Children* (see Appendix, page 5).
3. MacKinnon, (1998), *Trust and Betrayal in the Treatment of Child Abuse* (see Appendix, page 6).
4. O'Neill (2005), "Christmas Without the Kids: Losing Children Through the Child Protection System" (see Appendix, page 7).
5. Scott and Honner (2003), *The Most Enduring of Relationships: Engaging Families Who Have Children in Substitute Care* (see Appendix, page 8).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding the experiences of parents of children in care?

Research into the experiences of parents has largely comprised small sample qualitative studies, perhaps reflecting the difficulties of accessing and engaging this very marginalised group. The report by Scott and Honner (2003) did not contain sufficient description of the study methodology to assess the quality of the research. However, the remaining studies were adequately described and appeared to be methodologically sound.

What do we know about the experiences of parents of children in care?

How does removal impact on birth parents of children in out-of-home care?

Fernandez (1996) conducted interviews with 115 parents with children in out-of-home care, with findings revealing that the parents felt a sense of powerlessness, alienation and sadness. Similarly, O'Neill (2005) investigated the experiences of ten parents in Victoria of losing their children through the child protection system. One of the main issues reflected in the interviews was the parents' sense of loss and despair after having their children removed. They also commented on the loss of their role as being a parent.

> **Parents experience a sense of powerlessness, alienation, sadness, loss and despair after having their children removed.**

In a study with 44 families involved with both child protection services and therapeutic services in NSW (in some of which children had been removed), MacKinnon (1998) reported that parents found involvement with child protection both threatening and confusing. These feelings were often transferred to the therapists if clients were ordered to therapy or reluctantly accepted a referral.

> **Parents find involvement with child protection both threatening and confusing.**

In a paper discussing a group work model for engaging with natural parents, Thomson and Thorpe (2003) reported that parents are overtly excluded from out-of-home care services in Australia and that there is no formal group to advocate for them.

> **Parents experience overt exclusion from out-of-home care services in Australia.**

What responses are needed for parents of children in out-of-home care?

MacKinnon (1998) reported that an engagement model for working with parents involved with child protection services (some of whom had children removed) was found to contribute to enhanced therapeutic relationships. However, MacKinnon cautioned, "therapists who work with parents who have abused walk a fine line. If therapists lean too far to one side and thereby invoke judgment and social control, they risk alienating parents and losing the opportunity for therapeutic change. If therapists lean too far to the other side and do not invoke social control when necessary, therapy is potentially dangerous and risks colluding with physical and emotional damage to a child" (p. 5). In a paper discussing these issues specifically in relation to parents of children in out-of-home care, Thorpe (2002) reiterated these sentiments, arguing that the challenge for caseworkers is to ensure parents are involved in planning and decision-making about their children in care, while at the same time ensuring the safety of the child and not compromising the placement stability.

> **The challenge for caseworkers is to ensure parents are involved, while at the same time ensuring the safety of the child and not compromising placement stability.**

Fernandez (1996) argued that the "authoritarian" approach of some child welfare workers is inappropriate given the history of adversity experienced by many families. O'Neill (2005) commented that what these parents need from professionals is "for their stories to be heard without blame; to be consulted about their children's future; and to be offered the possibility of meeting up with parents who have similar experiences" (p. 17). Similarly, Scott and Honner (2003) advocated engaging and developing positive working relationships with natural families to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in care. Fernandez also advocated a more participatory empowerment-oriented practice for supporting parents of children in out-of-home care. Delfabbro, Barber, and Cooper (2003), in their South Australian research concerning the predictors of short-term reunification, highlighted the importance of providing ongoing support and services to parents of children in care.

> **There is a need for ongoing support and services for parents of children in care.**

Thomson and Thorpe (2003, 2004) discussed the importance of group work as a method for engaging and encouraging parents to maintain contact with their children and work towards personal change and family reunification. The authors briefly drew on an example of group work with parents that was conducted in the non-government sector.

> **Methods that engage, encourage and empower parents may assist them to maintain contact with their children and work towards personal change and family reunification.**

The findings from these studies into the experiences of parents of children in care provide insight into a group that is often vilified and not often given a chance to voice their experiences of having their children removed by the child protection system.

What future research is needed regarding the experiences of parents of children in care?

Research shows that parents of children in care experience a range of negative emotions, including loss, despair, alienation and powerlessness. Thomson and Thorpe (2004) identified the need for further documentation and understanding of parents' characteristics and experiences.

They suggested that future research priorities concerning parents with children in care should include examining the impact of child loss and grief, studying attachment and children's relationships with their parents, and analysing parent–worker interactions in child welfare.

Researchers have theorised that better engagement and support of parents may assist them to maintain family contact, make personal changes and ultimately improve the likelihood of reunification. Further research is needed to identify whether better engagement and support of parents can improve the outcomes of a child in care or the likelihood of reunification. Research is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific methods of engaging and supporting parents.

What do we know from Australian research on issues relating to reunification? A summary

Australian research issues related to reunification comprised 8 studies in three areas: factors associated with reunification, family contact and experiences of natural parents.

Overall, the research demonstrated that:

- 60% of reunifications can predicted based on three factors: ethnicity, neglect and parental incapacity.
- In 40% of cases, children are reunified due to their mother's improved ability to cope.
- Aboriginal children from metropolitan areas and non-Aboriginal children from rural areas experienced the longest periods of time in alternative care.
- Family contact is less likely for children from rural areas, children of Aboriginal background, and children who score higher on a measure of hyperactivity.
- At least one form of regular parental contact can increase the likelihood of family reunification and decreases the amount of time a child remains in care.
- The majority of caseworkers regard family contact positively.
- It is very likely that both contact and reunification owe their connection to other factors. For example, children who are better adjusted or have a good relationship with their parents tend to remain in contact and are more likely to go home.
- Sibling placement has been formally encouraged in legislation in the US and UK. In Australia, sibling placement has not been adequately addressed in Australian legislation.
- There is a lack of Australian data regarding the placement of sibling groups, which may have contributed to the limited attention given to this issue in Australia.
- Parents experience a sense of powerlessness, alienation, sadness, loss and despair after having their children removed.
- Parents find involvement with child protection both threatening and confusing.
- Parents experience overt exclusion from out-of-home care services in Australia.
- The challenge for caseworkers is to ensure parents are involved, while at the same time ensuring the safety of the child and not compromising placement stability.
- There is a need for ongoing support and services for parents of children in care.
- Methods that engage, encourage and empower parents may assist them to maintain contact with their children and work towards personal change and family reunification.

The research relating to reunification drew very heavily on findings from the South Australian Longitudinal Study. Although the South Australian Longitudinal Study was methodologically rigorous, further research is required to investigate factors associated with reunification in other states and territories, with different geographies and population distributions. With some notable exceptions, such as the study by Fernandez (1996), the remaining research in this area tended to be small-sample qualitative studies. While the research that has been conducted in this area has been largely methodologically rigorous, there is a need for large-scale quantitative

findings that can be generalised to other samples. In particular, this area could benefit from further prospective longitudinal research. Given the specific preferencing of family reunification in legislation and policy around Australia, the absence of an adequate evidence base to inform policy and practice in this area constitutes a significant gap.

Implications of the research for policy and practice

It may be unsuitable to attempt reunification between families and children who have been removed due to chronic neglect. Children in these circumstances may be better served by early identification and early efforts to secure permanent placements. Parents experience loss, despair, alienation and powerlessness. However, research shows that a large proportion of reunifications occur when a mother's capacity to cope has been enhanced. In addition, regular family contact is associated with an increased likelihood of reunification occurring. Providing enhanced engagement and ongoing support for parents may assist them to maintain regular contact with their children in care and to make personal changes to enable the children to be returned to their care.

Conclusion

In brief, the findings indicate that ethnicity and neglect are the primary predictors of reunification. Family contact increases the likelihood of reunification, but some groups of children are less likely to experience family contact. Better support for parents may help to increase the likelihood of family contact and reunification.

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