



Reunification

Department Name Quality Management		
CHAPTER:	SUBJECT: Reunification	POLICY NUMBER: QM - 011
APPROVAL: DCF	EFFECTIVE DATE: 7/01/05 Revised: 08-15-07 Revised: 08-07-08	REPLACES (policy # and date): CFOP 175-38

- I. **PURPOSE:** This operating procedure establishes the steps to be followed when recommending reunification in court ordered out-of-home placements.
- II. **REVIEW HISTORY:** Revision to policy dated July 1, 2005.
- III. **CONTACT:** Quality Management Department.
- IV. **PERSONS AFFECTED:** Case Management Organizations.
- V. **POLICY:** It is the policy of Children's Network that the proper steps are taken when recommending reunification in court ordered out-of-home placements to ensure child safety.
- VI. **RATIONALE:** The rationale of this policy is to ensure the proper steps are taken when recommending reunification in court ordered out-of-home placements.
- VII. **CROSS REFERENCES:** Ch. 98-403, Laws of Florida
- VIII. **PROCEDURES:**
 - A. General Requirement.
 - a. The case manager makes face-to-face contact with the parent a minimum of every 30 days when the case plan goal is reunification with the parent who is a party to the case.
 - b. When the court has awarded legal custody of a child to community based care or other custodian, the court must explicitly approve release of the child from custody. Release of the child without such approval may result in contempt action by the court and disciplinary action by community based care for those responsible for releasing the child.

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

- c. If the court orders community based care to reunify a child (and there is no judicial stay of the order), the child must be reunified immediately, regardless of the provisions of the reunification policy.

B. Visitation / Transition from Placement to Reunification.

- a. During initial visitations, the child welfare case manager, or other responsible third party, must be present to:
 - (1) Assist the parent and child in working toward reunification.
 - (2) Assist all parties in minimizing the stress inherent to parental visiting.
 - (3) Observe and document progress.
- b. If the court has prohibited or restricted visitation, the case plan must detail specific steps that, if successful, will lead to the recommendation by the community based care for visitation to begin or become less restricted.
- c. Community based care staff shall work to ensure that visits take place in a setting conducive to parent-child interaction, e.g., a playground, park, home of the child's family, home of the foster parent or a visitation center.
- d. Visits must, when possible, include activities in which a parent normally assumes the responsibility, such as meetings with school staff, doctors, etc.
- e. Visitation must be continually assessed (and documented in the file) to:
 - (1) Ensure community based care has supported and facilitated visitation by arranging/providing transportation when necessary and minimizing any other obstacles noted.
 - (2) Determine whether the parent-child interactions are achieving desired results. If significant concerns are noted, the child welfare case manager and supervisor must determine if modification of the case plan or assessment of parenting skills which may include assessment by a therapeutic professional are required.
 - (3) Determine when it is appropriate to recommend that the court decrease or withdraw the requirement to supervise visitation.
 - (4) Determine whether it is safe and appropriate to proceed with increased frequency and duration of visitation.

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

- f. In situations where visitation is not occurring regularly, or is detrimental to the child, it will be necessary to collaborate with the parents and other involved persons or entities to determine what, if any, assistance community based care can offer.
- g. In situations where community based care efforts to implement visitation or improve constructive effect of the visits fail, the goal of reunification must be reconsidered.

C. Criteria for Reunification.

- a. Any decision to return the child home must be made in collaboration with all involved persons or entities to assess whether the child will be safe, and to assess the readiness of the parents and child to live together on a full-time basis. The criteria to be used are:
 - (1) Identified risk factors have been reduced to the extent that reunification is considered safe for the child and any other children in the family, as well as appropriate for parents.
 - (2) The parents and child have successfully spent extended periods of time together including overnight and weekend visits without further abuse or neglect.
 - (3) The parents and child indicate verbally and by their actions that they are ready for reunification. The case manager is encouraged to talk to the child (if age-appropriate) about how s/he feels about being reunified, and what hopes or fears s/he has about the reunification?
 - (4) The family has a well established support system made up of individuals such as: family members, extended relatives, church members, neighbors, friends, foster parents, employers and service providers to assist parents in making changes that will permit safe reunification and ameliorate problem areas that make it unsafe to return the child home.

D. Assessment

- a. There will be a documented Assessment prior to reunification that is a joint effort of the caseworker and the family, which includes input from the family, GAL and all parties.
- b. Prior to reunification, if any risk factors are noted during the assessment, these issues must be discussed thoroughly with the family members and clearly noted in the case manager's JRSSR or written report to the court.

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

- c. Prior to reunification, if there are differing viewpoints or opinions among the other professionals and agency staff, these differing opinions must be clearly noted in the case manager's JRSSR or written report to the court.

E. Factors that Warrant Special Consideration.

- a. If a service provider such as Family Centered Services is used to assist in/evaluate the family's readiness for reunification, staff, in collaboration with the service provider is to ensure that the child's safety is the primary issue.
- b. If the maltreatment(s) is egregious in nature and the person(s) allegedly responsible for the maltreatment would have access to the child and have not acknowledged their responsibility for previous harm, or it is not determined who in the home was responsible for the maltreatment, reunification is not appropriate.
- c. In cases of egregious maltreatment in which the person(s) allegedly responsible have acknowledged their responsibility, any risk factors that may continue to be present following treatment/rehabilitation must be carefully assessed during the reunification staffing described below. The treatment professional(s) involved in rehabilitation must be invited to participate in the reunification staffing. If they are unable to participate, their reports must be available for the review during the staffing.
- d. Families in which there is a history of chronically neglected and abusive behaviors usually do not benefit from short-term intensive treatment services. Decisions concerning success of treatment/rehabilitation of these families and subsequent reunification should be reviewed carefully with the safety of the child foremost in the decision process. The treatment professional(s) involved in rehabilitation must be invited to participate in the reunification staffing. If they are unable to participate, their reports must be available for the review during the staffing.

E. Overnight Visitation and Reunification Staffings.

- a. When the plan is to allow a child of any age to start overnight visitation with the person(s) responsible for the abuse or neglect, a staffing involving the child welfare case manager, the next two levels of supervision, and, if available, the child welfare attorney shall occur in an attempt to ensure the child's safety and well-being.
- b. When the plan is to allow a child of any age to be reunified with the person(s) responsible for the abuse or neglect, a staffing involving the child welfare case manager, the next two levels of supervision, Guardian Ad Litem, Children's Network Quality Management Specialist, the

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

caregiver(s) of the child, and, if available, the child welfare attorney shall occur in an attempt to ensure the child's safety and well-being. In the event that the child's caretaker(s) is/are unable to attend then a written statement must be attached to the staffing form with their recommendations or the staffing will need to be rescheduled. If the staffing decision is to return the child(ren) home, then a written approval by the Program Director designated by the Case Management Organization will be required. If the court orders the child(ren) be reunified against or without a recommendation from the agency then the case needs to be staffed within 72 hours of the court hearing and all of the above individuals need to be invited. During the staffing or case review, the following information shall be reviewed:

- (1) All pertinent case file information.
- (2) Initial and current risk assessments.
- (3) All abuse, neglect or abandonment reports of the child and other children in the family prior to the report which resulted in the removal, the report which resulted in the child(ren)'s removal and any subsequent reports received while in out of home care.
- (4) Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), local law criminal record checks and abuse registry checks on the parent(s), all adults and all adolescents (ages 12 and up) in the home. Department of Juvenile Justice checks must also be done on all adolescents/adults in the home (ages 12-26). This should include a check to see if there have been allegations or responses to domestic violence and whether any injunctions for protection have been entered. If there is access to information concerning how often law enforcement has responded to such complaints, this information should be evaluated.
- (5) Any assessments and/or reports from service providers who assisted in or evaluated the family's readiness for reunification.
- (6) All current psychological and medical assessments including County Health Department medical reports on drug-exposed infants.
- (7) Any assessments and/or reports from the school or day care.
- (8) The home study completed on the parent(s).
- (9) Pre-disposition study.
- (10) Guardian ad Litem report.

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

- (11) Current case plans.
 - (12) Child Protection Team assessments.
 - (13) Written opinion from the current caregiver concerning the proposed reunification if they are unable to attend.
 - (14) Day care arrangements for any child(ren) five and under. If the child(ren) are in daycare prior to reunification then the requirements for Rilya Wilson must be followed.
 - (15) Judicial Review findings.
 - (16) Proposed date of returning home.
 - (17) Case Plan for post-placement supervision that have been negotiated with the family (if the staffing is held within 72 hours of the court hearing requesting reunification).
 - (18) Frequency of face to face home visits must be determined and documented at the staffing based on the conditions in the home, needs of the child(ren), level of safety and risk to the child(ren) and the level of cooperation of the parent(s). At a minimum the case manager will make face-to-face contact with the parent every 30 days when the case plan goal is reunification with the parent who is a party to the case. Once every three months the case manager make an unannounced visit to the child's residence.
- b. When the plan is to allow for short, unsupervised day visits with the person responsible for the abuse or neglect, a case review as described above is not required. However, prior to the visit the matter must be staffed with the immediate supervisor and concurrence documented in FSFN.
 - c. The results, both positive and negative, of all visits occurring under this section must be documented in the case file.
- F. Post-Placement Supervision. The court is required to exercise a minimum of 6-months continued jurisdiction after a child is returned home. Post-placement supervision shall include:
- a. The child(ren)'s adjustment to reunification, best interest and safety considerations shall be evaluated throughout the post-placement supervision period.

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

- b. The post-placement case plan shall be completed and filed with the court at least 72 hours prior to the court hearing in which reunification is being recommended. If the court returns custody to the parent(s) contrary to the agencies recommendations then the post-placement case plan shall be completed and filed with the court within thirty (30) working days of the court hearing.
- c. Case Plan for post placement supervision includes services supports and activities necessary to both remedy any of the initial problems that remain, and maintain or increase parenting skills, and that the plan is filed with the court.
- d. Case plans for post-placement supervision include specific provisions regarding the need for child-care or early education programs.
- e. If the case manager becomes aware of conditions or activities in the child's home, placement home or another location, that threaten the safety of the child, the case manager must take whatever steps are necessary to protect the child, and make a report to the Florida Abuse Hotline. If the above circumstances exist and the child is in a licensed home, the case manager must also advise the licensing unit.
- f. The case manager must update computer systems to indicate the change from substitute care to post-placement supervision.
- g. The frequency of visitation can be reduced after a staffing is held between the child welfare case manager and their supervisor and documented in FSFN. The case manager and supervisor must discuss such factors as attendance at day care, presence of other protective adults, and involvement of other social service programs.
 - (1) The visits must occur in the home. All visits are to be face-to-face with the child. The purpose of the visit is:
 - i. Observing and documenting the child's condition, appearance and development;
 - ii. Observing and documenting child/parent interaction;
 - iii. Monitoring the child's safety and well-being;
 - iv. Continuing to implement the case plan objectives; and,
 - v. Supporting the family in their reintegration.

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

- (2) The case manager with case responsibility establish and maintain regular face-to-face contact a minimum of every 30 days with the custodial parents of any child under in-home supervision.

If a parent or person responsible will not allow observation of the child, for whatever reason, the child welfare case manager making the home visit shall immediately contact their supervisor for guidance as to possible law enforcement involvement to gain access to the child.

h. Following six months of post-placement supervision all identified staff must collaborate with the parent, child, and other involved persons and entities included in the post-placement plan to assess status of the case and the court must be advised in writing. When post-placement supervision continues beyond six months, a written assessment for the status must be submitted to the court at least every six months and justification for continued supervision provided.

- (1) If previously identified or new risk factors are present to the extent that continued supervision is warranted, these risk factors must be specified with a recommendation for continued supervision; and,
- (2) A case plan update or amendment negotiated with the family to address the risk factors must be submitted to the court along with the recommendation for continued supervision; or,
- (3) When the assessment indicates that case plan requirements have been met and any remaining risk factors have been satisfactory resolved, community based care must file a motion to terminate supervision.
- (4) The court order terminating supervision must be received before supervision is terminated or the case is closed.
- (5) The court order terminating supervision must be filed in the child's case record and computer systems must be updated to indicate case closure.

G. Interstate Placement of Children. Pre-placement planning with a parent or relative who lives in another state must include request for a home study through Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), a clear understanding that the child may be reunified with the parent or custodian from who the child was removed, and that the out-of-state person must agree to cooperate in return of the child to Florida for the reunification process. Also, the other state's social services contact and the out-of-state person with

**Children's Network of Southwest Florida
Reunification**

whom placement is being made must understand that parent/child contact may be limited to telephone calls and letters with few or no face-to-face visits.

- a. Reunification of children (returning children to Florida) who have been legally placed into another state through the ICPC requires careful planning to ensure that all aspects of inter-family communication, coordination with the local social services worker in the other state (who is supervising the child for community based care) and travel arrangements take place.
- b. Florida's court jurisdiction over the child remains in effect during a legal placement in the other state, through ICPC, and is legally sufficient to cause the return of the child for the purpose of reunification. However, if the parent or relative in the other state will not cooperate with community based care in the return of the child, then the court may have to assert jurisdiction by issuing a pick-up order. Any such pick-up order should also direct the Sheriff to put the pick-up order on the Criminal Information Computer (CIC) System. This necessary precaution will afford some protection to a worker who may be sent to pick up the child in another state, or enable the worker to obtain law enforcement assistance in the other state with the pick-up.
- c. Written progress reports by the supervising social worker in the other state are essential for judicial reviews. Accordingly, social worker to social worker telephone contact is necessary, and notification of court dates will ensure the availability of reports in time for court hearings. Direct transmission of reports is encouraged as long as a copy is also provided to the central Interstate Compact Office in each state. Frequency of progress reports may be determined in case staffings or directed by court order, but must occur quarterly at a minimum.
- d. Children who have been placed, or allowed to be placed, into another state by community based care, or a Florida court, without the approval of the other state's Interstate Compact Office lose protection of the ICPC law. It also means a social service worker in the other state will have no legal authority to represent the department in supervising the child under the Interstate Compact law. An illegal child placement could seriously delay reunification, or even prevent it, especially if the out-of-state parent or relative applies for legal custody in the other state's court.

IX. EXHIBITS:

Exhibit A: Reunification staffing form



REQUEST TO INITIATE OVERNIGHT VISITATION OR REUNIFICATION

DATE OF STAFFING: _____

CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	
CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	
CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	
CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	

1)	REQUESTING:		OVERNIGHT VISITATION		TO BEGIN:	
			REUNIFICATION		WHEN:	

2) CURRENT PLACEMENT TYPE, INCLUDING NAME:

	RELATIVE		FOSTER CARE		OTHER
	NON-RELATIVE		NON-OFFENDING PARENT		

3) THIS OVERNIGHT VISIT / REUNIFICATION IS AUTHORIZED AS PART OF A:

	CASE PLAN		COURT ORDER
--	-----------	--	-------------

EXPLAIN:

- 7) HOW WILL THIS VISITATION / REUNIFICATION BE MONITORED? (List name of person(s) responsible, frequency, reporting requirements or any other pertinent data.) Document compliance with the agency directive which requires those children under the age of five who are in the care of the perpetrator be enrolled in an early childhood program or a child care facility and if not what services have been added to protect the child(ren) in the home.

- 8) THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTATION HAS BEEN OR WILL BE SHARED WITH THE COURT: (DOCUMENTS MUST BE TABBED IN THE CASE FILE FOR THIS STAFFING). CHECK IF LOCATED IN THE CASE FILE:

A.	Original child safety assessment <u>and</u> updated risk/safety assessment		
B.	GAL reports		
C.	Foster Parents / Caregivers written concurrence or disagreement with the request		
D.	Medical and/or psychological assessments (Mandatory, if they address reunification)		
E.	Pertinent Case Notes / Progress Reports		
F.	Any documentation contradicting the recommendation for reunification		
G.	Information from school and/or child care		
H.	Documentation of Home Study on parent(s)		

