



Reunification

Department Name Quality Management		
CHAPTER:	SUBJECT: Reunification	POLICY NUMBER: QM - 011
APPROVAL: DCF	EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2005	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:** New Policy.
- 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 order 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. 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.
 - b. If the court orders community based care to return a child (and there is no judicial stay of the order), the child must be returned immediately, regardless of the provisions of the reunification policy.

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

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 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.
- 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.

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

- 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.
 - (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 providers.

D. 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 are 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

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

participate in the reunification staffing. If they are unable to participate, their reports must be available for the review during the staffing.

- d.
- e. 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. Reunification Staffing.

- a. When the plan is to return a child of any age on a permanent basis or for a first overnight visit with the person responsible for the abuse or neglect, a staffing or case review involving the child welfare case manager, the next two levels of supervision, and, if available, the child welfare attorney and the individual who made the original shelter shall occur in an attempt to ensure the child's safety and well-being. If the staffing decision is that the child should return home, it will require written approval by the Program Director designated by the Case Management Organization. During the staffing or case review, the following information shall be reviewed:
 - (1) All case file information including all conflicting information.
 - (2) Initial and current risk assessments.
 - (3) All abuse, neglect or abandonment reports which resulted in the removal.
 - (4) Prior history of abuse, abandonment or neglect of the child and other children in the family.
 - (5) Florida Department of Law Enforcement and city and county law enforcement criminal records checks on all adults and adolescents (including Department of Juvenile Justice involvement) in the home. 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.
 - (6) Reports from service providers like Family Centered Services, who assisted in or evaluated the family's readiness for reunification.

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

- (7) Psychological and medical assessments.
 - (8) County Health Department medical reports on all drug exposed infants.
 - (9) Assessments from other service providers such as school or day care.
 - (10) Child Protection Team assessment.
 - (11) Home study.
 - (12) Pre-disposition study.
 - (13) Guardian ad Litem report.
 - (14) Case Plans.
 - (15) Written opinion from the current caregiver concerning the proposed reunification.
 - (16) Day care arrangements.
 - (17) Judicial Review findings.
 - (18) Proposed date of returning home.
 - (19) Case Plan for post-placement supervision that have been negotiated with the family.
- 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 the case file.
- 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 6-months continuing jurisdiction after a child is returned home. When community based care recommends and the court orders post-placement supervision during this time, it shall include:
- a. Updating computer systems to indicate the change from substitute care to post-placement supervision.

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

- b. Developing a post-placement plan with child, parents, other household members or other support persons identified by the parents or directed by the court who are to participate in the plan.
 - (1) If the child is reunified with parents, the plan will include services and supports the family needs to maintain or increase parenting skills and resources that enabled reunification.
 - (2) If the child is placed temporarily with relatives or non-relatives, the plan will include both parental reunification services and services needed to maintain the child in the temporary relative placement.
 - (3) While there is no specific statutory requirement for supervision after reunification from relative placement, community based care is requiring the same procedures be followed in these cases unless there is justification for not doing so. Such justification must be documented in the case record.
- c. Filing the plan with the court.
- d. For children under age six, weekly visits by the assigned staff or agency for the first three months and every other week thereafter are required until the child reaches age six. For children ages six and over, visitation must be twice a month for the first three months and monthly thereafter. These levels of visitation can be reduced, unless ordered by the court, by the reunification staffing committee after careful analysis of such factors as attendance at day care, presence of other protective adults, and involvement of other social service programs. The staffing committee may also determine if visits by other individuals such as guardians ad litem or others may substitute for the required visits where there is some agreed upon mechanism or procedure for guaranteeing that these visits by the other individuals actually occur. Justification for any variation must be documented in the child's case file.
 - (1) Whenever possible, the visits must occur in the home. All visits are to be face-to-face with the child. The purpose of the visits 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,

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

- v. Supporting the family in their reintegration.
 - (2) If a parent or person responsible will not allow observation of the child, for whatever reason, the person making the home visit shall immediately contact their supervisor for guidance as to possible law enforcement involvement to gain access to or remove the child.
- e. Following six months of post-placement supervision, community based care 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 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.

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

- 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 REUNIFICATION
PROCESS PURSUANT TO CFOP 175-38**

WHEN THE PLAN IS TO RETURN ANY **CHILD** ON A **PERMANENT BASIS** OR FOR A **FIRST OVERNIGHT VISIT** WITH THE **PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ABUSE OR NEGLECT**, A STAFFING OR CASE REVIEW INVOLVING THE CHILD WELFARE CASE MANAGER, CWCM SUPERVISOR, CMO DIRECTOR AND, IF AVAILABLE, THE CHILD WELFARE ATTORNEY AND THE INDIVIDUAL WHO MADE THE ORIGINAL SHELTER PLACEMENT, SHALL OCCUR IN AN ATTEMPT TO ENSURE THE CHILD'S SAFETY AND WELL-BEING.

CHILD(REN): _____

DATE OF STAFFING: _____

IN ATTENDANCE:

CHILD WELFARE CASE MANAGER

CWCM SUPERVISOR

CMO PROGRAM DIRECTOR

4) DATE OF CHILD'S REMOVAL AND WHY:

5) LIST EVERY HOUSEHOLD MEMBER IN THE PARENT'S HOME AT THIS TIME AND INDICATE WHEN FDLE / DJJ / LOCAL CRIMINAL AND ABUSE REGISTRY CHECKS WERE LAST COMPLETED (MUST BE WITHIN THE PAST 6 MONTHS). *Also required to check for DV incidents / Injunctions for protection / Call outs to the home

Name:

Name:

FDLE/DJJ Date:

FDLE/DJJ Date:

Local Date:

Local Date:

Abuse Registry Date:

Abuse Registry Date:

Name:

Name:

FDLE/DJJ Date:

FDLE/DJJ Date:

Local Date:

Local Date:

Abuse Registry Date:

Abuse Registry Date:

Discuss Overall Results:

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 and updated risk/safety assessment _____
- B. Child Protection Team or 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) _____

9) IF ANY OF THE ABOVE DOCUMENTATION IS NOT IN THE CASE FILE YOU MUST EXPLAIN WHY:

10) IF THE CHILD IS **FIVE YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER**, HAS THE CASE BEEN STAFFED FOR UNSUPERVISED VISITATION / OVERNIGHT VISITATION PRIOR TO THIS STAFFING? IF SO, WHEN, HOW (file review, permanency staffing, etc.), WITH WHOM AND ANY DISSENTING VIEWS?

11) IF THIS FORM WAS NOT COMPLETED SEVENTY-TWO (72) HOURS PRIOR TO THE REQUESTED DATE OF RETURN PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY.

Child Welfare Case Manager Signature

SUPERVISOR COMMENTS:

Child Welfare Case Manager Supervisor
Signature

BASED UPON MY REVIEW OF THE CASE FILE, THE SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION, THE MANDATES CONTAINED IN STATUTE, RULE, REGULATION, DIRECTIVES AND CONSIDERATION OF THE REUNIFICATION PACKET:

I _____ concur _____ do not concur

with the Child Welfare Case Manager's request

CMO Program Director Signature

Date

DIRECTIVES FROM THE CMO PROGRAM DIRECTOR, if any:

**If reunification has been recommended the child welfare case manager should begin preparing the post-placement supervision case plan to be negotiated with the family.

**For children under the age of six, weekly visits by the case manager for the first three months and every other week thereafter are required until the child reaches age six. For children ages six and over, visitation must be twice a month for the first three months and monthly thereafter. These levels can be reduced

Signature

Date

Signature

Date