

QUALITY PROTECTS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

The Reunification of Looked After Children with their Parents: Patterns, Interventions and Outcomes

Elaine Farmer, Wendy Sturgess & Teresa O'Neill

Practitioners address complex issues in deciding whether and when to return looked after children to their parents, particularly those at risk of significant harm, but research evidence to assist them in making these difficult decisions is thin. However, we do know that return breakdown is now twice as high as was the case prior to the Children Act 1989. At present, little is known about the key factors that would predict whether reunification is likely to be successful or what leads to some children oscillating in and out of care.

Study Aims:

The study is funded by the Department of Health and will examine the patterns and outcomes of return home by means of a two year follow-up of a large case file sample of returned looked after children. The factors associated with successful and unsuccessful returns will be investigated as will the characteristics of children and their families for whom return is very unlikely to work. Interviews with children and parents will explore their experiences of returns and the impact of these experiences on them.

Sample:

The research will be conducted in four to five local authorities.

Selection:

Children and parents to be interviewed will be selected from an initial case file study in the four to five local authorities.

Data Collection:

- Case file study of 300 children aged up to 14 returned to a parent from being looked after over a one year period (60-75 in each authority). A range of demographic information and data related to the return and its progress will be collected so that factors related to the success or failure of the returns can be analysed.
- Two groups of 50 children aged 8-14 will be interviewed, the first of whom will have had successful returns and the second of whose returns have failed (about 20-25 in each authority).
- Semi-structured interviews with the children's parents

- Standardised measures with children and parents/carers
- Brief telephone interviews with children's social workers

Findings:

The study will provide a clear picture of patterns of reunification, how concerns about risk are managed, the preparation and interventions provided to support the child and/or parents and the outcomes for children over a two-year follow-up period. Multivariate analyses will be used to discover the key factors associated with successful and unsuccessful return outcomes. The study relates directly to the Quality Protects policy objectives of promoting secure attachments to carers and promoting stability. The findings should be useful to managers, policy makers and practitioners who have the responsibility of making decisions about reunification and who need information about which supports are crucial to success over what period and in what circumstances return is contra-indicated.

For further information about this study please contact:

Dr Elaine Farmer 0117 9546727
Wendy Sturgess 0117 9546728
Dr Teresa O'Neill 0117 9546715

Email W.Sturgess@bristol.ac.uk

University of Bristol
School for Policy Studies
Centre for Family Policy and Child Welfare
8 Priory Road
Bristol
BS8 1TZ