

# SELF-STUDY COURSE

## Helping Children Move On: Reunification and Transition

Revised 7/06

### 2.0 Hours Training Credit



#### **CREDITS:**

This self-study course is adapted from the larger curriculum *From Home to Home*, a curriculum addressing the topic of working with children and the families they come from. References for sources of the materials included in this self-study are given in full in the complete curriculum.



If you wish to receive training credit for reading this self-study, please fill out the “CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING” Questionnaire” at the back of this course. Return the questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for 2.0 hours of training credit. The course is yours to keep for further reference.

This self study course was developed by Aileen McInnis for the Alaska Center for Resource Families.

#### **RETURN YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE TO:**

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# HELPING CHILDREN MOVE ON: REUNIFICATION AND TRANSITION

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The initial goal of the caseplan that the Office of Children's Services develops with a family who has come into the child protective system is usually reunification. We see that there is great value in a child being able to return to his birth family if the family can make the changes to keep a child safe. If a child is placed in a foster home, then the foster parent becomes part of the team that help a child successfully transition back home.

This self-study will explore reunification and transition in the context of Family Centered Services and explore the important role that foster families play.



## ***Defining Reunification***

Family reunification is usually defined as the point children return to live with their birth families. In Family Centered Services, reunification takes on new meanings as we work with families in new ways. Reunification includes the physical reunification of families, but it also includes efforts at continuity while a child is in care. The success of returning a child to his family depends largely on the support for reunification that begins the day the child is placed in out-of-home care.

***Family reunification is the planned process of reconnecting children in out-of-home care with their families by means of a variety of services and supports to the children, their families, and their foster parents. It aims to help each child and family to achieve and maintain at any given time their optimal level of reconnection from full re-entry into the family system to other forms of contact, such as visiting, that affirms the child's membership in his family.***

From Together Again, Family Reunification in Foster Care Edited by Pine, Warsch and Maluccio published by CWLA.

This definition broadens what we mean by reunification to include promoting connections between a child and his family while the child is in placement. This view of family reunification is based on the values of reunification in a Family Centered Services model as outlined by Pine, Warsch and Maluccio.

1. *The importance of connection to family, kinship and culture.*
2. *Finding the best level of reconnection -- beginning where each individual family is.*
3. *Being committed to visiting and parent-child contact.*
4. *Affirming a child's membership in his family even if he will not be able to return home.*

## ***What Are the Reunification Values of a Family Centered Approach?***

In a family centered approach to reunification, we look at the important of staying connected to extended families and culture, keeping a connection at whatever level is appropriate for the family, being committed to keeping in contact and a connection, and honoring a child's connection to his family no matter what the outcome. Let's explore each of these further.

### ***1. The importance of connection to family, kinship and culture***

A family centered approach promotes the health of the family system in order to protect the child. It recognizes that the preferable place for a child to grow is in his birth family. This respect for a child's attachment to his family -- and a family's attachment to their child -- is the foundation for nurturing the connection between parent and child. A family centered approach also recognizes the importance of a child's continued connection to extended family and culture. This is sometimes referred to as "kinship circles". In order to successfully bring families back together, we need to actively promote the connection between a child in out-of-home care and his family.

*EXAMPLE: The foster parent talks to the caseworker about arranging visits between Johnny and his grandfather who is an important person to him.*

### ***2. Finding the best level of reconnection -- beginning where each individual family is.***

No one plan of visitation, parent-child contact, or schedule of reunification will fit all families. Some parents need limited, supervised contact with their children until they learn some new coping skills. Other families will need to increase and lengthen visits as the possibility of reunification approaches.

In order to successfully bring families back together, we need to help them reconnect at a level best for each individual family.

*EXAMPLE: Foster family care for 3-year-old Amanda with plans of her living with her father after he has successfully completed a residential treatment facility for alcohol and drugs. Amanda's father expects to be ready for reunification in four months. Visits are currently every two weeks, with a plan to increase visits in two months.*

### ***3. Being committed to visiting and parent-child contact***

Commitment to visiting and parent-child contact is essential to promote reunification. Visitations build bonds between parent and child and gives the family a chance to practice new ways of being together. Consistent contact offers ongoing evaluation of a family to help determine the best level of visitation.

In order to successfully reunite families, caseworkers, foster parents and birth parents need to be committed to the importance of visits and keeping contact between parent and child.

*EXAMPLE: A foster parent talks to her foster son about upcoming visits and puts a calendar of scheduled visits up on the wall to let child know when the next one is coming up.*

**4. *Affirming a child's membership in his family even if he will not be able to return home.***

Even when reunification can't happen, we can help a child preserve his history and memories. We can help him understand why he is not able to live with his birth family. This will help children make a successful transition into a more permanent kind of care. For adolescents especially, it is important to come to some kind of emotional understanding with the past in order to successfully become an independent adult.

*EXAMPLE: 16-year-old Sam will be leaving residential care in two weeks and transitioning into a foster home. He still visits his dad occasionally but will probably become an adult in foster care. His resource family has agreed to continue the lifebook he has assembled in residential care including photographs and poems Sam has written about his family.*

## ***Implications for Foster Care***

What does reunification mean for resource families? It means from **the first day** a child comes to your home, you should assume that a child is going home. That goal may change as time passes. But your efforts should still be to respect the child's connection to his home.

Support for reunification or some kind of permanency means also believing that foster care is not a permanent placement. Foster care should be a safe, nurturing place for children to be while their families attempt to make the changes they need to make. In a family centered approach, resource families are part of a system that protects children, but also supports and encourages the changes in families that will allow family members to be able to live together again. The four values of reunification listed previously should guide foster parent's view of reunification.

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## EXERCISE #1: Reviewing the Different Forms of Family Reunification



Match the form of reunification discussed in this self-study in Column A with the matching example in Column B. Not all items in Column B will be used.\*

### COLUMN A

Connection to family and culture

Find the best level of reconnection

Be committed to parent-child contacts

Affirm child's membership in family

### COLUMN B

a. Contact social worker to set up visitation with parent if you haven't heard.

b. Work on a good communication level with your caseworker.

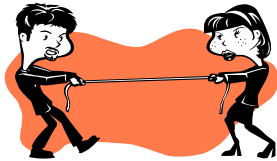
c. Visitations are set up with grandparents even though it is determined that visits with the birth mother is not recommended at this time.

d. Foster parent accompanies child to a local potlatch sponsored by the local Native Association.

e. Take pictures of the child with his brothers and mother and help child post them in a photo album.

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\* Answers: 1. d; 2. c; 3. a; 4. e



## **DEALING WITH CONFLICTS OF LOYALTY**

While the efforts are being made to reunify families, children often develop strong attachments to their foster parents as well as their birth parents. For many children this creates a sense of divided loyalty. Children do not understand that you can love two people at once. They feel they are betraying their birth parents. Foster children may have mixed feelings about reunification and may actually work to sabotage the reunion with their parents. Foster parents can help children resolve this conflict of loyalty by promoting connection to the family and allowing an open discussion of feelings. The following ideas might also help.

1. Being open about the child’s parents and family. Don’t be afraid to talk about them. Bring the topic up early in the placement so that the child knows it is okay to talk about.
2. Promote continuity between child and parent. Keep the child connected to his family through lifebooks, visits, telephone calls, and photographs.
3. Give a blessing. Let the child know that it is okay with you that he is going to be back with his family. Wishes for a happy reunion helps a child keep an attachment with you without feeling guilty for “leaving” you.
4. If you have concerns about a child’s safety, make sure he or she has some basic self care skills and knows how to ask for help. Don’t make him believe that his parents are not going to take care of him, but include some basic skills in your everyday parenting and teaching. *EXAMPLE: Teaching basic skills in the kitchen such as how to make sandwiches.*
5. Recognize your own feelings of attachment and grief. Foster parents often get attached to their foster children and may have very mixed feelings about letting them go. Allow yourself time to cry, miss the child, look at pictures, or whatever way you handle grief. Recognize when your feelings of attachment might be causing anxiety for the child or might be interfering with the reunification process. Take responsibility for taking care of your self and your own needs.

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### **EXERCISE #2: A Resource Family’s Feelings**



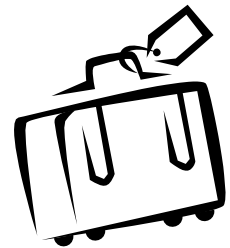
How do you feel or think you would feel when a child returns to his birth family?  
Describe those feelings here.

### **Working Through the Grief of Saying Good-Bye**

Talking with your caseworker, a spouse, a friend or another supportive foster parent can help in sorting through the tangled feelings of saying good-bye to a child. Remember, you offered a stepping stone to getting better for both the child and his family. Take strength from that fact and know you played a vital role in the family's life. Learn to get your rewards of foster parents through your internal sense of satisfaction.

Foster care carries the paradox that you are supposed to provide a home environment for a child and make him part of your family. On the other end, you must also try to preserve his connections to his birth family. Many foster parents get attached to their foster children. Give yourself time and permission to miss them. Oftentimes the transition period (when the child is getting ready to return home or into an adoptive home) is a time for foster parents also to prepare to let the child go. Allow yourself your own ritual of saying good-bye to a child.

### ***What Does A Child Need From At The Time Of A Move?<sup>1</sup>***



- ◆ **Information:** Children need to have information about when transition will happen and what will happen. Children need time to prepare and to make adjustments. Just like parents and foster parents who experience grief, separation, and adjustment, children do too.
- ◆ **Answers to questions:** Children need a chance to ask questions and they have the right to have answers.
- ◆ **Reassurance and Validation:** Children need to hear that they will be okay and that their feelings are important, even when those feelings include anger, doubt or fear. They need a chance to talk and express those feelings without having them discounted.
- ◆ **Visitation with Birth or Adoptive Family:** Children need visitation with their birth family on a regular basis in order to keep attachments going or to build new ones. Visitation and contact with the adoptive family before the transition is made also helps a child make the change from one home to another.
- ◆ **A Chance to Say Good-bye and Hello:** Rituals of good-bye, dinners or parties, or some designated time to say good-bye are important part of transitions both for children and for foster parents. Conversely, if there is a welcome from the adoptive parents or birth parents, it helps a child make a clear transition.
- ◆ **A Blessing:** Children need to hear from their foster parents (especially if it has been a long term placement) that they “bless” or approve that this transition is taking place.

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<sup>1</sup> Suggestions in this section were presented by Norma Nelson, Northwest Adoption Exchange. Transitions Workshop held in Anchorage in May, 1994, and used here with permission.

- ◆ **Post Placement Contact:** Ideally, contact between family and foster family can continue after reunification. Phone calls, remembering birthdays, doing respite care, or providing support to a birth parent are all ways to continue contact.

### ***What Can The Foster Parents Do?***

- ◆ If the child is being adopted, provide information to new family. Write out the child's schedule. Share photos, school papers, artwork. With child, compile lifebook to share with the new family.
- ◆ If child is being adopted, find out as much information as you can about new family so that you can prepare child and answer his/her questions.
- ◆ Increase your availability to the child. That means "hanging out" and being there just in case a child wants to talk. Listen, allow for feelings and validate those feelings
- ◆ Learn about, watch for and normalize signs of grieving. Help children understand and express what they are feeling. Don't rush to make everything okay for the child.
- ◆ Facilitate and support visits with the adoptive parents and with birth parents and family members. Help children deal with feelings about visits -- both negative and positive.
- ◆ Deal with concerns promptly. Learn to express your feelings and your concerns outright. When problems start, deal with them right away before they get too big.
- ◆ Make moving day significant. Send favored objects and toys and clothes with child. Give a simple gift -- a photo album or an address book allow for good memories.
- ◆ Talk about post placement contact during the transition, not after. Talk with parents and caseworker about what is acceptable to all parties.



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**EXERCISE #3: Making the Transition Home or Into Adoptive Care**

You have been told by the caseworker that your foster child, 5-year-old Mindy, is probably going to be returned to her birth mother in two to three weeks. Name two ways you can help Mindy make the transition. Or, if you work with older children, take the case of 14-year-old Sammy who is going to go live with his aunt in a nearby community. Name two ways you could help Sammy.

Circle the child you choose for this exercise: *MindySammy*

What are two (2) ways you can help this child make the transition?

1.

2.

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## THE FAMILY UNITY MEETING

One of the tools caseworkers use with a family in a family centered approach is the Family Unity Meeting. This model was developed by Larry Graber of the Oregon Children Services Division and is used in three different ways:

1. To prevent placement of child in out-of-home care.
2. To aid in the reunification of a child and his parents.
3. To determine optimum connections and participation of a family when a child is not returning home.

A unity meeting is a tool to empower parents and families and aid in their taking responsibility for the health and safety of their child. With the caseworkers as a facilitator not a leader, the family chooses who in their family and community they want to attend the meeting. In some cases, the foster parent might be invited by the birth parent to attend the meeting.

Instead of the caseworker dictating the terms of the reunification, the caseworker gives responsibility to the family to come up with a safety plan, or a timeline, or problem solving on making reunification work. Family unity meetings don't focus on blaming for past problems. They help families identify their strengths and plan for successful reunion.

A foster parent who is asked to participate in the meeting may give his or her concerns, ideas, suggest options, and express feelings. The foster parents participate as part of that family supportive system. Other people the family may choose to attend the meeting might include counselors extended family members, teachers, pastor or neighbors. The focus is on "what do we as a family need to do to succeed in reunification?" It is a powerful and empowering tool.

The caseworker's or facilitator's role is to empower and assist families in participating in their own decisions and responsibilities. When people have had input into the solutions, they are much more motivated to follow through. Unity meetings are a tool to use families to solve their own problems. Their ideas and suggestions are written up into a formal agreement, complete with checks and balances and time lines. These checks and balances encourage family responsibility and provide a level of safety for all family members.

**NOTE:** *As of 2005, in Anchorage, Team Decision Making Meetings have been used when children might be coming into out-of-home care or when a change of placement is made. Similar to a Family Unity Meeting, these meetings bring as many interested parties together with the birth family also being able to choose supports to bring to the meeting. These meetings, or TDMs have proved very successful in making better placement decisions and in some cases, preventing placement in foster care altogether.*

## TO REVIEW:

- Reunification includes both efforts to promote ongoing continuity between a child and his birth family and efforts to reunite a family after placement has occurred.
- Foster parents must be able to identify and deal with their own emotions and grief when a child is returned home or is placed in adoptive care. They must take care not to let conflicts of loyalty hurt the chances of reunification.
- In helping a child transition home, a foster parent can do many things both to satisfy the questions and concerns of the foster child and to insure that the transition goes smoothly. The child has many needs at the time of the move.
- The Family Unity Meeting is one tool used by caseworkers to aid in either the prevention of placement of a child or to help a family plan for the reunification of its members.



## REVIEW QUESTIONS

Upon completing this self-study, you should be able to answer these questions:

1. *Could you define reunification and explain its role in working with children and the families they come from?*
2. *Can you name some of the ways a foster parent can promote and support attempts for reunification?*
3. *Can you identify your own way of dealing with grief and separation?*
4. *Can you identify ways to help transition a child into adoptive care or back home to his birth family?*
5. *Do you know what a Family Unity Meeting is and can you name its purpose?*

# TEST