

Reunification: A Decision and Practice Within Provisional Safety Management

Introduction

Provisional safety management is *impermanent*. Funny word, huh? It's a real word, and it means that the things you do during safety management from the onset to conclusion are not permanent; safety management is always subject to change or revision and to being increased or decreased. We have said in previous articles that provisional safety management is dynamic driven by seeking the least intrusive means necessary to assure a child's protection and a desire for family member proximity. Family member proximity is a system theory idea which supports keeping children with their families or as closely connected as possible with respect to relationship and interaction. For more details about provisional safety management, check out the May 2005 article "Provisional Safety Management."

Safety plans can include in-home safety management, out-of-home safety management or combinations of the two. A placement with relatives or a foster home is a safety plan or the means by which safety management is to occur. The use of placement for safety management occurs for two reasons. A child's caregivers are unable or unwilling to participate in an in-home safety plan, or circumstances within the family or home preclude using an in-home safety management option. An out-of-home placement is never considered a permanent or long-term strategy for safety management. In fact, it should be approached as a temporary, provisional action with constant and vigilant efforts to routinely consider differences in caregivers, safety threats and the home with the intention of adjusting safety plans appropriately. This kind of thinking, decision making and practice is why we must bear in mind that reunification is a decision and practice that is part of provisional safety management.

The Reunification Decision

The reunification decision is a determination about four things:

1. Progress toward enhancement of diminished caregiver protective capacities.
2. Change or adjustment to circumstances within the family, home or among caregivers.
3. Conditions for return have or can be met.
4. An in-home plan can be implemented.

Two of these issues must always be addressed in the decision. Reunification can occur only when conditions for return have been met and an in-home safety plan can be implemented. Progress and change that are apparent either through planned action or shifts in circumstance are important but not defining when making the decision to return a child. Notably these four considerations affirm that returning children is not predicated on caregivers fully changing their lives or achievement of results or outcome. Reunification is possible and ethical as remediation continues. Fundamentally, the reunification decision is a determination about whether an in-home safety plan can replace an out-of-home safety plan. That is why reunification can be considered practice and decision making within the context of provisional safety management.

The Reunification Decision Benchmark

The reunification decision is a judgment about the extent to which the circumstances and behaviors identified in the conditions of return now exist and can be sustained using an in-home safety plan. Conditions for return are statements that are part of a court order which identify specific behavior and circumstances that must exist within a child's home for the child who is placed to return home. Conditions for return statements are concerned with what must occur within a child's home. These are environmental statements more than statements about people and what they must do. These are statements about status or the state of circumstances within a child's home. Basically conditions for

return statements are descriptions of what the home must be like in order to be a “safe home.” The fundamental purposes for the concept and practice of conditions for return are to insure that caregivers are informed about how to get their children back home and to serve as the benchmark for the reunification decision.

Impending danger threats do not have to be eradicated in order for children to be reunified with their families. Caregivers do not necessarily have to change in order for children to be reunified with their families. What is necessary for children to be reunified with their family is the establishment of well-defined circumstances within a child’s home that serve to mitigate against threats to child safety. For more specific information on conditions for return, refer to the June 2004 article “Conditions for Return.”

The reunification decision always includes a judgment about caregiver willingness and cooperation which likewise should always be a consideration within conditions for return. Reunification should occur at the earliest time that you can conclude that impending danger has been eliminated or impending danger can be sufficiently managed with an in-home safety plan because of the progress that has been made related to the conditions for return.

Essential Rules for Reunification

There are several rules that apply to deciding to reunify a child with his family. You must determine and conclude that a child’s safety can be maintained within the child’s family. You must determine and conclude that circumstances and behavior that resulted in removal can now be managed within a safe environment in the home. You must demonstrate that provisional safety planning meets the reasonable efforts requirement. You always institute an in-home safety plan even if for only a brief period. You must determine and conclude that an in-home safety plan can be sustained while ongoing case planned services continue.

The decision to reunify is based fundamentally on the judgment that a child's safety can be sufficiently maintained in the home. Reunification should be based on a reversal of the circumstances and behaviors that resulted in the decision to remove the child. The challenge in making the reunification decision is to effectively judge *the potential to establish a safe environment in the home*. Reasonable efforts require that a child should be reunified as promptly as is possible and appropriate. The level of effort to reunify (keep separation of the child from his family as temporary as possible) should be constant and intense. An in-home safety plan is always required when reunifying a child for a period of time to confirm that threats to safety no longer exist or that caregiver protective capacities have been sufficiently enhanced to assure child safety. An in-home plan can be sustained. Sustained! This is judgment that requires you to anticipate that the in-home safety plan and the child remaining in the home can continue—be stable—while treatment continues. The point here is to avoid “bouncing” or “yo-yoing” kids back and forth between placements and their homes.

Safety Assessment and Safety Planning as Part of Reunification

You know, as an ongoing CPS worker, you need to possess the same knowledge and skill related to safety assessment and safety planning as an initial assessment/investigation worker. The reason this is so is that ongoing safety management requires a versatile use of the same ideas and practice that begin the process of safety intervention. Right here we have perhaps the best example. When considering reunification, you are required to assess safety in the home prior to returning a child and immediately thereafter. And, as we've emphasized, when a child is reunified, an in-home safety plan is always installed.

Safety assessment associated with reunification always involves formal use of the same criteria applied during initial assessment—the same criteria that concluded the presence of impending danger. Here we refer to the listing of safety threats that appear on agency safety assessment instruments. The safety assessment should include an analysis of safety threats that continue to exist and

how they are occurring (i.e., frequency, intensity, influences, etc.).

The in-home safety plan that is put in place when a child is reunified occurs because you've concluded that:

- The home environment is stable enough to sustain the use of an in-home safety plan.
- Caregivers are willing to be involved and cooperate with the use of an in-home safety plan.
- Safety services are available and accessible at the level of effort required to assure safety in the home.
- Safety service providers are committed to participating in the in-home safety plan.
- The in-home safety plan will provide the proper level of intrusiveness and level of effort to manage safety threats.
- There have been specific changes in family circumstances and/or protective capacities that would allow for the use of an in-home safety plan.

The Reunification Process

So far we've written about reunification decision making and practices. We'll conclude this article by providing an overview of the process that can be used to achieve reunification.

Reunification is a very serious decision. It should occur within the context of a well planned out, specific process involving discrete steps. A reunification process helps to structure and standardize practice and enhance decision-making effectiveness. The different steps in this process help to insure that particular individuals who make these decisions are included such as: treatment providers, safety service providers, CPS supervisors, parents, children, extended family, foster parents, etc. Application of this process is part of provisional safety management. The step-by-step reunification process involves:

1. Assess safety threats before (and within 24 hours prior to) returning a child home.
2. Assess parent - child visitation.

3. Assess the circumstances within the home primarily concerned with the presence of a safe home and the potential to produce one.
4. Reach a judgment about the willingness and capacity the parents possess in respect to actively supporting reunification and accompanying in-home safety plans.
5. Conduct meetings with foster parents.
6. Conduct meetings with treatment providers.
7. Document information regarding presence of a safe home.
8. Establish a reunification plan.
9. Prepare the child for return.
10. Prepare the caregivers, family and home for return.
11. Initiate efforts and activities at establishing a safe home including safety assessment, and identify and discuss any alerts to danger or deterioration of the reunification plan.
12. Plan and arrange an in-home safety plan.
13. Implement in-home safety plan and proceed with reunification.
14. Engage in immediate follow-up and oversight to confirm the reunification decision including conducting a safety assessment following reunification within 24 hours and at one week.