



ARIZONA DEPARTMENT of CHILD SAFETY

December 19, 2023

Encourage parents to believe they can succeed.

Parents can get discouraged. Reassure them that you want them to be successful and will help them connect with supports to make their family stronger. Encourage them by explaining that many parents succeed at having their children returned to them, and they can too.

Talk to parents about their hopes and fears.

Reunification is a time of readjustment. Parents may feel excited and happy, but also stressed, uncertain, rejected (if the child misses their foster family), sad about lost time or missed milestones, and afraid of losing their children again. Children might miss their friends and foster parents, and can struggle adjusting to different rules, schedules, and schools. Assure parents that these feelings are normal. Encourage parents to be patient with themselves and to let someone know when they feel uncertain or stressed.

Carefully plan for everyday life to reduce stress after reunification.

Ask about the family's current daily routine, how it might change once reunification occurs, and what times of day might be stressful. Include service providers and foster parents in planning for a child's transition home.

Family Reunification Planning and Services

Parents succeed when they are involved in developing their case plans, and have frequent contact with their caseworkers.

Create a written case plan in partnership with parents and youth. Asking parents for their input shows that you value their knowledge about their children's needs, and believe in their potential to keep their children safe.

Ask the parents and youth to tell you about their family's needs, strengths, support system, and goals. The following are some topics to discuss:

- Parents' understanding about what needs to change before their child can return home
- Areas where parent and/or child feel they need support
- Parents' insight about a time they felt successful as a parent, including what that looked and felt like for them
- Important people in the child and/or parents' life (i.e. individuals they feel supported by, those they call when things are hard)
- Worries parent and child may have about child returning home
- Services and supports that parent and/or child have found to be most helpful
- Ideas regarding different or additional services that could be helpful
- Parents willingness to engage with service providers in their home
- Parents' back-up plan in the event of a relapse/recurrence

Focus on permanency and progress toward reunification during each monthly contact with parents. Discuss with parents their progress toward achieving behavioral changes, barriers they may be encountering, and ask what additional assistance they need to be successful. Explain permanency – what it is, why it is important, types of permanency, and legal timeframes. Encourage them to attend Team Decision Making (TDM), Child and Family Team (CFT), and case plan staffing meetings to ask questions and talk about their needs, strengths, goals, and progress. Help parents see their strengths and successes.

Parenting Time and parent-child connectedness make readjustment at reunification easier.

Encourage parents to participate in parenting time with their children. Unless safety concerns cannot be controlled, encourage parents to be involved in the child's daily life by attending sports games, holiday events, health appointments, or educational meetings. Encourage the foster/kinship caregiver to keep a journal or share notes, pictures, or videos with the parents about the child's daily life, development, and important events. For more information, see the practice guidelines on parenting time.

Discuss plans for:

- communication between the foster parent and parent during and after reunification;
- child care or after-school program;
- rules, expectations, bedtimes;
- housing and utilities;
- food, clothing, furniture, equipment;
- transportation;
- educational services/school;
- Healthcare coverage, Department of Economic Security (DES) cash/nutrition assistance (if applicable), counseling;
- community, recreational, and social activities;
- accessing community resources.

Encourage the parents to ask questions and share their concerns about reunification. Listen and have honest dialogue. A parent's questions and concerns are normal and do not mean that the parents are not ready for reunification.

Maintain contact with the family and service providers to get updates on the family's progress, celebrate successes, and learn of barriers or concerns to address.

Adapted from: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). Reunification: Bringing your children home from foster care. Washington, DC: U.S. DHHS, Children's Bureau.

Strong social networks help parents in stressful times.

Develop the family's informal social network so that parents feel more secure and have someone to turn to when they experience challenges. Identify and involve people in the parents' network from the earliest possible point. Encourage parents to reconnect with positive people in their lives, join a community group or club, volunteer, or attend spiritual services that are in line with their cultural beliefs and preferences. Programs with parent mentors who had previous involvement with the child welfare system are a resource that can provide support and advocate for parents.

Begin the reunification process once it has been determined that the danger can be managed in the home.

Remember that a child does not need to be assessed as safe prior to reunification. Reunification should occur when conditions for return have been met and the child can reside in the home with a safety plan or caregiver protective capacities have been enhanced and the child has been assessed as safe. Reunification should begin at the earliest point possible when a child can be maintained safely in the home. Schedule a TDM when reunification is being recommended to ensure that feasible and sustainable safety plans are in place, when necessary, and a transition plan is developed.

Services can support the family prior to reunification and while a child is transitioning home.

Services can support reunification by increasing the parent's knowledge of child development and parenting techniques, addressing child behavioral or emotional needs, improving parent-child relationships, increasing parent self-care and stress-management skills, and connecting parents with concrete supports and community resources. During a TDM, create a transition schedule and plan with the family and their network for reunification supports that will meet the family's needs. In the event the court has ordered the return of a child, prior to the Department filing a Change of Physical Custody (CPC), consider discussing post reunification supports in a case plan staffing if the DCS case will remain open.

Determine if services to support reunification should be provided by the behavioral health (BH) system. Services through the BH system may be appropriate if:

- the child and/or parent is currently receiving behavioral health system services;
- the child and/or parent has behavioral health needs that are expected to increase during the reunification transition process; or
- the child and/or parent will require services to treat an ongoing behavioral health need, such as a chronic substance use disorder or a mental health condition.

For additional information refer to the following policies and guides:

- DCS policy Chapter 5: Section 1 Family Reunification
- DCS policy chapter 2, Section 8 Team Decision Making
- Practice Guidelines Parenting Time Planning
- Service Guide – Family Connections (FC)
- Service Guide – Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP)

Consider whether the child will continue to be title XIX (19) eligible after reunification, and plan for service continuity.

Request BH services early, at a CFT meeting or Adult Recovery Team (ART) meeting for a parent. If a BH provider declines to provide requested services, consult your supervisor or the DCS CHP System of Care at chpsystemofcare@azdcs.gov.

The DCS service array includes Family Connections (FC) and Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) which can be utilized to strengthen families and support reunification.

- Family Connections (FC) services are tailored to the family's needs in order to strengthen family protective factors, enhance caregiver protective capacities and meet conditions for return.
- Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) services are focused on building nurturing parenting skills through curriculum-based education and coaching.

Refer to the service guides for additional details regarding each of these programs. Discuss the reason a referral is being recommended and the potential benefits of a service with the family. Confirm that the parent is willing to meet with the service provider prior to submitting the referral.