

Achieving Permanency Through Reunification

By [Plummer Youth Promise](#)

Think of a time as a child when you remember temporarily losing your parent:

You're 5 years old and you've lost your mother in a crowded grocery store.

You're in second grade and your dad is more than an hour late to pick you up and hasn't called.

You're eleven and taking your first public bus on your own. You miss your stop and get off in an unknown neighborhood. Your cell phone battery is dead.

- What are you feeling?
- What is your parent feeling?
- How do you each feel when you find each other?

The threat – even fleeting – of losing one's parent is profound for most children, and memories of situations like those described above can be powerfully evocative for adults. The activity described here is a "Tuning-In" exercise to effectively engage participants in a training session on best practices to support reunification.

[Plummer Youth Promise](#) delivers direct services to youth and families in Massachusetts and offers training and consulting nationally to help youth stay home, go home, or find home. Working with child welfare jurisdictions, courts, and private providers across the country, Plummer staff have observed that child welfare professionals almost always place a strong value on the importance of reunification as the first and best permanency option, when children come into the foster care system. Yet, most training and practice skills to support reunification have not kept up with newly recognized values, emerging research, and responsive interventions.

Responding to this gap, Plummer developed a training to build skills and practical application for child welfare workers, supervisors, and leaders specific to achieving permanency through reunification. Importantly, training is only one component of effective reunification work. To sustain effective practice within an agency or organization, training must be done parallel with an organizational strategy and values that anchor permanency practice competencies.

Training Approach

While collecting and analyzing disaggregated data can be overwhelming, using it to set the context for reunification efforts is critical. Once youth enter foster care, children of color are reunified less often and not as timely as white children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). We can only start to address this disparity, when we recognize both the context of the system in which we operate, and the cultural context of the families served. The Plummer team partners with local jurisdictions to examine the connection between race, poverty, and reunification outcomes, and use an approach that is family-specific and culturally responsive.

“Family is the essential presence – the thing that never leaves you even if you have to leave it.” – Bill Buford

In addition to examining disaggregated data, the training is grounded in the essential practice of youth and family engagement in every intervention. Youth and family voice is central to defining needs, creating goals, and guiding ongoing planning and decision making. Meaningful partnership with youth, families, and communities help to ensure culturally relevant conversations, improve understanding of the family, and promote development of broader and deeper networks for ongoing support. Since we know kids need their families for their well-being, and families know their own needs and networks best - strong reunification practices centered in youth and family voice, are that much more urgent.

“The only thing sweeter than union is reunion.” – Kathleen McGowan

Core Components of Reunification Best Practice

Reunification is more than just a goal. There are specific interventions that when prioritized and coordinated increase the likelihood of successful reunification outcomes. Often, workers will attend training and understand the concepts, but if the time and space is not created to repeatedly implement specific interventions and supervise to the values and best practice, reunification can become more of a hope than a reality.

While there are technical tools that are useful, ongoing application of the core components is essential to successfully address the adaptive and relational challenges that arise in the reunification process. Connecting families to services can be important, but if you don’t develop the family network and support the family in applying new skills and developing relationships, reunification may not be sustainable.



Accurate Assessment

Staying focused on the primary safety issues that impact the parent’s ability to meet the child needs, and not moving the goal post, is vital in creating case plans that ultimately lead to reunification.

Clarity of Expectation

Individualized needs assessment and clear, mutually established goals are critical to case planning. Communicating clearly with parents in a timely manner about what conditions need to change and how they can work towards this provides parents with a roadmap for success. Clarity of expectations is needed throughout the process.

Concurrent Planning

Supporting parents to engage their support network from the start can facilitate reunification while also identifying trusted persons who can step in to offer permanency should it be needed.

Shared Parenting

The goal of shared parenting is for parents to collaborate and to remain actively involved in their child's life. The focus is on protecting continuity of relationships, helping to meet the full spectrum of a child's needs and increasing the likelihood of reunification.

Meaningful Family Time

Consistent visitation is a strong predictor that reunification will occur. Meaningful family time strengthens and repairs the parent-child relationship by allowing the parent to act as parent again and the child to accept them in their parental role. Family time is foundational to providing information for assessment of readiness for reunification.

Informal Support Networks

Families can thrive with resources used by or available within the family system or their community and which are consistent with the cultural beliefs and practices of the family. Safe, sustainable reunification requires more than formal supports such as professional intervention and services. The function of natural supports is to enhance the treatment process, not to eliminate the need or to replace professional functions.

As we continue our reunification efforts, we always try to keep the words of Alex Haley present –

“In every conceivable manner, the family is a link to our past, a bridge to our future.” – Alex Haley

About Our Training and Consultation

Plummer delivers training using a variety of learning strategies and experiential activities. Through a mix of demonstrated conversations, case scenarios, videos as well as small and large group discussions, participants engage with concepts and solutions presented and can apply the material to situations from their own work experience. Agencies can also contract with Plummer for coaching, case consultation, and strategic consulting support.

To learn more about [Plummer's Training and Consulting services](#) available through the Plummer Youth Promise contact Paula R. Young at pyoung@plummeryouthpromise.org.

Reference

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/racial-disproportionality/>