

BOOK REVIEW

Accomplishing Permanency: Reunification Pathways and Outcomes for Foster Children

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Accomplishing Permanency: Reunification Pathways and Outcomes for Foster Children is a new publication that describes an important 4-year study of children's reunification with biological families, following temporary foster care placement. The research aimed to explore pre- and post-placement circumstances, care pathways and outcomes, whether the latter involved reunification or other options, including long-term care. The study also explored the impact of case characteristics, decision-making processes and other service variables on reunification outcomes. The book is published as a research monograph by Springer. The author is Professor Elizabeth Fernandez, Professor of Social Work at the University of New South Wales. The study was conducted at Barnardo's Australia, an organisation with which Professor Fernandez has a longstanding and highly productive research relationship.

The book commences with a thorough examination of the reunification literature. It is clear that although reunification remains an espoused aim of much child placement intervention, there are many knowledge gaps in this domain, locally and internationally. We still have much to learn about the interconnectedness of family circumstance that gives rise to removal, the administrative process of child placement, the lived experience of foster care for all parties involved (child, biological parent and professional) and the outcomes that eventuate. Issues such as prior child welfare involvement, child behaviour problems, birth family issues (including abuse and neglect, drug and mental health problems and family violence) along with race, culture and ethnicity clearly have roles to play in determining placement outcomes, including reunification. Client variables do not stand alone, however. These clearly interact powerfully with carer training, behaviours and attitudes, especially carer-parent contact during placement, administrative decision-making and professional relationships and case management.

Pre cursors to a potential return home are clearly identified in the findings as a result of a creative mixed methods

research design, implemented longitudinally over a 4-year period; the copious data have also been analysed rigorously. This design and the attendant methodology should, in itself, provide helpful guidance for researchers in all domains of child and family welfare and, indeed, within domains beyond. All stakeholders in the child and family sector, specifically, will gain an enhanced understanding of care pathways as a result of a thorough review of administrative data. This is triangulated with thick qualitative descriptions derived from all key players in the placement scenario. It is reassuring that the voices of birth parent and carer resound strongly in this study. The response of birth parents to the placement experience and the complex challenges they confront in relation to reunification with their children are too rarely explored; the positive impact of support, mentorship and education emerges clearly here. Carers, too, can be silenced in relation to reunification processes as a result of their often precarious situation; this study provides convincing evidence that we must privilege training, empowerment and agency of carers if reunification is to be optimally facilitated.

Policy and practice implications of the study are well articulated in the book's final chapter. Targeted future directions include re-prioritising resources to support reunification, reducing structural risk factors, fostering positive relationships, extending specialist training and other support. The importance of developing a strong reunification research agenda was also a clear imperative emergent from the findings.

Overall this book makes an important contribution to the field. The study described moves us forward substantially in our understanding of what facilitates a return to the biological family from foster care and what creates potential barriers to this. It is recommended to carers, practitioners, managers and researchers, locally and internationally, who are keen to help preserve vulnerable, disrupted families whose children have been placed in short-term foster care.