



October 2024

What strategies facilitate safe family reunification?

“If we don't fundamentally change how we work with families and how we supervise staff in order to urgently facilitate reunification, and build in structures, incentives, and tools to strengthen permanency planning and family engagement, we won't reduce the amount of time that children spend in out-of-home placement. We need more than policies. All too often, nothing happens until the six-month court hearing. But children can't wait. Unless agencies institute strong scaffolding and supervisory support for caseworkers that prioritize reunification from day one, we won't change how children linger in foster care.”

—David Sanders, Executive Vice President, Systems Improvement, Casey Family Programs

Well-established research substantiates the [negative impacts that family separation has on the well-being of children](#). Parents must be supported so that their children can remain safely with them whenever possible. If children need to be separated from their parents due to safety concerns, child protection agencies should make [active, affirming, thorough, and timely efforts](#) to swiftly and safely reunify children with their families, with foster care used [as a last resort](#) and placement with [kinship caregivers](#) the highest priority.

While the number of children in foster care is decreasing, almost one-third of the nearly 350,000 children in foster care in 2022 had been lingering for two years or longer. For Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children, the percentages were even higher, at 39% and 35% respectively.¹ To support the well-being of children in foster care, child protection agencies need to devote additional attention on effective practice and policy strategies to ensure that family separation, if it must occur, is as short as possible.

A range of permanency options can and should be rigorously explored with the child, family, and other caring and committed adults in the child's life. These include [reunification](#), [guardianship](#), and [adoption](#), with

the innovative [SOUL Family Permanency](#) model considered as an option for older youth. Given the importance of connections to family, kin, and community, safe family reunification always should be explored first. All child protection agencies must prioritize strategies to dramatically improve time to permanency in order to prevent children from lingering in foster care and the severing of family and community connections.

This brief presents strategies for achieving safe and timely family reunification² through elevating agency commitment and practice, supporting families, and strengthening communities. It draws on insights from individuals with lived experience as well as lessons from jurisdictions with promising trends in timely permanency and reunification, including Sacramento County and Orange County, Calif., and Hawaii. For more information about the critical importance of minimizing a child's time away from family, see the companion brief: [Why is it important to minimize children's time away from family?](#)

Commit to safe family reunification at every level

Communicate the “why”

A clear commitment and a sense of urgency for [minimizing time away from family and swiftly achieving safe reunification](#) must come from all levels of agency leadership. This requires an agency-wide understanding that children's sense of belonging and connection to family are fundamental to their well-being. “When people understand the ‘why,’ it just makes more sense,” said Michelle Callejas, director of the Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services. “It's not just because management said so or because it's the law. It's because it matters to children and families, and because what we do matters.”

Adoptive parent Samaris Rose recounted a story of advocating for her godchild to return to her instead of staying in foster care: “They were saying, ‘We don't want to rush things.’ At the end of the day, it was the baby who was going to suffer.”

Build in behavioral roadblocks and supervisory support

Child protection agencies must ensure [supervisors](#) have sufficient management support and commitment to help them prioritize safe family reunification. Agencies must institute robust internal structures and processes — such as firewalls, incentives, additional management approvals for goals other than reunification or extension of timeframes, and enhanced decision-making tools — to help build accountability into the system and ensure that minimizing time away from family and advancing safe reunification remains urgent and the top priority.

Approaches such as [casework teaming](#), dedicated permanency staff, and the use of case aides can support staff having the time to prioritize reunification efforts. [Business-process mapping for reunification](#), [structured decision-making](#) and [team decision-making](#) can help strengthen planning processes and support staff in partnering with families, providers, and other partners to work together toward safe and timely reunification. The National Quality Improvement Center on Family-Centered Reunification [best practice assessment tool](#) can help

Decreasing foster care placements in Sacramento County

Sacramento County's progress in reducing child welfare involvement and improving permanency for children who experience foster care placement underscores that focusing on the front and back ends of the child protection continuum simultaneously is possible. Over the past decade, the county has been expanding upstream prevention services, increasing access to mental health supports, and enhancing training for its social workers.

During that timeframe, the number of children in foster care decreased by nearly 50%, from 2,324 on January 1, 2014, to 1,176 on January 1, 2024. Rates of substantiated recurrence of child maltreatment, the percent of children in foster care two years or longer, and the percent of children re-entering foster care all decreased over the same period. As family reunification caseloads have decreased, social workers have had more time for thorough assessments and family support.

Data source: University of California at Berkeley
[California Child Welfare Indicators Project](#)

caseworkers and supervisors ensure families have the stability and resources they need during and after reunification.

Address staff capacity and training

[High turnover rates](#) within the child welfare workforce negatively impact children, families, and agencies. [High caseloads, job stress, unsupportive supervisors, paperwork, and inadequate compensation](#) all contribute to worker turnover. When job retention rates decrease and vacancy rates increase, progress toward family reunification stalls.

As part of its strategy to reduce the number of children in foster care, the **Sacramento County** Department of Child, Family and Adult Services added staff throughout the agency, from emergency response and permanency units to its data management unit. The county provides robust training for new social workers and facilitates understanding of new governmental mandates and policies. New social workers' caseloads are ramped up slowly in order to have time to integrate what they learn from the training into their practice.³

Staff who are overworked and undertrained may take shortcuts rather than follow policy, which hinders the achievement of reunification. Specialized training can help. An analysis of state-level policies found that specialized child welfare training available through Title IV-E stipend programs increased the likelihood of reunification more than caseworker level of education.⁴ Frontline staff also need pre-service and other refresher trainings, such as the [Innovation Institute's Family-Centered Reunification Training](#) and The Annie E. Casey Foundation's [Achieving Permanency through Reunification Training](#), to ensure they are comfortable, capable, and consistent in their efforts to urgently and safely reunify any children separated from their family.

Prioritize kin placement

Child welfare staff should work toward permanency from the very beginning of working with a child and family, and safe reunification should be a priority from the outset. In **Orange County**, the prioritization of kin begins as soon as a child enters foster care.

"Wherever you are in the dependency process, you're impacting permanency outcomes," said Marlene Telegadas, senior human services manager for adoptions with the Orange County Social Services Agency. "Achieving permanency is at the heart of the work that everyone's doing, from line workers to managers to directors. This is where we want to focus our energy."

Kristi Fiskum, the agency's deputy director of family assessment and shelter services, echoed that sentiment: "Focusing on permanency is not just the responsibility of the very last social worker who has the case. It starts off right at the very first contact that we have."

Child welfare practice must shift to a [kin-first approach](#), in which kinship placement is the expectation and goal rather than a practice alternative. Committing to a kin-first approach means centering the input of children and their families, engaging the whole family network, and striving to make every child's first — and only — placement with kin. In Orange County, children enter a shelter called First Step, where they may stay for up to 23 hours while a dedicated team works to

Improving permanency in Orange County

Orange County's progress improving permanency outcomes for children who experience foster care placement underscores how prioritizing permanency across the agency's staff and from the earliest contact with a family can make a difference.

The county's [Permanency is Home](#) initiative was based on data about "long-stayers" across programs, input from focus groups, and the development of specific goals and a theory of change related to permanency. Work groups formed around prioritizing, maintaining, and removing barriers to permanency, with a focus on relational permanency.

Between federal fiscal year 2013 and 2022, the percentage of children who entered foster care and achieved permanency within 12 months increased from 27% to 40%.

Data source: University of California at Berkeley
[California Child Welfare Indicators Project](#)

approve placement with kin. “We have that very urgent need for that 23-hour time period,” Fiskum said. “That may put us in a better place to make an impact on permanency. If children are placed in an available foster home right away, that urgency for them to get connected back to relatives goes away.”

Stop collecting child support

Until recently, federal law required families to pay child support when their children entered foster care, but a [July 2022 federal memorandum](#) urged child welfare systems to cease this practice. [Research](#) shows that when parents pay at least \$100 per month in child support, their children spend more than six extra months in foster care, and studies in both [California](#) and [Minnesota](#) indicate that it costs more to administer child support programs for child welfare-involved families than the amount of funds recouped. A [proposed California law](#) would allow families to avoid paying child support and keep their benefits for up to six months, easing the financial pressure of having a child in foster care and allowing them to focus on addressing the issues that brought them to the attention of the child protection agency.

“We’re not here to raise children indefinitely when they come into care. I’ve seen a more intentional focus on bringing services to families and not disrupting them with a removal. When a removal does need to happen, we focus on how we can help the entire family heal so they can get their kids back.”

— Melissa Lloyd, Deputy Director, Department of Child, Family and Adult Services, Sacramento County

Facilitate partnership between families and caregivers

“It seems like the system is set up to pit different groups against each other,” kinship caregiver and former kinship navigator Lynn Urвина said. “We start bumping heads and the kids end up being victims.”

Child protection agency staff should promote clear, respectful [communication pathways between parents](#) — including [fathers](#), who often are overlooked, kinship and foster caregivers, and others involved in the case. “The reunification period can be stressful for caregivers as well,” Telegadas of Orange County said. “We ask people to love the children as their own and give them back on demand.”

The [Quality Parenting Initiative](#), now implemented in over 85 jurisdictions, has a demonstrated positive impact on permanency outcomes, including reunification.⁵ The national Birth and Foster Parent Partnership offers [tools to support relationships](#) between parents and foster parents. Sacramento County offers coaching to strengthen family visitation time. As reunification nears, when appropriate, foster parents and kinship caregivers are encouraged to invite parents for meals, bathtimes, and other activities. The agency also offers a great deal of support to caregivers.

Increase collaboration among family-serving systems

The issues that bring families to the attention of child protection agencies are usually more complex than any one agency can address on its own. Child protection agencies therefore should [collaborate with other family-serving systems](#), such as behavioral health, public health, social services, education, Medicaid, and the [courts](#). This includes developing a shared vision, creating structures that facilitate communication, [sharing data and other information](#), and coordinating and aligning funding. “My daughter had our grandson in another county,” kinship caregiver Raul Enriquez said. “When the courts got involved, it took about six months to get the documentation transferred from one county to another.” Research shows that children reunify with their families more quickly if their caseworkers regularly communicate with others who support the family, including counselors, therapists, and guardians ad litem.⁶

Meet the needs of children and families

When child removal occurs, families must receive high-quality, timely, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed support to address the issues that led to it. “Although there are consistent and well-disseminated

findings regarding what works to support successful reunifications, actual practice does not always reflect best practice,” according to a 2021 report of the [National Quality Improvement Center on Family-Centered Reunification](#). Several best practices are summarized below.

Build trust from the start

In all interactions between child protection agency staff and families, it is imperative that staff be aware of power dynamics and carefully work to build trust. “Parents are so fearful of the power of the state workers that they are afraid to question anything they do, even if they believe it might be incorrect,” kinship caregiver Urvina said. Casework practice models, such as [motivational interviewing](#) and [solution-based casework](#), also help support trust and engagement and nurture positive change. In **Hawaii**, [‘Ohana Conferencing](#) is a collaborative approach that brings together extended family, support systems, providers, and agency staff to build trust, identify family strengths, and work together to make decisions related to permanency. A commitment to concurrent planning in all cases, with the ‘Ohana conferencing model as a tool, has been central to efforts to reduce length of stay and increase permanency in Hawaii.

“As a father who’s navigated the system, a day without your child is like a thousand years. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done. It feels like that.”

—Roger DeLeon Jr., Father and 2023 Casey Excellence for Children Award Winner

Provide parent partners

Matching [parent partners](#) with parents who are navigating the child welfare system has numerous benefits. “When parents come in, it is assumed that they know the system, how it functions, what their rights are, how it flows, and what the next steps are,” said Roger DeLeon Jr., a father and 2023 Casey Excellence for Children award winner. “A lot of families don’t know how the system works, and if they don’t know, they’re being held accountable for something they don’t understand.”

Research shows that parent partners (sometimes referred to as family coaches) are perceived positively and are considered relatable because of their lived experience.⁷ They provide emotional support as well as information about resources and referrals. Some models, such as the [Iowa Parent Partner Approach](#), have demonstrated higher rates of reunification and lower rates of reentry among program participants.

Facilitate frequent, meaningful family time

Caseworkers and supervisors must support and facilitate frequent and meaningful family time, as families that experience [regular family visits have a greater likelihood of reunification](#). These visits also can decrease depression, anxiety, and externalizing problem behaviors in children. De Leon, however, said that in his experience, some caseworkers prevent parents from regularly visiting their children: “Visitation is a right, but it’s more often used as a privilege. That’s against the law.”

Offer access to high quality legal representation

High quality legal representation also [supports improved permanency outcomes](#), including reunification. The [Safe Babies Court Team™](#) approach and [family treatment courts](#) are both family-centered models that have shown positive outcomes on both time to and rate of reunification.

Connect parents to services

When a child does experience an out-of-home placement, services should focus on strengthening the family and paving a path toward safe reunification. Families may need access to support groups like [Parents Anonymous®](#) or universal programs like [home visiting](#),⁸ as well as more targeted programs such as [Homebuilders](#), [Project Connect](#), [Family Connections](#), [GenerationPMTQ](#), [SafeCare®](#), [Family Centered Treatment](#), [Indiana Family Preservation Services](#), and [SAFE@Home](#).

Sacramento County pays for all court-mandated services — including anger management, domestic violence, and substance use disorder treatment — because the costs of those services could be a barrier to reunification. [Family Wrap Hawai'i](#) provides families intensive services and support from a multidisciplinary team (including parent and youth partners) to help children achieve permanency. Families help develop their own service plans that reflect their strengths, values, and culture.

Substance use disorder is associated with many out-of-home placements, and disparities in access to treatment and penalization may impact reunification among families of color.^{9 10} Jurisdictions therefore should be [intentional about investing in strategies](#) that contribute to successful recovery and reunification. The strongest predictor of safe reunification for families affected by substance use disorder is completion of treatment,¹¹ yet access to treatment services remains limited, especially for [family-based residential treatment](#) and other [family-centered approaches](#), including [Family-Based Recovery](#), recovery coaches,¹² and [Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams](#) (START), all of which have been shown to improve outcomes for families affected by parental substance use disorder.

Deliver developmentally appropriate supports

Fully supporting and engaging youth in discussions and decisions related to placement and permanency is critical, and youth advocates have developed [tools to support child welfare professionals](#) in this important work. Youth in foster care should be informed of their rights and have opportunities to participate in developmentally appropriate planning and advocacy. In **Hawaii**, youth involved with the child welfare system have access to [youth partners](#) to guide them through the system and provide peer support.

Children with more adverse childhood experiences are less likely to be reunified with their families,¹³ and children with special needs, such as behavioral or medical, are less likely to achieve permanency. In a study of 3,351 children who entered foster care in 2006 in a midwestern state, disability and mental health problems were associated with a significantly lower likelihood of reunification.¹⁴ Children with special needs should be more consistently identified and tracked so they can be connected to effective supports, and parents of children with special needs must have timely access to critical services, such as respite care and support groups.¹⁵

[On the Way Home](#) is a year-long program that helps middle and high school students with emotional or behavioral health needs transition from residential placements back into their communities. [Fostering Healthy Futures - Preteen](#) aims to increase protective factors for preteens in the child welfare system through mentoring and skills groups.

Prioritize relational permanency

When [planning for legal permanency](#), relational permanency should be the first option.

“Relational permanency is just as important as legal permanency,” said Orange County’s Telegadas. “You may have legal guardianship, but if there’s no sense of connection, what have you really achieved? In the beginning of a case, we tend to contact a lot of people and ask, ‘Can you take placement?’ But we forget to ask the next two or three questions when they can’t take placement: ‘Would you like to maintain contact? What would contact look like? Could they spend holidays and birthdays with you?’”

[Permanency pacts](#) are tools that can help supportive adults establish commitments to young people.

Ensure post-reunification support

Post-reunification stability and preventing reentry into placement are critical. Trial home visits are an integral reunification support and may help reduce reentries, particularly for children with siblings also in placement.¹⁶ The [Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018](#) allows states and tribes to use federal Title IV-E funding for [upstream services](#) designed to prevent child removals, strengthen family stability, and prevent re-removals following reunification. “As soon as a case is done, support goes away,” De Leon Jr. said. “We have to be inclusive of community, including the faith-based community, so that we are opening up options for anyone to get the support they need.”

Support communities

Although the child welfare system historically has considered child maltreatment to be a [family-level](#) issue, it is now understood that [community-level and societal factors](#) — such as poverty, substance use, and inequitable access to housing, transportation, employment, education, and other services — also play critical roles. Child maltreatment should be considered a [public health issue](#), and seeking help should be normalized so that parents don't feel stigmatized when accessing parenting classes, counseling, peer support, or other concrete resources in their communities.

Promote economic policies that decrease risk of child maltreatment

A growing body of research demonstrates the [links between child poverty and child well-being](#). Decreasing poverty rates through upstream economic policies can decrease child welfare involvement.¹⁷ Research shows that higher minimum wages,¹⁸ more [generous TANF policies](#), and the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#) reduce child maltreatment. Many [guaranteed income pilots](#) taking place across the country are showing promising results on a range of employment and health outcomes, and a new [Direct Cash Transfer research pilot](#) is examining the impact of a cash stipend on child welfare system involvement.

Ensure access to concrete goods and local supports

All communities need support networks that connect families with accessible local resources, such as food banks, health care, transportation services, and educational programs. A [large and growing body of research](#) demonstrates the link between concrete supports and child and family well-being. Providing [flexible funds](#) so that families can access concrete goods and supports reduces stress and decreases the risk of child maltreatment within a family. For example, **Orange County** uses its Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program dollars to fund [family resource centers](#), which have a growing [track record](#) of strengthening protective factors and reducing the risk of child maltreatment. Many jurisdictions are developing other [community-based pathways](#) for prevention services, increasing access to culturally relevant services without direct involvement of child protective services.

In **Orange County**, [differential response](#) offers supports to families that come to the attention of the child welfare system but do not require child removal. “We respond to child abuse reports with a focus on linking families to family resource centers and other community resources so that we can prevent them from having repeat contact with our agency,” Telegadas said. “Even though there was contact with our agency, we are taking that opportunity to say, ‘We want to prevent you from having future contact with us. We want to get you the resources you need to promote safe and stable families.’”

¹ Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) made available by National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect Data (NDACAN) and analyzed by Casey Family Programs.

² Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Roger De Leon Jr., Raul Enriquez, Gwendolyn Forrest, Pasqueal Nguyen, Jaquelyn Reyes, Samaris Rose, and Lynn Urvina. In addition, this brief was informed by conversations with Tonia Mahi, Statewide Child Welfare Services Section Coordinator, State of Hawaii, January 9, 2024; Kristi Fiskum, Deputy Director, Family Assessment & Shelter Services, Orange County Social Services Agency, Marlene Telegadas, Senior Human Services Manager, Adoptions, Orange County Social Services Agency, February 29, 2024; Michelle Callejas, Director, Department of Child, Family and Adult Services, Sacramento County; and Melissa Lloyd, Deputy Director, Department of Child, Family and Adult Services, Sacramento County, March 25, 2024.

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