Reunification Heroes

FosterAdopt Connect Rapid Reunification Program

The staff at the FosterAdopt Connect Rapid Reunification Program was nominated as Reunification Month Heroes because of the significant improvement in reunification outcomes seen from this team's 60-day strengths-based program.

The Rapid Reunification Program focuses on assessing the family's strengths and needs, determining related areas of concern, and quickly starting the family on intensive services. The program offers unique opportunities for its clients including allowing the parents an opportunity to parent their children from 8am to 8pm every day. With very low caseloads - each family liaison works with up to three families at a time – the program is able to give intensive, individualized services to each family. After 60 days, 85% of the families taking part in the program are reunified with a parent, an additional 12% are reunified with extended family members or fictive kin.

FosterAdopt Connect provides a residential program for children in need of services which keeps sibling groups together, provides parents with staff who act as parenting models, and relieves some of the financial and supervision-based stresses of parenting. While there certainly is needed focus on ensuring children are not placed in group home settings because there are no other more appropriate placements available, the particular structure of FosterAdopt Connect – housing sibling groups together, a maximum of 18 children in the residence, staff trained in the same parenting techniques as the birth parents, daily family dinners, 12 hours available daily for parenting time, and tailored psychological and educational services for children- has led to a high reunification rate and improved educational outcomes when compared to typical foster home settings in Missouri and Eastern Kansas. More information about the unique setting of the Family Connections Intake and Assessment Shelter is available here.

By Dana Leader, University of Georgia School of Law, J.D./M.S.W. Candidate, 2019

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
**What is something unique to your organization?**

FosterAdopt Connect started as a grass roots organization. We were founded by foster parents for foster parents. We started as a group of foster parents who were completing the STARS (Pre-foster) training. What started as a series of potlucks with conversations about what foster parents needed out of training, turned into an organization focused on finding and filling systemic holes.

**How long has the organization focused reunification?**

The organization started in 1998 but the rapid reunification team is relatively new, only three and a half years old. The team started because we noticed that families who have intensive services early were more likely to reunify. The team starts in the first 60 days of the case even before the first hearing. This allows us to show what the family has accomplished in those 60 days.

**What process does your team use for reunification?**

We encourage visitation with parents. Parents can come in and “do life” from 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week, which is significantly more than other families are offered. We train our staff on the same techniques the parents are taught in parenting classes so there is consistency and the staff can model some of the techniques for parents when parents do life with their children.

We specialize in large sibling sets. We cut down on travel time by housing siblings in one location on site. Our family connection center takes children from birth to 18 years old. We also ensure children stay in their school of origin by providing transportation to the school until the district can arrange transportation for the child. We’ve found that the majority of children have developmental delays or education deficits. The staff in the center work with children to make sure they are caught up in their homework and classes. For younger children, we have a preschool program that focuses on kindergarten readiness. We work to change the stigma the school has about parents with children in care. The family liaison joins parents at parent teacher conferences.

Our family liaisons come to the bi-weekly family team meeting. The team includes the guardian ad litem, caseworker, nurse case managers, the birth parents, and their attorneys. Family liaisons touch on behaviors of children as well as their progress in school. We facilitate a discussion about the children’s medical and educational status. When the kids come in to our program, within 72 hours, they have a physical with doctor as well as dental and eye checks. The reports our family liaisons bring to the meeting include interactions with children, parenting successes plus growth areas.

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Can you describe how your program has changed (or evolved) over the years?
Before we started, we had been offering help to parents after reunification but they weren’t taking us up on it because the dependency case was a wound that the family just wanted to close. This wasn’t helping the parents. We began mandatory weekly contact after reunification with parents which tapered off over the course of 6 months. Then we started including home visits prior to reunification which helped with the transition.
Now, we call our parents if something is going on, even if the problem wasn’t part of the original case. We try to have a holistic approach because if we are aware of a potential problem initially, we can restructure services so that the program will actually help the family.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?
There are specific people who deal with the Rapid Reunification Program. There is one supervisor with two to three workers with whom we have built an excellent relationship. There’s a degree of trust because they know us, our success rate, and our dedication to the children. They know we will advocate for the parents and talk about the family’s strengths.

What are some of the weaknesses?
The family support team meeting is a meeting with people who are there to talk about why your kids were taken, which can be very intimidating. Parents are much less likely to present their case well because of the intimidation factor. Having someone in the parents’ corner as a champion is really important. Because of our hands-on contact with parents, we know what’s going on and what struggles the parents are having.

What are some interventions you use in the first 60 days?
North Carolina Family Assessment Scale for Reunification (NCFAS-R)  
An assessment tool that looks at 7 domains (Environment, Parental Capabilities, Family Interactions, Family Safety, Child Well-Being, Caregiver/Child Ambivalence, and Readiness for Reunification) to determine the immediate needs of the family.
A sample is available here.

Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory-2 (AAPI-2)  
A tool used pre and post parenting course to determine parenting attitudes and potential abusive behaviors and show growth.
Information is available here.

Child Behavioral Check List  
This form can be used to establish the needs and strengths of the child as well as a means to create reasonable goals.
A sample is available here.

Genogram and Ecomap  
A genogram is a family tree which often includes close friends of the family. An ecomap acts like a genogram but includes community organizations, potential supports, and less close friendships and acquaintances. Examples of can be found here and here.

Housing, employment, and wrap-around services

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What is the one thing the organization would recommend when working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?
Focus on the first 60 days. We capitalize on a family's initial crisis response to the children being in care. Having a family liaison helps the parents through the 60-day process as well as helping the parents to see that long-term support is still there. During that 60-day window there’s still hope. After 60 days, the likelihood of reunification drops because the parents get used to not having their kids or being regularly told what the parents are doing wrong.

How would you tell judges, agency directors, legislators, or governors to help improve the system?
Don’t give up. When you are starting out, you will get a lot of pushback. When an agency does come up with an innovative idea, keep fighting, and get the word out there. Continue to advocate for these families because doing what’s best for the child is what we’re all here for. Sometimes you get outdated opinions or a skewed idea of what is possible. So continue to fight for the children regardless of how hard it is.

It’s difficult to parent when your child has been bounced from foster home to foster home and you are dealing with a variety of bad parenting models. Give foster kids long-term support systems after they age out; more permanency and more support systems will break the cycle.

What programs/practices are most effective in helping parents reunify with their children?
With an increase in visitation from one to three times a week, we have seen a 19% increase in successful reunification. More visits mean more reunifications. Don’t stop parents from parenting their children. The staff is there as a support for the parents, not replacement. We help to maintain the child/parent relationship thus lessening the trauma for the family and increasing the higher likelihood of reunification.

Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed? If so, why?
The large case loads of caseworkers prevent them from having the time to tailor services and support parents properly. Each family liaison in our rapid reunification program works with only three parents at a time.

What preventative actions are most effective in avoiding the conditions that lead to foster care?
Provide parenting courses before removal happens. Offer services during the first signs of trouble. We all parent the way we were parenthood and many of us need to learn better.

Is there anything else about the organization that we should highlight?
Once the family is in the rapid reunification program, they are eligible for all services even after the 6 months of program-initiated contact is done. We’ve created a youth program for current and former foster kids up to 26 years old.
“Once they’re our family, they’re always our family.”