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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

## **SUCCESSFUL FAMILY REUNIFICATION: LOOKING AT THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

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### History of the Family Preservation Movement

The family preservation movement can be traced through the permanency planning movement that began in 1959 when Maas and Engler first published the results of their research identifying what became known as *foster care drift*. At the time this research took place foster-care had become a vehicle for the long-term placement of children, denying them the opportunity to establish long-term, permanent relationships with caring adults. The Maas and Engler research documented a common practice in child welfare that allowed children to remain in foster care for long periods of time, or until they reached maturity. Maas and Engler found that once children were placed outside the family they remained in foster care, drifting from one home to another until they reached maturity.

The findings of Mass and Engler generated more than a decade of research and attempts to find a reasonable solution that would end the practice of foster-care drift and

provide children with permanent relationships with caring adults. One outcome as a result of this research was the enactment of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, mandating child welfare agencies to develop permanency plans for children in out of home placements, and giving parents 18 months post adjudication to correct conditions that led to the separation of the family. The mandate was to preserve the family when possible. Under the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 parental rights became paramount.

As the issues of child welfare practice became more complex in the 1980's and early 1990's, the number of children in foster-care increased significantly. One major societal cause for this trend in child welfare was the increasing availability of drugs on streets throughout the United States. The number of mothers addicted to alcohol and drugs burgeoned out of control as the system staggered to accommodate the infants who were born plagued with the addiction of their mothers. There were also an increasing number of children born testing positive for HIV/AIDs, due to the exposure through mothers who carried the virus.

The increase in the number of children entering the child welfare system during the turbulent years of the 1980's and 1990's can be demonstrated by looking at the increased number of children living in the foster care system in Illinois. In Illinois, during the Fiscal Year 1987, there were 17,276 children in foster care placements. By Fiscal Year 1997, that number had risen to 51,311 children in foster care. Only California and New York surpassed Illinois in the number of children living in out of home placements.

Another issue that increasingly plagued the Illinois child welfare system was the length of time children were spending in out of home placements. Even more disturbing

was the recognition that once families were separated it was difficult to reconcile the difficulties and reunify families. Once children entered the system they were spending long periods of time separated from their families. Foster care did not provide children with the necessary stability, largely because it is a system that was designed as a short-term remedy for children in need of care. Consequently, children were frequently moved from one foster-home to another, compounding problems for children and their families.

Additional concerns arising during the turbulent years of the 1980's and 1990's was a concern for the number of children who died after an interface with the child welfare system. Whenever a death occurred waves of fear rippled through the child welfare system, from the office of the director to the front line caseworkers and investigators. Consequently, many children were placed as a result of the fear that an error in judgment could occur, when services might have been more appropriate.

Once children entered foster care many caseworkers were afraid to recommend family reunification because of the severe reaction by the system toward front line staff perceived as failing to protect children. The response of the system to any error in judgment made family reunification more difficult and risky for caseworkers mandated to seek the preservation of the family first. Even the judicial system approached family reunification with trepidation. Consequently children became caught in a system that was afraid to risk reunification but mandated to seek permanency. As a result many children were permanently placed with relatives or moved toward adoption. Family reunification was extremely difficult to achieve and the number of children in foster care steadily increased.

One remedy to decrease the growing number of children adrift in the child welfare system was the enactment of the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in November of 1997. ASFA reaffirmed the mandate to preserve the family and to reunify families when possible. It also reaffirmed the importance of parental rights. However, the health and safety of children became paramount. ASFA also reduced the time frame for parents to correct conditions that led to the placement of the children from 18 months to 12 months post-adjudication. This allowed child welfare agencies to pursue other permanency goals 6 months sooner than was previously allowed. Even though the purpose of ASFA emphasizes the need to move children out of foster-care and in to permanent living situations sooner than the previous time frame of 18 months, it increased the burden on parents who needed time to change and to develop trusting relationships with a powerful child welfare system.

ASFA has indeed created successful changes in the system. The mandated to demonstrate that services to preserve the family prior to placement did reduced the number of children entering the foster care system. The number of children entering the system in Illinois has decreased every year since 1997. For example, in 1997, 9,134 children entered foster care. In 2000, 5,458 children entered foster care. However, as the number of children entering the foster-care system decreased, the overall rate of families reunified remained low. In 1999, the year I began collecting data, the reunification rate in Illinois was only 19% and has risen only slightly, to about 24% in recent years. Family reunification is thought to be the most difficult area of practice in child welfare.

## Empirical Research Study

The purpose of the research that I conducted was to explore successful family reunification, essentially, to look at what worked. Because I am a practitioner I understand how important the application of theory is in social work practice. I also recognize how the use of theory can improve the outcome for children and families who interface with the child welfare system.

Based on my experience as a practitioner in child welfare I decided to explore Successful Family Reunification using a theoretical lens. I wanted to illuminate the powerful impact of social work theory on child welfare practice when families were separated by court order due to child abuse and neglect. I wanted to examine how social workers used social work theory in their work with the children and families they served. More specifically, I wanted to know how social workers used theory to justify to themselves the decision to recommend family reunification, how it influenced the decision to recommend reunification to the agencies supervisors and the court system. Essentially, I wanted to know what worked and how MSWs used their social work education to help them in family reunification work.

This was an exploratory research study with a qualitative ex post facto design. I interviewed 12 social workers about their work with families who had been successfully reunified. The goal was to:

- Understand how social work theory informed and influenced the MSWs work with families and the decision to recommend family reunification.

- Identify a constellation of successful variables that would provide a framework for practitioners who must justify the decision to recommend reunification to themselves, the agency, and the courts.

#### Population and Selection of Sample

The sample was selected for maximum variation. I interviewed 12 MSW's from geographically diverse settings throughout the State of Illinois---from the most northern boarder of Illinois to the southern tip of the state. Caseworkers from all six DCFS regions were represented. The sample included MSWs from DCFS and private agency field offices.

#### Expertise of Social Worker Participants

Requirements for participation in the study included a minimum of four years of child welfare practice experience in the field, with two of the four years as an MSW. They needed a reputation for being able to successfully work with difficult families. The participants were referred by field office supervisors and case review administrators who had an opportunity to observe the work of those with an expertise in successful work with families seeking reunification. The social workers needed to have a willingness to participate in the study, and to discuss their work (a case) with a successfully reunified family with whom they worked after receiving the MSW.

The social work sample included 3 men and 9 women. Their ages ranged from 31-54 (m=43). The experience in child welfare practice ranged from 4.5 – 25 years (m=10.9). The number of years employed as an MSW was from 2-17 years (m=7.79).

#### Credentials

Two of the respondents had a second master's degree in a related field. One had an advanced certificate in family therapy, and 5 held the LCSW from Illinois. Two of the five had additional licensing credentials, ACSW, CQSW and CADC.

#### Parameters for the Cases Presented

The family needed to be considered a difficult family. The child/children who were identified as having been abused needed to be age 0-12 at the time of placement. They needed to be separated for at least one year and successfully reunified for one year without further DCFS involvement. A 12-month time frame was selected because it is consistent with that used to judge the performance of the child welfare system by the Department of Health and Human Services. At least one parent to whom the children were returned had to have been adjudicated as the perpetrator of the original report. At the point of reunification only the biological parent/s of the children and those in a parental role could be living in the home. If other family members or friends were living in the home at the point of reunification the case did not qualify.

#### Case Demographics

Of the family cases presented, 7 were white, 4 African American, and 1 Hispanic family. Three of the families were 2-parent families and 9 were single-parent families.

#### Reason for DCFS Involvement

The cases presented were difficult and diverse in the issues that brought the families to the attention of the department. They included the following:

1. A cocaine-addicted infant who was also blind at birth.
2. An alcoholic mother who intentionally gave one of her children an overdose of cough medicine so he would sleep while she went out drinking.

3. A mother with a history of alcoholism who was having difficulty coping with her three children.
4. A two-parent, educated family, isolated and living in poverty.
5. A family with a drug-addicted mother who was homeless, and who failed to cooperate with preservation services to stabilize the family.
6. A young unmarried couple with two children living in a dilapidated and roach-infested environment. The children frequently had bruises that were the result of inappropriate discipline.
7. A single mother who became so overwhelmed with her difficult child that she abandoned him in a police station.
8. A single mother with a history of mental illness reported herself because she was afraid that she was going to hurt her children.
9. A single father who chased his son through the hallway of an elementary school as he threatened him with a beating.
10. A drug-addicted mother and boyfriend who were asleep when her two-year old was shot with a gun that had been carelessly left within reach of the children.
11. A two-parent family whose infant child had a spiral break to the femur.
12. A drug-addicted mother who was frequently absent and a step-father who was accused of molesting four of eight children.

#### Instruments

Interviews with each social worker lasted from 1-3 hours. The social workers discussed the case, their work with the family, and the decision to recommend reunification. Each completed a reunification check-list, a forced choice document that



was a modified version of the CERAP (Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol used by DCFS). The document provided information about the social worker's assessment of the potential safety of the environment at the time of reunification, and the decision-making process as it applied to the best interest of the child. The social workers also completed a Collateral Contribution Checklist that provided information about the recommendations of other professionals working with the family.

### Analytical Framework

An underlying assumption of the research conducted was that MSW's who were successful in their work with difficult families utilized the theoretical knowledge base of the profession in their work with families and when making the decision to recommend reunification to their supervisors and the courts.

Two theories were selected for the analytical framework. A systems theory was selected because systems theories are widely taught in graduate schools of social work. The Life Model was selected because it is a systems theory that has been taught in graduate social work programs. The Problem-Solving Model was also selected. Although it is a model that has not been taught recently in schools of social work it does incorporate knowledge from psychodynamic theories that are taught in schools of social work. It incorporates ideas drawn from the functionalist school of social work that have been used in more current theoretical models, such as brief treatment models and the strengths perspective. Its underlying assumptions are also consistent with case planning, such as the importance of the here and now, opportunity, the partialization of services, and time limitations.

## Findings

### Study Questions

1. How has theory informed and influenced the social worker's perception of the family and the interventions that led to a recommendation for reunification?

### Implications for the Use of Theory

- Provided a lens through which to observe the problem
  - Guided social workers on how to assess the needs of families
  - Influenced them when they were deciding upon appropriate interventions
  - Provided knowledge on how to understand the problem from the client's perspective, and to intervene without diminishing an already overwhelmed ego
  - Led to a deeper understanding of how the past can effect the present and interfere with the parent-child relationship.
  - Humanized people who had been found by the system to have committed unacceptable acts of abuse toward their children.
  - Helped social workers understand the role of the social worker-client relationship during the process of change.
2. How has theory been helpful to social workers who have successfully recommended family reunification?
    - Provided an epistemological framework from which to observe the dysfunctional behaviors that brought the family to the attention of the Department of Children and Family Services.

- Provided a framework from which to assess the problem and knowledge to understand how: 1) the family needed to change, 2) to intervene, 3) recognize and understand the process of change, and 4) to understand and know when change had actually occurred.
  - A belief system about family life, relationships between family members, and the importance of attachment between parents and children.
  - A moral standard that contributed to an enhanced sense of objectivity and ethical practice.
  - Social workers who relied more heavily on theory were more confident in their decision to recommend family reunification. They reached this level of confidence sooner than the social workers who felt theory was not influential in their work with the family, or in their decision to recommend reunification. This level of confidence resulted in a timelier reunification of the family.
3. In what ways and with what awareness do MSWs specifically draw from the clinical knowledge base of the profession to guide them when justifying their recommendations for reunification?
- The theoretical lens allowed the social workers to objectively observe the struggle for change.
  - Provided a frame of reference for knowing when change has occurred.
  - Provided a language to describe the observed changes.

- Provided a framework for understanding behavior that might otherwise have been misunderstood as dysfunctional, such as the re-emergence of fear, at a point when efforts to reunify the family began.
- A way to describe and document the evidence needed to understand when change has occurred, and to justify the social worker's confidence in the recommendations that the children would be safe and healthy after reunification
- A lens through which to objectively assess, document, and justify that recommendations for reunification were in the best interest of the children.
- An understanding of the centrality of the client-worker relationship in making successful interventions.
- Aided in the development of a mutual trust and an enhanced relationship with family members.
- The relationship, filtered through the theoretical lens, established a foundation for the social workers' confidence in the changes that were observed.
  - Gave the social worker the objectivity necessary to recommend family reunification.
  - Led to the development of a mutual trust, enhanced the relationship and established a foundation for the confidence in the social worker's recommendation for reunification.

All the social workers used theoretical language and ideas during the interviews.

Theory was used intentionally by nine (9) MSWs. One felt the use of theory was outside

of awareness. Two were unaware of the theoretical language and ideas that emerged during the discussions.

4. What other data or reports did social workers use to make their decision to recommend family reunification?
  - The reports and recommendations of collaterals were significant factors in the decision to recommend reunification of the family.
  - Three factors were found to be present in all the cases presented:
    1. The family had successfully completed the objectives described in the case plan.
    2. The decision to recommend reunification was influenced by the recommendations from the counselors treating the various members of the family.
    3. The social worker's supervisor was in agreement with the recommendations for reunification.

#### Research Questions

*Question 1:* How has social work theory informed and influenced MSWs work with families and the decision to recommend family reunification?

1. MSWs used the clinical knowledge base of the profession to inform and influence their work with families who were separated by the court and successfully reunified.
2. Clinical theory provided social workers with a lens through which to observe change and a language to describe the changes made by families. Theory helped the social workers objectively justify the decision to recommend reunification to themselves, the agency, and the courts.

3. Casework was made easier by a frame of reference and that frame of reference is theory.
4. Social workers who intentionally use a theoretical frame of reference were more confident more quickly in the decision to reunify families, and were able to make the recommendation for reunification sooner.
5. Ideas associated with social work theory established a foundation that bridged the gap between social work theory and the application of theory in the practice of child welfare.

*Question 2:* Is there a constellation of successful variables that would provide a framework for practitioners who must justify the decision to recommend family reunification to themselves, the agency, and the courts?

The analysis of the data provided three constellations of variables. The first is a constellation of variables leading to successful work with families seeking reunification. The second and third are check-lists that can be used by social workers to help them document observed changes that would support their decision to recommend family reunification.

*Social Worker's Constellation of Variables Leading to Successful Work with Families*

*Seeking Reunification:*

- Determination to be helpful
- Establishing a trusting relationship
- Encouragement and the giving of hope
- Frequent in-home visits by the social worker (at least on time each week)
- Giving the client the opportunity to vent and empathizing with their feelings
- Listening as the life story of the client emerges

- Exploring the client's perceptions and thoughts
- Observing personal and environmental features
- Listening for latent or manifest content in order to identify the core problem
- Helping the client to problem-solve
- Increasing opportunities for the parents to be with their children
- Directly stating, clarifying and re-emphasizing what is expected of the parent
- Parent education, timed to a point when the parent is able to integrate the material
- Use of self as a role model
- Providing the family with a specific time when the social worker would be in the office and available for calls, i.e., "being there" for the client when they needed the social worker
- Setting boundaries and a time limit for compliance with tasks
- A non-judgmental attitude toward the client
- Starting "where the client is at"
- Advocating on behalf of the client with the community, the courts, and the foster parents

*Parent-Child Variables that Contribute to Successful Family Reunification*

Parent's List

- Commitment to change by the parents
- Observed change in life-style
- Demonstrated personal growth and changed behaviors
- Making better choices
- Exhibits a higher sense of self-esteem than when the case was first opened

- Recognizes own role in the abuse or neglect
- Identified and enhanced strengths within the environment
- Understand why change was necessary
- Participated in case planning
- Followed through with the tasks on the case plan
- A strong desire to parent the children
- An observed, documented and described improvement in parenting and the application of new knowledge
- A better understanding of the children's needs and behaviors
- An improved or strong relationship between the parents and children
- Children have become a priority in the parent's life

#### Child's List

- Demonstrating personal growth and changed behavior
- Making better choices
- Higher sense of self-esteem than when the case was first opened
- Participated in case planning
- Followed through with the tasks on the case plan
- Improvement in relationship with parents
- Desire to be reunified with the family
- Doing well academically

#### Summary

This research demonstrates the powerful impact of social work theory in the process of helping difficult families in the process of change and the achievement of



successful family reunification. It also demonstrates that social workers who are successful in their work with difficult families utilize the theoretical knowledge base of the profession. The findings further support the decision of child welfare administrators to support and encourage direct service staff to seek graduate social work education.

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