

REUNIFICATION POLICY JULY 2012

POLICY STATEMENT

The Department for Child Protection (the Department) is responsible for the care and wellbeing of children in the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO)ⁱ care under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* (the Act). The Department has a responsibility to provide stable and secure environments for children in care that meet their social, emotional, cultural, psychological and developmental needs.

In this context, the Department aims to reunify children in the care of the CEO with their parent/sⁱⁱ when it is in the child's best interests to do so, and where it will safeguard the child's long-term stability and permanency.

This emphasises the Department's commitment to the principle that the preferred way of safeguarding and promoting a child's wellbeing is to support the child's family to care for them.

The Department must make timely case planning decisions as to whether reunification is achievable for children in the care of the CEO.

PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

The purpose of this policy is to assist child protection workers and staff in community sector services to understand the concept and process of reunification and the need to assess, plan, implement and transition a child in the care of the CEO to his/her parent/s within the required timeframes.

This policy applies to children who are the subject of a protection order (time-limited). The policy will not apply in circumstances where children come into the CEO's care subject to negotiated placement arrangements under section 75 of the Act, nor those in placement arrangements under section 32(1)(a).

BACKGROUND

Reunification is used to describe the planned process of returning a child home to parent/s after a period of foster care.

Reunifying children in the care of the CEO with their parent/s is the principal goal to be achieved, where it is assessed as appropriate and in the best interests of the child.

It is important to view reunification as a process rather than a placement event. Family engagement is essential to achieving successful reunification and should focus on the relationship between parent and child, relativesⁱⁱⁱ, child protection workers, other professionals and carers. Professional judgement and decision-making is required when assessing whether reunification is appropriate. These decisions will be informed by the use of the *Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework* (Signs of Safety Framework) and take into account the child's best interests, attachments, developmental needs, the assessment of harm and future risk, and parental capacity.

This policy emphasises the need for early decision-making and planning when working towards reunification in order to achieve permanency and stability for a child in care. Permanency planning should not be confused with 'permanent care' or 'permanent out-of-home placement'. It is intended to place an emphasis on meeting the child's need for

stability, permanency and continuity of relationships – either through reunification **or** through stable long-term out-of-home care.

LEGISLATIVE MANDATE AND PRINCIPLES

The Department is guided by section 7 of the Act, that states that the best interests of the child are paramount when performing a function or exercising any powers under the Act. Section 8 of the Act lists the guiding principles on matters which must be taken into account when determining what is in a child's best interests and section 10 includes the principle of child participation.

Under section 9 of the Act, the following principles are relevant when considering reunification:

- That the preferred way of safeguarding and promoting a child's wellbeing is to support the child's parents, family and community in the care of the child
- If a child is removed from the child's family then, so far as is consistent with the child's best interests, planning should occur as soon as possible to ensure long term stability for the child.

Section 12 of the Act outlines the Aboriginal child placement principle and states the importance of maintaining a connection with family and culture for Aboriginal children who are placed in the CEO's care. Section 81 outlines the requirement for consultation with an Aboriginal officer, or Aboriginal person or agency with relevant knowledge of the child, the child's family, or the child's community, when making placement arrangements for Aboriginal children. It is a policy requirement that child protection workers consult with an Aboriginal Practice Leader or other senior Aboriginal officer when developing permanency plans for Aboriginal children.

ASSESSING READINESS FOR REUNIFICATION

Early and timely decisions must be made, planned and implemented with respect to reunification. The quality of the relationship between parent/s and child must be assessed through a variety of means, including the observation of their contact together which is a significant contributing factor to assessing readiness for reunification. Assessments will determine the strength of the child's relationships prior to the child coming into care and during care, and will be used to predict the likely relationship if the child is returned home.

The Department will use the Signs of Safety Framework with all parties to develop a clear understanding of the risk and protective concerns that exist when assessing whether it is safe for a child to be reunified with parent/s, or whether it is in the best interests of the child to be placed in long-term out-of-home care. This will allow analysis of the critical indicators which influence the reunification process and focus on building safety for the child.

Ongoing assessment of the readiness for reunification will occur as part of the Department's case planning with parents and relatives, and information collected will be documented in the case plan.

Regular case planning meetings help to reduce delays in achieving permanency for children. Therefore, the Department's policy and practice guidelines state that formal review of the case plan should occur, at a minimum, once every 6 months and more frequently for children under 2 years of age.

TIMEFRAMES FOR DECISION-MAKING

Decisions regarding the possibility of reunification need to be made as soon as possible through the case planning process. Evidence indicates that timeframes should be based on the child's age, developmental needs and length of time already spent in care.

The timeliness of decision-making regarding reunification is particularly important for younger children because the first 2 years of a child's life are the most critical for the development of emotional attachments, and the first 3 years of life for the establishment of competence and coping skills.

Therefore, as a general rule, the Department's permanency planning policy requires that from the time a protection order is granted, decisions about whether reunification is realistic and possible must be made within:

- **12 months for children who enter care at less than 2 years of age and;**
- **24 months for all other children and young people.**

PLANNING FOR REUNIFICATION

Case planning meetings will be used to clearly articulate the Department's goals regarding reunification. The Department will ensure the overall goals and tasks are specific, achievable, include clear timeframes and are result-oriented.

The case plan will outline the purpose, intent and direction of the Department's involvement and the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved.

Using the Signs of Safety Framework in case planning can provide opportunities to identify the strengths, resources and safety concerns of the child's family, extended social network, carers and community and mobilise these in ways that facilitate sustainable reunification for the child. Family strengths and resources should be identified in these meetings so that practitioners and family members can begin to think positively about the family's potential.

Members of a child's family, including parents, relatives, carers and others who are significant in the child's life, as well as community sector service providers, may be able to offer important insights and experiences to assist in planning for reunification

Services and Support

The types of services and support required for each child and family will vary depending on the safety and wellbeing concerns that led to the child coming into the care of the CEO. The services and support required should be identified as part of the case plan, focusing on building parental capacity, and commence as soon as practical after the child enters care. Services should be timely, targeted and culturally appropriate. In some cases, and where available, community sector services can be contracted by the Department to provide specialist support services to families working towards reunification.

PARALLEL PLANNING

Where the goal for achieving a child's permanency is for reunification to occur, the Department will need to consider more than one permanent option through the implementation of parallel planning. Parallel planning is the process of working towards the goal of reunification while at the same time establishing an alternative back-up plan.

By parallel planning, child protection workers create a safeguard in the event that reunification is assessed as no longer being in the best interests of the child. This

process of concurrent planning, rather than sequential planning, reduces the likelihood of 'drift' caused by short-term decision-making and multiple placements.

Parallel planning is no longer applied once a protection order (until 18) or (special guardianship) is granted and where the goal of the case plan is long-term out-of-home care.

PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN

A guiding principle of the Act is that children in care are able to participate in the decision-making processes that impact on their lives, appropriate to their age and capacity. Children in the CEO's care are entitled to access advice, support and advocacy services from the Department's Advocate for Children in Care.

All children in care must be provided with a copy of the *Charter of Rights* to assist them understand their rights and responsibilities. Young people should also be advised of the CREATE Foundation, a non-government organisation which advocates for the rights of young people in care.

CONTACT

Contact between a child in care and their parents, relatives and others who are significant to the child is an important element of planning for children in care, regardless of whether the child's permanency plan is reunification or long-term out-of-home care.

Where the plan for achieving a child's permanency is for reunification to occur, contact needs to be meaningful and frequent enough to prepare the child and family for the transition of the child back home.

TRANSITION PLANNING

Transition planning should occur over a time-limited period to facilitate the transference of the child's primary involvements and attachments from the carer to the parent/s.

The reunification of a child with his or her parents is highly significant and often places complex demands on the child, the carer and the family. Therefore, the aim of transition planning is to minimise the impact of these demands, promote the primary attachment of the child to the parents and prevent the child from returning to care.

POST REUNIFICATION CONTACT

Insofar as it is assessed as being in the best interests of the child, contact with previous carers and their families should be considered when planning for a child's reunification with parents. This can help to prevent the child experiencing a sense of abandonment and acknowledges significant relationships the child may have formed in care.

The arrangements may need to be supported, as they are often sensitive and complex situations to manage.

ONGOING MONITORING AND SUPPORT AFTER REUNIFICATION

After Care Services and Support

Returning a child home to parents can be a highly stressful time for a child's family and for the carers.

The Department will assess the family's support network and identify what additional supports may be required to link them to community services in preparing for a child to

return home. The case plan will consider sustainable support after reunification, to support the child's safety and prevent reunification breakdown.

Reunification Breakdown and Re-entry to Care

It is acknowledged that not all reunification with parent/s will be successful and every attempt will be made to minimise the disruption for a child who needs to re-enter care. As part of planning for reunification, consideration will be given to the possibility of re-entry to care occurring and the pre-existing relationships that may have been formed within previous out-of-home care arrangements.

RELATED POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS

- Permanency Planning in Western Australia Background Paper
- Permanency Planning Fact Sheet
- Permanency Planning Policy 2012
- Contact Policy 2012
- Care Planning Policy 2010
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles
- Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care

GUIDELINES

The Case Work Practice Manual provides guidelines based on this policy.

EFFECTIVE DATE

July 1, 2012

REVIEW DATE

July 1, 2014

OWNER

Executive Director, Policy and Learning

ⁱ Under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, a child is "in the CEO's care" if the child is in provisional protection and care, is the subject of a protection order (time-limited) or a protection order (until 18), is the subject of a negotiated placement agreement, or is provided with a placement in order to safeguard or promote the child's wellbeing.

ⁱⁱ The term parent refers to a person, other than the CEO, who at law has responsibility for the day-to-day and long-term care, welfare and development of the child.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term relative refers to a child's: grandparent, other ancestor, step-parent, sibling, uncle or aunt, cousin, spouse or de facto partner. In the case of an Aboriginal child, a person regarded under the customary law or tradition of the child's community may also be considered a relative.