Returning children home from care: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice for reunification

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Returning a child home to their family after a period in local authority care is a time of great upheaval and adjustment for both the child and their family.

The learning from case reviews highlights that professionals need to thoroughly assess the situation before returning children home. They need to carefully plan and prepare for the reunification and continue to monitor the child’s safety and wellbeing before, during and after the return.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2010 which have highlighted lessons for returning children home from care.

In these case reviews, children died or suffered serious harm in a number of different ways:

- took their own lives
- died of an accidental overdose
- re-entered care following abuse or neglect
- killed by a parent or carer
- killed by a parent who then went on to take their own life.

Key issues around returning children home from care in case reviews

Delay or lack of assessment before deciding to return a child home

Children were returned to the care of their families without a thorough risk assessment. Where assessments did take place they often did not involve the whole family. For example new partners and siblings were not involved in assessments.

When assessments were made there was sometimes a significant delay in writing them up, meaning that decisions were made on the basis of verbal reports rather than a full outline of available information. In other cases, not all the relevant
agencies were involved. In particular, adult services, who often held important information about parents' capacity to care for their children, were not represented.

A lack of thorough, timely assessments meant that family’s support needs post reunification were not identified or provided for.

**Lack of understanding about a parent’s capacity to change**

Children were often returned home despite there being little sign of improvement. This was particularly true in cases when there were ongoing issues with child neglect.

Professionals saw parents as needing a break rather than recognising neglect as an ongoing problem with a cumulative impact on the child.

**Acting on children’s expressed wishes without considering the potential risks involved**

In some cases professionals took on face value children’s expressed desire to return home. There was a failure to take into consideration the potential impact of parental pressure on what young people were saying.

In cases involving adolescents, some professionals decided it was unrealistic to prevent them from returning to their families regardless of how harmful it was. In particular, when adolescents repeatedly ran from care back to their birth family, there seemed to be a perception that care decisions couldn’t be enforced. In one cases a failure to return a child to care after they ran home to their birth family set a precedent resulting in the disruption of other siblings’ care placements.

**Lack of use or understanding of legal powers**

Professionals often believed they had no power to prevent a child returning to a harmful home environment if the child had originally been taken in to care voluntarily.

In some cases the child was returned home after parents signed a written agreement outlining what was expected of them and the support they would receive. These agreements did not outline what would happen if conditions were not adhered to and there was no response when parents did not fulfil these expectations.

**Professional optimism**

In a number of cases one parent was recognised as the sole source of risk to their child. Once the risk was removed following imprisonment of the risky parent or parental separation, the child was returned to the “safe” parent without a proper assessment of their own capacity to care for their child.
Information sharing

Agencies working with children and their families were not always informed when care was transferred to or from parents.

Information about changes in the family’s situation wasn’t always integrated into parenting assessments and care planning meetings. Key agencies were sometimes missing from planning meetings leaving professionals unable to build a full picture of the family’s situation.

Particular issues arose when care placements were in different local authorities or countries to the birth families. Problems around cross-border communication meant that information was lost about the child’s vulnerabilities and the parents’ capacity to care for them.

Lack of observation/monitoring

In a number of cases children were temporarily taken into care because their parents were struggling with a particular issue. When this issue was addressed, children were returned home. However there was no system in place to monitor whether parents continued to engage with support services or the impact a future lack of engagement would have on their children.

Lack of planning and support during and after the process of returning a child home

External time pressures were allowed to dictate the timing of returns home. For example one child returned home quickly because their social worker wanted to get them settled before the start of the new school year. In one case, despite the parent not having parental responsibility, children were allowed to stay overnight with them because it was Christmas.

In a number of cases agency support was withdrawn shortly after children ceased to have looked after status. Contingency plans were not put in place at the point of withdrawal of local authority support.

Learning for improved practice

The case reviews identified a number of ways to improve practice, which are also reflected in current legislation and guidance.

Thorough assessments

Before making the decision to return a child home from care there should be a thorough assessment of:
• potential risks and protective factors  
• parenting capacity and capacity to change  
• on-going support needs.

Assessments should also consider the child’s wants and needs and the impact their early experiences have had on them.

Assessments should be based on a thorough understanding of the birth family including a knowledge of family history and any changes to family dynamics, for example new partners or siblings.

**Clear conditions for return of child**

Parents need to know what is expected of them if their child is returned. They should know what support and help they will receive. It should be made clear what will happen if they fail to provide an acceptable level of care. This should all be set out in a written agreement.

**Preparation for and staged return of the child**

A transition period should be provided to allow both the child and carer to adjust to the move home. This should include a period of increased contact so professionals can monitor how the parents cope with the pressure of assuming more responsibility for caring for their child.

Returning a child to their birth family shouldn’t automatically result in the closure of a case. All children returning home from care should be considered Children in Need for a suitable period of time following a return home.

**Sharing information and working with professionals in other agencies**

Care review and planning meetings should involve all agencies who work directly with the child or their family.

**Good monitoring of the child before, during and after the return**

All agencies that work with a family need to recognise that family situations change and parents who have previously struggled may struggle again. Their progress needs to be monitored and support provided as the need arises.

**Contact the NSPCC’s Knowledge and Information Service with any questions about child protection or related topics:**

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