



Reunification of foster children: Factors associated with reunification outcomes in Flanders and the Netherlands



Anouk Goemans^{a,*}, Johan Vanderfaeillie^b, Harm Damen^c, Huub Pijnenburg^d, Frank Van Holen^e

^a Institute of Education and Child Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

^b Department of Clinical and Lifespan Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

^c Praktikon, Nijmegen and Pactum, Arnhem, The Netherlands

^d Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen, Praktikon and Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

^e Pleegzorg Vlaams-Brabant en Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 May 2016

Received in revised form 23 September 2016

Accepted 23 September 2016

Available online 25 September 2016

Keywords:

Foster care
Reunification
Permanency planning
Decision making
Outcomes

ABSTRACT

Although a significant number of foster children eventually return to their birth parents, evidence-based models for permanency planning are scarce, and there is a lack of clear decision-making criteria for reunification. This study aimed to establish further knowledge about reunification. Both reunification pace and factors which are associated with reunification were examined. The focus was on factors related to the foster child, the birth parents, the foster parents and the foster placement, and reasons for removal. Case file analysis was performed for 580 Flemish and Dutch foster children ages 0–18. Cox regression analyses showed contact with birth parents to be most strongly associated with reunification. Moreover, particularly placement related factors (e.g., legal framework, additional support services, contact with birth parents) increased the likelihood of reunification. Furthermore, over a period of six years approximately 15% of foster placements led to reunification notably during the first 2.5 years of placement. Policy makers and foster care professionals are therefore encouraged to timely aim for permanency planning. Reunification efforts should be planned from the start of the foster placement. If subsequently reunification proves not feasible, permanency should be secured within the foster family.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Permanency planning is basic to the foster care process. It is, ideally, a systematic, goal-directed and timely approach to case planning, aimed to find the best possible and stable care situation for a child that is conducive to the child's positive development (Tilbury & Osmond, 2006; Vedder, Veenstra, Goemans, & Van Geel, 2015). It is of primary importance that decisions regarding permanency planning are made in the light of child safety, and well-being. This means that the outcome of permanency planning differs for each child: reunification, long-term foster care, residential care, or adoption. Although permanency planning perspectives of foster care can be different, there is international consensus that children have the right to grow up with their birth parents (United Nations, 1989). As a consequence, family reunification is in principle considered as the preferred option with respect to permanency planning (Fernandez, 2013; Maluccio, Pine, & Warsh, 1994). In this light, it

is noteworthy that clear decision-making criteria (e.g., the criteria with-in child welfare that guide decisions) for reunification are lacking or might differ between countries and even within countries between foster care agencies, and that evidence-based models for permanency planning are generally lacking (Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Gelles, 1993; Hess, Folaron, & Jefferson, 1992; Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Gypen, 2016; Vedder et al., 2015; Wulczyn, 2004). As a result, permanency planning, and especially family reunification, is a challenging and complex process. In order to expand the knowledge required for effectively supporting and creating evidence-based policy and practice on family reunification, the current empirical study aims to uncover key factors associated with reunification in Flanders and the Netherlands. Furthermore, we aim to examine several understudied factors (e.g., family composition and age of the foster parents) in association with the likelihood of reunification. This can help to improve and expand knowledge which is necessary for supporting and creating evidence-based policy and practice worldwide. First, we give a brief introduction on family reunification and the characteristics of the Flemish and Dutch foster care systems, followed by an overview of national and international research on factors associated with reunification outcome. Next, the results of our empirical study are presented and discussed.

* Corresponding author at: Leiden University, Institute of Education and Child Studies, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, The Netherlands.

E-mail addresses: a.goemans@fsw.leidenuniv.nl (A. Goemans), jvdfaeil@vub.ac.be (J. Vanderfaeillie), damen.h@pactum.org (H. Damen), H.Pijnenburg@han.nl (H. Pijnenburg), frank.vanholen@pleegzorgvbb.be (F. Van Holen).

1.1. Family reunification

Family reunification in foster care refers to the process in which foster children are reunited with their families of origin. American studies have reported reunification rates between 8% (Cheng, 2010) and 68% (Courtney & Hook, 2012). Recent European studies on reunification indicated rates of reunification of 26% in Flanders (Vanderfaellie et al., 2016a), 20% in Spain (López, del Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2013), and 45% in Germany (Van Santen, 2010); reunification rates in the Netherlands are not known due to a lack of research. These results indicate that the percentages of reunified children differ widely between countries. However, these reunification rates cannot be compared in a straightforward fashion. Variation exists between study designs and legislations differ between and even within countries where the studies have been performed (Russell & Macgill, 2015; Vanderfaellie et al., 2016a). For example in the US, where most studies on reunification have been performed, the implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997, shifted the focus on family preservation and reunification to a model in which permanency and stability could be obtained through adoption (Wulczyn, 2004) and to a system of concurrent planning (e.g., making efforts for both reunification and adoption at the same time). Although reunification is still considered the preferred option, the US legal framework and policies differ considerably from several European countries. In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, with 6058 foster children in 2015) and the Netherlands (over 22,000 foster children), where similar legislation and procedures apply, permanency is for instance created through long-term foster care, not through adoption. As was already the case in the Netherlands, recent policies in Flanders followed this Dutch model and also distinguish between short and long-term foster care. In contrast to short-term foster care, in which foster care is considered a temporary intervention aimed at reunification, long-term foster care provides a more indefinite alternative living arrangement in the foster family. Still, the option of reunification can be evaluated in long-term foster care. Although until recently reunification was the major goal in Flanders, in practice approximately 25% of the children returned to their family of origin. Furthermore, despite the distinction between short and long-term foster care, few children in Flanders resided in short-term foster care which indicates that foster care is the most likely solution for children who cannot stay with their biological parents for longer periods of time. In addition, in Flanders and the Netherlands timeframes in which decisions regarding permanency planning must occur, are not specified in the same strict way as they are in the US (Vedder et al., 2015). Both in the Netherlands and in Flanders, there is a general consensus that permanency planning should occur within six till twelve months after foster placement, although this is not laid down by law.

Differences between foster care systems need to be taken into account when interpreting and generalizing the results of previous studies (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014). This is not only true for conclusions about reunification rates, but also for conclusions about the factors related to reunification outcomes. Much research is done on factors relating to reunification, but country-specific knowledge is needed to determine whether these findings can be generalized to the Flemish and Dutch foster care context. A brief overview of the research findings is given below, in which a distinction is made between factors related to foster child, birth parents, foster parents, and the foster placement, and reasons for removal (see Biehal (2006/2007), Akin (2011), and Pritchett, Gillberg, and Minnis (2013) for more extensive reviews). As will become clear from the short overview of the literature below, only one study on reunification is performed in Flanders, none in the Netherlands. Although most studies have been performed in the US (unless otherwise stated, the studies discussed below took place in the US), it is important to note that study findings should be interpreted in light of the country in which the study took place, given the previously described differences in policies between countries. In addition, it is essential to keep in mind the period in which the study has been

performed, because of changes in policy over time (e.g., by implementation of acts such as ASFA in the US).

1.2. Foster child characteristics associated with reunification

Many studies have been performed on the association between child characteristics and reunification, both in Europe and in the US (López et al., 2013; Vanderfaellie et al., 2016a; Wulczyn, 2004). Child characteristics include factors like gender, age of the child at entry in foster care, and ethnicity, but also the number of prior foster care placements (placement history/stability). Regarding gender, studies repeatedly have found that gender was not a significant predictor of reunification rates (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Courtney, 1994; Goerge, 1990). The findings with regard to the age of the foster child have been mixed. While some studies have shown that older children were more likely to experience reunification than infants (Akin, 2011; Harris & Courtney, 2003; Leathers, Falconnier, & Spielfogel, 2010; Wulczyn, 2004), other studies found that the odds of reunification did not differ significantly between younger and older children (Becker et al., 2007; Wells & Guo, 1999). More consistent research findings were found for ethnicity. Children from ethnic minorities, especially African American children, had lower rates of reunification (Akin, 2011; Courtney, 1994; McMurtry & Lie, 1992; Wells & Guo, 1999; Wulczyn, 2004). As to placement, it was repeatedly found that children who had experienced prior placement changes were less likely to be reunified (Connell et al., 2006; Courtney, 1994; Goerge, 1990; Smith, 2003). A possible explanation for this is that the association between placement history and reunification rates is mediated by children's behavior problems: a history of former out-of-home placements has been shown to contribute to behavioral problems (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), and also that these behavioral problems are associated with a lower likelihood of reunification (Connell et al., 2006). Another explanation might be that a volatile placement history could also indicate more chronic or entrenched problems in the birth families that are not being resolved.

1.3. Birth parents and foster family characteristics associated with reunification

Knowledge of birth parents' characteristics associated with reunification helps to get a better indication of conditions in the family of origin that should be met for reunification to occur. Research on these factors also provides information to establish a profile of which parents are more likely to be able to retain care of and responsibility for their children. In contrast to the ample research on foster child characteristics, few studies have been performed on the association of characteristics of birth parents and reunification (Akin, 2011; McDonald, Poertner, & Jennings, 2007). It is known that reunification was more likely if the foster child returned to a two-parent family rather than to a single-parent family (Harris & Courtney, 2003; Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007; Wells & Guo, 1999), although not all studies confirmed this result (Malm & Zielewski, 2009; Noonan & Burke, 2005). Furthermore, bivariate analyses showed birth parents' ages to be significantly related to reunification outcomes (Fraser, Walton, Lewis, Pecora, & Walton, 1996): the older the birth parents, the more likely the child was to be reunited with them.

Studies have also focused on the association between foster family characteristics and reunification, most often the difference between kinship and non-kinship foster families. However, the results of these studies have been inconclusive (Berrick & Needell, 1999; Connell et al., 2006; Courtney, 1994; Courtney & Barth, 1996; Koh & Testa, 2008; Wells & Guo, 1999). A recent meta-analysis has reported that although the overall effect size was in favor of children in non-kinship foster care; this effect was not statistically significant. This means that children in kinship care are equally likely to be reunified with their birth parents as children in non-kinship foster care (Winokur et al., 2014). Research on other foster family characteristics in relation to the likelihood of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4936644>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4936644>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)