

REUNIFICATION PRACTICE GUIDE

Practice Guides support the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#). They set out the best available evidence to support senior leaders and practitioners in local authorities to drive the conditions for effective practice and improve how services are commissioned, developed and delivered.

Senior leaders include but are not limited to directors of children's services, directors of public health, local authority chief executives, elected members (including lead members for children's services), children's services commissioners, heads of services, and others involved in developing and commissioning services.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable input of our advisers who worked closely alongside our Guidance Writing Advisory Group and whose contributions have greatly enriched this Practice Guide: Kar-Man Au; Kiefer Bird; Adam Birchall (Birmingham Children's Trust); Matt Clayton (Coventry City Council); Emeritus Professor Elaine Farmer (University of Bristol); Eavan McKay (NSPCC); Sorcha Morgan (Children and Families Across Borders); Rasheed Pendry (Solihull Council); Mandy Wilkins (Adopt London West); Danuta Withington (Stoke on Trent City Council).

We would also like to thank the National Children's Bureau for their work on the systematic review that underpinned this Practice Guide.

foundations.org.uk

X @foundationsww

in /foundationsww

🦋 @foundationsww.bsky.social

If you would like this publication in an alternative format such as Braille, large print or audio, please contact us at: info@foundations.org.uk

© Foundations 2026. Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales with company number 12136703 and charity number 1188350

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ▼	4
Extended definitions	5
Equality, diversity, inclusion & equity (EDIE)	7

KEY PRINCIPLES	10
-----------------------	----

RECOMMENDATIONS	25
------------------------	----

RESOURCES	30
------------------	----

EVIDENCE SUMMARY	31
-------------------------	----



INTRODUCTION

This Practice Guide focuses on reunification, the structured and supported process through which a child returns to their family after a period in care, including foster and residential care. The enablers of the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#) (leadership, workforce, multi-agency working) have a role in supporting delivery of this Guide's key principles and recommendations. The aim of this Guide is to support senior leaders, practice supervisors, and practitioners, including Independent Reviewing Officers in local authorities, across Family Help, child protection, safeguarding, and corporate parenting to make evidence-informed decisions that enable safe, stable, and well-supported reunification for children and their families.

This Guide relates predominantly to Outcome 3 of the Children's Social Care National Framework: children are supported by their family network, and Outcome 4: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. It also relates to Outcome 1: families stay together and get the help they need.

Reunification serves as a pivotal transition in the lives of both the child or young person and wider family. Decisions about whether looked-after children can return home will rest on whether the needs that were previously identified have been addressed. In these cases, the lead practitioner will be a social worker who should work with partners to take the decision about how to keep the child safe following the return to their family. These decisions should be informed by multiagency collaboration and shared responsibility to safeguard children, as set out in [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#). They should also be in line with the principles of the Children Act 1989: reunification planning and support should keep the child's welfare and best interests at the centre of decision-making, support children to be cared for within their families wherever it is safe to do so, and take a proportionate and timely approach through partnership with parents and carers.

Over the past decade, children's social care in England has rightly focused on the need for children to experience timely decisions and stable living arrangements, often framed through the lens of permanence. However, within this landscape, reunification as a route out of care has received comparatively less strategic attention, policy development, and investment than other pathways such as adoption or Special Guardianship Orders. Despite being the most common way children leave care, reunification is often underplanned and undersupported, increasing the risk of breakdown and reentry to care. The period following return home is one of heightened vulnerability, as families are managing the impact of separation. This Guide seeks to address that gap by strengthening reunification as a purposeful, planned, and supported process rather than a single event.



This Practice Guide is also published at a time of great change within the sphere of reunification policy, via the reforms to Family Help and the integration of reunification policy. Parents and family networks can be supported by Family Help, by providing a route to support them to address the issues which led to a child being removed, and increase success of reunification. Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) can also be seen as one of the pathways for reunification, with this potentially supported through a Family Network Support Package following FGDM. An FGDM is an umbrella term for different methods that involve families in decisions about their children.

This Practice Guide is based on findings from a robust systematic review, comprising of a comprehensive search of both quantitative and qualitative literature. A significant feature of this Guide is that the key principles and recommendations have been informed by primary research with parents and young people who have gone through the reunification process, as well as practitioners who work with these families. This has allowed the key principles and recommendations to be built on a rich evidence base with relevance to the UK context.

In total, the systematic review included 73 studies, with quantitative studies (n=27) broken down across eight typologies.¹ Twenty-eight participants took part in focus groups or 1:1 interviews. This included 12 young people, six parents, and 10 practitioners. Fifty-three practitioners working with care-experienced children completed the survey. More information on frequencies and demographic details can be found in the evidence annex.

EXTENDED DEFINITIONS

What do mean by reunification?

Reunification refers to the structured and supported return of a child to their parent(s) following a period in foster or residential care, underpinned by ongoing assessment, planning, and support to promote safety, stability, and family functioning. The Guide focuses on children and young people who are reunified within England.

Who do we mean by the term ‘parents’?

This refers to both birth parents and adoptive parents. For the purposes of this Guide, this term does not refer to foster carers, kinship carers, or extended networks of kin. This, however, does not take away from the vital role that they play in supporting children and families before, during, and after reunification, including through nurturing relationships, shared care planning, and continuity of support.

¹ The eight typologies are: parent-focused skills building; parent mentoring/coaching; multi-agency team around the family; therapeutic problem-solving courts; family finding; child-focused; family group decision-making; financial support.



What do we mean by ‘care experienced’?

Anyone who has been, or currently is, in care at any point in their life, including foster care, residential homes, kinship care, or secure care. While not a strict legal definition, it is a term widely used in policy to describe children looked after or care leavers. Reunification most commonly applies where a child or young person has been looked after by a local authority under section 20 or section 31 of the Children Act 1989.

Who do we mean by practitioners?

Reunification is varied across local authorities and can sit within Family Hubs, Edge of Care, or children looked after services in niche teams or individual workers. Therefore, by practitioners we mean any practitioner that might directly support a family prior, during, and post reunification. This includes social workers in safeguarding and children looked after services, early help and family support workers, and residential social workers. Foster carers also play a key role in supporting reunification along with practitioners in health and education across the multi-agency partnership.

Practice supervisors

Relevant service leads, heads, and managers.

Senior leaders

Any senior leader working across Family Hubs, safeguarding, and corporate parenting partnerships. This includes local authority leaders, such as lead members for children’s services, other elected members (councillors), directors of children’s services, and commissioners, as well as leaders working in health, the police, education, and youth justice services, for example.

Independent Reviewing Officers

Independent Reviewing Officers have a critical role in ensuring that reunification is actively considered as part of care planning, where it is safe to do so. This includes providing independent challenge where reunification has not been explored, ensuring plans are based on evidence rather than assumption or drift, and monitoring whether appropriate support is in place before and after a child’s return home.



EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION & EQUITY (EDIE)

As part of Foundations' commitment to promoting equality, diversity, inclusion, and equity (EDIE), our review considered how interventions aimed at supporting reunification address the needs of different populations of parents, caregivers, children, and young people.

The different groups of families and children included in the evidence

The review explored factors that may impact access to interventions and outcomes, including families' and children's:

- Place of residence
- Race/ethnicity/culture/language
- Gender/sex
- Education
- Age
- Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Religion
- Family composition
- Family's socio-economic status
- Care experience and reasons for out-of-home care.

All included effectiveness studies reported at least one PROGRESS-Plus² characteristic in their baseline demographic information. The most frequently measured characteristic was race/ethnicity, followed by gender/sex. There was no reporting of occupation, education, or socio-economic status in the studies. Only one study reported on religion, and one study reported on language.

2 A tool used in health equity research to identify and analyse social determinants of health – place of residence, race, occupation, gender, religion, education, socioeconomic status, and social capital – along with additional context-specific factors (the 'plus') that influence health outcomes and inequalities.



Effectiveness of programmes for particular groups of families and children

Our findings show that there was insufficient evidence that intervention outcomes varied according to sample gender, ethnicity, SEND status, socio-economic status, reason for being in care, or number of previous care placements.

There was limited evidence that outcomes varied according to the average age of children in the sample, with samples involving older children (12+ years old) tending to have more positive outcomes. In addition, findings suggest that reunification is less likely to be achieved in families where a sole parent is caring alone for children, compared with households with more than one parent/carer.

Effectiveness of intervention typologies across demographic groups or types of need

Our review also explored whether certain types of intervention were more effective for specific groups. These analyses were exploratory, and the evidence was often limited.

There was no significant interaction between intervention type and sample gender, socio-economic status, place of residence, SEND status, parent age, or family composition.

The research found evidence for mentoring and coaching interventions being effective for white families, but there was statistically weak evidence in Black or minoritised ethnic families.

Where neglect was the main reason children were in care, parent-focused skills-building interventions appeared to be more effective compared to other typologies, although this finding was based on only one study.

Experiences of specific populations of families

Qualitative and survey evidence suggests that effective reunification practice depends both on how support is delivered and on whether families can realistically access it. Families were more likely to engage with support when it reflected their cultural and linguistic needs. This included using accessible language, allowing more time for understanding, and adapting materials, examples, and intervention content so that they were relevant to minoritised ethnic families and accessible to all. Translation alone was not always enough, particularly where families were unfamiliar with legal processes or service systems. Peer or mentor support could also strengthen engagement, especially when families felt understood by someone with lived experience or who spoke their language.

The evidence also suggests that interventions aimed at supporting reunification are not always experienced fairly across all groups. Some family members and groups appeared



to be less well-served than others, particularly biological fathers, sole parents, and younger children, pointing to uneven reach and possible gaps in practitioner confidence, skills, or resources. Children and young people's participation was also influenced by age. While some reported feeling listened to, others described being excluded from meetings, receiving too little information, or not fully understanding why reunification was happening. This suggests that good practice should include developmentally appropriate communication and meaningful involvement throughout planning and implementation, not only in decisions about whether return home will happen.

Additional needs were also a major consideration. Parents, children, and young people with learning disabilities, ADHD, mental health needs, trauma-related communication difficulties, or other additional needs often required more time, repeated explanations, advocacy, and consistent relationships with practitioners. Where this happened, families described more positive and inclusive experiences. However, practitioners did not always appear to have sufficient knowledge or specialist training to adapt support well.

Overall, the evidence suggests that successful reunification support depends on relational, structural, and practical factors. Practice is more likely to meet families' different needs when support is inclusive, tailored, and responsive, but also when wider barriers such as poverty, housing insecurity, service thresholds, and local variation are addressed. Together, these findings suggest that effective reunification requires both inclusive practice and practical systems of support that enable all families to access and benefit from help.

More information on EDIE within the included studies can be found in the evidence annex material.



KEY PRINCIPLES



Key principle 1: Ensure reunification practice is based on partnership, trust, and shared decisions with children, young people, and families, throughout a child’s care journey and continued beyond a child’s return home

Children, young people, and families’ views and needs should be at the centre of reunification practice. Positive experiences of reunification depend on practitioners working in partnership with families to plan and sustain support that helps children return home safely and remain there. Children, young people, and parents emphasise that reunification works when they are actively involved in decisions about what support is needed, how it is provided, and who should be involved. Feedback from our Advisory Group highlighted the importance of reunification planning starting when a child first goes into care. It is also important to consider the child’s wider networks to identify people important to them and support them to maintain those relationships.

Children, young people, and parents value practitioners who listen, communicate clearly, and involve them in shared planning. Feeling heard and respected helps reduce fear and uncertainty, acknowledging the trauma which occurs when a child is removed from their families. Partnership is strengthened when families understand decision-making processes and see their views reflected in plans. Some parents shared the value of peer or parent mentors who bring lived experience and culturally relevant support.

Children, young people, and families consistently stress the importance of support continuing after reunification. Parents and young people describe practitioners as an important source of stability during this period, and report that abrupt endings to support can leave them feeling vulnerable. Young people also highlight the importance of

“I think for me the best person to have [catch ups about how things are going with reunification] would be the social worker, but, again, for me we had so many social workers, we didn’t have a consistent one. So, if we had an individual contact across somebody who remained with us throughout that process, I think that would make it a lot easier.”

Young person



maintaining valued relationships from their time in care, including with foster carers or residential care practitioners. Planned transitions, agreed follow-up contact with carers and other important people from their time in care, and access to emotional and mental health support help families manage emerging challenges and promote enduring relationships.

Family Group Decision Making approaches, including Family Group Conferences, were identified in the primary research to support reunification by placing families at the centre of planning and strengthening wider family and community networks. A Family Group Conference is a family-led meeting in which a network of family and friends comes together to make a plan for a child.

Parents report that these processes help create realistic, individualised plans and ensure support is in place for everyday pressures and unexpected situations. As a key aspect of the government’s ongoing reform programme, local areas should draw on these approaches, including combining with support available from Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs), to support with reunification.

Reunification is further supported when local authorities use clear assessment and planning tools collaboratively with families. These tools help families understand expectations, build on their strengths, and identify the support they believe will help keep their family together safely.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Ensure reunification support is designed as a long-term offer of structured help that extends beyond return home and ends only when the child, family, and practitioner jointly decide it is appropriate to do so.
- Commission and resource services that prioritise relational, family-centered practice, including manageable caseloads and continuity of practitioner wherever possible.
- Establish and embed a shared reunification framework, including assessment standards, planning templates, and minimum expectations for transition support.
- Promote multi-agency contributions to reunification support including through the Family Help Offer and referrals to domestic abuse, mental health, education, and community provision so families can access the right help at the right time.

“I think the difficulty is especially when the care order’s discharged, there’s just nothing for the family. That’s really difficult because going from all the support, all these interventions, so much scaffolding support, so many professionals breathing down your neck almost, to then everyone backing away and no funding’s available, no extra support, it’s really scary for families.”

Social worker



Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Use supervision to strengthen practitioners' relational skills, including purposeful communication, empathetic approaches, and maintaining trust with parents, children, and young people.
- Support practitioners to apply the reunification framework consistently, ensuring assessments are timely and proportionate, and that they directly inform clear action plans.
- Build and maintain trusting relationships with parents, children, and young people through consistent contact, empathy, honesty, and clear communication.
- Use the agreed framework to complete appropriate assessments and co-produce clear action plans with families, including the wider family network, about shared goals and practical steps.
- Develop a structured transition plan that sets out what support will continue after a child or young person returns home, including maintaining relationships from their time in care, check-ins, and who to approach if difficulties emerge.
- Recognise that reunification is a period of adjustment, provide reassurance and practical support to reduce families' feelings of vulnerability, and continue supporting families until no longer wanted and needed.
- Communicate clearly and work in partnership with families to plan when reunification support will reduce or end, and ensure families know what ongoing help is available and how to access it.

Key principle 2: Develop a reunification policy which draws on existing practice models that can support reunification

Interventions which support reunification are often existing models integrated within local authorities. The interventions that were most commonly identified and discussed in detail by families and practitioners as having a perceived positive role in supporting reunification included Family Group Decision Making, Multisystemic Therapy, Life Story Work, and Functional Family Therapy. Parents and young people consistently emphasised that what mattered most in supporting reunification was the purpose and quality of support.

Uptake of reunification practice varies substantially across areas. Some local authorities adopt dedicated reunification strategies and specialist teams, while others embed reunification within broader permanency and careplanning policies. Even without specialist teams, reunification practice can still spread across the system when supported by a clear strategic direction and consistent messaging.

Overall, the evidence highlights that families value interventions when they are offered as supportive resources, introduced through conversations about what would help them, and adapted to their circumstances and stage of reunification.



Clear, proactive multi-agency communication helps build shared responsibility for reunification planning and supports implementation to be sustained over time.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Develop a reunification policy which sets clear expectations for planning for a child’s possible return home, starting when they become looked after and reviewed throughout their time in care. This builds on the Children’s Social Care National Framework, which states practitioners should consider every possible option for safe reunification.
- Establish clear governance, ownership, and accountability for implementation, including agreed priorities and resourcing.
- Set expectations for consistent partnership communication, including shared messaging about the purpose of interventions and the benefits for families.
- Share best practice with senior leaders from other local areas.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Support teams to understand how interventions fit within local pathways, thresholds, and roles, reinforcing consistent application in practice.
- Promote shared learning from delivering the reunification policy, using supervision and team forums to address concerns, clarify roles, and build confidence.
- Encourage proactive communication with partner teams to coordinate input and reduce delays or duplication in family support.
- Use local implementation feedback (e.g. referral patterns, engagement data, practitioner feedback) to identify barriers to uptake and escalate system issues to be resolved.
- Communicate clearly with families and partner services about the purpose of different interventions, what they involve, and what different roles and responsibilities are.
- Engage wider stakeholders early where support depends on coordinated input, helping to align expectations and reduce mixed messages to families.
- Recognise that consistent implementation relies on shared commitment, and use professional curiosity and respectful challenge to resolve gaps in understanding or engagement across the system.

“I think the FGC is a really important ingredient as well. They organise what I need for my new home, for my home at that time, when my son comes back. Say, emergency, or I need to go somewhere, who will look after my son. In my network there are people from my church, and in whatever situation, who will do this, who will do that, who will support me. So, we have all the plans in place, so it’s all happening in that time. So, it’s quite holistic I think.”

Parent

Key principle 3: Ensure reunification support is flexibly offered and tailored to the racial, cultural, linguistic, mental health, and SEND needs and preferences of children, young people, and parents

Reunification support is most effective when delivered flexibly and tailored to the needs and strengths of children, young people, and parents. Parents and young people emphasise the importance of discussing reunification with trusted individuals and being listened to in planning. Families and practitioners value approaches that respond to complex and overlapping needs, including poverty, trauma, mental health needs, alcohol/drug misuse, housing instability, and limited social support. Parents also highlight the vulnerability associated with child removal and the importance of support from voluntary organisations and peer mentors. Practical help, practice that acknowledges prior trauma, and strengths-based approaches are most effective when practitioners have the time and confidence to respond to families' priorities.

Cultural and linguistic responsiveness is central to families' understanding and acceptance of reunification support. Parents with limited English proficiency or unfamiliarity with court or children's services terminology may struggle to understand assessments and expectations, even when translation is offered. Early identification of communication needs, clearer language, and culturally relevant content improve families' ability to participate meaningfully. Respectful engagement with cultural backgrounds, use of preferred languages, and adaptation of examples and concepts all enhance relevance. Delivering culturally competent support requires training, manageable caseloads, consistent, highquality communication, and awareness of the effects of systemic racism on minoritised ethnic families.

“By the very nature of having your child removed, you’ve become a vulnerable person, and we don’t recognise that enough and put into place the safeguards for vulnerable people, because I’m not sure you can be labelled anything worse in our society than a bad mother.”

Parent

Interventions must also adapt to the learning needs and SEND profiles of parents, children, and young people. Some families need additional time, modified communication, advocacy support, or adjustments to intervention structure to ensure understanding and engagement. Practitioners require the knowledge and training to recognise the spectrum of communication needs, and systems must ensure specialist expertise is available where needed.



To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Ensure the local reunification offer is designed with built-in flexibility so support can be tailored to children's and parents' needs, rather than delivered as a fixed model.
- Commission and resource culturally and linguistically appropriate provision, including access to interpreters, translated materials, and culturally aware practitioners.
- Embed expectations and pathways for identifying and responding to mental health and SEND needs, including links with relevant specialist services, throughout a family's journey with the children's social care system and including before and after reunification.
- Establish clear guidance on reasonable adjustments and accessibility standards so adaptations are consistently available across services.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Support practitioners to apply professional judgement to tailor delivery, ensuring plans remain purposeful while adapting to families' circumstances and needs.
- Use supervision to strengthen culturally responsive practice, including reflective discussion about bias, identity, communication, and trust building.
- Promote consistent identification and review of mental health and SEND needs within assessment and planning, ensuring adaptations are agreed, recorded, and revisited.
- Monitor engagement and outcomes for minoritised groups to identify where the intervention may not meet a family's needs, and work with leaders to adjust the offer.
- Work with children, parents, and carers to identify what support will be most helpful, tailoring intensity, pacing, and approach to their needs and preferences.
- Use accessible communication and ensure families can participate fully, including arranging interpreters, using plain language, and checking understanding.
- Recognise and respond to cultural context in a respectful, strengths-based way, drawing on community knowledge and trusted partners where appropriate.
- Identify mental health and SEND needs early, agree practical adjustments, and coordinate with relevant practitioners to ensure support is joined up.
- Review and adapt plans over time as needs change, ensuring families experience the intervention as relevant, respectful, and workable.



Key principle 4: Build the organisational and multi-agency capacity needed to deliver reunification support effectively

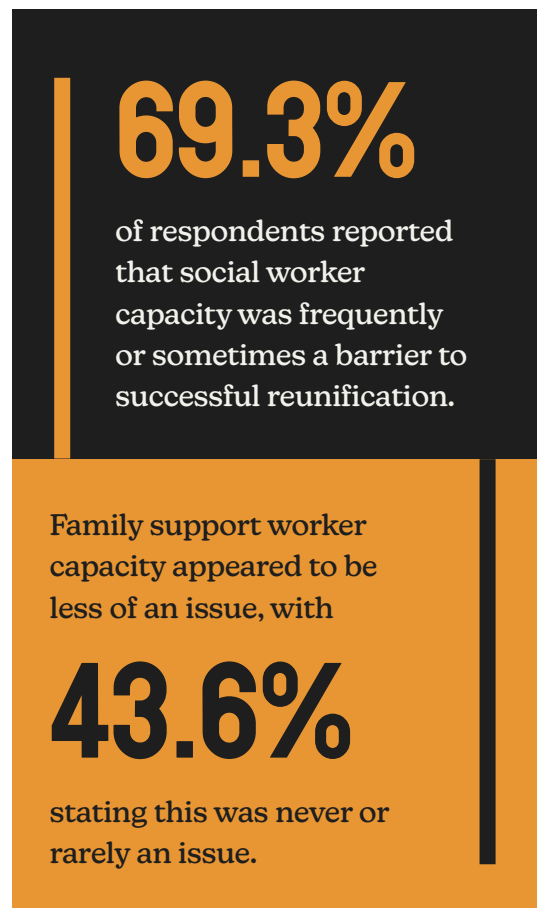
Successful reunification requires a well-resourced workforce, effective leadership and management, strong multi-agency collaboration, and adequate financial and material resourcing alongside a commitment to shifting culture.

Staffing pressures and workload demands significantly affect reunification practice. Teams working with high numbers of families and complex family needs have limited time to provide the needs-based and individualised support required for safe and stable reunification, while families face systemic barriers including inadequate housing, challenges accessing medical care or SEND support, and gaps in local therapeutic and community services. Our Advisory Group also highlighted the importance of having an organisational culture which views reunification as a key part of the system.

The **Families First Partnership (FFP) Programme Guide** (2026) sets out how the new approach to Family Help and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) can support family networks, and will play a key role in ensuring reunification is an integral part of practice and that key multi-agency partners work together to support families. The role of the Family Help Lead Practitioner can be an integral part of supporting families when a child is removed. This includes maintaining relationships and offering support to parents when their child enters care, and continuing to offer support to children and families when they return home.

Practitioners shared that reunification planning can be met with resistance from multi-agency partners, including schools, health, and police. This may reflect differing professional perspectives, previous experiences of unsuccessful reunification, and concerns about the child’s exposure to ongoing risk following a return home.

Children, young people, and families reported needing support with trauma and their self-esteem to improve their mental health, which in turn would support successful reunification. A lack of consistent access to therapies for children, young people, and parents was highlighted as an issue. Close collaboration with CAHMS and voluntary





organisations offering mental health support for children, young people, and families should be prioritised to support successful reunification.

Where programmes or local services include flexible discretionary funds or access to material supports, families can be better supported to reunify with their children. Financial precarity can impact families' ability to reunify with their children. Family Network Support Packages can play an important role in supporting families during their reunification journey.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Provide clear strategic leadership and governance so teams across the local partnership and the broader system can understand their role in reunification, follow consistent expectations, and are jointly accountable for progress and outcomes.
- Ensure responsibility for the capacity required to deliver reunification is shared across children's social care, education, housing, mental health services, family help, SEND, and other local teams, with collective accountability for staffing, caseloads, and continuity of support.
- Strengthen multiagency and multi-department arrangements, agreeing shared pathways, escalation routes, and informationsharing processes so that families experience coherent, wellsequenced support.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Use supervision to maintain safe and consistent delivery, helping practitioners prioritise their workload, adapt practice appropriately to family need, and address any drift or delay for the child and family.
- Identify and escalate capacity pressures early (e.g. staffing gaps, delays, unmet resource needs) and contribute to practical solutions that protect families' experience of support.
- Support effective multi-agency working by clarifying roles and expectations and ensuring coordination is built into delivery plans.
- Work collaboratively with partner agencies to ensure families experience coordinated support, with clear communication about roles, plans, and next steps.
- Be transparent with families about what support is available locally and help navigate access to practical resources (e.g. transport, venues, specialist input) where needed.
- Contribute to identifying barriers to reunification by feeding back to senior coworkers about what is and is not workable in delivery, including capacity and resource gaps.
- Use planning and recording systems consistently to support continuity, effective handovers, and joined-up working across the system.



Key principle 5: Have strong training and monitoring systems in place to support consistent reunification practice

Consistent implementation of reunification support relies on clear structures that help practitioners deliver approaches as intended. Without these foundations, support varies across teams and settings, making it harder to understand what is being provided and how support achieves positive outcomes for children and families.

The evidence base is really valuable when making adaptations to support and enables adaptation to local context and family need. Local authorities have frequently adjusted reunification frameworks, shortened tools, or developed local interpretations where national guidance is limited. Practitioners should regularly review the evidence base on reunification and be equipped to understand how to apply the learning to their practice.

High-quality training and ongoing supervision are central to supporting practitioners to deliver support consistently. Practitioners need a clear explanation of the model, opportunities to practise core skills, and guidance on working with complex family needs. Where training is limited, particularly in areas with fewer specialist staff, practitioners can struggle to apply approaches as intended. Programmes that supplement initial training with regular supervision, structured feedback, and routine monitoring tend to achieve more consistent delivery over time.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Provide a clear, shared definition of core components for reunification practice so practitioners understand what must be delivered consistently and what can be adapted.
- Set expectations for minimum support standards and escalation routes where these cannot be met due to capacity or engagement challenges.
- Invest in structured workforce development, including induction, ongoing training, and access to specialist expertise.
- Establish proportionate quality assurance processes that focus on learning and maintaining consistency.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Use supervision, reflective practice, and structured tools to maintain a clear understanding of models.
- Monitor delivery in practice, responding quickly where expectations are not being met and addressing barriers to consistent support.
- Translate training into practice through ongoing learning, skills development, and use of feedback.
- Be clear with children, young people, and families about what support involves.
- Record adaptations and key decisions consistently, including the reasons for changes and any implications for outcomes.



Key principle 6: Ensure reunification practice is shaped through the meaningful involvement of children, young people, and families, recognising the impact of trauma and understanding of risk

All groups highlighted the importance of meaningful involvement and careful communication throughout reunification, but emphasised different aspects of this process. Young people and parents experience reunification support most positively when they understand why plans are being made, what will happen next, and how their views will shape decisions both before and after a return home. This means engaging young people and parents as partners in developing plans. The research found fathers and younger children are less likely to be identified for reunification support.

Young people described highly variable experiences of being informed and consulted. Some felt listened to where reunification reflected their wishes, while others reported being excluded from meetings, given limited explanation, or returned home before they felt ready. Young people placed particular value on honest conversations about why reunification was being considered, whether they would be safe, what support would be in place, and how quickly changes would happen. Opportunities to ask questions, reflect on timing, and raise concerns were critical to building trust. Where young people felt ignored in earlier decision making, trust in practitioners was reduced and engagement became more difficult during reunification planning and implementation.

Parents placed emphasis on how reunification was planned and managed over time. Many parents reported not feeling proactively involved in planning, often shaped by earlier adversarial experiences with children's social care alongside a strong desire to have their child return home quickly. Practical constraints such as transport, childcare, scheduling, and access can be a barrier for families wanting to reunify with their children. Family Network Support Packages can be drawn on to overcome these barriers.

“You want them to come back and be like, ‘this is the situation’, and just having, I think, honesty is so important. If they’re saying, you know, ‘you’re going back to your mum and dad’, why do you think that’s suitable? That would be the question I’d be asking is ‘why do you think that’s suitable? How are you going to support me?’ Allowing, like, a young person to have the confidence to ask those questions, especially when they’re a teenager and they’re settled. Well, not necessarily settled, but they’re older and they are sort of like just trying to get their GCSEs done or whatever. Why now? Why not before? Why not in the future? Just those sorts of questions that it’s just like, what is your reasoning, and do you think I’m going to be safe? Being able to ask that and being told the honest answer.”

Young person



Taken together, this evidence shows that inconsistencies in how families are identified, engaged, and supported through reunification are not only about access to services, but about whether children, young people, and parents experience the process as transparent, respectful, and responsive to their needs. Reunification support is more likely to feel meaningful and sustainable where local authorities offer a clear, consistent approach; actively address barriers to participation; and prioritise ongoing involvement of children, young people, and families throughout planning, transition, and follow-up.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Set clear expectations for a consistent reunification offer across the area, including minimum standards for communication, involvement, support, and follow up.
- Ensure reunification planning actively involves children, young people, and families at all stages, with clear expectations for transparency, continuity, and oversight.
- Ensure the local model identifies and responds to underserved groups, including biological fathers and families with babies and younger children, with clear pathways for engagement.
- Commission practical support that enables participation, such as transport, childcare, flexible venues, and timing, including drawing on Family Network Support Packages.
- Use data and performance oversight to understand who is not being reached and address gaps in access, engagement, and outcomes.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Actively involve children, young people, and families in reunification planning, ensuring they understand what is happening, what will happen next, and how their views shape decisions.
- Plan and deliver engagement proactively, using clear communication and flexible approaches to reduce barriers and support participation.
- Identify unequal reach in practice, including limited involvement of fathers and younger children, or points where engagement drops off, and take action to address this.
- Tailor approaches for families with babies and younger children, using home-based and developmentally appropriate methods where needed.
- Recognise and respond to practical barriers such as transport, childcare, and scheduling, adapting delivery to make participation realistic.
- Use supervision, reflection, and case discussion to understand families' past experiences of services and strengthen relational approaches that build trust.
- Work with partner teams to coordinate involvement, reduce duplication, and ensure families experience support as consistent and joined up.
- Explain the purpose of support clearly and work collaboratively with families to ensure involvement feels accessible, proportionate, and meaningful.



Key principle 7: Invest in high-quality reunification support to increase the chance of stability for children, young people, and families, reduce the chance of breakdowns, and prevent costly care re-entry for local area budgets

Good reunification practice recognises that, when a return home is assessed as safe and achievable, specialist support can make this possible. Crucially, support that continues well beyond the point of return helps maintain stability and prevents breakdowns, which are traumatic for children and families and costly for local authorities. As with any support package, this ongoing support requires upfront investment from local areas.

Current evidence shows that insufficient support for families after a child returns home is costing millions each year, whereas investing in higherquality support could keep more children safely at home, and avoid care re-entry costs later down the line. Local areas should therefore prioritise reunification support as a core part of their preventative family-first approach, in order to reduce care re-entry through increasing reunification stability and improving outcomes for children.

Costing analysis research commissioned by the NSPCC and completed in 2024 by Professor Lisa Holmes³ showed that the government spent over £300m each year on children going back into care when a return home fails. In contrast, the estimated cost of providing support and services to meet the needs of all children and families returning home from care to reduce the chance of breakdown would be £67m – indicating huge potential cost savings if effective reunification support is provided. It was estimated that it costs £105,804 on average for each child who returns to care, compared to an average of just £7,857 to provide support to a family when the child returns home. Local areas **can draw on a tool created** as part of this work which enables local authorities to explore their own local patterns of need, costs and potential benefits.

Investing in reunification is underpinned by a strong moral case to help support families to stay together, where it is safe to do so. Outcome 1 of the Children's Social Care National Framework states children are best looked after and protected within their own network of enduring, loving, and caring family relationships. Local areas should also understand the cost-avoidance benefits in increased reunification support, in order to prioritise it as an investment area.

Overall, reunification practice is most likely to be implemented and sustained where decision-making takes account of both long-term value for money and the costs associated with reunification, alongside aligned budgets and commissioning across

3 Ford, J. and McKay, E. (2023) Home again: understanding reunification practice in the children's social care system in England. London: NSPCC. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2024/home-again-reunification-practice-in-england>

partners. Reunification support should always be carried out in the best interests of the child, and not purely to save money.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Prioritise investment in reunification support to help more children safely return to, and remain with, their families and avoid reentry to care.
- Use cost and outcome data to show how sustained support benefits children and families and reduces future disruption.
- Plan resources to ensure families receive consistent, ongoing support beyond return home, not just at the point of reunification.
- Work with partners to align funding and services so families experience coordinated, joinedup support.
- Draw on Family Network Support Packages to support reunification.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Provide consistent support that helps children and families feel secure and supported after return home.
- Focus on longterm stability by maintaining support beyond reunification and responding early to signs of strain or breakdown.
- Work with families to overcome practical barriers (e.g. housing, finances, transport) that affect their ability to stay together.
- Use feedback from children, young people, and families to shape support and focus on what helps them stay safely together.

Key principle 8: Recognise how systemic pressures can affect long-term permanence, and ensure reunification planning includes support to help families address these challenges

Evidence shows that financial insecurity and housing insecurity can undermine reunification and reduce the likelihood of long-term stability for children and young people returning home.

Without practical support for families in poverty and housing need, reunification may be more difficult to sustain. Financial hardship and homelessness can disrupt routines, limit families' ability to meet children's day-to-day needs, and increase the risk of children returning to care. Where these pressures remain unresolved, the likelihood of achieving long-term permanency is reduced.



Reunification planning can mitigate this risk where it explicitly includes assessment of poverty-related pressures and housing circumstances, alongside action to support stable living conditions and access to material and practical support. Supporting these needs early, and as part of the reunification process, can improve the likelihood that children and young people remain in stable home-based care and do not experience further disruption.

To apply this evidence to practice:

Senior leaders should:

- Ensure reunification planning explicitly considers poverty, financial hardship, housing instability, and homelessness where these may affect long-term permanency.
- Set expectations for coordinated working between children’s social care, housing, welfare, and local support services so that families receive timely practical support.
- Ensure local reunification approaches recognise that housing needs may need to be resolved before reunification can safely proceed.
- Commission, or enable access to, practical support that can reduce immediate material hardship, such as emergency funds, financial assistance, or support through voluntary and community sector organisations.
- Use local data and oversight to understand how poverty and housing instability affect reunification outcomes and where additional support may be needed.
- Consider what agreements can be put in place between local authorities and their own housing department to support families with long-term housing.

Practice supervisors and practitioners should:

- Assess financial hardship, housing instability, and homelessness risk as part of reunification planning and review.
- Identify how poverty-related pressures or unstable living conditions may undermine reunification if left unsupported.

Suitable housing for reunited families was the most commonly reported barrier for professionals, with

89.7%

reporting that housing is frequently or sometimes a barrier to successful reunification.

A lack of financial support for families was also a common issue reported by professionals, with

84.7%

reporting that this occurs frequently or sometimes.



- Where viable, build clear actions into reunification plans to improve housing stability and reduce immediate material hardship.
- Coordinate with housing, welfare, and community-based services to support families whose circumstances place reunification at risk.
- Monitor whether changes in family income, housing status, or living conditions increase the likelihood of reunification breakdown.
- Respond early where poverty or housing-related pressures threaten the stability of the child's return home.
- Recognise that, for some families, practical and material support is necessary alongside relational or behavioural support to sustain long-term permanency.



RECOMMENDATIONS



Reunification is a pivotal transition in the lives of the child or young person and their wider family. The period following their return home is often one of vulnerability: families must not only cope with the impact of separation, but continue to address the adversities and needs that may have contributed to the child's entry to care and experiences associated with their time in care. Moreover, factors such as length of separation, age of child, and expectations of family dynamics can all contribute to length of the adjustment phase.

This Practice Guide **recommends** the use of evidence-based interventions aimed at supporting reunification to improve outcomes for children returning home.

Our evidence shows that interventions that support reunification contribute to supporting and improving the lives of children returning home. On average, children and families who receive reunification support achieve better outcomes than around 60% of those who do not receive an intervention, suggesting a meaningful overall advantage for those receiving support.

Recommendation 1: Ensure support is made available and matched to the assessed needs and experiences of children and families

NO RATING⁴

Effective reunification is not determined by intervention type alone, but by how well support is matched to the assessed needs and experiences of children and families.

Interventions aimed at supporting reunification can vary widely in their form and intensity. Our review categorised interventions into eight overarching models: Family Group Decision-Making (including family group conferencing); therapeutic problem-solving courts, such as Family Drug and Alcohol Courts; multi-agency teams around a family; parenting mentoring/coaching⁵; family finding⁶; parent-focused skills building; financial support; and child-focussed programmes. When statistically comparing these,

⁴ Statistical analysis conducted as part of the underpinning systematic review indicates that intervention type was not a significant factor in the efficacy of reunification support. This suggests that commissioners, service leads and practice supervisors should be **guided by thorough assessment of needs at the family level** to choose appropriate intervention approach/es.

⁵ Interventions that involve a trusting, long-term relationship between a mentor or coach and the parent to provide support and advocacy

⁶ Interventions that aim to find relatives or family friends who can provide support to children and parents during the reunification process



the evidence did not identify a single intervention model that was consistently more effective than others. Reunification should therefore not be approached as a one-size-fits-all process, more a combination and choice of approaches to be carefully tailored.

Children return home to families with different strengths, risks, histories, and experiences of both pre- and post-care harm. Some families may need intensive parenting support, others financial assistance, therapeutic input, or coordinated multi-agency involvement.

In the absence of strong evidence favouring a single intervention model, decisions about support should be based on careful assessment of the specific needs, experiences, and circumstances of the child, young person, and parents involved.

Practitioners should therefore be supported by their practice supervisors to select and tailor evidence-informed reunification support on the basis of assessment, rather than being required to deliver a single prescribed model. The role of the system is to ensure practitioners have access to a range of evidence-informed options, alongside supervision and guidance, so that support can be matched to the context and needs of each family.

Recommendation 2: Offer evidence-based interventions⁷ to support children to remain safely at home and reduce re-entry into care

GOOD EVIDENCE

There is good evidence that carefully tailored reunification support can help children and young people remain safely at home and reduce the likelihood of re-entry into care.

Both prior to, and after, reunification, families often face continued pressures. The challenges that led to care entry may persist, while children may return home with needs requiring sustained support. Without early and effective help, these pressures can undermine stability and increase the likelihood of returning to care.

Evidence-based interventions aimed at supporting reunification reduce this likelihood by offering structured support before, during and after the child returns home. Their value lies not just in enabling reunification, but in helping to sustain it safely over time. This requires attention to the factors most likely to disrupt stability, timely responses when difficulties emerge, and consistent support across the transition home.

“It’s about really understanding the specific needs of that family and their journey to date, and really tailoring the support to them.”

**Team manager for
‘children in care’ team**

⁷ This recommendation is based on a moderator analysis of 17 studies showing a significant positive effect of interventions to support children to safely remain at home and not return to care. More information about the 17 studies can be found here: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Rec2-underpinning-evidence-reunification-practice-guide.pdf>



Senior leaders, practice supervisors, and practitioners should ensure that reunification support is explicitly designed to promote safe stability at home and reduce re-entry into care. This includes:

- Providing structured support before, during, and after reunification, with continuity across the transition home.
- Identifying and addressing the factors most likely to undermine reunification.
- Setting goals that focus on sustaining safe care at home over time and reviewing these goals regularly.
- Considering parent mentoring and coaching, where appropriate.
- Monitoring family stability and responding early to emerging risks. This could include planning solutions and mitigations for when potential difficulties might arise in the future. For example, if a parent can't get a child to school that day, who can support?
- Ensuring safety planning is clear, practical, and regularly reviewed.
- Coordinating timely support to prevent escalation.
- Maintaining oversight of progress towards safe and sustained reunification at home.

Recommendation 3: Link parents to appropriate specialist treatment and support through early intervention, following a child being placed into care, to increase the later likelihood of safe return home

PROMISING EVIDENCE

There is promising evidence that linking parents to appropriate specialist treatment and support following a child's removal can increase the likelihood of a later safe return home.

The period after a child is placed in care is often marked by distress and uncertainty. Parents may be experiencing adversities such as mental health needs, alcohol/drug misuse, or housing instability. Without timely help, these pressures can reduce parents' ability to engage with reunification planning and make safe return home less likely.

Delays in accessing treatment or support can also slow progress towards reunification goals. Barriers such as waiting lists, service thresholds, transport, cost, stigma, or unclear referral pathways may limit engagement. Where parents are not connected promptly to appropriate support, opportunities to address risks early may be missed.



Early identification of need, followed by timely and coordinated access to services, can help parents make progress on the issues most closely related to safe return home and strengthen their capacity to engage in change. A compassionate and supportive approach is essential, one that recognises the impact of adversity and trauma experienced both before and during a child's time in care, alongside families' immediate practical and emotional needs.

Evidence highlights the importance of ensuring that parents with alcohol/drug misuse problems are linked to, and get treated by, local specialist services, to increase chances of successful reunification. The research points to the value of approaches such as Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs), which combine judicial oversight with intensive, multi-disciplinary support. These approaches can improve the prospects of successful reunification by helping parents engage with treatment, sustain progress, and address the issues most closely linked to safe return home within a coordinated framework. Though it is recognised this intensive model of support is expensive to implement at scale, senior leaders should work with partners to prioritise access to support for drug and alcohol misuse and ensure local services have treatment available that is appropriate and accessible for parents who have had children placed in care.

“So, for our interventions we normally use any recommendations from proceedings as to what would govern the work that we would do and then look at gaps around that. So, if it's concerns around parenting, concerns around neglect, domestic abuse, we would then deliver interventions around that, so we were specifically working towards what the issues were and what the outcomes from proceedings were.”

Senior practitioner

Senior leaders, practice supervisors, and practitioners should ensure that post-removal support includes active linkage to appropriate specialist treatment and support where relevant to safe return home, prioritising the safety of the child. This includes:

- Assessing parents' treatment and support needs as early as possible following removal.
- Identifying the factors most likely to affect safe return home if left unaddressed.
- Making timely referrals to appropriate services and advocating for these. This can include treatment and practical support, as well as having a support plan in place post-reunification, if factors return.
- Actively supporting parents to access services through clear guidance, coordination, and follow-up, rather than relying on referral alone.
- Addressing barriers to engagement, such as transport, cost, appointment systems, uncertainty about processes, and lack of availability of key resources.
- Ensuring local authorities commission key resources that support making successful reunification possible. This could include employing a child psychologist where CAMHS services are difficult to access.



Recommendation 4: Target multi-agency reunification support to families with multiple needs, where coordinated, wraparound support is most needed to sustain reunification

PROMISING EVIDENCE

There is promising evidence that multi-agency reunification models are effective for families facing the greatest adversities, where the likelihood of children returning to care is highest, and single-agency support is unlikely to be enough.

This includes children and young people with multiple prior placements, often older children (12+ years old), and families experiencing overlapping challenges such as safeguarding concerns (e.g. child neglect or maltreatment), reduced parenting capacity, mental health difficulties, alcohol/drug misuse, domestic abuse, housing insecurity, and unmet education or health needs. In these cases, reunification is more likely to breakdown and children re-enter care without holistic, coordinated, and timely support.

Multi-agency models to support reunification provide a means of matching support to this level of need. By bringing together children's social care, health, education, youth justice where relevant, and specialist services, these models can create a single, coherent plan that addresses the range of factors affecting reunification. This can help practitioners respond early to emerging difficulties, reduce the fragmentation of support, and maintain continuity across the transition home.

Targeting these models towards families with the highest needs help direct intensive resources where they are most likely to strengthen reunification stability and sustain positive outcomes over time. Wraparound support enables interventions, practical assistance, and risk management to be aligned within a shared plan, helping families manage multiple challenges concurrently and reducing the likelihood that difficulties escalate or re-emerge.

Senior leaders, practice supervisors, and practitioners should ensure that multi-agency reunification support is focused on improving stability and long-term permanency in families with the greatest needs. This includes:

- Prioritising children and young people at greatest likelihood of re-entry to care.
- Coordinating support across agencies through clear roles, shared outcomes, and agreed timescales.
- Ensuring continuity of support and often of treatment before, during and after reunification.
- Aligning specialist and practical support to the adversities and needs most likely to undermine family stability.
- Monitoring progress closely and responding early to emerging difficulties.
- Maintaining clear, regularly reviewed safety plans understood across agencies.
- Reducing duplication through consistent communication and shared decision-making.
- Keeping oversight of progress towards stable, safe reunification at home.



RESOURCES

Reunification Practice Guide (online summary)

Explore the summary version of the Practice Guide on our website: <https://foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides/reunification>



Summary for Elected Members

This document summarises the key principles and recommendations of the Practice Guide to support elected members to reflect on their local offer, and consider how it could be strengthened: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-summary-elected-members.pdf>



Reflective Tool

For actioning the Reunification Practice Guide: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-reflective-tool.pdf>



Systematic review

Read the systematic review that underpins the Practice Guide: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/systematic-review-reunification-practice-guide.pdf>



Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDIE) annex

Read more about sample sizes, demographics & findings related to EDIE characteristics identified in the systematic review: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-edie-annex.pdf>



Evidence annex

Find out more about the underpinning evidence for each key principle and recommendation & read recommendations for future research & evaluation: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-evidence-annex.pdf>



Technical annex on methodology

Find out more about the methodology used in the creation of this Practice Guide: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-technical-annex.pdf>





EVIDENCE SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATION	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
1. Ensure support is made available and matched to the assessed needs and experiences of children and families		NO RATING ⁷	
2. Offer evidence-based interventions to support children to remain safely at home and reduce re-entry into care		✓	
3. Link parents to appropriate specialist treatment and support through early intervention, following a child being placed into care, to increase the later likelihood of safe return home			✓
4. Target multi-agency reunification support to families with multiple needs, where coordinated, wraparound support is most needed to sustain reunification			✓

⁷ Statistical analysis conducted as part of the underpinning systematic review indicates that intervention type was not a significant factor in the efficacy of reunification support. This suggests that commissioners, service leads and practice supervisors should be **guided by thorough assessment of needs at the family level** to choose appropriate intervention approach/es.

This resource is part of a set of publications linked to the Reunification Practice Guide

Find out more about the series of Practice Guides: foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides

We want to hear from local leaders who are engaging with the Practice Guides. Get in touch at practice_guides@foundations.org.uk

