Research Brief

Maltreated Children In The Looked After System: A Comparison Of Outcomes For Those Who Go Home And Those Who Do Not

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Introduction

This study is one of a series of projects jointly commissioned by the former Department for Children Schools and Families and Department of Health to strengthen the evidence base on recognition, effective interventions and inter-agency working in child abuse and neglect. This project has a focus on the consequences of decisions to reunify children who had entered the looked after system for abuse or neglect. It compares the progress and outcomes of a sample of maltreated children who either went home or remained in the looked after system.

Key findings

- Maltreated children were less likely than children looked after for other reasons to leave the care system within the study timeframe. Placing children at home whilst the subject of a care order was an important avenue for attempting their reunification, although breakdowns were higher for this group.
- Outcomes for maltreated children who remained looked after were better than for those who went home with respect to stability and well-being. Those who had experienced one or more breakdowns at home fared worst, but even those children whose reunifications had endured had lower levels of well-being than those who had not gone home. This was especially so for neglected and emotionally abused children.
- Decisions to reunify maltreated children should be based on careful assessment. Well planned reunifications, based on clear evidence of sustained change in parenting capacity, and provision of support services to assist parents and children were factors associated with stable reunifications over the follow-up period.
- Provision of services, often at quite high intensities, will be needed to support successful reunions for as long as these are required. Although services helped children's stability at home, there was little evidence that they improved significantly children's overall well-being at home.
- Where reunification failed, there were often early signs. Over one third of children (35%) had re-entered the looked after children system within six months. Speedier assessment and decision-making is needed where home placements are in difficulty to reduce the likelihood of further harm to children and being successful in finding alternative pathways to permanence.
- There were major variations by local authority and social work team in children's care pathways and in planning and decision-making. Although the reasons for these require further investigation, they do provide potential for shared learning about 'best practice'.

Background

Around six in ten children in the looked after system have entered for reasons of abuse or neglect. Many of these children subsequently go home and, while some reunifications are successful, many others are not. This study examined the care pathways of these children and, in particular, compared outcomes for those who remain looked after away from home and those who return home. The decision to separate children from their families and, subsequently, to return them home again or provide them with a long-term alternative placement are amongst the most serious taken by children's social care services.

Such decisions involve considerable uncertainty. Some children who become looked after do not settle, they may continuously yearn to be with their families and do not do very well. However, the risks of harm associated with reunifying maltreated children may also be high, including the potential for further maltreatment or breakdown. This study set out to strengthen the evidence base about the longer-term consequences of these decisions to reunify or not reunify maltreated children.

Aims

The study had four principal aims:

1.   To compare the care pathways of maltreated children to those of children looked after for other reasons and account for any differences identified.

2.   To investigate which maltreated children are more, or less, likely to go home and why this may be the case.

3.   To examine how the key decision for these children to return home, or not, was made, identify the main factors that were taken into account when making it and how this decision was supported over the next six months.

4.   To compare the progress of children in relation to their safety, stability and psychosocial well-being up to (on average) four years after this key decision was made.

Methodology

The research design comprised:

1.   A *census study* of all 3,872 children who were looked after by seven local authorities at some point in 2003-2004. Information primarily from local administrative systems was used to track the care pathways of these children for up to three years and to compare those for maltreated and other types of looked after children.

2.   A *survey* of 149 of these children, supplemented by interviews with nine birth parents and 11 children. All were maltreated children, aged 0-12 years at admission and while some returned home (*home group*, n=68) others remained continuously looked after (*care group,* n=81) until or beyond the end of the census follow-up period. Information from case records was used to investigate each child's background, how the key decision to reunify them or not was made and how it was supported over a six month period. Information from children's current (or most recent) social workers and teachers assessed progress and outcomes at final follow-up, on average four years after this decision was made.

Findings

Children's backgrounds and entry to the looked after children system

Most children had experienced multiple forms of maltreatment (89%), most commonly a combination of physical and emotional abuse with neglect (34%). A range of complex and inter-connected parental

problems had also contributed to their admission, including substance misuse, domestic violence, offending and/or mental ill health. Most children had been known to children's social care services for two or more years prior to admission (83%). In most cases (79%) some family support services had been provided, although these had not prevented them from becoming looked after.

Comparing the care pathways of maltreated and other children

Maltreated children were less likely than children who were looked after for reasons other than abuse or neglect to have left the looked after system within the *census* follow-up period. They were more likely than other children to have taken alternative pathways to permanence through adoption, residence orders or long-term fostering. Maltreated children were more likely to be the subject of a care order. As a result of this more maltreated children were likely to have returned home subject to the Placement of Children with Parents Regulations etc 1991. This therefore provides an important mechanism for managing the reunification of these children.

Care pathways varied by local authority and the social work teams within them. Local authority effects were evident in relation to the pathways of children (whether children went home, moved on to adoption or remained looked after). Local authorities, however, had less influence over whether children who went home stayed there or returned to the looked after system after breakdown, or whether those looked after had a stable placement. In these respects, the levers available to local authorities were weaker and outcomes of placement were more dependent on the quality of care and support provided by carers, social workers and parents.

There was also evidence that social work teams exerted an influence on these pathways over and above that exerted by the local authority as a whole. Not only did teams influence these pathways, they also seemed to have some influence over children's stability at home or in care, most likely through the direct work undertaken with carers and parents to support placements.

Which maltreated children go home?

The *census* study identified a number of factors associated with whether or not children went home, although none predicted return as strongly as did the local authority responsible for their care. Reunification was cumulatively less likely where children had been looked after for a longer time, they accepted the need to be looked after, they were considered to have a disability and if they had come from families affected by substance misuse and domestic violence.

More detailed evidence from the *survey* showed that children were less likely to return home where they had become looked after as a result of neglect, they had a learning disability, there was evidence on file that they did not want to return, their contact with birth parents was infrequent and where the parental problems that had led to the admission of these children were still the subject of 'serious' social work concern at the time the key decision to return them home or not was taken.

The most important predictors of return home were whether (a) the risks to the safety of the child were assessed as being acceptable and (b) the problems that had led to the child becoming looked after were considered to have improved during the child's time in the looked after system. Given the risk that maltreated children who return home may experience further maltreatment, it seems right that a focus on child safety and evidence of change should be of central importance in reunification decisions.

Planning and decision-making

The *Survey* revealed good evidence of purposeful social work planning in a majority of these cases (67%) that was broadly inclusive of birth parents and children (73% of cases).

The planning process varied by local authority. For most of the authorities this pattern of variation was not consistent, each appearing to have different strengths and weaknesses. Typically authorities would have strengths in some areas of planning (e.g. involvement of external professionals), but weaknesses in others (e.g. inclusion of children). However, in one area with weaker overall planning there was evidence of parents removing children who were accommodated by the local authority at will, of planning drift requiring the intervention of children's guardians and of reunification occurring by default without evidence of clear plans.

The existence of a care order gave social workers greater control over the planning and timing of reunion. For children who returned home on a care order, every dimension of planning was stronger than for children who went home after a period of voluntary accommodation, for whom planning was either less consistent or less within the control of social workers.

Children's safety and stability

An initial assessment of children's progress was made six months after the decision not to return the child home (*care group*) or after reunion (*home group*). Final outcomes were assessed four years, on average, after this key decision had been made.

Most concerns about children were already evident at the six month stage. Amongst those who went home, concerns about child safety and quality of parental care were significantly higher than for children in the *care group*. The latter were also rated as being more settled at six months. Although similar proportions in each group had moved, most moves for the *care group* were rated as planned moves for broadly positive reasons. Virtually all moves for the *home group* were the result of breakdown and more than one third (35%) had returned to the care system within six months.

By final follow-up, on average four years later, only one third of the *home group* had remained continuously at home. Three in five (59%) had made at least one return to the looked after system (though some were back home again) and one fifth had experienced more than one reunification attempt. Children in the *care group* continued to be more settled, with two thirds (65%) in the same placement for two or more years compared to 41% of those at home.

Social work concerns about children who had been returned home meant that more services had been devoted to maintaining them there when compared to those provided to children in the *care group*. In the first six months, social work contact was more frequent, more family-focused social work interventions were provided and parents accessed more services than did parents of looked after children. Over the whole follow-up period, more services were also provided to children at home. Overall, there was some association between provision of services and reunifications having endured at follow-up.

A number of factors were associated with reunifications continuing at six months. These reunifications were more likely to have endured where:

- Children had gone home slowly, over a longer period of time
- Planning for reunion had been purposeful and inclusive of children and birth families
- The problems that had led to the child's admission had reduced
- More family-focused social work interventions had been provided
- Parents had accessed more services.

These factors continued to have resonance for stability at final follow-up, although not all reached the threshold for statistical significance. In addition, by this stage re-entry to the looked after system was more

likely where parents had continuing difficulties with substance misuse or where children had been placed at home subject to a care order.

These findings on stability make sense. Going home over a longer period of time provides greater opportunity for well managed planning and proper consultation. Evidence of change, support to achieve it within an acceptable timeframe and provision of services to support return appear important to the likelihood of children's reunifications lasting.

Children's well-being at follow-up

A global outcome measure was constructed to assess the overall well-being of children at final follow-up. This combined separate measures of risky behaviour, emotional and behavioural development, school adjustment and well-being, and overall progress in line with the five outcome areas of *Every Child Matters.*

In relation to this well-being measure, children in the *care group* were faring better, even compared to children in the *home group* whose reunification had remained stable throughout the follow-up period. There was no evidence that this finding could be explained by greater difficulties among children who went home and this suggests, overall, that remaining looked after is likely to enhance the well-being of maltreated children.

In overall terms, stability was associated with well-being since those settled for longer (either at home or in care) tended to have a better well-being score. Children in the *unstable reunification* group, who had experienced a breakdown, had a worse score than those in the *stable reunification* group who had not returned to the looked after system. Yet, despite this latter group including children who had the best chance of success at home, those continuously looked after still had a more positive well-being score.

Some variations were evident for children who had experienced different types of maltreatment. The clearest findings concerned neglected children. Where there had been strong evidence of past neglect, even after taking account of other factors that predicted the well-being outcome, these children did best if they remained looked after. Amongst those who went home, the stability of the reunion appeared to have little impact on their overall well-being. Where children have suffered chronic and/or severe neglect, therefore, the potential for reunification should be viewed with great caution. This was generally recognised by social workers through their greater reluctance to return these children home. Emotionally abused children who went home also tended to fare worse than similarly abused children who remained looked after.

Certain groups of maltreated children may do better if they return to homes where significant adults responsible for the maltreatment have left or if they return to a different parent. While this pattern of improvement was suggested for most groups of maltreated children, it could not be evidenced for children who had only experienced serious neglect. This may reflect the pervasive and chronic nature and effects of this form of maltreatment.

Problems in the early stages of reunion also predicted a poor well-being outcome at final follow-up. Behaviour problems at six months predicted poor well-being at follow up and this was also the case where serious social work concerns had existed about the child's safety or where placements had broken down (or were subject to serious concerns) at that stage. These findings point to the link between further maltreatment, disruption or the failure to protect children from their own risky behaviour and the continuing legacy of these some years later with respect to children's well-being.

Implications for policy and practice

The evidence from this study should not lead to the blanket conclusion that maltreated children should not go home. In any case, where children and parents strongly want to be reunified it may prove extremely difficult to resist. It does, however, suggest that there is a high risk of failure and that decisions to reunify should be taken with considerable caution, perhaps especially where children have experienced serious and sustained emotional abuse and neglect.

Most children had a relatively long exposure to harm before becoming looked after, had experienced multiple forms of maltreatment and a high number of other adversities. At this stage there is a need for decisive early intervention and provision of services (identifying written goals, timescales and consequences) in order to support families, make speedier decisions and reduce the likelihood of further damage to children.

Decisions to reunify maltreated children should not occur without careful assessment and evidence of sustained positive change in the parenting practices that had given concern. It will help for reunifications to take place slowly, over a planned period, giving time for a well managed and inclusive planning process and for services to be provided to help parents make and sustain the changes that are needed. These factors appeared to be important for reunifications that endured. Some children may fare better if the primary abuser is no longer there or they return to a different parent.

Services, often of quite high intensity, will be needed to support reunifications for as long as they are needed. Although we found evidence that services helped reunifications to endure, there was little evidence that they helped to improve children's overall well-being at home.

Repeated attempts at reunification should be avoided. The children in our *unstable reunification group* were amongst those to have the worst overall outcomes and around one fifth had made two or more returns to home. Not only is this damaging for children, it also increases the risk that they will not be found a permanent placement or, that if they are, it will not be successful. Where changes in the homes of reunified children are not sustained or parents fail to comply with treatment programmes, an early assessment of its longer term potential for the child should be made to prevent drift and further deterioration. Most difficulties had emerged within the first few months of reunion.

Local authority variations in children's care pathways and in planning and decision-making require further investigation. This variation does, however, point to the existence of a range of policy and practice levers that local authorities might be able to exploit (and share) to increase and make more consistent the range of permanence options available to maltreated (and other) looked after children. Some authorities (and teams within them) were more successful than others at providing children with permanent placements through adoption or family reunification. Some social work teams (even within the same authority) were more successful than others at making these placements durable and stable for children. The more we understand about how these differences occur, the greater the potential will be for shared learning.

While many reunifications proved problematic, the findings also provide important messages about the potential of substitute care for many maltreated children. In overall terms, most children had settled quite well in care, had good relationships with those supporting them, were doing reasonably well at school and were not getting into great difficulty. Compared to those who then went home, those who stayed were also more likely to be settled and doing well at follow-up. Although the care system is rightly criticised for its weaknesses, this study has shown that for many maltreated children it can provide an opportunity for children to feel safe, to re-shape their lives and take advantage of opportunities that had previously been closed to them.

Additional information

Further information about this research can be obtained from Isabella Craig, Analysis and Research Division, 4FL-ARD, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT.

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Information about other studies which are part of the Safeguarding Children Research Initiative can be found at http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/scri/