




CHILDREN'S NETWORK

OF HILLSBOROUGH, LLC

Policy and Procedure

Department Name Quality Management		
SUBJECT: Reunification		POLICY NUMBER: QM - 011
APPROVAL: 	EFFECTIVE DATE: 06/12/2024	REPLACES (policy # and date):

- I. **PURPOSE:** This policy and procedure establishes the steps to be followed when recommending reunification in court ordered out-of-home placements.
- II. **REVIEW HISTORY:** New Policy
- III. **CONTACT:** Quality Management Department.
- IV. **PERSONS AFFECTED:** Children’s Network of Hillsborough staff and contracted Case Management Organizations.
- V. **POLICY:** It is the policy of Children’s Network of Hillsborough County that the proper steps are taken when recommending reunification in court order out-of-home placements to ensure child safety.
- VI. **RATIONALE:** The rationale of this policy is to ensure the proper steps are taken when recommending reunification in court ordered out-of-home placements.
- VII. **CROSS REFERENCES:** Ch. 98-403, Laws of Florida; FAC 65C-30
- VIII. **PROCEDURES:**
 - A. **General Requirement.**
 - 1. When the court has removed a child from the legal custody of a parent and placed them under the supervision of the Children’s Network of Hillsborough (CNHC), the court must explicitly approve the return of the child to the care of the parent or other custodian. Return of the child to the parent without court approval is a violation of the court’s order and may result in a finding of contempt by the court and disciplinary action by the assigned Case Management Organization.

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

2. If the court orders the return of a child to the custody of the parent, and there is no judicial stay of the order, the child must be returned immediately, regardless of the provisions of the reunification policy.

B. Visitation / Transition from Placement to Reunification.

1. During initial visitations, the child welfare case manager, or other court approved responsible third party, must be present to:
 - a. Assist the parent and child in working toward reunification.
 - b. Assist all parties in minimizing the stress inherent to parental visiting.
 - c. Observe and document progress of the parents increased protective capacity and positive behavioral change.
 - d. Observe and respond to any unsafe behaviors displayed by the parent.
2. If the court has prohibited or restricted visitation, the case plan must detail specific steps that, if successful, will lead to the recommendation by the case management organization for visitation to begin or become less restricted.

Case management staff shall work to ensure that visits take place in a setting conducive to parent-child interaction, e.g., a playground, park, home of the child's family, home of the foster parent or a visitation center as long as it is safe.

3. Visits must, when possible, include activities in which a parent normally assumes the responsibility, such as meetings with school staff, doctors, etc.
4. Visitation must be continually assessed, and documented in the file to:
 - a. Ensure case management staff has supported and facilitated visitation by arranging/providing transportation when necessary and minimizing any other obstacles noted.
 - b. Determine whether the parent-child interactions are achieving desired results. If significant concerns are noted, the Case Manager and Supervisor must determine if modification of the case plan or assessment of parenting skills which may include assessment by a therapeutic professional are required.
 - c. Determine when it is appropriate to recommend that the court modify supervised visitation.

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

- d. Determine whether it is safe and appropriate expand the frequency and duration of visitation.
- e. In situations where visitation is not occurring regularly, or is detrimental to the child, it will be necessary to collaborate with the parents and other involved persons or entities to determine what, if any, assistance case management can offer.

C. Criteria for Reunification.

Any decision to return the child home must be made in collaboration with all involved persons or entities to assess whether the child will be safe, and to assess the readiness of the parents and child to live together on a full-time basis. The criteria to be used are:

1. Increased protective capacities by the parents to the extent that reunification is considered safe for the child and any other children in the family, as well as appropriate for parents.
2. The parents and child have successfully spent extended periods of time together including overnight and weekend visits where appropriate without further abuse or neglect.
3. The parents and child indicate verbally and by their actions that they are ready for reunification.
4. Whenever possible, the family has a well-established support system made up of individuals such as: family members, extended relatives, church members, neighbors, friends, foster parents, employers and providers.

D. Factors that Warrant Special Consideration.

1. In cases of egregious maltreatment in which the person(s) allegedly responsible have acknowledged their responsibility, any safety factors that may continue to be present following treatment/rehabilitation must be carefully assessed during the reunification staffing described below. The treatment professional(s) involved in rehabilitation must be invited to participate in the MDT reunification staffing. If they are unable to participate, their reports must be available for review prior to the staffing.
2. Families in which there is a history of chronically neglected and abusive behaviors may not benefit from short-term intensive treatment services. Decisions concerning success of treatment/rehabilitation of these families and subsequent reunification should be reviewed carefully with the safety of the

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

child foremost in the decision process. The treatment professional(s) involved in rehabilitation must be invited to participate in the reunification staffing. If they are unable to participate, their reports must be available for review prior to the staffing.

E. Overnight Visitation and Reunification Staffings.

1. When the plan is to allow a child of any age to start overnight visitation with the person(s) responsible for the abuse or neglect, a MDT/Reunification Permanency staffing involving the Case Manager and a Case Management Supervisor or above shall occur in an attempt to ensure the child's safety and well-being. During the staffing, the following information will be reviewed:

- a. All abuse, neglect or abandonment reports of the child and other children in the family prior to the report which resulted in the removal, the report which resulted in the child(ren)'s removal and any subsequent reports received while in out of home care.
- b. Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), local law criminal record checks and abuse registry checks on the parent(s), household members, frequent visitors, and any paramours of household members. Department of Juvenile Justice checks must also be done on all adolescents/adults in the home (ages 12-26). This should include a check to see if there have been allegations or responses to domestic violence and whether any injunctions for protection have been entered. If there is access to information concerning how often law enforcement has responded to such complaints, this information should be evaluated. Within 10 business days of initiating the Reunification Progress Update, local backgrounds must be updated including fingerprinting of any household members 18 years of age or older.
- c. The home study completed on the parent(s) utilizing the Family Functioning Assessment Progress Update. The Reunification Progress Update must address the change in parental capacities, the physical home environment and an analysis of all pertinent information including information related to additional household members.
- d. If overnight visitation is approved a transition plan, formal or informal, should be developed that specifies: the visitation schedule including dates and duration, how to compensate for missed visits due to the child's illness or other unforeseen circumstances, supplemental forms of contact between visits e.g., video conferencing, telephone calls, etc., persons responsible for providing transportation, and points of contact for emergency.

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

2. When the plan is to allow a child of any age to be reunified with the person(s) responsible for the abuse or neglect, a staffing involving the Case Manager, the next two levels of supervision, Guardian Ad Litem if assigned, Children's Network MDT and Permanency Specialists, and the caregiver(s) of the child shall occur in an attempt to ensure the child's safety and well-being. If the court orders the child(ren) to be reunified against or without a recommendation from the agency then the case needs to be staffed within 48 business hours of the court hearing and all of the above individuals need to be invited. During the staffing or case review, the following information shall be reviewed:

- a. All pertinent case file information.
- b. All abuse, neglect or abandonment reports of the child and other children in the family prior to the report which resulted in the removal, the report which resulted in the child(ren)'s removal and any subsequent reports received while in out of home care.
- c. Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), local law criminal record checks and abuse registry checks on the parent(s), household members, frequent visitors and any paramours of household members. Department of Juvenile Justice checks must also be done on all adolescents/adults in the home (ages 12-26). This should include a check to see if there have been allegations or responses to domestic violence and whether any injunctions for protection have been entered. If there is access to information concerning how often law enforcement has responded to such complaints, this information should be evaluated.
- d. Any assessments and/or reports from service providers who assisted in or evaluated the family's readiness for reunification.
- e. All current psychological and medical assessments.
- f. Any assessments and/or reports from the school or day care.
- g. The home study completed on the parent(s) utilizing the Family Functioning Assessment Progress Update or home study form.
- h. Guardian ad Litem report or written statement concerning the proposed reunification.
- i. Progress on case plan services.
- j. Child Protection Team assessments.

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

k. Written statement from the current caregiver concerning the proposed reunification if they are unable to attend.

Day care arrangements for any child(ren) five and under.

l. Judicial Review findings.

m. Proposed date of returning home.

n. Case Plan for post-placement supervision that have been negotiated with the family (if the staffing is held within 72 hours of the court hearing requesting reunification).

o. The frequency of face-to-face home visits must be determined and documented at the staffing based on the conditions in the home, needs of the child(ren), level of safety and risk to the child(ren) and the level of cooperation of the parent(s).

p. A transition plan to develop a written plan to transition the child(ren) into the home.

q. Any educational or provider changes that will change with the reunification.

r. Updated Safety Plan and CPA, if appropriate.

3. When the plan is to allow for short, unsupervised day visits in the community with the person responsible for the abuse or neglect, a full case review as described above is not required. However, prior to the visit, the expansion of visits must be staffed with the team to address any concerns, develop a plan, develop a safety plan and outline guidelines for unsupervised visits in a public place documented in FSFN under the meeting tab. Whenever possible, expansion of visits should be part of a team transition plan covered in an MDT

4. The results, both positive and negative, of all visits occurring under this section must be documented in the case file.

5. It is the expectation that unannounced visits will occur during the parent's unsupervised visits to ensure they are following the guidelines and expectations discussed in the transition discussion.

F. Post-Placement Supervision. The court is required to exercise a minimum of 6-months post placement supervision from the date of legal reunification. . Post-placement supervision shall include:

1. The child(ren)'s best interest and safety considerations, including conditions of return, shall be evaluated prior to recommending reunification

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

and throughout the post-placement supervision period. The child's adjustment shall be evaluated throughout the post-placement supervision period.

2. The case plan for post-placement supervision shall be completed, filed with the court and served on all parties at least 72 hours prior to the court hearing in which reunification is recommended. If the court returns custody to the parent contrary to the Case Management Organization's recommendation the post-placement supervision case plan shall be completed, filed with the court and served on all parties within 14 working days of the court hearing. The effective date is the date custody changed to the parent.

3. The case plan for post-placement supervision shall include:

(a) Case plan outcomes that are informed by the ongoing family functioning assessment or progress update assessment.

(b) An in-home safety plan

(c) Routine health care, as well as follow-up for physical health or substance abuse service needs that have been identified if related to identified diminished caregiver protective capacities.

(d) Specific provisions regarding the need for child-care or early education programs, and,

(e) Frequency for contacts by child welfare professionals.

3. Post-placement Services. Services to be provided by the Case Manager in reunification cases include:

(a) Continuous monitoring of the in-home safety plan, and modification of the safety plan if necessary;

(b) Exchange of information with parents;

(c) Support, Guidance and referrals, as needed;

(d) Return to the parents of original documents, including the child's social security card and birth certificate;

(e) Determine in accordance with Section 402.17(7),F.S., and subsection 65C-17.006(3),F.A.C., of the disposition of any of Master Trust moneys being held for the child;

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

- (f) Provide a copy of the child's resource record contents, including any individual education plans that were approved while the child was in out-of-home care.
- (g) Assistance in using community and other family resources;
- (h) Coordination with the school district regarding educational stability so, whenever possible, the child can continue attending the same school following reunification;
- (i) Evaluation of the family's progress as a unit; and,
- (j) Evaluation of the child's progress. The case manager shall be aware of the child's development, school attendance and adjustment, health and medical care, child-care arrangements, treatment plans, nutrition, recreation, community activities and family dynamics.

4. If the Case Manager becomes aware of conditions or activities in the child's home, placement home or another location, that threaten the safety of the child, the Case Manager must take whatever steps are necessary to protect the child and make a report to the Florida Abuse Hotline.

5. The Case Management Organization must submit the placement change form for updating the change from substitute care to post-placement in FSFN.

6. The frequency of visitation can be reduced after a staffing is held between the Case Manager and their Supervisor and documented in FSFN. The Case Manager and Supervisor must discuss such factors as attendance at daycare, presence of other protective adults, and involvement of other social service programs.

(a) The visits must occur in the home. All visits are to be face-to-face with the child. The purpose of the visit is:

- (1) Observing and documenting the child's condition, appearance and development;
- (2) Observing and documenting child/parent interaction;
- (3) Monitoring the child's safety and well-being;
- (4) Continuing to implement the case plan objectives; and,
- (5) Supporting the family in their reintegration.

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

(b) Additional face-to-face visits with the child can occur outside of the home environment if there are concerns regarding child safety or well-being factors and the Case Manager determines that a conversation with the child in another location will facilitate an open and honest discussion.

(c) The Case Manager must establish and maintain regular face-to-face contact at a minimum of every 30 days with the custodial parent(s) with one unannounced visit minimum every 90 days to any child under in-home supervision. If a parent or person responsible will not allow observation of the child, for whatever reason, the Case Manager making the home visit shall immediately contact their Supervisor for guidance as to possible law enforcement involvement to gain access to or remove the child.

7. Following three (3) months of post-placement supervision, the Case Manager shall:

(a) Evaluate with the family their adjustment following the return of the child and their progress toward completion of outcomes in the case plan;

(b) Assess any continuing safety concerns;

(c) Update the family functioning through the progress update, and,

9. When requesting an extension of post-placement supervision from the court, specific details explaining safety, risks, service needs and the parent's case plan accomplishments shall be provided to the court.

10. Reunification with a parent outside of Florida requires approval through the Interstate compact on the Placement of children, Section 409.401, F.S.

11. When the assessment indicates that case plan requirements have been met and any remaining safety concerns have been satisfactorily resolved, the Case Management Organization must file a motion to terminate supervision.

12. When the court orders terminating supervision during a hearing presided over by the Judge, the agency will proceed with immediate case closure. If, however, the hearing is presided over by a Magistrate, Citizen Panel or the court is ordering closure by letter, the agency must receive the signed closure order before supervision is terminated or the case is closed.

G. Interstate Placement of Children. Pre-placement planning with a parent or relative who lives in another state must include request for a home study through Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), a clear understanding that the child may be reunified with the parent or custodian from who the child was removed, and that the out-of-state person must agree

**Children's Network of Hillsborough, LLC
Reunification**

to cooperate in return of the child to Florida for the reunification process. Also, the other state's social services contact and the out-of-state person with whom placement is being made must understand that parent/child contact may be limited to telephone/video calls and letters with few or no face-to-face visits.

1. Reunification of children (returning children to Florida) who have been legally placed in another state through the ICPC requires careful planning to ensure that all aspects of inter-family communication, coordination with the local social services worker in the other state (who is supervising the child for community-based care) and travel arrangements take place.
2. Florida's court jurisdiction over the child remains in effect during a legal placement in the other state, through ICPC, and is legally sufficient to cause the return of the child for the purpose of reunification. However, if the parent or relative in the other state will not cooperate with case management in the return of the child, then the court may have to assert jurisdiction by issuing a pick-up order. Any such pick-up order should also direct law enforcement to put the pick-up order on the Criminal Information Computer (CIC) System. This necessary precaution will afford some protection to a worker who may be sent to pick up the child in another state or enable the worker to obtain law enforcement assistance in the other state with the pick-up.
3. Written progress reports by the supervising social worker in the other state are essential for judicial reviews. Accordingly, social worker to social worker communication is necessary, and notification of court dates will ensure the availability of reports in time for court hearings. Direct transmission of reports may occur in accordance with the receiving state protocol as long as a copy is also provided to the central Interstate Compact Office in each state. Frequency of progress reports may be determined in case staffings or directed by court order but must occur quarterly at a minimum.
4. Children who have been placed, or allowed to be placed, in another state by case management, or a Florida court, without the approval of the other state's Interstate Compact Office lose protection of the ICPC law. It also means a social service worker in the other state will have no legal authority to represent the agency in supervising the child under the Interstate Compact law. An illegal child placement could seriously delay reunification, or even prevent it, especially if the out-of-state parent or relative applies for legal custody in the other state's court.

IX. EXHIBITS:

Exhibit A: Reunification staffing form



REQUEST TO INITIATE OVERNIGHT VISITATION OR REUNIFICATION

DATE OF STAFFING: _____

CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	
CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	
CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	
CHILD'S NAME:		AGE:	

Caregiver's Name:	
Mother's Name:	
Father's Name:	
Father's Name:	
Father's Name:	
Father's Name:	

1)	REQUESTING:		OVERNIGHT VISITATION		TO BEGIN:	
			REUNIFICATION		WHEN:	

2) CURRENT PLACEMENT TYPE, INCLUDING NAME:

	RELATIVE		FOSTER CARE		OTHER
	NON-RELATIVE		NON-OFFENDING PARENT		

3) OVERNIGHT VISIT/REUNIFICATION IS AUTHORIZED AS PART OF A:

	CASE PLAN		COURT ORDER
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EXPLAIN:

enrolled in an early childhood program or a child care facility and if not what services have been added to protection the child(ren) in the home.

8) THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTATION HAS BEEN OR WILL BE SHARED WITH THE COURT. CHECK IF LOCATED IN THE CASE FILE:

A.	Original child safety assessment <u>and</u> updated risk/safety assessment		
B.	GAL recommendations		
C.	Foster Parents / Caregivers written concurrence or disagreement with the request		
D.	Medical and/or psychological assessments (Mandatory, if they address reunification)		
E.	Pertinent Case Notes / Progress Reports / Termination Summaries		
F.	Any documentation contradicting the recommendation for reunification		
G.	Information from school and/or child care		
H.	Documentation of Home Study on parent(s)		
I.	Child’s statement (age is not an exclusionary factor)		

(9) IF ANY OF THE ABOVE DOCUMENTATION IS NOT IN THE CASE FILE YOU MUST EXPLAIN WHY:

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