

Improving the chances of successful reunification for children who return home from care: a rapid evidence review

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Summary

Supporting children to return home after an episode of care is a key concern within children's social care services. As part of work undertaken to support the Independent Review into Children's Social Care, What Works for Children's Social Care has commissioned a brief evidence review into this area to capture a growing evidence base and inform the recommendations of the Independent Review. The aim of the evidence review is to contribute to the knowledge base about improving the chances of successful reunification. It will do this through a systematic search of the literature, focusing on empirical studies of services designed to improve the outcomes of reunification in the UK and some other countries with a comparable child welfare system. The review will be carried out from September-December 2021 and will report in mid-January 2021.

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Part 1) Rationale and question formulation

- An explanation of the theoretical and scientific background, policy context and rationale for the systematic review.

Rationale

Reunification is when children return home to their parents after a period in out-of-home care, or remain with their parents if their care placement was at home. Although it is still the most common way for children to leave care, reunification is becoming less frequent and rates of re-entry to care are high compared to other exit routes such as adoption and special guardianship (Selwyn et al., 2015; Mc Grath-Lone et al., 2017). Recent analysis of the national datasets for England has shown that rates of re-entry have been rising for children who return home and the likelihood of re-entry varies significantly depending on characteristics of the child and on the type and quality of provision (Hood et al., 2021). Improving outcomes for children in care is a key social policy goal. UK research into reunification has tended to focus on re-entry to care and the factors influencing the stability of reunification. The factors influencing rates of reunification and re-entry to care have been fairly well established in existing reviews and studies (Cordero, 2004; Esposito *et al.*, 2014; Murphy and Fairtlough, 2014; Biehal *et al.*, 2015; Wilkins and Farmer, 2015; Van Holen *et al.*, 2018; Carlson *et al.*, 2020; Martin *et al.*, 2020; Hood *et al.*, 2021). However, evidence on how to improve the chances of successful reunification for children who return home from care has

	<p>as yet not been systematically assembled and is therefore an important contribution to the field.</p> <p>This review will focus on the services and interventions that have been found to improve reunification outcomes and investigate the support that can help children who return home to thrive in their families. The questions also enable a consideration of how the contextual factors shaping children’s post-care trajectory interact with the quality and nature of services that help parents and children prepare for reunification but also to support them in its aftermath.</p>
Research question(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What services and interventions have been found to improve the outcomes of reunification? 2. What types of support (for children, parents, families, networks) can help children who return home to thrive? <p>Population: children (0-17) who return home to their parents following an episode of out-of-home care, or remain with parents if their care placement was at home (does not include care leavers who return home after ‘ageing out’ of care). Intervention: services to support and improve reunification Context: child welfare/children’s social care services 2000-2021.</p>

Part 2) Identifying relevant work

Search Strategy

Electronic databases	<p>Scopus, Cochrane, PubMed, PsychINFO, Web of Science</p> <p>2000 – 2021</p>
Other sources	<p>Alongside the databases, other citations (including grey literature) will be searched through a manual search of key websites: DfE, Ofsted; NCB; and Cafcass.</p>
Key search terms	<p>Domain</p> <p>#1 (Population): Child* OR Adolesce* OR Infant* OR Baby or Babies* OR "Young people" OR Teenagers OR parent* OR family OR families).</p> <p>#2 (Intervention): Reunif* OR "return home" OR "returning home" OR "go home" OR "going home" OR "go back home".</p> <p>#3 (Outcome): Quality OR Effectiveness OR Evaluat* OR Efficacy OR Success* OR Improve* OR Improving OR Support OR Facilitate OR Enable OR Help .</p> <p>#4 (Context – type of provision): Care OR “looked after” OR Foster OR “children’s home” OR Residential)</p>

Draft search strategy

Example from Web of Science search:

(#1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4) AND (LA=("ENGLISH")) and Articles or Early Access (Document Types) ▼	Web of Science Core Collection	668
12:43 PM Timespan: 2000-01-01 to 2021-08-16 (Index Date)		
(#1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4) AND (LA=("ENGLISH")) ▼	Web of Science Core Collection	720
12:26 PM Timespan: 2000-01-01 to 2021-08-16 (Index Date)		
TS=(Care OR "looked after" OR Foster OR "children's home" OR Residential)	Web of Science Core Collection	1,957
12:26 PM		
TS=(Quality OR Effectiveness OR Evaluat* OR Efficacy OR Success* OR Improve* OR Improving OR Support OR Facilitate OR Enable OR Help)	Web of Science Core Collection	18,51
12:26 PM		
TS=(Reunif* OR "return home" OR "returning home" OR "go home" OR "going home" OR "go back home")	Web of Science Core Collection	7,672
12:26 PM		
TS=(Child* OR Adolesce* OR Infant* OR Baby or Babies* OR "Young people" OR Teenagers OR parent* OR family OR families)	Web of Science Core Collection	4,187
12:26 PM		

Study selection criteria

Inclusion criteria

Inclusion:

- Empirical study designs (e.g. RCTs, observational studies, qualitative studies, case-studies)
- Publication date: 2000 – 2021.
- Geographical region: UK (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), Republic of Ireland, United States, Canada, Australia
- Language: English
- Type: article, report

Studies will be included if they directly consider services to improve the outcomes of reunification. Grey literature will be included along with peer-reviewed articles where it meets inclusion criteria.

The geographical inclusion criteria are designed to provide insight into contextual factors affecting decision-making in jurisdictions with a similar 'child protection' orientation towards child welfare (Gilbert et al., 2012).

Exclusion criteria

Exclusion: see flow chart below for exclusion criteria and associated codes.

Process of study selection

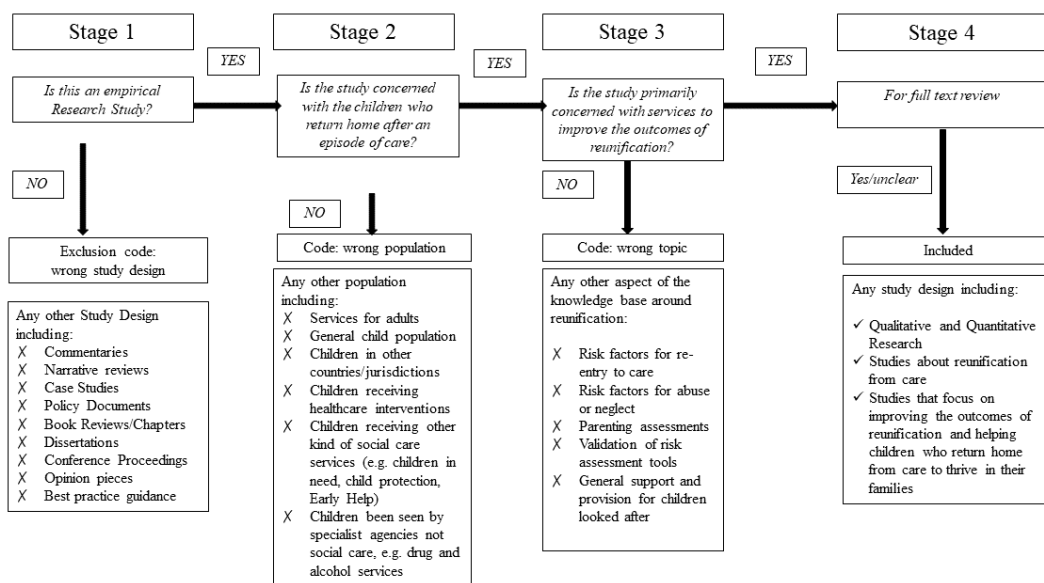
After removal of duplicates, abstracts will be screened according to the inclusion criteria and then the remaining full texts will be screened to obtain a final sample. Screening will be carried out separately by two reviewers and any inconsistent results passed to a third reviewer or discussed by the project team.

A 'pilot' screening exercise will be carried out with a limited sample of 100 entries to support consistent inclusion/exclusion decisions..

Once a provisional list of full text articles has been identified, further screening will take place to check that the full text is available and that inclusion criteria are met.

A flow chart illustrating study selection has been added below

Flow chart for title/abstract selection:



Study records

Data collection

The following data will be extracted from each study: author, year, funding, aims, study design, methods of data collection and analysis, sample, interventions (if applicable), follow-up period (if applicable), main findings, ethics, strengths, and limitations. A pro-forma framework will also be used to record data specifically relevant to the research questions to assist with thematic analysis.

Data management process

A shared folder in KU Box, an encrypted storage and file sharing system, has been set up for this project. A record of all database searches carried out will be stored in this folder. Citation records from searches will be imported into specialist software for collaborative reviews (Rayyan) for abstract and title screening. Full text publications will be stored in Pdf format and decisions on final screening for inclusion recorded in Rayyan.

Data items

For quantitative studies, data will include participants, intervention/programme, comparators and outcomes (for

	quantitative studies), principal thematic categories will also be collected for qualitative studies and implications (all studies). Specific data relating to the research questions will be additionally recorded.
Outcomes and prioritisation	The outcomes of interest are measures of the success of reunification. This may be measured in various ways. For example, some studies may operationalise success as reducing the proportion of children returning home who subsequently re-enter care. Others may use other measures, e.g. the quality of parent-child interactions, or long-term developmental outcomes such as emotional and psychological wellbeing or educational attainment.

Part 3) Risk of bias assessment

Risk of bias assessment criteria	The final sample of publications will be appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong <i>et al.</i> , 2018). This tool is particularly suitable for systematic reviews that will include a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and has been found to have sound psychometric properties by Pace <i>et al.</i> (2012).
Purpose of risk of bias assessment	This review will not carry out meta-analysis of quantitative results. The principal purpose of bias assessment is to contribute to the appraisal of the overall strength of evidence in relation to the review questions.

Part 4) Summarising the evidence

Data synthesis	The principal method of data synthesis will be a thematic analysis of study findings (in the final sample of full text articles) based on an adapted Framework approach (Gale <i>et al.</i> , 2013). The framework will combine the MMAT appraisal criteria with a set of analytical categories focused on the results/findings and designed to capture data relevant to the review questions. Although some of these categories will be a-priori, there will be scope to generate new themes from the data in an iterative process of interpretation and synthesis.
Meta-bias(es)	n/a
Confidence in cumulative evidence	The strength of the body of evidence will be reported through a summary of the MMAT appraisal used to examine all included studies.
Reporting and interpreting findings	The findings will be written up in a report using a pre-specified review template. It will include an overview of the area, an account of methods and results, strengths and limitations of the review process and evidence base, as well as a discussion of the implications of findings for practice, policy and research.

Registration

The review was registered with the OSF on 15/10/2021. Registration link:
<https://osf.io/n7x24/>

Personnel

Hood will coordinate the project, contribute to all aspects of the review, and lead on design and report writing. Abbott and Nilsson will undertake database search, screening, appraisal and evidence synthesis, and contribute to design and report writing. Screening and appraisal will be assisted by Baginsky and Dimond. Hood will supervise technical aspects of the search and appraisal process. Baginsky and Dimond will contribute to knowledge synthesis and report writing.

Timeline

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
September 2021	Database search and title/abstract screening	Hood Nilsson, Abbott, Baginsky, Dimond
October 2021	Agreement, appraisal and analysis of final sample	Hood Nilsson, Abbott, Baginsky, Dimond
November 2021	Report writing	Hood Nilsson, Abbott, Baginsky, Dimond
3 December 2021	Draft report submitted	Hood
January 2021	Amendments to report following review	Hood
January 2021	Final report submitted	Hood

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