

Reunification

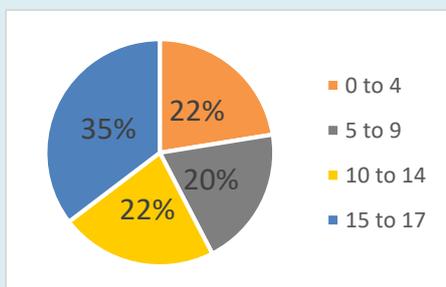
Reunification for children in out-of-home care - part 1: How long does it take and which children are reunified? December 2017

FAST FACTS

2,428 Queensland children and young people entered out-of-home care in 2015-16

1,667 Queensland children and young people left out-of-home care in 2016-17

Figure 1. Breakdown by age of 1667 children exiting the Queensland child protection system in 2016-17



- Around 30% of children brought into care are reunified with their family within 6 months
- 60% of children are still in out-of-home care 2 years after they have entered

This paper describes the number of children entering and leaving care and time taken to reunification. It describes child and family factors that make it more or less likely that reunification will occur.

Number of children entering and leaving out-of-home care

Currently child protection data is more 'removal focused' than 'reunification driven'. More information is available about children entering the care system, and less about those leaving, including those who have been reunified with their families. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2015-16, a total of 2,428 Queensland children and young people entered out-of-home care.

Queensland Child Safety Services reports on the number of children and young people leaving out-of-home care each financial year. In 2016-17, 1,667 children and young people left out-of-home care in Queensland. This number includes 18 year olds who would have 'aged out' of the system. Child Safety Services does not report on the length of time to reunification or the number of reunification attempts children experience. Work is currently being undertaken to develop consistent national data on reunification attempts.¹

Internationally, research studies have consistently found that reunifications are most likely within the first 6 months of coming into care. As time progresses, the chance of reunification rapidly decreases.^{2 3} One, of a very small number of Australian research studies that have explored this issue⁴, found that just under one-third of children returned home from care within 6 months but the majority (60%) were still in out-of-home care two years after they had entered.



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IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- More nationally consistent data needs to be collected and reported upon to inform the development of policies around reunification.^{5 6} This should include: (i) length of time in care prior to reunification; (ii) a count of reunification attempts; and, (iii) where a child re-enters the child protection system, time to re-entry.
- Quick reunifications are not necessarily successful reunifications. Research shows that when reunification happens without enough time to support parents in addressing issues such as substance abuse, children are more likely to re-experience abuse and neglect, and to re-enter the child protection system.⁷
- Safe reunification is always the first choice for children in out-of-home care. However, the majority of children will not be reunified with their families within 2 years. Once reunification has been ruled out, timely decisions need to be made to achieve alternative, stable, long-term care arrangements.

Which child and family factors predict reunification?

A number of child and family characteristics predict the likelihood of reunification. Reunifications are less likely for:

- Children who are younger when entering care⁸ - reasons may include caseworker concerns about the safety of younger children and greater availability of kinship arrangements for infants (which may delay reunification).⁹
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children¹⁰ - probably due to higher levels of disadvantage and more complex family problems experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.¹¹
- Children with emotional or behaviour problems.¹²
- Children who have been subjected to severe physical and sexual abuse.¹³
- Families experiencing poverty¹⁴ and inadequate housing¹⁵ - as they may be less likely to be able to provide a safe and nurturing home environment.¹⁶
- Families with complex problems including mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuse.¹⁷

More frequent levels of contact between birth parents and children in out-of-home care has been found to be significantly associated with a greater likelihood of successful reunification.¹⁸ It has been noted, however, that contact and reunification may share common factors, such as a better parent-child relationship prior to entering care, which drives both the likelihood of ongoing contact and the successful return to home.¹⁹

Key reunification issue

It is important to establish the extent to which reunification decision making is effective. Australian research has found that caseworker perceptions of parents' capacity to parent, their level of participation in interventions, and their level of family support are critical factors influencing reunification decision-making.²⁰ Part 2 of this summary series will explore the extent to which current decision-making strategies promote successful reunification decision making.



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