

OUT OF THE SHADOWS: FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Our community has always stood firmly on the side of protecting children who have experienced abuse and neglect. When a family situation warrants it, children are removed and are placed in out-of-home care. While there are a variety of reasons for this separation—most commonly allegations of neglect, the goal is to reunify the family in a healthy manner.

Reunification of children with their parents can and does happen. When parents are able to successfully address the concerns that brought about the family's separation, children can be returned to safe homes. Research over the past thirty years indicates that the best prognosis for children who have experienced this trauma is healthy reunification. Without family contact, these children languish. Despite the past, they love their parents and siblings, worry about them and constantly wonder when they will see them again.

State and federal laws require the Courts and child welfare agencies to work toward family reunification except in rare circumstances. Pima County Family Court and Child Protective Services have been more successful each year in doing so. While parents are ultimately the ones who must demonstrate the safety of their homes, resource families, social workers, court personnel, mental health experts and community service agencies support the efforts to bring children and parents back together.

The tasks facing parents are formidable. Not only must parents comply with court directives, they frequently must deal with their own past. Many parents have experienced abuse and neglect in their own childhood. Compliance is not necessarily a sign that the commitment to creating a healthy family is deeply rooted. On June 18th, Pima County Juvenile Court, Child Protective Services, Pima County Child Abuse Prevention Counsel and Aviva Children's Services will celebrate and commend the parents who have been reunified with their children and who remain committed to a healthy, healing family.

Perhaps this observance of Reunification Day is a good opportunity for all to evaluate attitudes that may work against families who are reunified or are moving in that direction. With recent cuts in state funding, many of the safety nets that were available to post-supervision parents are no longer available. The struggles to maintain a healthy family life coupled with the inevitable shame of having had their children removed put many parents in an isolated situation.

It is time for these parents to come out of the shadows into the light of supportive communities. The community at large supports the efforts of alcoholics and addicts to achieve a state of recovery. Where can parents who have gone through the process of reunifying their family go to find compassionate support? With whom can they be honest and not be rebuffed? With whom can they share their struggle?

I believe faith-communities in particular can be instrumental in helping these reunified families not only by moving away from negative stereotypes but also by sponsoring support groups for them. Imagine the impact of a community that is more committed to helping reunified families than judging the past. Imagine if there were groups of such parents able to come together to “share their experience, strength and hope with one another”. Imagine communities that create a climate in which healing, forgiveness and reconciliation were cultivated and celebrated.

Families who have been reunified deserve our support and encouragement. I congratulate them. And...I hope that Reunification Day prods us all to open our hearts and minds to them that they remain healthy and whole.

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