



Derby and Derbyshire  
Safeguarding Children Partnership

# Best Practice Guide: Reunification

July 2025

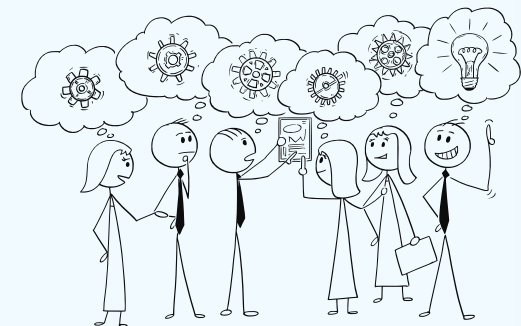
Derby and Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (DDSCP) commissioned a local child safeguarding practice review following the death of "Theo" (TDS20). The review found that the assessment and planning arrangements to reunify "Theo" with his parents were not robust enough to safeguard him.

To check that current practice has improved, DDSCP undertook an audit with front line practitioners and their managers from several statutory and voluntary agencies across Derby and Derbyshire and with parents and carers where children had returned to live with their parent(s) in pre-proceedings or during care proceedings that were taking place in the family court. The following areas of reunification practice were explored:

- Involving parents, children, family members and partner agencies in planning for reunification.
- The extent to which the levels of support and challenge provided were consistent with the level of risk identified.
- The quality of contingency planning.

The Social Workers for the families involved in the audit have helped to develop several best practice principles relating to 8 overarching areas of reunification work. These areas are outlined in this guide to help support and enhance the work of practitioners and their managers in agencies across Derby and Derbyshire. The 8 areas align to the Children's Social Care National Framework 2023 which details the following expected outcomes:

- Children, young people and families stay together and get the help they need.
- Children and young people are safe in and outside of their homes.
- Children and young people are supported by their family network.
- Children in care and care leavers have stable loving homes.



## Keeping Children at the Centre of Practice

- The best interests of children are prioritised.
- Processes are undertaken swiftly to minimise the impact on children.
- Care is taken to learn about children's life experiences, the risks that they currently face and may face in future.
- Practitioners learn about children's identities and interests to help engage them and build trust.
- Creative methods are used to gain children's views, especially about where they would like to live and to explain reunification processes to them.
- Support is tailored to meet the specific needs of children, particularly in respect of emotional health and neurodiversity.
- There is strong advocacy amongst the practitioner group and within the court arena for children to live at home if safe to do so.

## Engaging Families

- Consideration is given to parents' histories and how their experiences may impact on their capacity or willingness to care for and safeguard their children.
- Where parents have a history of social care involvement including the removal of other children, this is considered without bias and prejudgements are not made about permanence plans for younger siblings.
- Where there are barriers to engaging families including the denial of risk, a persistence approach is taken to help build trust and encourage responsibility.
- Interest is shown in families' culture and background to help understand any factors which may impact on caregiving. A balance is struck between respecting cultural norms and prioritising the safety of children.
- Where there is conflict within families about the plan for reunification, an environment is created where emotions and views can be expressed and where difficulties can be resolved.

## Evidence Based Decision Making

- Proven assessment tools and frameworks are used to form decisions and proposals about children's care plans.
- Research and guidance about what works for children shapes decision making, intervention and support.
- Gut feeling about risk and vulnerability is corroborated or disproved with the findings of assessments.
- Specialist assessments are undertaken or information from specialists is used to help support practitioners to think about the right outcomes for children.
- Information is gathered from multiple sources, especially when there are suspicions of risk, to help make informed decisions based on fact, not assumption.
- Contact and interactions between children and their parents is observed and considered to help inform judgements about the likely success of reunification.
- Managers oversee and contribute to decision making. They offer scrutiny and challenge to the practitioner group to ensure that the decision to reunify children with their parents is defensible, well supported and sustainable.

## Safety Planning and Risk Management

- Proven tools and frameworks are used to assess risk to children in multiple environments including in and outside of the home. The findings of which then inform safety plans.
- Safety plans are written collaboratively with agencies and families and include a range of clear and realistic strategies to manage complex risks like substance use, mental health and domestic abuse.
- Factors that mitigate against risk are set out alongside the actions to be taken by parents, wider family members, practitioners and managers to ensure that risk and vulnerability is managed appropriately.
- The approach to managing the specific risks and vulnerabilities surrounding babies and toddlers who are completely dependent on their parents' care is detailed in safety plans.
- The significance and imminence of emerging risks are recorded with analysis about how families respond to the level of support and challenge delivered as a result of those risks.

## Planning Intervention and Support

- Overarching intervention and support plans are written collaboratively with agencies and families. Families are asked what they think would help them and their responses are incorporated into plans.
- The objectives and actions required to address the primary risks and needs are set out with detail about who will do what within defined timescales. The desired outcomes of intervention and support are documented.
- Circumstances under which risk could increase are documented in plans.
- Intervention and support is tailored to the specific needs of families and follows the proposals made in assessments.
- Historical risks which may re-emerge are included in intervention and support plans.
- Specific objectives are established to help protect the physical safety of babies and toddlers, especially where there are concerns about substance use, domestic abuse and mental health.

## Delivering Intervention and Support

- Delivering intervention is collaborative across agencies and a balance is struck between managing risk and supporting families to make and sustain change.
- Specialist services deliver intervention which responds to the unique risks and needs presented by families.
- Intervention and support is delivered in locations and environments that suit children and their families.
- There is active and regular review by practitioners, their managers and families, to ensure that the intervention and support plan remains appropriate.
- Where there is an outstanding criminal investigation involving parents, especially related to harm caused to a child, the current position is gained from the Police. Risks arising from potential future charges which may impact on safeguarding children and reunification are considered and documented before the intervention and support plan ends. Rationale is recorded about whether a future plan is necessary should charges be made. A sustainability plan is written, with oversight from a manager, which incorporates relevant considerations, balanced against progress and mitigating factors.

## Supporting and Challenging Parents and Families

- A resolution focused approach is taken to supporting families to reach a position where children are safe in their care.
- Parents are sensitively but firmly challenged about their risky behaviours and the decisions that they make, especially where children are at risk of physical harm or neglect. Persistence is applied to help develop parents' motivation to change and to encourage them to take responsibility for the risks posed to their children.
- Families are encouraged to work together with relatives, former carers and community groups to build or rebuild their own support and safeguarding network.
- A focus is on the progress made by families and on their ability to sustain change without the involvement of statutory services in future.

## Contingency Planning

- Contingency plans are documented in plain language in partnership with families and are shared with all relevant parties and recorded clearly on case files.
- Contingency plans are tailored to families' unique risks and vulnerabilities. They detail the specific actions necessary, including who will do what, should any of the identified risks arise.
- To help keep families together, a staged approach is taken to dealing with concerns, especially where there are interconnected risks which may vary in significance, intensity and imminence and which may require different levels of response.
- Viable care and placement alternatives for children are included in contingency plans in case reunification breaks down completely.
- Contingency plans are reviewed actively and regularly by the practitioner group and by managers and particularly when risk and vulnerability increases or decreases, when completely new concerns emerge or where there is a significant change in circumstances.

# Useful Links

## **DDSCP: Keeping Babies Safe**

The Three Steps for Baby Safety strategy has been established to support partner agencies and practitioners working with families to ensure that the babies in Derby City and Derbyshire remain safe from abuse, neglect and harm.

## **Derby City and Derbyshire Multi Agency Dispute Resolution and Escalation Protocol (November 2024)**

Outlines the steps to be taken when there are disagreements between practitioners from differing agencies in relation to concerns about the safety and welfare of a child or young person and / or about action being taken to safeguard a child or young person

## **Department for Education: Children's Social Care National Framework Statutory guidance on the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care (December 2023)**

Brings together the purpose of local authority children's social care, the principles by which children, young people and families should be supported, the enablers that should be in place so the system is effective and the outcomes that should be achieved so that children and young people can grow up to thrive.

## **Foundations: Practice Guide - Kinship Care**

Produced to support senior leaders and commissioners in local areas to commission and develop effective services to support kinship families.

## **NSPCC: Home again: reunification practice in England**

Explores what guides reunification practice, how decisions are made before and after reunification, what support for reunification looks like and how reunification practice is monitored and improved.

## **NSPCC: Returning children home from care: learning from case reviews**

Summary of key issues and learning for improving practice in respect of children returning home from care.

## **NSPCC: Reunification: an evidence-informed framework for return home practice**

A reunification practice framework which provides practical guidance and tools for practitioners working with children and families. The framework supports practitioners and managers to apply structured professional judgement to decisions about whether and how a child should return home from care. It supports families and workers to understand what needs to change, to set goals, access support and services and review progress.

