

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY REUNIFICATION SERVICES

Anesta Potgieter, Shanaaz Hoosain

This paper discusses the experiences of parents receiving family reunification services because their children have been placed in child and youth care centres. The sample was purposively selected according to inclusion criteria. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and guided by participatory learning action techniques. The findings were valuable as existing challenges were mentioned, like the unavailability of designated social workers and lack of communication, which in the end affected family reunification. The value of support became evident as the parents expressed how support assisted them while their children were in care.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In South Africa millions of children are placed in child and youth care centres, shelters and children's homes as a result of abuse, neglect, HIV/Aids, abandonment, parents being incapable of looking after their children, relationship problems in the family, and problems and difficulties of the child (Earle, 2008:6; Thoburn, 2009:9; Unicef, 2010). Parents with vulnerable children experience various challenges which require intervention from welfare agencies (Nhedz & Makofane, 2015:354).

A child can be removed from home for several reasons, as stated in the Children's Act (38 of 2005), as amended. However, section 187 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005), as amended, clearly states that a child in need of care and protection should be removed with the view that reunification between the child and the biological parents is possible and is in the child's best interest. The primary goal is therefore to stabilise the family circumstances and reunite the child with his or her biological parents. Section 157, subsection 2 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005), as amended, states that a social worker rendering reunification services should investigate the reason for the removal, take action to prevent those causes from recurring and provide counselling for the child as well as the parent during removal as well as after reunification. However, social workers in South Africa have extremely high caseloads, which may prevent them from delivering effective reunification services. According to Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015), high caseloads and poor working conditions are a reality for social workers in South Africa, where the average number of cases per social worker is 150.

The Child Welfare Manual (2013) of South Africa mentions ways to prepare the child for family reunification, but excludes a consideration of parents' experiences during family reunification. It has been confirmed that parents feel their needs are not being met during reunification and that they are not being heard, which affects the reunification services that are rendered to them (Karam, 2014:68; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2011; Thoburn, 2009). Various factors contribute to children not being reunited with their families, for example, the age of the child, the period spent in care, or the reason for the placement. Other factors that contribute to failed reunification may be excluding the parents and not making them feel heard (Karam, 2014:68; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2011; Thoburn, 2009). If children are reunited with their family after two years, as expected, child and youth care centres (CYCCs) will be able to assist more children in need rather than turning them down because of limited space. Lastly, since healthy families represent the core of our South African society, we should protect and support effective and efficient service delivery to meet their needs when it comes to reunification services (Department of Social Development, 2013:34).

Successful reunification is characterised as a service where both the child and the parents are engaged in family reunification (Miller, 2004:32). This means that both the child and the parents will be involved in decision making and commit to working with the designated social worker. De Villiers (2008:5) strongly believes that the designated social worker should give more attention to strengthening and supporting families while their children are in care, as this can allow parents to reunite with the child as soon as possible. However, because of the high caseloads, designated social workers may not be able to focus on strengthening families.

This study is important for families with children in care as the information contributes towards rendering effective reunification services by exploring the parents' experience of family reunification. Also, parents play a crucial role in terms of family reunification as the child needs to return to their care again. During reunification the focus should therefore be directed towards the needs of both the child and the parents.

Research by Kiraly and Humphreys (2011) and Thoburn (2009) identified that parents needed to feel that they were being listened to by welfare agencies. During this study parents shared their experiences

of family reunification that directly affected them and their children, giving them the opportunity to be heard. Furthermore, the information specifically gained through this study provides designated social workers with a parental view on the experience of family reunification. Understanding parents' experiences of reunification could assist designated social workers to render more effective support to parents. The research is also valuable for designated social workers because successful family reunification is every social agency's goal (Talbot, 2006:105).

Parents feel that their voices are not being heard and that they are overlooked by the system, as if their needs are not taken into account during family reunification (Alpert, 2005:363). Internationally, family reunification programmes tend to overlook parental needs and to exclude their experiences of the reunification process, which decreases the likelihood of successful reunification (Alpert, 2005:363; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2011; Thoburn, 2009). If social workers are aware of the parents' experience of reunification, their current programmes can be adapted to ensure that the parents' needs and views are also taken into account during reunification.

The theoretical framework, research aim, research question and methodology are discussed next, followed by the findings of the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that guided this study was Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory was useful to understand parents' experience of family reunification within their changing environment. Firstly, the bio-ecological systems theory provides a way to view dynamic events such as family reunification and helps to understand parents individually and within their environment as well as the systems within the environment. Applying the bio-ecological systems theory means that the context in which the developing individual spent time and his/her relations with other individuals in the same settings were taken into account (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244). In the context of this study, the influence of the systems outside of the parental context, like the social worker, supportive systems and other relatives, formed their experience of family reunification. Rosa and Tudge (2013:243) divide ecological systems theory into three phases, focusing on individual development within a set of systems. For family reunification to occur effectively, one cannot look only at the child's circumstances in isolation, as the child's circumstances are influenced by other systems that involve the parents, designated social worker, the CYCC and friends. These systems are integrated and influence one another. The circumstances of the family and environment should therefore also be considered to ensure that reunification is in the child's best interest.

For the purpose of this study, parents' experience should be viewed in terms of the context in which they live. During the study the context of the parents was considered by referring to neighbours, friends and relatives as well as the designated social worker and the CYCC. These systems formed part of the parental context in which they live, and parents had an opportunity to explain how these systems impacted on their experience of family reunification.

The research aim of this study was therefore to explore and describe parents' experience of family reunification.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A qualitative approach was followed using a descriptive design to achieve an in-depth understanding of parents' experience of family reunification as a phenomenon on a conscious level (Bothma, Greeff, Mulaudzi & Wright, 2010:194; Sandelowski, 2000:335). The purpose of adopting a qualitative research approach was to enable the researcher to understand the social world of the parents, their experience of family reunification, and the systems around the parents that affected them during family reunification (Hancock, Ockleford & Windrige, 2009:7; Johnson, 2008:2; Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244).

Participants were identified according to purposive sampling, as described by Babbie (2014:200), Edmonds and Kennedy (2013:17), and Grinelle and Unrau (2008:152). The participants were biological parents

whose children were in the care of Girls and Boys Town and who were reunited with their children. Girls and Boys Town is a CYCC that specialises in providing residential facilities and programmes for girls and boys aged 8 to 17 years. Girls and Boys Town focuses on children 'at risk', children of parents who find it difficult to manage them, and children who put themselves at risk through the choices they make. Permission was obtained from the Girls and Boys Town CEO, research department and manager to use the site as a research field. The following criteria were set for inclusion in this study:

- Participants had to be the biological parents of the child who was staying in the Girls and Boys Town youth development centre;
- The child had to have been in the care of Girls and Boys Town for six months or longer;
- The parent could either represent a single-parent household (be a single parent) or a household with both parents present;
- Parents' biological children at Girls and Boys Town must have signed the assent form to agree that their parents could be contacted to take part in the study;
- The parents must have received reunification services from a designated social worker;
- Parents must have received services for a minimum of six months;
- The parent could either be male or female.

Parents who were clients of the researcher in the past and present, parents whose child did not sign the assent form for his or her parents to take part in the research, and parents whose child had been at Girls and Boys Town less than six months were excluded from this study.

Ethical approval to conduct the research was received from the Ethics Committee at North-West University (Ethical number: NWU000-90-16-S1). Assent forms were signed by the children as permission to make contact with their parents and consent was obtained from the parents. It was explained to the parents that their participation in the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw without any consequences to them.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants' individually on separate occasions; the interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours each. The researcher designed a set of questions prior to the study based on a literature review, but opted for a semi-structured interview to allow new questions to emerge during the interviews, based on the information shared by the participants (Appel, Buckinham, Jodion & Roth, 2012:36). This semi-structured interview was guided by a participatory learning action (PLA) technique called a communication map, where the researcher asked the participant to draw a communication map at the start of the interview. The communication map requires the parents to draw themselves and to write down the names of the people with whom they communicated during the reunification process. Using lines, they had to indicate the quality of the communication between them and the other persons involved in the process.

The PLA technique was chosen because it is flexible and can accommodate different participants, with different histories, while still covering the same area of parental experience of family reunification (Alam, 2008:1604). The communication map was only used to facilitate the discussion during the interview in order to understand the communication between the parents and other systems around them like friends, relatives and the designated social worker (Zaveri, 2009:180).

The researcher used thematic analysis, as described by Clarke and Braun (2013:4), to analyse the data. The researcher familiarised herself with the existing data by listening to the recordings and transcribing the data. After transcribing the data, the researcher read through the transcripts and made notes of the information that was relevant to the research topic and contributed towards achieving the research aim. This information was sorted into broad categories to identify possible themes and subthemes. A co-coder was appointed to ensure trustworthiness of the data when each theme was discussed.

Trustworthiness was achieved by using strategies such as ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through clarification and summarisation to ensure that the researcher understood what participants meant during the interviews. Concerning transferability, this study was not conducted to offer generalisations. However, a detailed outline of the process will allow future research to be conducted in a similar matter. The dependability of this study was ensured by conducting the research under the supervision of a supervisor to ensure objectivity. Confirmability was ensured by being objective when analysing the data and using a co-coder to ensure that the identified themes were true reflections of the interviews. The themes and subthemes are discussed next.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The themes and subthemes are discussed individually. The findings are supported by direct quotes from the participants and compared with current literature. Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes that were identified during this study.

TABLE 1
THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

Theme	Subtheme
1. The availability and accessibility of the designated social worker when rendering family reunification services	1.1. Parental experience of communication when it comes to family reunification
2. Parental involvement while the child is in care of CYCC	2.1. Link between uninformed parent and uninvolved parent
3. Contact between the child in the CYCC and the biological parent	3.1. Experiencing challenges when making contact
4. The experience of support when it comes to family reunification	4.1. Support versus lack of support 4.2. Availability of professional support

Theme 1: Availability and accessibility of the designated social worker when rendering family reunification services

According to Dumbrill (2006:28), in-depth qualitative studies revealed that parents experienced services from the designated social worker as inhumane and that they also experienced a sense of intimidation by the power of social workers. Most parents shared their history and the process they followed prior to their child's admission to Girls and Boys Town. They also described how they struggled to make contact with a social worker to help them with their troubled child. Not all the parents experienced the social workers as accessible and available. Participant A stated the following:

“Ek het daar in daai mense se kantoor gaan sit vir ure. Op die ou end met iemand gepraat en ‘n vorm ingevul – ‘we will phone you and make an appointment’ – ek wag nog steeds vir daardie persoon. [I sat there in those people’s office and waited for hours. In the end I completed a form and they said they will phone me. I am still waiting for their phone call].”

Another participant had a similar experience when she was looking for assistance from the social worker:

“The previous social worker did not do much; it took me three years to get help from her.”

Parents did not experience the designated social workers as being available or accessible. This in turn affected their motivation to be part of a family reunification process and caused frustration: *“If (social worker’s name) is going to contact me tomorrow I am not going to talk to her.”* The bio-ecological system theory is based on the premise that the individual should be understood in the context of the environment (Rasaili & Titus, 2007:17). Hence, the reasons why parents are unwilling or reluctant to engage in family reunification should be explored. Parents are often blamed for not engaging with social workers. However, the results of this study indicated that the parents experienced the designated social worker as unavailable most of the time. Parents felt that social workers were too busy to assist

and that they would rather not bother them. In a study conducted in the Western Cape by Sauls and Esau (2015:13) social workers reported that more intensive support is required during the initial months of family reunification. Knowing that regular contact is important for successful reunification, social workers agreed that reunification services do not receive the needed attention as a result of high caseloads and excessive administrative duties (Sauls & Esau, 2015:24). At the same time social workers experienced limited support services from multidisciplinary team members, especially when it comes to referring a child for specialised services as part of the reunification process (Sauls & Esau, 2015:24). Social workers should promote reunification by being available for the parents and by making contact with them, making them feel valued, being supportive and strengthening them (Department of Social Development, 2013; Magagula, 2009:96; Sauls & Esau, 2015:16).

The parents did not feel comfortable about making contact with the designated social worker as they felt the social worker was not accessible or available. The parents also experienced the designated social worker as being too occupied with other cases so the parents did not want to bother them: *“They are underpaid and overworked.”* A participant also mentioned that she had experienced challenges in terms of making contact with the designated social worker and explained that she had to go to the provincial department to be assisted as the local department did not assist her. When social workers are not accessible, parents cannot receive the services that are required for family reunification to take place. Some social workers who participated in the study of Sauls and Esau (2015:24) stated that allowing social axillary workers to make contact with parents during reunification helps to address the challenge around parents feeling left out.

The bio-ecological systems theory underlines that one system can influence or be influenced by other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Miller, 2004:32). The designated social worker as a part the system therefore influences the parents in the process of family reunification. Parents explained their expectations of the designated social workers when rendering family reunification services. They felt that social workers should advocate for them and communicate regularly, so that they could build a relationship and work jointly towards family reunification.

According to Dumbrill (2006:28), parents do feel intimidated by the power of social workers. Hence, if parents experience social workers as unavailable and inaccessible instead of warm and respectful, they will resist cooperation (Nhedzi & Makofane, 2015). The attitude from the designated social worker, as an external system, determines parents' involvement in family reunification as well as how parents experience the reunification services they receive (Corwin, 2012:9).

Subtheme 1.1: Parental experience of communication when it comes to family reunification

When the topic of communication emerged during the interviews, parents indicated that there was a lack of communication between themselves, their child, the designated social worker and the residential staff. Parents noted that they expected more communication between the different stakeholders. Participants drew attention to physical challenges that hindered communication and the ability to make contact, for example:

“Daar is nie behoorlike werkende telefone nie [There are no properly functioning telephones].”

They mentioned that they would prefer to communicate more.

The lack of communication caused frustration among parents; for example, one parent said,

“I was angry, because I said I don't understand, they don't call me. I do not know what is going on with my son.”

Parents felt that important information involving their children was not communicated with them,

“Nobody told me that he stopped the medication. Nobody told me any information which at times makes me angry”.

Other parents mentioned that they did not receive feedback on the wellbeing of their child. They usually had to ask administration staff or support staff like drivers for feedback or information, instead of professional staff who worked directly with their child. Parents required more open communication as a lack of communication affected their involvement in the process to be reunited with the child. The lack of communication could make parents feel excluded from their child. In addition, the lack of proper communication regarding their child could result in parents feeling more inadequate (Eugster, s.a.:1).

Open communication with the designated social worker can help parents to overcome challenges and also provide a platform for parents to give vent to their frustrations and stressful experiences during the family reunification process (Balsells, Pastor, Amarós, Mateos, Ponce & Navjas, 2014:818; Sandoval, 2010:19). Open and honest communication between the designated social worker and the parent is essential for effective reunification, and parents are demanding improvement in the channels of communication (Balsells *et al.*, 2014:818; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011:7).

Theme 2: Parental involvement while their child is in care of CYCC

Geurts, Noom and Knorth (2011:1) demonstrated that the active involvement of parents while their child was in care could be helpful, as it could ensure that parents remain responsible for raising their child and making decisions. Programmes that included parental involvement are associated with positive results of family reunification compared to those programmes that excluded the involvement of parents while their child was in care (Geurts *et al.*, 2011:2). Research indicated that 58% of children whose parents were involved while they were in care improved their problem behaviour, while only 32% of the children whose parents were not involved showed improvement (Scholte & Van der Ploeg, 2000).

Subtheme 2.1: Link between uninformed parent and uninvolved parent

When the participants discussed their experiences with regard to decision making, they mainly referred to schooling and medical factors. The participants mentioned that they were not informed about certain things that involved their child.

“Nobody told me any information which at times I get angry that you know, you cannot just give a child a Disprin while you don’t know what is going on, you know. As a parent I must know, okay he took that Disprin because of a headache. Then I know. That worries me a lot.”

The results indicated that parents tended to be judged by professionals because they were not involved, but parents were not actively involved because they were not informed. For example, one participant explained that his child got hurt once, but that he was never informed about the incident. According to him, if he had known, he would have come through to ensure that his child was doing okay and at the same time to show that he cared. There is a link between an uninformed parent and an uninvolved parent, as seen with this participant, who would have comforted his child in a time of need if he had been informed about it.

Another participant had a similar experience. She mentioned that her child had overdosed on medication and she only found out about the incident two days after it had happened. As she was not informed about what her child had done, it appeared as if the parent no longer wanted to be involved in family reunification. As a consequence, the experience affected the relationship between the child and the parent. Some participants felt that their children were put on medication without their knowledge and that they were not even informed of the type of medication nor the reason for the medication:

“Lately I was surprised that my son is taking medication.”

Two of the parents mentioned that it was important for them to be informed about and become involved in any medication that their children are taking, so that they could monitor the children when they came home.

Parents said that they wanted to be involved in clinic visits to hear for themselves what was going on with their child and what certain medication was for. Effective family reunification involves engaging the parents in the planning process of family reunification as well as in decision making regarding the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011:4). One parent expressed his concern about being left

out in decision making regarding his child's schooling. He asked for his child to be enrolled in a technical school, but his request was not granted:

“Hulle luister nie. Net so min soos wat ek luister, luister hulle en ek voel dit is verkeerd want juis hulle is veronderstel om die professionele mense te wees wat ouers probleme aanhoor en aanspreek. [They are not listening. Just as much as I am not listening, they are also not listening, and I feel this is wrong as they are supposed to be the professional people who listen to and address parents' problems.]

The participants' experiences indicated that they wanted to be more involved with their child in care. Geurts *et al.* (2011:3) believe that parental involvement improves family functioning and is an essential component in successfully reuniting the child with the parents”.

Theme 3: Contact between the child in the CYCC and the biological parent

While children are in the care of Girls and Boys Town, it is expected that they will continue to have contact with their parents. Maintaining contact with the child increases the likelihood of family reunification as contact keeps parents informed (Barnados, 2013:1). Regular contact is therefore an important aspect of family reunification (Karam, 2014:58).

Subtheme 3.1: Experiencing challenges when making contact

During the interviews parents expressed their frustration about the logistical challenges they encountered when they tried to make contact with their child. These challenges included no proper telephones and parents struggling to get hold of children, with both the child and parents feeling unsure when they were allowed to phone. The first challenge of the lack of working telephones is an indication of the limited resources of the welfare agency to encourage contact between the parent and the child. Despite this, one participant also mentioned that the outings arranged for the children at Girls and Boys Town affected their contact:

“He will just say he does not want to come home because maybe they are going somewhere, an outing or something, and then he knows that he is going to be left out when he comes home.”

Financially, not all parents can afford to take their children on outings, which poses a challenge as parents feel that they cannot provide the same activities as the CYCC. Children in CYCCs are encouraged to visit their parents over weekends and during school holidays. However, when the CYCC plans fun activities during this time, children choose not to go home, which can negatively impact on the parent-child contact aimed at promoting successful reunification.

Using the bio-ecological systems theory, it is important to be aware of and understand the factors that affect parenting positively and negatively (Rasaili & Titus, 2007:18). In the case of this participant, the outings of the CYCC were identified as the factor that negatively affected the development of the parent-child relationship as the child did not want to go home.

Another challenge was having private conversations with the child:

“They want to know what he is telling me; what he is not telling me and I do not like that.”

Mostly, parents and children communicate through WhatsApp instead of telephone calls in order to have more privacy. The children at the CYCC are not allowed to have cell phones, but will then break this rule and bring in their own cell phones to communicate with their families.

Using WhatsApp also provides children and parents with an alternative means of communication as they do not have to struggle with landline telephones which may be out of order.

It also became obvious that parents were uncertain about the rules in terms of making contact with their child. Some of their responses included:

“As ek vir (residential) sê, ‘Hoor hierso, kan ek nie net vir (youth's name) sê dis nou skoolvakansie, ek sal hom agtuur die oggend optel en vieruur die middag terugbring, daar is

nie oorslaap of niks nie', nee, dit is teen die reëls. [If I ask the residential whether (youth's name)) can visit me, saying, 'I will pick him up at 8 am and bring him back at 4 pm, there's no staying over or anything,' they will just say no, it is against the rules.']

"Lately, when I called him, they are going to tell me you must book for talking to your son. You must not just call and want to speak to your son. I said, 'Oh, I did not know.' But nobody told me that, you know. I used to talk to him almost every day, but nobody told me I must book the day before maybe to talk with him."

These quotes reflect the inconsistent rules when parents want to make contact with their children. The lack of consistency may affect parents' commitment to continue making contact with their children. The influence of one system (the CYCC) can impact on the interactions between other systems (the parent and the child) and in the broader context also impact negatively on successful family reunification.

It is beneficial for parents to maintain contact as this increases the likelihood of family reunification to take place (Barnados, 2013:1). However, if parents are not encouraged to maintain contact, family reunification could be affected:

"Die verhouding tussen my en my seun het geweldig agteruit gegaan" [The relationship between my son and me deteriorated significantly].

The participant made the comment when discussing the lack of contact with his son. He experienced a deterioration in the relationship with his son as the parent-child relationship was affected by the limited contact.

Theme 4: The experience of support leading to family reunification

Support refers to the assistance that is provided by one person to another. This support can be the key to emotional or informational resources emerging from different social relations between individuals or groups (Balsells, Pastor, Molina, Fuentes-Pelaez & Vázquez, 2016:3; Spilsbury & Korbin, 2013:9). Support can be formal, which can involve professional people like social workers, psychologists and doctors, as well as informal, which can include friends, neighbours and relatives (Balsells *et al.*, 2016:4). Support can come in different forms such as emotional support, physical support, material support and psychological support. A combination of different types of support can help families to cope in difficult situations (Balsells *et al.*, 2016:3). Balsells and her co-authors stress the value of having support and emphasise the importance of visible support, especially when the child returns home (Balsells *et al.*, 2016:3). Support can assist with emotional, informational and instrumental resources to maintain wellbeing or to adapt to difficult situations (Balsells *et al.*, 2016:3). Support, or the lack of support, emerged as a theme in the study with the parents. The participants mentioned how support from friends or relatives helped them in the process of family reunification.

Subtheme 4.1: Support versus lack of support

Providing support can reduce the occurrence of depression and bring relief to those who experience distress (Lietz, Lacasse & Cacciatore, 2011:4). The same authors believe that formal as well as informal support are important in social functioning as it could provide emotional support when the family is experiencing a crisis (Lietz *et al.*, 2011:5). Families whose children were removed can experience a sense of trauma. However, with the necessary support they can overcome the difficult situation that is causing so much distress. This relates to the influence that supportive services can have on the individual system. Support to work through the trauma of the removal of the child is required for both the parents and the child so that the process of family reunification can become possible (Miller, 2007:40; Papageorgiou, s.a:9). If the family lacks support, the designated social worker should identify supportive systems for the parents to help facilitate their journey towards successful and sustainable family reunification (Papageorgiou, s.a:2). One participant stated:

"If it wasn't for my friend, I would not have been empowered to be there for my child."

Parents rely on the support of friends and family to encourage them to continue building a relationship with their child in the CYCC. One participant mentioned that his friend helped him with housing to move closer to his child so that he could see his child more often, allowing him to maintain contact which was a protective factor for successful family reunification (Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin, s.a.:3).

Other participants reported that their support systems linked them up with resources, helped them to obtain material resources like housing or clothes, and encouraged them to understand their children better. These support systems provided parents with emotional, material and financial support, helping them to create stability, which was important for family reunification. When family reunification is being considered, the stability of the parents' circumstances is taken into account (Sauls & Esau, 2015:6; Talbot, 2006:105). It was important for the participants to refer to their support systems during the interviews, because these support systems provided them with stress relief. Support made the experience of having a child in care more bearable, as they knew they were not alone. Balsells *et al.* (2016:3) believe that a lack of support could be a risk factor leading to failed reunification.

A study undertaken by Lin (2014) indicates that when parents lacked support, this could hinder their ability to care for their children (Lin, 2014:37). The isolation of the parent from social networks and the lack of support could be related to inadequate parenting, as this isolation reduces the availability of resources (Rodrigo, Martin, Máiquez & Rodriguez, 2007:330). One participant mentioned how his friend linked him up with resources to help him prepare for the return of his child.

Another participant indicated that she lacked the support she needed, mainly because she felt that those around her did not understand what she was going through.

"I don't want to tell you a lie, but I don't have that (support). My family is very few. My friends, you know you cannot just tell your friends everything. Some friends, they are not going to take you seriously because they've never gone through that."

This particular participant said that no one would understand her experiences, which made her feel isolated. Another participant described how overwhelmed she felt and how she desired to have some form of support to assist her when her child was there. She said:

"That kills me very much because I do not get any support."

The removal of the child can make parents experience loss as well as a need for support (Balsells *et al.*, 2016:8). She also mentioned how some form of support would have helped her to cope during this difficult time with her child in care:

"For instance, if it is now, the school is closing so I know that okay I've got a relative somewhere, maybe if (youth's name) comes I can say go and visit there, so that I am stress free."

Parents who have not had a child in their care for a long period of time may doubt themselves and may experience a sense of anxiety when the child is returned to their care (Balsells *et al.*, 2016:8). Support could relieve the stress parents feel as a result of the responsibility of caring for the children when the child comes home for contact or when reunited with their parents.

As mentioned before, in order for the children to go home and be reunited with their family, the behaviour of the children must improve and the circumstances of the parents must be stable. According to the parents who participated in this study, having some form of emotional, material or financial support helped them to stabilise their environment. Support can be provided in different settings, with each type of support assisting the parents in a unique way to prepare for family reunification. This is in line with the bio-ecological system theory, where individuals are influenced by those around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:21; Johnson, 2008:2; Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244). The influence of the environmental systems was described as both positive and negative by the participants. Some of the parents felt that, without their support networks, they would not have been able to cope with their

difficult circumstances. Despite having informal support like friends, family and colleagues, some parents mentioned the availability of professional support.

Subtheme 4.2: The availability of professional support

In the context of this study professional support refers to lawyers, medical staff and family workers. One participant mentioned that he had a lawyer who introduced him to resources that provided him with information that he never had before. The participant gained a better understanding of the statutory placement of his child and how to reconnect with his child so that they could be reunited.

Some participants mentioned the services they had received from the family service department of Girls and Boys Town. These services were rendered by social workers and auxiliary social workers employed by Girls and Boys Town to strengthen families while their children were in care. Parents described their experiences with professionals who were supportive in the following way:

“Ek voel baie goed as sy so elke maand kom en vir my interview. [I feel good if she comes to interview me once a month.]”

“Quite nice guy who made me understand what I am going through and what my son is going through.”

Some participants felt that the involvement of the family worker helped them to acquire certain skills, for example, anger management skills and keeping calm to help them cope better when their children displayed negative behaviour such as being disrespectful or aggressive. By acquiring anger management skills and calming down, one parent was able to see the improvement when dealing with the child:

“I learnt so many skills because sometimes I used to be angry and impatient. Since he told me what I must do I am achieving a lot you know because he used to tell me how I must treat my son and I am trying to do those things that he told me as a parent to do. I am quite happy about it [support] because I can see that I am improving.”

Acquiring some form of skill was helpful to the parents when children visited them over weekends and during holidays. Parents need information to help them understand the kind of behaviour they may see once the children come home. Parents also need skills to help children control their behaviour (Children’s Service, Practice Notes, 2013:1). These skills also allow the parents to prepare for the child’s return and at the same time help parents feel equipped to deal with their child after family reunification has occurred. The effective use of parenting skills can contribute to family reunification (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011:11).

By analysing the findings the researcher was able to draw some conclusions and make recommendations, which are discussed in the next section.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored parents’ experience of family reunification and concluded that family reunification can only be successful when the parents fully collaborate in the reunification process. Based on the findings of this empirical research, parents experienced the following as challenging: the unavailability and inaccessibility of the designated social worker, the lack of information about the child in out-of-home care, and the lack of involvement and contact with the child in care.

The parents’ experience of support played a significant role leading to family reunification. The positive role of support from friends, relatives and others toward parents must be encouraged. However, negative aspects such as judgement from the community or the designated social worker must be viewed in a holistic way to address specific issues. Helpful ways to support parents include improving communication between the designated social worker and the parents, keeping parents informed about decisions regarding their children in care, involving parents in therapeutic interventions and being available to parents during family reunification.

The designated social worker should encourage communication among all the relevant parties and involve the parents in the reunification process as the involvement of the parents is directly linked to successful family reunification. This also refers to building a support network with multidisciplinary team members in the community who could contribute to the family reunification process. Furthermore, parents should feel respected and valued during this process and be able to rely on the availability of the designated social worker. This can also be done through utilising the services of auxiliary social workers to facilitate visits between parent and child, and more frequent communication with the parents. Parental involvement during the family reunification process contributes to parent-child attachments and to effective transitioning from statutory care to family care. On the other hand, isolation, a lack of support and a lack of information can have a negative impact on family reunification.

It is therefore recommended that the designated social workers and social workers at CYCCs consult with parents and involve them in the process leading to family reunification.

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