



Monthly Review

published by the International Reference Center for the
Rights of Children Deprived of their Family-ISS

N° 251
May 2021

EDITORIAL

Family reintegration: a collective success for the child

The term “reintegration” covers a variety of different contexts and sets of needs: reintegration of a child who has been in alternative care; reintegration of a street child; reintegration of a young adult into their community; reunification, reintegration or sometimes reinsertion of a young adult in the migration context, etc. This can sometimes result in a lack of clarity, in theory and in practice, both about how to conduct this process and about the timeline involved. The ISS/IRC has thus chosen to cover the topic in this editorial. The aim is not to address each of the situations mentioned above, but rather to highlight several key benchmarks for any of these processes, in the best interests of the child and their rights and needs.

Family reintegration – in other words the permanent return of a child to his or her parents, extended family or community¹ – is the primary goal for any child separated from their family environment, as long as it is in their best interests. The aim is to ensure that every child can flourish and develop in a safe and secure environment, which is a cornerstone of the various international standards applicable to alternative care². The reintegration process requires the sustained involvement of all actors at the local, national and even international level, putting the family and the child at the heart of the process. In fact, the family and child must be engaged as agents of change, as their commitment and involvement will be key to successful reintegration.

Reintegration is without doubt the recommended permanent solution for a child, but this must not override what should be seen as the essence of any intervention for a child: taking into account their individual situation, including their history, age, physical and mental needs, and opinion. In this respect, how can we ascertain and guarantee that reintegration is in the best interests of the child? At what point would we consider that reintegration is not the answer? How can we assess the risks involved? Can every child's needs be met by a family environment? What if a child or family refuses

reintegration, or if the family accepts for motives that prove incompatible with the needs and rights of the child (for domestic servitude, financial return, etc.)? There should be no dogmatic answers to these questions (see Editorial of Monthly Review No 219, March 2018). They underline the importance of developing an individual plan for every child, adolescent and family, based on in-depth assessments and professional advice.

Reintegration: a structured process

Right from the start of care for a child separated from their family, all efforts and measures taken should be leading towards the goal of family reintegration. With this priority in mind, there must be a systematic and standardised pathway. But when and how should the reintegration process be actively set in motion for a child? To ensure reintegration is a shared goal and becomes a reality, it needs to be discussed by a trained multidisciplinary team. It needs to be implemented through a clear legal framework, and be backed up by access to basic and specialised services. There needs to be close collaboration between different sectors (social care, health, education, justice, etc.), because family reintegration cannot be undertaken in isolation. It requires the involvement of professionals (social workers, psychologists, mediators, police, judges, etc.), the child, the family, and also the community (teachers,

doctors, religious leaders, village leaders, etc.). The community must be informed, empowered and involved in properly reintegrating the child.

What about during deinstitutionalisation processes, or under “fast track” procedures in times of crisis (such as the COVID-19 health crisis), when children who have a family, are returned to them without proper assessment or preparation? Whatever the context, it is crucial that the process is supported by a plan for every child. Figures on the number of children reintegrated are often put forward as an indicator of success, when we should really be assessing the quality of reintegration and its outcomes.

Reintegration: an incremental process

Moreover, reintegration is not an instant process. Incremental actions need to be planned and implemented from the moment the child enters the care system. Essential actions include assessing whether the decision is appropriate, and developing an individual reintegration plan (see MRs No 242, June 2020, and No 249, February 2021). But successful reintegration will also depend on bonds being maintained or rebuilt through regular supervised contact between the child and their parent(s). Otherwise, how can we consider returning the child to people they have not seen or heard since they went into care?

It must be emphasised how important it is for families and children to have access, throughout the process, to clear information and adequate preparation, with mediation and psychosocial support playing a vital role (see p. 9). Access to this support is a determinant factor in empowering parents as their child returns to the family home. In addition to the parents, those currently caring for the child (foster family, institutional staff, etc.) play a crucial role. They can channel the child's story and are best placed to advise professionals and the family on the child's needs, strengths and weaknesses, preferences and daily routines (see p. 11). They can also prepare the child for the return to their biological family, and respond to their questions and concerns, so they experience the transition as positive and controlled. But how can we ensure close, continuous and multidisciplinary collaboration when the family is a long way away? Or where there are limited financial and human resources? (see p. 9). New technologies (such as video calls, WhatsApp and social networks) could be

a major asset in these situations (see Editorial of MR No 244, August 2020), as long as certain factors are in place (in particular, professional support, and access to digital equipment and the internet).

Reintegration: a supported process

How will reintegration work out if we do not address the causes of the separation and their impacts on the child? From the moment the child enters care, close attention must be paid to the factors that led to their separation, while still respecting diversity in families and ways of life. There will be a variety of factors (such as illnesses, poverty, lack of access to basic and specialist services, or disabilities), requiring a variety of responses and individual support. This should include working to capitalise on the strengths and address the weaknesses identified within the family. Often, a lack of access to appropriate social services is a major reason for a child being separated from their family. In these cases, the community, civil society or governmental bodies can play an important role, for example by providing economic empowerment or vocational training programmes, or initiatives such as “income generating activities” (see pp. 7 and 9) – projects that will help the family in the long term. However, how can we ensure that this support, which can be financial, does not stir up tensions within the community (see p. 9), or even lead some very vulnerable families to separate from their child to take advantage of the schemes?

Reintegration: a far-reaching process

In addition to the services themselves, we need to evaluate their impact on the family and on the reintegration process³. In the final assessment, we should take a wider look at the impacts of a reintegration, which may not only bring considerable benefits for the child involved, but also significantly help with “gatekeeping”⁴ – avoiding this child or others from the same community being (re)admitted to alternative care. The more the community is involved, the greater solidarity is developed within it, for the benefit of other vulnerable children and families.

At the end of the day, what is a successful reintegration? Numerous aspects⁵ can be used to assess how well a child's needs are being met after reintegration. These include their physical development, diet and nutrition, health, attendance and progress at school, inclusion for children living

with a disability, protection from all forms of violence, access to appropriate social services, economic stability, and also their sense of belonging to the family and the community. It will be part of the role

of supervision visits to review these aspects and to check that the reintegration continues to be in the best interests of the child.

In accordance with the two key principles in the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children⁶, a successful reintegration process is one that has been determined necessary and suitable for the child, based on a clear regulatory and operational framework. To conclude, the underlying principle and advocacy message remain the same: it is vital to support families and governments need to place greater emphasis on this, to avoid unnecessary family separations and to ensure that children are properly reintegrated.

ISS/IRC Team
May 2021

References:

¹ For a definition, see [Guidelines on Children's Reintegration](#), 2016.

² See [Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#), in particular paras. 4 and 12; [Guidelines on Children's Reintegration](#), in particular pp. 3-4; [Resolution by the General Assembly of the United Nations, Promotion and protection of the rights of children](#), 2019, in particular paras. 22, 30 and 35.

³ See, in particular, Republic of Kenya – Department of Children's Services (2019), [Caseworker's Guidebook](#), p. 43; Childnomics, [Measuring the long-term social and economic value of investing in children](#) (2018).

⁴ See [MOVING FORWARD: Implementing the 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children'](#), pp. 68 onwards.

⁵ See, in particular, Republic of Kenya – Department of Children's Services (2019), [Caseworker's Guidebook](#), p. 22.

⁶ See [MOVING FORWARD: Implementing the 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children'](#), p. 24 onwards.