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## Components of a holistic family reunification services model for children in alternative care – a South African perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*The goal of alternative care is to ensure that children are well taken care of whilst the circumstances that led to their removal are being addressed. It is therefore imperative to have a holistic model that guides the implementation of family reunification services. In the absence of a guiding model, most children end up staying for longer periods in alternative care than needed. This article highlights several aspects of family reunification, based on a study conducted at child protection organisations in South Africa, which was underpinned by ubuntu and rights-based approaches, and employed a mixed methods research design. Data was collected from social workers by means of interviews and questionnaires and analysed using thematic analysis and a statistical package for social sciences. The components of a holistic family reunification services model are: the involvement of extended family members and significant others; guidelines for the role of a social worker; the standard of the best interests of the child; the fact that reunification should be a gradual and holistic process; the provision of parenting skills, and a strong relationship between foster parents and biological parents. The article concludes that family reunification services should be rights-based and holistic to be effective.*

**KEY TERMS:** alternative care, child protection, family reunification; rights-based approach, social workers; ubuntu approach

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## INTRODUCTION

Family is a fundamental unit of a society which should be strengthened and empowered to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children. If a child is removed from the family due to the inability of the family to care for and protect the child, placement of such a child in alternative care should be on a temporary basis, whilst social workers and other stakeholders address the reasons behind the incapacity of the family to adequately look after the child. Such services may entail poverty alleviation, counselling, psycho-social support, training on parenting skills, and referral to specialised organisations. Family reunification services are an important vehicle for delivering such a child back to the family. It is unfortunate that family reunification services are not being adequately practiced by social workers due to the absence of a family reunification services model and several institutional and infrastructural barriers. The article explores the components of a holistic family reunification services model. It begins with a background, followed by a review of literature which provides an overview of the family reunification process and positions it within the child protection processes. The next section discusses the approaches that are more influential in directing the rendering of family reunification services. The research methods used in the study are then discussed, followed by a presentation and discussion of the research findings. The next discussion focuses on the conclusions from the study. Finally, recommendations are made for effective rendering of family reunification services.

## BACKGROUND

The child protection process in South Africa starts with prevention and early intervention, proceeding to the removal of the child and ending with reunification with the family of origin (Sibanda & Lombard, 2022). The social worker initiates children's court proceedings based on evidence that prevention and early intervention services have failed or are inappropriate. The removal of the child is a serious, thorough and intensive process. Therefore, family reunification services should be implemented with the same level of intensity if a child is to be successfully reunited with a family from where he or she was removed (Smith & Lidström, 2020). In an attempt to maintain family contact and to foster reunification, the Children's Act 38 of 2005 directs that, where possible, children should be placed in an alternative care placement located as close as possible to their family. This is to ensure that the family has easy access to the child.

Placement of children in alternative care is supposed to be a temporary and not a permanent arrangement (Children's Act 38 of 2005). However, most children in alternative care stay for longer periods before they are reunified with their families. Some children stay in alternative care until they "Age out of care". Epworth Children's Village (2015) has observed that most children in South Africa stay in residential care centres on a long-term basis, they are placed in alternative care as babies and remain in alternative care until they are 18 years of age, by then a foster family, or a child and youth care centre is the only place they call home. This situation has not changed since Nephawe's study on challenges faced in rendering family reunification services in Johannesburg, which found evidence of a decline in numbers of successful reunification cases in South Africa (Nephawe, 2011). Family reunification services are not being effectively practised, resulting in "bed blocking" by children who unnecessarily stay for longer periods of time in alternative care (Epworth Children's Village, 2015:3).

The lack of effective family reunification services does not serve the best interests of children. It impinges on their attachment, linguistic, social, intellectual, and cultural development (Smith & Lidström, 2020). Children that are not reunified timely experience an emotional fallout that stimulates renewed behavioural difficulties associated with drug abuse, violence, crime, hopelessness, and poor education (Dziro & Rufurwokuda, 2013). Epworth Children's Village (2015) notes that children who have been deprived of a normal home, have trouble in accounting for themselves and find general questions regarding their background, history, and family to be loaded and embarrassing.

The absence of a family reunification services model in South Africa for children placed in alternative care contributes to social workers not being well equipped to render adequate services to children and their families (Sibanda & Lombard, 2022). It is against this background that the paper discusses components of a holistic family reunification services model for children in alternative care. These components are intended to guide and assist social workers working in child protection services to render effective, efficient, comprehensive, and timely reunification services to children and their families.

## Theoretical framework

The study was conducted from a rights-based and ubuntu approaches due to its emphasis on the promotion and protection of children's rights in the African context. A rights-based approach draws upon mainstream social work practice theories and concepts such as the strengths perspective, empowerment, capacity building, respect for diversity, ethnic-sensitive practice, and cultural competence (Androff, 2016). Families are entitled to a service,



benefit, or resource not because they deserve it, or even because they need it, but because they have a right to it on the basis simply of their humanity (Androff, 2016). Some of the key principles of a rights-based approach that are applicable to the rendering of family reunification services are: participation, accountability, empowerment, universal access, social integration, appropriateness, and accessibility (Patel, 2015).

Similarly, the Ubuntu approach, as a key African theory on child protection emphasises the collective responsibility of the community to raise and protect children, essentially meaning "I am because we are," highlighting the importance of interconnectedness and shared care within a community to safeguard children's wellbeing; this philosophy promotes a strong focus on family, social support networks, and communal oversight to ensure children's safety and development (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Sekudu, 2019; Dziro & Rufurwokuda, 2013). Some of the key features of the ubuntu approach that are relevant to the field of family reunification are: collective responsibility, community-led intervention, holistic approach, respect for cultural norms, mutual support, empathy, child participation, and addressing structural inequalities (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Mbedzi, 2019; Molose, 2019).

## LITERATURE

In terms of establishing a successful reunification, research points out the importance of collaboration between the parties involved in the reunification process. This includes parental involvement, the child's involvement, and a functioning communication between the parties (Sibanda & Lombard, 2022). The approaches that are more influential in directing the rendering of family reunification services are the systems approach, the bio-ecological systems approach, and the strengths-based approach. These approaches have been adapted by African scholars to ensure relevancy and appropriateness to the African context, as discussed below.

In systems theory, as adapted by Mugumbate and Chereni (2019), the child is considered as a sub-system of the family and the family is considered as a sub-system of the community. The tenets of an ubuntu systems approach lay a foundation for developmental social welfare services that are characterised by an integrated approach to service delivery; hence it is fundamental for reunification social workers to apply it along with other approaches and perspectives (Sekudu, 2019). From a systems approach, services should be designed to promote an environment to which a child can be safely returned and to help maintain that environment after reunification. The ubuntu systems approach is drawn from structural perspectives which state that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Mbedzi, 2019). In this way, the family is considered as a social system because its members are inter-reliant and any change in the circumstances of one family member will have a significant impact on the circumstances of other family members. As such, the systems theory empowers social workers to analyse and interpret family-related issues, enabling them to locate the position of the family in a society.

The bio-ecological systems approach, as adapted by Mbedzi (2019), is an extension of the systems theory, and it offers a rounded view of how individuals interact with the numerous environmental systems that are linked to them. The bio-ecological systems approach provides an explanation on how an individual influences and is influenced by reciprocal interactions within his or her environment. Proponents of the bio-ecological systems approach are of the view that biological, psychological, social, economic, political, spiritual, and cultural factors have a significant bearing on the behaviour of human beings (Mbedzi, 2019). For the social worker to comprehend why some families have registered strides towards family reunification services whilst others have not, it is critical for the social worker to contemplate on how the biological, socio-economic, political, spiritual, and cultural factors interact and influence family reunification (Masinga & Sibanda, 2024). Doing so enables the social worker to understand the circumstances of families being engaged in family reunification services. Family reunification social workers who use the bio-ecological systems approach should hold a two-pronged focus and pay attention to both personal and external environmental factors that influence family reunification. Family reunification workers who hold a narrow focus, and only pay exclusive attention to factors within families, are at risk of failing to challenge structural inequalities that contribute to a family's failure to address issues that led to the removal of the child.

The strengths-based approaches enable practitioners to discover and explore the service users' strengths and resources in empowering them to achieve goals (Molose, 2019). From a strengths-based perspective, a holistic family reunification service is achieved when families are encouraged to use their knowledge, skills, and expertise of their own situations to address their social and economic needs. Family reunification social workers practicing from a strengths-based perspective facilitate the assessment, detection, exploration and use of family strengths and resources. From an ubuntu perspective, the strength-based theory is premised on the principles of inclusion and participation in decision making (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007).

## METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed methods research design, more specifically an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. The use of this design provided an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and explored the components of a holistic family reunification



services by asking ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ questions.

The study was conducted at five child protection agencies based in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. Each of the five selected NGOs has more than 50 years of service delivery experience in the field of child protection. The selected organisations render services not only in urban areas but also in the rural and peri-urban areas of Gauteng, including farming and mining towns. Targeting these selected child protection organisations provided a true reflection of the nature of family reunification services. The researcher utilised a non-probability sampling technique, namely purposive sampling, to select a sample of 15 social workers for the qualitative study based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study; having at least two years’ experience in rendering family reunification services; serving different population groups in terms of race, culture, religion, beliefs and social status; and being in the employment of participating organisations for at least one year. For the quantitative study, the researcher applied total population sampling and targeted 183 respondents from all five organisations to complete the questionnaire.

The study received ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria (Reference number: 20160932HS). The researcher collected data for the qualitative phase of the study by means of one-on-one semi-structured interviews and used a questionnaire to collect data for the quantitative study. In analysing qualitative data, the researcher utilised Creswell’s (2014) model of thematic data analysis, this entailed familiarization of data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining, and naming themes and producing the report. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed by using a computer based statistical software programme, specifically Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.

## FINDINGS

This section presents findings on the components of a holistic family reunification services model. In reporting on the findings, the data sets were integrated in order to gain deeper insights into the components that constitute a holistic family reunification services model. The components of a holistic family reunification services were identified by participants as: the involvement of extended family members and significant others, guidelines for the role of a social worker; the standard of the best interests of the child; the fact that reunification should be a gradual and holistic process; the provision of parenting skills, and a strong relationship between foster parents and biological parents.

### *Involvement of extended family members and significant others*

The participants were asked to indicate components that should constitute a holistic family reunification services model. As opposed to 3,9% (5 of 127) of participants who maintained a neutral view, an overwhelming 96% (122 of 127) of participants indicated that a holistic family reunification services model should not only focus on biological parents but should find ways of involving extended family members and significant others in the family reunification process. According to participants, extended family members and significant others act as a support system to the biological parents to improve their circumstances:

*Children should be encouraged to have contact with other extended family members so that they can be aware of their culture and traditions (Participant 1).*

*For family reunification services to be holistic, social workers must not only focus on biological parents, but also on the extended family members. The support from family members makes family reunification services to be successful, so it is very important to include them from the onset (Participant 2).*

*Also, they (biological parents) must have a support system because it is very important for the biological parents to involve other significant people. This includes the grandparents, uncles, aunts, the church, the friends and even the neighbours. These should form part of the family reunification process (Participant 7).*

### *Guidelines for the role of a social worker*

In identifying the components of a holistic family reunification services model, 95.3% (121 of 127) of participants indicated guidelines for the role of a family reunification social worker as a key component, whereas 4,5% (6) had a neutral opinion on the matter. The participants stated that the social worker is key in facilitating and driving the family reunification process. As such, his or her role should be categorically clear:

*The social workers should include the family in all aspects of the child’s life, for example, showing parents the school reports of their children. It is just including the family in all aspects of a child’s life*



*and making sure that they are involved and that they are consulted (Participant 12).*

*The model should also look at what the social worker should do to help the family. The social worker should contribute positively; he or she cannot say you need to change your circumstances without specifying what exactly needs to change and how it should change (Participant 13).*

*The model should include the keeping of records of biological parents. Even when the biological parents are untraceable, social workers should keep records of where the child was found (Participant 3).*

### ***The standard of the best interests of the child***

Most participants were of the view that a holistic family reunification services model should be premised on the standard of the best interests of the child. The opinions of participants regarding this component are:

*First thing, at the centre of it (the model), must be a child; the interests and preferences of a child must be at the centre of the model. You can do anything that you want to do but this child must determine everything. So, we start off with the child and then we go on to look at the surroundings, the assessment of the parent, we look at the parent's physical factors, emotional factors, psychological factors, and everything (Participant 4).*

*The needs of a child should also be considered; when a child is reunified with parents, the child might mourn the loss of the foster parent. I think the arrangement should be that the child should still be part of the lives of foster parents (Participant 6).*

*I think we must consider the best interests of the child, the well-being of the child. And also, we must look at the circumstances of the family (Participant 11).*

The quantitative findings confirm the qualitative findings, 99.2% (126 of 127) of participants indicated adherence to the best interests of the child standard as a component of a holistic family reunification services model, as opposed to one (0.8%) participant who did not support the finding.

### ***A gradual and holistic process***

A holistic family reunification services model must reflect the fact that family reunification is a gradual and holistic process, as indicated by 99.2% (123 of 124) of participants. One (0.8%) participant held a neutral view on the matter. Participants shared the following sentiments:

*It is not a brief one-time event. If the reunification process is brief, one does not get a true picture of the biological parents. If you give them three months to prove themselves, they are going to be as good as possible and as perfect as possible so that they get the child, but that is not really who they are and how they will be after a child has been placed back with them. So, if it is an ongoing process, then they cannot fake it (Participant 4).*

*I think the core elements of the model should reflect a longitudinal and holistic process that revolves around the physical and emotional development of the children, their educational support, the relationship, and support from the extended family (Participant 15).*

### ***The provision of parenting skill***

The provision of parenting skills to biological parents was identified by 94.3% (117 of 124) of participants as a component of a holistic family reunification services model, whereas 5.5% (7) held no view on the matter. Adequate parenting skills training empowers parents to address reasons that led to the removal of the child and increases the competency of parents in taking care of their children.

*For sure there must be parenting skills. The biological parents should be able to know themselves, their strengths, and weaknesses, and then, of course, the relationship skills must also be part of it (Participant 6).*

*Parenting skills must also be a huge part of the model. Parents should be empowered to develop skills to be better parents than they were before. Also, trauma counselling should be organised for the parents as soon as the children are removed from them because, to them, it is real loss, it is almost like death (Participant 8).*



### ***A strong relationship between foster parents and biological parents***

A holistic family reunification services model should focus on ensuring a strong relationship between foster parents and biological parents, as indicated by 91.2% (113 of 124) of participants. Two (1.6%) participants disagreed, and eight (6.3%) participants did not have a view on the matter. A strong relationship between foster parents and biological parents makes family reunification a possibility and enables all parties to be prepared to adjust to the reunification of the child.

*The biological parents must maintain a close relationship with foster parents, especially when children have stayed long in foster care, because that is the only family that the child knows. For instance, we reunified a child that was placed with the foster parent when she was only 3 days old, and the family only found out about the child when the child was already five years old. So, we advised them that they need to form a close relationship with the foster parents. If the foster parent feels that they are missing the child, they can talk to her over the phone or even visit her one day (Participant 7).*

*I think the relationship between foster parents and biological parents should be a huge part of the model. This is because the foster parents can sometimes sabotage the whole family reunification process if their relationship with the biological parent is not strong (Participant 8).*

## **DISCUSSION**

In support of the findings, Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo (2008) state that services should not only be provided to the biological family but also to the extended family. Furthermore, services should be provided within the cultural context of a family (Dziro & Rufurwokuda, 2013). The African culture regards an extended family as a primary agent for resolving childcare, protecting a child, and solving other family issues (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Osei-Hwedie & Rankopo, 2008). Families have long been able to take care of the children, and they should be actively involved in any decisions concerning the children since they know how best to protect them (Molose, 2019).

The idea of involving significant others fully reflects the values and traditions of African families. In Africa, child caregiving is not only the responsibility of biological parents, but extended family members may also step in to support and care for the child (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). The involvement of extended family members and significant others can be achieved by family conferencing, where different role players, services providers, families, and significant others come together to discuss childcare arrangements (Lombard, 2019).

Sibanda and Lombard (2022) confirm the findings and state that the role of a social worker is to identify children who are ready for reunification, trace their families, and gather information for reports to be written to place children back with their parents. Another essential role of the social worker is to facilitate continuous contact between children and their parents (De Villiers 2008). In addition, social workers should strengthen and empower families to work towards addressing reasons that led to the removal of children from their care. Children have a right, as far as possible, to maintain direct and regular contact with their families when in alternative care. As such, the social worker has a mediating role of helping children repair the links with their parents through continuous contact (Mbedzi, 2019).

The primary objective of social workers is to render services to children in line with the best interests' standard. In the event of removal of a child from family care, the approach holds that access visits should be arranged between the child and parents, siblings, family members and significant others (Children's Act 38 of 2005). Additionally, the best interests' principle is clear about the desirability of continuity and stability in the child's care (Children's Act 38 of 2005). In a rights-based and ubuntu approaches, children are not seen as parental property, helpless objects of charity, or passive dependents. Rather, a child is an individual and a member of a family and community with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age and stage of development (Androff, 2016; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

Family reunification is a process rather than a placement event, family reunification services should be holistic and ongoing. In line with a rights-based approach, the focus of interventions should not only be on the outcomes but also on the process of achieving the outcomes (Androff, 2016). A study by D'Andre (2013) found that when social workers pressurise families and want reunification to be quick, they tend to simultaneously enrol family members in a variety of programmes, and this puts pressure on the family and sets them up for failure. Biological parents of children in alternative care should be taken through family reunification processes one step at a time so that they do not experience the process as abrupt, intense, demotivating, and demoralising.

Social workers should assist parents to understand their role in being competent parents, especially through the delivery of parenting and life skills training (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). By guiding parents on how to care for and protect their children, the social worker will not only be teaching the parents valuable guidelines in being competent parents but will at the same time be facilitating a healing process where children and parents learn to trust each other enough to be reunited again (De Villiers, 2008; Molose, 2019). Being a competent parent



involves helping children to be healthy, independent, and well adjusted.

The findings are in line with the views of De Villiers (2008) who challenges social workers to encourage both foster parents and biological parents to communicate and explore areas of common interests in a reunification process. One such common area of interest is the safety and wellbeing of the child and always prioritising what is in the best interest of the child.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK**

The implementation of a holistic family reunification services model by social workers requires well thought through institutional and infrastructural arrangements. In the best interests of children, social workers should render family reunification services from ubuntu and rights-based approaches. Such services should be packaged in a manner that targets all the aspects of child and family wellbeing. Holistic family reunification services should be geared towards addressing the reasons that led to the removal of the child from the family. Academic institutions involved in training of social workers should incorporate the holistic family reunification services model into the social work curriculum and create opportunities for students in field placements to experience family reunification services in practice. In addition, academic institutions should encourage research and engagement of academics and students in influencing family reunification policies.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, family reunification depends on stakeholder partnerships and active participation of children and families, which are common themes in the ubuntu and rights-based approaches to social work. To ensure successful family reunification, services should be adapted and tailor-made for diverse, specific, and unique needs of families. Efforts should be made to improve relationships among all stakeholders in the family reunification sphere. A holistic family reunification services model should comprise various multi-pronged, related elements and strategies.



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