

 VERMONT DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES Family Services Policy Manual		<h1 style="margin: 0;">98</h1>
Chapter:	Placing Children and Youth	
Subject:	Reunification of Abused or Neglected Children and Youth	Page 1 of 5
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Purpose

To ensure focus on the continued safety and well-being of children who have been physically returned to the parent from whom they were removed due to abuse or neglect (either through DCF custody or a Conditional Custody Order to others).

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Definitions

Background Check: The process of compiling and assessing criminal history and child protection records of an individual. For the purpose of this policy, the Vermont Child Protection Registry, SSMIS, DOC, and VCAS should be checked for all persons 16 years and older living in the household with the child or persons who will have child care responsibilities.

Child: A child who has been determined to be a Child in Need of Care or Supervision, specifically CHINS (A) or (B).

Conditional Custody Order (CCO): An order issued by the court in a juvenile proceeding conferring legal custody of a child to a parent, guardian, relative, or a person with a significant relationship with the child subject to such conditions and limitations as the court may deem necessary to provide for the safety and welfare of the child. Any conditions and limitations shall apply only to the individual to whom custody is granted. (33 V.S.A. § 5102(A)(5))

Family Team Meeting: A meeting of family members, natural supports, and providers to create a safety plan focused on the harm and risks posed to the child, assess

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the child’s safety and well-being in the home, develop a plan for responding to concerns, understand the family’s needs, make decisions about who can provide support to the family, and determine the best living situation for the child.

Parent: A parent whose acts or omissions caused the child to be determined CHINS (A) or (B).

Reunification: The return of a child to the full-time care of a parent from whom he or she was removed due to abuse or neglect. Reunification does not include the return of the child to the care of a parent who is living in a residential setting. Care is considered full-time if the parent is responsible for the care and supervision of the child, even if the child is in child care and/or spends some time with other family or informal supports.

Reunification Plan: A case plan specifically focused on the services and supports, including natural and professional, needed to maximize the success of a reunification, as well as a plan for ongoing monitoring of the child’s safety and well-being.

Safety Network: Family, friends, and community members who care about the child and are willing to take action to support the family and keep the child safe. They are willing to engage child protection staff and understand the concerns. For the purpose of this policy, a safety network may also include professionals.

Related Policies

Family Services [Policy 52](#): Child Safety Interventions: Investigations and Assessments

Family Services [Policy 68](#): Serious Physical Injury: Investigation and Case Planning

Family Services [Policy 84](#): Conditional Custody Orders (CCOs)

Family Services [Policy 125](#): Permanency Planning for Children and Youth in DCF Custody

Policy

Planning for Reunification of Abused or Neglected Children and Youth – CHINS (A) or (B)

Social workers shall consult with their superiors when considering returning a child to the care of a parent from whom the child was removed due to abuse or neglect. In cases of serious physical injury, districts shall consult with their operations manager about the

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case plan goal and the timing of any planned reunification per Family Services [Policy 68](#).

The division shall ensure that all persons living in the household with the child or persons who will have child care responsibilities are assessed for criminal history and potential safety risks. The Vermont Child Protection Registry, SSMIS, DOC, and VCAS should be checked for each individual 16 years and older. If indicated, the division may also conduct background checks on household member younger than sixteen.

Research indicates the likelihood of successful reunification increases by having all of the following in place:

- risk reduction since the first assessment of danger and safety;
- frequent and quality family time; and
- a safety plan with a network of family, friends, and community members.

Both the *SDM Safety Assessment* and *SDM Risk Reassessment* tools shall be completed prior to reunification. When it has been determined through ongoing risk assessment that identified present or impending dangers have been eliminated or reduced, no new dangers have emerged, and it is safe and appropriate for a child to be reunified with a parent, the child’s case plan will be amended to focus on a plan for supporting a safe and successful reunification.

The social worker will convene a family team meeting with providers, the child’s Guardian ad Litem (GAL), and informal supports that make up the safety network to develop the reunification case plan. A Family Safety Planning meeting may be appropriate for discussing and clarifying the plan. The case plan will specify:

- specific activities that support the continued progress the parents have made in addressing dangers and risks that brought the child into care – including the monitoring of participation in required services;
- any medical, mental health, educational, or other issues the child has which require close coordination and attention;
- the frequency of visits from the social worker;
- the frequency of visits from the safety network;
- a plan for services for the child and parent; and
- the method of monitoring the child’s safety and well-being for **at least a six-month period**.

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Conditional Reunification and Supervision

When returning a child to the care of a parent from whom he or she was removed due to abuse or neglect (either through DCF custody or a conditional custody order to others), the division shall request a hearing to request that custody be discharged conditionally to the parent with the reunification case plan specifying the conditions to be requested.

The presumptive duration of any order giving conditional custody to a parent is no longer than six months from the date of the disposition order or conditional custody order, **whichever occurs later**, unless otherwise extended by the court. For additional information on conditional custody orders, see Family Services [Policy 84](#).

If the social worker and supervisor do not believe a Conditional Custody Order (CCO) is needed, they will consult with the district director and he or she must approve. If the district director approves and a CCO is not requested or a CCO is not granted by the courts, a six-month supervisory period is still required

The division will ensure the child and family are visited in their home regularly by the social worker and the safety network, as indicated in the case plan. Social workers will visit the home **within two weeks of the conditional reunification and at least monthly thereafter**. If the child is living with a parent out of state, the plan for face-to-face contact may be tailored but must clearly attend to the child’s safety. For information on handling situations governed by the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), see Family Services [Policy 181](#).

The social worker will ensure that other professionals and/or the child’s safety network see the child regularly, at intervals indicated by the age and vulnerability of the child, between team meetings to assess the child’s safety and well-being. The team will convene **every other month** to:

- assess the child’s safety and well-being at home;
- determine if any newly identified dangers or risks have emerged;
- assure the commitments of the safety network remain in effect;
- assure the services put in place are adequately addressing the parent’s and child’s needs;
- discuss how the plan is working; and
- recommend modifications to the case plan when appropriate.

The division shall continually monitor whether the conditional reunification is successful and in the best interests of the child.

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Reviewing or Modifying the CCO for Newly Identified Dangers or Risks

Additionally, the division shall monitor:

- The need for any additional releases of information to appropriately monitor the case plan.
- Any safety concerns that necessitate requesting a hearing to review or modify the CCO. If there are newly identified dangers or risks, the division shall notify the court and either request a hearing to discuss a substantial change in the circumstances of the existing CCO or seek custody of the child.
- Whether the CCO needs to be extended beyond a six-month period. Because these orders will expire automatically at the end of six months, it is critical to evaluate, by the end of the 5th month, whether DCF should seek an extension of that order. If it should be extended, the division must file a petition at least 14 days before the presumptive expiration date.

Services Following Successful Completion of CCO Period

After a CCO has expired or has been vacated, when appropriate, the division may continue to provide ongoing services and work with the family through a family support case with the safety network continuing to review the plan and child’s safety and well-being at home.

Placement with a Parent in Residential Settings

Children placed with a parent in a residential setting receive a level of parenting support that differs significantly from the level of support the parent receives after discharge from the program. Therefore, a child who is placed with his or her parents in a residential treatment program is not considered to be reunified for the purposes of this policy.

Following discharge of the parent from the residential program, the division will retain custody of the child for sixty days, with a reunification case plan in place. Assuming that the child is receiving safe and appropriate care during that period, the social worker will request a hearing to transfer legal custody of the child to the parent, with conditions, as outlined above in this policy.