



## Considerations in the Utilization of “Reunification Bypass:” A Qualitative Study in Six California Counties

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The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 includes a provision that allows child welfare agencies to deny reunification services to parents in certain circumstances known as “reunification exceptions.” Because state reporting is not required, we know little about when or how often these reunification exceptions are invoked. This qualitative study presents the results of interviews and focus groups with social workers, social worker supervisors, judges, attorneys, concurrent planning foster parents, and birth parents in six California counties.

Although California has many opportunities for reunification bypass, and many child welfare clients are eligible, a referral for reunification bypass is uncommon. Why?

*Findings:* Reasons for the limited used of reunification bypass among social workers included:

- Philosophical reasons, including a commitment to attempt reunification when possible.
- Some reunification exception conditions may be hard to “prove” in court.
- Legislated time limits for young children (may lead to faster outcomes than a contested bypass recommendation).
- Limited alternatives for permanence (age and adoptability of child/sibling group and availability of kin influence the perceived need to attempt reunification).
- Availability of promising remedial services.
- Need for extensive consultation.

*Findings:* Perceptions of reunification bypass in the courts were:

- Some see the threat of bypass as another tool to “motivate” birth parents.
- Clarification is needed on some indicators.
- Contested hearings slow resolution of cases.

In sum, philosophical, beauracratc and permanency considerations limit use of reunification bypass.

*Some Recommendations:*

- More research is needed to develop an evidence-based prognosis for reunification.
- Greater legislative clarity is needed to reduce inequities in implementation.
- Improved ability of courts to be consistent with legislated timelines.
- Requirements for reporting use of reunification bypass within and across states are needed.

## **Methods**

This qualitative study presents the results of interviews and focus groups with social workers, social worker supervisors, judges, attorneys, concurrent planning foster parents, and birth parents in six California counties.

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