

Family drug courts with parenting programs yield better reunification rates, researchers say

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Families who had children removed from the home due to parental substance abuse were more than twice as likely to be reunified when they took part in a family drug court that incorporated two innovative evidence-based parenting programs, when compared with those who took part in regular child welfare courts, a University of Kansas study has found. The success of the program has led KU researchers to partner with the state of Oklahoma in securing a new, \$1.2 million grant to take the program to a new location, all with the goal of safely reunifying families involved in foster care.

Jody Brook and Becci Akin, assistant professors of social welfare, and Margaret Lloyd and Yueqi Yan, doctoral students, all at KU, authored an evaluation of a [family](#) drug court in Tulsa County, Oklahoma. Their study was published in the Juvenile and Family Court Journal. Estimates have suggested that 50 to 79 percent of cases in which a child is removed from the home are characterized by parental alcohol or other drug abuse. Further, research has also shown that children placed in foster care for these reasons stay there longer, encounter worse outcomes than their peers in [foster care](#) for other reasons, are less likely to reunify with their primary caregivers and are more likely to re-enter care even when they do return home.

"Finding effective ways to work with families characterized by [parental substance abuse](#) is a critical issue in [child welfare](#) service delivery.

Despite the fact that substance abuse is a widely known precursor to child welfare system involvement, evidence-supported interventions are still lacking," Brook said. "In an environment of scarce resources, we need to know what works so that families can be safely reunified or children can be freed up for other permanency arrangements as quickly as possible."

The KU researchers evaluated the Tulsa County family drug court to gauge its effectiveness. The court is unique in that it features two parenting skills programs built on evidence-supported interventions. Parents in the court took part in the Strengthening Families Program and Celebrating Families! program in a sequential format. The study team compared the reunification rates of families in the program to those of families receiving regular child welfare services from January 2011 to September 2013.

For the first 200 days of the program, reunification rates were relatively similar for the two programs. But at the 400th day from removal from the home, the family drug court featuring evidence-based practices began showing marked improvement. At that mark, 17 percent of the former group achieved reunification, compared with 9 percent of the comparison group. By the 600-day mark, the family drug court group achieved a 46 percent reunification rate, while the comparison group was at 17 percent. By the 1,000th day, the family drug court group was at more than 56 percent, while the comparison group only reached 24 percent.

"Family Drug Courts are still a relatively new intervention, and family drug courts with parenting services are fewer still," Brook said. "These specialty dockets are a direct response to failed efforts in mainstream child welfare to successfully reunify families. The courts provide structure, strong case oversight, enhanced collaboration among service team members and case management that connects families to services

that they need, including access to [substance abuse treatment](#). By adding a parenting component, the entire family works on communication, skill building, child developmental education and attachment."

The study is among the first comprehensive looks at family drug courts, which are growing in use throughout the United States. The pronounced difference in reunification rates shows that programs with evidence-based parenting skills programs warrant more use and further analysis.

"The difference between the two programs is quite striking," Brook said. "The program gets kids back in their homes quicker and saves the state a great deal of money."

Brook and Lloyd recently assisted Oklahoma in securing grant funding to implement an identical family drug court with evidence-based parenting programs in Okmulgee County, Oklahoma. They will be evaluating that program to analyze and compare successful family reunification rates to the Tulsa program and other drug courts nationwide over the next three years.

In addition to shedding light on more effective ways to reunite families affected by substance abuse, Brook said the program has been an invaluable experience for graduate students such as Lloyd. Not only was she able to gain experience conducting research and analyzing family reunification rates, it laid the basis for her to advance scholarship around a relatively new area of intervention research.

The new grant will continue to provide learning opportunities for graduate students as well, who will eventually go on to serve some of society's most vulnerable populations. That service and scholarship benefits a wide range of society.

"The families receiving these services are arguably the most challenging

to serve within judicial and other human service delivery systems, and they face multiple complex intrapersonal, interpersonal and systematic barriers to successful outcomes," the authors wrote. "When families are served in a way that yields better permanency outcomes, it benefits the court, child welfare, [substance abuse](#) treatment and most importantly, the child and family, to continue implementing and studying the service strategy."

Provided by University of Kansas

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