KEY FINDINGS

◊ Family reunification is more likely when the mother is present at dependency hearings.
◊ Reunification is also more likely when the mother’s attorney is present at hearings.
◊ The father’s presence at hearings does not appear to increase the likelihood of reunification.
◊ Family reunification is more likely when the father’s attorney attends disposition hearings.

BACKGROUND

What factors influence whether children are reunified with their families? Most research on this question has focused on individual-level factors such as age, education and family composition, but few studies have looked at the processes of the juvenile dependency court system. The involvement of parents and their attorneys in preliminary protective, adjudication, disposition and review hearings may increase the likelihood and timing of a child being reunified with his/her parents. Past research has indicated that higher degrees of mothers’ involvement¹ and compliance² have a positive effect on reunification. However, there is a paucity of empirical research concerning the influence of fathers’ involvement, or the influence of having parents’ attorneys present at hearings.

SUMMARY

The PPCD conducted a study of dependency court data to determine if parental and attorney presence during early dependency hearings is related to the likelihood and timing of reunification. The data included a random sample of child abuse and neglect cases from four counties in Colorado and three counties in California. The analysis revealed that children whose mothers and mothers’ attorneys were present at the first four hearings were more likely to be reunified with their parents, and this reunification tended to occur sooner than children whose mothers and mothers’ attorneys were not present. On the other hand, the father’s presence at the early hearings was not a robust predictor of reunification.

IMPLICATIONS

The current study supports previous research that mothers’ engagement has a positive effect on family reunification. Accordingly, efforts are needed to ensure mothers are present at each of the early hearings. Assigning parents, especially mothers, legal counsel at or before one of the four early hearings will also increase the chances of reunification. The results of this study suggest that assigning legal counsel in dependency cases would ultimately be less burdensome than the cost of maintaining children in the foster care system.