

Reunification of Families

By Ruby Gan



Some people wonder if residents of children's homes visit their families or eventually go home. The key objective for each child is to be reunified and reintegrated with their family of origin. The journey is not always straightforward. Ahuva Good Shepherd - Children's Home (CH) works with other stakeholders, including agencies which operate Safe and Strong Families - Reunification (SSF-R) to help the child and her parent or caregiver to eventually achieve their common goal.

SSF-R is sponsored by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). The mission of each SSF-R team is to reunify children residing in children's homes or foster care with their families in a safe and sustainable manner over a period of 12 months. Typically, the process starts with twice weekly visits to the family home followed by a 2-phase framework. Let me briefly share the journey of 12-year-old Ema (not her real name) and her mother, who gave her permission for the publication of this article.

When Ema moved from Malaysia to live with her mother, Mdm Shelly (not her real name), their relationship was fraught with conflicts. One day Ema was placed in CH. Although Mdm Shelly did not fully agree with Ema being taken away from her, she did not think of abandoning her child and worked hard to mend the relationship with her daughter. Working closely with the SSF-R team, Ema was successfully reunited with her mother.



Following are excerpts of a reflective discussion I facilitated with Mdm Shelly and the social worker from SSF-R.



Ruby: What are some significant points in this journey leading to reunification?

Mdm Shelly: I think I have been quite consistent in my effort. It is my child who needs to cooperate that makes reunification possible. If she is not cooperative the case would be stuck, no progress. I know she wants to come home, but she is just stubborn. She said things to spite me. Now that she's going to secondary school, she is more cooperative. She asked me not to tell her new secondary school about her stay in the children's home. It seems she wants to start afresh.

Ruby: What was helpful in this journey of reunification?

Mdm Shelly: I think Ema needs to understand the effort I put in, to know that I never gave up on her. She needs to put in some effort too, whether she is in the children's home or at home with me. For example, during the family counselling sessions, it would not have worked if she remained resistant. She must understand that it takes two hands to clap in a relationship.

SSF-R SW: I resonate with what Mdm Shelly shared, and I want to echo that a lot of the success of reunification was when the two of them worked together. In the beginning it was extremely tough, especially when Ema was rejecting a lot of her mother's effort. However, Mdm Shelly persevered despite the pain and hurt from Ema's rejection. We all saw how difficult it was for Mdm Shelly but she never once gave up in the 2 years. I respect her and her efforts because not all parents we worked with were so committed to reunification. Mdm Shelly was able to recognize that Ema needed time and I'm glad that she was patient with her. Although Ema appeared to be slow in accepting her mother, she did try to take steps towards building their relationship. In other words, there was effort from both. I think what was important was that Mdm Shelly had the support of her friends from church, who were there to empathize with her and just be present for her in her difficult moments. Mdm Shelly's partner and her family were also there to help her. These are the factors that contributed positively to this reunification journey.

Mdm Shelly: It has been a difficult journey. I need to keep looking and moving forward, despite the difficulties and challenges. I am prepared to face them.

SSF-R SW: It has been a humbling experience for me to work with Ema and Mdm Shelly on their journey. It really does take a whole kampung to raise a child. For Mdm Shelly her kampung is her family and friends. For the SSF-R team, we are our own kampung. We don't always agree, however by focusing on the child and her safety we always have good collaboration. Our common goal is to sustain and build permanency for families.