From Reunification to Family Unification: Centering Families and Preventing Harm

Each June, the ABA Center on Children and the Law has celebrated Family Reunification Month as a time to recognize the tireless efforts of parents and families working toward reunification, as well as the professionals who support them. These celebrations have uplifted families navigating the trauma of separation and the long road toward being together again. Last year, we intentionally broadened our focus and recognized the month of June as *Family Unification Month*.

This shift reflects a powerful truth: family unification is not just a case outcome or a permanency goal—it's a lifelong journey. It is more than a system's response to a family's struggles; it is a collective responsibility to ensure families are supported, protected, and kept whole whenever possible.

This focus reflects a deeper understanding of the complex realities families face. Reunification events can risk becoming celebrations of a system that often causes the very harm it then attempts to repair. Reunification can indeed be a powerful milestone in a family's journey, and those moments and system partners deserve recognition. But reunification should not obscure the truth that many separations could—and should—have been avoided altogether. Many parents, especially Black, Indigenous, and parents of color generally, have long voiced that had they received appropriate support, their families would never have been separated. Throughout this piece, we've included reflections from past unification heroes whose experiences help to illustrate why focusing solely on reunification—without a broader commitment to preserving family unity from the beginning—can miss the deeper needs of families and unintentionally affirm the system's role in separating families in the first place, often under conditions rooted in poverty rather than actual safety risk. It is time we meet this moment to go farther in preventing the harm of system involvement.

As Ambrosia shared, *"It was extremely stressful not knowing where they are, how they're doing, or even if they're safe. The impact of family separation can be long-lasting and can lead to damaged relationships that can take years to heal."*

Family Unification Month seeks to recenter the conversation where it began: around families themselves. This means celebrating parents and youth's strength and resilience not just after reunification, but throughout the continuum of family preservation. We will lift up families who have overcome separation *and* families who remained together despite the

weight of systemic involvement. We will honor parents who continue to fight for their families, even as they navigate ongoing challenges because family unification, like life, is not linear. It is a journey—one that includes ups and downs, steps forward and setbacks, ultimately including hope and healing.

Jessica, a mother of seven and former foster youth whose family has been investigated, shares, *"It weighs on you a bit, and if I didn't have a good support system, I would probably be depressed. For example, my brother is a mental health specialist, and my best friend is a social worker. So I am surrounded by people who have insight and I reach out for help. If I feel like I'm struggling as a parent in an area, it means that there could be a bit of a transference, so I make sure to reach out."*

When families face challenges, they deserve to be supported by a compassionate community and a network that responds with care. As Alishia put it, *"When I was at my lowest, I was met with hardened souls, and I needed to be met with love. … I needed someone to see my humanness. … The trauma response I had after contact with the Department lingered for months."*

We call on our communities, our systems, and ourselves to do more, to stand for family unity not just in rhetoric, but in action, investment, and support.

As we expand our lens, we also remain grounded in the original purpose of June's recognition efforts: to eliminate shame, honor parent and youth voices, and challenge the flawed assumptions that underlie family separation. *Family Unification Month* is a call to action: to celebrate parents, caregivers, and youth as heroes, to dismantle harmful narratives, and to recognize that family unification doesn't happen in isolation. Families should not have to rely solely on government systems to fix what those systems often helped break. At the same time, families should not be expected to face challenges alone. Unification is made possible through **community**—the neighbors, kin, faith leaders, educators, community service providers, and mentors who stand alongside families and provide stability, guidance, and care.

Throughout the month of June, the ABA will continue to celebrate unification heroes through national stories, highlighting local events, and a webinar on June 11th. This includes recognizing parents, youth, and the members of their support teams who have worked to keep families together or reunify them with dignity and care. But more than ever, we will also center prevention—celebrating those who have played a role in keeping families whole in the first place.

Unification is not a single moment—it is a lifelong commitment to family, community, and healing. This June, and moving forward, we celebrate the full spectrum of that journey with *Family Unification Month*.

Our Theme for June 2025

This year, we are embracing this broader and more inclusive vision with the theme, **Communities Supporting Family Unification**. This year's theme affirms the essential role of natural supports. It allows jurisdictions to define "community" in locally grounded ways, whether through partnerships with parent-led advocacy groups, peer mentors, culturally responsive healing spaces, or place-based supports. True family unification is about creating a flow of care—across systems and beyond them—that honors family integrity and prioritizes early, affirming support. We owe it to families to invest in solutions that center wellness, not surveillance; healing, not punishment.