



Reseda family reunited after year of foster care

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The Nino-Andrade family of Reseda was brought back together by the Department of Children and Family Services. From left are Dulce Nino, 8, Hector Andrade, 12, Richard Nino, 8, Pablo Nino w/son Pablo 8 months, Lucia Andrade, Bryan Andrade, 15, and David Andrade, 13. The family was first separated after Dulce went to school with a head injury. (David Crane/Daily News Staff Photographer)

Pablo Nino smiled proudly while posing for pictures with his family on a patch of grass in downtown Los Angeles.

All but one of the Reseda construction worker's six children had spent about a year in foster care, and he was deeply grateful to have them back.

"I'm so happy," the father said in halting English.

Nino is a beneficiary of the county Department of Children and Family Services' relatively recent drive to reunite children with biological parents and relatives who have consistently shown desire and ability to once again safely care for them.

"I think it's important for families to be

together," said Phillip Browning, who took over as interim director of the DCFS three weeks ago.

"So

often, we've taken families and pulled them apart," he said. "Now, I think there's a renewed emphasis to make sure that we can provide the support that is needed to keep a family together."

Nino was among several parents and social workers honored by the county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday for being "Family Reunification Heroes."

During the fiscal year that ended in June, DCFS reunited 9,730 children with their families, though 977 of them were in foster care again as of Tuesday.

DCFS had more than 35,000 open cases as of Aug. 31, including about 9,100 who are receiving family reunification services.

Another 15,500 are in out-of-home placement, such as foster homes and group homes. Five years ago, that number was around 50,000.

Sometimes returning children to families that harmed or neglected them in the past can lead

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again to tragic outcomes, acknowledged Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform.

Still, he contends that returning them is less risky than keeping them in prolonged foster care, citing research from 2007 and 2008 that involved more than 15,000 children.

The studies found that children who were left in their own homes fared better in later life than comparably maltreated children placed in foster care.

"When you think about how traumatic it is to be completely uprooted from everyone you know, and bounced from one home to another, and then another, the findings should not surprise anyone," Wexler said.

"Some children really do have to be taken away, but foster care is an extremely toxic intervention that has to be used sparingly and in small doses," he added.

The DCFS was unable to provide statistics on the number of children who died from abuse or neglect after being returned to their families.

Wexler said when such tragedies do occur, they can be blamed on lack of sufficient staffing at the DCFS.

About 34,000 children entered its system during the last fiscal year.

"By and large, when you have the cases that go wrong, it's because workers don't have time to investigate carefully enough because they're so overloaded, they can't make that extra phone call or check with that extra source, or review the child's history carefully enough," Wexler said.

Browning said he intends to have more employees handle casework.

"We're looking at all the positions within the

department that can be moved to do frontline work, move them from administrative role back to a case-carrying situation," he said.

He also intends to provide them with better technology so they can have as much data as possible to make an informed decision about cases.

In Nino's case, DCFS intervened to take custody over his children after his only daughter, then age 6, came to school with a bloody gash at the top of her head.

Nino had hit her with a belt buckle for telling a lie.

DCFS placed the five children in two separate foster homes. Nino's sixth child had not been born at the time.

"I felt bad, I was so sad," Nino said Tuesday while recalling the incident.

He spent about a year trying to win his children back, including attending parenting and anger management classes.

Finally, last November, DCFS deemed it safe to reunite the family.



Judge Michael Nash, presiding judge of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court, said parents should be given a chance to redeem themselves.

"A family that is unfit at a particular point in time may not be unfit forever," he said. "Families are the cornerstone, the foundation of our community in this country, and we should do everything possible to maintain families when we can safely do so."