

Emotional Abuse

In previous issue papers, we discussed the danger of physical and sexual abuse inherent in amending "reasonable efforts" and severely restricting or abolishing family preservation. But there is another danger that is even more widespread: the emotional abuse that often is an inevitable part of the investigation and placement process.

Even when foster parents do not physically or sexually abuse the children in their care, and the children do not abuse each other, the child has been taken not only from his or her parents, but often from friends, neighbors, teachers -- and even brothers and sisters.

And because the parents rarely are the monsters that critics of family preservation say they are, this can have devastating consequences for children.

Worse, the first move often is not the last. Children are bounced from foster home to foster home, emerging years later unable to love or trust anyone. As one such child put it: "I felt I was in a zoo and I was being transferred to another cage."¹

Unfortunately, the emotional devastation of foster care sometimes is written off as mere collateral damage. The assumption is "well, at least they're not being brutally beaten and tortured by their parents." But, of course, few parents who lose children to foster care brutally beat and torture their children. And it is often the emotional harm of foster care that leaves the deepest scars; the ones that never heal.

A study released in 2005, based on a random sample of 659 case records and interviews with 479 foster-care survivors, documented the rotten outcomes.

When compared to adults of the same age and ethnic background who did not endure foster care:

- Only 20 percent of the alumni could be said to be "doing well." Thus, foster care failed for 80 percent.
- They have double the rate of mental illness.
- Their rate of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder was double the rate for Iraq War veterans.
- The former foster children were three times more likely to be living in poverty – and fifteen times *less* likely to have finished college.²

A 2006 Minnesota study compared children placed in foster care to children left in their own homes. The children left in their own homes suffered just as much maltreatment. The overall psychological health of the two groups was the same - before foster care.

But even though the children left in their

own homes were identified by the researchers, not child protective services, so in most cases the children got no help at all, they still did *better* than the children placed in foster care.³

And then came the largest, most comprehensive comparison done to date. In two studies of more than 15,000 cases, MIT researcher Joseph Doyle found the same thing the Minnesota researchers found: Children left in their own homes typically fared better than comparably-maltreated children placed in foster care – even when the birth families got only the ordinary "help" provided by child welfare agencies.⁴

Boyd A. lived in five different foster homes over five years between the ages of seven and twelve. His mother had been forced to place him in foster care. But it was not because she had beaten him, or neglected him or sexually abused him.

It happened when she was hospitalized after being beaten by Boyd's father. But when she was well, the agencies that had control over the children wouldn't give Boyd, his two brothers, or his sister back -- because they weren't satisfied with the housing his mother was able to find.

Critics of family preservation say agencies bend over backwards to keep families together. They say agencies do this because the law requires "reasonable efforts" to keep families whole. But there were no "reasonable efforts" in Boyd's case. There were no efforts at all.

Critics also say family preservation causes children to languish in foster care. In fact, as Boyd's case and many others make clear, it is the *lack* of family preservation that causes children to languish in foster care.

It took five years -- and a class action lawsuit -- before the family was reunited.

"The worst fear was never seeing my mother again," Boyd told a Congressional hearing. "I have nightmares. I had a nightmare that a cop came and took me back to foster care and I never got to see her again.

"It's hard for me to tell you how bad foster care is. My mother used to come visit me a lot when I was in care, and when she left, it felt like the whole world was leaving me."⁵

Here are some other voices from the system:

Anne. Nine homes in nine years:

"When you spend your life going from place to place and knowing you're not going to be in any place for very long, you learn not to reach out, not to care, not to feel ... My bitterness

(over)

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is not that I went through what I did ...my bitterness is that I don't think it should have had to happen. There was no reason why my family's life should have been destroyed ... The people that I've seen, the kids that have emerged, [from foster care] are ... dead. Their hearts are functioning. The ol' heart's pumping the blood around. But they're basically dead inside. It's been killed. Either they had to kill it to survive physically, or somebody else killed it in them. Whatever it is that makes people human."⁶

Michael. 16 placements in six years:

"In my opinion, foster care destroyed our whole sense of family in the end. We can't sit down together and feel like siblings. ... If the state had invested the same money they spent putting us in all those placements into weekly visits with our mother and had given her skill lessons, it might not have escalated to us needing to go into permanent foster care."

Rob, Age 18: "To take a child away from his family is one of the most heartbreaking things you can do to him. Then to put him back with his family is one of the greatest things you can give him."

Linda, Age 25: "I felt like my heart had been ripped out of me when they took us all away."⁷

Kathy, Age 18. "When you're in foster care, you can't find no love."⁸

Many people know about the emotional trauma of foster care, at least intellectually. But even when people know, they tend to think "Yes, but..." As in, "Yes, but, didn't we have to do this to these children because their parents are so dangerous and brutal?"

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the answer is no. **Because most of the parents don't fit the stereotypes.** (See Issue Paper 5).

And even when the parents have problems, helping those parents often is the best way to help the child.

In a University of Florida study of infants born with cocaine in their systems, one group was placed in foster care, the other group with birth mothers able to care for them. After one year, the babies were tested using all the usual

measures of infant development: rolling over, sitting up, reaching out. Consistently, the children placed with their birth mothers did better. For the foster children, being taken from their mothers was more toxic than the cocaine.⁹ Those infants are trying to tell us something. We owe it to them to listen.

We seem to sense the emotional trauma of being taken away from parents only when the parents are white, middle class -- and foster.

In the case of "baby Jessica" for example, a birth mother surrendered her child for adoption after having "consent" forms thrown at her right after birth, in violation of state law. She changed her mind five days later, but the foster parents stalled and stalled and stalled, dragging the case through courts in two states. They lost every time. When they finally ran out of ways to stall, two-and-a-half years had passed. But the foster parents won enormous sympathy when they condemned the birth parents for trying to take the child from "the only parents she has ever known."¹⁰

In contrast, because we have so stereotyped birth parents, we react with indifference or even relief when thousands of poor, often black, children are needlessly taken from the only parents *they* have ever known.

These problems can't be solved by "fixing" foster care. The authors of the study cited earlier estimate that even if every problem that besets foster care were miraculously fixed tomorrow, it would reduce rotten outcomes by only 22.2 percent.¹¹

And they can't be solved by warehousing children in orphanages. As is discussed in detail in Issue Paper 15, more than a century of research shows the outcomes for orphanages are even worse than for family foster care.

The only way to fix foster care is to have less of it.

Intensive Family Preservation Services and other safe, proven programs to keep families together, are among the most promising innovations in child welfare in decades. Abandon these approaches and thousands more children will have "the whole world" taken from them.

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//1. Michelle Gillen, "Florida: State of Neglect," WPLG-TV, Miami, 1987. //2. Peter Pecora, et. al., *Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study* (Seattle: Casey Family Programs, 2005). //3. Catherine R. Lawrence, Elizabeth A. Carlson, Byron Egeland, "The impact of foster care on development," *Development and Psychopathology*, Vol. 18, 2006, pp. 57-76. //4. Joseph J. Doyle, Jr., "Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effect of Foster Care" *American Economic Review*: December, 2007 and Joseph J. Doyle, "Child Protection and Adult Crime: Using Investigator Assignment to Estimate Causal Effects of Foster Care," *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 116, No. 4, 2008. //5. Testimony of Boyd A., *Foster Care, Adoption, and Child Welfare Reforms*, Joint Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation of the Committee on Ways and Means and the Select committee on Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. House of Representatives, April 13 and 28, May 12, 1988. //6. Personal communication. //7. Michael, Rob and Linda: North American Council on Adoptable Children, *Promote Permanent Families: Reform Foster Care Now*, Press Packet, March 12, 2007. //8. Ray Nunn (producer), "Crimes Against Children: The Failure of Foster Care," *ABC News Close-Up*, Aug. 30, 1988. //9. Kathleen Wobie, Marylou Behnke et. al., *To Have and To Hold: A Descriptive Study of Custody Status Following Prenatal Exposure to Cocaine*, paper presented at joint annual meeting of the American Pediatric Society and the Society for Pediatric Research, May 3, 1998. //10. Alice Bussiere, "Baby Jessica Case Highlights Old Conflict," *Youth Law News*, 14, No. 4, (July-August 1993, p.15) and Olya Thompson, "Motherhood Myopia: Blowing the DeBoer Story," *New York Newsday*, Aug. 11, 1993, p.85. //11. Pecora, note 2, supra.