

Ethical Issues in Child Welfare Services

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Reasonable Efforts Symposium

September 6, 2006 ~ Walla Walla

1. In any profession which engages with messy, often painful human emotions and relationships, some degree of composure and detachment is necessary to be a competent decision maker. But one can be so detached that the human meanings of events, as experienced by participants, is lost.

An ethical perspective requires careful thinking about the impact of our actions on others and an emotional engagement with the meaning and significance of events as experienced by the parties themselves.

Removing children from their parents and planning their futures is not a minor matter, and should not become business as usual.

2. It is also useful to have some humility about our collective understanding of the needs of children.

What do these items have in common?

- Indenture
- Almshouses
- Orphanages
- Orphan Trains / Foster care
- Mother's Pensions
- Therapeutic Foster Care
- Kinship Care / Family Group Conferencing
- Juvenile Institutions
- Residential Care
- Wrap Around / Community Placement

3. Each of these items was at one time viewed as a child welfare reform; and there were enthusiastic advocates for every item on the list. It is not only possible – but likely – that whatever experts currently think regarding the needs of children will be very different a generation from now, partly as a result of new knowledge, partly because of changing ideas about childhood.

4. For what state are the following true statements?

- Some children and youth entering out-of-home care are moved from home to home on a daily basis until a long-term placement can be found; other children are placed in distant communities.
- Children in foster care score 15-20 percentile points below non-foster youth on standardized achievement tests, and scores do not improve as length of stay in care increases.
- Almost one-fifth of the children in out-of-home care on any one day have been in 5 or more placements, and this percentage increased steadily between 1997-2003; the average number of placements for youth in residential care is 6.6; over one quarter of youth in group care have had 10 or more placements.

- One quarter of foster care alumni in their 20s and with histories of extensive time in care as adolescents have PTSD.
- Reunifications have steadily declined over a period of years; and, in FY 2005, there were 1000 fewer children returned to parents than in 2000.
- Racial disproportionality for African American and Native American children increases as children move from the front end to the back end of child welfare systems.

Ethical Concerns

- Foster home shortages
- Overwhelmed, under-resourced foster homes/ kinship homes
- Placement instability
- Poor educational achievement of children in foster care
- High rates of mental health problems among foster children / poor mental health services
- Steady reduction in reunifications
- Racial inequity in services / outcomes

Ethical Imperatives

- Children placed out of the home will not be further harmed by their experiences in care.
- Out-of-home care will be a therapeutic experience for children / youth in care longer than a few months.
- Parents will receive services / assistance which will give them the best chance of regaining custody of their children.
- There will be equity in services provided and outcomes achieved for children of various ethnic groups.

5. Foster care systems experiencing acute and chronic shortages of homes cannot:

- Match children's needs to foster family strengths and capacities
- Keep siblings together, especially sibling groups of larger than 2 children
- Place children in their own neighborhoods / communities
- Maintain high standards of care

6. The number of children in out-of-home care has increased by 900 children (to 9,700 children) in care on any one day during the past 2 years; but the number of available foster homes has not increased much since 2000.

7. Foster home recruitment initiatives over the past 10 years have not been effective despite a large investment of resources; and, as a result, the Children's Administration has placed an increased emphasis on kinship care.

8. The percentage of children in kinship care can be further increased, but cannot eliminate the need for high quality foster care.

9. New strategies must be found to recruit and retain foster homes, or the number of children entering out-of-home care must be greatly reduced.

10. Possible strategies:

- Neighborhood- / community-based recruitment campaigns
- Professional foster care
- Better support / a larger percentage of the foster care system run by private agencies

11. Kinship care must be better supported

- Respite care
- Emergency financial assistance / concrete assistance
- Liaison to public systems
- Family Group Conferencing; other family meeting formats

12. It is useful to make a distinction between placement instability and placement disruptions.

13. Placement instability increases with length of stay; children in care longer than 2 years are more likely to experience multiple placement changes; almost half of children in care for 4 or more years have been in 5 or more placements.

14. Placement disruptions are associated with externalizing behavior problems, e.g., conduct disorder, ADHD.

15. Placement disruptions are often experienced as rejection; all over the world, the experience of rejection increases aggression.

16. Eight years after initiation of the Braam's lawsuit, there has yet to be a systematic effort in Washington state to reduce placement instability.

17. Nevertheless, studies conducted in other states have provided a better understanding of placement changes. A surprisingly high percentage of placement moves occur for administrative reasons, or to facilitate permanent planning; but placement disruptions usually occur because foster parents can't cope with children's behavior.

18. Foster parents are far more likely to tolerate obnoxious child behavior when they have a positive relationship with a child.

19. There are promising practices with the potential to reduce placement instability / disruptions already being implemented in some CA offices: Placement disruption staffings conducted by family team meeting coordinators, foster parents hubs organized around a home providing respite care and other support services, multi-dimensional foster care on the model developed by the Oregon Social Learning Center.

20. Furthermore, the use of kinship care has increased; and kinship care is more stable than non-kin care.

21. These strategies must be rigorously evaluated and, if they are effective, expanded.

22. Other strategies should be tested as well; any strategy likely to work will:

- a) Increase the use of professional foster parents.
- b) Give greatly enhanced levels of support to foster parents or kinship care families.

23. Efforts to reduce placement instability must be persistent, determined, and well-funded; and must combine programmatic innovation with rigorous evaluation.

24. Reunifications have declined in part because of the increase in children placed due to neglect related to parents' substance abuse.

25. Child welfare research has indicated that no more than 20-25% of substance abusing parents whose children have been removed from the home complete substance abuse treatment programs.

26. Parents' income following placement of their children has a major influence on reunification rates.

27. The federal government has offered states incentives for increased adoptions but not increased reunifications. This is not balanced public policy.

28. Substance abuse treatment works as well for methamphetamine users as for other groups of substance abusers.

29. The additional of 22 chemical dependency liaisons in CA offices is a positive step; other promising practices include the extension of drug courts, therapeutic advocates for parents whose children have been removed from the home, foster parent / birth parent partnerships, and transitional housing programs.

Most of these programs are already being tried, to some extent, in Washington state. They can be evaluated and expanded if found to be effective.

30. Racial disproportionality is driven to a great extent by reduced exit rates from out-of-home care for African American and Native American children.

31. Reduced exit rates from care are associated with longer lengths of stay and higher rates of permanent planning casualties.

32. Longer lengths of stay in out-of-home care lead to increased rates of placement instability / disruptions; and higher rates of runaways.

33. African American children and families in the child welfare system receive fewer services than white children / parents.

34. Child welfare caseworkers have less contact with African American parents than with white parents.

35. Furthermore, African American families and Native American families served by child welfare agencies are poorer on average than white families, and the lack of poverty related services is more impactful on their ability to parent.

36. Once children have been in out-of-home care with non-relatives for 2 years and are not in a potentially permanent home, this should be viewed as a child welfare emergency.

37. An indifference to poor outcomes for minority children is an indicator of racial bias.

38. Programs which increase reunification rates for children removed from substance abusing parents have the potential of reducing racial disproportionality; the same is true for early intervention / family support programs which place a greater emphasis on poverty-related services.

39. The new CA neglect initiative has the potential to increase or decrease racial disproportionality. An increased emphasis on chronic neglect without a determined effort to improve in-home service programs for neglecting families may increase out-of-home placements of African American and Native American children.

40. Public child welfare systems are evolving toward greater concern with child well-being; enhancing the well-being of children in long-term foster care requires greater concern with placement stability, education, children's mental health, and youths' social adjustment following emancipation from out-of-home care.

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