



Beyond Common Sense: Child Welfare, Child Well -Being and the Evidence for Policy Reform by Fred Wulczyn, Richard Barth, Ying Ying T.Yuan, Brenda Jones Harden and John Landsverk, Aldine Transaction, 2005.

This important book is both a thought provoking discussion of child welfare policy in the United States and a summary of research findings regarding developmental and mental health problems of children served by public child welfare systems, a description of evidence based programs designed to serve these children and parents and an analysis of foster care dynamics related to the ages of children entering out of home care. This is a large scope which challenges even this group of distinguished scholars struggling with the question of what it would mean to take child well being as a fundamental goal of child welfare on a par with safety and permanency. The answers these scholars arrive at are not necessarily consistent, but they are thoughtful and well informed; they will almost certainly have a major influence on public policy debate in the next several years.

The authors assert that "Common sense suggests that interest in child well -being is a positive, albeit belated development." However, "common sense does not always transform easily into practical reality." The authors are fully aware that child welfare agencies are having great difficulty delivering on a mission of safety and permanency without taking on an expanded poorly defined mission related to child well being. Nevertheless, researchers, advocates and policymakers have a strong interest in child well being issues because (a) child maltreatment has been found to have large detrimental effects on child development and children's mental health (b) arguably, the developmental and emotional effects of child maltreatment (considered in the aggregate) are at least as important as the physical harm it causes (c) factors such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems and poverty combine with child abuse and neglect to negatively impact children's development and their mental health; it is far from clear that child maltreatment has any greater negative impact on children than these factors which often accompany it. (d) large numbers of children are spending extensive periods of time in out of home care, and research findings regarding the long term outcomes of foster care are sobering (e) "A long history of research in child development suggests that children develop best when living in safe and stable families." "In other words, safety and permanence are a part of, not separate from, a larger concept generally referred to as well being."

In the book's first chapter, the authors opine that "A commitment to child well - being could transform the child welfare system in the United States, leading it away from the largely residual system it is today to one that engages children and their families in a more pro -active way that does not require a child maltreatment report for entry." By the end of the book, the authors maintain that child well being is shorthand for health,

mental health and education; and that "The child welfare system cannot be accountable for safety, permanency and education, health and mental health because the resources needed to influence the well-being outcomes are outside the boundaries of the system." The authors go on to advocate that child welfare agencies be held accountable for achieving safety and permanency but only be required to engage health, mental health and education systems in efforts to better serve child welfare populations. These differences in perspectives may be the result of several authors taking turns in writing about the same issues, or they may reflect the results of thinking about child well being outcomes from within the current welfare system vs. imagining a new system with broader goals.

This book contains an outstanding analysis of foster care dynamics based on Chapin Hall's archive of out of home care data from 11 states with about 50% of the nation's foster care population. According to the authors, "For as far back as the data go, the child welfare system in the United States has served three developmentally distinct populations, children starting out, children starting school, and children starting adolescence." Infants are placed in far larger numbers than any other age group (20% of children entering out of home care), mostly due to neglect, and these children are less likely to return home than older children entering care for the first time." "In the starkest possible terms, the data point to the fact that almost half of all infants -- the largest group of children entering foster care -- will leave with a new set of adults acting as their legal parents."

Racial disproportionality is greater (by far) for infant placements compared to other age groups, so much so that these authors claim that "disproportionality in the child welfare system is a function of how the system responds to African- American families with babies." "In particular, for African - American children residing in poor counties, the rate of (substantiated) maltreatment for children under the age of 1 was more than 5 times the rate for white children of the same age who were also living in high poverty counties." The authors assert that "disproportionality in the child welfare system in the United States is to a very large extent a function of how well the needs of African American families with very young children are addressed."

The authors find that rates of physical abuse for children 5 - 9 are elevated, with a peak around age 6; however, neglect remains the main reason these children come to the attention of public child welfare agencies. Children, age 6 -10, who enter out of home care "have higher rates of problem behavior than any other age group, indicating that these children have long exposure to maltreatment, few services and high risk." This age group is far more likely to be reunified with birth parents than younger children after shorter lengths of stay in out of home care. However, for children in this age group who do not return home quickly, "other exits are slower and there is a good chance the child will still be in care even after a considerable period of time (6 years) has elapsed." Washington State data indicates that this group of long stayers in care has very high rates of placement disruptions.

Rates of (substantiated) physical abuse increase sharply after age 10 with a peak at about age 14. Surprisingly, neglect rates also rise as children move into adolescence. "... most of the adolescent child maltreatment cases are "late onset" rather than chronic or "early onset" cases," according to surveys of adolescents conducted as a part of the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well Being (NSCAW). The authors anticipate poorer developmental outcomes for "early onset" cases. Placement rates increase for adolescents; very few of these youth are adopted. "The larger number of 'other' exits (running away, psychiatric hospitalization, incarceration, emancipation out of care) is perhaps the most troubling finding." Fully 40% of adolescents in out of home care have 'other' exits, i.e., they have exits other than reunification, adoption or guardianship, according to the multi - state data archive.

Beyond Common Sense also contains an excellent summary of the evidence for various parent training programs which the authors refer to as "parent mediated interventions". "Estimates derived from NSCAW suggest that parents of as many as 400,000 children a year will participate in voluntary or mandated parent training." The authors maintain that "although parent - mediated interventions are routinely used in child welfare, there is little to suggest that these strategies are evidence based, especially for biological parents who are working toward reunification with their children."

Nevertheless, effective parent training programs have been developed for children with externalizing behavior problems and anti - social tendencies. These programs (one of which is Carolyn Webster Stratton's The Incredible Years) have common elements; "they emphasized having the parents track their children's prosocial and problem behaviors; provide daily encouragement; consistent, rational limits and nonviolent discipline." They also encourage parents to provide children and youth large daily doses of praise and other forms of positive reinforcement. "Outcome data indicated that by using these tactics, rates of child problem behaviors dropped to normal levels in 75 percent of the cases." Furthermore, these changes are long lasting and generalize to the sibling of the problem child. These parent training programs "are poised for adaptation for greater use with the child welfare system." Two of these parent training programs, Project 12 -Ways and its offshoot, Project Safe Care, have been successfully tested in quasi - experimental designs with neglecting parents.

The authors comment on the lack of research based parent training programs for children younger than 3 years old, a sizeable percentage of the children entering out of home care.

In summary, Beyond Common Sense contains a wealth of information regarding the evidence base in children's mental health and an in- depth discussion of foster care dynamics by age group. It is, however, the policy discussion which is likely to generate heated debate between those policymakers, practitioners and scholars who believe the public child welfare mission must be contained to be manageable and their counterparts, who believe child welfare boundaries must be stretched to include well being as a matter of "common sense" and because of an evolving understanding of the

consequences of child maltreatment. Anyone interested in this debate should carefully read this book.