

Emotional Abuse

In previous issue papers, we discussed the danger of physical and sexual abuse inherent in curbing "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 almost never 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 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 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.

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 -- which sometimes can be worse than no help at all.

At least two more studies reached the same conclusion.³

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. The cruelty is compounded for children like Boyd, taken from battered mothers -- still a widespread practice today.⁴

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

Decades later, Nico'Lee Biddle [wrote this](#) for *Teen Vogue*:

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"When I look back now on my family's experiences, I realize that the child welfare system only saw our family's trauma and hurt, our dysfunction and abnormalities. They didn't see parents who raised me for fourteen years, who taught me the values of honesty, education, humor, and compassion. ... The system only saw a missed appointment, or a positive drug test, and seemed to assume the worst about our lives. ...

"My mom and dad made mistakes, but they were good parents who made me feel loved every day of my life. I miss them, and every day I wish things had been different. If they would have been offered treatment before I was removed, maybe they wouldn't have ended up in jail, and would have been in treatment sooner. Maybe I wouldn't have had to switch schools and become part of a statistic of teens in foster care. Maybe they would be alive today, and my father could have walked me down the aisle at my wedding. With better support for them before I was removed, maybe I wouldn't have spent seven years in foster care."⁶

Here are some other voices from the system:

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, as Nico'Lee Biddle explained in her commentary, even when the parents have problems, helping those parents often is the best way to help the child. Her lived experience also is backed up by research.

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

Even when children are not removed, the trauma of being investigated and having the entire family put under constant surveillance **is enormously damaging in itself**.¹⁰ All over America there are children who dive under beds when they hear a loud knock on the door – because they are afraid the family police are back, **they'll be stripsearched again**, and this time they might be taken away.¹¹

These problems can't be solved by "fixing" foster care. The authors of the first 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.¹²

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.

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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. For links to all of these studies, [see this post to the NCCPR Child Welfare Blog](#). //4. See [NCCPR's material on this problem here](#). //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. Nico'Lee Biddle, "How Prevention Services Could Help Youth Avoid the Foster Care System," *Teen Vogue*, May 12, 2018. //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. Shakira Kennedy, "My kids at risk because of pot," *New York Daily News*, June 21, 2018. //11. Larissa MacFarquhar, "When Should a Child Be Taken from His Parents?" *The New Yorker*, July 17, 2017. //12. Pecora, note 2, supra.