Corporal Punishment: Helping Parents Change Their Discipline Paradigm

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The Debate Continues

Child welfare research indicates that corporal punishment is ineffective, unnecessary, and a harmful form of discipline for parents to use with children (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). Despite that knowledge some parents still believe that in order to raise a compliant and well-behaved child, corporal punishment, including spanking, hitting, and slapping, is necessary. For decades professionals and parents alike have debated the differences between corporal punishment and physical abuse. Corporal punishment includes the use of physical force with either the parent’s hand or an instrument as a way of disciplining a child for what the parent considers to be inappropriate behavior. Many argue that corporal punishment helps children change negative behaviors and promote positive moral development. In contrast, physical abuse involves physical punishment that parents dole out in anger and hostility in reaction to a child’s behavior or action.

In this debate some parents and professionals assert that the injuries sustained by the child determine the distinction between corporal punishment and physical abuse. This argument maintains that if a child does not have physical injuries then physical punishment is an acceptable discipline method and should not be considered abuse. Durrant (2005) argues that one cannot assume that the absence of a physical mark or bruise equates to the absence of abuse. The instrument used, the child’s physical size, and the body part struck determine whether bruising will occur. More importantly, the absence of an injury does not necessarily imply the absence of physical or emotional pain. Another consideration is whether the parent uses corporal punishment for behavior that, while labeled as negative behavior, may in fact reflect age and developmentally appropriate testing of boundaries. For instance, a two-year-old whose development requires the practicing of separation and individuation often demonstrates this developmental process through oppositional behaviors.

Support for corporal punishment among Americans as a whole has decreased slightly since the middle part of the 20th century. One study conducted in 2003 showed that

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THREE WOMEN, TWO MOTHERS, ONE ADOPTION: REFLECTIONS UPON REUNION

Karen Jick, MSSW, LCSW

Sara’s* adoption journey includes reunion, which began in 2008 on the day before her 26th birthday. On that day, she received registered mail containing a card, a letter, and a photo sent by her birth mother. Adopted as an infant, Sara decided in late adolescence that when the time was right, she would try to find her birth mother. “I got the paperwork from the state to be able to have my file ‘opened’ so that I would be able to share my information with my birth mother and vice versa. I never submitted the paperwork though because I thought that I wasn’t ready yet.” Sara’s birth mother had gone through a people-finding agency and waited a year for her to be located.

*For this case study on adoption reunion, Sara is a pseudonym used to preserve confidentiality. She transcribed information from her adoptive mother and provided written journals prepared by herself and her birth mother. All three women have given permission for their stories to be reported herein.

Adoptive Mother

Research on reunion in adoption typically includes the adoptive parents in terms of their support of search and the reunion process. Adoptive parents express concern about how the reunion will affect their child, whether or not their child will be accepted by the birth parent, whether they will lose their child to the birth parent, whether they will be judged by both the child and the birth parent, and how they themselves will integrate the new experiences into their lives. In 1982, Depp conducted a small study involving six adoptive parent couples. She found that initially, adoptive parents felt the most threatened of the three parties by reunions but perceived the reunion experience itself as positive. She concluded that “adoptive parents are capable of coming to appreciate the adoptee’s need for a reunion” (Depp, 1982, p. 118). Petta and Steed (2005) studied 21 adoptive parents who had participated in such reunions. Of the major themes that emerged, fear of losing their child was most prominent. Participants identified the reunion as

(Three Women, Two Mothers, One Adoption, continued on page 6)
individuals within the United States who perceived spanking as an acceptable disciplinary method dropped 30% since the 1960s (Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006). Still, social workers find that many parents see corporal punishment as a necessity in today’s society in order to keep “children in line,” “help curb unacceptable behavior,” and ensure that children become “productive citizens” in the future. Supporters of corporal punishment attribute frequent displays of disobedient, defiant, and oppositional behavior; talking back to adults or authoritative figures; and temper tantrums to a parent’s unwillingness to utilize corporal punishment.

**A Global Perspective**

Corporal punishment as a form of child discipline has existed since the time of ancient civilizations. Many cultures outside of the United States also use corporal punishment as a method to regulate child misconduct, instill obedience, or demonstrate parental power and authority. However, a total of 23 countries are slowly banning this practice. Some of the countries that legally ban corporal punishment include the Netherlands, Chile, New Zealand, Sweden, Finland, United Kingdom, Italy, Israel, Croatia, Portugal, Spain, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Germany. In addition, 91 countries have at least banned corporal punishment by teachers and school administrators within school and academic environments (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007; Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006). If there are changes in international and national perceptions of the use of corporal punishment, why do so many individuals within the United States still perceive corporal punishment as being not only an effective method of child discipline, but a necessary one?

**Corporal Punishment and Religion**

Religious beliefs that reinforce corporal punishment as an appropriate discipline for helping children develop respect toward authority and developing good morals may also account for the use of corporal punishment (Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006). The debate over this type of discipline is evident when religious supporters of corporal punishment argue that the absence of such discipline practices will lead to an increase in youth delinquency, crime, and other negative behaviors. Opponents of corporal punishment advocate that the decrease of corporal punishment will result in decreased anger and aggression among youth, who, as a consequence of being physically punished, resort to delinquency, drugs, crime, and other destructive behaviors.

**Corporal Punishment, Families, and Culture**

Parents who consider their children property and believe they have the right to choose and implement whatever form of discipline perceived to be appropriate, accept corporal punishment as an extension of this right. This perspective views disciplining children, regardless of the
methods, as a private matter (Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006).

Families from different cultures who come to the United States may use disciplinary practices that are acceptable in their homeland but may appear to be abusive in this country. Social, cultural, religious, and moral values influenced by culture determine appropriate discipline utilized in any country of origin. Upon arriving in the United States, parents from other cultures sometimes recognize that their own discipline practices differ from mainstream American values that are moving toward the use of positive reinforcement in child discipline. Parents from other cultural backgrounds do not always understand the American legal parameters related to child discipline. This may result in a higher incidence of reports to child protection agencies. However, even within these cultural groups, differences related to socioeconomic status and the use of corporal punishment exist and practitioners should not make the assumption that everyone in a cultural group approaches child discipline from the same perspective (Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005).

Behavior Takes Time to Change

Behavioral changes in children take time to manifest. Parents often do not have the necessary patience to wait for changes to be evident and instead resort to corporal punishment. In such cases, the parent may believe the swift delivery of physical punishment will produce the immediate change in behavior desired. Last but not least, parents do not always have enough information on age appropriate development and sometimes mislabel normal developmental behaviors as willful oppositional acts. In those instances, parents are more concerned with finding a quick way to correct and/or stop the undesirable behavior.

Recommendations for Practitioners

It is important to recognize that most parents who utilize corporal punishment believe they are engaging in responsible parenting practices that will help children become productive citizens. The practitioner’s role then is to help parents understand the negative consequences of corporal punishment and help parents find new ways of reinforcing positive behaviors in their children. Practitioners can facilitate a paradigm shift concerning discipline by helping parents:
1. Understand the relationship between corporal punishment and a variety of problems, including higher rates of criminal activity, assault against a domestic partner, abuse with one’s own children, depression, and substance abuse (Douglas, 2006). Children practice what they learn in their environment. There is a danger that children who are corporally punished may assume that physical punishment is the only way to change behaviors, attitudes, or actions in someone else.

2. Distinguish developmentally appropriate or age appropriate ‘testing’ behaviors from behaviors that may indicate more serious behavioral or mental health problems.

3. Learn how to appropriately use discipline and provide information regarding alternatives to physical punishment. It is important to help the parent identify positive disciplining techniques that are age appropriate and may include using a system of earning privileges for positive behaviors, time outs, and open communication.

4. Identify ways to reduce parental stress, anger, and conflict. Often times, these stressors will influence whether a parent utilizes appropriate discipline or reacts in anger when disciplining a child.

5. Understand the value of appropriate parenting and disciplinary practices as prevention strategies. Too often parents want to introduce appropriate, non-corporal punishment when the child is an adolescent and already acting out, not realizing the value of structure and appropriate discipline during the early years.

Conclusion

Parenting is a challenging job that requires patience, flexibility, “choosing your battles,” and most of all understanding each child’s needs. Most parents want to help their children learn self-regulation, empathy, morals, values, and appropriate behaviors so that children may become productive members of their families, their communities, and society. Age-appropriate discipline helps children achieve these goals and reach optimal levels of functioning in a variety of contexts. The reality and challenges of daily-living stressors, as well as the lack of knowledge of child development and parenting techniques, may result in parents resorting to corporal punishment in efforts to extinguish negative behaviors. Helping parents find positive ways to discipline children can lead to “win-win” situations that support both parents and their children.

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References


“marking the juncture at which their failings and inadequacies as parents would be revealed in the eyes of both the birth family and the adopted child” (Petta & Steed, 2005, p. 233). They also describe feeling grief for the end of what their parent-child relationship had been, feelings of entitlement to parent their adopted child, reawakening of feelings of loss around infertility, reassessment of their understanding of the birth mother’s experience, and a sense that they needed to protect their adopted child by keeping their mixed feelings to themselves. Indeed, the adoptive parents felt that reunions were generally represented as involving only the child and the birth parent/family. They felt they had no socially recognized and affirmed inclusion in the reunion process.

“My adoptive mother always knew that my birth mother would be a lovely lady from the background information that she and my dad received when I was adopted. When I was little and growing up, my adoptive mother had hoped that my birth mother would not be a part of my life and theirs. This changed when I went to college and my adoptive mother knew that meeting [my birth mother] was something I wanted to do. My adoptive mother sought counseling to discuss my adoption and the possibility of me someday meeting my birth mother. The therapist calmed her by sharing that it was normal for me to want to meet my birth mother and that this was an experience she should support me in. When birth mothers initiated the reunion, Petta & Steed (2005) found that the adoptive parents initially experienced shock, anger, and resentment toward the birth mother, feeling loss of control over what was happening. They worried about their child’s ability to handle all that might develop through reunion, and this tension continued throughout the reunion process. “These parents seemed to take longer to adjust in some way to their child’s reunion” (Petta & Steed, 2005, p. 237).

Sara: “While my adoptive mother was happy to see me happy in meeting my birth mother…she also worried about ‘losing’ me and ‘being replaced.’ Though a little over two years has gone by since I first met my birth mother, my adoptive mother still worries about ‘losing’ me and ‘being replaced.’ It is hard for her to see me spending so much time with my birth mother and seeing all of the ‘genetic’ things we have in common. She has tried her best to be supportive in my relationship with my birth mother and has met with her on a few occasions as well.”

**Birth mother:** “I felt keenly sensitive to the fears that [her adoptive parents] might have around my popping up in their lives so suddenly, turning everything on its head. I felt a need to be as nonthreatening as possible, to respect that Sara’s parents were her ‘real’ parents who loved her, raised and cared for her all these years, and that I was not here to negate or replace that.” “For most adoptees, contact with the birth parent does not lead to an abandonment of the adoptive parents, but rather clarifies the importance of the adoptive parent in their lives” (Müller & Perry, 2001, p. 58).

**Sara**

Numerous researchers report the experience of psychological uncertainty felt by many adoptees regarding their personal histories and its impact on their identity formation. According to separate studies by Kirk and Brodzinsky (as cited in Powell and Afifi, 2005), how the adoptive family communicates with their adopted child about their adoption history plays a major role in how well their child manages her/his uncertainty. In addition, each adoptee’s response to uncertainty is unique, ranging from avoidance to actively seeking information. March (cited in Powell and Afifi, 2005) suggests that the adoptee’s fear of rejection informs the nature of her/his search activities.

In their study of 53 adoptees, Powell and Afifi (2005) found adoptees experienced varying degrees of ambiguous loss (the loss of someone who is still alive), depending on the quality of communication in their adoptive family and the
amount of information they had about their birth family. Adoptive families with open communication about the adoption resulted in adoptees feeling the least uncertain and feeling more security in their adoptive homes.

According to Gonyo and Watson (as cited in Müller and Perry, 2001), an adoptee’s commencement of search activities is usually the culmination of a long process of internal struggle and ambivalence involving four major concerns. These concerns are fear of intruding into the life of the birth parent, feelings of disloyalty to the adoptive parents, fear of rejection by the birth parent, and concern for unforeseen problems.

“Ever since I was little, I knew that I was adopted. My parents shared this information with me freely and told me that I was so special and loved by not only them, but my birth mother as well. My adoptive mother told me that she frequently thought of my birth mother on my birthday and thought of how much she must have loved me, to be able to make such a hard decision in placing me for adoption. I always thought that my birth mother was a wonderful and loving person for the decision that she had to make, and I honestly never felt any resentment, anger, or negative feelings towards her and the decision she made in placing me for adoption. I always felt that my birth mother was a wonderful and loving person for the decision that she had to make, and I honestly never felt any resentment, anger, or negative feelings towards her and the decision she made in placing me for adoption. I always thought that my birth mother was a wonderful and loving person for the decision that she had to make, and I honestly never felt any resentment, anger, or negative feelings towards her and the decision she made in placing me for adoption.

Birth Mother

It is not known if Sara’s birth mother connected with the Adoption Registry in the state where Sara was relinquished for adoption. In a study of the use of a state registry in Georgia, Fischer (2002) found that 60% of 46 birth parents interviewed were also searching by multiple other means. “Respondents expressed that they had never forgotten about the child for whom they had made a plan of adoption...”

“I was 20 years old. Sara’s birth was as joy-filled a time for me as the births of all my children. Knowing that I had chosen to give her up for adoption in no way negated the elated feelings that I had as any new mother would! But after that second day, it was time to say good-bye. I felt as if my child had died. It was painful, wrenching, and unnatural. I used every ounce of my intellectual and spiritual strength to let go, going against every natural impulse to feed, protect, nurture, and love this child. I knew in my heart, though, that it was right for her.”

Just as the adoptee’s decision to act regarding a search is usually the culmination of a long emotional process, this experience is likely mirrored for the birth parent. Erickson’s developmental tasks of adulthood, specifically generativity and life review, might also facilitate answering the question of “Why now?” in a birth parent’s decision to search for a relinquished child.

“For the next 25 years, I would remember her at each birthday. I always felt at peace, knowing and trusting that she was well loved and well-cared for, and that all was well. I never once felt otherwise. Then, on her 25th birthday, I felt a powerful feeling, as if my heart were being pulled out of my chest, as if I were being called to find her. Somehow I knew that was what I had to do.
I hired an agency…and waited almost a year before I received THE call with Sara’s information. What a joy it was for me to be able to write her a card wishing her a happy 26th birthday.”

First Meeting

Sara: “She invited me to call or email when I felt comfortable in contacting her. I called her that night and have seen her about once a month ever since…I met with her for the first time at a restaurant. We shared photos, memories, and a lot of emotions. I couldn’t believe to have her right there in front of me and she was so beautiful. We agreed that we would continue emailing and that I would go down to visit soon. Since then, I have been visiting about once a month.”

Birth mother: “Our first phone conversation was filled with questions: families, homes, likes and dislikes, eye color, favorite foods, music, activities, where we were educated and in what, and marveling at our similarities. It was like a dream. We met for the first time for a lunch date near her hometown. I was nervous, excited, hopeful. I remember lots of staring, lots of smiling! There were photos and tears shared, and a feeling that much time and no time had passed. It was a like a new birth day, and will remain for me one of the best days of my life.”

After the Reunion

Sorovsky et al. (as cited in Müller & Perry, 2001) reported that contact with birth parents “brought a deeper sense of love and appreciation for their adoptive parents” (Müller & Perry, 2001, p. 57).

“One feeling that started that first year, that has continued throughout our relationship, is that of unbalance. It is very hard for me to try to balance the relationship I have between my adoptive mother and my birth mother. While I’ve explained many times to my adoptive mother that she will never be replaced and she is the mother who raised me, I still find myself having to reassure her that she will not “lose me” to my birth mother. I sometimes feel tension from my adoptive parents when they know I will be going for a visit to my birth mother’s. They always try to act supportive and ask me about the time I spend with her and the rest of the family, but I know that they are sometimes comparing themselves and the experiences I have with my birth mother to them and the experiences that I’ve had with them growing up. I wish that there was something I could say or do to prove to them that I consider them my parents, who will always be my parents, and that nobody can ever take their places.”

Continuing uncertainty about how to develop the post-reunion relationships subsequent to reunion was reported by Powell and Afifi (2005). With questions answered and ambiguous loss resolved between the adoptee and the birth parent, adoptees were unsure of the appropriate level of intimacy for the relationship.

“During the first year and a half, I felt like an outsider with [my birth family]. Even though I knew I was welcome in their home and as part of the family, I still didn’t feel like ‘part of the family.’ I didn’t want to intrude in any way between my siblings and the relationship they had with my birth mother, and I wanted to be the best possible person I could be for them. I had a hard time being physically affectionate with my birth mother and siblings and expressing my love for them because I was afraid that they might get tired of me and not want to see me anymore. I know a lot of it was my own trust issues, but I didn’t want to disappoint any of them, so I kept a sort of distance.”

Birth parents reported to Fischer (2002) the feeling of relief for having answers to questions they had had all the years since the relinquishment. They felt reassured that they had made the right decision, that the child had grown to be a competent adult with caring parents.
Emotions of grief and joy were reported. Birth mother: “That first year was one of intense emotion: intense sadness, intense fear, intense joy. Meeting Sara’s parents was just that—a time of intense gratitude, of different, but shared losses, of respect for each other, of a shared love for this beautiful girl/woman. Then the grief came. The joy came. The grief came. The fears surfaced. All the unfinished feelings arose, asking for forgiveness, for resolution. There were times that I feared I would once again lose her, that she would choose not to continue a relationship with me. I was constantly checking my own boundaries. Sometimes I felt like a teenager wondering what to do next: ‘Will she call? Did I say too much? Should I wait? What if she doesn’t like me?’ ”

In Reconstruction of Adoption Issues: Delineation of Five Phases Among Adult Adoptees, the authors suggested possible phases experienced by adoptees as they negotiate resolution of the adoption experience (Penny et al., 2007). These phases ranged from no awareness of adoption [concerns] to acute awareness to a sense of peace and acceptance. While the research participants were in their middle years, the themes described were similar to the continuum of salience found by Grotevant and colleagues in adopted adolescents that included preoccupation regarding adoption to finding meaning in adoption to little or no interest in adoption. (Penny et al., 2007).

The narrative that emerges through Sara’s journal is reflective of a range of feelings that to some degree are reflected in phases experienced subsequent to adoption and to later reunion.

Sara: “The relationship I have with my birth mother is undefinable. While she gave birth to me, I don’t consider her my ‘mother’; I call her by her first name. However, she is someone I see as a motherly figure in my life. She is someone I go to for advice and love and support and I feel the same back from her...My birth mother and I have grown closer in expressing and sharing our emotions, and I feel accepted and unafraid of her ‘getting tired of me.’ The relationship I have with her is one of friendship, love, guidance, and compassion.”

Birth mother: “And now, Sara and I truly have a relationship. What I have come to accept is that this relationship is an undefinable one. We will use the terms birth mother, birth daughter, mother, daughter as needed for others to feel comfortable with who we are together, but what I feel is a much deeper spiritual connection that is unlimited in definition. It is unending, full of grace, magic, delight, tenderness, and love. Knowing Sara has brought indescribable joy into my life. I thank her for her courage, her trust, and her willingness to allow me into her life. We will always have each other.”

Conclusion

Adoption is truly a lifelong journey. While not all reunions are wanted or successful, the literature suggests that the bulk of them work out to the satisfaction of the parties involved. For adoptive parents, the reunion experience is influenced by factors such as adoptee-versus-birth-mother-initiated searches; participation in counseling or self-help activities; the adoptee’s motivation, expectations, and timing of the search; the quality of the relationship between the adoptive parent and the child; and the ability to form a new kinship relationship that accommodates the inclusion of the birth parent/family into their lives (Petta & Steed, 2005). Research findings indicate that overall, adoptive parents see the reunion experience as positive when their child has clearly benefited from the process.

For birth parents, Fischer found that post-reunion, 80% wished for as much contact with their child as the child wanted. Fifteen percent emailed, spoke frequently on the telephone, and planned to spend time together. Comments such as “I no longer have a hole in my heart” were common. One birth parent wrote, “I desire to have as much contact with my daughter as possible.”
Powell and Afifi report that for adoptees, resolution of uncertainty and ambiguous loss were among the benefits of reunion. They suggest that a ritual of open family communication in the adoptive home regarding the adoptee’s feelings was a key factor in resolution (2005).

Social workers should remember that adoption reunion is a significant step in the adoption journey that impacts the adoptive parents/family, the birth parent(s)/family, and the adoptee in profound ways that create a ripple effect over time. Identifying the needs of each person at various phases of reunion is essential to promoting continued successful reconstruction of identities and relationships.

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Resources

REMEMBERING HOMELESSNESS AMONG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Ana M. Leon, PhD, LCSW • Audra Eastwood, MSW Student

Introduction
Although determining the exact number of families experiencing homelessness in the United States is difficult, studies show that amongst industrialized nations, the United States has the leading number of homeless women and children making up 34% of the indigent population (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2008). In fact, the current number of families experiencing homelessness has not been this high since the Great Depression. Within these families, the statistics showcasing the numbers and psychosocial characteristics of transient children are staggering.

Almost 1.35 million children will not have a place to live over the course of a year, and 200,000 will encounter homelessness on any given day. Forty-three percent of these children are under the age of six and a high percentage are more likely to end up in foster care: 12% compared to 1% of non-homeless children. Homelessness is often the barrier to reunification. At least 30% of the children in foster care could return home if their parents had permanent housing.

Statistics show that children who face life without a home also experience a variety of other problems. For example, children experiencing homelessness are confronted with violence, illnesses, emotional and behavioral problems, and
academic issues daily at alarming rates (Anooshian, 2005).

As reported by the National Center on Family Homelessness (2008), 83% of homeless children in America have been exposed to at least one severe violent event by age 12 and approximately 25% have observed violent acts within their families. Children who witness or experience violent acts often display continual apprehension, higher levels of anxiety and depression, recurrent antisocial and/or aggressive behavior, and an acceptance of violence as an appropriate conflict resolution tool.

The Effects of Homelessness

Children without homes are often affected by major physical health issues, when compared with non-homeless children. They have four times more illness in general, five times more gastrointestinal problems, four times as many respiratory infections, four times higher risk of asthma, and report twice as many ear infections. Additionally, children who experience homelessness face hunger at double the rate of other children—a factor which results in nutritional deficits, and in turn, weight issues including obesity (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2008).

Children without a home, especially those between the ages of 3-6 years, experience emotional and behavioral problems three times more than children who have stable housing. The National Center on Family Homelessness (2008) also reports that 16% of preschoolers without a home have behavioral issues such as severe hostility and aggression; 47% of children who are of school-age have emotional problems such as withdrawal, anxiety, and depression; and 36% of school age children exhibit aggressive or delinquent behaviors. The specific worries expressed by children without safe and stable living conditions include having no place to live (74%), having no place to sleep (58%), and fearing that something terrible will happen to their families (85%).

Lastly, children experiencing homelessness convey a high rate of academic and developmental issues and are underrepresented in preschool programs (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). Compared with non-homeless children, homeless children are four times more likely to portray delayed development and have twice the rate of learning disabilities; 36% have repeated a grade in school. On a positive note, due to the passing of the McKinney-Vento Act, a federal law that mandates educational access to ensure school attendance and achievement for homeless children, 85% of children experiencing homelessness are now attending school.

Recommendations for Addressing the Problem

Turbulent economic times, increases in foreclosures, and high rates of unemployment and homelessness present American families with numerous hurdles, all of which social workers must be equipped to address. First, we must recognize that as social workers we have the advantage of grounding our practice interventions within a strengths-based perspective. An integral part of social work practice is the practitioner’s ability to provide support, instill hope, and demonstrate compassion for homeless children and families. Social workers serving homeless children and their families may advocate at legislative, agency, and community levels for economic change aimed at providing relief. Practitioners are also concerned with addressing the daily living challenges faced by this population. Treatment planning must therefore be conducted in phases that include realistic goals and objectives homeless children and families can achieve. Safe, affordable, stable housing is the most important issue to address when sorting through the often debilitating and overwhelming challenges faced by children and families experiencing homelessness (Rafferty, Shinn, &
Weitzman, 2004). Applying Maslow’s theory of motivation and human needs, physiological and safety needs, which include stable housing, food, water, employment, resources, good health, and the security of all family members, must be attained in order for further growth and development to occur. Once these are achieved, other needs on Maslow’s hierarchy, including love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization can be more realistically explored with children and families experiencing homelessness.

Social workers and school teachers need to be sensitive to the multiple needs of this population. It is not uncommon for homeless children to present health, mental health, behavioral, interpersonal, and learning or academic problems simultaneously. Similarly, the families of these children can simultaneously experience financial, health, mental health, employment, and relationship challenges. It is the social worker’s task to prioritize these problems with input from the family and begin to find the needed community and family resources to help homeless families address their challenges.

**Conclusion**

It is important for us to remember that, while the recent economic changes have increased the numbers of children and families experiencing homelessness, the problem of homelessness among this population has existed for decades. It is only through economic change combined with hope, support, compassion, and needed resources that children and families experiencing homelessness will return to or reach newer levels of optimal functioning.

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**References**


CHILD WELFARE: THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR REFORM

Bekki Ow-Ärhus, ACSW, DCSW, C-ACYFSW

Introduction

Historically, social workers have played a key role in the child welfare system by protecting our nation’s most vulnerable and troubled children and families. Since the implementation of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, policy and practice have focused on the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in care within the child welfare system.

Practitioners and researchers are continually challenged by the difficulties agencies face in recruitment and retention of a competent child welfare workforce. NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare cite recent studies reported by the Child Welfare League of America (2003) indicating that social work degrees are the most appropriate degrees for this field of practice. A social-work-educated workforce has been directly linked to better outcomes for children and families and to lower staff turnover in child welfare settings.

Social workers engaged in practice, at any level, within the child welfare system strive to adhere to the NASW Standards for Social Work Practice in Child Welfare, the NASW Code of Ethics, the NASW Standards for Continuing Education, and state licensing requirements. They also strive to adhere to the Indicators for the Achievement of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice and, where appropriate, the NASW Standards for Clinical Social Work Practice.

Massachusetts Civil Class Action Suit

National advocacy group Children’s Rights has brought a lawsuit commonly referred to as Connor B. v. Patrick. This is a civil rights class action brought on behalf of all children who are now or will be in the foster care custody of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (“DCF”) as a result of abuse or neglect (“Plaintiff Children”). The case accuses the Massachusetts system with physical and psychological harm to the abused and neglected children it is mandated to protect, citing a myriad of systemic defects such as:

- High rates of abuse and neglect of children within foster care in the state
- Frequent moves from foster home to foster home
- Low rate of timely adoptions
- Lack of permanency and a high rate of kids aging out of the system
- Low reunification rate
- Poor workforce practices that result in the failure to effectively manage agency workforce, resources, and practices

The suit hopes to have the court address a number of systemic issues including:

- Caseload limits
- Education and training, preservice and in-service, for case workers and supervisors
- Assessment of the need for additional services and resources
- Safety monitoring of placements
- Child, parent, and sibling visitation
- Case and service planning
- Quality assurance and data
- Contract monitoring and performance-based monitoring
- Foster care maintenance rates
- Monitoring and enforcement by the court

Discussion Regarding the Massachusetts Civil Class Action Suit

- The Massachusetts case represents a standard description of foster care systems in class action lawsuits around the country. Cited cases often include examples such as school-aged children moved from home to home, separated from siblings, and sometimes abused or neglected in care (especially in residential facilities); inadequate follow-up on medical and educational needs; lack of timely permanency planning; over-use of psychotropic
medications; and acute and chronic shortages of foster homes. These complex, and often compound issues, lead to deplorable practices such as moving difficult-to-place children daily from home to home and inadequate compensation and support to foster parents. Similar class action suit examples include Dwayne B. v. Granholm, filed in Detroit, Michigan, 2006, and Bramms v. Washington State, 2001.

- Current child welfare systems across the country sometimes may rely on lawsuits to apply a great deal of pressure to urge legislators to allocate needed resources to carry out the charge of providing for the health, safety, and well-being of children in care. In the meantime, child welfare workers (including administrators, managers, social workers, case managers, investigators, intake workers, and others) are left to carry out the charge of the system to the best of their ability, with a serious lack of resources in an often prescribed, inflexible, and mostly reactive system that struggles to imagine new and creative ways of thinking about foster care that might support better outcomes of kids in care.

- For class action lawsuits to achieve desired results, the executive branch and child welfare system must accept the class action suit as an opportunity to reform their systems; otherwise, much needed resources and time are wasted while policy makers, administrators, and plaintiffs hassle endlessly over compliance with settlement agreements, court orders, and performance measures that tie up a child welfare agency in a time-consuming, litigious process that generally results in little more than vastly increased documentation requirements, with no real improved outcomes for kids in care.

- In child welfare cases, the term “deliberate indifference” generally refers to intention, awareness of specific facts, and the actual drawing of a conclusion. It is a way of singling out and identifying policy makers and managers as the responsible parties. One common response of current child welfare systems is identifying and eliminating the “bad guys” to solve the problem. Unfortunately, the problems identified within child welfare systems are generally systemic rather than individual. Consequently, individual responses are inadequate to address the underlying problems within those systems.

- In these difficult economic times, it is likely that budget cuts have greatly added to problems that have been present for years within child welfare systems. It is also possible that agency administrators and managers have had other priorities, for example, preventing the need for foster care or reducing its length. It may be more accurate to state that agency actions in the past several years do not indicate that the state agency has a plan to reform the foster care system in fundamental ways, or it may believe that what is needed are additional resources that are unavailable at the current time.

- A staggering lack of resources forces the individuals working within child welfare systems to make difficult program, policy, and practice decisions daily on issues of great importance to the allocation of scarce resources that have a direct impact on the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. In order to meet essential levels of service, the following must be elevated in priority:
  - Staff size—recruitment, hiring, restructuring, and retention
  - Appropriate caseload
  - Training for frontline workers, including a plan to cover caseload while workers attend needed trainings
  - Case monitoring practices
  - Parent and sibling visitation practices
  - Community placement options available at all levels of care needed
  - Foster care recruitment and retention efforts
  - Recruitment of appropriate adoptive and kinship placements
  - Processing of timely and appropriate payments to support kids in care at all stages to promote successful placements and eventual permanency
  - Appropriate reimbursement rates for community providers to ensure kids in care receive essential medical and dental care,
educational support, mental health services, and other community supports.

- Planning and implementing proactive reforms that may improve Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) outcomes rather than a reactive-based crisis intervention approach.
- Allocation of social workers’ time to attend to the needs of each child in care.
- Allocation of social workers’ time to support foster and adoptive parents/families.
- Availability of tangible resources, such as money, vouchers, transportation, and in-kind donations, to meet the needs of kids in care – particularly in rural areas.

- Child and Family Service Review measures are referenced as a tool to measure desired outcomes for child welfare systems across the country. However, they do not always measure what they purport to measure. One example is the measure concerning multiple placements. Without further information, one does not know if an additional placement was used as an intervention to preserve a longer term placement, or if there was a disruption in the placement. There is no way to distinguish between a child being placed somewhere temporarily during the hospitalization of a foster parent and an improperly matched placement.

- Most child welfare agencies across the country are aiming for caseloads of about 15 children per full-time equivalent (FTE), and workload studies usually recommend caseloads of about 12 children per foster care caseworker.

- When states inadequately compensate and support foster parents, and allow caseloads to far exceed reasonable standards, foster home recruitment and retention, and lack of timely permanency planning, become major issues. However, even when states do a better job of funding foster care systems, it is still difficult to recruit, support, and retain foster parents, especially foster parents able and willing to care for behaviorally troubled children and youth.

- In some states, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining foster parents has led to a dependence on high-cost residential care for older youth. Many bad things happen to children and youth in residential care (especially bullying and sexual abuse of weaker youth by stronger youth) when these facilities are not well-managed. To maintain a large residential care system that is safe for children and youth and actually offers therapeutic services is a tough challenge that child welfare agencies are frequently unable to meet.

- One consequence of a child welfare system that heavily depends on residential care for its adolescent out-of-home care population is that it may result in significant numbers of youth aging out of care without the safety net of healthy permanent families or a sustained relationship with an appropriate supportive adult.

- Children who remain in foster care longer than a few weeks can have a therapeutic experience. If the goal becomes that children who leave lengthy stays in foster care are better off developmentally and behaviorally less troubled than when they entered care, and this becomes a deeply felt goal of policy makers, administrators, and managers, it may be possible to develop an action agenda that leads to real foster care reform that is clearly focused on better outcomes for the children who come in contact with the foster care system.

- Finally, there has been a hard-to-understand resistance on the part of child welfare agencies to do something about placement instability. Possibly, agencies are not quite sure what to do or they accept placement moves as a standard characteristic of foster care systems. The resistance to working toward reducing placement instability is as much about agency priorities and about having a strategy ready to implement once resources become available as it is about inadequate resources.

NASW supports the role of social workers within child welfare systems across the nation, and recognizes the services social workers provide as administrators, managers, frontline workers, and advocates supporting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families across the United States.
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Resources

Books and Reference Works


Online Resources
For additional background and current status information on the Massachusetts suit and similar cases around the country, visit www.childrensrights.org


