

Dear Students of Social Work,

Caring for Juveniles



When professionals appear before the juvenile court judge, their recommendations assuring that the children would be well taken care of are often accepted. This is done as there is trust that the “system” is doing right by the children it cared for. The question remains however as to how the system is maintained to provide that assurance as we know that it is hard work to get an inter-disciplinary system to be indomitably child-centric.

The focus of our juvenile system in the last couple of decades has treaded the balance of safety of the child through removal and intervention onsite within the household situation. The key challenge in some situations is the meaning of “best interests” when deciding whether to send children home after being in the system. The key issue that keeps us all awake at night is the breaking of the inter-generational cycle of the appearance of children in the juvenile system.

If removal was indeed solving the problem or if interventions were targeted, we would not see a generational carry over. This is not unique to us. Many around the world are kept awake trying to find the illusive solution. Upon reflection, we continue to ask ourselves how we have healed the children and families of origin that become involved in the juvenile system. While removal may well interrupt a pattern of abuse or neglect, it is not sufficient to ensure that the children have an opportunity to grow up in healthy families, which everyone agrees is best for children. Moving children from foster home to foster home or into institutional care does not provide them with the necessary modeling and long-term connections to launch them on positive trajectories. So we know that safety is not a sufficient standard and social work help is critical in the service delivery plan.

We know too that despite the challenges, studies have shown that good social work has helped some children to survive the very worst sexual or physical abuse and come out seemingly whole. Research has also revealed that resilience is the product of multiple connections. Connections to people who genuinely care about the children turn out to be critical. And yet, too often when children are removed from families, there is little real effort to maintain or enhance children’s current relationships while in care. (It is even more uncommon to see efforts to create new relationships through natural connections to relatives not tied to placement options.)

If we know these connections are necessary, why do we not routinely ensure that they are in place? Perhaps for the same reason we ignore visitation evidence. The average parent gets one hour of visits per week with the children. We know from research that adding another hour of visits results in a tripling of successful reunification efforts, doing nothing additional in the case. Adding another hour triples success again. Going from one hour of visits to three hours of visits can result in a nine-fold increase in successful reunification. And yet, the possibility of additional visits is given little attention. Similarly, caseworkers sometimes struggle to keep families as the center of their work while working on documenting compliance with standards.

Research is clear that children who manage with good community support to stay out of the justice system have better outcomes than those who are in care and those who age out of care without the caring connections of families or stable relationships with adults.

As some would say, maybe it is time to remind ourselves to have a system that intervenes in the lives of children and families in such a way as to bring healing, not separation; to bring improvements, not disadvantages and burdens; to bring an ally to families in trouble, not an adversary. Segments of the child-serving community have been doing this work and we need to support that work.

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