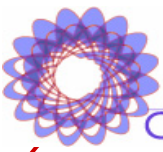


Removal from the Home: Resulting Trauma

It is vitally important to consider the physical and psychological safety of children living in foster care. Every year, 2 million children come into contact with the child welfare system due to investigations of parental abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Many of these children are removed from their homes and placed into the foster care system. Foster care is known to produce poor social outcomes, such as high delinquency rates, high teen birth rates, and lower earnings. Furthermore, researchers have found that children on the verge of placement tend to have better outcomes when they are allowed to stay with their families; this is especially true for older children (Doyle, 2007).

Foster care is meant to be a temporary solution, but children stay in foster care for an average of two years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). In addition, the average foster child is moved from one home to another at least once, with 25 percent moving three or more times (Doyle, 2007).

Although an abusive family would undoubtedly be harmful to children, removing a child from his or her family can be just as traumatic. For example, placement instability in foster care could be a potentially serious problem for child development. Everyone would agree that children should not be exposed to abuse or neglect. However, the process of being removed from one's home and placed in foster care has consequences as well, and can have negative effects that last a lifetime (Bruskas, 2008). Such children are affected by a variety of factors, including; "the psychological and neurobiological effects associated with disrupted attachment to biological parents, the specific traumatic experiences (e.g.,

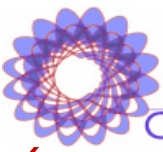


neglect and/or abuse) that necessitated placement, the emotional disruption of placement, and the need to adjust to the foster care environment.” (Isquith, Maerlender, Racusin, Sengupta, & Straus, 2005)

The loss of a parent is arguably one of the most distressing experiences that a child can undergo. Losing a parent through state intervention can be especially harmful as it creates a “divorce” scenario in which children are removed from their family, friends, and environments with no sense of closure. This can lead to an irreparable sense of loss that can stunt development and lead to behavioral problems (Silver et al., 1999).

Few foster care systems have sufficient orientation programs to ease a child’s transition into foster care. Children may then have problems adjusting, as the foster care system lacks explanations and assistance to help them understand why they were taken from their home and what their future holds. Lack of understanding of the foster care system and the process may lead to feelings of loss and/or rejection for children grappling to understand the separation from their biological families (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006). Removal from the home and replacement in the home can lead to feelings of instability, loss of status and a loss of control as children may always expect and fear that they can be removed and replaced at any time without explanation (Schneider & Vivky, 2005). Children may worry how they will be seen and treated by peers and school personnel who find out that they are in foster care.

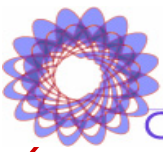
Neva Pryor, director of volunteers and counseling services at the Interfaith Hospitality Network in Philadelphia and an expert in the area of trauma-informed services, explains that when a child is taken away from a parent, the child is confused. The child



might think that the parent is betraying him/her, especially if the child is not given an explanation that is clear, age-appropriate and trauma-informed. Traumatic removal and foster care experiences can create mistrust, which may lead to a range of psychological problems and personality disorders among these children, stemming from abandonment.

The younger the child when s/he is removed from the family, the worse the situation. If the child is preverbal, the effect can be multiplied because s/he does not yet know how to express his/her feelings. This may set the child up for a long-lasting sense of abandonment. Neva Pryor described a woman whose first memory is of being left on the porch of a foster home as her mother drove away (Pryor, 2009). Pryor explains that, even in the case of child abuse, the child attaches to the parents.

Edie Mannion, a marriage and family therapist for over 25 years and the co-founder and director of the Training and Education Center (TEC), a program of the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, is an expert on families affected by mental illnesses. She agrees that, in comparable cases, it is better for children to stay with their families and have the families get appropriate supportive services, as this is far less traumatizing for the children and is more cost-effective. As one example of a traumatic effect, she describes how children of distressed parents can become “parentified.” That is, they become worried about the parent, and perhaps their siblings, the way a parent typically worries about the safety and well-being of a child. These children become “little adults” and worry that their parent or siblings might not survive without them further adding to the trauma of being removed from the home. Addressing parentification of children through appropriate clinical and in-home services can be far less traumatizing than removing them.

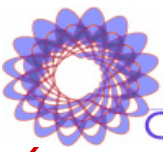


Mannion notes that it is critically important to study the effects of foster care placement, and to alter policies and procedures for moving children into foster care so that iatrogenic traumatization can be reduced (Mannion, 2009).

Sometimes the symptoms of a mental illness may present as problematic behaviors, including abuse and neglect. In these situations, intervention by child protective services is warranted. In such instances, a parent's illness is of significance as it can help inform appropriate services that will help the parent eliminate or reduce these problematic behaviors. However, there is no basis for a blanket assumption that having a mental illness means a parent will have symptoms that will present as dangerous behaviors. Therefore, the existence of parental mental illness alone is not, and should not be considered, just cause to remove a child from the home; and there should be no reason to cause a child the lasting psychological distress that may result from foster care placement.

In the case of the parent, the mental illness will only be exacerbated in these situations as the parent will understandably experience mental distress over the loss of his/her child. In fact, being a parent has proven to be one of the most effective motivators for individuals to engage in treatment/recovery. The parental role gives individuals a sense of purpose and positive identity in society that they may not otherwise be able to find (Nicholson & Henry, 2003).

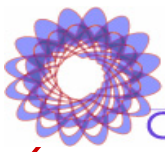
Patrice Gammon frequently speaks about her experiences as a child in foster care. She entered the New York City foster care system with her two younger brothers when she was approximately eight years old. She is now working on her doctorate in social work. She notes that people frequently comment on what they call her success story, to which she replies that "if growing up in foster care and doing well is so rare that we need to notice



and call it a success – that is a huge failure of the system. It shouldn't be a comfort to any of us that the successes seem rare.” She also comments that, no matter how successful her life looks now, she still has to deal with a lot of pain. As most other people who have experienced trauma understand, one can work through it, but a traumatized person can never really live the life that they could or should have had.

Patrice was never told the truth about why she was removed from her mother: that her mother had a mental illness. The most explicit information she was given was that her mother had a “nervous breakdown.” She wishes she had been told the truth and that “grownups had not been so quick to label me because I was in foster care, or because my mother was crazy.” She relates that, as a foster kid, she knew that people considered her damaged goods. “It was hard not to internalize that in myself as a child,” she says. She also wished that people had realized that she might have had more questions about her mother when she grew older and left foster care. This could be as simple as giving resource lists to adoptive parents or older kids aging out of the system – letting them know they can call for information (Gammon, 2009).

In short, the foster care system is meant to be a temporary solution. Children of parents with mental illnesses who have not demonstrated that they are a threat to the children's well-being should be allowed to stay with their families. In many cases, removal is just as harmful and traumatizing as having an abusive parent. The practice of removing a child from his or her natural home based on the belief that it would be better than leaving him/her in the care of a parent with a mental illness is based on stigma, not fact. It does a child no good to be removed from his/her natural home unless it has proven to be an abusive or neglectful environment.



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