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A. Pare
McGill University

J. Torczyner
McGill University

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THE INTERESTS OF CHILDREN AND THE
INTERESTS OF THE STATE:
RETHINKING THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CHILD
WELFARE POLICY AND FOSTER CARE PRACTICE

A. Pare
J. Torczyner

McGill University
School of Social Work

ABSTRACT

The social welfare literature -- whether embodied in the ideology of the profession, claimed in its social policy, substantiated through empirical research, or espoused in practice -- suggests that children should not be removed from their natural homes as a solution to economic woes or to the unavailability of social support services.

This apparent convergence of ideology, policy and practice -- buttressed by social values which recognize the importance of family life -- would suggest that few children, if any, would enter foster care because of inadequate income or the absence of social services. Yet, in 1977, between one quarter and one half a million children in the United States are in foster care and most of them are children of the poor. While policy statements claim that substitute care should be a last resort, it is more often than not the only resource available to child welfare practitioners.

This paper will examine the incongruent relationship between ideology, policy and practice. It will argue that child welfare standards can rarely be implemented in child welfare practice and that child welfare professionals lack the necessary resources to help parents and children remain together.

Alternatives to foster care which would enable parents to raise their children are not difficult to find. Some have been posed, but none have been realized because they have not been accompanied by an effective political strategy. This paper proposes organizing natural parents as a possible vehicle for promoting reform in the foster care system. Child welfare practitioners who now protect the anonymity of natural parents are called on, instead, to act as catalysts by encouraging natural parents to meet with one another and organize.

Principles of Foster Care Policy

"There is a constantly increasing number of vagrant, idle, and vicious children of both sexes who infest our public thoroughfares, hotels, docks, etc., children who are growing up in ignorance, only destined to a life of misery, shame and crime, and ultimately to a felon's doom... Their numbers are almost incredible, and to those whose business and habits do not permit them a searching scrutiny, the degrading and disgusting practices of these almost infants

in the school of vice, prostitution, and rowdyism, would certainly be beyond belief."1)

These remarks, delivered by the Chief of Police of New York City in 1853, reflected a growing public alarm concerning the state of its troubled youth. Across the nation, citizens and officials, unable to cope with these problems, began to demand federal intervention. Some twenty years later, these concerns provoked a public response and the Children's Act was passed in 1875.

Since that time, the field of child welfare has been concerned with the development of better ways to meet the needs of children from troubled families. The underlying principles of child welfare which seek to promote the development of these children have evolved during this century of practice. One principle, clearly established early in child welfare tradition, is that children should not be removed from their natural families because of poverty. In 1909, the first White House Conference on Children proposed that "children should not be deprived of home life except for urgent and compelling reasons ... homes should not be broken up for reasons of poverty, but only for ... inefficiency or immorality."2)

A second principle which has become an integral part of child welfare philosophy is that the best place for a child is in his own home, provided that his minimum needs can be met. Separation of a child from his family is perceived as a tragic event which has damaging effects on children and often results in a long-term state of impermanence for them. 3)

A related principle which has received growing recognition in the Child Welfare field is that prevention of placement must be seriously attempted. For example, in 1975, the New York State Temporary Commission on Child Welfare reported that, "the hour is at hand for careful but massive re-direction of the child care industry toward preventive services for children and their families."4)

Yet, even with a commitment to prevention, foster care is still necessary in certain cases in order to protect children and safeguard their development. When necessary, the Child Welfare League of America proposes that the "ultimate objectives of foster family service should be the promotion of healthy personality development of the child, and amelioration of problems that are personally or socially destructive."5)

The authors suggest, therefore, that present foster care policy consists of three underlying principles:

1. that the main purpose of foster care is to promote healthy child development
2. that no child be removed from his home except as a last resort after all alternative resources and services have been tried
3. that the field of child placement be committed to a philosophy of prevention.

Foster Care Population

These principles suggest that child placement is a last resort which should be averted through preventative service.

Yet, in 1977, three hundred and fifty thousand children in the United States are in foster homes alone.⁶⁾ Since these policies assure that no child will be removed from his home because of inadequate income or support service, one would assume that child placement requests cut across all income categories. Yet, the overwhelming majority of children in care come from families plagued by severe economic hardship which have had few, if any, social supports.

Jenkins and Sauber wrote the following: "...inadequate financial resources comprise an underlying factor to one degree or another in almost all cases where children are in foster care at public charge."⁷⁾ These researchers, investigating 425 families, who placed 891 children in foster care in New York City, found that only a third of the families were two-parent families, that public assistance was the largest source of income, and that close to half the sample had physical health problems.

A 1975 national census of requests for child welfare services supports the Jenkins and Sauber study. This census found fifty percent of all white families and more than seventy percent of all black families requesting child care services from public institutions were known to be receiving public assistance.⁸⁾

While these findings have been supported by numerous other studies, child welfare practitioners have been reluctant to identify poverty as the primary cause of placement. Child welfare practitioners argue that while most of the families who place their children in care are poor, most of the poor do not place their children in care. Moreover, many

of the nonpoor make substitute child care arrangements in the private market.

One response to why some poor people and not others place their children in care can be elicited from a related study by Giovanni and Billingsley.⁹⁾ These authors compared poor "neglected" families with poor "adequate" families on a range of social variables. Their most outstanding finding was that the poorer the poor families, the more likely they were to be maternally neglected.

Three separate and related studies, however, demonstrate that increased income and support services are the most important factors in restoring positive family functioning. Irene Olson compared the effectiveness of increased grants and experienced case workers on family health, social participation, satisfaction, and living conditions. Olsen found that the "major differences in clients were effected when more adequate grants alone were instituted, although the combination of the grants and experienced workers had additional effectiveness."¹⁰⁾

Jones, Neuman and Shyne¹¹⁾ tested and demonstrated the effectiveness of intensive family services in averting or shortening placement. They found that 92% of the children of families who received these services and who were home initially were still at home a year and a half later. For the group which did not receive these services, 77% of the children still lived at home. Furthermore, Jones et al. found that children from families receiving these services while already in care, spent an average of 24 days less in

foster homes during the first year of this program than children from families which did not benefit from these services.

Pare and Torczyner¹²⁾ compared the influence of environmental and psychological factors on foster care placement and discharge. Four categories of possible reasons for placement and discharge were developed and itemized; they include parent behavior, child behavior, parent personal circumstances and environmental circumstances. The first two categories represent the psychological position since these causes of placement are predominantly situated within or between the individuals involved in placement. The last two categories represent financial and service issues. The environmental circumstance, category identified income, support services, and personal circumstance is peripherally related to these issues as it concerns events which the parents had little control over and which necessitated placement (hospitalization, illness, etc.).

Two Q-sort instruments were developed. The first Q-sort measured reasons for placement, and the second Q-sort was prepared to measure the relevant changes since placement. The Q-sorts were applied to a random selection of forty natural parents -- twenty who still had a child in care, and twenty whose child had been returned. The most outstanding findings were that the sample population rated environmental circumstance as a significantly more important reason for placement than any of the others. One clear significant difference emerged between the two groups concerning discharge: those who had their children returned experienced considerable improvement in their environmental circumstances and those who still had

children in care did not experience a significant improvement in this area. On a scale of one to five -- one representing the most important changes which have occurred since placement, and five representing the least important changes -- the mean score for the two groups were significantly different. The group which had their children returned had a mean score of 2.75 with a standard deviation of .330. The group which still had their children in care had a mean score of 3.08 with a standard deviation of .384. These findings were significant at the .008 level, had a correlation coefficient of .415, and accounted for 17% of the variance between those whose children were returned from care and those whose children were still in a foster home.

Scholars in the Child Welfare field have long recognized this link between poverty and foster care and between increased income and increased family stability. Kadushin wrote that "there is ... evidence that more adequate housing and more adequate medical services would enable the family to come to crisis situations with a greater possibility of maintaining the child in the home."¹³) Similarly, Dinnage adds that foster care can be reduced only through the alleviation of poverty which can only be done through an effective political strategy.

"While facilities should be improved, it is argued that the large numbers of children entering care can only be reduced by a serious attempt to alleviate the 'poverty-syndrome' -- low incomes, exclusion from the mainstream of society, lack of opportunity and family breakdown."¹⁴)

Foster Care Practice and Its Consequences

Given child welfare policy's stated objectives of maintaining children in their natural family whenever possible, and given the importance of income supplementation and support service in both preventing placement and in promoting positive family functioning in order for a child to return home, one would assume that child welfare practice is directed toward improvements in these areas. It would seem likely that preventative service, income supplementation and support services to the natural family would characterize child welfare practice. In practice, however, this is not the case.

In practice, despite the sound intentions of policy statements and of practitioners alike, the practitioners are confronted with a different reality than child welfare principles have allowed for. The practitioner must act often in a crisis situation with few alternative resources to apply before placement becomes the only realistic course to follow.

The pre-placement crises are many and varied. Pre-placement crises may range from physical illness of the primary caretaker, through abrupt changes in housing circumstances, such as fire, emotional exhaustion on the part of the parent, child delinquency, disruptive marital discord, to abuse and neglect. A crisis situation is compounded in most cases by a family's own lack of resources, especially financial resources, with which to survive the crisis privately. It is this lack of private resources that leads to social service involvement; it is the aforementioned crisis that makes it necessary for the social worker to do something fast.

The worker could try counselling, homemaker service, day care, financial assistance, but given the paucity of these resources and the crisis context making speed of service delivery so important, the most immediate and trusted solution is child placement. In a recent report on child welfare, child placement is referred to as a "knee-jerk reaction to threatening family crises."¹⁵⁾

Often this solution is considered temporary and that eventually child and natural family will be reunited. However, the application of this solution, even temporarily, to situations where it is not necessarily warranted contradicts the principles of child welfare policy. On the other hand, the reality of such a situation allows a worker few alternative solutions.

Once a child is in care, there is little chance that his stay will be brief. Maas and Engler¹⁶⁾ reported in their comprehensive study on child placement, that the average length of stay was between 2 to 5 years. Not only is placement not brief, there is usually more than one foster placement. Again, in their study, Maas and Engler reported that the average number of moves experienced by a foster child was 2 to 3 a year. The initial move from natural home to foster home can be traumatic enough, but the subsequent moves from one foster home to another can be seriously damaging to psychological health. Joseph Goldstein et al. have emphasized that "placement decisions should safeguard the child's need for continuity of relationship"¹⁷⁾ and "that placement decisions should reflect the child's, not the adult's sense of time."¹⁸⁾

Bryce and Ehlert in an article on children in care state "that it is (their) conviction that no child can grow emotionally while in limbo, never really belonging to anyone except on a temporary and ill-defined or partial basis. He cannot invest except in a minimal way (just enough to survive) if tomorrow the relationship may be severed. To remain superficially involved can be an advantage in the temporary foster care arrangement, but it is disastrous on a long-term basis. To grow, the child needs at least the promise of permanency in relationships and some continuity of environment."¹⁹⁾

The consequences of foster care can be harmful for the foster child. In addition, the consequences of having to seek foster care can also be difficult for the natural family; this is difficult because, once a child has been placed, the parents suffer a sense of guilt and loss of self-esteem, having failed in their basic roles of parents.²⁰⁾ Whether the child returns or not the parents feel that they have failed once.

Foster care therefore does not really solve the problem of children and families in distress. Foster care simply eliminates this problem temporarily. The children, the natural families and society are granted a respite from the immediate circumstances that precipitated placement and the underlying problems remain. Placement itself often compounds those problems without ensuring that either the "promotion of healthy personality development of the child" nor the amelioration of problems that are personally or socially destructive.

The Discrepancy Between Policy and Practice

Foster care practice as it is realistically practiced does not meet the goals of foster care policy. To argue that foster care practice is not necessarily in the best interest of the child should not come as a surprise to those who have some familiarity with child welfare practice. Surprising perhaps, are the standards which child welfare policy fosters in light of its actual practice. These standards have been unattainable not because of discrepancies between policy and practice brought on by faults in its implementation, by the nature of bureaucracies, by lack of child welfare worker skills, or as a consequence of limited funds, but because child welfare does not have, and never has had, a mandate to deal with much else other than the immediate crisis.

Welfare systems in North America -- be they for children, the aged, the infirm or the incapacitated, do not respond to underlying causes by providing adequate incomes and service. Rather, the welfare systems are designed to provide marginal relief -- which serves to keep the situation in check at a level well below adequate living standards.

There are values and policies which are derived from them which run much deeper and are much more fundamental to American society than those expressed in child welfare philosophy. These values, eloquently explained by Cloward and Piven²¹) assert the independence of the market place, free enterprise, and competition. Men and women should be self-reliant, and self-supporting. Welfare systems are designed to provide relief to the casualties of this system --

those people who, for one reason or another, are unable to independently compete in the market place. The marginal level of public support represents a policy which makes life for the poor survivable but extremely uncomfortable as it seeks to discourage complacency and reliance on public aid.

It is these values and policies which conflict. On the one hand, there is a genuine belief in child welfare expressed in child welfare policies. On the other hand, there is a commitment to limited public support and relief. The first set of values would lead to adequate income maintenance programs and preventative service. The second set of values leads to a marginal relief role, with, at best, rehabilitative services. Child welfare standards reflect the former set of values; income maintenance policy and child welfare practice represent the preeminence of these latter values.

In the absence of adequate income maintenance policies and preventative social services, child welfare practice has a restricted and limited mandate. Unable to deal with these underlying issues, practitioners often first come into contact with children and families only after poverty and the lack of social supports have taken their toll, and worse, the situation of these families has usually reached crisis proportion -- often accompanied with immediate peril to the safety of the child. Practitioners are faced with the contradictory demands of policy and the immediate situation, and are forced, as Banfield put it, "to do something, rather than to do something good."22)

Within this context, it makes sense that child welfare practice offers substitute care rather than support to the natural family. Yet, by so doing, child welfare practice has fostered a multi-million dollar business in substitute care, and had made its major time and organizational commitments to the recruitment and maintenance of foster homes.

These commitments to substitute care make it increasingly difficult for child welfare workers to think about, let alone change, the orientation of these services. As need continues to escalate and as requests for service generally match what is available, foster homes continue to grow. As these organizational commitments and responses unfold, less -- not more -- time and resources become available for the natural parents and preventative services.

The Need for a Politically Viable Alternative

Some practitioners, however, have argued that costs can be substantially reduced and child welfare enhanced by making available to natural parents the same subsidies which are now available to substitute care-takers. Rather than paying foster parents, it is suggested that natural parents in financial distress could be given an equivalent sum, together with intensive support. Since families are more likely to establish themselves more quickly with these efforts, it stands to reason that financial support to natural families would be of shorter duration than subsidies to foster home support.

These proposals have been put forth in a variety of briefs and position papers. These proposals, however, have never been legislated because of the primacy of a value system

which limits the public expenditure of funds for parents to raise children, even though costs could be reduced and child welfare enhanced.

These proposals, seeking to promote incremental change between these conflicting values, are open to the type of criticism which befalls most attempts at welfare reform. These criticisms concern both equity and feasibility. For example, how would one determine which low income families are likely to give up their children? What would be the eligibility criteria and income cutoffs? Would this policy encourage low income parents to threaten to give up their children in order to become eligible for income supplementation? Would these proposals provide incentives for the poor to have children they cannot afford to look after and who will become permanent dependents of the state?

In the past, welfare legislation, seeking to promote incremental change within this conflicting value framework, has responded to these questions by developing procedures and regulations which are often not in the best interest of families in need. The number of potential beneficiaries has been substantially reduced through eligibility requirements and many who are eligible have not benefitted because they have been unable to ascertain their rights in the fact of voluminous procedures and criteria.

These requirements and procedures have created a distressing and de-humanizing process for those who do receive assistance, and have often inadvertently promoted family break-up. Such well-known clauses as "the man in the house"

and the accompanying "midnight raids" and numerous others fully documented by welfare rights activists, illustrate a societal response to this value conflict between child and family welfare and public aid.

To think that natural parent subsidy proposals, directed at an even more selective population than public welfare programs can succeed where others have failed, is not consistent with past and current social policy experience. These proposals fall by the wayside, not because of lack of merit, and not because of the technical difficulties which they raise, but because they have not been accompanied by an effective political strategy. Kadushin, for example, arguing that improved medical and housing services could reduce the incidence of foster care, wrote as follows: "If this is an old refrain ... it is because the implementation of these research findings is more a political than a technical problem".²³⁾

A Political Alternative: Organizing Natural Parents

Gains in related fields such as welfare rights, civil rights, and women's rights suggest to us that organizing natural parents may be an effective political strategy. Perhaps it could be one in which child welfare practitioners can play an important and direct role.

Current child welfare practice toward natural parents represents a form of "protectionism". Practitioners seek to protect the anonymity of natural parents and try to help them resolve feelings of guilt brought on by parent-child separation. We suggest an opposite course of action. We

suggest that child welfare workers ought to encourage natural parents to meet collectively, ought to demonstrate to them that foster care is a poor solution for thousands of parents whose circumstances are very similar to their own, and ought to encourage natural parents to act on their anger rather than their guilt.

Workers who encourage natural parents to organize may not gain favor with the management of child care agencies and may even face repercussions for these actions. Since there are inherent risks in any organizing venture, child welfare workers would be well advised to develop strategies which would minimize retaliation. These strategies could include organizing co-workers through study groups, by appealing to their own interests such as their professional values and autonomy and by rooting their proposals in the espoused policy of child welfare.

Child welfare workers are the essential instrumentality through which natural parents can meet each other and learn of their shared circumstances. Other movements such as civil rights and women's rights have leadership and a collective identity. Welfare recipients were able to organize because, among other reasons, they shared a common meeting ground in long waiting rooms. Natural parents have none of these vehicles and no other common forum which could promote a collective organization.

While child welfare practitioners should initiate this process, they should not tie it too closely to the agency. The possibility of socializing natural parents into roles

acceptable to the agency, the likelihood that natural parents may be intimidated from expressing their sentiments at the agency or in the presence of a worker, and the necessity of establishing independent organizations, call for an autonomous structure. Moreover, if child care agencies initially become the targets of proposed change, child care workers who support these collective organizations could find themselves isolated. On the one hand, management and other workers could demand that they cool out this dissent and even hold these workers responsible. At the same time, natural parents would probably seek and expect the active support of these workers. Natural parent leadership could minimize these risks.

Viable citizens' groups provide personal benefits to the participants, and immediate and tangible benefits to the collectivity, while promoting wider and more long-term reforms. Associations of natural parents have much to contribute in each of these areas.

Organizations of natural parents may be able to strengthen the links between parent and child which become strained or broken during foster care. Parents who are actively fighting to regain custody of their children and are seeking to collectively improve their circumstances in order to provide a more healthy environment for their children, are more likely to have greater contact with their children and a better sense of themselves, than parents who feel that they have failed and are working out their guilt and loss.

Natural parent associations could provide immediate benefits through self-help and self-support systems such as

cooperative child care, transportation, home help and legal information. They could also apply political pressure on the local level for increases and improvements in service delivery.

In terms of broader goals, such as natural parent subsidies or universal income maintenance policies, it is open to question whether natural parents associations could develop the political strength to bring about increases and improvement in service delivery.

Certainly, if natural parent associations were formed across the nation, they could look to such traditional groups for support as civil rights, women's rights, anti-poverty groups and churches.

It seems feasible, however, that the issue of welfare policy and foster care practice dramatically portrayed, could mobilize the political mainstream to actively support reform through petitions, fund-raising and legal defense. Few issues have a more dramatic effect on public opinion than a family's struggle to keep their children. Be it in works of fiction or the daily press, inequities are portrayed and the public moved to act, not by statistical information, but by events such as parent-child loss and separation, which most people can identify with and which most people fear because, in one form or another, it effects each of us.

Tactics to portray these circumstances are not difficult to find. For example, natural parents could organize in each locality and collectively apply for foster parent positions and look after each other's children.

There is no certainty of what, if anything, can promote these reforms which imply a radical transformation of our own value structure. It seems clear, however, that only dramatic issues which can confront the public on both a personal and national level carry the potential for the realization of these goals. Without this transformation, and, in the absence of political capital, child welfare, despite its policies and ideology, will be unable to enhance the interests of children.

Footnotes

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