

Life in Government Care: The Connection of Youth to Family

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to examine the family attachments of youth who have lived in foster care. Though young people are the primary recipients of services in the child welfare system, their voices are seldom heard both in research and their own plans of care. Data was gathered through a questionnaire distributed to youth aged 17–24 years. Youth named siblings more frequently than any other family member with whom they now have contact, and identified their birth family as their primary object of attachment, despite the birth family being identified the least often as those to whom the youth turn when they are sick or who they talk to about their feelings. Youth who lived in many foster homes stated they do not feel part of any family. Many youth stated that they did not feel listened to by their social workers. Support for co-operative relationships between foster parents and birth parents and alternate dispute resolution are discussed as ways of preventing young people from severing their vital family connections.

KEY WORDS: children; youth; foster care; family; attachment.

Introduction

Instability is a significant problem for children in government care. In Canada, there are over 60,000 children and youth living under the

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This article documents a research project about how the experiences of youth in government care, including both foster care and group home care, affect their sense of belonging and connection to “family”. It reports findings that show that as the number of foster placements increase the “feeling of being part of a family” diminishes among youth. The research participants, twenty youth aged 17–23 years, most often identify siblings as family members with whom they still have contact, and the birth family is considered to be their most salient attachment. Many youth state that they did not feel listened to or understood by their social workers. Recommendations for social policy and child and youth care practice are discussed.

guardianship of the child welfare system (National Youth in Care Network, 2001). First Nations children are more likely to be placed in the child welfare system than other Canadian children. It is estimated there are between 22,500 and 28,000 Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, 2003). British Columbia meets the national average as one-third of children in care are of aboriginal background (British Columbia Children's Commission, 2000), yet aboriginals represent approximately 5% of the population of that province. Children and youth in foster care experience poorer health and do less well in school than other children (British Columbia Children's Commission, 2000). In a recent study of incarcerated youth, 72% of girls and 60% of boys said they had been in state care at some point in their lives (McCreary Centre, 2001). Courtney and Barth (1996) looked at the records of 2653 foster children and found that multiple moves in and out of the foster care system, involving unsuccessful attempts at family reunification, increased the likelihood of an unsuccessful outcome at exit from care, using multiple adjustment measures. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000) found in their study of children in youth detention that children who were removed from parental care more than twice were more likely to be incarcerated. The disruptions in the lives of children removed from their birth families often include frequent changes of caregivers, schools, and social workers, as transiency "is one of the largest contributing factors to the instability experienced by youth in care" (National Youth in Care Network, 2001, p.19). Research shows that former youth in care are significantly over-represented among the homeless (Penzerro, 2003; Serge, Eberle, Goldberg, Sullivan, & Duding 2002; O'Brien, 1997).

Although parent-child attachment and continuity of relationships, and in particular those between parent and child, are identified as primary principles in legal decisions about "the best interests of the child," Ryburn (1994) and Bala (2000) argue that the "best interests of children" is an indeterminate and relative notion, interpreted by legal and social service practitioners in a variety of ways, and there is no consensus on these "best interests" in the fields of foster and residential care, and child and youth care practice (Anglin, 2002). In child protection systems, the dominant view has been that children's individual welfare is readily separable from that of their families of origin. However, Fanshel, Finch, and Grundy (1990: 212) write, "even where a child is involved in very stressful conflict with birth parents, it is rarely a viable solution to seek termination of the relationship. They are too enmeshed with each other." Cantos and Gries (1997) interviewed and looked at the case records of 49 children in foster care who were

referred for therapy due to behavioural difficulties, along with a comparison group of 19 foster children who had never been referred to therapy since their initial placement. They found that the longer children had been in care and the more placements they had endured, the less likely they were to be visited by their birth families. The children who were visited regularly exhibited fewer behavioural problems, especially problems of an internalizing nature (i.e. withdrawal, depression, anxiety) than the children who were visited irregularly or not at all. They concluded that the complaints made by some foster parents and caseworkers regarding the worsening of behaviour following visits with parents were obscuring the benefits of family contact experienced by most children. The researchers also stated that children's guilt and ambivalence regarding their positive feelings for foster parents may be at the core of children's dysphoria or anxiety, particularly when a distant or adversarial relationship exists between their biological parents and foster parents. They noted that when children were being visited after parental rights were terminated, a positive and collaborative relationship between the foster and biological parents is a critical factor on multiple measures of child adjustment.

As Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Kruk (1994) pointed out in the context of divorce, it may be that it is the nature of current "visitation" and "access" arrangements that is at the core of the difficulties that youth in care experience in maintaining a relationship or even contact with their parents, as the constraints of an artificial "visiting" relationship are such that the responsibilities of *parenting* cannot be fulfilled, as parents are unable to meet the physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual needs of their children in any routine fashion. "Visiting" is not "parenting" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Kruk, 1994).

Children's attachment to their biological families, however, seems to endure in spite of the obstacles created by foster care, adoption or maltreatment. Courtney and Barth (1996) found that a significant proportion of youth returned to their families of origin when they ran away from government care or became adults. The value for children of open adoption has generally not been considered in the area of child welfare placement, yet Ryburn (1994) concluded that providing permanence for children through adoption could co-exist with the continuity provided by contact with the birth family who had lost their parental rights. Penzerro and Lein (1995) state that research shows that not having stable parental figures due to placement disruption severely affects children's social development. As attachments become tenuous, children become less selective regarding relationships and either drift into harmful relationships or repeat the established

pattern of “drifting” through relationships. The principal recommendation of Daniel, Wassell, and Gilligan (1999) for child and youth service workers is to appreciate the complexity and depth of children’s ties to their caregivers. Recognizing the importance of the relationship between children and their birth family and supporting regular contact could lessen children’s emotional and behavioural problems and the resulting moves to new foster homes. Some of the key findings of a questionnaire survey of 706 children in care in the United Kingdom are: over half of the respondents did not see enough of their father; more than a third did not see enough of their mother; a third did not see enough of their siblings; and nearly half did not see enough of other family members (Timms & Thoburn, 2003). They recommended a comprehensive review of all contact arrangements and additional resources to facilitate contact, family support and reunification, and resources to reduce unnecessary moves in care. Chapman, Wall, and Barth (2004) found similar results. Out of a group of 727 children who had been in out-of-home placement for one year, 65% desired more contact with their mother, 60% desired more contact with their father, and 77% reported wanting more contact with siblings.

Children’s voices are lacking in research due partly to the challenges of obtaining consent from their legal guardians to participate in research. According to Berrick, Frasch, and Fox (2000), there are political, legal and administrative barriers which limit researchers’ access to and contact with foster children. Consequently, the research which informs the child delivery system lacks children’s perspectives.

Methodology

For this research, current and former foster children were recruited via the British Columbia Federation of Youth in Care Networks, and Covenant House, in Vancouver, British Columbia. Other agencies serving youth were reluctant to grant the researcher access to youth interested in participating in the study because their main funding organizations did not give the researcher permission to contact youth. Confidentiality was cited as the reason even though the information was being received through confidential questionnaires. The sample of youth that completed the questionnaire is a unique group within the general population of foster children because the youth had voluntarily connected themselves with these support agencies. This is a limitation of the research as this sample is not necessarily representative of all youth in care. The research is also limited by the small sample due to the researcher’s lack of access to child protection social workers, the legal

guardians of youth in government care. The research information was also limited by the use of a self-administered questionnaire as the research instrument. By not being available to clarify questions, probe for more information, and query inconsistent responses, the researcher could not be certain that each youth participating in the study answered the questions with the same understanding.

The research sought to find out about the connections foster children see themselves as having with their “family”, particularly their birth family. The questionnaire required both quantitative and qualitative responses and was designed without specific response categories in order not to limit the answers. The quantitative questions were coded to distinguish between birth family members and other persons such as friends and foster parents. Questions asked about what youth felt was helpful and unhelpful about social workers and also what social workers and birth parents need to know to help them make better decisions. Several questions related to the youths’ relationship with and attachment to family, time spent in foster care, and contact with their birth family.

Descriptive statistics of frequency were conducted by processing the quantitative data via SPSS. For the open-ended qualitative questions, we used content analysis to “pull out” the main theme and “pull together” recurrent themes in the participants’ words. The responses were analyzed for common themes via grouping together similar responses and identifying mutually exclusive categories. The development of coding categories for the open-ended questions emerged from a process of constant comparison of youths’ responses, identifying similar clusters of constructs, themes, and issues related to each item, and the labelling of categories in accordance with the major themes. The process of coding was not complex in this study, as the questions were specific and concrete, and promoted clear responses that could easily be classified into themes and labelled according to the meaning they represented. The unit of analysis in the coding process was always the main idea stated by the youth for each question asked.

Findings

The sample of twenty youth was comprised of 10 males and 10 females ranging in age from 17 to 23 years. Seven of the youth identified themselves as of aboriginal or partly aboriginal cultural background. Ten of the 20 youth were still in school and 14 were working. The youth entered foster care between the ages of 2 and 14 years. Ten youth were 12–14 years old when they first came into foster care.

Table 1
With Whom the Youth Live

Youth Lives	Frequency
Alone	12
With Foster Parent	3
With a Room Mate	1
With an Adult	1
With Grandparents	1
With others at Covenant House	1
Did not Answer	1
Total	20

Table 2
Number of Foster Homes For Aboriginal & Non-Aboriginal Youth

	Number of Foster Homes				
	1	2-4	5-24	25 and over	“Too many”; “Lots”
Male Aboriginal	1	-	-	-	1
Male Non-Aboriginal	-	1	3	2	-
Female Aboriginal	-	-	1	-	2
Female Non-Aboriginal	-	4	-	-	-

Table 1 shows that 12 youth now lived on their own. No one lived with their birth parents and only one lived with a birth relative.

Table 2 shows the number of foster homes for aboriginal and non-aboriginal males and females.¹ Although the sample is too small to draw any conclusions about gender and race and foster care placements, aboriginal children and non-aboriginal boys seem to be particularly at risk of multiple placements. Table 2 indicates that both

¹Missing from the data are five youth who did not answer.

aboriginal and non-aboriginal youth, and both male and female youth, are highly at risk of multiple placements and broken attachments; however, male youth are more likely to have experienced five or more foster home placements. Non-Aboriginal female youth experienced the least number of placement moves.

To analyze the effect of number of foster home placements and the youths' connection to family, we divided the subjects in half, based on the number of foster homes. The result was one group of youth who lived in five or less foster homes (Table 3) and another group of youth who lived in more than five foster homes (Table 4). This division approximates the finding by the National Federation of Youth in Care Networks (1996) showing 55% of youth had lived in less than five foster homes.

There are several noteworthy findings in this data, not the least of which is the high number of foster placements many of these youth have had to experience and the accompanying loss of relationships. In response to the question regarding the level of conflict, no one who lived in less than five foster homes (Table 3) stated that they were "usually in conflict" with their birth family, whereas four youth who lived in more than five foster homes (Table 4) stated that they were "usually in conflict". Youths' responses to their feeling of closeness to their birth family did not show a significant difference between those who had experienced a high number of foster placements and those who had not. However, it is noteworthy that in total, nine youth stated they did not feel close to birth family members.

There is a marked difference between the two groups of youth in response to the question that asked them, "What family or friends do you feel a part of?" Only one youth (in Table 3) identified no family members, whereas in Table 4, of the 6 youth who had lived in over 5 foster homes, 4 answered "none" and 2 did not provide an answer. This data shows that as the number of foster homes increase, the youth feel not only disconnected from their birth family, but also lack any connection or feeling of being part of *any* family system.

Another way we looked at attachment in this study was by asking a series of "who" questions to find out to whom these youth would turn when sick and needing to talk and whom they cared about and believed cared about them. Birth parents were the last group the youth identified as people they would turn to when sick or whom they would talk to about feelings, but the youth said they most cared about their birth parents. Nineteen youth responded to these questions as shown in the following four charts (Charts 1, 2, 3, 4).

It is heartening to discover that the youth who completed this questionnaire mostly feel cared about and care about someone. These

Table 3
Youth Who Lived in 5 or Less Different Foster Homes And Their Relationship with Birth Family
And Feeling of Belonging to Any Family

Number of Foster Homes	Level of Conflict With Birth Family (3 choices)	Feeling of Closeness To Birth Family (3 choices)	Feel Part of What Family?
1	Usually in Conflict	Not Close	None
1	Sometimes Argue	Not Close	Mom & Dad
2	Sometimes Argue	A little Close	Foster Family
4	Sometimes Argue	Not Close	Youth in Care Family
4	Get Along Pretty Well	Very Close	Friends
4	Get Along Pretty Well	Very Close	Step Mom's
4	Get Along Pretty Well	Not Close	None
5	Get Along Pretty Well	A Little Close	Foster Family
5	Sometimes Argue	Not Close	Foster Family
5	Get Along Pretty Well	Not Close	Foster Family

Table 4
Youth Who Lived in More Than 5 Foster Homes and Their Relationship with Birth Family
and Feelings of Belonging to Any Family

Number of Foster Homes	Level of Conflict with Birth Family (3 choices)	Feeling of Closeness to Birth Family (3 choices)	Feel Part of What Family?
5+	Get Along Pretty Well	Not Close	None
7	Get Along Pretty Well	A Little Close	Foster Family
9	Usually in Conflict	A Little Close	Both
11	Get Along with Sister	Close To Sister	None / Sister
25-30	Usually in Conflict	Not Close	None
36+	Usually in Conflict	A Little Close	None
Lots	No Contact	Not Close	None
Too Many	Get Along Pretty Well	Very Close	No Answer
Too Many	Usually in Conflict	A Little Close	My Son & My Family
No Answer	No Answer	Not Close	No Answer

Chart 1
Who Cares For You When You Are Sick?

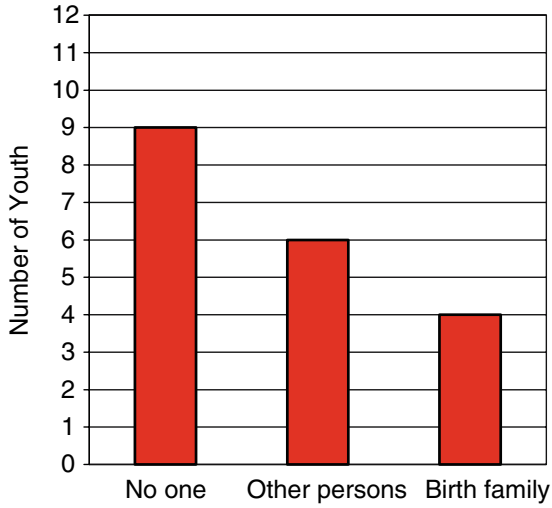


Chart 2
To Whom Do You Talk About Feelings?

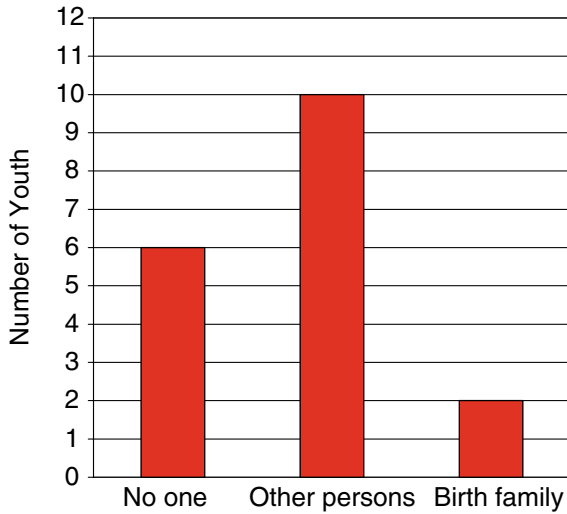


Chart 3
Who Cares About You?

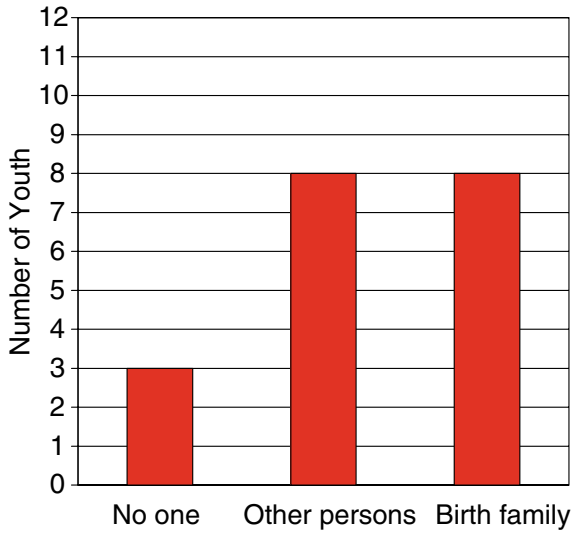


Chart 4
Who Do You Care About?

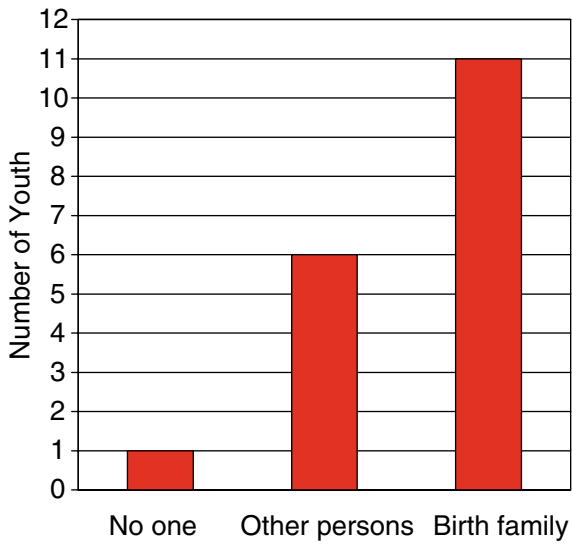
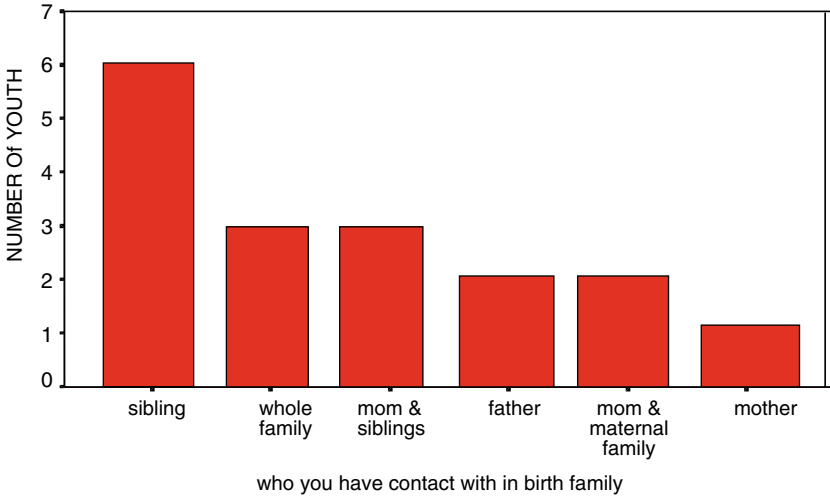


Chart 5
Birth Family Members With Whom Youth Have Contact



youth are active in youth related organizations and therefore have some skill in seeking help and maintaining connections.

Yet in relation to their birth family, whereas only eight youth felt cared about *by* their birth family, 11 indicated they cared *for* their birth family; a situation which presumably led to the involvement of the child protection system. There is a perceived imbalance in the parent–child relationships in this regard.

Youth were also asked about their contact with various family members. That siblings are the most frequent response is noteworthy as “siblings are likely to be significant members of a child’s attachment network especially in conditions of family stress” (Daniel et al., 1999, p. 292).

When asked if they ever moved from one foster home to another and did not want to move, nine youth answered “yes”. Six of these youth gave a reason for their move: three youth said they moved because it was a short term home; two youth said it was because of their foster parents’ behaviour; and one youth stated that it was because of her behaviour (“hit another child”). This shows that some youth, who did not want to move, had to move for reasons that may have been preventable or resolvable. Eleven youth replied “no,” however, indicating that they did want to move; yet in their response to the number of foster homes in which they lived, one of these youth said “too many,” and another stated “36+” foster homes. These responses may speak to

the necessity for youth to detach from foster parents in order to cope with the frequent moves.

The most consistent finding in the data was in the response to the question, "Who helped you stay in touch with your family?" Sixteen youth stated that "no one" had helped them stay in touch with family members. One youth indicated that it was a sibling; one youth indicated that her birth mother had helped her stay in touch with family members; and two youth did not answer this question. No one mentioned his or her social worker. This group of children in care and former children in care see themselves as having taken charge of this important aspect of their life. During a discussion at Covenant House with a group of youth interested in participating in this research, the issue of "choice" became a focal part of the discussion about contact with birth family. The consensus was that children's needs are more important than anything else, and if children want to spend time with their birth family members, parents should be encouraged to spend time with their children.

Thirteen youth spoke to the need for social workers to listen; spend time with them to get to know them better; and know that they "are people too". The British Columbia Children's Commission (2000) has stated that the lack of participation of youth in decision making was a major concern in the commission's care plan reviews and analysis of complaints of youth in care. Wilson and Conroy (1999) found that less than one third of children helped their caseworkers to decide their permanency goals.

In our study, youth were vocal about the importance of self-determination and autonomy, the importance of considering their needs as they identified them, and the responsibilities of adults vis-a-vis these needs. One youth wrote: "[Social workers] need more time, less case loads so that they can spend time to know the individual youths and foster parents and see the whole picture to make the right decisions." Another echoed, "to listen to what you need and want. To understand the situation before deciding situations". Youth did make positive comments about their social workers as well: "telling my mom when she was in the wrong"; "she listens, understand, supports, cares, believes in me"; "she is always there for me"; and "took time, complimented me, [offered] support [and] encouragement." Yet for every positive remark, there were many criticisms such as, "they didn't listen when I just needed to vent"; "they don't care"; and "they were too busy to hang out". Youth identified the key system problems— inconsistent workers, constant moves and high caseloads.

Tester (2002) states that computers, risk assessments, and electronic "fill in the blanks" plans of care have replaced personal contact

and professional judgment in the child welfare field in particular. This may be one explanation for the system problems that youth identified in this study.

Discussion

There is little research about the lives of foster children from their own perspective, and thus this study should be considered exploratory. The issue of continued contact with birth parents who have abused or neglected their children is controversial and the research inconclusive. Gross (1993) writes that there is not enough research-based evidence of children's responses to draw conclusions. However, the responses from this small group of youth about the challenges they faced living in foster care are hard to ignore. The number of foster home placements is alarming, and it is this frequent moving that contributes to the reputation of foster care being a poor substitute for the birth family. U.S.-based studies show that approximately half of adults living in shelters have had some contact as children with child welfare agencies (O'Brien, 1997). In a study by Wilson and Conroy (1999), children reported that the quality of their lives was improved by moving to out-of-home care but they also frequently talked about being separated from or not seeing their parents and siblings.

The National Youth in Care Network (2001) recommends a system with less frequent and dramatic moves. This study shows that high numbers of foster care moves are still a part of regular practice. This is a system that will not meet the needs of children, especially when their needs are self-identified. If children must be removed from their birth families, more effort should be put into helping foster parents and birth parents develop cooperative and shared parenting relationships. How does it enable parents to attend to their children's needs and thereby meet their parenting responsibilities when they have little opportunity to be part of their children's lives? Cantos and Greis (1997) state that when children witness their birth parents and foster parents working together their adjustment to care may be easier. A positive adjustment to care likely will mean fewer moves and a smoother transition home.

Recognizing that a child's family of origin is a fundamental aspect of his or her subjective experience while in government care, and including the family, wherever possible, as a central component of the child's experience in both foster care, and group home care, are essential (Fewster, 2003). The development of peer support groups are

one means of ensuring ongoing family involvement of children in care (Modlin, 2003).

Foster carers who strive to give youth a feeling of being part of a family, which they assume youth need, may contribute to feelings of disloyalty and betrayal, as youth are faced with the expectation to “treat strangers as family” (Anglin, 2002). Further, group home policies that strive to offer a “surrogate family” to youth are strongly challenged by the findings of Anglin (2002), the first major grounded theory study of residential group care for children and youth.

We would go further, however, and ask whether the majority of youth presently in government care should ever have been removed from the daily routine care of their parents. Child protection service involvement may be necessary when, as with the youth in our study, there exists an imbalance between the needs of children versus the needs of parents in the family system, with parental needs taking precedence. Certainly when child abuse or neglect is a factor, child protection agency involvement is necessary, and most youth in care have experienced the trauma of parental rejection, neglect and abuse. However, it may be questioned whether child removal and foster care as presently structured is the most effective means of meeting the needs of many of the children and youth currently in foster care, and this issue strikes at the heart of the family preservation and reunification debate. Does child removal and government-based foster care in the first instance exacerbate the problems experienced by many of the children and youth?

As we see it, the role of social institutions such as the child welfare system is to support parents in the fulfillment of their parental responsibilities, as a principal means toward the goal of child protection. It needs to be asked whether the responsibilities of both social institutions and of parents themselves are being met by current child custody and foster care arrangements that entirely remove child care responsibilities from one or both of the child’s parents.

A “shared parental responsibility” framework, such as that piloted in Scotland as the “Share the Care” program in the 1980’s, in which parents remain as parenting partners in the care and control of their children, may be a more effective means of ensuring that children’s essential needs are met, and that family members remain in the picture. When child placement decisions are difficult to make, such an option may well prevent the need for “continuing care” orders, as parents remain involved as partners in the care of their children. Family reunification efforts may also be aided by the introduction of a shared parenting option, in which child placement in government care is offered as a respite care option, with children spending a roughly

equal proportion of their residential time with their parents and in government care. The challenges facing parents who are relegated to “visiting” their children in foster care, and the resultant high rates of parental disengagement, are thus avoided.

Fortunately, many child welfare agencies around the world are recognizing the need for major change and are implementing programs that prevent children from coming into foster care. Interventions that deal with prevention and family support appear in some circumstances to be a better alternative than interventions after the children are in foster care (Bowlby, 1988). Alternate dispute resolution, such as Family Group Conferencing (FGC) and Mediation, help families and social workers cooperate on plans for what is “in the child’s best interest”. In New Zealand, referral to FGC is mandatory, giving all families a chance to participate and be responsible for caring for their children. In planning for youth, FGC often lets youth take the lead in deciding who will attend the family meeting and they participate fully in decisions that are made about their future. Feedback from families who have participated in FGC is very positive. In a Swedish study involving 413 extended family participants, 86% favoured FGC as a method for finding solutions in child protection cases (Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004).

Two factors that influence attachment—continuity and stability—can be supported by a more humane child welfare system. This research shows that many youth care about their birth parents in spite of many moves, which suggests that children’s needs may be best served by supporting effective family preservation. Despite research challenges, if the child’s feelings of belonging and connection to “family” are related to decisions made by social workers, then more research needs to include the voices of children and youth.

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