

Lighting the Fire of Urgency...

Families Lost and Found in America's Child Welfare System

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Catholic Community Services of Western Washington's Family Preservation System set out to learn what it would take for children and youth with complex needs living in the foster care and children's mental health systems to have connections with those who cared most about them: parents, relatives, and others that loved them. The children and youth initially targeted by this effort were those who were living in foster or group care or at imminent risk of psychiatric hospitalization in Pierce County, Washington.

A key question

What sort of framework and technologies would be necessary to overcome the systemic barriers that block the ability for children and adolescents living in out-of-home care to maintain or re-establish contact and relationships with those that love them or could love them?

The Strategy

Look inside and outside of child welfare and children's mental health service traditions for examples of extraordinary frameworks that could improve safety, well being, and permanency outcomes for children in America's out-of-home care.

Some Extraordinary Frameworks

The International Red Cross

"Armed conflict and natural disaster leave millions of people around the globe in urgent need of humanitarian assistance every year. Adding to the physical losses, the confusion and chaos surrounding war and natural disaster often separates families just when they need each other most. Tragically, when families and loved ones are separated by war or disaster, their suffering is greater. But, through the strength of the Red Cross Movement and the work of trained volunteers at national societies around the world, including the American Red Cross, families reconnect." (Source: International Red Cross)

Imagine you are sent to the border of a country experiencing war, famine or disaster. One hundred and fifty thousand men, women and children of all ages are headed for the border to seek safety, food, water, shelter and medical care. You and your team have three days and nights to prepare the necessary provisions for these life-sustaining needs, or watch an even greater calamity

unfold before you. A completely overwhelming experience, yet every year in places around the world the International Red Cross responds to just such situations as do many other government and non government organizations.

There is no choice; it simply must be done. Because of this imperative, people just like you and me have developed frameworks, strategies, and tools to make it possible. Even more remarkable, given the scale and speed of the response, the Red Cross gives equal priority to providing personnel and equipment to interview those affected and store information about their relatives. This is done to help family members reconnect as soon as possible after the tragedy. The driving force is the understanding that the family's best chance for recovery lies with one another, in a situation where civil government may have limited ability to help.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) consider the family to be an essential source of joy and fulfillment as well as the cornerstone of civilization. The LDS church reaches out to parents with clever advertisements encouraging and reminding them to spend quality time with their children. Perhaps you have heard one of these ads on the radio,

- “There Are Lots of Little Reasons to Be a Good Example, and Someday They’ll All Be Big,”
- “Spend time with your family. It’s not such a tough assignment. In fact, you may discover it isn’t work at all.”
- “Invest in Bonds: Invest yourself in your family. The payoffs start now and continue through eternity,”
- “Family. Isn’t it About Time?”
- “Hey Mom and Dad, Don’t forget to do YOUR Homework.”

Without question, there is no greater influence than family on the development of a child’s self-concept and sense of identity. Members of the church are encouraged to keep journals documenting important events, accomplishments as well as adversity and challenges they have had to overcome. This information is not only valuable to those who document their personal history but it is also valuable to those descendants who may one day read this as part of their family history. Family histories link the present with the past and can provide numerous wonderful role models and other sources of strength and identity.

Throughout China’s five thousand years of continuous civilization they have maintained a respect and appreciation for their ancestors. Chinese genealogies typically contain a great deal of information extolling the virtues and abilities of ancestors and giving straightforward advice from them to their descendants. The readers gain a feeling for what is expected of them, what role their heritage has played in their capabilities, and the importance of their own lives upon generations yet to come.

Family ancestry is an important part of individual, family and spiritual life. Through the use of the church's extensive data-bases, search procedures and a world wide network of Family Resource Centers members of the church and others can work to extensively identify and document their family ancestry.

Through personal communication with church members, including members of the Ogden, Utah Department of Children and Family Services it is estimated that the average American has conservatively between 100-300 living relatives.

Several of those interviewed spoke of family gatherings in Ogden that filled small soccer stadiums.

The American Family

American families of all races and cultures stand out as tremendous examples of

According to the US Census Bureau 2000 Census

Of 71 Million Children in the US:

98% Grow up with Family
2% Foster Care Institutions

"In 1999, 2.3 million children, or 90 percent of children not living with their parents, lived with relatives, according to the 1999 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). The vast majority (1.8 million) of these placements were private, without child welfare involvement. Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) from 49 states (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) that were able to provide data, show that in 1999 kin were caring for 151,864 children in foster care, 26 percent of all foster care children (US DHHS 2001b)." (The Continuing Evolution of State Kinship Care Policies, Author(s): [Amy Jantz](#), [Rob Geen](#), [Roseana Bess](#), [Cynthia Andrews](#), [Victoria Russell](#))

Lessons from the Frameworks Reviewed

- It is possible to respond to the immediate crisis while preserving and expanding on information and connections that will enable the restoration of self-sufficiency.
- Barriers of time and distance can be overcome with a flexible and scaleable organizational design.
- Government interventions are temporary, limited in scope and are not intended to supplant the individual or family's ability to care for themselves.

- The typical American child living in out-of-home care has 100 to 300 living relatives.
- Technologies exist to extensively identify and document the relatives of children living in out of home care.
- The early identification of relatives, including non-custodial fathers and their extended family is possible.
- Relatives and others close to the family are willing to care for children when parents cannot.
- Families provide the most normative environment for child rearing in the United States.

Hundreds of Children Later

The children and adolescents Catholic Community Services of Western Washington served with these additions to our framework did indeed have parents, relatives, and others who loved them and were willing to get involved. Of 1000 searches for family members, we were only unable to locate the parent(s) and relatives for one.

The most effective strategy for locating parents and relatives was face to face interviews and child welfare record reviews. The average record reviewed contained information on 3 to 5 adult relatives.

Most records contained specific information only about those identified as having party status in the dependency matter. Records reflected social work practice heavily influenced by court proceedings and timeframes.

Upon contacting relatives most wanted to offer assistance of some kind. Many were willing to consider caring for the child or children, even when they had complex needs, if support and services were offered. The relatives located lived locally, in other states, and even abroad.

Why had the family not come forward before?

In many situations the children had been lost due to broken family connections, multiple placements in foster care, or multiple family moves. Some of the families feared system involvement or felt powerless to advocate for their children. In many instances family members did not know the children were in foster care or simply could not find their lost children.

Finding Family & Relatives

The initial phase of searching for relatives is simply for gathering information, not for finding placement. All possible family information should be obtained to maximize the number of possible connections, and provide the opportunity for concurrent planning. Information comes from a variety of sources: case files, relatives, social workers, and the child. During the search process it is important to consider all information as possibly relevant and without judgment. (Avoid assumptions based on very old or inaccurate historical data.) Parents, relatives and others are considered important sources of information during the search phase. Limiting interviews by premature considerations of placement resources can result in unsatisfactory search results.

Private agency personnel should inform key decision-makers as information comes forward. Initially information must be collected in a way that minimizes expectations about reunification.

The use of computer databases can be very helpful in some situations. However less than 10% of successful searches required use of Internet searches.

Why Family?

Famous Roots author, Alex Haley, once said: “*In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage—to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still ... an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness.*”

Children who are away from family are less likely to have a safe and stable place to live (50% percent of children placed have multiple placements (National Center for Policy Analysis, 2001).

Children and the systems who care for them simply cannot afford the costs and consequences of being raised in a system designed for temporary safeguarding, especially when they have a fit and willing relative who could love and care for them.

The children’s mental health system cannot treat the absence of committed loving adults in the life of a child with medication or therapy. Treatment to ameliorate behavior of children without the involvement of parents, relatives or others that love the children are not proven to be effective.

Children gain permanence, identity, and a true belief that they belong to a family. Belonging includes culture, traditions, languages, ancestry, stories, similar appearance and spiritual practices.

Many children who previously had no connection to their tribe were actually able to be enrolled and develop strong tribal connections and supports.

Once children know who they are and who cares about them we see improvement in behavior, ultimately increasing safety and stabilizing placement.

The search for, location of, and engagement of relatives is a basic social work practice that must be prioritized and acted on with a sense of urgency for every child entering systems that place children away from their families.

Reasonable efforts to provide services to the family must include a completed search that identifies and locates each available adult relative, their response to being contacted and what services they may need to provide a safe, loving and permanent connection or home for their family's lost child. A completed search also includes locating every sibling of the child, and supporting family connections for all.

Expanding Our Vision

Who is family?

Families are larger, healthier and more connected than we previously thought. Children and adolescents also often meet and connect with others, during their journey through the out-of-home care system who love them and will get involved if invited, supported, and included.

Time and Distance

In a sample of 120 children who received family search services from Catholic Community Service of Western Washington the average completed search required 39 staff hours,

- Searches ranged from one hour to 400 hours,
- 91% of searches were completed within Washington State,
- 9% required travel within the United States and its territories.

No child is too sick to have a family

Children and adolescents have a fundamental need for love and acceptance. Treatment and support for developmental disabilities, mental illness, and severe behavior challenges must be done in the context of loving and committed relationships. Every child has a family, and every child has strengths. No child should grow up in the out-of-home care system without loving connections.

Can this Happen Elsewhere?

Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children and Family Services worked together beginning in January 2003, to target 30 youth living in residential placements in Sacramento County for family search. All 30 youth exited residential care by June 30th, 2003. This was reported on at the Permanency Convening II hosted by the Stuart Foundation in San Francisco, CA April 2003.

Catholic Community Services and EMQ began a partnership to provide searches for 27 youth in residential care in Santa Clara County, California in June 2003. More than 220 relatives were located for eight of the youth in nine hours of work.

We cannot continue to fail to see clearly that a loving family connection is the primary need of every child an out-of-home care. Too often we excuse our failure by saying “ these children are resilient, they will be ok, at least we kept them safe...”

In the meantime tens of thousands of children and adolescents living in out-of-home care have family members gathering at reunions every year somewhere in the United States wondering what happened to their lost children.

We must redefine reasonable efforts and basic social work practice to include the extensive search and engagement of relatives.

Remember the Red Cross example, “there are 150,000 refugees coming to the border, they will be here in three days... people just like you and me will respond, there is no choice it simply must be done.” There are more than 550,000 children in the out-of-home care system in the United States, too many living without lifelong loving connections. Responsibility comes with knowledge, there is a family and they can be found. Now we must work from the first day of placement with a determined sense of urgency and purpose to find and engage the family, there is no choice it simply must be done.