

Foster Care: A Broken System That Has Hope

In 1853, modern day foster care was founded when a minister, Charles Loring Brace, used the railway to send homeless children west to predetermined families. This was known as the "Orphan Train Movement". Since then, the fostering system has seen many changes to its rules, laws, and regulations, but one thing has remained constant. The system does severe harm to many children who pass through it. Along with this, not only are there more children entering the system, but fewer families are willing to foster them. We must work to fix this essential part of care for millions of children and ensure that they are living their lives in a safe environment.

In the US, foster care has been around since colonization, stemming from the British Poor Law which allowed children to come to the area as indentured servants. Following the Orphan Train Movement, subsidization of the system started in the early 1900s, and involvement of social organizations began. Today, the process works differently. First, a report must be filed with CPS (Child Protection Services) about the family in question. CPS will then investigate the claim and decide if they will separate the family and their child; reasons for removal include abuse, neglect, and abandonment of the child by their guardian. If there are no qualified relatives to take the minor, they will then enter the foster care system, and be moved to a separate home. During the time period in which the child stays in the system, their guardian should work to resolve the problem that caused separation. After a year in the system, a permanency hearing, a court hearing in which eligibility of the guardian to take back custody of the minor is assessed, occurs. The hearing has three possible outcomes. Either the court decides to reunify the child and the guardian, the court feels it must continue to monitor the situation and another permanency hearing is held at a later date, or the court decides reunification is not possible. In the last case, the minor will qualify for adoption. Before a family is allowed to foster a child, they must complete studies and educational training. Once they are approved, the child is brought into their home. Here, the minor will live a somewhat normal life with their new family. A social worker will periodically check on the child to see how they are adjusting as well. The family will be equipped with free food and aid programs, along with a monthly subsidy to use for the minor's care. On the surface, the foster care system seems like a working process, but this is not the case. Children are often placed in homes that cannot provide them with proper support. For example, a 17 year old girl named Tenaja Jordan was kicked out of her home after coming out to her parents. Following this, she was placed within New York's child welfare system. The last thing she wanted was to live with guardians that were homophobic, and she expressed this clearly to her social worker, but in an interview with Mashable, she states "(my foster mom's) first words to me were 'Did any of those lesbians at the children's center hit on you?' They put me exactly where I didn't want to be". Children are also often put in group homes instead of with steady families. "We believe all kids who have to be removed from their families should be placed with other families," says Tracey Field, director of the Child Welfare Strategy Group at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "That's the most important criterion for placement -- or it should be". Many people say that there is a lack of focus on reunification as well. Not only are children separated from their guardian when they are put into the system, but siblings and other family members as well, who they may not see for years after.

Outside of the US, the foster care system is very different. UNICEF highlights this in their paper, "Supporting Foster Care in Eastern and Southern Africa". Within this document, there is information on the differences between kinship and foster care. "Foster care often involves NGO-run programs reaching a few hundred children at most. Generally, there are far more children in kinship or residential care than foster care" (UNICEF, 10). "There is cultural resistance to foster care in the region, and, as with any form of care, risk of abuse and violence if caregivers are not carefully selected and monitored" (UNICEF, 11). In comparison to the one million orphaned children in Rwanda, only about 2,000 were placed in a foster care program. By 2055, it is expected that Africa will reach a record-breaking child population of one billion. Many of them will be uncared for and will be provided with no government aid. Canada is regarded as having one of the best foster care systems in the world. Around 30,000 minors in the country live with a foster parent. Certification in Canada for families looking to foster is extensive. The process includes training, background checks, home visits, licensing, and more. Although the system is better, the concerns of past foster children are similar to those in the US, especially regarding those who have "aged out" of the system.

Improvement of the foster care system is critical for children on a global scale. So how do we go about fixing it? The innovative strategy I am proposing will have three parts to it. The first part will be raising money. Through donations, outside organizations, or the government, we must gather money to allocate towards two different purposes. The first of these purposes will be putting children back with their families. Not nearly enough time is spent on reunification, although it is universally agreed upon as the final goal for most foster children. If reunification is not an option, then our next purpose will be funding social firms, which will be key to getting children situated with suitable families. Cases of abuse are common in foster homes, and this isn't acceptable. It is unjustifiable that we are taking kids away from their families by telling them that they are unsafe, only to put them with strangers who are harming them as well. To stop this from happening, we would need to pay social workers a higher wage. In the US, social workers earn about 8k less than the mean national annual salary. Considering the difficult work they do, it is no wonder that there is a shortage of people in these jobs. Once more people are hired in these positions, they can work to ensure children are going to a home that will treat them well. The second part of this plan is to create foster care systems in developing nations. It is vital that we get these countries' children into stable homes. Despite there being almost 150 million orphaned children worldwide, only 2 million are currently in a residential care system, and this doesn't take into account the children whose parents are alive but unable to take care of them. We would build the system in these areas by promoting the idea of fostering through new outlets, social media, and rallies, and then spread information on how people can register as foster parents with their government. Once a working system is established, social services will be able to find children a stable home. The funding for this would come from the money we raised during the first part of the strategy. Finally, the last part of this plan is to work with people who were once in the foster care system. We would start by addressing the concerns they have already spoken about such as providing these children with a better education, aiding them with their mental health and trauma concerns, and providing resources for those who have aged out of the system. They can also help us with any other problems that arise by giving us their input and drawing from the experiences they have.

The foster care system has been broken for centuries. Since the days of indentured servitude till now when abuse and mistreatment run rampant, there have always been severe problems with the care of children coming from unstable homes. It is fair to wonder if resolving this issue is still possible; changing a long-standing problem has proven quite difficult in the past. But through the process I have explained, I believe that we can help give these kids a better childhood. And we must give these kids a better childhood, they are our future. After all, fostering may be temporary, but its impacts will last a lifetime.

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