



Three things we learned about foster care

The big takeaways from Crosscut's six-month-long series on Washington's foster care system.

By Mary Bruno

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Crosscut officially launched its Kids@Risk series on June 28, 2013 with writer Judy Lightfoot's story about the dissolution — after nine years — of the Braam Panel, the team of child welfare experts which was convened to oversee reforms to the state's foster care system. Well, here we are five months and some 25 stories later. What have we learned about foster care?

Lesson #1: Family matters

We can complain all we want about mom's nagging or dad's stupid jokes. Even when the problems kids face are a lot more serious, the fact is that being part of a family unit, a tribe, confers that most critical of all gifts: a sense of who we are and where we belong. Our family doesn't have to be perfect — what family is? — because it turns out that kids can absorb a good deal of dysfunction and still thrive. In fact, better a little dysfunction in their own home than the trauma of being dislocated to another, a realization that is changing how we administer foster care in several ways.

First, there is the embrace of Family Assessment Response. FAR, which launches next year in 12 sites around the state, provides the kind of support that keeps immediate families, even troubled ones, together. It used to be that a call to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) about suspected child abuse or neglect triggered an investigation which led, more often than not, to a tearful separation. With FAR, investigators from DSHS's Child Protective Services (CPS) still pursue all reports of sexual and severe physical abuse or neglect aggressively. But if assessment workers determine that the home situation isn't putting the child at undo risk, they toggle into help mode.

"FAR might provide a utility payment to families whose electricity has been shut off, or seek affordable housing for them if they can't pay the rent," says Jennifer Strus, the acting secretary of the state's Children's Administration. FAR will also help with job training, mental health treatment or coaching in better parenting techniques. The goal is to reduce the number of kids in foster care. That lightens the state's financial burden, but research has shown that, by keeping families together and supporting them, FAR-like programs also make kids safer in the present and more likely to succeed in the future.

Another shift in foster care is an emphasis on kin-care. If children do have to be removed from the home, placing them with relatives is best. To that end, caseworkers have 30 days to locate, screen and convene suitable family members who are willing and able to take the children in.

Kin-care works: Compared to kids placed with strangers, children who move in with relatives have a much better chance of keeping ties with their extended families, communities and schools. They also tend to stay put, which helps them avoid the trauma

of serial homes and the social stigma attached to being a “foster child.” Kin-care kids usually get reunited with their parents faster too.

Washington State is, proudly, in the vanguard of the kin-care movement. In fact, five times as many foster children in Washington (about 34,000) live with relatives as with strangers.

Finally, the state will pilot a related approach next year called The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM), which attempts to simulate the extended family and all its positive effects, to create that “village” Hillary Clinton so famously wrote about. MFM recruits foster parents from within a neighborhood as a way to approximate the feel and very real support of an extended family living close by.

Lesson #2: Kids need lawyers too

Imagine a 10-year-old boy with a six year old sister. Both are in foster care, but they don't live in the same home. They don't even live close by. All they want to do is be together, but the arcana of the law and the state bureaucracy stand in the way. A lawyer would be helpful. But whether these young siblings get one is a function of their age, the county they live in and the judge who catches their case. In short, it's a crap shoot.

King County appoints lawyers for kids 12 and up; Benton-Franklin county for kids eight and older; judges in some of the state's counties not at all. Washington ranks close to last in the nation when it comes to providing legal representation for children whose parents' rights have been terminated. Upfront cost (of the lawyers) is the excuse most often cited by Olympia lawmakers for the failure to correct this oversight.

Of course, our 10-year-old could always find and retain an attorney on his own. Though, the thought of a 10-year-old filling out and filing all that paperwork, said Columbia Legal Services attorney and child advocate Casey Trupin, “stretches the bounds of my imagination.”

Lesson #3: All you need is love

Neuroscience research has now shown that John Lennon's simple aphorism was dead on: Being loved, cared about and cared for as an infant actually stimulates the kind of neural connections that help children regulate their emotions and develop decision-making, long-term planning and other high-level skills.

The quality of our earliest relationships is critical to our later success in life, says Sue Spieker, professor in the University of Washington's department of Family and Child Nursing and director of the Barnard Center for Infant Mental Health & Development. “When that wiring doesn't happen, the child is at a great disadvantage for the rest of their lives.”

Neural “wiring” occurs with each parent-child exchange. Infants learn how to get what they need from mom (or dad) in the very first year of life. The relationship falls into a “pattern,” which the child internalizes. Secure patterns result when mom or dad or someone responds to the baby's needs, comforting them when they're distressed. “Emotional availability of a caregiver is essential for that to happen,” says Spieker. When caregivers aren't emotionally available, maybe because they're too tired or too stressed, children suffer degrees of trauma. “The child develops adaptations,” says Spieker. “But those adaptations have costs.” Emotional, psychological, even physical.

“There's always a cost for that early trauma,” says Spieker. Some adaptations, like self-reliance or an ability to approach the world less emotionally, can be advantageous. Others, such as a shorter life span or vulnerability to depression and anxiety, not so much.

On the flip side, a nurturing relationship can save a child. “It's not just any relationship,” cautions Spieker, “but the ones in which you feel known and understood for yourself.”

Those close relationships are very rare, very special, precious for a foster child who has issues with trust.”

The right kind of love can be the antidote to poverty, abuse and neglect. That’s why Spieker is a fan of home visits, especially the kind that focus on cultivating the relationship between parent and child. “We’re wired to nurture,” she says. Proximity to an infant stimulates the release of oxytocin, the attachment hormone. That wiring “can get tangled,” says Spieker, if our own parenting was less than secure. But it can be untangled too.

These were the big takeaways from our six months of reporting on at-risk/foster kids. You’ll find many more stories and people and issues in our Kids@Risk archive. And we’re not stopping. We’ll keep following foster care, and in January branch out into another at-risk category: homeless youth. We hope you’ll come along.

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