

Rise empowers parents involved with the child welfare system to tell their stories. Rise magazine provides peer-support and information to parents and educates child welfare professionals about parent perspectives.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 11, FALL 2008

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Healing Ourselves for Our Children

Parents who were abused or neglected as children, or grew up in foster care, face challenges creating safe and stable family lives. But it is possible to heal from childhood trauma and become a stronger parent.

In this issue, parents write about breaking destructive family patterns—and working to prevent foster care placement in their communities—with support from loved ones, therapy, community organizations and effective services.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAMELA HUGHES

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Building a Foundation

I'm giving my kids the love I never had.

BY PAMELA HUGHES

When I was a little girl, my siblings and I went from group homes to foster homes, from one grandmother's house to the other grandmother's house, due to our parents' drug use.

Some people might think that, growing up in the foster care system for half my life, I wouldn't let my children go through the same experiences. Not so. I have five children and—I'm not proud to say this—all five children eventually wound up in foster care too.

Having five children in the system is very depressing for me. But I'm in a treatment program and I feel confident that I will reunify with my two youngest children very soon. I am determined to succeed.

I want to break the cycle. I will not die from drugs like my mother did. I will build the foundation that was missing in my childhood and help my

children grow up feeling cared about and loved.

On My Own

Moving from home to home as a child, I felt that no one cared about me, especially my mother and father:

I felt unwanted, and this made me feel like no one could like me. I remember being in gym class in the 8th grade. Every day, I sat in that same corner. The other girls would go to the locker room and get dressed but not me. I wouldn't play. The gym teacher did nothing to break me out of that corner. As I am writing this story, remembering those times, I am feeling a little lonely.

As a teenager, I started staying out until 2 a.m., smoking marijuana and sleeping with boys. Sleeping around made me feel wanted. My grandmother called me a ho. She would always say, "You're going to be just

like your mother." One day my grandmother hit me with a two-by-four and I hit her back with my hand. That is when she called the agency to take me once again to a group home.

My grandmother rode with me up to a group home where I stayed for four years. As we rode down the highway, my grandmother told me, "I'm sending you upstate for your own good." I felt so alone and unwanted.

Looking for a Connection

In the group home, I started drinking and smoking weed more often. When I was high my loneliness and depression went away for a moment.

Looking for love also wound me up in violent situations with men, and the violence sent me further into my drug addiction.

At 16, I left the group home to live with an older man who I wound up

marrying. At first I was holding down a 9 to 5 and also going to the clubs and getting drunk on the weekends. But as time went on, our drinking led us to lose our jobs. My husband started stealing, got caught, and the judge slapped him with a long sentence.

I thought I would die. I was so scared. All I knew was this man. Soon I started hanging out with a negative crowd and, when I was 19, I was introduced to crack. I didn't know the impact it would have on me.

Repeating the Pattern

I got pregnant with my first son when I was 23, after I met a big drug dealer who supplied me with crack. I had my son because I was lonely. But he was born positive tox and was taken from me from me right from the hospital. Eventually he got lost in the system. To this day all I know is that he is 21 years old.

Five years later I had a son and a daughter who were also taken at birth and were adopted by their aunt. They are now 17 and 13. At that time, their father used to beat me for breakfast, lunch and dinner. He took my money, my dignity and respect. I just kept on drugging.

One Program to the Next

Drug use completely took over my life. I almost died from drugs and yet continued to use. Using landed me in prison for three years. There I kept asking myself, "What is wrong with me that I can't stop using drugs? Why am I in these abusive relationships, thinking about a man before myself or my children?" I also thought about how my family didn't care for me. Those thoughts put me into a deeper and deeper depression.

After I left prison, I went from one program to the next. I kept trying to get clean because I'm a very determined person. But the negative people had too big a grip on me, and I kept them in my life.

Clean and Proud

Finally when I was 37, I went into a shelter when I was pregnant and I got clean. I had my youngest son, and two years later, I gave birth to my



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAMELA HUGHES

youngest daughter. My last two children I took home with me from the hospital. I was proud of myself.

I relapsed once, when my son was four months old, and I found out his father was cheating on me. But I straightened out, and after that, I worked hard to be a good mother and to stay clean.

I went to an outpatient program, I got a two-bedroom apartment, and I went to an employment program and landed a job with the Board of Education. After four months, I was promoted to a private secretary. I was climbing the ladder fast. I even started to go to school to get my GED.

I also decided that trying to find the right man was too much drama. I felt good being a single mother to my children. Every Saturday we went to Jamaica Avenue and shopped. I treated the kids to McDonald's and I ate pizza. At home, they liked to jump on my bed and bother each other.

After school, they loved to watch *Madagascar*. I still love to watch *Madagascar* because it reminds me of being home with my children. I'd cook dinner while they watched, then I'd iron their clothes and go to bed. It was just us three having fun.

Losing Hope

But after four years of being a good mom, I returned to using drugs.

I was working far from where I

lived, and my school was far away in the other direction. I began feeling depressed and stressed out being a single parent of a 2 and 3 year old. That last straw was that the program that was helping me pay my bills ended, so I had to pay \$1200 a month for rent on my own. Soon I was backed up on my rent.

I started hanging out with old friends and drinking every weekend. Then I lost my home, and I started drinking even more. Then I turned back to drugs. Eventually, I lost my children.

Out on the Streets

For a while after I lost them, I gave

up on life. I was out on the streets. Finally, though, I went to a women's shelter and told the social worker there that I wanted to get clean but couldn't. They sent me to an out patient rehab program, but I still couldn't stay clean. I set myself back so many times.

Finally, I came to a residential program, VIP Women's Services, on Sept. 2, 2007. I relapsed for one month on New Year's Eve after I went to see my son and daughter and grew depressed. But I returned to the program, and since February 25, 2008, I have been clean.

Getting Help

This is the best program I have ever attended. In therapy I realized that since I had no solid emotional foundation in my life, and no secure feeling of being loved or of belonging, whenever things became hard, I became depressed and turned to drugs.

I also started to see a psychiatrist. I had always said, "I don't need pills." But I knew I was falling into depression again and would relapse. So he put me on an anti-depressant medication. Soon I could feel a difference. Now, when I get stressed about my children, I am better able to stay focused on getting my life

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back together and child welfare out of our lives.

I am also taking anger management and parenting skills classes, and doing an internship at a nursing home as an administrative assistant. Plus I am studying for my GED. Every time I take it I fail the math but I've been studying math for seven months now and feel like I am ready to pass the test this time.

I know I made bad mistakes but I am a good person. I will not forget about keeping the faith with God, who continued to carry me the whole time.

I don't think just about myself anymore. Now I think about my children, my family, the people that

suffer when I relapse. I know I cannot wallow in self-pity anymore. I am too old for that. I am confident that I will make it.

I Want to Break the Cycle

I feel sad that all my children are separated. They do not even know one another.

But I am searching for my 21 year old, and I will speak to my middle children soon. I hope to explain to them the trials and tribulations that

I and their grandparents have been through. I do not want them to turn out like me and my parents: addicts. I want them to grow up to love themselves and their children.

Determined to Succeed

I am close to reunifying with my youngest children. I face a lot of challenges as a parent. The biggest challenge I face is with myself. Still, I go to visit my youngest children every week, and I have overnights with my son. They are so happy to see me.

I had no secure feeling of being loved so whenever things became hard, I became depressed and turned to drugs.

On overnights, my son and I, go to movies and out to eat. We play videogames and I take him to the park. We stay at my aunt's house or spend time with my brother. We talk. My son talks like he's 20 years old.

I ask him, "How do you feel about coming home?" He tells me, "Mommy, I want to live with you, because I don't want nobody to hurt you, man or woman. I'm going to be your bodyguard."

Once he told me, "You're the best Mommy in the world because you give me hugs, kisses and gifts." That's what keeps me motivated—knowing my kids love me and depend on me.

Fragile Families

Child welfare must offer support without judgment.

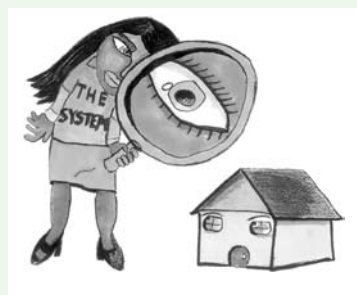


ILLUSTRATION BY JOSHUA HECTOR

Parents who were abused or neglected, or grew up in foster care as children, face practical and emotional barriers to creating safe, stable homes for their children. Susan Kelly, a senior director of strategic consulting with Casey Family Programs in Seattle, explains how the child welfare system must change the support it provides to fragile parents and families.

In general, we don't do a very good job in the United States providing systems of care that really focus on helping families achieve long-term stability and safety. Many European countries have a safety net for children and families that we don't have in the United States. In these countries, parents are encouraged to take time off to take care of a baby. They are paid for the time off and they

are guaranteed not to lose their jobs when they return. Families are also entitled to visit a pediatrician to learn about caring for a baby.

The Blame Game

In America, middle-class and wealthy parents are able to pay for the help their families need. They pay for services like therapy, drug treatment, babysitting and pediatrician visits to check on the baby's development.

They don't face the stress of living in dangerous neighborhoods or raising a child in a shelter.

That's why it's no accident that many of the families that we focus on in child welfare are headed by poor women. If you are homeless and struggling to find food for your family, and you don't have job, and you live in a tough neighborhood, then you're a parent under stress, and you may

not always feel capable of responding to your child's needs. You may fear reaching out for support with raising your children because asking for government help could lead you to be reported to the child welfare system.

When poor parents are struggling, we judge them, as if they could thrive despite problems like poverty, poor housing and inadequate medical care.

Preventing Generations in Care

Young people who leave the foster care system and become parents face many practical barriers.

In Detroit, a study by Wayne State University found that within the first few years of aging out of foster care, 47% of young people experienced a period of homelessness, and their average income was \$500 a month. That indicates that the foster care system has not prepared them very well for adulthood.

When we take children into foster care, we promise to give them a safer life than they would live with their biological family. But if we do not help them find long-term sources of stability and support, then it's not any surprise that some have their own children who they abuse or neglect.

One positive step we've taken in this country is to pass a new foster care bill that allows young people in all states to stay in foster care

until 21, instead of being forced to leave at 18. The bill provides incentives for improving young people's education, mental health and employment after leaving care.

This bill is about making sure that young people have adequate skills and support when they leave foster care, which will help to reduce the cycle of foster care placement from generation to generation.

—Susan Kelly

It Takes a Neighborhood

I'm working to break the cycle of foster care for my community.

BY CARLOS BOYET

In the 1980s and '90s when I was a kid, they used to say the South Bronx was on fire, and growing up here was very hard. There were a lot of gangs and people robbing people. In high school I used to run from school to the bus so that I wouldn't get beat up.

Things are still hard in my neighborhood. I live in the Highbridge section of the South Bronx and my community has the largest number of children being placed into foster care in New York City.

Family Stress

I know about the stresses that living in a community like mine can put on a family because I had my own child placed in foster care.

I also know that when we talk about breaking the cycle of children going into foster care, we need to help people deal with stresses due to poverty, lack of education and institutional racism, because those stresses affect how we parent every single day.

For the past three years, I have been a parent organizer for a grass-roots organization called the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP). My job is to help parents like myself navigate the child welfare system, which is a system that may or may not respect your rights as a parent, and may or may not provide you with the information you need to know your rights. My job is to help my whole neighborhood break its cycle of foster care placement.

Stretching Chump Change

Like many kids today, when I was little it was just my moms raising me. She ran away from Puerto Rico when she was 14, and when she arrived here at 15, she had no educa-

tion, no nothing.

A lot of times our public assistance case didn't help because if she missed an appointment because she didn't have money to pay a babysitter, her case would be closed and we'd have to survive on our own.

As soon as I hit 15 I left home and went to live with a friend in

stretch only \$56 a week to provide for the whole family.

Life Feels Like a Trap

I see a lot of the same stresses on the families I work with as a parent organizer. A lot of people are stuck in Mickey D jobs. People are living so below the poverty line that they can't afford to go college to improve their situation. They don't have the

lies are living on beer income.

Parents don't know what type of discipline would bring their kids back to reality. When kids decide not to go to school, their parents can't follow them and make sure they're going because they have to go to work. For a lot of parents, life winds up feeling like a trap.

A lot of families could use some help, but they're afraid to reach out to child welfare, because child welfare officials might come to the house and see that there's no food in the fridge and remove the kids. Parents in poverty are afraid that if they call child welfare, they'll be putting their families in even greater jeopardy.

Reaching Out for Help

That's where CWOP comes in. We've been in this community for five years and parents have learned that they can turn to us.

About half of my cases are about helping parents meet their basic needs. We use flex funds to help parents pay a portion of their rent or their light bill, buy clothes or furniture. Sometimes just that little bit is enough to get a parent back on track.

If the child welfare system wants to break the cycle of foster care, they need to figure out a way to support families that doesn't leave parents scared to reach out for basic help.

The other part of my job is to help parents navigate the child welfare system once they're already involved in it. What I consider unique about CWOP is that it takes its time to train parents like me who have overcome the child welfare system and gotten their children returned to them. I think if we want to break the cycle of foster care, we need more



ILLUSTRATION BY KATE MARTIN AND FRANK MALCOLM

The child welfare system needs to figure out a way to support families that doesn't leave parents scared to reach out for basic help.

Connecticut. There I saw a whole different way of life. I said, "Damn, Tom, you got it good. Your mom supports you in whatever you do."

I wondered, "Why my moms couldn't be supportive like that?" But then Tom's mom didn't have to

money to pay the rent every month, and sometimes they get their lights cut off.

On top of that their kids are surrounded by hip-hop values, 50 Cent and Ferraris, and they develop champagne tastes even though their fami-

'Your History Is Not Destiny'

Most parents who were abused do not harm their kids.

people from the community who can bridge the divide between parents and the child welfare system.

Breaking the Cycle

Here in Highbridge, CWOP has a good relationship with the child welfare field office. When we think a parent is being treated unfairly, we can bring the problem up to them and feel that there's some hope of having the problem resolved. Still, some agencies that the city employs are not so good, and some employees aren't either.

I am working with a mom and we have shown that her agency made false reports about her. I called the city's Office of Advocacy and I was told that the city realizes that there is a problem with this agency and that something will be done about it. But in the meantime, the parent is going crazy. She's in here every day crying, and I say, "It's great that something is going to be done, but when is it going to happen? When can this parent begin to pick up the pieces?"

Tough Calls

In the years that I've been doing this job, I've called child welfare on a parent three times. I didn't feel proud of myself but I also felt that the child needed to be elsewhere.

More often, though, I feel pissed off that the child welfare system isn't doing more to help parents deal with the stresses in their lives so that there can be less violence in our community and so our kids can stay at home.

We need to figure out how to change the face of child welfare so that it's about the whole community supporting each other. I believe that's the only way we can stop having our children go into foster care generation after generation. Organizations like CWOP are a good start.

Although people often talk about "breaking the cycle of abuse," studies show that most parents who were physically abused as children do not grow up to physically abuse their children, says Katherine Pears, a research scientist at the Oregon Social Learning Center. Here she explains the research on abuse and parenting:

That's a notion in people's heads that if you haven't had a good model of parenting, you're unlikely to become a good parent yourself.

But studies that have been going on for 20 years have looked at parents who were physically abused and how they care for their children, and most find that only 20-30 percent of people who were physically abused as children go on to be abusive. That means that at least 70 percent don't go on to be abusive.

A history of abuse is not destiny. It doesn't mean that you will grow up to have difficulties as a parent. There's a lot of room for hope.

Make a Rule a Rule

In my research, I found that one key to whether parents were physically abusive or not had to do with whether the parent was consistent in enforcing rules. I studied boys who had parents that had been abused, and found the parents who were inconsistent were more likely to be abusive.

Many parents find it difficult to remain consistent, but it's essential to be consistent as a parent. If something is a rule on Monday, but not on Tuesday, kids learn from that that they don't really have to mind what the parent says. Then, if the kid is not listening to the parent—well, that's annoying! The parent



ILLUSTRATION BY TERENCE TAYLOR

together? Do you need a few minutes to cool off, or does your child? If you feel more positive, it's easier to be consistent about setting limits.

We also teach parents to take small steps. Say you want your child to put his backpack and lunchbox away when he comes home from school. We suggest taking small steps—first working with him on hanging up his backpack. Then, when he's doing well with his backpack, showing him

how to put his lunchbox away.

gets irritated.

If the parent backs off, that encourages the kid to be more negative next time, and that starts a negative cycle. The parent and child begin one-upping the other, hoping the other will back off, but sometimes the parent gets very angry and responds with aggression or abuse.

Consistent parenting keeps these negative cycles from developing. If a rule is a rule, and the child has to mind what the parent says all of the time, you nip that cycle in the bud.

Praise Your Child

We also know that one key to successful parenting is positive reinforcement. If you can catch your child doing something good, and praise your child for what he does well, then everyone feels better.

We ask parents, "What is your child doing well?" Even if it's just putting a plate on the counter without banging it, then you can say, "I

Parents who are inconsistent are more likely to be abusive but all parents can learn to be effective parents.

Take Steps to Avoid Triggers

The hopeful message is that parents can learn techniques to stop the cycle. We teach the parent to be consistent and to use tools for reducing tension.

We teach parents to recognize triggers to negative interactions. If you tend to get in fights right after school, maybe you need a routine that will help you feel more positive. Can you have a snack

noticed how you put your plate on the counter without banging!" If kids feel recognized for the things they do well, they are more willing to accept limits.

Programs that teach parents to set consistent limits, reduce triggers, and be positive with their children do help parents stop abusive patterns. Nobody is a lost cause. All parents can learn to be effective parents.

Calling For Help

I reached out for support to become a calmer mother.

BY MAYA NOY

Here is my shameful confession: I'm a screamer. I was worse when my daughter was first born. Mostly I screamed at my boyfriend when I was frustrated. And I was frustrated a lot.

I screamed because I was in pain, screamed because I couldn't figure out how to breastfeed. I screamed because I felt like my boyfriend wasn't there for me. I screamed because I was tired, hungry, hot, cold, and mostly because Jaiya would not stop crying (so it seemed).

Important to Nobody

I didn't think my behavior really mattered. For so long, I was just going through life thinking no one cared about me and I didn't have to care about myself. I never felt connected to my parents growing up, and when I was teenager, my mother placed me in foster care for a few years. Those experiences left me feeling unwanted and disconnected.



As an adult, I went to work and came home, and even though I lived with Jaiya's father for years, I still felt as if I existed to no one. Forcing myself to become who I really wanted to be seemed pointless.

But I wasn't aware that my daughter would grow up to mimic nearly every little thing I did! About two years ago, when Jaiya was almost 2, it started to

be clear to me how much of an impact I have on her.

Just like Mommy!

Jaiya would do little things that were obviously stolen from me. I am a cleanaholic, always wiping something up. At a very young age, there she was, grabbing a baby wipe and wiping away. She did highchairs, walls, sheets, anything she could reach!

Then I started to notice that Jaiya would scream at her dad when she was frustrated. At first, it was funny because I didn't recognize that it was a fault of mine that she had learned. Then it sank in, and I felt very ashamed.

Now that I see that my daughter is a "quicker picker upper," as I think most children are, I am very aware of how I behave. I feel pressure to do the right thing even when I'm angry or upset. I realize that I'm Jaiya's role model, so I have to become the person I want my daughter to grow

up to be: Confident successful, and happy with myself. What I do, say and feel affects how she acts and how she feels inside.

Trying to Adjust

Of course, I can't simply become Ms. Perfect. But I have been working hard to show my daughter love and rein in my anger.

I have trained myself to say and do all kinds of things that I don't think my mother did for me. I started with saying "I love you," then moved on to "Great job!" "That's fantastic!" and other encouraging statements that feel unfamiliar on my tongue.

At times when I've been upset with Jaiya and needed help to calm down, I have called crisis hotlines and even my mother, of all people. Normally I wouldn't have dared talk to a stranger about anything, let alone what goes on in my personal life, but I felt so out of control and desperate when I made those calls. I would cry and beg for help. I just wanted

'Can I Do This?'

Support services helped me prepare for motherhood.

BY ERICA HARRIGAN

When I found out I was expecting, I didn't feel like I was mentally ready to care for a baby. I had just aged out of foster care and was only beginning to learn how to handle life without the system.

I also have a mood disorder and I wasn't taking my medication on a regular basis. I'd seen stories on the news about mentally ill mothers harming their children and I was afraid that I might end up on the news too.

Information and Skills

My boyfriend, Michael, and I both grew up in foster care. We hoped to give our baby all the things we longed for—a stable home and a loving mother and father to guide her and help her with whatever she might need. So during my pregnancy, I took many steps to set up a safe home for our child.

I got a referral to speak with a therapist who is experienced in supporting mothers. She talked with me

about how to build the connection between mother and child. She said that breastfeeding is the best way to bond. I thought, "She is crazy!" I thought breastfeeding was gross until I learned that breast milk is the best milk for a baby.

I also started attending parenting classes and support groups for first-time mothers. I learned mother-to-be tools, like how to bathe a baby, create bedtime routines and set feeding times. I was glad to be armed with

the knowledge.

Serious Support

As I hit the sixth month of my pregnancy, I began to catch overwhelming ups and downs. I tend to melt down when things don't go as planned. At those times, walked myself to the psych ER. I was losing my mind slowly. After about five hospital visits in a month, the doctors suggested I seek more treatment.

I talked it over with the hospital's

an answer to one question: "What should I do?"

Really, I wanted someone to step in and take over my life, but that wasn't very realistic. It helped, though, to have sounding boards. Sometimes I just need to stop and think, "She is just a baby! What do I expect?"

Handling Our Tantrums

I'm also learning to handle Jaiya's tantrums better. I used to get flustered and frustrated, grabbing Jaiya's arm and leading her out of a store if she misbehaved. She would exaggerately yell, "Why did you do that?" Then I would be embarrassed and let go, giving her control of the situation.

As time went on, I reminded myself that I was the parent and I was in control. I also learned to talk to her before going into a store, explaining that she would need to behave or there would be consequences.

I'm not sure if my daughter's behavior changed on its own or my responses helped her calm down, but I know she has calmed down and so have I. Now, when she has a tantrum, it is usually short and not as serious. I talk to her calmly about what is going on, or I simply change the subject.

If I start getting upset, I take a "time

out" instead of pushing through bad feelings and becoming angrier and nastier toward my child. Then, when I'm calmer, we start again.

'Mommy's Sorry'

Although I'm proud of what I've done to change my relationship with Jaiya, sometimes I worry that the damage is already done. I have it stuck in my head that children are most impressionable until age 3, and I feel that during her first three years of

What I do, say and feel affects how my daughter acts and how she feels inside. Now I am very aware of how I behave.

life she saw me at my worst. Is that how she will always remember me?

It's a real struggle to feel good about myself as a parent. On most days, I'm not sure if I've done my best, and on other days, I think, "This is my best," and feel sorry for both myself and my daughter.

When I do end up having outbursts, and I do something wrong or bad, I feel tremendous guilt. I tell myself, "I shouldn't have yelled or gotten angry. I could have handled things better."

But at least I am trying to teach myself to apologize to Jaiya when I misbehave.

Resentful and Confused

Sometimes I am also resentful of how much I need to change and control myself. I don't like feeling that I have to watch my every move. I just want to be me, despite fearing that the real me could possibly scar my daughter for life!

I wonder how to balance the "real" me with being a "good" mom. I don't want to act out of control around Jaiya, but I do want her to know I am human and have feelings. My mother did not show us her feelings, aside from her anger. I fear that my daughter will see me as a robot, and that things between us will be smooth but we won't be connected.

There are still many days that I think to myself, "I don't want to do this anymore. I quit." But I won't turn my back on Jaiya, or give up on changing

myself. I won't do what my mother did to me.

A Friend to Myself

There are rare moments when I feel confident and proud. Jaiya is bright, observant and sweet. She loves people (I have no idea where she got that from!) and she loves to read and draw and watch movies. I love spending time with Jaiya. We take walks, go to the library, go to the park, color, read books—all that fun stuff!

Parent-teacher meetings really help me see that I'm doing OK as a mother. The teachers always have fabulous things to say about Jaiya and I can't help feeling that I had a little something to do with her achievements.

I know the steps I've taken to nurture Jaiya are helping me to be a better person. I feel more protective, loving, concerned and confident. I have learned to be a mother, a teacher, a provider—an adult.

It took a helpless little baby to help me grow up. I'm proud that I've realized how much Jaiya needed me. I've learned to be two new people: A mother to Jaiya and a friend to myself.

social worker, and she suggested I sign up for day treatment. I had my doubts, but I agreed to take a three-day trial. I found out that I felt safe and secure there. In the morning I had 45 minutes of counseling with a therapist I came to adore, and after that I had groups. I learned more about coping when things don't go my way.

Usually I don't stick with treatment because I don't think it will work, or I find it overwhelming. My therapists are mostly interns and I get a new one just as I begin to trust the one I had. But this time, I found that my treatment program felt like a family and I love to be in a family setting.

Baby Blues

When my baby girl, Emmanuella, came into this world, I loved her from holding her the very first time. That day, Emma made me feel like the happiest person on this earth.

Still, the first few weeks after we came home from the hospital, I felt distant and overwhelmed. I was afraid of the tasks of motherhood. Bathing Emma was scary to me, and I was confused about what size diaper to put on her and how often to change her. I didn't want to hold her because I feared I'd drop her.

But I soon learned what the therapist meant by bonding with the baby



did so much work to get myself set up to be a mother.

It's been challenging for me to care for a baby that needs so much love and attention from me. Many times I feel I need mothering because I didn't have much love or attention growing up. But I've been dealing with it by talking with my therapist. I've found that the more I show love and attention to my baby, the more I feel loved.

through breastfeeding. Our special connection gave me a good feeling.

A Loving Mother

Now that Emma is 7 months old, I've learned that so much about motherhood can't be taught, but I'm glad I

I worry that if I slip up, Children's Services will come knocking at my door. But I also feel more confident that Emma won't end up growing up like me, habitually feeling starved for attention. I am slowly becoming the kind of mother I longed for.

Do Over

Changing as a parent takes courage and practice.

BY YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

Most parents like me want their children to have an easy, decent life as far removed from what we ourselves experienced as possible. We want to be good parents, but sometimes it can be very difficult to know how if you grew up in foster care or in a home where you experienced abuse or neglect.

Losing my children to the system made me realize that I had a lot to overcome from my past and a lot to change about my ways of thinking as a parent.

*So, how do you become a terrific parent even if you didn't have one? That's a very good question. It's also the subtitle of *The Whole Parent* by therapist Debra Wessellmann. Her book helped me think about new ways to overcome my feelings of inadequacy so that I can change my life and my children's lives for the better. Here is her advice to parents:*

It is a challenge to know how to give your child a secure nurturing environment if you grew up in the foster care system, especially if, like many children in care, you were shuttled between foster families or went back and forth between foster care and your birth home many times.

'Am I Good Enough?'

A person in that situation grows up not really having an idea what a healthy family life should look like, and often has lots of self-doubts like, "Why me? Why didn't my parents love me? Why didn't another family love me? Was I unlovable?" In truth, the system and the adults in our lives have let us down.

Experiences that lead you to doubt

your self-worth can leave you feeling like you're not good enough when you start raising your own families. Sometimes the anger and pain on our children's faces during difficult moment just triggers all the shame and guilt and "I'm not good enough" feelings that parents feel inside.

One mother I worked with had a lot of traumatic experiences growing up. Her own mother died of alcoholism. Still, she has successfully raised three nice children. It's amazing what she's done, despite feeling at times that she wasn't good enough or lovable.

This mom found a good mate, a good supportive church environment, and supportive friends. She looked to other people who she admired as parents and tried to emulate them. So becoming a good parent even when you have grown up in foster care definitely can be done, but it's important to be conscious of the challenges you face and stay motivated.

Parents can recognize how past traumas are affecting them, and make changes so their children will grow up safe and secure.

Changing Angry Reactions

Another challenge for parents who had negative experiences as children is that early experiences are lodged in the emotional part of the brain, which creates responses that feel so automatic that your actions may not feel like something you can consciously control.

When parents respond to various things that their children do with



ILLUSTRATION BY DAYTON TOWN

negative responses that feel extreme and out of sync with how they want to treat their children, it's often very difficult for them to understand why they respond the way they do. But you can change those automatic responses with a lot of effort.

For example, I worked with a mom who was having strong angry reactions. In therapy, the mom realized that when her son was doing some typical teenage things, like rolling his

were not rejections, and she was able to deal with those feelings of hurt related to her upbringing.

Common Misperceptions

In *The Whole Parent* I talk about a number of other common parental misperceptions that relate to negative childhood experiences—like, "my child is invading me," or "my child is abusive," or "I have to have complete control for my child to be safe."

I worked with a father who was having strong rage reactions when his 7 year old would embarrass him in public. His immediate reaction was, "What are people thinking of me? They're thinking I'm a bad father and a terrible person," and he just wanted to kill his son. But as he worked through those feelings with me, he realized that growing up with an alcoholic father had left him feeling very insecure about the way people were looking at him, and this trauma was being tapped into.

That's not to say that we don't all feel embarrassed when our children act out in public, but we're being irrational if we begin to think, "I'm a bad person," or "People think I'm a bad person" and take those feelings out on the child, because every parent has had embarrassing incidents in public.

A Chance to Heal

The good news is that, when you realize the ways you're thinking and acting might be hurting you and your child, and you consciously set out to change your thoughts and behaviors, you can break those negative patterns. You can give your children much more positive feelings about themselves than you might have had.

One technique is to write out our

Breaking a Painful Pattern

My children won't grow up silenced and afraid.

BY MILAGROS SANCHEZ

irrational thoughts and feelings and then practice having different thoughts and feelings. The mother who felt rejected by her teenage son could write herself a little reminder card with her irrational feeling at the top: "My child is rejecting me." Undereath it she might write: "This is not true. All teenagers sometimes act like they don't have respect for their parents. I'm getting him confused with my mom. He's really not my mom. I love him and he loves me." And she could carry that reminder card with her and read it over and over until it really sinks in.

I often have people do writing exercises, such as writing down their irrational beliefs on one side of the paper, like, "My child is abusive" and writing down on other side some rational, logical responses they could have when those feelings come up.

Finding Support

You can also break negative patterns by getting help from a good support network. Whether you attend a support group or speak to a therapist, religious leader, a loving mate, or a supportive group of friends, you need people who you can talk to openly and honestly.

You can also find another parent who you admire who you can really talk to, and you can read books about the effects of trauma on parenting. Whatever way you choose, it's important to sort out how your past might be affecting the way you feel as a parent and take steps to change your thinking and behavior.

Working on your own childhood issues takes tremendous courage. It's a lot easier to try not to think about what you went through. It's painful to look back on abuse or neglect you faced as a child, but if you don't, your parenting will not get better. Parents can face the traumas of the past, recognize how those experiences are affecting them as parents, and make changes so their children will grow up safe and secure.

On Aug. 4, 1997, I got my sons back after they'd been in foster care and I'd been out on the streets for many years. I felt that God had given me a second chance to be a best mom.

I was determined to be different toward my sons than my mother had been toward me. My mother resorted to violence whenever she was upset with me, and she didn't believe me when I told her I was being sexually abused. When I was a teenager, she put me in a group home, where I was sexually abused again. She never once came to visit.

I felt very alone, angry and abandoned. I grew up, but the depression I'd felt since my childhood did not leave me.

Opening Up to Mom

In my early 20s, I began using crack. Crack gave me a sense of security, a sense of time freezing so I didn't have to think, cry and feel all alone. Slowly but surely I lost everything: first my children (who went to stay with my mom), then my job and my apartment. After that I lost my self-respect and self-esteem.

Finally, I went to rehab, and there started talking about my feelings, even to my mother.

My mom was very closed at the beginning. There was a lot of shouting and screaming, but one day she said to me, "I know I have not been the best person or mother to you. But I'm sorry for not being there for you. I love you." I know that was very difficult for her.

As we talked more, our relationship improved. I found out that this pattern of not speaking and physical abuse was passed down from my great-grandmother to my grandmother to my mother and to

my sisters and me.

I told myself, "I will make it my business to change that pattern when I get my life together." It wasn't easy, but I did.

Honest Answers

In the months before they returned home I built a bond with my boys. We spent every other weekend together. We went to the movies, the beach, the pool, and to museums and the library.



Every Friday we had a family conference. That was a chance for them to let out their feelings and ask me any questions about my addiction and the time I was not with them.

My son JonPaul asked why I left him with grandma for so long. He said, "Didn't you love us? Was it something we did?"

Answering their questions, I would get very emotional, but it helped us get closer. It was a step toward breaking the silence and anger that had dominated my family's relationships for too long.

A Terrifying Moment

It wasn't always easy to be a good mom. One afternoon I came home from work feeling very tired and found a message on my answering

machine from JonPaul's teacher. She said JonPaul, who was 12, was not showing up to school. Plus, he had never turned in the \$75 I gave him for his cap and gown.

I asked JonPaul, "What was that all about?" He was giving me all kinds of excuses, but when he said, "I don't care and I can do what I want," I totally lost it and started hitting him. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I even grabbed him by his throat and started choking him.

He said, with tears in his eyes, "Mami, you're choking me." At that moment I saw myself in JonPaul and my mother in me. That scared the hell out of me. I panicked, let go and ran to the hallway where I sat on the steps and called my sister, sobbing.

When I calmed down, I hugged him, apologized and promised it would never happen again. After that, I recommitted myself to talking to my boys no matter what they do that upsets me.

Today I'm Blessed

Today I have a good relationship with my boys. We share our thoughts and feelings, good and bad. We go out together and, every other weekend, we have family game night. We all sit around the table and play Parcheesi, Sorry, Charades and Operation.

As with every teen and mom, at times things get hectic, but together we pull through.

When I look back on what I've been through and what I put my kids through, I often start crying. Then I look at where I am today and realize I'm blessed. Not everyone gets a second chance.

Out of the Fire

Unlike my own mom, I got my children out of foster care.

BY DENISE LEE

Growing up in the system, I'd constantly tell myself I would be nothing like my mother, who abused drugs and just left me in the system where I never felt any kind of love.

My mom had me when she was 15. Nine years later, the child welfare system removed me and my eight younger siblings from her because she was using drugs. I was bounced from one foster home to another until they could no longer find a family that wanted me. Then I became the property of various institutions.

My Mom, a Stranger

I stayed in the system until I was 18. Then I was sent back to live with my mother, no family counseling, no questions, no nothing.

When we arrived, my mom and the worker said a few words, and the worker left. Then my mom went into her room and I stayed in that bare living room looking out the window. The next day, when neighbors asked about me, my mom told them I was her niece. When she cooked, she fixed plates for her, her boyfriend and her daughter. On the way to her room she said, "You can fix a plate of food. It's ready."

I felt that my mom didn't love me or even like me. I felt my presence was a constant reminder of how she had failed as a mother.

But despite all my anger and pain, there was still a part of me that wanted her to love me. It was the strength of that desire that got me into the most trouble.

Drugs Instead of Love

One day, my mom asked if I wanted to chip in and get some cocaine. It was one of the first times my mom had ever included me in anything and I wanted to believe that she was finally starting to love me. Soon I sniffed with mom regularly, and I sniffed on



ILLUSTRATION BY YONG HAN CHEN

my own, too. We were getting high at least six days a week.

At 20, I became pregnant. I didn't love my daughter's father, but I slept with him because I wanted to show him that I appreciated him listening to my problems. He wanted me to abort the baby, but I felt so much love for this baby who wasn't even born yet. I would rub my stomach very gently and say hello.

After a while, I found I was not only doing drug treatment for my children, but for myself as well.

I began to change my life. I stopped using drugs and started saving my money. I moved into the Bryant Hotel with a friend because I didn't want to raise my child under my mother's unhappy roof.

Losing My Daughter

When Chloe was born, I felt like I finally had someone I could love and who would love me. I also felt like I'd finally done something that might

please my mom. But Chloe didn't bring my mother and me closer. Instead, my mother seemed jealous and her jealousy pushed us even farther apart.

After a few years, I went back to using drugs. Eventually my mother introduced me to crack and soon we were using crack every time we had the money. I lost my job and so I started sleeping with men for the

money. I no longer had any ambition and I was definitely not being a good mother. I was neglecting my child, just like my mom.

Most often I felt nothing except the drugs. It was only when the high wore off that I would feel disgraceful, depressed, dirty, ashamed and guilty. Usually it was on my way to buy more drugs that I would think for a moment about what I was doing to my child, but that alone wasn't

enough to stop me.

Child welfare removed my daughter when she was 5. When they did, I went through a rage and destroyed the apartment because it was then that I had to come to terms with what I'd done. Losing my daughter put a hole in my soul, but I continued to use drugs and sell myself. I never thought I'd get her back. I thought it was my fate to be just like my mom.

Another on the Way

Chloe was in foster care for three years, and then I got pregnant again, the result of my survival sex. Although I had preached to other addicts who were using while pregnant, I too used because it was just too hard to stop.

It wasn't until my seventh month of pregnancy that a close friend came home from rehab and took me to sign up for a drug program.

Waiting in line to register, I felt afraid. For almost 10 years I'd been using drugs and running from reality, and now I was on my way to the unknown (recovery). I was also angry, because I didn't believe this was going to work for me. I was sure that the people there wouldn't like me.

But I was finally doing something my mom hadn't tried to do, for herself or her children: getting help to get clean. While I was answering the intake questions, a feeling of relief came over me. I wanted child welfare to know I was turning my life around. After a while, I found I was not only doing the program for my children, but for myself as well.

Love Conquers Shame

Soon I started showing up for my bi-weekly visits with Chloe. My motivation was to be a better mother than my mom. I wanted to be loving, kind and understanding.

Fighting the System as a Parent

Teen mothers in care have more to prove.

Teens who become parents while they are still in foster care, or soon after aging out of the system, face special challenges parenting their children and advocating for themselves in family court. Andrea Khoury, a child lawyer in Maryland, and David Meyers, a senior attorney with The Center for Families, Children & the Courts, in California, explain how to partner with your lawyer to keep your child out of foster care.

Q: What challenges do teens face raising a baby in a foster home or group home?

David Meyers: The real question is whether anyone is providing the parents the kind of treatment and services they need. If parents have experienced the level of trauma that most people experience growing up in foster care, and if that trauma remains untreated, it's likely that parents will repeat some of the same parenting style that they experienced. Unfortunately, we have very little family support services out there, so people who never experienced a positive family setting face bigger obstacles as parents.

Andrea Khoury: For teens in care, there is also so much more attention paid to how they raise their child than there would be for a parent not in the system. As with any teen in foster care who is struggling with growing up, it can be hard following the rules. But with a teen who has a child, that conflict can be more intense. Teens in care need to take extra responsibility and be cautious.

I had a client who wanted to raise her child as she wanted to. Initially after my client gave birth, I thought that they were going to help her be as good a parent as she could be and make sure that she understood that her child was her responsibility. But my client did not have the best intuition and she needed a ton of guidance. I was trying to refocus the agency on providing my client with services such as parenting classes, rather than judging her. Even so, I think that over the course of about a year, the social workers decided that she was not an appropriate parent, whether or not their judgment was based on any direct evidence of abuse or neglect.

The baby ultimately came into care when my client left her child at the foster home and took off for a couple of days without giving notice. She knew the child would never be in danger, but the court and the agency thought she showed poor judgment.

Still, if a youth was not in foster care and had her parents taking care of her baby, she would probably not have lost her child.

Q: What challenge do parents who grew up in care face advocating for themselves?

David Meyers: Court is a scary place. It can be very hard to empower parents to believe they have a voice, especially when they've grown up their whole lives in foster care being told what to do and where to go. I find that parents who grew up in foster care generally have a much higher level of motivation. Unfortunately, they also have a much lower level of resources, tools and confidence.

There are so many opportunities for conflict when a parent winds up in court. Parents come in with trauma and shame. Child welfare workers come in with their bias. Then, on top of that, you might get a lawyer who never met a poor parent until he became a lawyer.

Somehow, though, I just couldn't feel those same feelings for the baby I was carrying. I think it was my guilt that he would be born with a drug addiction. My intention was to give him to my friend to raise.

The day I delivered Avery I felt horrible. When the doctor pulled him out and held him up, I looked up at him and started crying. How could I hurt someone so small, defenseless and beautiful? I felt like a monster.

Avery went home with my friend, but she brought him to my program every day. Soon she started leaving him with me for a couple of hours. Slowly my love began to be stronger than my guilt and shame.

At four months, my friend and I decided he should live with me. It was then that I really fell in love my son.

My Child's Return

My daughter was returned to me a year after I got clean, a day before her eighth birthday.

Now my two children are my world. I'm trying to love them the way I wanted to be loved, so I don't say or do things that would damage their spirits.

When my daughter first came back into my life, she went to group counseling for a year. Then just recently she and I went to counseling together for some new problems.

Chloe and I are close. We talk about what's happened in our pasts. I tell her that when I came to visit her, I felt the pain she felt when those visits were over.

I continue to tell Chloe that I'm truly sorry about the past. But I've also had to learn not to feel guilty, and to know that now, unlike my own mother, I am raising my children to the best of my ability.

I hope that my children will see that though we come from a long line of addiction, we do not have to continue that cycle.



ILLUSTRATION BY YONG HAN CHEN

Despite all that, my advice for parents is to really understand that the attorney works for you, not the other way around. Tell your attorney, "I need you as my attorney to help me get my kids back. I need you to give me tools to go into court to make that happen." And then listen to what your attorney has to say.

Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. As your attorney, I want to hear you on my voicemail a lot. Not every day. But I want to hear when you're doing well. I want to hear when you've spoken to your worker. I want to hear when your visits increase. You need to show me that you're being productive so I can do the best job on your case.

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Rise uses writing to empower parents and support parent advocacy, and to guide child welfare professionals in developing effective services and policies that help families stay together. Rise partners with parent advocacy and family support organizations to train parents to write their stories. Rise stories are used in support groups, parenting classes and staff training. Rise magazine is printed three times each year. Go to www.risemagazine.org to learn more about Rise.

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'Mommy's Going Away'

I couldn't change fast enough to bring my children home.

BY ROBIN LARIMORE

I grew up in different places: my mother's house, my aunty's house, foster homes and group homes. I thought that being hurt and abandoned was how my life was supposed to be.

The Hardest Thing Ever

I met my boyfriend when I was 16. After six years, I realized I needed to get away from his cheating and abuse.

When I decided to place my two children in foster care so I could go into hiding, I was so afraid that they would have the same bad experiences I'd had as a child in foster care. But I felt I had no choice.

My son was 4 and my daughter was 2 when I told them, "Mommy has to go away for a little while and I will get you back home as soon as I can." I thought it would be easy, but it was hard.

The Strength to Leave

For many years, I'd move to a shelter and start seeing my kids, then get back together with my boyfriend until he started hitting me, and then I'd stop seeing my kids. Through it all,

I was totally depressed and I could not seem to protect myself or my children.

After my children had been in care for six years, a judge ruled that my children would be adopted by strangers. I was afraid that if I fought the adoption, my kids would bounce from home to home so I let them be adopted. But I regretted it every day. I missed them so much.

A Call From My Son

In the years since, I have come from a deep depression to having a stable home, a good job and a relationship with no abuse.

A few years ago, I got a letter from a caseworker stating that my son wanted to see me. I cried tears of joy.

My son just turned 16. I am so happy to be visiting my son again. I'm also glad he's seeing how I've changed my life, even if I couldn't change fast enough to bring him and his sister home.

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