

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 22, SUMMER 2012

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Raising Teens in Tough Neighborhoods

When children become teens, their peers become more important to them, and their schools and communities influence their choices. In neighborhoods marked by gangs, drugs, inadequate schools and heavy police presence, the teen years can be scary, especially for families once separated by foster care.

In this issue, parents share their efforts to raise safe, healthy teens—and to change policies that hurt teens and their families.

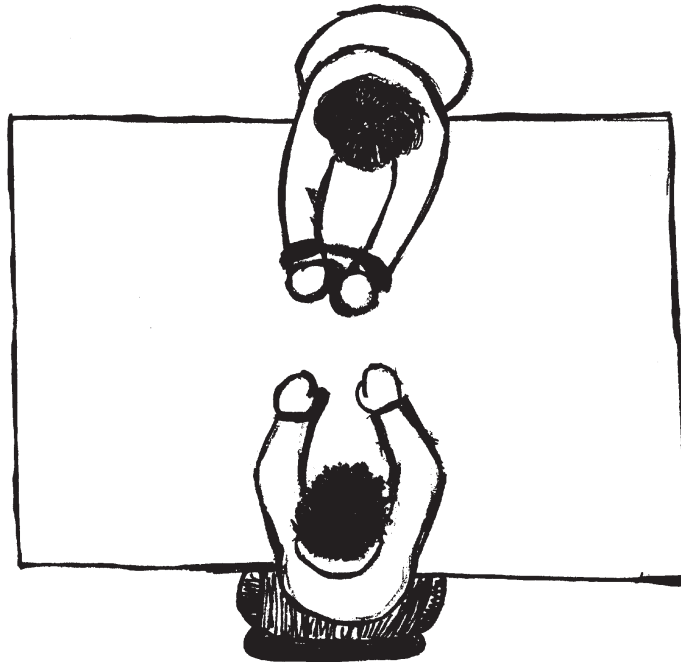


ILLUSTRATION BY VIOLETA AYALA

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Devastated

I couldn't keep my son from the streets.

BY DAISY NUNEZ

When my youngest son, Charlie, was in nursery school, his teacher suggested that I put him in a gifted and talented school for kindergarten. She told me that the school I was going to enroll him in wasn't challenging, warning me, "When he reaches the 3rd or 4th grade, he's going to get in trouble. The work is going to be too easy."

But at that time I was a caretaker for children and I brought all the children to the same school, so I couldn't easily put Charlie in a different school. Looking back, I often wish I'd tried to make an arrangement for Charlie, because what they predicted is just what happened.

Charlie got straight A's until he reached 3rd grade. That's when his behavior problems started. Many times I would sit with him in school during my break from work. He would get into fights and even got

suspended a couple of times.

Negative Influences

My other three children did not have the same problems. It wasn't easy to raise my children in the neighborhood we lived in—the East River Houses. There were shootings, fighting, people killing one another. The children would be playing basketball and a fight or shooting would take place.

Still, I tried to be a positive parent. I would gather my children and my children's friends in our apartment and let them play Playstation and board games. I would monitor them as they all played in our living room and I would cook for them. I took them to the pool. They all gave me respect and called me Miss Daisy. My home, to them, was like a safety net.

At home, I would talk to all my children and go over their homework. My older children came home straight

after school. But Charlie was more influenced by the neighborhood.

You had to be tough in that neighborhood. Some kids wanted to pick at you and fight you. Charlie was small and he just didn't have the personality to shake off challenges. "I'm going to fight back, Mommy. I'm no punk," he'd say.

'Where Did I Go Wrong?'

I always said when I was growing up that I'd be more understanding than my own very strict parents. My mother was the warden of the house. She had a short temper. I was unable to speak unless I was told to. Back then, it was corporal punishment, beating with a switch, cords, etc. But that's not how I raised my own kids.

My other four children and six grandchildren are all doing well. My eldest son lives in Connecticut with his three children. My second eldest lives in

Ohio with his three children. My son Jeremiah lives with me. He is a full time student and works part time. My daughter lives with her father and visits every other day. She is in school, too.

Looking for Help

When Charlie started getting in trouble, I wondered, "Where did I go wrong?" I told myself, "I just have to keep on trying." I sat and talked with him at home, gave him time outs, took away things, allowed him no company or grounded him for a week. But in school he kept fighting. "The children in my class like to test me," he'd say.

I tried to speak to Charlie about what was bothering him. But his response was just, "Nothing." That made me angry. I would say, "Why do you just answer 'nothing' so many times?" I wanted to give him an old-fashioned beating like my mother used to give to me, but I had to compose myself.

Finding Supports

When Charlie was 9, I went to a therapist with him, but the therapist suggested several medications: Concerta, Strattera and two others. It seemed like too much for a little boy.

I felt that my son wouldn't need to take medication if he was living in a great neighborhood, attending a challenging school and involved in after-school programs. I was sure that's what he needed.

So I got my son involved in after-school basketball. He loved it and won a couple of trophies. I felt very positive then, and so did he. I thought his problems would go away. But his good behavior didn't last.

'Please Comply'

The first incident that led my son to the juvenile system was when he was 11 years old. One day, a 15-year-old chased him with a knife. Charlie decided to retaliate with three friends.

Charlie was arrested and had to see his parole officer three times a week. I would say, "Please comply with the judge's orders," but Charlie did whatever he wanted. My son kept getting

a lot of chances, but eventually he was locked up.

I was devastated to see my youngest son taken away in handcuffs, shackled like a criminal. That was my baby.

Begging My Son

When my son came home from his first incarceration a few months later, I hoped he had learned his lesson, and I begged him to comply with the court order. He had to see his PO and get counseling at the Dome Project, where they had a therapy support group. He only complied for one week.

Next the court sent him to a group home. But when he came home after another few months, he refused to comply once again. Next they placed him in a therapeutic foster home. The judge thought that a foster parent trained to create a therapeutic environment would be able to give Charlie the structure he needed.

'Please Don't Cry'

At this point, Charlie was 12 years old and he was still small for his age, with an angelic face. The foster mom told me my son had good manners and was helpful and kind. She wanted to take him under her wing. But within a few months, he'd had another fight in school and the judge placed him in a juvenile detention facility once more.

When I saw him in the courtroom that day, he looked worried and fragile. He held himself strong with his head up when he was handcuffed in front of me. But when he was sentenced, he cried and said sorry to me and to the foster mom. I was devastated again. I broke down in tears. He told me, "Mommy, it's not your fault. Please don't cry."

Painful Visits

While he was first locked up, I wrote Charlie letters and made it to every visit. Visiting Charlie was hard. I hated to see him in uniform. Other mothers would comment on how young he looked.

During visits I kissed and hugged my son. I spoke to him about his dog and tried to keep the conversation

on positive things. I never pointed a finger like, "You should've done this, you should've done that." I felt that that would have just made him more rebellious and angry.

Then Charlie was moved to a facility in Middleton, N.Y., far upstate. When I heard that bad news, I cried. I was only able to visit him twice. But in that facility they worked with him on his anger and gave him counseling and support. I saw a difference in

My son arrived in shackles. I held my son, grown taller without me.

his attitude and his thinking. My son made the honor roll six times.

When we saw the judge in court, she looked at his report card and assessment report and said he was beyond high school level and to keep up the good work. I'm so proud of the changes my son has made.

Coming Home

In December, my son was released.

He went straight to an aftercare program in the Bronx, where he will stay before going home to his father.

His father now has custody of him, while I have visitation rights. I think this is a good decision for Charlie, because his father is stricter and lives in a better neighborhood. Charlie was hanging around the wrong people near where I live.

But it was also not my choice—I live in New York City public housing, and Charlie's arrest record is putting my lease in jeopardy. Not having Charlie come home to me is one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Holding My Son

On the day Charlie was released, I left my house early to make sure I would be there when he arrived. It was snowing when I came out of the train station, and the blocks seemed never ending.

My son arrived in shackles, but when they took them off, he came over and hugged me. I was crying with happiness and sadness. I was sad to see him in shackles, grown taller without me. I was happy to hold my son and spend the holidays with him.

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Parents, Advocates, Allies

Our teens need us to be voices for change.

BY MAXINE KING AS TOLD TO PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

On Dec. 22, I saw my neighbor's son being stopped and frisked by the police. In New York City, police stop and frisk hundreds of thousands of young men of color in poor communities. Of the 686,000 stop-and-frisks last year, 84 percent were of blacks and Latinos. I have five sons, and my sons have been stopped and frisked so many times.

That December day, I asked the police, "What's going on? This is a good kid. Why do you have him against a wall?" I added, "Stop and frisk is racial!" Next thing I knew, I was on the ground, being arrested.

After my arrest I thought, "I need to organize around this so that other people won't experience what I've been through."

A Parent, An Advocate

My journey as an advocate started four years ago when I was released from prison and reunited with my sons. I had dealt with child welfare cases and the justice system for many years and I wanted to make a difference in the lives of families.

My last child welfare case was in 2006. I was a substance abuse counselor but I'd relapsed and I went to jail. I left my sons with my daughter, who was 21. She was overwhelmed and reached out to the city child welfare system (ACS) for help. It was strange because ACS took me to court for neglect but ultimately made the same decision I had—they gave guardianship to my daughter. I came back home after only six months, but it wasn't until 2008 that my sons were finally returned to me.

When I got my sons home, I didn't want to see other families floundering. I wanted to be a leader who helped families navigate the system. So I got involved with the Correctional Association of New York and joined the Parent

Leadership Curriculum at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP).

Sending a Message

After my arrest, I went to those two organizations with the idea to organize a rally on my court date, March 22. I wanted to send the message that kids are being targeted and that folks need to get involved if they see kids in their community up against a wall.

That day, about 100 people came out. I told my story and we had signs saying "Stop and Frisk is Illegal" and "Stop Targeting Our Children." Since then, I've spoken at a number of rallies and marches. I've seen that thousands of New Yorkers have joined together to stop stop-and-frisk. I am very hopeful that this policy will change.

The message I have for parents is: Don't give up! Get involved!

I hope these protests are showing my sons that they can have a voice. Recently I brought home t-shirts that say, "I do not consent to this search." My sons were ecstatic. They can say at protests and with their shirts what they're afraid to say on the street.

Families Under Pressure

There is so much that parents can do to make change in our communities. In the spring, I spoke at a community forum that CWOP helped organize to "raise the age" of criminal responsibility in New York from 16 to 18. In



Maxine King speaking to media about stop-and-frisk.

scans my body. I feel like I'm walking into a prison. I ask myself, "What are they preparing our children for?"

And we know what the numbers look like for blacks and Latino children that enter the child welfare system. Our children enter foster care at a higher rate—an alarming rate—and stay in care longer than their white counterparts.

nearly all other states, teenagers who are 16 and 17 are treated as juveniles when they're arrested, unless it's for a very serious crime. In New York state, teens 16 and 17 are treated as adults and families are left out of the court process.

Not long ago, it hit me in my gut how important it is that children's lives shouldn't be ruined by one instance. That day I got a phone call: "The police have your son." I went

up the street and saw my son sitting on the sidewalk, handcuffed. The police said to me, "We can't talk to you about this." I said, "That's my son and he's a minor." The officer told me, "No, he's 16 years old. We treat him as an adult."

Young people need to have a chance to grow up in their communities without living in a war zone. When I walk into my sons' schools, I have to put my bags through the metal detectors. If I set off the alarm, someone comes with a metal wand and

Get Involved!

The message I have for parents is: Don't give up! Get involved! Now I'm a member of a coalition called Undoing Racism in Child Welfare and I'm on CWOP's board.

One initiative that's exciting to me is CWOP's Community Representative project. In many New York City neighborhoods, trained Community Reps attend conferences where the decision is made whether to remove a child from home. Their role is to support parents during the conferences. In East Harlem, CWOP trains the Community Reps and they are all parents with first-hand experience with child welfare.

So often when you're in need, people are talking at you and telling you what you should do. There's a different spin on things when another parent is at the table advising families and offering support.

We've seen that, in East Harlem, children are far less likely to enter foster care than in a similar communities without CWOP's Community Reps. Wow! I know that, through my advocacy, I'm already making a difference.

To Bathe in Gold

I try to see the good in my son and in me.

BY ELLA VERES

My son is very bright and handsome. But instead of using all his gifts to shine, instead he slumps when he walks. He coasts in school. His grades drop, then he studies a bit to catch up, then again his grades drop because he gets bored.

He is constantly entangled with his teachers, who he says are stupid.

At times, my son's scorn turns on me, too.

When we first went to the shelter where we now live, he was upset and tried to get us kicked out by being late for curfew. I told him, "I have to stay in the shelter to try to heal. I feel safe here. After all, I was a victim of domestic violence."

"You called it upon yourself," my kind son said. But then they installed cable TV and he was always home early.

I Blame Myself

At times I blame myself for my son's poor grades, for the hours of video games he plays, and for the fact that he isn't living up to his potential. I think about all the times I was not a good mother.

Once, when he was 6 or 7 and we were still living in my homeland of Hungary, we went away for the weekend. Our hosts had said they'd be home in the evening, and I made plans to bathe in gold with the next love of my life, actually another loser.

But when our hosts didn't show up on time for me to go on my date, I decided to leave anyway. My son cried that he didn't want to stay alone. I said, "Oh, shut up. Our friends will show up in a minute."

He cried more. He said he would die

if I left him alone. "What about me? You'll grow up and leave me behind," I said and I left.

There was no bathing in gold. Just my guilt and listening to my date whining.

I Blame Our Neighborhood

Other times I blame our neighborhood when my son doesn't live up to his potential. Just recently, my son was robbed right around the corner from our shelter for the second time.

The first time a big kid got his phone,

no," he declines softly.

My Angry Words

At times when I am too frustrated with my son I go at him like this: "Why did you lie to me about failing summer school? This is such bullshit! All you do is play videogames. This is a mass addiction. You are all zombies pushing buttons killing ugly creatures in your dark corners on your TV screens. You don't read. You don't watch movies. You don't do anything. You'll end up like your uncle who died of alcoholism. I swear you get

My son gets annoyed and says, "Mom, bad things happened to you, but I'm not you. If someone is inappropriate to me I just get the f-out of there."

"Well done, my son," I think. But I also think about how helpless he was when he was robbed, and I worry for him.

Remembering the Good

There are times when I am able to see all my son's beauty.

When I was growing up, I was told to cook and clean and to this day I am a lousy cook. But, funny, my son is so talented. He can cook wonderful Thai food! Unbelievable how he slices the garlic, paper thin! He has such patience.

Seeing my son's talents helps me remember that I have also been a good mother.

My parents quarreled all the time because of my father's drinking and womanizing, and my mother often humiliated me. But I often laugh with my son as well as yell at him, and we share our struggles. I teach in a college in New Jersey and we laugh together about my funny students, my 55 other sons and daughters. I am nice to my son's girlfriend, and I tell my son that he is smart and beautiful.

When my son doesn't live up to his potential, I get down about my decision to come to America. I get down about the neighborhood we live in. I get down on myself as a mother. I get down on my son, too. But when I stop long enough to see all my son's good qualities, I hold out hope that eventually all the good in him, and all the good I helped to put in him, will come shining through.



ILLUSTRATION BY FREDDY BRUCE

his money. All I could think was, "My son is a martial arts champion. I don't understand." He just handed the robber his cell phone and wallet.

Then, before he had time to get over his shock, he was robbed a second time. That day when he came home, he opened the door and said smiling, "I have great news!" and I thought, "Let's hear it! Maybe he got a summer job."

"I was robbed again," he told me, this time by a gang of five kids.

Now when my son walks the streets he puts on his street face, his doberman face. I tell him, maybe he should get a mohawk, maybe he should get spikes and chains, maybe he should have blue hair, like his girlfriend. "Oh,

out of my house when you turn 18!"

Recently, in one of my domestic violence groups, I was asked to remember how I realized I was a girl, and what I was told I could or could not do. I remembered how I was told, "Stay with your legs closed. Don't let people see your panties. Be careful, it is dangerous. Watch, they might rape you."

I realized that I talk to my son in the same terms: "Don't sprawl your legs when you sit. It is ugly, rude. Don't stay out late! You have a curfew. And watch. If anyone touches you inappropriately, what will you do?"

When I hear myself saying the same damned things my mother said to me, it enrages me.

Taking Back Our Teens

With support and practice, parents can regain authority in their families.

INTERVIEW BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

This spring, New York City's Children's Services (ACS) announced a new initiative to keep teens safe at home and out of foster care. The "Teen Preventive Initiative" will expand access to two intensive, short-term supports—Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) and Family Functional Therapy (FFT). Both focus on supporting the whole family and have been proven to help families of teens during a crisis.

Here, Sara Hemmeter, NYC Children's Services Associate Commissioner of Family and Youth Justice Programs, and Paul Schiller, Division Director of MST at The Children's Village, describe how families can turn things around with their teens:

'I've Lost Him'

Hemmeter: In 2010, 2,500 teens entered foster care in NYC. We know that foster care is often not the answer for teenagers or any young person. With this initiative, we hope to see a 30-40 percent drop in the number of teens placed in foster care.

Schiller: A lot of parents feel that they've lost their kids to the street. They say, 'He's 16, he's grown, I've lost him.' MST is about empowering parents to respond to challenges. Our job is to motivate parents not to give up and to keep trying to find things that the teen will respond to.

MST is not the same as "going to therapy" and it's not focused on the teen alone. We involve the family, school, peers and community. We meet with families at least twice a week at their homes or other places in their community at times that are convenient. We're also available to talk to families 24-7. Our goal is to help families think creatively and to give parents back their power.

Planning With Families

Schiller: For instance, a lot of schools are not very family friendly and use

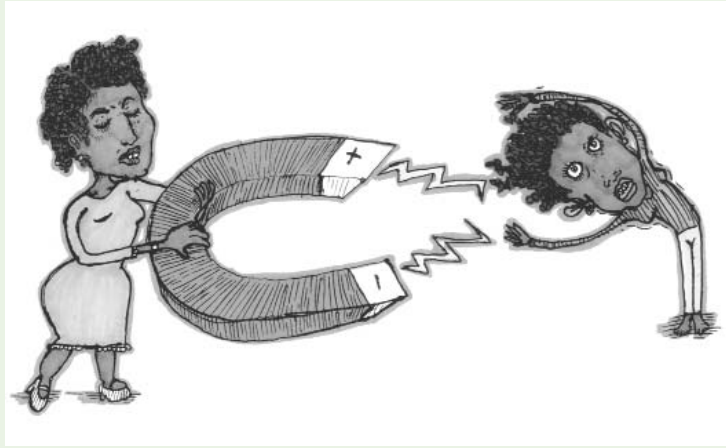


ILLUSTRATION BY ERIKA FAYE BURKE

language that parents don't understand. We can help parents advocate for school services and develop stronger relationships with school staff.

We can also help parents develop a stronger support system of extended family and neighbors. It's important to track where your teen is and who he is with. We've seen neighbors call and say, "You asked me to call if I

contribute to the home. Parents feel helpless, but often they have more power than they realize.

One young man we worked with enjoyed sleeping in and hanging out with his friends. Day in and day out there was nothing to deter him—he still enjoyed the privileges of home, like watching TV and having his meals cooked and laundry done by his mom. Every day mom would ask,

Parents feel helpless, but often they have more power than they realize.

saw your child on this side of town. Well, I've seen him."

One of the biggest ways to counteract a young person's negative behaviors is to replace them with positive behaviors. In addition to saying, "No, don't do that," we help parents find resources in their neighborhoods so they can say, "Do this instead."

From Helpless to Hopeful

Schiller: The families we see struggle to manage teens who have stopped following their parents' rules, wishes, expectations and values. They're engaging in dangerous and destructive behaviors and openly refusing to participate in any activities that

path. The next day, he awoke to find that there was no more TV to watch.

It's almost cliché to say that things get worse before they get better, but that's true for many of our families. When parents start setting limits and supervising their children more closely, they are all too often met with infuriated adolescents who are determined to make their parents give up. This is when the hard work begins. MST therapists are available to give parents the support, encouragement and practice to stick to their guns. When the teen is able to see that it is to their benefit to follow the rules, change happens.

Proven Results

Schiller: When supports are individualized, families can make these major changes in just four or five months; 86 percent of our teens are living at home with their families when we complete treatment. Families also are able to stick with MST—only about 50 percent of families stick with traditional therapy, but 90 percent of our families complete treatment.

Hemmeter: We've been using MST and FFT with families who want to file a PINS petition, which can result in foster care placement. These programs help families in crisis. We've seen a significant drop in the number of PINS filings and placements when families are offered these services, and we've seen kids attending school more often, using substances less and getting involved in positive activities. We are working now to make these services available to families citywide by the spring of 2013.

To access MST or FFT, contact the Family Assistance Program (FAP) in your neighborhood: Manhattan (212) 341-0012; Brooklyn (718) 260-8550 or (718) 260-8508; Queens (718) 725-3244; Bronx (718) 664-1731; Staten Island (718) 720-0071.

‘What Can I Do?’

As teens, my children needed me to try new ways to parent.

BY LATONYA BASKERVILLE

When my children first came home from foster care, life was different for all of us. I was clean and sober, thrown into a new apartment with three little strangers. My children were 10 years, 5 years and two weeks old when they were removed, and 12, 7 and 18 months when they were returned.

Old-School Techniques

At first, I was very confused how to parent my children. The fact is, during my children's early years I used the parenting style I learned from family members. You know the model: beat your children if they disobey you, beat them if they talk back, beat them if they get in trouble, steal, have sex at a young age, act disrespectful. Beat them!

Don't get me wrong, some of the old-school rules are good and important. For example: have manners, respect your elders—that's a must. But techniques like, "Children should be seen and not heard" and beating or controlling your children had to go.

My theory is that, for my community, this method of raising your kids began with slavery. Parents probably figured that if they beat their own children, their masters wouldn't, and this would save the children's lives. The method was meant to protect children. But beating your children really doesn't work. It creates silent and enraged children who, too often, grow up to be rigid and insensitive to their own children's feelings and needs.

I Needed to Change

Once I took parenting classes, I also realized that the model I mimicked was not legal. If I wanted to keep my children out of foster care, I needed to change my style.

But when my teenage son started running wild, I didn't know how to



ILLUSTRATION BY GUILLERMO MATA, JR.

respond. My son was having many problems at school, at home and in our neighborhood. He started getting high and gang banging. I thought I was going to bury my son before he was 18.

I was so afraid of disciplining him the old way, but all I knew how to do was yell at him. We were arguing and cursing all the time. Our relationship was crazy.

Then came a knock on the door. A detective from the local precinct came holding a manila folder as thick as a cinderblock. The detective had evidence that my son had been committing robberies dating back two years. My son and I sat at the kitchen table with this detective. That was the first time I saw my son smoke a

cigarette. He was tight.

I looked in his face and asked him, "Did you do these robberies?"

He said, "Yes, Mommy."

"Well, then you must take ownership," I told him. We wrote a full confession and the judge sentenced him to 15 months in a group home.

I started thinking, "Really, what can

The parenting model I mimicked was not legal. If I wanted to keep my children out of foster care, I needed to change my style.

I do to parent this kid?" I thought back on the parenting and anger management classes I took when my kids were in care. I decided to create a parenting style for my son that I called, "Firm as a father, soft like a mother."

Keeping My Distance

When my son got locked up, I didn't scream and beg and cry. I let him do hard time for 15 months, firm like a father. I didn't want to give him extra attention for doing negative things. I was afraid this would only encourage him to commit crimes again.

But once my son came home, I began listening to him more, soft like a mother. I encouraged my son and held him to the standards he set for himself. Soon my son dropped his gang activities, went back to school and got his GED.

Trying Straight Talk

I faced similar challenges when my daughter was around 14. My daughter was suddenly a whole new child. She began hanging with sexually experienced girls and started asking a lot of questions about boys.

I did my best to detour her from sex, but soon I found out that my daughter was having sex with a 17-year-old boy. I was shocked, but I knew that if I overreacted she would not open up to me, so I tried to play it cool.

We sat down in the living room and I asked her, "Why are you dealing with older boys and having sex right now? It seems like you're too young." I explained that I was not trying to take away the wonderful experience of sex, but that I worried that the sex she was having could come with painful experiences, like unwanted pregnancy and STDs.

Learning to Listen

But straight talk did not help my daughter. Soon she started cutting school and running away from home. It was so serious that I went to the child welfare system for help before they came to me, charging me for educational neglect because she was truant. The caseworker told me to

Where the Heart Is

An NYC initiative will keep teens convicted of crimes close to home.

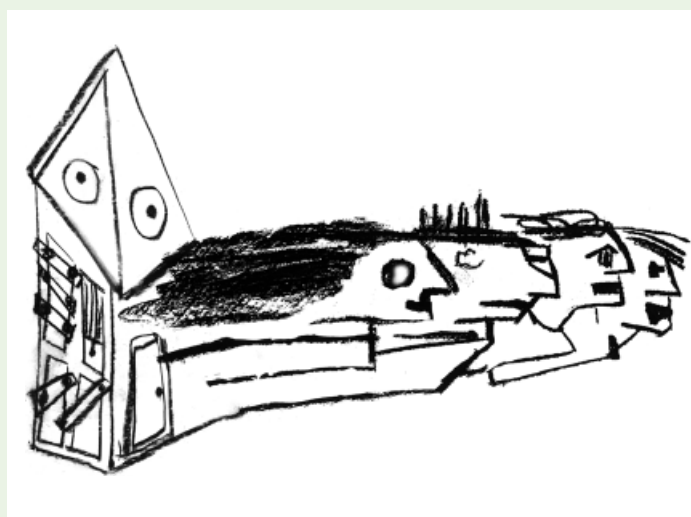


ILLUSTRATION BY STEFAN VAUBEL

put her in therapy and I reconnected her to our former foster care agency. But she went to three sessions and refused to go back.

Once again, I had to dig into my bag of parenting skills and find a way to reach her. I decided that what my daughter needed was nurturing, compassion, connection. I started having girl talks with my daughter. I didn't do much talking; I just listened openly. We even invited her runaway partners over to our house to have real heart-to-hearts.

My daughter is doing well for herself. She stayed with my grandmother for two years and recently moved home again. Now her GPA has gone from a 40 to an 87. She applied to a college program in her high school and was accepted. She also got a job at our local supermarket.

All Children Need Kindness

As teenagers, my children needed two different parenting styles. My son needed me to let him experience the consequences of his own mistakes. My daughter needed me to come closer. Both needed me to listen.

I try to use patience, open-mindedness, understanding, empathy, nurturing, respect, kindness, honesty, courage, security and discipline. To be honest, these skills came from the many classes I completed while my children were in foster care. I'm thankful that I learned these skills. I needed more tools to deal with my children.

I believe parents should surrender the punitive parenting styles that they suffered as children. Adults who are good providers associate brutal beatings with their success. They tell their children, "It worked for me, it will work for you." But children need to feel safe. They need our support to get ready to be responsible.

New York City teens convicted of crimes have usually been sent to facilities upstate, far from their families. Now an initiative called Close to Home will change that—these teens will receive services at home or go to city residences where they can stay more connected to their families and communities. Reverend Emma Jordan-Simpson, executive director of the Children's Defense Fund of New York and chair of the Office of Children and Families Brooklyn for Brooklyn Community Advisory Board, explains the reform:

Q: What is "Close to Home"?

A: The majority of youth locked up in New York state come from the five boroughs of New York City but we were housing them at a great distance from their families. There was even a state-operated juvenile facility on the Canadian border. When you're asking family members to make the trek to the Canadian border, you know what the outcome is going to be. The child is going to lose that family connection.

"Close to Home" is not only about keeping young people physically close to their homes. These programs will focus on positive youth development and strengthening

families rather than punishment.

Young people have different impulse controls than adults. When young people fall off track, our rescue should be humane. We don't want a 14-year-old's impulsive decision to steal someone's iPhone, or to smoke marijuana to affect him for the rest of his life.

In the last few years, New York City and other big counties have been investing heavily in alternatives-to-incarceration programs that offer services like therapy and family therapy and a focus on getting young people back on track in school and meaningfully employed. Up to 80 percent of New York youth who go through these programs complete them.

Under "Close to Home," most young people now in non-secure facilities should be coming to residences in the city between September 1 and December 1. Young people in secure facilities should be coming back in 2013.

Keeping young people closer to home means they can stay in closer contact with their families and communities. It also means easier coordination among city agencies, like the Department of Education, NYC Children's Services

(ACS), and all the agencies that touch these young people's lives, so there isn't a big transition when their sentences end. This makes me very hopeful that young people are going to get what they need, in terms of positive supports and programs.

Q: How did this reform come about?

A: In 2006-2007, it began to be clear that we needed to reform how New York state responds to teens who commit crimes. There were reports of abuse of children in state juvenile detention centers, and there were many children in detention who needed mental health services but were not getting services. The state Office of Children and Family Services had themselves done studies that showed more than 70% of males and 30% of females placed in these facilities had an adult felony conviction by the time they were 28 years old.

But the reports really fell on deaf ears until the Department of Justice stepped in and said this system is violating the rights of children. To their credit, OCFS Commissioner Gladys Carrion and other state and city leaders used that Department of Justice report as momentum to start closing down some of these facilities. Now NYC Children's Services is working with local agencies to set up local residences.

Still, no one knows for sure how these programs are going to work. That's why it's so important for families to get involved. New York has great advocacy organizations that have played a key role in pushing for these changes. Families that have been affected by the juvenile justice system need to stay active in demanding that we treat our young people like young people and not like criminals.

The Wrong Lessons

My son's time upstate left him distrustful and angry.

BY ANONYMOUS

My son's problems started in high school. My son had always done well at small schools but he wound up in a school with more than 3,000 kids. There were too many kids getting into trouble and the school did too much policing. I knew from the beginning there was too much for my son to explore. I met with the principal, the parent coordinator, and the guidance counselor. They all assured me that my son would be fine. But pretty soon my son started getting in trouble.

One day, my son and two friends went up to another boy in the school and told him to give them \$2. My son was suspended, and the dean called the cops. I thought my son would just have to talk to the cop handling the case, so I took him



to the precinct myself. But at the precinct, they handcuffed my son.

It was horrible to see my son in handcuffs. I felt like I couldn't do anything, like I was handcuffed myself.

From School to Handcuffs

In family court, his appointed lawyer said, "You have to plead guilty."

I said, "Why does he have to plead?" By then, the school had dropped the suspension because of "insufficient

findings." It was clear on the school's videotape that my son wasn't being aggressive. He was just standing there.

The lawyer said, "I'm not your lawyer, I'm his lawyer."

The way he spoke to me made me feel like I was a bad parent who'd raised a bad child. But my child is not a bad child, and none of my other children have ever had problems with the justice system. I was angry but powerless that my son and I were being treated like dirt.

My son pleaded guilty and the judge put him on probation. Something small had quickly turned into something big.

ILLUSTRATION BY STEFAN VALBEL

Back in Touch

I'm getting to know my son after 14 years apart.

BY ERIC BENSON

I felt extremely bad about myself as a parent when I came to prison. As a teenager I had really wanted a son. Then, when I was 20 and my son was just 4 months old, I was arrested and handed a long sentence. That day, when the police jumped out at me with their guns drawn, I pictured my son's face. I had a really bad feeling. Now, 14 years later, I still regret every day that I am not being the parent that my son needed.

I have a few good memories of my son. I loved the way he drooled when I took his bottle out of his mouth. I also remember taking him to a carnival in Virginia, not long before I got locked up.

Soon after I was sent to prison, in the winter of 1993, my son's mother

and I broke up. She decided that it was best that my son and I not have a relationship while I was in prison. I stayed persistent year after year, writing to her, attempting to establish a relationship with my son. I never imagined that our separation would last for more than 14 years.

Transforming My Life

In prison I began to transform my life. I looked at my mistakes and told myself that I was going to mature into a man and a responsible father so that, when given the opportunity, I could be that parent that my son deserved. I even took a parenting class, hoping that I could one day use what I learned.

Other prisoners often tell me that I have been handling my situation the

I am in prison, paying for the bad decisions I made when I was not much older than my son is now.

right way. Their words of encouragement help me to persevere.

At last, my consistency paid off. Not long ago, my son's mother relented.

'Shocked to See You'

My first visit with my son was like an out of body experience. In the visiting room, the officer told me, "Your visitors are in Row 4 table 6." I saw my son sitting with his head down on the

table. I recognized him immediately. My son has short hair like me. He has big dark brown eyes and a familiar blush.

I was stunned but I found the voice to say, "How's everything with you, Kharon?"

"I'm OK," he said.

I asked him, "Can I have a hug?" He gave me a hug and we sat down.

"Kharon, how are you feeling right now?" I asked.

"Shocked to see you," he said.

I told him, "Everything is going to be all right."

Far From Home

Some time later, my son was again hanging out with the wrong people. One of his friends beat up a kid and took his game from him. In court, the victim in the case testified that my son wasn't involved in the robbery. But the judge decided to send my son to a facility anyway.

When I heard that my son was going upstate, I felt destroyed. My son needed a program that could help him stay busy in a positive way, not a prison term like he was already a criminal.

When we arrived the facility, it looked beautiful, just like a college campus. But in the first week, my son was jumped and robbed. Later he was robbed again. The staff didn't do anything about it.

They also tried to medicate my son for ADHD, even though my son has

never been diagnosed with any kind of disability. Over the phone, my son said, "They're giving me some pills."

"Don't take them. You don't know what they are," I said.

When I called and told the psychiatrist that my son was never diagnosed with ADHD, he apologized and said it would never happen again. But another time they had a meeting about my son and neglected to invite me. I wanted to be involved in every aspect of my son's life. After that, I called to remind them, "My son may be in the custody of the state but I'm still very much involved in his life."

We Were Both Angry

During his time at the facility, my son seemed to lose more and more trust in adults, including me. At first, he would call and say, "Mommy, get me out of here." But after a while he sounded angry with me, and started

saying, "Why are you calling me?" I wanted to hold him and tell him it was going to be OK but I couldn't.

When he came home a few months later, oh my God, he was angry. This was my son who I could hug at any time, who had always shown me a lot of respect. But suddenly he did not want me to hug him. He would yell at everybody, even his friends. He was not the same kid. It wasn't long before he robbed someone and was sent upstate again.

I was disappointed with my son. I thought, "If you didn't want to go upstate again, you should have changed your behavior." But I was angrier at the system. I knew how much money went into sending him upstate, but incarceration hadn't helped him learn from his mistakes and move forward. It had only made him worse.

Hopeful for the Future

This time, my son was sent to a different facility. There were some staff that seemed to use excessive force, but there were also some who cared. My son didn't seem as angry. When I came to visit, he would let me hug him.

Just a few weeks ago, my son came home. He seems to be doing better than before. He is very excited about his summer job program. My son has always liked working and making money.

My son has a family that is there for him. I just hope we can find programs and other people who can help him see the way forward and who will listen without judging. I hope some of the good in my son will have a chance to come out again.

I had so much I wanted to tell my son. Time wouldn't allow me to express everything that I wanted to say on that day. When I returned to my cell I wrote him a long letter. I stayed up for most of that night thinking about our visit. I cried tears of joy for finally being able to look my son in the face and hug him after so many years.

Catching Up

On our second visit, Kharon surprised me by talking to me about any and everything. He even talked to me about girls—I couldn't believe that! He also asked me where he got his height from, because he is taller than his mother and me. Then he said, "You look just like me!" I said, "No, you look like me."

I asked him to write all of his questions down in a letter. His letter

made me so happy. He had quite a few questions: "What is your favorite color? What sports did you like to play when you were younger? Were you ever an A student in school? Were you ever a ladies' man?"

He said he didn't want to O.D. with the questions but I was happy to see him opening up to me.

Too Much Like Me?

Since then, I've been able to see my son once a month through the Osborne Association, an organization that helps incarcerated parents and their children. I'm feeling really good about how Kharon and I are getting to know each other.

I also worry about my son. I see how he holds the same materialistic mindset that I had as a teenager. That mindset hurt me. I am scared of the



ILLUSTRATION BY OGEN-DOLPH

influence the streets can have on a materialistic 15-year-old.

In parenting class, I learned about teenagers' typical behaviors. I hope that what I learned will help me steer my son the right way as I get to know him more. I'm talking to Kharon about growing up and taking on the responsibilities of adulthood, and about being able to respect him-

self first before thinking about others respecting him. I hope I can help him to understand that the decisions that he makes now will affect his future.

The Happiest Father

At the end of the parenting class, I had the privilege of inviting my son to my graduation. With Kharon in the audience, I gave a speech about my quest to establish a relationship with him. Afterward, Kharon came up to the podium and gave me the biggest hug. I was the happiest father on the planet that day.

Now it has been more than nine months since my son's first visit. I hope and pray that all goes well with my son while I continue my journey in prison, paying for the bad decisions that I made when I was not much older than Kharon is now.

Listening Past the Anger

Family therapy helped my children and me.

BY YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

My story begins with my marriage, when I was 19. He was 36 and seemed older and wiser. My father was abusive, my mother had died, and I felt lost. But this man abused me. When he wasn't calling me names, he was out in the streets getting drunk and having affairs. When my son and my daughter were still small, I had had enough. I let go of my anchor and sent him on his way to give other women hell.

It wasn't easy taking care of two small children alone, though. Eventually I moved, found childcare and was making good money, yet I was not happy. I was short-tempered and angry and cried a lot. I didn't know what was wrong with me.

One nice man at my job suggested that I see a therapist. I felt I was too strong for that nonsense. Yet I felt myself getting weaker and weaker and crying more and more. Soon I became so depressed that I stopped working, and some days I wouldn't bother taking my kids to school. I just wanted to keep them home with me where I knew they were safe and taken care of. That got child protective services involved in our lives.

When my son was 6 years old and my daughter was 7, I broke down. I placed my children in foster care with my sister, and for a short time, I was hospitalized to deal with my depression.

Tension in the House

My sister was wonderful to my children. When I visited my sister's house, I was able to witness the attention she lavished on my children. But seeing what my sister could provide made me fear that I would mess up my children's lives if I took them back.

My sister woke me up. One day she said to me, "It doesn't seem like you want them back." My new worker

helped, too. Finally I went to court and, after three years in foster care, my children came home.

After such a long absence, though, my children were angry, and showed it in many ways: lots of arguments, disrespect and shouting that "You should have left us at Aunt Gina's!" Plus a whole lot of pretending that they did not hear me or my rules.

They spent weekends with my sister. When they came home on Sunday nights, the anger on their faces was chilling. I'd get angry, too, and just say, "Yeah, y'all home now, so go unpack and get ready for school tomorrow." "Yeah, whatever!" they'd say, slamming their doors.

The Support We Needed

Luckily, when my kids were 12 and

13, we went to family therapy. In therapy, I found out a lot. At home all I heard was my children's anger. But when we played games, I was able to hear them express their fears and frustration, and what they wanted from me. My favorite part of therapy was a game where we all had to say words that expressed how we

At home all I heard was my children's anger. But in family therapy, I was able to hear them express their fears and frustration.

were feeling at that moment, and how we felt about each other.

My children were fearful and disappointed in me. I had seemed so strong to them that it had been

shocking to them to watch me fall so hard. They were scared that I might fall once again—and that our family would not recover from the past. They were asking, "Where do we go from here?"

I was determined to put their fears to rest by telling them and showing them that Mommy would never give up on herself again. I realized that we might not be able to get those three years back but we could move forward and make new memories, happier memories.

Over time, when my children returned from visiting Aunt Gina, they came home saying, "Hi, Mom," and I could see in their faces that they were happy to be back.

'Love Yourself'

Now my children are 16 and 17, and I have a 6-year-old, too. Sometimes I feel like we are having the ordinary dramas of a family with two teenagers. But other times I feel like the past won't let us go.

I feel pretty easy about my daughter Janelle. My Janelle has blossomed. As a little girl, she always had a worried look on her face. She didn't smile much, and if I yelled at her, she would flinch like I was hurting her. I couldn't see myself from her eyes at that time, but looking back I see that I was intimidating. I truly didn't have much patience for my children.

But these days, Janelle seems strong and independent. She is doing pretty well in school, looking for a job and planning to go to college.



ILLUSTRATION BY JANEL BLASS

A Risky Bet

Placing teens in foster care can do more harm than good.

INTERVIEW BY NICOLE JONES

I love that she takes great care of herself. She loves the latest fashions and must have her hair done at least every two weeks. We argue because I don't want her to hang out (she wants to), I don't want her to have boy-friends (she wants to), I don't want her to buy Jordans every time they come out (she wants to and is very upset if I don't have the money). Sometimes she is so outrageously into herself that I need to tell her to bring it down a notch! But I also tell her, "I love that you love yourself, my Nelly-belle. You saw what happened to me, and that's because I never loved myself. You do! So don't ever let no man bring you down, baby."

"OK, Mom," she'll say quietly.

"But do you love me, Nelly?" I'll ask.

"Yeah, Mom!" she says, sighing loudly, rolling her beautiful eyes.

My Sensitive Son

Life doesn't seem as smooth for my son, Ramel. Ramel is so talented and creative. He builds intricate aircrafts with his Legos and is a gaming wiz. I really want him to know how important he is to me, and I hope that one day soon he'll realize what a wonderful young man he is.

But Ramel is like me. He gets depressed and doesn't want to be bothered. He doesn't listen to almost anything I say and he refuses to go to school. He promises to go to school consistently, but just when it looks like he's getting

the hang of it, he slacks off. He's still angry at me, and he is not functioning in a normal way right now.

I recently found Ramel a new therapist. When we went together, he told the therapist, "All she does is repeat the same stories about what happened to her, yet she continues to allow people to walk all over her!"

"Would you consider yourself to be one of those people, walking all over your mother?" the therapist asked.

Ramel said, "Yeah! Why not? Everyone does!"

Struggling Together

I don't know how completely my children trust me now, but we are more comfortable with each other and we have come a long way. Despite the obstacles that still insist on blocking our paths, we are struggling through together, as a family.

I think my children have seen my persistence in listening to them and in rebuilding our family. It would have been easy, in the face of their hostility, to throw my hands up and say, "Y'all don't need me." But that wasn't true. They needed me to be their advocate, to talk to them, and most of all, to be their caring mother.

For a long time, I didn't think that I deserved my children, but now I know that no one else can be a better mother to them.



ILLUSTRATION BY LEE SAMUEL

When parents are at their wit's end, they sometimes think child welfare can do a better job controlling their teens than they can. Priti Kataria, director of the ACT Project (Adolescents Confronting Transition) for older youth at Lawyers For Children, cautions parents against voluntarily placing teens in foster care:

Sometimes parents decide to seek help from child welfare when they have seen their teen's situation get worse and worse. The child is rebelling, testing, staying out late, not going to school. Parents have a lot of anger. They're exhausted.

At that point, some parents are just done. Some don't even come to court appearances once the child is placed in foster care. But other parents are clearly hoping that the child will get mental health services and structure through foster care placement. Sometimes they hope that being in foster care will give their child a new appreciation for actually being a part of a family.

Some of these are parents who adopted from foster care and are returning those children to foster care now that they're teens. Sometimes foster parents are pressured to adopt, or they adopt without understanding how trauma and foster care placement can affect children when they become teens. Then, when that child starts

acting out, the adoptive parent places that child back in care.

Hit or Miss

Although some young adults in foster care can thrive because they want and need the support services that foster care can provide, foster care placement often falls far short of its promise to help. Sometimes the behaviors that parents want to "cure" will actually get worse. In group homes or residential treatment centers where most older youth wind up, the level of service and supervision is hit or miss. Very often, young people in care will be surrounded by other youth who are in pain and acting out. There's gang involvement. There's theft. There's running away. That kind of environment can affect a teen's behavior.

Many agencies don't have their own mental health staff, either, and rely on local clinics. Teens in care often face the same long waiting lists for mental health services as they would if they were home.

Perhaps most importantly, there's the trauma to the parent-child relationship. A lot of times teens will say, "If I'm here, why should I even bother trying?" Even if they don't show it, placement in foster care can make a youth feel abandoned and create a lifelong struggle to regain confidence and acceptance.

Seek Supports at Home

Some teens really do need the support and services that an appropriate placement can provide and some parents who are ill or otherwise struggling simply must turn to the foster care system for help. Some agencies have in-house staff psychiatrists and psychologists, and some smaller therapeutic settings can provide welcome structure and supervision. However, in most cases, the medicine a parent seeks can often be more harmful than the cure they are hoping for.

For more information about accessing supports for families of teens, see "Taking Back Our Teens" on p. 5.

ABOUT Rise

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and to guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, www.risemagazine.org, help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in parent groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at nora@risemagazine.org or (646) 543-7099 for informa-

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'Relax Your Mind'

I'm trying to keep my cool when my son loses his.

BY JEANETTE VEGA

My son Remi is only 12 but lately he thinks he rules the world. Remi desperately wants to be a teenager, hanging out on the block. When I was a teen, I wasn't even allowed to go to the store alone. If I wanted to hang outside with my friends, my mother would say, "Explain what you will get out of doing that." In the end, I rebelled.

I understand that letting children run loose is not love. Parents who say, "Do what you want" are really saying, "I don't have the energy to deal with you." But I also worry, "Am I being so harsh on Remi that he will lie to me?"

I try to give Remi some space. He is allowed to come and go from school, he can go to the store before dark and he can have as many friends over as he likes. Sometimes I hang outside so he can, too. But when I say no, the mouth starts running: "You're always treating me like a baby! I never get to do anything!"

Thinking of my little boy becoming a teenager scares me. Remi has always been a hyper kid who takes jokes too far. I worry that Remi will get hurt if he starts up with his screaming and goofing off outside. Ours is not a good neighborhood, and jokes don't go over well with everyone. I also worry about the consequences Remi will face in school if he doesn't settle down.

I've taken Remi to counseling many times. I've been told he has ADHD, "slight bipolar" or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, maybe because he was in foster care for three years when he was little. But the only advice I got was, "Distract him with other activities and be patient."

Steps Forward, Steps Back

Sometimes I see signs that Remi is stepping up. Not long ago he said,

"Mom, I think I should get \$25 a week for my allowance."

Immediately his dad and I made a couple jokes, but we realized that he was serious. So we told Remi that he could earn \$5 if he did extra chores around the house. I didn't expect much. Remi knows his promises mean nothing in our house. So I was surprised to see Remi scrub the oven, wipe down the microwave and fridge, or clean the bathroom.

But at times, Remi gets into a childish level like he is 5 again, running and screaming, yelling at me when he doesn't get his way, or just saying things that make no sense.

Trying to Connect

Sometimes I have the urge to back-slap Remi the way my mother slapped me when I was a kid. But I know from experience that beating Remi down won't help him, and I don't want to teach Remi that violence is the key to getting people to do what he wants.

So I fight my own emotions when he drives me crazy, even though his behavior embarrasses and even scares me at times. I tell him, "You really have pushed your luck with me. It would be wise to leave me alone for about 10 minutes." I'll read a book or play a game of spades to relax my mind. Then I can deal with the issue at hand.

I know it's normal that Remi wants to be a kid in some moments and a grown man the next—and that he swears he knows it all! Didn't we all at that point in life?

As Remi grows up, there will be times that he makes bad choices. I hope that I will be able to stay calm and tell him, "It's OK, this is how we learn and grow."

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