

Founded in 2005, Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system. Visit Rise online at: www.risemagazine.org

Rise

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WRITTEN BY
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Generations In Foster Care

When you grow up in foster care and become a mother, your greatest hope is that you'll get to be your child's Mommy. Yet mothers who grew up in foster care are at high risk of having their own children removed.

This is the first issue in a series on what it takes for young mothers who grew up in foster care to build stable families. This issue looks at the painful relationship between child welfare systems and the mothers they helped raise.



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Fight and Flight

Will my family ever be safe from child welfare's reach?

BY STEPHANIE HAUPT

I became pregnant at 18. I was living in Champaign, Illinois, under state custody. I was a runaway from a transitional living placement and had met the man of my dreams.

We were in love and so happy to become parents. Still, I worried. I told my boyfriend all about my involvement with the state. He said we weren't doing anything wrong so I didn't need to be afraid. But I knew the system has a way of grabbing you and ruining your life before you can understand what's happening.

Awestruck By My Son

When Vincent was born, I felt that everything in my life had been preparing me for this child. But Vincent never even came home.

Vincent didn't have a sucking reflex and was in the NICU for 28 days. My boyfriend and I spent every day at the hospital. Sometimes I would sleep

in the waiting room, waiting for visiting hours to start.

About two weeks into my son's hospital stay I was holding my son when my cell phone went off in my pocket. I silenced it by turning it off through my jeans. The nurse told me I had to wash my hands.

"Just a moment," I told her. She demanded, "No, now." As I attempted to get up, still recovering from surgery, she walked over and wrapped her hands around my son's torso and began to lift him up without a word to me—and without attempting to support his head. I panicked. Without thinking, I reacted by tightening my hold on my son and kicking the nurse as hard as I could.

Later I came to think that my experiences in residential care had influenced my reaction. Being in an RTC had taught me how uncaring

staff could be when I was explaining something important. When I saw that nurse not hearing me, I think my mind snapped to thinking I couldn't stop her with words.

But the damage was done. I was escorted off the property. The next day, my boyfriend and I met with child protective services.

Facing CPS

The CPS investigator seemed suspicious of everything we said. She asked my boyfriend, "Do you drink alcohol?" He said, "Yeah, occasionally," to which she replied, "What occasions?" My boyfriend was autistic and did not understand why she didn't understand him. He became irritated and left shortly after the interview began.

As soon as she learned I had previously been in state custody, I could almost feel her mood perk up. At 26 days old, my son was taken into

protective custody from the NICU because “the environment he would be in was injurious to his welfare.” Nothing more specific.

A Broken Soul

During the next year and a half, I was allowed to see my son just once a week. It was brutal. In truth, I never felt like Vincent’s mother after he left the hospital, just the nice lady he saw every now and then.

With the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), it felt like there was no way to do right.

My boyfriend and I got in an argument one night and the next week we were told it would help us if we split up, so we did. Then, in court, it was written, “Mother and Father... still talk to each other regularly” and “this could create a hazardous environment if they continue contact with each other.”

Then, when Vince was 18 months old, I became pregnant again. The Department told me that if I did not sign papers to terminate my parental rights to Vincent, they would be “waiting at the hospital” for my next child.

I was a broken soul. I never wanted to die more in my life. I wished I had been addicted to drugs, something, anything, to give me a reason why I wasn’t good enough. But I signed the papers. All I have now is the hope that someday Vincent will come looking for answers—and my love.

A Second Chance

Then I ran away.

I was afraid that if I didn’t leave Illinois, DCFS would take my next child, too. My second child’s dad ended up in prison while I was pregnant, but his mom and stepdad in South Dakota said they would help me. When I got to Aberdeen, South Dakota, things didn’t go as planned, though. Just before Christmas, I ended up sleeping in my car in a Walmart parking lot.

Finally I called a church and asked if there were any shelters available (there weren’t) but a lovely woman named Sister Lois Ann put me in a hotel for about a week. Then she

got me an apartment and furnished it herself with a bed for me, a crib, changing table, clothes for my baby’s arrival, everything a home needed.

Still, I was afraid of everything in the weeks leading up to Lucas’ birth. I was afraid to give the doctor my medical records. I was afraid to be asked about my Caesarean scar. Driving away from the hospital with Lucas safely in the backseat, I cried and told him how special this moment was.

Afraid to Love

In the months that followed, though, I was not as connected to Lucas as I should have been. I left him in the car if I ran into a gas station—it was easy to detach from his crying and not care. When I left him in the church daycare on Sundays, I didn’t really want to pick him up. I see now that I refused to care about Lucas because I was preparing for the inevitable.

But after about six months of hugs and smiles, midnight feedings, playtime and sleepy cuddles, my ice heart started melting. I danced around, made funny faces and sang in very high pitches to make him smile and laugh at his silly mommy.

He Was Gone

And then, right when I was at my happiest... he was gone.

It happened one morning. Lucas’ dad had gotten out of prison and joined me in South Dakota some months before. He was feeding Lucas. I came into the kitchen to fry up some eggs. Dad put Lucas on the floor to play. At that point, Lucas was only kind-of sitting up and frequently fell over. That morning he fell backward. At first I thought nothing of it. Then I saw his eyes. They were rolling with no sense of direction and his arms didn’t look right. I had seen a seizure before and I knew that’s what this was.

I called 911 frantically. Lucas was taken to the ER and given a CT scan that revealed bleeding on his brain, and then he and I were flown to Sioux Falls to a specialist.

The specialist said an easy way to determine if the brain bleed was

intentional was to do a retina scan. If there was no retinal bleeding they could rule out Shaken Baby Syndrome. I said, “Please do it!” To my horror, my Lucas had retinal bleeding. He was taken into protective custody.

I cried for hours, and am still crying as I type this three months later.

There were so many times I contemplated suicide in the next few months. The thought of someone telling my kids I gave up on them kept me going. During that time, I screamed at everyone but CPS to make sure that, when CPS saw me, I was always pleasant. I also did every service, every evaluation asked of me.

I was distrusting and afraid, but I started to lower my hackles when the workers put real effort into talking to me. Within two months, I was getting unsupervised visits every weekday.

My Baby Is Home

The separation hurt my son, too. Before he was taken, Lucas was so well tempered. But during visits, Lucas would be napping and start crying in his sleep. If I turned from him, he thought I was not coming back and would cry inconsolably.

To show my attorney his behavior,

I scheduled an appointment with her while I had Lucas. My attorney told me she would ask the judge for physical custody—the same as “trial discharge”—at our next court date.

First we had a long Christmas visit. It was fantastic! I had Lucas for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and the day after. We went to his dad’s grandma’s house and he took his first steps! I was on top of the world.

Then, on Feb. 24th, 2014, I was given physical custody of my Lucas! My baby was home and I was so, so happy. During our first week together, Lucas and I just hung out at the apartment in our jammies. I took him everywhere I went, in a carrier strapped to my belly.

Wishing for a Fairy Tale

Through all of this, my son Vincent has been ever present. Every day something reminds me of him. I tried once to fight for Vincent after my rights were terminated, and lost. I would like to continue fighting for him, though I know it’s a far stretch.

As a kid, I was fed fairy tales. Cinderella and all those girls were at their lowest points before something fantastic and beautiful happened. Maybe I’m still wishing for that.

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A Responsibility to Support

Improving how child welfare systems respond to mothers who grew up in their care.

BY TYASIA NICHOLSON AND ANTOINETTE ROBINSON

When you grow up in foster care and have a child, your greatest hope is that you'll get to be your child's Mommy. Your greatest fear is that you'll fail, and your child will feel the same pain you felt. When you lose your mother, you feel like you've lost a part of yourself.

Too often, our fears come true. Few child welfare systems nationwide track removals of children from mothers who have been in foster care, but according to New York City Children's Services, nearly one out of three babies (29 percent) born to mothers in foster care in New York City from 2006-2012 was placed in foster care.

To understand what child welfare systems can do to better support the mothers they helped raise, we interviewed Susan Notkin, associate director at the Center for the Study of Social Policy in New York; Amy Lemley, policy director for the John Burton Foundation in California; and Amelia Franck Meyer, CEO of Anu Family Services in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Q: Why do moms who grew up in foster care lose their kids at such high rates? What responsibility does the child welfare system have to do better by these moms?

Notkin: Many moms have experienced an awful lot of loss and pain, which can trigger painful, confusing feelings when they become parents. They also may not have much support and can find themselves raising their children alone while still trying to grow up themselves. At the same time, moms in care are under scrutiny by foster parents and staff, and by mandated reporters at public agencies after they leave care, which means they are often being watched and judged more than other parents.

Lemley: When a system removes children from parents, that system takes full legal responsibility for those

children. It's unacceptable for it to then stand by while those children have poor outcomes as parents.

One of the first things systems should do is address unintended pregnancies. We see that 1 out of 3 teen girls in foster care has a child by 19, but 2 out of 3 say they didn't mean to get pregnant. Sexuality is complex for everyone, but especially for people who have been abused and neglected. With help, young people can understand what sex and intimacy mean to them, and make choices. But in California, like most states, there are no formal policies on pregnancy prevention for youth in care.

When a young woman does decide to have a baby, too often nothing is done to help her prepare until after the baby is born. Some child welfare systems have begun using maternity specialists to help pregnant girls plan: What will this baby mean for my housing and education? Do I have enough support? If I have issues, like anger, depression, or drug use, how can I begin to address them? More systems should be doing that. Birth shouldn't feel like a crisis.

'We know more than ever how to break the cycle. We just have to start doing it.'

Franck Meyer: In Minnesota and Wisconsin, child welfare systems hire us to work with young mothers as individual coaches. Our goal is to help moms understand that when they lose control, or get so stressed they tune their kids out, their responses are normal given the trauma they've experienced. At those times, they're in survival brain, but

with healing and practice they can get back into thinking brain. Teaching mothers this takes them from feeling like they keep messing up and it's hopeless, to thinking it's a pattern they can predict and begin to change.



ILLUSTRATION BY PANKA CHOWHANG

in all ways. At the same time, we are incredibly clear that we are only going to make a report if the safety concerns are very serious. Otherwise, we bring support to increase safety.

Having your child removed when you've been in care means the worst thing that happened to you is now happening again. It can take superhuman strength to recover from that. When moms don't get the support they need to heal, what makes us think we won't be in the same spot when that child becomes a parent? We know more than ever how to break that cycle. We just have to start doing it.

Notkin: The Center for the Study of Social

Mothers in care are often afraid that admitting to problems may lead to a call to child protective services. Because we're seen as outside the system, moms are more willing to talk to us. Still, trust takes time. When mothers say they don't want us to come for the next session, we say: 'OK, when can I come?' But moms in care have also often been forced into services they don't want, so we try to

Policy is working with child welfare systems around the country to improve services for pregnant and parenting youth in foster care. Right now most systems don't even count the number pregnant and parenting youth in their care. We think they should.

We also think systems ought to provide evidence-based services for mothers, their babies, and mothers and babies together, and help mothers build a support system, with at least one person mothers know they can count on through thick and thin. Mothers in care—like all of us—need support.

give them control. We acknowledge that they are the most important person in their child's life, not us.

As mandated reporters, we have to ensure safety. If a mother is not attending to her baby's cries, that baby might look safe but it's only physically safe. Our goal is to teach moms how to keep their child safe

Lastly, systems need to get much smarter about when they make reports. When there are safety issues, there needs to be a response. But mothers in care shouldn't live in fear that the first response to any concern will be a call to child protection.

Everything Felt Like Nothing

I ran from my feelings and I didn't know how to stop.

BY TYESHA ANDERSON

When you spend too much time as a kid in survival mode—feeling like you have no one to rely on and blocking out the pain whatever ways you can—sometimes you don't realize in time that you have to change.

Alone in the System

I was raised by my grandmother until I was 10, when my mom decided she was done doing drugs and wanted her children. To me, it seemed like one big adventure. But when I was 11, child protective services found us living with my mother even though my grandma still had custody. My brother and I were remanded into care.

I felt like I was all alone in foster care and that I had to take care of my little brother, too.

One night on the way back from a visit, the foster mother was talking about my mother being nothing more than another crackhead. That's when I decided I'd had enough.

When she went upstairs, I picked up my little brother and ran one block, flagged a cab and gave him my mother's address. When my mother opened the door I started to cry. My mother was in pain, too. I think she was most hurt that night when she told us that she had to take us back. It was about a year and a half until we were allowed to go home.

Running Wild

By that time I was a teenager, though. I had seen some things and gone through some hurts and the relationship between my mom and me went totally wrong. Eventually she gave me \$1.50—what the subway cost in those days—and told me not to come back. My life became a series of crazy adventures. Underneath, I was in pain.

First I was in the streets, then I went to Covenant house, then to a group



Tyesha Anderson with her daughter.

home. Then I ran away and became a stripper. Everything I was doing felt like nothing. The sex, the stripping, the running the streets were all a means of survival.

At 16, I got pregnant with twins boys. I was happy to finally mean something to someone. For a time, I also found safety. My boyfriend's sister became my angel and took me under her wing. She was my friend, my sister, my mother:

But when she moved away, life

both using crack and he was putting his hands on me. Life was crazy.

I Couldn't Stop Using

It was during that time that child welfare came back into my life. My worker was young, like me, and I felt like she understood me and tried to be good to me. I was living in an apartment with no heat, and preventive services made sure my apartment got fixed. When my son was born, our blood tests came back positive but my worker didn't take my baby. She gave me a chance to stop.

My biggest regret is not being able to stop using drugs and deal with all that had happened in my life in time to be my children's mother.

became a whirlwind again. When my twins were about 2, I started using cocaine. At 19, I got pregnant again and moved in with the father, who was also an addict. He was selling drugs but he wasn't making enough so I prostituted. Pretty soon we were

At first I did. I entered a program. I'd take my baby and they'd feed us. I felt safe and supported. I wasn't prostituting. I had friends. I had normalcy. I was happy. I loved it there.

But I didn't last long. Eventually I lost

my housing, my boyfriend started hitting me again, I started using cocaine again, I gave my twins to my grandma, and I went crazy partying to forget everything that had happened in my life.

Sudden Realization

The moment I saw the child welfare van and the cops, I realized for the first time that I was going to lose my children.

I felt like somebody had ripped out my heart. I told myself, "You let it happen. You did it. You're a prostitute. Your boyfriend smacks you around. You live on the street. At least when you had your kids you were somebody's mother. Now you're not."

I tried to run away but I knew I couldn't so I went and faced my worker. Because she was my friend she didn't take my baby out my arms. She asked the officer to take him.

I Learned Too Late

After that I tried to stop using but I wasn't ready deal with all that had happened in my life. Finally, the courts decided too much time had passed. I had two choices: Either I could give my rights away with the agreement that I could be in my children's lives, or I could refuse to sign the "conditional surrender" and never see my children again. It broke my heart, but given my choices, I chose to sign.

Today I have five years clean and my husband is my rock. He is the safety that helped me stop running. I also have a child at home, and I continue to see my other children, who were adopted.

Still, I often feel like less of a person because I gave my children up. My biggest regret is not being able to be their mother. When you don't know anything but running, sometimes the hardest thing in the world is learning how to stop.

‘When Someone Takes Care of Us, It’s Easier For Us to Take Care of Our Children’

Recommendations from young mothers who grew up in foster care.

Since 2012, Rise has worked with or interviewed more than 40 mothers who grew up in foster care. Here, five New York City mothers share their perspectives on how child welfare can better partner with parents who grew up in care. Chitara Plasencia, 17, Jennie Alvarado, 18, and TyAsia Nicholson, 21, are members of a support group for young mothers at Lawyers For Children, which provides legal and social work advocacy for young people in foster care. Piaadora Footman, 29, and Lashonda Murray, 29, are from Rise.

1. If you want our children to be safe, make it safer for us to ask for help. And keep reaching out with support.

Chitara: The other day I had a fight with my baby’s father. My baby was not in the room, but when my caseworker found out, she said to me: “Your actions make me question whether you’re fit to be a mother.” I started feeling very depressed, very anxious and jumpy. I told my caseworker I was thinking of going on medication. Again she questioned whether I was fit to be a mother. I don’t think it’s fair to get treated like that when I’m asking for help. If the child welfare system wants our children to be safe, it needs to make sure we feel safe asking for help.

TyAsia: When you’re in foster care, you can feel like you can’t trust anybody and nobody is going to be there for you.

When I started going to the support group at Lawyers For Children (LFC), the leader of the group, Mary Ellen, would call or text me after hours or on the weekend just to make sure I was OK. If I told her I felt like banging my head into the wall, she would talk it through with me and help me calm down. Mary Ellen also opened up so many opportunities for me. She even helped me become a youth ambassa-

dor for LFC, which means I speak to professionals about my experiences as a youth in foster care.

It’s important for people who care about us to keep reaching out, even if we don’t respond at first. When someone takes care of us, it’s easier for us to take care of our children.

2. Connect us to help outside the system.

Jennie: I’ve been in foster care since I was 3 years old but I’ve never run to my agency to tell them anything. When I do need something, I see a doctor, therapist, or psychiatrist outside the system. Why? I don’t want anything I say to be used against me.

Many moms don’t trust the system. Caseworkers should help those moms get connected to outside help, so at least we’re getting help from somewhere. Before we leave care, we should also know what help is in our community.

3. Let us hear from parents who have been there and help us connect to our peers.

I would have liked to hear from parents like the mother I am today. We can tell young moms, ‘You do have a future.’

Pia: When I had a child, I wanted to be a mom so bad but I just wasn’t ready. I had my baby out at night while I was selling drugs. I knew it was wrong but I needed to survive, and I was afraid that if I told anyone I needed help, they’d think I couldn’t do it. I would have liked to hear from parents like the mother I am today.

We can tell young moms: “We went through this, and you do have a future.” By telling our stories, we can also help caseworkers and foster par-



ILLUSTRATION BY DARTON TOWN

an organization called Robin’s Nest doing home-visiting with me. When my relationship turned violent, my worker told me: “I have to make the phone call. Your relationship is bad for you, and either you’re going to get hurt or your kids are.” I was so scared but I didn’t feel betrayed. I told her, “I respect that you are telling me.”

Reports are always scary, but we are less scared when there is communication.

5. Remember that we want to be good parents.

Lashonda: I was sexually abused as a child, and when my son was born I was afraid that if I rubbed his back, I was seducing him, and if I kissed and hugged him, I was molesting him. With help, I learned the difference between good and bad touch, and now I give my children lots of hugs and kisses. When I ask my children, “Do you know I love you?” and they say, “We know,” that’s the icing on the cake.

Most of us struggle with how our childhoods affect our parenting, even if we don’t want to admit it. It’s important for people who want to help us to understand that.

Pia: My past makes me want to know my children in ways I was never known and play with them in ways I didn’t get to play. When it snowed, we went outside and made snowmen and snow angels.

I went to lots of parenting classes that just made me feel like giving up. What I finally learned was to keep trying different approaches and keep finding different ways of getting help. I used to be afraid to be a parent. I’ve had to reset my mind so that I’m no longer afraid.

ents better understand what younger moms are going through.

TyAsia: Moms who grew up in foster care should also have a chance to have fun with their kids and other young families. When I started going to support group, I didn’t trust opening up to the other moms. But when I saw my son making friends, that helped me. Sometimes our kids teach us that if they can trust, we can too.

4. Tell us before you make a report.

Lashonda: Too often, mothers don’t know they’re being reported until someone is knocking at our door. That leaves us living in fear.

When I had my third child, I had

Support Without Judgment

I didn't want to get services from a system set up to judge me.

BY RHONNEIL COOPER

This past summer, another young mother in my foster home got child protective services called on her. That got me watched, too.

The first time it happened, it was 10 p.m. I was in bed asleep with my 2-month-old son. The crib was a few steps away, but I was breastfeeding every two hours and I did not want to keep getting up.

"Knock, knock, knock," I heard on my bedroom door.

"Who is it?" I woke up grumpy.

"It's me," said my friend. "The lady wants to see you."

When I opened the door, the investigator was there with a notebook in her hand. She peeked in, wrote something down and said to me, "Hello, Rhonneil. Do you know you're not supposed to be in the bed with your baby?"

She was perfectly nice about it. But after she left, I felt scared and angry. I thought, "What if she reports me?"

My Biggest Fear

I am 16 years old, and my son Malachi is 6 months old.

The day my son was born, babies were crying all around, but as I looked at Malachi lying there wrapped in a white blanket with his wondering eyes, and I touched his tiny fingers, all I could focus on was bonding with my baby boy.

When I was 1, my mom left Grenada and moved to the United States. After that, I was raised by my grandmother, who took great care of me. But she died when I was 6. When I was 8, I came to the U.S. But both my mother and aunt worked all the time, so I was just there with no one to show me any kind of love. I was 13 when I went into foster care.

When I got pregnant with Malachi, I promised that he would never experience the same loss and loneliness.

The Ache to Change

When you're in foster care, though, you feel watched all the time and you see so many mothers lose their babies.

In one home, my foster mother always used to tell my friend what to do with her baby. She'd open the door and scream, "Lexxi, give the baby a bath." Lexxi would usually shout back, "She took a shower yesterday, she don't need to shower!" That's when our foster mother would say, "You're being disrespectful!" The worst part is, if you have an argument with your foster parent, they can report you.

Take the situation of a girl I know, Tyesha. One night when her baby was only a few weeks old, Tyesha told me, her foster mother came into her room and said: "You can't be in the bed with the baby, you know that, Tyesha." Tyesha got so mad that she started throwing things at her foster mother while holding her baby.

Going to my probation officer while I was pregnant made me realize I needed to learn to control my anger or I'd be in danger of losing my baby.

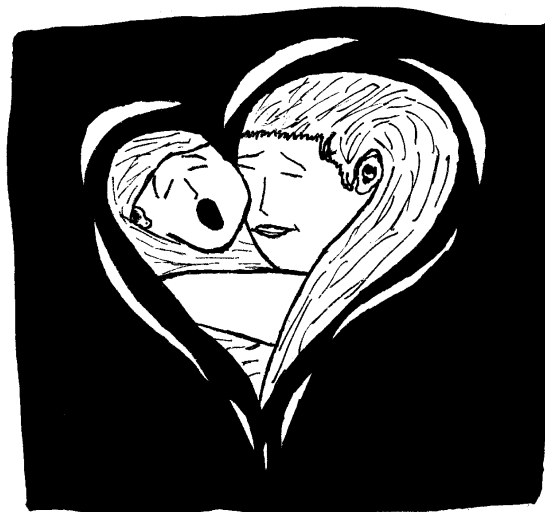
The foster mother reported her and she wound up being separated from her baby for six months.

Then there's Tiny, a girl in my group home. Tiny was always so depressed. Every day she dressed in the same

baggy blue sweats with her head tie on. All she would do is sit at the computer on Facebook looking at beautiful daughter she was separated from, eating White Castle burgers, drinking cranberry juice and crying.

I Got Myself Help

When I was pregnant, I decided that if I wanted to make sure nobody ever took my baby, I'd better go to therapy.



Before my baby was born, I'd get into big fights every few weeks, usually because one of the other girls stole something from me. One time I pulled a knife on a boy who was trying to start a fight with me, and

because right after I moved to the U.S., I went to therapy in school. It helped me to have someone to talk to.

But I wasn't going to speak to the therapist at my agency. If I did, it was too likely that whatever I said would get out to other people at the agency. And I didn't want to get services from a system that is set up to judge me.

Luckily, my worker at the agency understood and helped me get connected to a therapist outside the agency. That therapist was also a mandated reporter, but I felt better knowing there was more of a separation between her and the system. She helped me calm down my anger and focus on what matters to me: my son or letting out my rage.

'She Spoke to Me as a Friend'

After my son was born, I continued to get support from outside agencies. I think more of us need help from people outside the system who know how to help young mothers without making us feel judged.

Brooklyn Young Mothers helped me get back into school and connected me to Rise.

A visiting nurse also visited my son and me once a week for the first few months of his life. She made sure my son and I were healthy, gave me practical advice and spoke to me as a friend. She would even watch Malachi for me while I showered.

At the time I felt drained and exhausted. Turning on the hot water, I'd stand in the steam falling asleep. Just having that time to myself made a big difference.

that got me put on probation. Going to my probation officer while I was pregnant is what made me realize I needed to learn to control my anger or I'd be in danger of losing my baby.

I knew therapy could help me,

Reducing the Risk

Mothers in foster care need to know what's in their case file and address risks.

BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

Many of us who grew up in foster care feel like the child welfare system is just waiting for us to mess up, and according to the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law, 77% of lawyers who responded to a recent survey said they believe that mothers in foster care are separated from their children for less serious allegations than other mothers.

Here, Jessica Weidmann, a lawyer at the Center for Family Representation in New York City, and Benita Miller, Deputy Commissioner for Family Permanency Services at New York City's Children's Services, explain what mothers—and the child welfare system—can do to keep children safe at home.

Q: What are the most common reasons that mothers in foster care have their children removed?

Weidmann: A lot of mothers who grew up in care say they don't understand why they're being charged, especially for neglect. They say they always make sure their child is fed, has clothes, has a place to sleep. But under the law, there are a lot of other behaviors that can be considered neglect and it's really important to understand that. If you grew up in foster care, child protective services also has information about you that it doesn't have about other mothers, and that can affect your case.

Miller: Many young mothers in foster care are subject to investigations and removals because of allegations of "inadequate guardianship," or lack of supervision. Sometimes it's the result of leaving foster care without permission, with or without the baby, without making proper child care arrangements. It's very natural to want to connect your baby to extended family, to their fathers and to your community, but as a system, we need to make sure that children know their roots and are safe.

Weidmann: Under the law, moms in care have full legal rights to make decisions for their children—including whom they visit. But the agency you're in and your foster parent can also be held responsible if something happens to your child. That can lead them to call in a case if you go AWOL and they don't know where you are, or they think you may be somewhere unsafe. Once you become a parent, it's much more important to think about how you interact with foster care staff and foster parents. If you can't agree on where it's OK to take your child, you should talk with your lawyer.

Miller: Other issues that can lead to allegations are untreated mental illness, substance abuse and domestic violence.

Weidmann: A report may be called in for something that doesn't seem that significant, like fighting with your boyfriend. But if child protective services sees a diagnosis in your case file like oppositional defiance disorder or bipolar disorder, and you're not complying with mental health services, that allegation can snowball into a case that's much harder to fight.

Q: What can mothers do to reduce the chance of an investigation or removal?

Weidmann: Before they ever have a case, mothers in foster care should talk to their lawyer—the lawyer that has represented them as a child—to better understand their risks and rights and get help. It's incredibly important to address any issues you feel you have, or that have been raised with you. If you've experienced physical violence with the father of your child, have you

received counseling to address that? If you have a problem with drug use, have you considered treatment?

Mothers especially need to understand the mental health history in their case file. Many times people just stop taking medication or going to therapy because it wasn't helping. But if you've told a psychiatrist that medication is not working for you and made an alternative plan, or found a therapist you do like talking to, you'll be in better shape if you do get a case. If you don't agree with the diagnosis or treatment plan, you can get a second opinion.

In New York City, foster care agencies are required to offer preventive services to mothers in foster care—things like parenting classes, or parent-child therapy. Getting help can be very hard, because of the fear that information will be used against you. But there are ways to get help that are safer. If you don't trust your agency, find help outside your agency.

your child to be placed with that foster parent if your child is removed.

Q: What steps can foster care agencies take to reduce investigations and removals?

Miller: At ACS, the teen specialist unit provides support and resources to young parents in foster care before a crisis hits. I encourage young parents to reach out to us. We want to connect young parents to education and employment resources and to early learning activities for babies. Everyone wants a smart baby. The city's early learning system can open up opportunities for your baby to learn and open up networks of other parents for you to connect to.

If mothers in foster care are investigated for neglect or abuse, we also have someone from the teen specialists unit attend "initial child safety conference" in order to connect mothers to support and to bring a

trauma focus and developmental lens to the conference.

ACS also has hired three young parents to go out into the community to connect with other young parents in care and let them know about resources. We have about 250 young mothers in foster care—and that

number has dropped in the last 10 years—and our aim is to impact all of our young parents. We're identifying fathers of children in foster care and providing them with support so our young mothers can safely co-parent.

As a result of all these efforts, last year we saw a slight downward tick in the number of investigations of mothers in foster care. We see that as very promising.



ILLUSTRATION BY IRONIA RATH O'HALEY

Ask other parents what has helped them. You can also ask service providers directly what might lead a program to make a report. It's important to remember that not getting help is also a risk.

If a case is called in, try to get support from past lawyers, counselors, mentors, foster parents, staff or teachers. If you had a good relationship with a foster parent, it may be possible for

From Enemy to Ally

Because my caseworker accepted me, I was able to believe in myself.

BY LASHONDA MURRAY

From ages 8 through 18, I was a foster child. I was in so many homes that I can't remember them all. Some of my foster parents abused their authority. I didn't know if my real parents loved me. I felt like everyone was against me.

I was 17 and at the hospital for a suicide attempt (my last) when I found out I was pregnant. I felt overwhelmed and so ashamed. I couldn't take care of myself. How was I going to care for this baby? I had grown up with so much shame that I didn't know how I could bear any more.

From the beginning, though, I wanted to prove that I could break that rusty chain of dysfunction. Reaching out for help was one way I could do that.

Learning to Nurture

When my first son was born, a worker from a home-visiting program came every two or three days and taught me how to love him. She said, "You can't just feed him, change him and leave him in his crib. You have to show him affection." I looked at her like, "What does that mean?" But over time I learned how to cuddle him, and to appreciate the amazing things he would do. I found I could give love to someone who also loved me.

I had two more children. As they got older, I sought out parenting groups and went to therapy. My children looked surprised when I finally started talking and not yelling so much. Over time, I began to actually feel calmer.

Losing Hope

But when my children were 8, 3 and 1, their father started drinking, and then a cycle of domestic violence started. He called me names and threatened me. Eventually he assaulted me so seriously I wound up at the hospital.

In all, the violence lasted for about a year. I felt devastated. My childhood had been filled with so much hopelessness that when things started to go wrong again, I didn't know how to hold on to hope. I started yelling at the kids, saying things like, "You all make me sick. I wish I could run away. Nobody cares about me."

My kids were also scared for me. They didn't want to go to school because they thought I wouldn't be OK. My daughter didn't even want to nap. My oldest son started acting up and his grades went from B's and C's to D's and F's. But I was so ashamed that I just put on a happy face for the world so no one would ask any questions.

From Enemy to Support

Then, in June 2012, New Jersey's Department of Youth and Family Services showed up. As the investigators checked my children in the other room, I felt so vulnerable. After they left, I told my kids, "They're here to take you away. Never put your trust in the enemy."

That night in bed, I realized how much I sounded like my parents. I felt like DYFS' arrival was the ultimate proof that I'd failed to break that chain.

But to my surprise, my caseworker became one of my main supports.

From the beginning she showed me respect. When she walked into our home, she didn't turn her nose up

at it. Instead, she sat down on our ripped furniture seemingly without any thought. She took time to build a relationship with me. She helped with the practical things, like getting beds for my children. She advised me to go back to therapy. She showed me the good in myself that I just couldn't see.

can't be here. Put it this way, either you're going to protect your kids from domestic violence or we will." I felt that her being blunt was her way of respecting me.

Eventually I saw for myself that his attitude hadn't changed, and I ended my relationship and got sole custody of my children.

Through it all, the fact that my caseworker stuck by me gave me hope.

Making Progress

Now I am trying to make my children's lives as positive as possible again. I go to their school events and try to give them the security they didn't have when I was overwhelmed by domestic violence. Still, sometimes I think my children and I need more support. When your childhood is filled with so much pain, trauma and betrayal, it's hard to create a family that feels free of those things.



Lashonda Murray with her family.

She also stuck with me as I struggled to decide what place my children's father should have in our lives.

Straight Talk

After DYFS showed up, my children's father got locked up for domestic violence. I felt very sad, very lost. Still, I decided he'd hurt me too much and I pressed charges. But when he came out of prison and went into rehab, I knew I wanted to try again.

My caseworker didn't tell me I was wrong but she gave me straight talk. She said, "He needs to get help or he

My older son, in particular, seems angry that his life has had pain and not as much fun as other children. He's in counseling but I wish I had someone to help me help him really address his feelings.

Still, at least I am no longer in a place where I couldn't give my children love or protect them adequately. I am so thankful to my caseworker for not judging me. Her acceptance helped me believe I could continue to make progress for myself and my family, even if that progress happens slowly.

'I Made a Mistake' Not 'I Am a Mistake'

How parents—and the child welfare system—can stand up to shame.

Ambrosia Eberhardt, Danielle Goodwin and Heather Cantamessa are "Veteran Parents" with the Washington State Parent Advocate Network, a project of The Children's Home Society. Here, they explain the importance of addressing shame in child welfare:

Q: Parent advocates and child welfare administrators in Washington state have begun a series of panel discussions on shame. Why shame?

Heather: All of us are parent advocates who had our own children placed in foster care. In the past year, we've been really diving in to Brené Brown's work on shame and reflecting on parents' experiences of shame in the child welfare system—how we spin out of control when we're experiencing shame, how that's triggered, what our behaviors look like when we're in a shame storm, and what we can do to build resiliency.

So many parents come from a place of shame. It's not, "I made a mistake," but, "I am the mistake, I am worthless, I am unable to do anything different, this is who I am." When the system comes in, so often it reaffirms everything you're afraid of because it's all about your deficiencies.

Before the child welfare system even knocked on my door I knew my family wasn't like other families. I saw in my kids' eyes that they weren't getting what they needed from me. But people who feel ashamed feel like the problem is not with their circumstances but with who they are as people. I didn't believe I could make changes to make things better.

Ambrosia: Being in the system reinforces the idea that either you're OK or you're a failure, and parents feel like every failure is proof that

they're failures and can't make it.

I grew up with parents who were addicts and then I got into relationships with men who were very violent with me. I always felt like I had to be perfect to counteract everything that was wrong in my life. When I got into the system, that shame was so reinforced. I felt like if I wasn't perfect I was never going to see my kids again. After my case was closed, when I hit bumps in the road, I hid my



problems instead of reaching out for help. Because of that, I almost did lose my children. That's when I finally learned that you can't let shame make you hide.

Danielle: If you grew up in foster care, your mission when you have a baby is to never repeat that. You have this fantasy of how things are going to be. Then when you see your own children's lives unravel the way yours did, you feel so helpless.

My first daughter was the result of a rape and I entered foster care with her when I was 15. I always felt responsible for what was done to me, and I felt ashamed entering care. But I also felt like maybe somebody would finally see that I needed help. When there was no real help offered, I felt like there was nothing for me to

do but numb my feelings with drugs. When I lost my children, my shame was overwhelming. I felt like I was destined to fail.

Q: As parent advocates, how do you help parents overcome shame?

Danielle: I don't talk about what's wrong with parents—I talk about what's happened to them. If you spent your whole life in foster care



Danielle Goodwin, Ambrosia Eberhardt and Heather Cantamessa with their families.

and never had healthy parenting role models, and now you're struggling raising your child, there is nothing wrong with you. You're just repeating what you learned. Everyone does that. But I learned new skills to care for my children, and other parents can too. I also try to lift parents' strengths for them, so they can see and begin to use them.

It can also help to change our ideas of what success looks like. When you grow up in foster care, you assume that everyone else grew up in per-

fect families. But successful people have struggles. I let parents know that struggling isn't proof that they're failing. It is their job to find the supports that can help them with those struggles.

Heather: Finding those supports can be very hard, especially when you're afraid you'll be judged rather than supported; when you don't trust yourself to pick people who are safe; or you feel like you're in it alone. I was taught to fear the system from the time I was young. My mother ran away from horrific domestic violence and she always told us, "You cannot talk about what happened or what is going on. If they know they will take you away and we will never see each other again."

The child welfare system came into my life three times. Each time I knew I needed help, but I really believed I would be punished if anyone saw how much I was struggling. It was only when I was 28 and I had my last case that I learned: Don't keep secrets. Ask for help when you need it. If you ever want to be free of the system, you have to begin to open up and build a support network.

One way to do it is to take little risks, reveal little things to someone who seems safe. When nothing bad happens, you begin to say, "Hey, maybe I can trust this person."

Ambrosia: We encourage parents to have one safe person they can talk to when they're in trouble. Not one of us stayed clean after we got our kids back, and we needed to tell on ourselves to get better. Because we had built healthy support systems, we were able to recover quickly.

But it's also the system's job to make it safe for parents to ask for help. They have to make sure parents are supported, not punished or shamed, for bringing a problem forward.

'I Can See His Happiness Just By Watching

My foster parents showed my son and me how to feel safe.

BY RAILEI GIRARD

I am 19 years old, married with two sons. I am surrounded by love and family. However it was not always like this for me.

I am a foster care alumni. I first went into care at 3 and exited for good at 18. When I was in care, I felt I had no one to depend on. I couldn't even be certain I would stay in one house for more than a week.

I was also sexually abused, both in care and in my family. I was beaten, too—in a foster home with a belt, and in my biological home with hangers and switches. In one foster home I was put in a dog kennel to punish me.

Over time I developed night terrors, which were like re-living everything bad I had gone through. I woke up breathless, covered in sweat. Sometimes I would be screaming. The worst part was knowing that if I got up, I would be made to go back to bed alone.

What Did They Want?

Then, when I was 16, I moved in with a foster family that was determined to love me.

I met them through their daughter, who went to my high school. When I first went to live with them it was close to Christmas. They took me to all of their outings and parties and even their annual ski trip. I had a hard time believing they could treat me like this without any type of return, though I also couldn't figure out what I had that they could possibly want.

The most difficult relationship was with my foster mother. As time progressed, I continued to think she must have some other motive. Even



ILLUSTRATION BY KATE PARENTIN

when she was doing something nice I regarded it with disinterest. I yelled a lot and was just plain rude.

Pregnant and Enraged

During this time, I met a man through my foster parents' daughter. He worked at a convenience store. I used to go on walks in the park near my house when night terrors kept me awake, and as we started talking

my knowledge or permission when I was taking heavy sleeping medication. I realized that when I came out pregnant. Pregnancy wasn't something I was ready for and didn't think I ever wanted.

When I found out I was pregnant, I couldn't breathe. I was overwhelmed with raw emotions: pain, anger, confusion. I didn't feel I could handle an

I've had to get over the idea that people are all bad and all they will do is bring harm.

more and more he would join me. He told me it was because he worried about me. It was nice to feel like someone finally cared.

But then he had sex with me without

abortion. I already suffered from PTSD and bipolar disorder. I was also sure that everyone would judge me and not believe me if I explained how my son was conceived, so I kept it a secret. Inside, I felt I would never be

able to depend on anyone.

Letting No One In

I took a long time for my foster parents to prove to me that wasn't true.

I was in their home for all of my pregnancy. After I gave birth to my son, I went back to school, and I also found a job in order to make a better life for my son and me. It was very hard. After school, I'd pick my son up from day care, go home and get ready for work. Then I would go to work until between 8 p.m. and 2 a.m., often leaving my son with my foster parents. Then my schedule would start all over.

I appreciated that I could depend on my foster parents to watch my son when I couldn't. But when I was around, I would not let anyone in the house help me with my son. I would always

remind my foster parents that they weren't his grandparents.

It wasn't that I was afraid they would try to take him from me. I'd done research and knew my rights. I was afraid of my son not wanting me. I was afraid of him loving someone else and choosing them over me.

I also was afraid of how difficult it was at first for me to attach to my son. My son was born in the midst of so much anger and pain. It was hard for me to fall in love with him like everyone kept telling me I would. But that just made me more stubborn not to let anyone in.

A New Respect

When my foster parents tried to tell me how to care for my son, I felt like they were trying to make me do it their way, not mine. If he cried and

Him'

they thought they knew better, they would correct me. They would tell me when to burp him, or what to do when he wouldn't sleep. Every time they said I needed to do this or that, I felt judged.

I felt like I needed to prove to myself that I could be a mother and that my son needed me. So one night after a fight with my foster mother, I moved out. I managed on my own for two months before life got complicated and I moved back in.

Those two months gave me a new respect for all my foster family did for me. When I returned, they also began to treat me more like a mother who could take care of her own baby. That allowed me to open up more to their help.

Open to Love

As we opened up to each other, I came to appreciate that my son was surrounded by love in a way I'd never been.

When my foster parents held my son, their faces lit up. They'd read books to him and play patty cake and talk in stupid voices to make him laugh. They'd also buy him clothes and spoil him.

For some reason, I didn't feel threatened by it. It's strange, because even today when my son is around other people, I sometimes feel insecure about my bond with him. But seeing my son get that love made me feel so good. Actually, their love helped me feel more confident as a mother. I finally felt I was doing things right. I really can't describe how special it was that his life was so different than mine was as a child.

'Mom' and 'Dad'

After a few months, I decided to move out on my own again. This time, it was out of confidence. My foster parents helped me with it all. My foster mother even threw me a housewarming party.

After I moved out, they would invite me for dinner. They would call just to ask how we were and offer assistance. It meant so much because it wasn't something they had to do.

That's when my feelings really changed. I felt there must be something in me that was worth holding on to. My foster parents said they loved me, and whether I believed them or not, they were determined to show me.

Finally, I started calling them my parents. At first I mostly did it behind their backs, because it was easier than explaining to other people that they were my foster parents. As time went on, though, I began to call them Mom and Dad to their faces. It fit with all they had done for me.

Surrounded by Love

Now I've come to want as many people to love my son as possible. The most important hurdle I've had to get over is the idea that people are all bad and all they will do is bring harm.

I still often get nervous that I will surround us with negative people who will use us or take advantage of us. But I've learned how it feels to be with people who are safe.

When I see my son smile, giggle, run and play, say hi to people, or ask to play with family and friends, I feel that I can relax. He's safe. I can see his happiness just by watching him.

Mothering the Mother

How foster parents and staff can strengthen mother-child bonds.

The Ackerman Institute's Center for the Developing Child and Family in New York has partnered with New York City Children's Services to train foster parents and staff at mother-child residences, and is beginning trainings in Washington D.C. Here, Martha Edwards, the Center's director, explains how staff and foster parents can support the mother-child bond:

After a baby is born, staff and foster parents sometimes look at moms struggling and find it easier to just take over. That's understandable because these adults may be more experienced as parents. But when that happens, mothers can wind up feeling less confident and less connected to their babies.

In our trainings, we encourage staff and foster parents to provide moms just enough help but not more. We also encourage them to think of their jobs as connecting with the mother, not with the baby.

We introduce the concept of "parallel process," which means that staff and foster parents provide the same kind of support to young mothers that they'd like to see mothers give their babies. Staff and foster parents often say moms should be more responsive to their babies, or try harder

start a conversation. In the conversation, the mom was able to explain that the middle of the night was a scary time when she used to wait for the person who sexually abused her: Going to sleep was the last thing she wanted to do. That understanding helped the foster mother be a lot more supportive and a lot less judgmental. Once mothers in foster care have support, they're better able to focus on the relationship with their babies.



ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD CORTIZ

When staff and foster parents just take over, mothers can wind up feeling less confident and less connected to their babies.

to understand their feelings. We ask them: "What are you doing to read that mom's cues and respond to her? What are you doing to learn what that mom is feeling?"

One foster mother told us, "The teen mom in my home is up all night on the phone. Then she has a hard time getting up for her child." We helped her become curious about that, and

If they decide they have to make a report, we advocate that they let the mom know exactly what they are going to report, have her sit with them while they make the report, and let the person receiving the report know they have discussed it with the mom. That can help preserve the relationship even through a very difficult process.

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 print and online magazine (www.risemagazine.org) helps 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.

This issue developed out of Rise's "My Story, My Life" writing workshop project for young mothers who grew up in foster care. Since 2012, "My Story, My Life" has been supported by the Child Welfare Fund, Viola W. Bernard Foundation, Dammann Fund and Pinkerton Foundation. Writing workshops and focus groups have been held at the Albert Einstein Infant-Parent Court

Project, Brooklyn Family Defense Project, Inwood House, Lawyers for Children, and at Rise itself. Chicago Family Defence Center also referred a writer. Thank you to all of our generous partners on this project.

"My Story, My Life" participants have presented their stories at a NYC Children's Services Convening on Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Foster Care and a Center for Family Representation forum on young mothers and mental health. If you are interested in bringing young mothers to present at your agency, please contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy: nora@risemagazine.org.

Rise is a partner project of the Fund for the City of New York. Major supporters include the Child Welfare Fund, Dammann Fund, Graham Windham, North Star Fund, NYC Children's Services and Pinkerton Foundation.

Acknowledged

It helped me heal when child welfare officials said, 'I'm sorry.'

BY TAHITIA FOGGIE



Tahitia and her daughters.

I wrote to his secretary. Next I wrote to the commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children's Services. I wrote about my abuse and explained that I wanted to help the system do better at protecting children. No one acknowledged my e-mails. Maybe they had good reason, but I felt overlooked, like I did when I was a child and my abuse went unnoticed by the system that was supposed to protect me.

People Who Care

Still, I kept looking for ways to speak up about what I'd been through. I began writing for Rise, and last March, I sent one of my stories, a poem, and a letter to child welfare officials in Texas, where I was living and where my daughter entered foster care.

When my oldest daughter was taken into foster care, I had to confess. I had to speak to people who thought the worst of me. I had to take responsibility for my actions even though I didn't understand what I had done wrong.

What I'd done was encourage my young nieces, nephews, cousins and my boyfriend's kids to experiment sexually during a game of Truth or Dare. Growing up, I was sexually abused so many times that I really didn't understand what was right or wrong in sex. Years later, after I found a good therapist and I did understand, I reached out to each child I'd harmed to ask forgiveness. I wanted them to know: "There was nothing wrong with you. The problem was with me."

A few days later, I received an email from the executive director of Prevent Child Abuse Texas thanking me for wanting to join the fight to end child abuse and asking me if I would like to attend their conferences. I also received a letter from a child welfare official in Austin. She wrote: "I am so very, very sorry for your extremely painful experiences as a child! It is truly sad when agencies of help and service fail miserably!" She also invited me to volunteer with her agency.

Looking for a Healing Word

After I did that, I wanted the same healing for myself from the foster care system, where I spent my entire childhood and where I experienced tremendous abuse. I had grown up feeling blamed for everything I suffered and like there was something wrong with me.

I am still waiting for the New York City agency and the system I spent my childhood in to apologize for all that I suffered. That would make the biggest difference to me. Still, having someone in the child welfare system acknowledge that what happened to me was real has helped me feel less responsible for my own suffering. It also showed me that there are people in this system that care, and that I, too, can have a role in making life better for children in it, despite my history.

So two years ago, I reached out. First I wrote to the CEO of the agency I was a ward of from 1976-1993. Then

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