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# Rise

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WRITTEN BY  
PARENTS IN THE  
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

## Someone to Turn To

Many struggling parents feel very alone, and isolation can put parents and children in jeopardy. The shame of a child welfare case can shatter relationships even further.

In this issue, parents describe how people they trusted inside and outside the system helped them stabilize their families—and why trust and peer support are critical components of any system that truly supports children's well-being.

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James with his daughters, Jayme and Sheryl

## A Step in My Direction

I wanted to be left alone, but kindness helped me find my way.

BY JAMES X. SUMROW

My kids were taken into custody in 2007. At the time, Jayme was 2 and Sheryl was 3. My kids loved to be with me. I rode a bike with a trailer attached to the back that the kids loved to ride in. They would cry when I went somewhere by myself.

I never, ever wanted to hurt my kids. But I was also using meth every day and selling it.

### A Hijacked Brain

I grew up in a home with parents who were good to us kids. I was into sports and BMX racing, but at 12 I drank a beer in our backyard, and that's when I thought I'd arrived. I moved on to weed and coke and eventually meth. My parents did everything they could to keep me on track, and I managed to finish high school, go to barber college and get a job in my dad's shop. But all my money went to drugs.

By the time my kids were taken, I was living with them in my barbershop and spending my time going up and down alleys stealing copper and aluminum to sell for dope. I had a house but couldn't live there because I got caught running electricity illegally, so the electric company cut off my power.

My kids had nice clothes and toys, and they ate pretty well. But there were also many times when I'd spent all my money on drugs and they had to eat ramen noodles. Other times I put them in situations they shouldn't have been in. One time a guy who owed me money came into my shop and tried to hit me with a big wrench. I picked up a pipe and hit him in the head with my kids right there.

When my kids weren't with me, they lived with their mother. She and I fought all the time. Still, I thought

that if everyone would just mind their business, my life would be OK. I thought what I really needed was for everyone to just leave me alone.

### Allegations of Drug Abuse

Then one day I took some dope over to a motel room where my kids and their mother were staying with a guy who was also selling. I sold him some dope, visited my kids for a few minutes and left.

The next day, my kids' mother called and told me the guy had kicked her out, accusing her of stealing dope. Later that day both my daughters started vomiting. I thought they had caught something. But soon after, child protective services contacted my kids' mother, saying there were allegations of drug abuse around my kids, and when they tested my kids, they tested positive for methamphetamines at very high levels. It wasn't my kids'

mother who took the dope: My kids ate it.

## **My World Fell Apart**

When my children went into custody, my world fell apart.

I didn't want to think of my kids staying with people they didn't know, wanting to be with Mom and Dad. I thought all the time of how my kids were feeling. I felt hopeless about getting them back. I came to a point where I felt my life was not worth living.

When I found out that it was the guy in the motel room who had called child protective services, I decided to kill him and save one bullet for me.

The day I meant to kill him, I sat on the curb by his apartment for hours waiting for him. But a cop came by and told me to leave, and I did.

Then I ran into a friend and told him my plans. He talked me into going over to a soup kitchen. He also asked to hold my gun, saying he would give it back when I was in a better frame of mind.

As we ate he convinced me to go to the hospital's mental health unit. He told me killing myself or someone else was not the answer. He was a guy I did drugs with regularly and I trusted him, so even though I was terrified of not getting high, I followed his advice. His was the first kindness that helped me change the path that I was on.

I detoxed in the hospital for a few days, then did an intake at a rehab center. But rehab had a waiting list, so after intake I went out to get high again to escape my feelings.

## **Throwing Blame**

A few days later, the office of the attorney assigned to me called. I was still high so I made excuses, saying I was busy. A few days later my attorney, Linda Foster, called herself. She told me it would be a good idea for me to come talk to her.

Ms. Foster proved to be another support at a moment when I most needed one. She was positive with

me. She told me she had other clients who had gotten their kids back after they changed their lives, and when I explained I had already done an intake for rehab, she said that was a great start. But she also was straight with me and helped me see my part in what was going on.

**Each time I took a step forward, someone took a step in my direction to help me.**

When we talked about my kids testing positive, I still wanted to throw blame and minimize the situation. Then she asked me one question I will never forget, "How much methamphetamine is acceptable in a child's system?" That is when I paused, and then I started to cry, because I knew the answer was zero.

## **'Please God...'**

Waiting for a bed in rehab, I got more and more depressed. The night before Thanksgiving I felt so desperate I had to do something.

I made a flag that was 3 feet by 4 feet, which I mounted to my bike. One side of the flag said, "Do not use drugs or alcohol because it will take your children away." On the other side it said, "Please GOD watch over Jayme and Sheryl."

I set out Thanksgiving morning with that flag on my bike and rode from church to church, praying for God to help me get my kids back. At the last church I fell off my bike and was lying on the ground looking up, cursing God.

Then I was on my knees, telling God, "I don't really know if you are there, but if I ever needed your help it is right now." At that moment I had energy like I had not had in a long time. I rode my bike to my kids' grandmother's house for Thanksgiving dinner. When I got there I explained what had happened. They all looked at each other like I was crazy.

## **I Got a Call**

But the next day, I got a call from rehab. They had a bed for me. I was so scared, I went out and sold my \$9,000 truck for a thousand dollars and partied one last time. But I still made it to court in the morning, and I made it to rehab the next day, too.

In rehab, my child welfare caseworker, Gloria Taylor, came to see me. She asked if there was anything she could do for me. I told her how difficult it was to be without my kids during the holidays and asked her if she could bring them to rehab for a visit. She said that wasn't usually done but she would see what she could do. A little while later I got a message that my kids were coming.

Each time I took a step forward, someone took a step in my direction to help me.

## **Christmas in Rehab**

I thought Christmas in rehab was going to be the worst Christmas ever. But some of the people there were very talented and made drawings and toys out of paper for me to give my kids. I also had a counselor who went out and bought a couple of dolls with some of my money so I could give them to my daughters.

Then my children came and we had Christmas on the floor of the rehab. I didn't realize it at the time but it

was a great Christmas. I was with my children and the people around me made sure that it was special.

## **Out the Other Side**

After I got out of rehab I joined a 12-step group, which was another place where I found community, and my life started to change one day at a time.

Soon the judge, Hon. Charles C. Currier, gave me my kids back. Then he asked me if I wanted to be a mentor to parents going through the system, in a program called First Steps Towards Reunification.

I started attending meetings the judge held at the courthouse. There I saw that the judge had a big heart for people going through the system. He's one of the greatest men I know. I started to feel like I was a part of something good. I had found kindness that others had given to me, and now I was part of a community that I could give back to.

## **Encouragement and Hope**

Today my life is better than I ever thought that it could be. I have been drug-free for six years. It has been the best gift I could give my kids. I also try to give the gift of support to others. I tell my story to parents and mentor them if they want encouragement and hope.



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Out of consideration for some parents with open cases or for parents sharing private information that could affect future job searches, Rise is not publishing names or full names of contributing writers.

# Someone to Turn To

Investing in supportive communities can prevent kids from entering foster care.

INTERVIEWS BY DOMINIQUE ARRINGTON, TYASIA NICHOLSON AND ANTOINETTE ROBINSON

Having no one to turn to makes parenting harder and increases the risk of child maltreatment. But until now, the federal government has mostly funded investigations and removals, without putting much money into supporting and strengthening families. Too often, what that teaches parents is to hide their problems rather than reach out for help.

This summer, Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon introduced the Family Stability and Kinship Care Act, which would allow states to expand support services and keep more children safe at home. A similar bill is now before the House.

Rise interviewed Tricia Stephens, professor of social work at the Silberman School of Social Work; Ross Thompson, professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis; Cailin O'Connor, senior policy analyst at the Center for the Study of Social Policy; and Mary Jane Dessables, director of research and information at the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA), about the supports that can make a difference.

## Q: Why is having support important for parents and children at risk of entering foster care?

**Stephens:** For the past several years I have interviewed child welfare-affected mothers in New York City about how trauma has affected their lives, who helped them cope with trauma and what helped them bring their children home from foster care. Moms who were able to successfully connect to "social supports" fared the best. Having someone listen who they felt was not judging was one of the most important benefits. Church was often an important place for this. So were groups with other

parents who'd had children in foster care.

Having trusting, supportive relationships with professionals in the system also made a difference. Many parents described negative relationships with their caseworkers. But parents who were lucky enough to develop strong ones said that getting that insider support—along with reliable, on-time information about navigating the system—was tremendously helpful in bringing their children home.

from bad influences can also find themselves very isolated.

**Stephens:** It's impossible to ignore the role that child welfare involvement itself plays in social isolation. Many of the moms I interviewed faced a lot aggressive judgments that they weren't good mothers or good people, and had a lot of inner conflict about how they were perceived. These interactions often fueled feelings of shame and further isolation.

## Q: What can child welfare do to make it easier to find support?

**O'Connor:** Often in child welfare, social support is seen as "fluffy" or an extra, even though there's a lot of research on how isolation is a risk factor for maltreatment. Child welfare systems ought to make it much more of a priority to help parents build a support system. There ought to be programs

that coach parents on how to make positive connections.

**Thompson:** Systems can also provide support in ways that reduce humiliation. They can provide services at home, church or a community center, rather than in child welfare offices. Finding ways for parents to give back—for instance, in a support group that allows parents to both get and give support—can be a wonderful way of breaking through isolation.

Programs that connect informal sources of support, like peers and people in your community, with formal sources of support, like psychologists and social workers, have also been shown to be effective. People coming from outside the community aren't going to be immediately trusted or know what

the community needs. You need leaders inside the community for that. At the same time, outsiders often have resources and expertise that communities sometimes lack. It can be powerful when these two groups work together.

Some communities have begun to mobilize around the idea of neighbors helping neighbors, by creating places for people to come together to address the concerns of the community as a community. It's a model that requires a lot of coordination and overcoming a lot of barriers. But it also has the potential to change the social support families feel every day.

## Q: If the Family Stability and Kinship Care Act becomes law, how might it change child welfare? What other reforms do we need?

**Dessables:** Right now most of what federal funding pays for is foster care placement. One of the best parts of the bill is that it would open up funding so that states could take some of the money they use now for foster care and use it to help at-risk families in their homes. Similarly, when a kid goes home, there's not much money to help that family make sure the child doesn't come back into care. The Wyden bill would help to increase those services.

If the bill passes, we think that would be a major step forward. But those services would only be for families deemed at-risk of foster care placement. We would also like to see child welfare systems invest in services for all families, particularly in communities where the largest proportion of kids in foster care come from. If we started investing money in supporting families in the highest-risk neighborhoods right from the moment their children were born, we might see a very different picture in the long run.



ILLUSTRATION BY KATE MARTIN AND FRANK MALKIN

## Q: Why are the people who need support the most sometimes the people who have the least of it?

**Thompson:** In my book, *Preventing Child Maltreatment Through Social Support: A Critical Analysis*, I look at research that shows that when you're in a crisis, people around you can get overwhelmed and withdraw. When you live in poverty, everyone in your life may be facing lots of stressors. That can leave whole communities exhausted.

People who need help may also feel humiliated by their needs or even resentful of people who try to help them, especially if they can't give anything back. People who have been exposed to trauma in the past or feel they have to protect their children

# Alone in the System

Would my son have come home sooner if someone had taken the time to know me?

BY JEANETTE VEGA

I was 19 when I was arrested for hitting my 2-year-old son with a belt. What I did wasn't right and it wasn't how I usually treated my son. Usually I loved him to death and spoiled him rotten. I had never hit him before. But that night my son got out of his crib and ran out of the apartment while I was taking a shower. I felt so shocked and scared that I hit him twice on the arm with a belt and left a big mark.

I did it because I was scared. I did it because I was run ragged with my all-over-the-place, running-around, never sitting-still type of kid. I did it because that's how people in my family and on my block did it. The way I was raised, if you're a kid and you act crazy, you get your ass kicked.

I always told myself that's not how I would treat my child. But in that moment, I did.

As soon as I did it, I regretted it. But it was too late.

## Cold in My Heart

After my son was taken, I didn't want my family involved in any part of my case. They didn't help me with my son before. When I would reach out to them to stay with my son for a day or a few hours so I could take a break, I would get the same response each time: "You had him, you take him with you. He is your responsibility." So I did.

Now he was gone and my love for my family was cold in my heart. For the three years that my son was in care, I tried not to let my family know anything about what was happening in my life.

## Was I a Monster?

I didn't tell friends much about it either. Even before the case, I only had three close friends. At first I didn't tell even them because I felt so ashamed. My heart was broken—taken—and I didn't know how to explain why and how this happened.



*Jeanette, her fiancé and her four boys.*

Most of all, I was afraid to be seen as a monster. Was I an evil person? Or did I just make a mistake as a first-time mom doing what I knew, how I was raised? I felt angry at being judged, but I also felt scared of myself, confused and ashamed.

**I felt angry at being judged, but I also felt scared of myself, confused and ashamed.**

When I finally did tell a friend, she judged me. She used to hit her son, but when I told her about my case, she said, "Oh my God! You hit your son that hard that you bruised his arm?" Later she said, "Maybe your

mom is right. Maybe you should have never been a mother."

I heard it from caseworkers, too—that I was a monster for hitting a 2-year-old with a belt.

## Secluding Myself

I thought maybe I just wasn't capable of being a good mother. I asked myself, "Why did I even grab the belt? Did I need my son to be taken to avoid something worse from happening?"

I was raised with hitting. I thought maybe there was something genetically wrong with me and that I was destined to raise my son the same way.

The judgments came from every direction, including inside myself. All I could think was to seclude myself

further. I didn't want to talk to anyone (caseworkers, therapists, service providers). I felt like it was me against the world. I had to protect my heart to have the strength to get my son back. So I cut everyone off.

not having my son. At other times, I wanted to fight and refuse to cooperate with anything the system asked of me. Thank God my fiancé made me get up from my bed and go get things done.

The one person in the system who supported me was my son's second foster mother, Gladys. Gladys thought my son and I belonged together. Though the agency didn't give us more time together, Gladys made it happen.

## What If I'd Had Support...

It's been a lot of years since then. My fiancé and I have been together 16 years and we have a big, loving family with three more boys. My son who went into foster care at 2 is now 18. He is in culinary school and still lives at home. He says he never wants to leave. Our dream is to one day open a family restaurant together and he'll be the chef.

Still, those were three long and lonely years that my son was in care. I still sometimes ask myself what if.

What if I'd had a caseworker that had compassion for me being such a young mother, and this being my first child? What if I'd had one caseworker instead of five or six? What if I'd had a lawyer who had time to meet me and didn't squeeze me in five minutes before court?

What if I'd had friends that fought for me or lent me a shoulder? What if my family had helped me before, when I asked them for the help?

What if the judge had seen that I already understood that I had gone wrong but was ready for change, ready to do better?

I didn't have that support. So my case got lost, or should I say my son and my soul got lost within the system for three long years.

# Getting Connected

A peer support group keeps at-risk newborns and mothers together.

BY DOMINIQUE ARRINGTON AND JEANETTE VEGA

Dealing with child welfare can be a scary and shameful experience. Mothers who become pregnant when they already have children in foster care feel particularly vulnerable, because their babies are at high risk of being removed right from the hospital.

In 2013, The Bronx Defenders, a New York City legal organization, created Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies to support these moms.

The program offers weekly support groups, advocacy and referrals. It even connects moms to doulas, who can be there during birth. One of the best things is that moms who have succeeded in bringing their newborns home can help moms who are still pregnant.

Here, Jennifer Bronson, coordinator of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, and Tiffany Muskelly, a former participant, explain the program:

**Q: Why did you start Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies?**

**Jennifer:** Once a baby is born to a mother with a child already in foster care in New York City, her caseworker has to hold a "child safety conference" to determine whether that baby will go home or into foster care. But a lot of our parents thought CPS would automatically take their baby and there wasn't anything they could do.

We saw that many women who were doing well planning for their children in foster care stopped visiting or seeking out services because they were trying to hide their pregnancy. We wanted to make sure mothers had accurate information about what would happen once their baby was born.

**Tiffany:** When I started attending the program, I had three kids in foster care and I was 6 or 7 months

pregnant.

Before I started, I had support from my daughter's father; my mother; my sister and from staff at my agency. I was also going to drug treatment programs, parenting classes and classes for children with special needs.

But I still didn't feel like I had anybody to talk to about this new baby and I was scared. I thought CPS was going to snatch my baby. I tried not to let people even know I was pregnant until my stomach got outrageously big.

I also didn't want to share my feelings about what was going on with family and friends, because I didn't want them to be like, "Oh, why you let this happen?" I didn't want them to put the blame on me. Nobody in my family had had children in foster care. Nobody experienced not hearing their children through the house saying, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy."

**Q: What services do you connect parents to, and what do you do in the group?**

**Jennifer:** We connect moms to services like parent-child therapy, home-visiting and inpatient mother-child substance abuse programs, so they already have supports in place when the baby is born.

In the support group we do workshops on whatever moms want to learn, from reproductive rights to healthy cooking. Moms also share their experiences. They tell each other about services. Mothers who have already given birth explain exactly

what happened when CPS visited them. They even motivate each other to make a backup plan if their baby can't go home, so that the baby can still be with family. That gives them more opportunities for early bonding, breastfeeding and attachment.

**Tiffany:** When I first came to the group, I was a little nervous. I sat and heard everybody's story before I started telling mine.

But really, I wanted everybody in the group to know my situation, because what I was going through was what they were going through. When I started speaking it felt like a big relief.

**program offer moms at birth?**

**Tiffany:** Before I gave birth, Jennifer walked me through the steps. She also arranged a meeting with CPS right before my delivery. CPS told me they surely didn't have any concerns about my baby coming home. That helped me feel less scared.

But I was still scared when the investigator came to my hospital room when my baby was not even 2-3 hours old. I got sad and depressed. I started crying. The investigator told me I'd better not run with my child or they'd put out a warrant for my arrest.

Then I called Jennifer and she let the investigator know I was doing everything I was supposed to. When they hung up, the investigator said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." After that she became real friendly and we made a connection.

**Q: Do the relationships moms make continue after they leave the program?**

**Tiffany:** I'm still in touch with four of the moms. Sometimes we go out or watch movies. One mom lives right behind me and comes over sometimes.

**Jennifer:** Last week, I saw one of the moms Tiffany is still in touch with, who has been struggling. One of the first things she told me was how helpful it was to see Tiffany and how much of an inspiration she is. It's exciting to hear that moms are making their own community outside the group.



ILLUSTRATION BY AMY SULMAN

One of the things I liked most was being able to help other mothers. Being that I was at the end of my pregnancy and the end of getting my other kids back, I had a lot to share. If someone didn't have stable housing or was having problems using, I'd tell them, "Go get yourself in shelter;" or, "Go put yourself in a program. Don't wait for child welfare to tell you what you have to do." I felt proud that I could help.

**Q: What support does the**

# 'I Needed Help That People in My Life Couldn't'

Through preventive services, I've found ways to feel safe, calm and connected.

BY ANONYMOUS

My father was gone and my mother had died by the time I was 7. I was raised by relatives. My main caregiver was what you'd consider "old fashioned"—strict and not very affectionate. I felt insecure and always looked over. When I was 13, I began to rebel. At 17, my relatives placed me in foster care. Going through foster care gave me strength and resilience but also a place of loneliness and feeling unloved.

After I aged out, I maintained an apartment and a job at Meals on Wheels. But a part of me felt vulnerable, lost and bitter: I had long periods when I would isolate myself and feel angry, or else hang out with the wrong people.

When it came to dating, I needed love so badly. When I didn't have it, I felt like I didn't exist. So if a guy made me feel important, I was blind to the fact that he might be bad for me.

I was also controlling, insecure and jealous. I felt like my childhood gave me justification to act out in romantic situations, so I didn't back down or try to address my feelings. Instead, my mentality was to love hard or not at all.

## **Support and Danger**

I was 23 when I met my child's father. When he said I was beautiful and told me all the nice things he was going to do for me, it made me a happy person with a glow. When he criticized his brother for being "too friendly," I just felt lucky that he was protecting me even from his own family.

But soon after we moved in together, he began to pressure me for sex all the time and encouraged me to cut off contact with friends and family. I tried to deal with it at first, hoping things would turn around, because at times he was loving and respectful.

But he also struggled with mental illness, and when he was unstable, his behavior could be downright scary. Once when he was having a manic episode, he collected every sharp object in the home and threatened me. I had to call the police or I was definitely going to get hurt. After that, I moved out and took out a restraining order on him.

Soon after, I learned I was pregnant.

## **Support and Judgment**

I felt like this baby was a blessing and a chance for me to become a better person. But I also felt lonely, vulnerable, stupid and afraid. I'd just moved to a new neighborhood, and I'd also lost my job, so I had few friends, little money and no place to go.

As my pregnancy wore on, I reached out to my relatives. I hoped my pregnancy could help me make things right. I felt hopeful about being a parent when they threw me a beautiful baby shower.

But my relatives also said they felt sorry for the baby because her par-

ents were crazy, and that I was going to suffer. That made me feel hurt and angry, like I had to put on a brave face and keep all my own fears hidden.

**More than anything, just hearing other women's experiences helped me feel less alone.**

ents were crazy, and that I was going to suffer. That made me feel hurt and angry, like I had to put on a brave face and keep all my own fears hidden.

## **Trying Again**

Right before my baby was born, I

We argued all through my labor. The social worker at the hospital kept asking me questions about our relationship and calling my relatives to ensure I was fit to be a good mother. I was furious.

Eventually I left the hospital and was

so happy to be home with my little princess, who was a very chill baby. The bond I felt when she was nursing was something only God could have created. I also had a visiting nurse who gave me pointers, asked me how I was feeling and lightened my load.

## **Overwhelmed and Alone**

For my daughter's first six months, my daughter's father and I went back and forth.

He was there for me financially and sometimes he'd try to help out with parenting. But he'd also whine that he didn't know how to be a father and say that if other women could be mothers without so much help, why not me? After a few months, I kicked him out.

After that I often felt lonely and overwhelmed with anxiety that something bad would happen to my daughter. One time my baby threw up on my last clean shirt. I burst into tears because I

was so exhausted, with no one to talk to without worrying they'd think I was an unfit mother.

I tried to reconcile with my daughter's father one more time about six months after my baby was born, but when I again told him it wasn't working, he beat me in the street so bad I had to go to the hospital. That got the police involved, and then the social worker at the hospital called child protection.

## **Positive Supports**

My daughter was never removed. But when they took me to court, accusing me of neglect, feelings of being unfairly judged came back and made me want to give up. Luckily my lawyer helped me prove that I had not been neglectful, and I was sent to preventive services. That gave me the



# Give Me'

# Home Safe Home

*I'm looking for supportive housing for my son and me.*

BY SARA WERNER

support I really needed.

I began attending parenting groups at the Lower East Side Family Union, where they taught us different methods of relieving stress, like meditation. At first I was fearful about opening up. But I had fun role-playing with other members how we respond to our children. More than anything, just hearing other women's experiences helped me feel less alone.

I also started going to church again. I felt calmer having a spiritual routine and community, and I embraced values I had moved away from, including not rushing into relationships. Those values are like my armor because I know how easily I can be sucked into a situation where my emotions are out of control.

DV counseling also helped me realize that those wild emotions I'd experienced in romantic relationships are not normal. I began to realize how important it is for me to feel calm and safe if I want my daughter to feel that way. I also realized that, for me, having many sources of support rather than just one romantic partner is my best protection.

## On the Straight and Narrow

Now, a year and a half later, I'm pleased to say that my case is closed. My daughter is thriving and I am spending a lot of time working at Rise. I continue to go to church and to therapy. I am hoping to soon go back to school.

I'm still not sure how my personal life will be in the future. Maybe I'll get to a place where I'm not so hungry for love that I can trust my emotions. But for now, keeping my daughter and me away from extremes is my most important goal. Having many sources of support is the best way for me to do that.

Before my son came home from foster care, I lived in supportive housing for almost a year. My program helped me with practical things, like learning the NYC buses and trains. But the main thing they helped me with was not isolating myself.

When I was younger, I didn't know positive ways of handling my emotions. When I felt too sad, afraid, lonely or angry, I would do whatever I could to escape those feelings. I'd keep myself isolated, too. But my loneliness only made me more depressed, and my depression made me even lonelier.

I truly started to improve when I became willing to accept help, after my children were placed in foster care. In therapy, I learned better ways to express my emotions. I started feeling good about myself as I noticed positive changes.

## Making Connections

When I first moved into supportive housing, it wasn't easy for me to open up to new friends.

I was afraid that people I didn't know wouldn't like me and I wouldn't like them. One time, when my program went to Great Adventure, I tried to partner with the counselor. But my program convinced me to go on the rides with three other women. We had fun, and I learned that we had a lot of the same problems, we'd come from the same kinds of homes, and we'd all been in shelters and on the streets. I could see that we weren't that different from each other. When we went to the arcade, I bought tokens so we could all play.

It felt great to share what I had with them, because I know what it's like not to have much.

## Finding 'Family'

Not everyone in my program was easy to be around. I didn't talk to one of the women I shared an apartment with, because no matter what anyone said to her she'd get loud and yell and scream. It got scary sometimes.

But the other woman in my apartment was there for me. We'd watch movies together and sometimes she'd help me out when I was low

I wanted it because parenting is a really hard job to do alone. I worried about little things, like what would happen if we both got sick at the same time. I worried about whether I would always be able to comfort Aaron when he missed his foster family and his sister. Plus, if I was having a hard time, having someone to watch Aaron even if only for 10 or 15 minutes so I could clear my head would really be a big help.

I looked for supportive housing for about a year. But a lot of places either wanted young mothers who had just aged out of foster care or mothers with a history of drug addiction. I didn't fit the criteria.

## Home Alone

Nine months ago, my son and I reunified to a shelter. It wasn't what I wanted, but it's been wonderful seeing how well we've done on our own. I feel stronger. I have more patience than I expected. I can deal with anger and anxiety better every day.

But I've also continued to search for supportive housing.

As a parent, I know now that it's OK to have feelings of sadness or anger or fear. But I also know that when I have those feelings, I need to make sure to use a support system. I don't have too strong a support system yet.

I'm determined to find a place for my son and me. The better I am able to care for myself, the better I can care for him.



Sara and her son.

on food. She even understood if I needed to be left alone. She became like family, and that's important to me, because my family's not always there for me.

## Parenting With Support

When I was preparing to reunify with my son, I asked whether I could have supportive housing for us as a family.

# Don't Battle Alone

*It's important to show the court that you have people on your team.*

INTERVIEW BY NICOLE GOODWIN

Kathleen Creamer, a parent attorney at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, explains how parents can strengthen their case by presenting the people in their lives in family court, as well as what parents can do if they don't have anyone to bring to court.

**Q: What role should friends, family and others play in court?**

**A:** When you walk into court, it's incredibly important to present as a parent who is willing and able to ask for help when you need it. Judges and workers also feel better about sending children home when they can see that the parent has someone to support them if new issues and challenges arise.

If you want to put on a good case, you should show you have rallied your people and made a plan to use their help. Just having friends and family in the waiting room can be powerful for people like the caseworker and the child's lawyer to see.

The reality is that judges don't always allow people into the courtroom if they're not directly involved in the case. But talk with your lawyer about whether it's a good idea to call them as witnesses. Grandma might be able to testify about the help she is able to offer and the good things she has to say about you, even if she can't sit through the whole hearing.

You should also make sure your lawyer knows if you have a good relationship with your child's teacher, with a current or former boss, or with anyone who can speak positively about you. Even if they can't come to court for you, they may be able to write a letter; and that can make a difference.

Unfortunately, many parents don't have a strong support system. If that's true for you, it's particularly important

to make a connection to service providers once you have a case. Many parents suffer through programs the system sends them to, with people they don't trust or connect to, because they don't want to seem noncompliant. But if you don't have enough support, and you also don't find providers you feel good about, it's ultimately going to be harder to make your case and get your children home.

You and your lawyer should work together to find programs where you do feel a strong connection, and then work to convince the court that these really are the best.

**Q: The system wants parents to ask for help. At the same time, sometimes they act like you've got to be able to do it alone. Why is that?**

**A:** There was a case last year in Massachusetts of a mother with an intellectual disability who planned to live with her parents and raise her baby with them. Instead, Massachusetts' Department of Children and Families removed the baby from the hospital and essentially said, "If you can't do it alone, you can't do it at all." It was outrageous.

The Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services eventually got involved and said that Massachusetts had violated the Americans with Disabilities Act. In this case, Massachusetts essentially ignored two things: that no one raises children alone, and that a parent has the right to determine who is a safe support for her child unless there is evidence she is making an unsafe plan. After the Department of Justice intervened, Massachusetts reversed course.

If you are in a similar situation, you have the right to make a parenting plan that involves supportive people in your life.

Recently I represented a mother who had her children living with their grandmother during the week, because she wanted her children to go to school in that district, but child protection charged Mom with

at times, the court and child welfare personnel judge a parent's supports unfairly especially when people have a criminal or child welfare history, even one from decades ago. Very often, parents are put in the position of having to agree to not use their support system, and that makes parenting that much harder. If someone is an important support to you, you should work with your lawyer to try to show that.

Recently I represented a dad whose stepdad helped care for his son while he was at work. The stepdad had gotten into a fight as a teenager and had an involuntary manslaughter conviction against him as a result. He had been completely crime-free for decades, and he had a really loving bond with his grandson, but the child's lawyer objected to him as a caregiver because of that old conviction.

We had Grandpa come in and testify. He brought pictures of himself and his grandson, he talked to the judge about their relationship, and we were successful in overcoming the child lawyer's objections.

**Q: What about when the system brings people into your life who you don't want there?**

**A:** For the most part, kinship care has been incredibly beneficial for my clients. But sometimes family members come out of the woodwork who are just not supportive, and that can be very damaging.

It's important to have parents testify to the court about their concerns. Sometimes the court listens. Sometimes they have an attitude of "we know best." The system needs to listen much more to who parents say is—and is not—supportive of them.

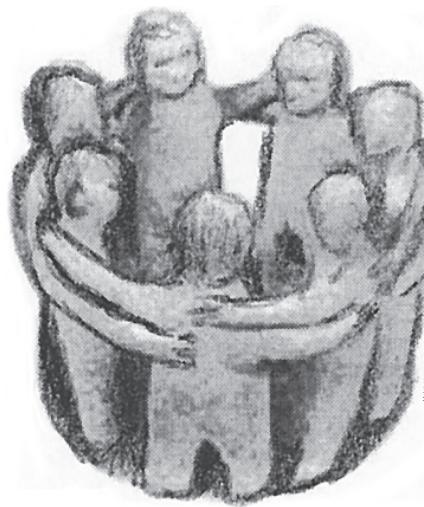


ILLUSTRATION BY IC

not providing adequate care to her children. Mom was very eloquent in court. She said, "You tell me I have to seek help when I need it and then you say my kids are not receiving adequate care when I do." Ultimately the judge ruled in Mom's favor.

**Q: Sometimes the system doesn't approve of the people in our lives. How do you help clients deal with those situations?**

**A:** When you have a child welfare case, your support system is going to be scrutinized.

I absolutely have had clients who have made really bad judgments about who would be good for their family, most often boyfriends or girlfriends who were not able to help them safely care for their child. But

# Family After Foster Care

I want my daughter to have the love and security I finally found.

BY ANONYMOUS

I met my child's mother when I was 21 and she was 22. After I got the courage to ask her out, we caught that instant connection. I had grown up in foster care, and she had come from drama, so we understood each other. Our relationship lasted for over four years and for a long time it was good.

In the last year, she became pregnant and we had a daughter. I really thought it was going to be this perfect thing. *Family Matters* or *Full House*.

Even though I didn't live with my daughter and her mother, I was there every day after my daughter was born. Having my daughter in my arms was amazing. I fed her, changed her and would lay her on my chest every night, putting her to sleep. I enjoyed the things most parents find frustrating. I realized I could live through her—giving her all the things I'd lacked.

But pregnancy seemed to make my girlfriend feel worse. I noticed her slowly change until, by the time she gave birth, she had become a person I couldn't recognize. At the hospital, the doctor said she had postpartum depression and the social worker called CPS.

## A Painful Echo

At first CPS helped us connect to services.

Then one day my girlfriend's mother criticized my girlfriend in front of the worker and my girlfriend attacked her mother. I closed the door to my daughter's room and broke up the fight, but the damage was done. The next day we had to go to court.

I lived in a room in supportive housing and had no space to take my daughter, so I decided to let her live with my girlfriend's mother. Eventually, though, CPS removed her and put

her in a foster home. In the transfer, two weeks passed when I had no idea where my daughter was.

More than anything, I didn't want what happened to me to happen to my daughter.

## Too Many Losses

I was 6 when my brother, sister and I were taken from our mother. I really didn't know what was going on. I just had memories of a woman (my mother) drawing in the park, gazing out the window to the night skies.

Then we moved to my aunt's house. She and my brother argued a lot. When I was 9 my aunt let him go. Next my sister and aunt started getting into it. Soon she was packing and leaving. I continued to see my siblings every other week for a while. Then the visits stopped.

After that, I tried to do everything right, cleaning the house, catering to my aunt. I was so scared that I would get the same fate as my siblings.

After a while, my aunt and I actually grew close. We would play board games, watch TV, stay up late nights eating snacks. I had family again. But when I was 14, my aunt became unstable, and I was placed in a foster home.

## Finding Forgiveness

All those losses were too much to handle, and I started to block every bad thing that happened to me out of my head. I felt I couldn't relate to anything that didn't involve destruction and chaos. I found myself in fights almost every day. I didn't want to open myself to anyone anymore.

But amazingly, at 17, after I got kicked out my foster home, my brother

found me and brought me to my mother's house.

At first, it was such a shock I just walked around not knowing what to feel.

**I see my daughter regularly, and I also get to learn about parenting from my brother and his wife.**

brother; hanging out and laughing, was the icing on the cake.

## I Needed Help

When my daughter went into foster care, the sense of hopelessness I'd had when I was a child in the system began to resurface.

The relationships I've found have given me faith that good things can happen. I have used that faith and the bond I feel with my daughter to remind myself it isn't over.

The first time I visited my daughter after she was placed in a stranger's home, I knelt down with my arms out and she ran to my arms. It was like a scene from a movie. Throughout the visit, though, I saw that she seemed held back and confused. I knew she and I needed help.

My brother had just gone through a divorce and I didn't want to burden

him. Besides, growing up in care, I'd gotten used to taking care of problems myself. But after that visit, I explained the situation to him. Immediately, he and his new wife told me they would be willing to be my daughter's foster parents.

## The Love and Security We Both Need

Things are so different now that my daughter is around people that love her. She's herself again, only happier. And I have a sense of peace.

I see my daughter regularly, and I also get to learn about parenting from my brother and his wife. Now I'm just waiting for housing so that my daughter and I can be reunified. I want my daughter to always feel the love and security I finally found.



ILLUSTRATION BY OGÉN DOWA

During my 20s, I struggled with mental illness, like my mother and my aunt. But the year and a half I spent living with my mother and sharing memories of my childhood helped to ease my loneliness. Being with my

# Trying Again

*This time, I have the support to face my feelings.*

BY KEYSHANA MIMS

I first smoked crack on a cold winter day when I was 19. At the time I was feeling desperate. I'd heard that crack would make me feel no pain, and it did. What pulled me in was the tinge, the suspense, the thrill and the numbness.

I'm 30 now, and for the past 11 years I've struggled to break my addiction and be a mother to my children. I have four girls—three are in foster care and my youngest is with me. We're living in a shelter and nothing feels easy. But I want to succeed in making a life for myself.

My story is about a confused young woman trying to handle her fear, pain and loneliness the only way she knew how. A girl looking for love in the wrong places. A mother trying to find her way home. A scared person who found that the love she was looking for was right there the whole time. It's about finding myself and realizing that I am not alone.

## Torn Apart

When I was young I lived with my parents, my older sister and my younger sister. Then things with my mother and father became rocky. My sisters and I watched them tear apart.

By the time I was 12, my mom was going through problems with addiction and my sisters and I were living with my grandmother in kinship foster care. That was also the year that my cousin started to molest me. When I told my grandmother and his mother, I wasn't believed.

## Angry...and Scared

At 16, I felt angry and alone. I didn't feel loved by my own family, especially my mom.

I began skipping school, hanging out



Keyshana and her youngest daughter.

late, getting in trouble. I also started having sex for favors and money. The money gave me a feeling of control after being used for sex. Then I went to Florida with an older guy. I thought he was my boyfriend but he made me prostitute on the street. I was also abducted, raped and tortured for a week. Finally I called my father for help. By then I was pregnant.

When I got home to my father and stepmother, I told my stepmother what happened. She immediately

## Starting Over

I was 17 when I gave birth to a baby girl named Tashia. I enrolled back into school and got a job to support my daughter. From my father, stepmother and daughter I could now feel a sense of love that I'd never felt. I felt happy as hell for that. I also felt overwhelmed, though. Working and being a mother while carrying so much in my mind was too much.

Within a year, everything good ended. I got in an argument with my step-

**I'm working on opening up. On taking the risk to talk to my family. Because being alone is what led me to use.**

took me to the hospital. I went through counseling, the whole nine yards. The therapy was a relief—I could finally be open and learn to feel again. Still, I had nightmares. At times, I flashed back to the bad moments, or couldn't feel anything. I couldn't stop blaming myself. I was so ashamed.

mother. My father brought me back to my mother. It was my 18th birthday. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I was begging them not to leave me with my mother. I was asking myself, "Why didn't I just listen and follow the rules?"

Desperate for love and family, I soon

got married, but once again, I didn't find the stability and connection I craved. It wasn't long before my marriage went downhill.

## Separated From the World

Over the next five years, my life was a mess. I lost Tashia to the system when she was 6 years old. I had two more little girls—Tyniah and Toteana—and lost them, too. Three times I went back and forth between getting high and then getting my life back together and being a mother.

For a while in 2008 I was living in my own 2-bedroom apartment, doing whatever the system asked me to do: give urine and go to an outpatient program. I had three hours each week with my girls at the agency. But waiting for my two daughters to be returned felt like the longest wait ever.

When my loneliness and hopelessness kicked in, I started looking for friends. I didn't want to ask my stable family for help. I felt so betrayed and hurt by them, and ashamed. Finally I had my mom stay over because I needed the company. Soon she smoked in my house and that was it. In less than 18 months, I was in the street again.

I would get so caught up in getting high. Crack made me feel like I was on top and nothing could get between that. When I wasn't high, I felt weird—lonely, confused and even separated from the world.

## We Missed You!

Finally, two years ago, when I was 4 months pregnant with my youngest, I knew that I needed to try again with my family. I called my sister and asked her if I could stay with her and she said yes.

Going to my sister's, I didn't know what to expect. I thought I would be

# Family Supports Save Lives

*Research finds a link between investment in preventive services and reduced child deaths.*

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

yelled at or blamed. But the moment my foot hit the doorstep, it was hugs, kisses and love. It was, "We missed you!" and cries, something I had missed.

When the children went to sleep, I thought my sister and I would argue about the times I was missing, but not at all. It was, "How are you doing? Are you hungry? What do you want to watch?" This is what I had longed for.

## Drugs or Life?

My sister allowed me to stay at her house for several months. I was very grateful. But when I gave birth to Teliah, she was removed from me. To get her back, I needed to enter a drug treatment program. The time had come for me to make a final decision: Drugs or life?

Luckily, I was able to go to Odyssey House's mother-child program, and Teliah was released to me 40 days later. I didn't let anyone touch her. She'd left me once and wasn't going to leave me again.

## A New Beginning

I'm proud to say I've learned to cope without using drugs. My focus right now is staying stopped. To do that, I'm working on opening up. On taking the risk to talk to my family about what is going through my mind. What my fears are. Not lying. Because being alone is what led me to use.

Teliah and I live in a shelter and I work at the Parks Department. I wake up racing time every day, traveling borough to borough to get my daughter to preschool and finish all my programs. Much of the time it feels like I'm not getting anywhere. Program to program, train to train, walking late in the cold. I'm not saying my life is supposed to get better at the snap of a finger but damn! I didn't think it would be this hard.

I keep reminding myself that I was

willing to do anything for drugs. If it was raining, sleet, or snow, I made it my business to buy my drugs.

Sometimes I feel like a child going through a tantrum. I feel like I'm working hard and I'm not being rewarded. Other times, I'm angry at myself for thinking like that. Teliah is my reward. I should be thankful I even have the chance to start over.

## Little Moments

I visit friends and family who encourage my recovery. I call on my step-mother, my mom's mother and my sister when things get complicated. I feel loved, because when I tell them I can't handle something, they don't throw things in my face about my past life. They fill the space that I used to think was empty.

Still, now that I'm clean, it hurts to think about all the things I have lost. I have lost three of my children. I remember when my oldest were home with me—their smiles in the morning, the sound of them fighting over which show to watch first, where we should go that weekend.

It's very depressing at times that Teliah looks like my second oldest daughter, Tyniah, who is now 7. Tyniah showed me the same attachment, the smile, the concern for attention. Day after day it sinks in more: I wish I'd realized earlier my desire to be a parent. Until now, though, I really didn't understand all my hurt, what I've been through, and how my past is still hurting me.

My daughter is putting me on my feet every day. When I get frustrated, I try to remember that there is nothing better than enjoying the growth that I have accomplished, and that she is the reason why I've changed. I like singing with my daughter, playing doctor, playing hide-and-go-seek, and most of all, "fashion hall!" We change into different outfits and walk. That is the fun part of my day.

When child welfare systems are forced to cut their budgets, often it's preventive services that are hardest hit. The belief is that family supports are nice if the government can afford them, but it's investigations that prevent child deaths. But a 2012 study of 20 years of child deaths in Sacramento, Calif., found that cutting preventive services put children at risk—and wasted money.

Sheila Boxley of the Child Abuse Prevention Center, who headed the team that did the study, explained the findings:

## Q: What connection did your report find between child deaths and funding for preventive services?

**A:** We found an almost perfect match between increased funding for preventive services and decreased child deaths due to abuse and neglect, and vice versa. Between 1999 and 2003, when funding for preventive programs was relatively high, child deaths due to abuse and neglect went down by 2.6 children a year. From 2003 to 2009, when many family support programs were cut, deaths from abuse and neglect went up by approximately one child per year.

During that time, child welfare funding in Sacramento was cut by almost one third. With fewer resources, the department had to continue to do the things they are legally mandated to do—such as investigations and foster care placement—and stopped being able to do much prevention. Early family maintenance programs and early intervention services all but disappeared. A network of family resource centers was cut significantly. Visiting nurses took quite extreme hits. The Black Infant Health Program was also extremely cut.

There were just not enough services to meet the needs of children and families in Sacramento County.

## Q: Should all preventive programs be put back?

**A:** No, what we're saying is, let's spend wisely on programs we know impact child well-being and prevent outcomes that include the death of children.

Insuring the well-being of our children is a moral imperative. There are also solid economic arguments for it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that a child abuse case ends up costing the government about \$100,000 over the course of that

**When we make cuts to programs that work, we wind up paying more.**

child's life. We know we can provide good preventive services for \$1,200-\$1,500 per year per child. That's a huge economic argument.

Particularly in the area of child abuse prevention, when we make cuts to programs that work, we wind up paying more. In the very year we make those cuts, we wind up paying more for investigations, for foster care and for hospitalizations. It's really pretty clear that, at least in California, when families who need supports don't get them, they are very likely to return to the child welfare system within the same year with very serious situations.

# 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 print and online magazine ([www.risemagazine.org](http://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 support 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, started in 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 Defender Services, Center for Family Representation, Inwood House, Lawyers for Children, and at Rise itself. Thank you to all of our generous partners on this project.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at [nora@risemagazine.org](mailto:nora@risemagazine.org) or (646) 543-7099 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work. For youth perspectives on foster care, visit [www.representmag.org](http://www.representmag.org). We regret that Rise cannot offer individual support to parents.

Rise is a partner project of the Fund for the City of New York. Major supporters include the Center for the Study of Social Policy, Child Welfare Fund, Graham Windham, North Star Fund, NYC Children's Services, New York Women's Foundation, Pinkerton Foundation and Sheltering Arms.

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# Safe and Loved

*I began to heal when I stopped carrying the burden of sexual abuse in silence.*

BY YASHEAMEIAN HAMILTON

I used to walk down the street looking at people. People looked back at me. I wanted to talk to someone, but my mom told me not to talk to strangers. But I am a person that likes talking. And I needed to tell someone what was happening to me.

### Carrying a Burden

My life changed when I was 9. I was hit by a car, and soon after I came home from the hospital, I was molested. For years, my mother's boyfriend kept touching me.

These experiences made me feel like a target. As a little girl, I loved to talk about Jesus. But being molested made me feel unloved. I felt no support from church or my mom. I was angry, too. I never needed my life to be turned upside down.

### Trying to Be Strong

My sister was my role model. She has a disease that makes her hair fall out. She was so confident despite her disease. She graduated high school. I wanted to do the same.

But as a teenager, I couldn't seem to follow her path. I wanted marijuana, cigarettes, alcohol to take away my heartache.

One day when I was a teenager, I told my mom her boyfriend was always touching me. She said I was not the only one, and not to feel bad. But when I brought it up a few years later, she began to verbally abuse me.

After that, my depression became powerful. I felt homeless within myself.

### Someone to Talk To

Finally, I admitted myself to the hospital. When I came out, eight years ago, I went into a substance abuse program. Eventually I also started therapy.

My therapist is beautiful. I told my therapist everything that happened in my past. My past made me feel unsafe. Being in therapy made me feel safe and loved.

Therapy also showed me the difference between real love and sex, and helped me believe I could make friends.

I always felt like a door was closed that I wanted open. The door was opened for others and not me. I felt jealous and angry, like I was becoming a monster. Going to therapy helped to make my mind positive.

### Painful Years

In my 20s I became a mother but I couldn't stop using drugs. At 24 my mom kicked me out. My daughter stayed with her. At 25 I had a son. I tried my hardest, but when he was 2 he was placed in foster care, and eventually he went to live with my mother.

With my therapist's help, though, I did not give up. My oldest two children are 9 and 4 and they live with my mother. But I have a 9-month-old baby that lives with me.

We live in a shelter. Every shelter has a social worker. My social worker is just like my therapist—calm and always smiles. I also go to parenting and to my writing group. People tell me I am a good mother. All the smiles and good remarks make my life better.

I believe that everyone has a light. My light was blinking on and off when I was a child. I knew it could be fixed and now it is. A person can fall down. Sometimes it takes another person to let you know you can get up again.