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

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 21, SPRING 2012

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

The Long Shadow of Foster Care

When children come home from foster care, parents hope they can leave the trauma of separation behind them. But for many families, separation casts a shadow for years to come.

In this issue, parents describe the impact of removal long after reunification, and they ask: Is the child welfare system really doing its best to protect kids when removal itself is so traumatic?

ILLUSTRATION BY YC

IN THIS ISSUE

'What Did I Do That They Took Me From You?'

My son's time in care left him feeling like there was something wrong with him.

BY LYNNE MILLER

My son came home from two years in foster care a scared, angry and confused 6-year-old. I kept telling myself that his fear, anger and confusion would all go away when life was "normal" again, but life never really got normal for us.

Lies and Stealing

I had already successfully raised three children when my youngest son was born. But my son's father died unexpectedly when I was pregnant with my son, and my mother died just a few years later. I turned to drugs to deal with grief.

When my son was little, we spent a lot of time together, going to the park and friends' houses. But after my mother died, I became addicted, and then my addiction got out of control. For a year before they took my son from me, I isolated him in his room in front of the TV a lot and we stopped going out like we used to.

After he went into care, we were lucky to have a great foster family that worked with us and stayed in our lives long after my son came home. But when my son was finally released to me, I had to help him not wince and hide every time someone knocked on the door, and I had to get used to the other changes in him: the occasional nightmares, the bed-wetting, his stealing, and his "little white lies" and defiance.

Testing and Control

As he got older, my son would steal from everyone: friends, family, strangers. He'd take money, and he'd also take anything he could "show off" with to friends. He'd lie about where he was, what he'd been up to, where he got stuff.

In part, I think my son was testing me to see whether I really cared enough and was paying enough attention to stop him. But I also think the lies and defiance were his way of being in control. When he was removed from our home, he'd had no control. I think my son was looking for ways to prove to himself he could be the one to make choices—even if they were the wrong ones!

When he defied me, my son also showed me that he didn't trust me. I'd made some bad decisions in the past and maybe he wasn't sure I could be trusted to make good ones.

Small Inside

Even though my son tried to act big and tough, I also knew that inside he felt very small. One time some of my son's classmates found out he'd been in care and they used that fact to taunt him. I know that, when my son was taunted, he felt like the time he'd spent in care was a black stain that people would never let us forget.

The guilt I felt was unimaginable. I felt

bad about the mistakes I'd made, and I felt even guiltier because my son seemed to think it had happened because there was something wrong with him.

One time when he was still in care, my son's foster mother confided in me that my son felt it was his fault that he came into care. She had assured him that going into foster care wasn't his fault, and later I put my son in therapy because I knew he needed help making sense of what had happened to him. But a couple of years later, when I attended my son's therapy one day, he asked me: "What did I do that they took me away from you?"

A Long Struggle

My son's sense that there was something wrong with him came out in smaller ways too. Whenever he had assignments from school that were pretty tough or he decided to do a project, like fix something around the house, he would say, "I'm not smart enough to do this," or "I'm not good enough to do this."

> I often wonder which of my son's problems came from him being in care and which ones I caused before he went into care.

I always let him know I would be there to help when I could. Sometimes I would give him a push in the right direction or get someone else to help him. I think all that support made some difference, because when my son completed something, he would speak about himself in a more positive way.

Still, by 16, my son's anger was so much worse and he hated school so much. I was there for meetings two or three times a week because of all the cutting, fighting, and my son's smart mouth. He had so much anger bottled up in him that he'd slam doors and even punch holes in my walls. If things didn't go his way—he'd lose a job or just misplace his wallet—he would make a comment about the world conspiring against him.

Finally, I allowed him to sign out of school and go to work because I was afraid that, otherwise, child welfare would come back into the picture.

A Place Where He Belongs

A positive change for my son finally came about a year ago, when he was 19. He found a sales job that he is good at. He was even promoted through the ranks from worker to area manager. Now my son is less angry than he used to be, and when he does get angry, he doesn't use his fists. He has also stopped stealing. I think that's because he has finally found a place where he feels like he's good at things and he belongs.

I often wonder which of my son's problems came from him being in care and which ones I caused before he went into care. When child protective services came into my life, I wasn't being the best mother to my son. Still, I always think about how he must have felt during those two years when I wasn't there to hug him when he got hurt or even to kiss him good night.

ILLUSTRATION BY YC

Right now, I am trying to get my son to move out on his own. I think he's ready to be more independent, but he says he doesn't want to leave because he doesn't want to leave me alone. Sometimes, though, I wonder if he still feels that same fear he felt when he was a little boy and they took him from me.

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‘A Child’s Whole Sense of Security Is Shaken’

What families need when children come home from foster care.

BY NICOLE JONES

Arietta Slade, City University of New York professor of clinical psychology and co-director of Minding the Baby, a mother-infant program at the Yale Child Study Center, describes the impact that removal can have on children and parents and the support they need to reconnect:

Q: How does placement in foster care affect children?

You want to think about it like this: We survive by being connected to other people. It’s the most natural thing in the world for children to become attached to their parents, to form a relationship with people who can take care of them, love them and provide for them. Given the strength of these connections, then, foster care placement can be extremely painful for both parent and child.

There are a number of factors that can make that separation hard, really hard, or terrible.

First, there are the circumstances that led up to the separation.

Second, it matters how the removal is carried out. Ideally, the world makes sense to children. If the removal comes with no warning, the children don’t understand what’s going on, and everybody’s really upset—that in itself is a major trauma. The child being terribly frightened can lead to a lot of lasting difficulties.

Where a child is placed is another factor. Some children are fortunate enough to be placed with family members who really know them. Some are not. They may experience multiple placements or bad placements. When siblings aren’t able to stay together, that makes it even harder.

The age of the child is also a factor. A child who is very young may have no way of understanding whether he will ever see his mom again, while an 8-year-old can at least understand a little bit about what’s going on and can communicate his feelings to somebody else.

Lastly, what happens when mom and child are reunited makes a difference. When children come home, everyone wants things to be positive. But usually parents and children have such strong feelings that it’s not easy. It’s a time full of hope and dreams, and full of disappointments.

Because of all of these factors, foster care placement and reunification will be a different experience for each child. Some children end up doing well despite all they’ve been through and some have a really hard time.

Q: What do families go through when children come home?

Any parent who has had her children removed is going to have a lot of very strong, intense feelings. Some parents might feel relieved, like a mother who knows she has a drug problem so big that she can’t care for her children. But many parents also feel shame, humiliation, or terrible guilt. Parents also are often very, very angry at the foster care system. Oftentimes mothers and fathers don’t have any place to talk about their feelings or get help.

When the children come home, both parents and children usually have such strong feelings that it’s not easy. One thing that happens a lot is that parents feel guilty so they bend over backwards to be a friend. But when parents don’t tell their children no, that doesn’t help a child feel safe. It’s scary for a child to feel that he’s more powerful than his parents.

Other times, parents feel rejected. The parents have all of their hopes pinned on reunion. But then, because the child is angry or traumatized, the child misbehaves, and the parent feels very angry and let down.

That’s why it’s so important to get as much help as possible around both separation and reunion.

Q: How can family therapy help?

The most important thing family therapy can do is help repair the relationship between the parent and the child. In Child-Parent Psychotherapy, which I practice, children come in and we encourage them to play. Then the parent, the therapist and the child make sense of the play together.

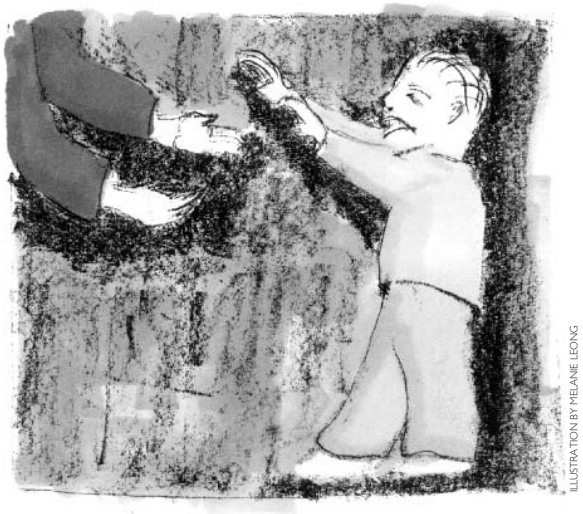

ILLUSTRATION BY MELANIE LEONG

Let’s say a child has witnessed his mother being beaten. You’d be surprised by how often that violence comes into the child’s play. When it does, mother and child can talk about what it was like when mommy got hit, when the police came, when the boy had to go to the hospital. The parent and therapist work together to address the child’s feelings.

Some therapists only want to see the child alone. But if a child therapist does not involve the parent, particularly in a situation where there’s been a removal and reunion, that child therapist is not doing her job. A child cannot get better unless therapy is focused on helping repair the child’s relationship with his parent.

After parents have had a child welfare case, it can feel scary to put their private business out there and many are skeptical of therapy. Most therapists try very hard not to involve themselves with the child welfare system but you may want to discuss your concerns with your therapist before you start.

It’s also important to find a therapist you feel comfortable with. You may want to see a therapist two or three times. Then ask yourself: “Is this someone I could imagine letting down my guard with?” A therapist who can really listen and communicate at a child’s level can help.

The most important thing for parents is not to minimize the child’s experience. A lot of parents wish their involvement with the child welfare system would all go away, and they convince themselves that being in foster care was no big deal for their child. It’s important to remember that a child’s whole sense of security can be shaken by foster care, and he may need an extra level of support, security, understanding and patience when he comes home.

Bonded for Life

Family therapy helped my son and me reconnect.

BY ROBIN WILEY

Twelve years ago, when my son Caiseem was 5, he came home from foster care, where he had been since birth. Caiseem is the youngest of my four children. I've always felt a strong connection with each one of my children, but with Caiseem, something was missing.

Pieces Missing

While he was in care, I would visit Caiseem at the agency, and during those visits I could feel that something wasn't right. I felt that there was a wall between my baby and me. But I would put that feeling to the side and just try to be happy to see my baby.

Caiseem was a big old bundle of joy, especially when his father would pick him up. Then he would smile from ear to ear. But from the beginning, I didn't feel like I got a positive response from him. Instead, I felt like he was looking around for his father.

Separated at Birth

I wondered if Caiseem understood somehow that, when I was pregnant with him, I didn't want him. During my pregnancy, I hoped God would take him away because I didn't want to bring him into this world while I was homeless and using crack.

I asked God to forgive me for my negative thoughts, but I feared that Caiseem always felt unloved and unwanted, no matter how I tried to love him.

Looking back, I think I felt rejected by my son because I felt so guilty, and that there was a wall between us because he went into foster care right from the hospital, before we had time to connect.

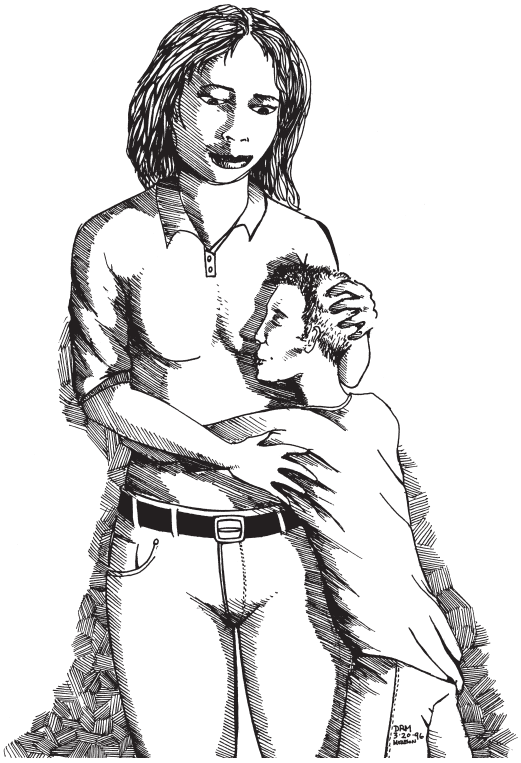

ILLUSTRATION BY DANI REYES-MOZEJKO

How Can We Bond?

In the years after he came home, I constantly wondered what I could do to create a bond with my son. I knew I needed to reach him, because he was going through many issues at school and at home.

Caiseem would not talk much. He would stay out past curfew. He would steal. When questioned, he would lie. He would even steal from his brother and lie about it, or steal in school. I would make him give his allowance to pay for what he stole, but discipline didn't solve the problem.

Finally, when Caiseem was 12, I thought, "He needs counseling." Then I corrected myself: "No, we need counseling." We needed someone to help us understand what the problem was.

I had been to counseling myself, not long after my children came home, because I was really stressed about taking care of my children and needed someone to talk to. My counselor helped me a lot. With her, I realized that counseling is mostly about listening to yourself and having someone whose responses can help you think from a new perspective. That counselor helped me hear myself.

'We Need Counseling'

This time I went with Caiseem. We were introduced to a really smart and understanding therapist at the Northside Center for Child Development in New York City. At first I wasn't sure she could help us because she was younger than me and didn't have children, but she really helped to bring us together.

Caiseem and I were very nervous at our first session. But after Ms. Gamble introduced herself, we started to relax. She had such a soft and comforting voice—you know, the kind that makes you feel like she cares.

Ms. Gamble told us that we would talk to her together. Other times, we would take turns talking with her separately, and then we would talk together about some of what we'd discussed.

> Counseling is mostly about listening to yourself and having someone whose responses can help you think from a new perspective.

Homework and Games

Ms. Gamble gave us homework and games to help us open up and try new ways of relating.

During one of our sessions, Caiseem seemed embarrassed when I mentioned his lying and stealing. I felt the same way when he said, "Mom's always yelling about stuff." I knew I yelled but I didn't understand the way it sounded to him.

Ms. Gamble gave us an assignment to do at home. Caiseem was to ask for what he wanted instead of stealing, and I was to congratulate Caiseem on his good work.

As for me, I was to talk instead of yelling, and when I did yell, Caiseem was to say, "Mom, do you know you're yelling?" Then I should stop and count slowly from 10 backwards to one.

Sometimes I would apologize. Other times I found myself saying, "Yeah, I know I'm yelling, and that's because I have to keep repeating myself." We discussed this in the next session.

Hearing Ourselves

Other times we played a game where I would be Caiseem and he would be me.

Playing Caiseem, I would say things like, "Ma, can I go outside?"

"Go outside for what?" he'd say. I began to think, "Every time I ask for something, he's yelling." I really started feeling sad.

Other times, Caiseem, acting as me, would ask me if I took something. Caiseem has this puppy dog look he gives where he looks real cute. I'd give him that sad look and I wouldn't say anything.

Do No Harm

Addressing the traumatic impact of removal.

BY LYNNE MILLER AND ERICA HARRIGAN-ORR

"Mommy, why you not answering me?" he'd ask, getting frustrated.

"Cause I'm being you, and that's what you do!" I said.

Caiseem was always afraid to ask for what he wanted, because I might say no. But a little while after that, he did stop stealing.

'Ma! Ma!'

Those experiences really helped Caiseem and me understand each other's perspectives and change our behaviors. But most of all, going to therapy together brought us closer.

I've noticed a big change in my son. Before he wouldn't talk to me, but now he is eager to share and connect.

Some days after school, Caiseem will rush into my bedroom all excited and say, "Ma, you know what happened today at school?"

Happy and Connected

I remember one time when I did not feel like talking with him. I was thinking, "Oh, no, Caiseem, I'm tired."

I said to him, "Not now, I'm watching my show."

Then he grabbed the remote and pressed pause, lying on the bed with his head on my shoulder, telling me about his incident at school, like a little boy.

I noticed that his hair was really fresh smelling from the apple shampoo he uses, and as I listened and talked with him, I felt so happy and connected to my son. I can actually say we have bonded.

Erika Tullberg, the administrative director of the NYC Children's Services-NYU Children's Trauma Institute, and Carol Wilson Spigner, a retired University of Pennsylvania social work professor, talked with Rise about the traumatic impact that foster care placement can have on parents and children, and what the system can do to reduce that trauma:

Q: What makes placement in foster care traumatic for parents and children?

Tullberg: There are situations when removing a child may be necessary for the child's safety. It can also motivate parents to get treatment or address past traumas. But removal is almost always a trauma as well. The child welfare system isn't always good at acknowledging that in helping children, their interventions may also do harm.

ILLUSTRATION BY KELVIN MCLENNON

Spigner: This helps to explain why, even when compared to children classified as high risk, outcomes are worse for kids who enter foster care. They are more likely than even other high-risk kids to have attachment disorders, depression and anxiety, poor social skills, aggression and impulsivity.

Children often don't understand why they are being taken into foster care, no matter how often people explain it to them, and they end up feeling that everything that happened was their fault. They also worry about how their parents are doing without them. When they come home, they worry whether they can trust their parents. Their relationships have been disrupted, so they don't trust adults, or any relationship, to protect them.

Tullberg: Many parents who come to the attention of child welfare have traumatic histories themselves. When their children are removed, they experience that loss of power and control all over again, and they can get stuck in a feeling of helplessness. Some parents react with anger. Other parents fall into quite a deep depression that makes it seem like they are giving up on their kids or makes it hard to give their children the support they need.

Q: What can child welfare do to reduce the trauma of foster care placement?

Tullberg: One thing it can do is become more trauma-informed. The ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute, which is part the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, educates child-serving systems about trauma and provides trauma services to children and families

For example, we have developed fact sheets that teach parents directly about trauma, and we let them know that there are ways that past traumas might affect their parenting, such as making it hard to recognize what is safe or unsafe, deal with stress, or trust other people. For many parents, getting this kind of education is really the first time they've understood how trauma has impacted them, and it can give them back some of that feeling of control they lost when their children were taken from them.

We're also helping workers deal with their own exposure to trauma. When you take the trauma that workers hear about on a daily basis, you add the very real fear for the safety of the child, and you overlay that with workers' fears not just of losing their job but of possibly going to jail for not removing a child, it's extremely challenging for workers to make good, nuanced decisions. They can begin to see the world in terms of all or nothing, black or white. But if we help them deal with those emotions, it's likely they'll be better able to make better decisions.

Spigner: Because foster care placement can be so traumatic to children, a big part of the answer is to get creative about serving children in their own families.

> 'The child welfare system isn't always good at acknowledging that in helping children, their interventions may also do harm.'

A safety plan might include anticipating times when a parent with a mental illness might be out of control, and the kids can go someplace else or mom can leave the home. It might be a visiting nurse or a daycare program that makes sure that kids are seen on a regular basis. In many cases, there has to be some action taken to make sure kids are safe, but that action doesn't have to be to take kids totally out of the family.

The challenge for child welfare agencies, families and communities is to minimize trauma while keeping childen safe and connected to their families.

A Long Time Gone

Fourteen years later, my children still feel scared and angry.

BY NICOLE JONES

In January 1999, my life changed in one moment because of an anonymous call saying I beat my kids, which was not true. Child welfare removed my four children, two boys and two girls, ages 2, 4, 6 and 8.

At the time, their father was using drugs and he was running with a crack crowd without my knowledge. At the same time, child protective services were going through our housing project like an epidemic of its own. The night CPS came to our door, they assumed all sorts of terrible things about us, grabbed our kids and asked questions later.

Confusion and Fear

The way they took our kids was traumatizing for us, but it was even worse for our children. The first time our children saw us after child welfare took them, they had a look of pure shock on their faces. They said the police told them that we were dead.

After a month, child welfare let my mom take our kids, but then they received a report that the kids were going to school dirty. I believe my mom was overwhelmed by suddenly having four kids to take care of. But when they came for the kids, they didn't even give my kids any warning. My kids ran out of the house into the streets trying to get away any way they could. My boys and girls were separated from each other and each pair went through three different foster homes in two years.

When my daughter Alliyah was about 3, I saw that she had been beat, with belt marks all up and down her back. I reported the foster mother to the law guardian, the judge, my lawyer, the public advocate's office, and the Black Women's Association, and my girls were moved. But there was a lot that happened when my kids were in care that they didn't tell me until much later.

Learning the Truth, Slowly

When my children first came home, I felt a wall up between my children and me. Over time, and with the help of family therapy, they began to open up. I learned that my older son's foster mother had burnt him with a light bulb while my middle son watched. The boys also told me about being left in a dark room and not being allowed to eat what the foster mother's grandchildren were eating or go out and play. They told me that they really didn't understand what was going on. I sat them down and explained that I hadn't known there was a system like that, either.

ILLUSTRATION BY YC

My oldest daughter told me how hard it was to watch her younger sister being beat and not be able to do anything about it. When she went into care, she became instant mom. When she came home, it was hard for her to let go of being the mother. She became very over-protective of her siblings and me, and she would always ask, "Mommy do you need me to do anything?"

Even though I tell her all the time, "Relax, you don't need to be the mother," sometimes when she's frustrated with me, she still says, "You wasn't there for two years. I got this."

The Scars Don't Heal

Even now, when someone knocks on the door, sometimes my children run and hide, even though they are grown. My older son and daughter both have trouble sleeping.

But the biggest impact has been on my middle boy. When he came home he was very withdrawn and at the same time very aggressive and disrespectful. Sometimes when we were walking down the street, he would start yelling and cursing, seemingly for no reason.

He was so frustrated and angry that he wasn't able to learn. His teachers reported that he would sometimes hide in the closet or go under the desk. I had him put in Special Ed and for several years I sent him to his own therapy but nothing seemed to help.

'I'm Just So Angry'

The best thing that's happened for my middle son is that he's in school to be a barber. Before, I could never get him up to go to school, but now he's up by 5 in the morning and out the door by 7:30. I think learning to be a barber is helping him feel whole.

Still, he has times when he gets upset and starts yelling and screaming obsessively. He'll say, "I don't love myself. I hate myself. I'm just so angry."

My children are now 16, 18, 19, and 21. When I see how they continue to suffer, I suck back tears. I have trouble saying no to anything they ask for, even expensive things they don't need and haven't earned. Knowing everything my children went through makes me feel an enormous guilt.

I've shown my children all the papers I have that prove all the efforts I made to get them home. But sometimes they will look at me and ask me, "When we was in foster care, what was you doing? Were you happy or sad?" It's almost like, 14 years later, they still can't get over feeling that I abandoned them, despite all the love I've shown them and all the times I've told them how lonely I was when they were gone.

Home Base

Intensive in-home services can keep children safer than placement.

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

Youth Villages—a national program serving children with emotional and behavioral disorders, as well as children who have suffered physical or sexual abuse—has pioneered an intensive in-home treatment program that works better than residential placement. Dr. Tim Goldsmith, chief clinical officer, discusses what it takes to keep children safe at home:

When Youth Villages first started, about 20 years ago, we only provided out-of-home services to children on our residential campuses.

We ran a good program and we assumed that the more time children spent with us in residential treatment the better they'd do. But when we did the research—by calling parents, teachers, children and court workers up to two years after kids left us—instead we found the opposite. The kids who did the best were the kids who spent the least time in residential treatment and the most time at home. What that told us is that we were not spending enough time, energy and resources to help the families have a successful environment for the child to live in.

Today our largest program provides intensive in-home services, and that's the program that has the best results. It's not that we're taking the best families into our home program, either. Our research shows that it's the same kids, and the ones who stay home do better. When we were just doing residential treatment, our success rate 12 months after discharge—in terms of the child living at home, going to school, not having trouble with the law or engaging in risky behavior—was 65%. Now it's 86%.

Convincing the System

Youth Village's children are referred to us by schools, state Medicaid systems, and child welfare systems. When the referral comes from child welfare, often they've already decided it would be better to treat the child out of the home because they're very concerned about safety. Typically what we have to do in those situations is let that caseworker know that we will be in the home whenever we're needed.

ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH DEEGAN

We can do that because our counselors carry four cases and that's all, and our counselors receive three to five hours of supervision a week, so they go into the field feeling like they know what they're doing. On average, our counselors visit a family three times a week. Sometimes it's seven days a week. We also have staff on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Making Sure of Safety

Cases typically last three to six months. During that time, we do many things.

We make sure there's safety in the home. For example, if there is an extra relative living in the home who is using drugs, we work with those parents to develop a plan to get that relative out. If mom or dad has mental health issues and needs medication, we make certain the appointments are made and kept.

When parents are overwhelmed, we work on finding extra sources of support. We also help parents learn new parenting strategies. We know that physical punishment works in the short term but it doesn't work in the long term, and it can also invite child protective services into your home. We discuss that.

One of the most important things we do is help parents learn to advocate for themselves. Before we go to court, we role-play what it's going to be like. We'll say: "What if the judge asks you, 'Well, ma'am, how are you going to be able to take care of this child?"' We help parents learn how to advocate for their children in school, too.

> 'We assumed that the more time children spent in residential treatment, the better. But research found the opposite: The kids who did the best spent the least time in residential and the most time at home.'

There's not a particular counseling technique we use. The main thing we ask is: What are the barriers to this family being successful?

Investing in What Works

To provide the kind of services we do, money is always a struggle. We do a lot of private fundraising, but the vast majority of our funding still comes from state contracts, the Medicaid system, and the child welfare system. That means we have to convince all those systems that we are a worthwhile investment.

One of the things that speaks loudly to child welfare is when you can show them that you can get better results with less money. When we show that we can get better results spending $150 a day, as opposed to $350 a day on residential care, most child welfare systems are convinced to work with us.

Sometimes, though, systems say, "We only have so much money. Can you change your program a little bit?" We say, "No, that's not what we do."

I think the larger message of our work is that it gets easier when dollars are spent on services that work. In all honesty, we know what works. It's incredibly frustrating that systems spend time, energy and money on things that don't work just because that's the way things have always been done.

Time for Bed

My kids' tears at bedtime reminded me of more painful goodbyes.

BY JEANETTE VEGA

Until recently, my 4-year-old and 1-year-old had no schedule. They'd eat when they were hungry and sleep when they were tired.

While my 12-year-old, Remi, went to bed at 10 p.m., my little guys, X-man and Zachary, would usually fall asleep around 3 a.m. and wake up at 1 or 2 in the afternoon.

'Your Kids Are Still Up?'

My mom called us vampires. My neighbors would say, "Your kids are still up? Oh, no, girl, I don't play that."

I told myself, "I believe children should be free to be themselves. Let them be them!" As a kid, my mother's rules were too much for me. I wanted my sons to see me as love and comfort.

But I was also afraid that I would lose my cool with my kids if I tried to get them to do what I wanted them to. That's what had happened with my oldest—and he ended up spending three years in foster care.

Robot and Mini-Robot

With Remi, I had tried following a strict routine. When he was born, I was 18, living at home and determined to show my family that I could handle a child, school and a job. I woke up at 7 a.m. and had Remi in daycare by 8. I went to college from 9 until noon, then headed straight to McDonald's and worked until 5. I picked Remi up by 6 p.m.

When we got home, we ate dinner and played but by 8 I was getting Remi ready for bed. Then it was time for my homework, and by 10, I was out.

I got so tired of this life. I was like a robot, making Remi my mini-robot.

Disastrous Consequences

When Remi was a year old, I quit school and we moved to our own apartment. But I didn't handle the freedom well. I was young and wanted to hang out, so I either kept Remi out with me or dropped him off at my mom's.

ILLUSTRATION BY THAYNIA WALDRON

Sad to say, I was barely with Remi, and as the year passed, I found him harder and harder to handle. Many nights Remi stayed up until 1 a.m. throwing toys, papers and clothes. I was always wondering, "What next?"

The night before Remi's second birthday changed our lives. I was taking a shower and Remi was in his crib. When I got out of the shower, I saw the front door open and Remi gone. I freaked out, ran to the door and there he was, playing outside all alone.

God forgive me but I flipped out and made the biggest mistake of my life: I hit my son. He had a bruise on his arm and his face, and a small red mark on his back. I felt terrible.

The next day, my family saw the marks and called child welfare. Remi ended up spending three years in foster care. Looking back, it breaks my heart to realize how young and stupid I was.

Enjoying the Baby Years

Years after Remi came home, my hubby and I had two more children. This time, I convinced myself that it was better to be lenient. Besides, I worked all day. I didn't want to come home just to watch my children sleep.

But a year ago, X-man was about to start preschool. I wanted him and Zach going to sleep at a reasonable time and waking up rested.

I also began to want some time to relax by myself. Many nights, the boys would run wild, playing tag, catch, hide and-seek, screaming and fighting until they collapsed—in our bed. The chaos was starting to frustrate me.

> I wasn't always confident that we'd have tomorrow together. My mind would go back to the day that I said 'goodbye' to Remi and he was gone for years.

So my husband and I started to try to put our little ones to bed by 10 p.m.

Feeling the Frustration

At first, it was a disaster. Just when I thought they were falling asleep, X-man would start his, "Please, Mommy, let me watch just one more cartoon." And if Zachy saw X-man up, he wouldn't sleep, either.

Other times, we had them in bed and asleep early—for nothing. They'd wake up by midnight as if they'd been napping. After that, oh man. They had recharged their batteries and were ready to play until 3 or 4 a.m. When Dad and I tried to insist on sleep, they would scream and cry like we were torturing them.

When my boys cried, it took me back to when Remi was in foster care. When the workers snatched him from me, he screamed. At every visit, he cried. For years I could hear his screams and remember his little arms reaching out to me.

Sometimes when my sons cried, I'd tell myself, "I couldn't stop Remi's cries then but I can stop their cries now."

Other times, though, I would get frustrated. I would grab them and put them on the bed. Then I worried, "Am I grabbing them too rough? Am I neglecting them by letting them cry and scream until they're losing their breath?" I was afraid I would lose my babies just because I wanted them to go to sleep.

Stern Mom, Good Mom

Eventually, though, I began to feel a little more certain that being consistent wouldn't make me a mean mom—it would help my kids learn respect and discipline so they could have constructive lives.

So my hubby and I decided to back

each other more. When we both said, "It's bedtime," it was more effective.

We focused on sticking to a basic schedule: After X-Man got home from school, I would take the kids outside and let them run and play. Once I brought them upstairs, they'd eat, play some more, then get in the bath by 10 p.m. Soon the boys were in bed by 12:30 a.m. at the latest.

Of course we heard: "No, I don't want to." But as time passed I began to see that X-Man and Zachy seemed relieved that we were telling them when to slow down.

Together as a Family

The final frontier was getting the kids to sleep in their own beds every night. My hubby and I decided that, when we moved to a new apartment, we would move the bedtime back to 10 p.m. and insist that they stay in their beds.

Once again it was a struggle. They kept getting up and coming to our room, crying, which I hated. But I found that I was now able to stay calm. I would take them back to their beds saying, "You will be fine. I love you. It's time for bed."

After we put the kids back to bed about 50 times a night for a week, X-Man and Zach started to get in their own beds and say goodnight to us. It was like a dream. After that, everything seemed to fall into place. Soon we were eating as a family, talking and making jokes together.

Ok to Be Apart

Now it feels good to tell my children, "Goodnight. Tomorrow is another day for fun and games." I wasn't always confident that we'd have tomorrow together. My mind would go back to the day that I said "goodbye" to Remi and he was gone for years. But I've learned that it's OK to be a little apart.

I'm proud that my husband and I got through our fears. What happened in the past won't happen again.

'What Do You Need?'

Approaching parents as partners helps families out of crisis.

BY SAMANTHA RUIZ

In many places, families who are investigated for child abuse or neglect face an unexpected visit from a child protective worker who knocks on the door and announces that she will investigate the family. During the investigation, parents are often focused only on getting child welfare out of their lives—even if they really do need help with practical problems like child care or clothing for their children, or parenting supports that would keep the family from reaching a crisis point where children do wind up being removed.

ILLUSTRATION BY TAMIKA ONO-KNIGHT

But some states are trying a less intrusive and more supportive approach. Here, Caren Kaplan, the former director of child protection reform at the American Humane Association, and Tony Loman, research director of the Institute of Applied Research, describe "differential response."

LOMAN: The idea of "differential response" is that child protective services needs more than just one kind of response—an investigation—for all the kinds of child protective cases. In the early 1970s, the idea of child protective services was to respond to severe cases of child abuse. But during the 1970s and 1980s, states began to respond to all kinds of things, like a dirty house, or inadequate clothing or food. People began to ask, "Do we really need to do a police-like investigation for all these cases?"

KAPLAN: A good analogy is that if you went through a red light, you wouldn't want or need a SWAT team as a response. We often give families a type of response that is unwarranted.

Families who are investigated are left feeling scared and angry. If their situations don't meet the standard of "imminent danger" to the child, the family usually declines services and the case is closed. But often, the same families are reported to the system again with more problems and more safety issues because the family didn't get any help.

In a differential response system, anywhere from 50% to 70% of cases called in to the State Central Registry might receive an "assessment" instead of an investigation. With an assessment, there's no unexpected knock at the door. Instead, the worker calls to set up an appointment with the family. The worker's job is to partner with families, listen to what families say they need, and help families build their own capacity to protect their children.

LOMAN: When child welfare systems ask, "What do you need?" families consistently request help with their basic needs, like emergency food, clothing, help with housing, transportation, day care. What we've found is that once you begin to address these kinds of poverty issues, the safety issues are not as likely to come back. I'm not saying that all you have to do is address poverty and all other family problems go away. But addressing poverty makes it easier to deal with the other problems.

KAPLAN: If a family is sleeping in the car and mom needs psychotropic medication, it's unfair and unreasonable to expect mom to take her medication and engage in treatment. In a differential response system, workers can help families find housing and give families gas cards. They can bring mom diapers or food for the baby. Differential response workers still have the power to remove a child if they believe that a child is in imminent danger. But for most cases on the assessment track, workers really do approach families more as partners than as adversaries.

> 'If you went through a red light, you wouldn't want or need a SWAT team as a response. We often give families a type of response that is unwarranted.'

From the very beginning, the research has shown that children are no less safe when we use the assessment approach with lower-risk families. We also see that families don't cycle back through the system the way they did before.

I think that when parents initially experience an assessment, they're not too thrilled. Who is thrilled about child protection showing up? But when we got feedback from parents who had experienced the assessment approach, they talked about the fact that they were listened to for first the time in their lives. Many continued to have contact with the worker after the case was closed. Several of the families had experienced both types of interventions, and they said there was there was really no comparison.

Too Scared to Learn

My daughter had to deal with her foster care fears before she could focus in school.

BY ANONYMOUS

My daughter had some very serious problems when she started first grade. Kindergarten wasn't too smooth, either, so on the first day of school this year I was encouraging her, saying, "This year is a new year for you." I had high hopes.

A Difficult First Day

I dressed my daughter in her uniform—yellow tights with a blue jumper and a long sleeved yellow shirt. But as we approached the school, my daughter started crying, holding onto a metal railing and refusing to go inside. "It'll be OK," I told her. "You look so beautiful."

In the cafeteria where the noise was tremendous, quite a few children were crying, so I didn't feel as bad that my baby was in tears. When I walked my daughter upstairs to her classroom, she did not let go of my hand. When she picked out a desk, she finally calmed down and I gave a last kiss goodbye.

'I Will Behave'

But my daughter's fears did not go away. She was having a major problem dealing with the other kids, and she kept crying and not respecting the teacher's rules. I was embarrassed when I heard about her behavior.

The teacher began calling to say that my daughter was throwing herself on the floor, poking kids with her pencil and threatening kids with scissors. That was very scary.

My husband and I took everything fun out of my daughter's room and made her write in her punishment book, "I will behave," but it didn't help. In about three weeks we had four conferences with the school counselor, principal, parent coordinator and teacher to discuss my daughter's behavior.

I blamed myself because soon after my daughter was born, I relapsed.

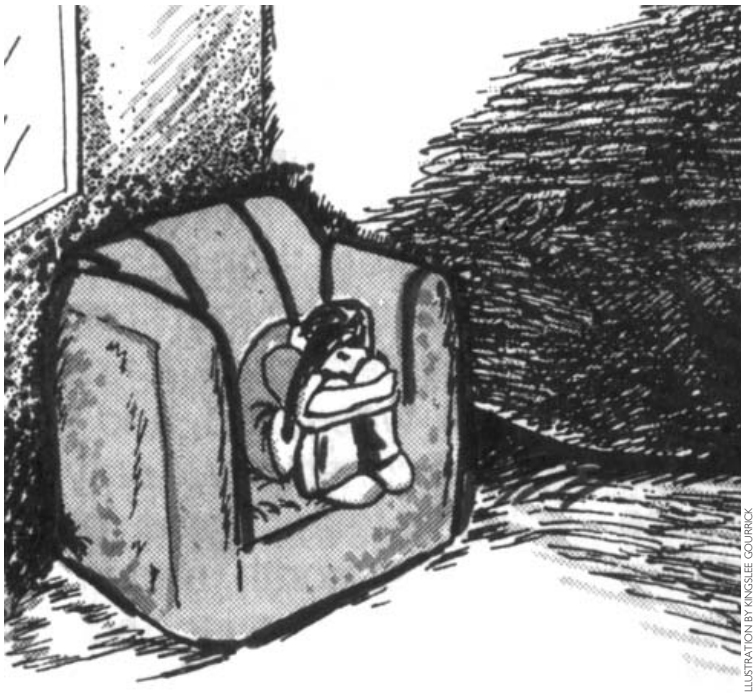

ILLUSTRATION BY KINGSLEE GOURROK

Because of my drug use, my daughter spent three years in foster care. But I also felt angry at my daughter. I felt she could do better.

She Needed Help

In our house, everyone felt full with anger and disappointment. My daughter was getting so angry sometimes that she would kick the wall, throw her toys everywhere, and tear things up. She would even tell me that she hated herself and she wished she were dead.

I decided to call a mental health hotline. They advised me to take her to the emergency room so she could get a psychiatric evaluation.

When my daughter and I got there, we were sent to the adult psychiatric ward. I felt nervous for our safety. Everybody was in pajamas and some of the men seemed drunk or were talking to themselves. When we sat down, they all stared at us, especially my daughter in her braids and pink jacket. Immediately, she started crying and said she wanted to go home.

"I'm sorry, but this is what we need to do because you need help. You need to see a doctor," I told her.

Earning Stars and Rewards

Finally, we met with a psychiatrist and then with a very nice therapist. The therapist said it sounded like my daughter was having separation anxiety, probably because of her experience in foster care. The therapist told me that by focusing on the positive things my daughter did, instead of punishing her, we could help her feel better about herself and less fearful and angry.

The therapist gave me a chart where my daughter could earn stars for the positive things she does. At the end of the week, if she had enough stars, she could earn a reward.

'Not a Baby Anymore'

The therapist also noticed me calling my daughter "Little Mama." "Why are you doing that?" she asked.

"It's just something I call her," I said.

"No, Mom. You need to call her by her name," she said. "She's not little anymore, and she's the child."

She also told me that I need to let my daughter grow up in certain ways. I have to stop getting her dressed, tying her shoes and cleaning her room. Treating her like a baby allows her to act like a baby, she said, and that's part of why she has tantrums.

Playing Catch Up

That advice made me feel sad. I know my daughter is a big girl, and I don't want to hurt her development in any way. But I also fear that her growing up is coming too soon. I feel that I missed out on my daughter's early years, so treating her like she is still small is a comfort for me. When I hug and kiss her, dress her and just wipe her tears away, I feel like I'm playing catch up.

Plus, my own growing up was so terrible that I want to protect my daughter and keep her by my side always. I was only 5 when my mom and dad left my brothers and me alone in the streets. In my adoptive home, I was abused and beaten. I never had a birthday party or a person who hugged me or loved me.

Even today I still wish I had a mother to love me and help me raise my

By focusing on the positive things my daughter did, we could help her feel better about herself and less fearful and angry.

daughter. I still wish I had my dad to hold on to me and protect me and let me know everything is going to be all right. I love holding my daughter's hand as we walk, letting her know I will always be here. I truly feel empty from my childhood, and I don't want her to feel empty or alone.

Making Progress

Now my daughter goes to therapy every week and talks about being in foster care, missing her brothers, her fears about school, and her progress.

We have a chart for the house, and at school the teacher also has a chart with stars so we can see her progress. Everyone at school is seeing how the therapy sessions and the charts are helping her.

In the house my little girl is doing so well. She now makes her bed and cleans her room. She usually respects Mom and Dad and does her homework with no attitude. In the morning, she dresses herself for school and ties her shoes. Every night she reads at bedtime with me. I am so proud of her and I always tell her that with hugs and kisses.

There are days when she doesn't do what she's supposed to. Some days I feel a constant guilt that she's having problems. I think to myself, "If I didn't use drugs and abandon her she would be different."

But I am beginning to see that my daughter and I can still be close as she gains more independence, and I feel proud of how much we've accomplished together. My girl is growing up.

Taking No Chances

Would my daughter be taken from me if I stayed in foster care?

BY DESIREE NAVARRO

When I found out I was pregnant, I was 19 and living in foster care. I didn't want my daughter to be born into the foster care system.

ILLUSTRATION BY MELANIE LEONG

I myself went into care with my sister when I was 4 and she was 1. Growing up, I felt like my little sister and I were alone in this world. We lived in many homes and went through verbal and physical abuse. We never felt loved or understood why we couldn't return home to our biological mom, even after she stopped using drugs. The idea that my daughter would be born into care really haunted me.

I also feared that if I raised my baby in foster care, she would fall into the hands of the system. When my older sister was in foster care, she permanently lost her parental rights to her first daughter and to this day she is unsure why.

My older sister hasn't seen her daughter in years, and her other children have never even met their sister. I've also met many other girls in care who have lost their children. I didn't want that to happen to me.

> The idea that my daughter would be born into care really haunted me.

I Belonged at Home

Above all, I wanted my daughter to grow up with what I didn't have—a family. Throughout the years that I lived in foster care, I felt I belonged in my mother's house.

When I was little, visits with my mom made me feel relieved. My mom always did her best to hide her problems from us and she was a very high-spirited person. The only time I saw my mom cry was when visits were over. If my sister and I cried to her, she would cry with us. But she would always tell us, "Everything is going to be OK." My mom made me feel that no one in the world mattered but us.

As a teenager, I ran away from my foster homes to stay with my mom over and over, off and on for two years. By then, my mom was sober and my older siblings were living at home again, but my mother's rights to my little sister and me were terminated.

But when I was 14, I decided I needed to focus on school. So I turned myself in to the foster care system and focused on my goal of a financially secure future.

Home for Good

When I got pregnant at 18, I decided that raising my daughter safe with family was more important than the financial supports I could get to attend college while in foster care. So when I was two months pregnant, I told my caseworker, "I want to sign myself out." Four months later, home I went to my mother's Harlem apartment.

Living with my mom hasn't exactly been how I thought it would be. At first, everything was great. My mom was with me for the whole 27 hours I was in labor. Since Jada was born, my mother has been my support, and she loves Jada dearly.

Even so, a couple of months after I gave birth we began to bump heads. All I know is that we can't really handle one another's attitude. Now I am planning to move out, get into college and begin a career as a nurse.

But I'm glad I left foster care to live with my mother. We needed the opportunity to get to know each other better, and I was able to take Jada's first year off from working or going to school so I could focus on my motherly duties. (Jada's father also helped me with money.)

I also joined a training program at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, which trains parents to know their rights. CWOP has helped my mother for many years. I wanted to make sure I could protect Jada if the system ever got involved in my life again.

Two Weeks Too Many

My daughters came home clingy, crying and aggressive

BY ERICA HARRIGAN-ORR

When my mom was drinking and using drugs, hours turned into days, and days turned into months. Many times I was removed from my home without ever really understanding why.

Until I was grown, I never fully understood that my mother had a substance abuse problem. Instead, I always felt I must have done something wrong. Every time I was removed, I felt even more responsible, helpless and hopeless of ever getting the mother-daughter bond I craved.

ILLUSTRATION BY TERRENCE TAYLOR

Trying to Break the Cycle

I had my first daughter a year after I aged out of foster care, at 22, and I had my second daughter when I was 23. My husband, their father, also grew up in care.

I wanted to leave the trauma of family separation in our past, so when I got pregnant, I signed up for parenting and anger management classes. Preventive services gave us a homemaker seven hours a day, five days a week. I hoped all the supports would be our best defense against ever losing our children.

But in January 2009, when my children were 1 and 2, I started having problems with my medication, and then I stopped taking it. Soon I started fighting with my husband. Once I got so angry I kicked a hole in the door. Another time he broke my cell phone during a fight, and, to get revenge, I called in a domestic violence report.

Repeating the Trauma

In the end, my therapist called child protective services. My daughters were 15 and 32 months when they were removed. They were gone for two weeks until a judge ordered more intensive services so they could return home.

Then in April 2009, the homemaker reported that my house wasn't clean, there wasn't enough food, and I wasn't compliant with services. Again, CPS removed my children for two weeks.

When they took my children, I felt like that helpless child I was when I went into foster care. And when my daughters came home, they were scared. Adults may think, "They were only gone for two weeks each time," but think about it from their perspective: My daughters didn't know where they were, why we'd left them, or if we were coming back. One time, we didn't even get to say goodbye.

Clinging, Crying and Aggression

Before my children were removed, it really didn't seem to affect them if we went out. But after, they started having lots of nightmares, and whenever their dad or I would leave, or even just talk on the phone or go to the bathroom, they would cry and cling to us. At times, they would grow aggressive and throw their toys. And when the worker came by, their smiles turned to tears. It seemed like they were in a panic the whole time that she was going to take them from us.

Judged and Scared

It has been more than two years since my kids have been home but my daughters continue to show signs of separation anxiety. What has helped most is constantly reassuring them, "We're doing our best to keep you safe at home."

Sometimes it's hard for me to believe my reassurances, though, because when I go to court, the worker says that I am not emotionally stable and recommends remanding the children to foster care, despite the fact that my therapist says that I am stable. The judge keeps extending court oversight of our case.

I feel like if I slip up and lose control even once, I could lose my children. I trust my therapist, but with child welfare, I just feel judged and scared.

ABOUT Rise

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

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

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at nora@risemagazine.org or (646) 543-7099 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work. For help with a child welfare case, please contact our partner organization, Children Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and peer support organization in East Harlem, NY: www.cwop.org or 212-348-3000.

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