

A Call for Radical Change in Child Protection Practice: Unleashing the Restorative Power of Relationship by Authentically Engaging the Extended Family, Community and Tribe

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January 2016

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

George Santayana

“Dignity cannot wait for better times...”

Alberto Cairo

We can all agree that abused, neglected and abandoned children deserve every resource we have at our disposal to help them heal, grow and thrive. As child welfare professionals we share a deep commitment to protecting and supporting the children whose parents have been found lacking in their ability to provide the safety and sustenance, if not the love, that every child needs and deserves. We are attracted to this challenge because we at once understand both the immensity and the profound importance of what we strive to accomplish.

Our goal is easy to state but seems nearly impossible to achieve: we want the young people in our systems of care to have access to the same opportunities, experiences and relationships of trust and love that we want for our own children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. It is a cruel irony that despite our heartfelt efforts, our allocation of resources, our foster homes and group homes, programs and services, clinicians and volunteers, the desires we have for the children we serve are so rarely realized and in fact children only seem to get worse the longer they stay in our care. Why? The answer lies in our failure to fully appreciate

and embrace the vital power of relationship—with parents, extended family, community or tribe—and our hard-wired need for human connections steeped in trust, unequivocal love, and the security of permanence.

To properly address our current challenge, it is important to understand the historical background of modern social welfare policy. The notion that government agencies and charitable organizations are responsible for social welfare is an evolving one. Our English ancestors in the 17th century placed full responsibility for the care and welfare of children upon the family and expected the family to find its own solutions. The 1601 Poor Laws in Elizabethan England meted out harsh justice for those who failed to adequately care for themselves and their families and thus committed the sin of poverty.

This view shifted over the years and a more paternalistic approach was presented by Lord William Beveridge in 1942. As he laid out in a series of groundbreaking reports, Beveridge believed that the solution to chronic intergenerational poverty and what we know now as social inequality lay in the establishment of a host of government programs. His reports became the

blueprint for the creation of the modern British welfare state in which parental responsibilities were shared with, if not replaced by, newly formed systems of public education, public health, mental health, social services, family courts and juvenile justice. Underlying these systems of services was the establishment of a social service bureaucracy and a perspective that families and young people from certain groups lack the capacity to safely and reliably address their own challenges.

While Beveridge's contributions served some groups well, they set the stage for government-sponsored social disparity and the generational repression of certain non-white indigenous and immigrant groups. Manifestations of this disparity are evident in historical practices of the United States and other former British colonies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries these include the orphan trains and Indian boarding schools of the United States, the Aboriginal residential schools of Canada, and the Stolen Generations of Australia which saw the compulsory removal and subsequent adoption of Aboriginal children by white families. Further evidence may be seen in the adoption policies of maternity homes and the "baby scoop" between the 1940's and the 1970's. All were the prevailing best practices of their day and staffed by well-intentioned professionals, clergy and volunteers implementing evolving models of services that we now recognize as part of a class-serving colonial or missionary agenda.

As distant from present day child protection practice as these examples may seem, some of their basic assumptions still shape our experience today as child welfare professionals. We continue to serve families predominantly impacted by economic and social inequality; just ask yourself how many children of wealth and privilege you have on your caseload. Furthermore, once the decision is made to remove a child from his parents, we cease to consider the child's broader family connections as having continued importance in the child's life. Conventional child welfare practice is still based on the presumption that young people served by child protection systems have no one willing or safe enough in the family or community to take greater responsibility for them. When capable family members are indeed found, their engagement with the youth is often blocked or delayed while we attempt to "fix"

emotional and behavioral problems using traditional methods and services. Efforts have been made to adopt alternate approaches with tools such as Wraparound and Family Group Decision Making, but these are typically discretionary and perceived to be time-consuming to a caseworker already feeling overloaded and questioning the value of adding one more service. Overcoming the collective and historical trauma wrought by earlier child welfare practices remains our significant challenge and opportunity.

Family Finding was developed to explore three questions about the families of children served by child protection systems:

1. Is it true that young people from predominantly poor and minority groups, who are the longest waiting children in government programs, have no safe family or community connections?
2. If there is a larger family, community or tribe that would claim a role in the child's life, can an overburdened caseworker or volunteer find these people with the time and tools they have available?
3. Finally, if the family, community or tribe is found, will there will be members safe and willing to help?

The overwhelming evidence in formal scientific evaluation of the original six-step model of Family Finding is yes to all three questions. In fact, in formal evaluations the answer was yes for 94% of even the longest waiting and loneliest young people in care systems across North America.

We have learned another truth not explored before: that present-day extended families are bigger than ever due to the prevalence of divorce and other changes in parental relationships. Put another way, the blended family has expanded the family tree. Other factors leading to the growth and diversity of the family are changes in social justice conditions; cheaper and more efficient global transportation, manufacturing and trade; and access to diverse and widespread communication through technology and social media.

Our societies have seen change on a massive scale in the makeup and relationships of extended families and communities.

On a personal scale, we must also recognize that the functioning of extended family members can vary greatly from one household to the next. Nearly all of us can think of a relative in struggle who should not be responsible for the care of a child and another relative who is or could be wonderful with children. In between these two extremes lie everyone else who exists in a family or tribe. In the future, agencies providing real and meaningful help to children will start by engaging members of diverse functioning families and Tribes in an urgent fashion when a relative of theirs, whether parent or child, is facing the crisis of their life. Agencies that ultimately fail in their mission to help children and families will be those that insist on holding onto conventional practices that create and deepen social and cultural quarantine around those they seek to help. We must undertake a radical change in the level of family participation that is sought, welcomed and supported in the services and programs of child protection, juvenile justice, mental health, education and homeless youth. To continue to treat young people served in these systems as though they have no one and need the ongoing services of government and charities is to practice as though we have learned nothing from our history. Between the perspective that vulnerable people are responsible for their own self-rescue and the notion that only services can create solutions lies the key. We must return the child, family, community and

Tribe to the center of the paradigm with an authentic experience of personal agency and participation. With the family in the forefront, our mandate is to offer supportive services that provide evidence-informed help when addressing a need that cannot otherwise be met or while more normative solutions are being sought or created.

Family Finding Model Revision One is a framework for transformation. In acknowledging a root cause of dissatisfaction and poor results in child protection practice we empower ourselves to find new solutions. Together with the manual, the new practice model contains the concepts, tools and strategies to bring about profound change and social justice through evolving casework practice. It emphasizes the importance of human relationship, mutual respect, and sustained partnership between professionals and volunteers, youth, and their families, communities or tribes. Relationship is the single most important factor in the capacity for healing and resilience and must be at the center of all human services casework. When we engage the child's extended family, community and tribe we provide the child with the opportunity of relationship, and we open the door to healing and permanence. As child welfare professionals we should settle for nothing less. By reinforcing class differences, Lord Beveridge and his contemporaries removed human dignity from the experience of receiving help from government and charities. When we do this today, whether knowingly or not, not only do we rob the participants of their dignity, we as professionals lose some of ours as well.



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