

Foster Care: Positive Approaches to a National Problem

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It gives me pleasure, as editor of *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, to introduce the guest editor of this special issue on Foster Care, Dr. Lenore Behar, Chief of North Carolina's Child Mental Health Services. Dr. Behar received her Ph.D. from Duke University in clinical and social psychology. She is a highly respected psychologist functioning in an important position, not only within the State of North Carolina, but on the national level. In North Carolina Dr. Behar supervises children's services in six institutions and 41 clinics. It is within this context that she became interested in foster care and foster parent training since numerous foster children presented with problems in the clinics that she supervises.

On the national scene Dr. Behar served on the President's Commission on Mental Health representing children and families from 1978-1979. In 1978 she was appointed to a four year term to the Board of State Mental Health Representatives for Children and Youth which is a Board of the National Governor's Association. Dr. Behar is also chair of the Advisory Board on the Martha Stuart Commission, a video production corporation that makes documentaries related to family issues.

The removal of children from their homes has, for decades, been considered an important component and a growing component of child welfare services. Federal expenditures for foster care through the Social Security Act are rapidly approaching two hundred million dollars a year (HEW 1976); and approximately 120,000 children per year are provided foster care placement (HEW 1977). Children are placed in substitute environments, usually child care institutions or foster homes, with the latter being the most desirable, for a variety of reasons — parents die through illness or accident and children are left homeless, children are abused or neglected and are removed from home for their own protection; to list the causes most usually offered.

The latter two causes imply the recognition that the home situation, in most cases, is fraught with such problems, perhaps such pathology, that the placement of the child in another environment is, in itself, therapeutic. However, as several of the articles in this issue indicate, the therapeutic benefits of removal to another environment, per se, are quite mixed. There are both positive and negative valences in such situations. The reactions of many foster children are highly mixed as well. Clearly placement in a "good home" is not the closing sentence in the child's story; rarely does he or she "live happily ever after." As child professionals, we know the importance of personal history, past trauma, past attachments, and the unfathomable bond of the parent-child relationship. It is only the most naive or the most desperately hopeful professional that could believe that finding a child a new family would bring him or her only happiness.

The removal of children from their homes is not a new topic for concern, as there have been innumerable professional articles, surveys, studies, and conferences focusing on dependent children as far back as the late 1800's with such articles as "The Shady Side of The Placing Out System (Alden, 1885); and Placing Out Children: Dangers of Careless Methods (Hedderd, 1899)". As early as 1909, a White House Conference on Dependent Children focused on these issues. Almost 70 years later the publication of *Children Without Homes* (Children's Defense Fund, 1978) brought into clear focus the overwhelming problems of the foster care system, problems which the child welfare professionals have known and have suffered. *Children Without Homes* reveals that the child welfare activity of removing a child from his or her home, although believed to be in the best interest of the child, has resulted in all too many cases in greater neglect, more serious abandonment, and deeper trauma to the child than the naive conceptualization of "helping" could have ever forewarned.

The problems that have developed within the foster care

system are indeed serious ones; children have gotten lost for years, maintained through foster care payments in out of state facilities; children have not been reunited with their families when a modest amount of case work would have made it a possibility; children have been placed in environments equally or more unsavory as the ones from which they came; or children, because of their emotional disturbance or other limitations, have repeatedly failed in their foster care environments, have been rejected, and placed again, with many children having 10 to 15 foster care placements in a two to three year period.

The recognition of the problem resulting from foster care placement has represented a challenge to professionals within the human service systems. There has been the recognition that foster care may be used too liberally, without adequate attempts to strengthen the home rather than remove the child from it. Foster care occurs in all too many cases without adequate planning, without adequate tracking, and without adequate attempts to reintegrate families. There has been the recognition that policies must be changed, that training programs must be developed for those involved in placing children and those involved in providing foster care. There is also the awareness that therapeutic intervention with children who have experienced the painful side of foster care may demand additional professional skills and understanding. But clearly there has also been the recognition that foster care is a system to be strengthened rather than to be abandoned. Because foster care appears to be the least restrictive and most homelike setting for children who must be removed from their homes, there is the professional commitment to improve this system, to use it when it is clearly appropriate, and to use it in the most appropriate way possible.

- Alden, L. The shady side of the placing out system (1885). In *Care of dependent children in the late nineteenth & early twentieth century*, New York: Arno Press, 1909.
- Children's Defense Fund. *Children Without Homes*, Washington, D.C., 1978.
- Hedderd, R. Placing out children: dangers of careless methods (1889). In *Care of dependent children in the late nineteenth & early twentieth century*. U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, Social and Rehabilitative Service, National Center for Social Statistics. *Public Assistance Statistics*, June, 1976, Washington, D.C. 1976.
- U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, Social and Rehabilitation Service, Division of Finance, Office of Financial Management, *State Expenditures for Public Assistance Programs Approved Under Titles I, IV-A, X, XIV, XVI, XIX, XX of the Social Security Act, Fiscal Year 1976*, Washington, D.C., 1977.