

A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO IMPROVE FOSTER CARE

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In the U.S., it remains an unfortunate reality that many children—including those born to low-income parents whose families live in poor neighborhoods with low-quality schools or who are members of minority groups—are statistically disadvantaged from the moment of birth or even earlier. Though some are able to break out and achieve educational and economic success, the odds are stacked against these children—now more than ever.

Among this already disadvantaged group of children, one subgroup stands out for the accumulation of factors that work against them enjoying a happy and normal childhood or beating the odds to achieve a fulfilling life as an adult characterized by a stable family, a good job, and financial independence. These most unfortunate and at-risk children are those removed from their homes by local officials and placed in the nation's foster care system. These are the most disadvantaged children in the nation, and therefore have the greatest claim to public support.

The magnitude of the problem is shown by a recent survey that found that nearly 40 percent of the nation's children experienced a child protective services investigation by age 18.¹ In 2014 alone, reports to public authorities documented child abuse or neglect allegations affecting 3.2 million children.² Not all children who are victims of abuse or neglect are identified when the maltreatment occurs—and even fewer receive services—but every state has a public entity, often called the Department of Social Services (DSS), that investigates these reports of abuse or neglect and, in the cases that the local DSS finds to be most serious, formulates and executes a plan for helping the parents and the child improve their relationship and reduce the problems that led to the maltreatment.

In the most serious cases of abuse or neglect, DSS may remove children from their parents and place them in a setting outside their family household, sometimes in a group or institutional care setting, sometimes with a relative, and sometimes with another family that has been determined to meet at least minimum standards of being able to provide an adequate environment for raising the child. About 260,000 children enter foster care each year; at any given moment, a total of around 400,000 of the nation's children are in foster care.³

The needs of children in foster care

Imagine the emotional condition of children who enter foster care. Before entering care, nearly all of them experience trauma that can have serious and sometimes lasting impacts on their development and personality. Once placed in foster care, their contact with their own parents is greatly reduced, at least temporarily. Although child welfare agencies are supposed to keep children in their home communities and in their own schools if possible, achieving these two placement goals is often difficult, in which case children may be placed in a new neighborhood where they must go to a new school and make new friends. Thus, children who already face many disadvantages can lose major

parts of their familiar environment while facing what must seem to them an uncertain and deeply confusing future.

It is little wonder that these children, when studied over many years, have outcomes in education, delinquency, mental health, employment, and many other areas that are far below average. One of the best studies of the long-term impacts of foster care and the conditions that cause children to enter foster care followed about 730 adolescents who were in foster care at age 17 in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. They were followed until they reached age 26. The authors' conclusion provides a clear picture of the fate of many of these young people who experienced years in foster care:

The picture that emerges . . . is disquieting, particularly if we measure the success of the young people . . . in terms of self-sufficiency during early adulthood. Across a wide range of outcome measures, including postsecondary educational attainment, employment, housing stability, public assistance receipt, and criminal justice system involvement, these former foster youth are faring poorly as a group. . . . Our findings raise questions about the adequacy of current efforts to help young people make a successful transition out of foster care.⁴

Research in recent decades has established that for most children, their parents are the most important influence on their development.⁵ Parents establish and maintain most parts of the preschool child's rearing environment and have more interactions with the child than any other person. Parents establish the child's daily routines, listen to and talk to the child more than anyone else, and are the child's original source of information and values. But just as children who enter foster care come from neighborhood and school environments that are less than ideal, their home environments—including their parents—are also unlikely to have supported normal child development. Most enter foster care already carrying emotional—and often physical—scars.

How foster care placement works

Precisely because parents are so important to children's development and well-being, when children are removed from their parents by public officials, the public assumes responsibility for their development and well-being. For the approximately 260,000 children placed in foster care each year, the choice of foster care setting is central to the child's future.

There is now almost universal agreement that group or institutional care should be considered an option of last resort.⁶ In 2014, a group of ten leading child welfare researchers with extensive careers of research on children felt so strongly about this issue that they issued a "consensus statement" on group care. Their conclusion, stated with admirable conciseness, is that children

should be placed in group care only “when necessary therapeutic mental health services cannot be delivered in a less restrictive setting.”⁷ Nonetheless, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 15 percent of children are placed in group homes or institutional care.⁸

Far preferable to group care is placement with a qualified, loving family. Two types of placements with families are used by child welfare offices across the nation. In one type, children are placed with family members, often grandparents. This mode of placement has been used for centuries and is today a form of foster care endorsed by child welfare agencies, government agencies responsible for administering child welfare programs, and child welfare professional organizations.⁹ There are two major factors that make kinship placements so desirable: First, children are usually familiar with the adults with whom they will be living. Second, both the parents and the child experience less trauma if the child is placed with someone known to and trusted by the parents and the child. About 30 percent of children in foster care are in kinship care.

Many families whose children enter foster care do not have relatives available or able to provide reliable and loving care to the child. Thus, DSS agencies find families—usually unknown to the child and the child’s family—that are willing to devote themselves to the care and nurturing of the child. Children placed with foster families are often traumatized, especially if they have been living in difficult circumstances with their biological family for many years. Thus, the children often act out and are resistant to adult supervision. As every parent knows, raising children is always challenging. But raising a foster child can be especially challenging due to the unique needs of foster children and tensions with parents who have lost temporary custody of their children. Both conditions weigh heavily on foster parents.

Given these challenges, DSS agencies have a demanding task in selecting, training, and certifying foster parents who can stand up to these various pressures—and all so they can serve a child and family they don’t know. Despite these barriers, however, placement with non-relative families is the most common placement type: 45 percent of foster children live with non-relative foster families.

A national campaign to catalyze foster care reform

Given the stakes, and our nation’s public responsibility for providing the best possible care for these abused and neglected children, a group of child welfare advocates, researchers, community activists, and foundation officials have initiated a national campaign called CHAMPS (CHildren need AMazing ParentS) to ensure bright futures for children in foster care by promoting the highest quality foster parenting.

To achieve this goal, CHAMPS will work with state policymakers, child welfare administrators, and advocates to leverage research and spur policy reforms in up to 25 states over the next five years.

As spelled out in detail in a paper published in 2016 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation,¹⁰ the reforms are aimed at:

- Building a robust constituency network and enhancing the capacity of advocates to effectively push for quality foster parenting through a broad-based coalition equipped with the latest evidence and tools.
- Reforming state policies, including changes to statutes, administrative codes, and regulations, to increase public and private agency capacity to support, engage, recruit, and retain foster parents. Policy approaches will vary by state, but will include steps to promote quality caregiving, ensure accountability and oversight, and create more effective partnerships between parents and agencies.
- Promoting stronger federal policies that firmly embed the principle that children do best in families. Federal policy approaches might include fiscal incentives and greater state accountability measures to ensure the availability of trained and qualified foster parents to meet the needs of children and communities.
- Changing the public narrative about foster parents to emphasize the vital role that they play in a child's life. By leveraging survey data, as well as the voices of foster parents, youth who have experienced foster care, and other community leaders, the public will gain greater understanding and appreciation of foster parents.

The Center on Children and Families (CCF) at Brookings is pleased to announce its participation in the project as the research arm of the CHAMPS initiative.

With financial and advisory support from several foundations, CCF will examine four key issues that are well-aligned with the aims of the CHAMPS reforms outlined above.

First, we will conduct research on the quality of foster care offered by states. We are especially interested in research on how the quality of foster care can best be measured and on the relationship between quality measures and child progress and outcomes. Measures of the quality of foster care should correlate with, or even cause, the most important outcomes such high school graduation, attaining a post-high school degree or certificate, avoiding teen pregnancy, and avoiding delinquency and criminal involvement.

Second, we plan to examine the best ways to determine state accountability for their foster care systems, especially the capacity of states to conduct oversight and evaluation of the services they are offering. We will focus attention on how the federal government and the states now measure accountability and how the measures could be improved. Again, as with measures of the quality

of foster care, measures of state accountability should be highly correlated with desirable child outcomes.

Third, we will explore ways to increase the American public's understanding of the vital role played by foster parents and the great value of the services they provide to foster children. Increasing the visibility of foster parents and promoting a greater understanding of their vital role in preparing the nation's most disadvantaged children for adulthood will increase the number of parents who are interested in the possibility of serving as foster parents as well as political support for public initiatives to improve foster care.

Fourth, as shown by a visit to the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare,¹¹ in recent decades program specialists and researchers have developed a number of programs capable of successfully treating the types of serious emotional and behavioral problems that afflict many of the children who wind up in foster care. The field needs to know more about these intervention programs and how foster parents can play an important role in improving the success of these programs in helping foster children. A special focus of our research will be figuring out how to adapt these treatment programs to the individual strengths and weaknesses of foster families so that the impact of the programs in reducing emotional and behavioral problems can be improved.

The Center on Children and Families at Brookings looks forward to playing a contributing role in the national movement to help states improve the quality of foster parenting for abused and neglected children through aggressive implementation of the CHAMPS initiative. There are few public policies for which the potential payoff in lives brightened is as promising as improvements in the nation's foster care system.

Endnotes

1. Hyunil Kim et al., “Lifetime Prevalence of Investigating Child Maltreatment among US Children,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 107 (2017): 274-280.
2. U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, “Child Welfare,” in *Green Book* (Washington: Committee on Ways and Means, 2016).
3. Ibid.
4. Mark F. Courtney et al., “Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26” (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2011).
5. Richard V. Reeves and Kimberly Howard, “The Parenting Gap” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2013); Ariel Kalil, “Addressing the Parenting Divide to Promote Early Childhood Development for Disadvantaged Children” (Washington: The Hamilton Project, 2014); Michael E. Lamb, “Mothers, Fathers, Families, and Circumstances: Factors Affecting Children’s Adjustment,” *Applied Developmental Science* 12 (2012): 98-111.
6. Fred Wulczyn et al., “Within and Between State Variation in the Use of Congregate Care” (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, June 2015); Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Every Kid Needs a Family: Giving Children in the Child Welfare System the Best Chance for Success” (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015); Richard P. Barth, “Institutions vs. Foster Homes: The Empirical Base for a Century of Action” (Chapel Hill, NC: Jordan Institute for Families, June 2002).
7. Mary Dozier et al., “Consensus Statement on Group Care for Children and Adolescents: A Statement of Policy of the American Orthopsychiatric Association,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 84 (2014): 219-225.
8. All placement estimates are taken from the Department of Health and Human Services, “The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2015 Estimates as of June 2016,” No. 23, accessed June 10, 2017, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport23.pdf>.
9. Children’s Bureau, Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Kinship Caregivers and the Child Welfare System” (Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, 2016), accessed June 10, 2017, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-kinshi/>; “Kinship Care,” Child Welfare Leagues of America, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.cwla.org/our-work/advocacy/placement-permanency/kinship-care/>.
10. Annie E. Casey Foundation, “A Movement to Transform Foster Parenting” (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016).
11. See California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, <http://www.cebc4cw.org/>.