



## In The Custody Of Others

*Abuse and neglect are compelling reasons to remove children from their parents. But moving them into temporary homes has its own set of risks.*

**M**ore than a half million American children are living in the homes of strangers, having been removed from the custody of their parents out of concern for their safety and well-being. For some, these new homes will be permanent. Others will drift from one temporary home to another throughout their childhood.

The reasons for placing children outside the care of their parents are compelling. Allegations of child abuse and serious neglect form the basis of many of the cases. But simply removing a child from a dangerous home far from guarantees smooth-sailing during childhood.

For the child, the realities of out-of-home placement are complex. They often arrive in their new homes burdened with psychological and emotional problems and being shuttled from one temporary home to another risks complicating their development even further.<sup>1</sup>

### Complicated Lives

No two children in placement are identical. But several characteristics have been identified as typical of many.

- Children in placement often have made extensive use of mental health or other social services before they were taken from their parents.<sup>2</sup>
- They often come from neglectful, abusive, or otherwise chaotic and dysfunctional homes.
- Their parents often have emotional

and behavioral problems themselves<sup>3</sup> and report high levels of stress. A pattern of substance abuse among parents is common.

- Abused children of these parents often experience emotional and behavioral problems, including chronic aggressive or destructive behaviors, suicidal behavior, and patterns of runaway behavior. Academic problems are common.

### Placement Risks

No matter how badly neglected or endangered children may be while living with their natural parents, removing them from their homes carries its own set of risks and may burden them with additional emotional baggage.

Placement outside the home tends to aggravate existing behavioral and emotional problems.<sup>4</sup> And severing the emotional bond between children and their parents is not inconsequential.

Disrupting that bond can be accompanied by rage, grief, sadness, and despair – even among children who've been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by their parents. And unless children are removed from their home at infancy, the bond between parent and child is likely to grow stronger, making it more difficult for a foster parent or other surrogate caregiver to establish an equally strong emotional connection.

The mix of psychological and emotional problems these children often

bring with them to their new homes is complex and difficult to deal with effectively. In that regard alone, those responsible for caring for these children shoulder a heavy burden.

### Temporary Parents

A surrogate caregiver – whether a foster parent, children and youth worker, or relative – carries significant influence over the children who've been placed in their custody.

Caring for these children can be an extremely difficult job. Not only are caregivers asked to supervise the child and ensure the child's safety, they often find themselves in the roles of coach, cook, advocate, counselor, mentor, taskmaster, cheerleader, and friend. In other words, they are asked to be both parent and therapist.

Many obstacles often confront them, in addition to the complexity of dealing with children who likely carry deep emotional scars.

With patients in therapy, forming a meaningful bond with their therapists is important to achieving successful outcomes. But with many children who have been involuntarily taken from their homes and placed in the care of others, trust is not easily established.

Foster parents and other surrogate caregivers may be asked to work with troubled children under difficult circum-

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"Sometimes it's like, why make friends? If I go and make friends and then I have to move somewhere else, or if I have to go to court or stuff like that, they'll wonder why I'm gone and I don't want anyone to know.

"No one knows in my school that I'm a foster child, except two people and they didn't spread it. I don't tell anyone because if they know that I'm a foster child they won't want to be friends with me. Like, in the school I used to go to, no one was my friend because I was a foster child. They all know."

— **Mary, 12, who has been a foster child for nearly five years.**

"Mary and Billy, we were told we were going to have them for six months. Here it is, four-and-a-half years later and we still don't know what we're doing with them.

"Every six months we have to go to court. And Mary would actually be physically sick because she doesn't want to go into the courtroom. And then it got worse because she didn't want to see her parents. So, by the time court would be over, she would be a basket case. We would go there and she would sit and shake."

— **Foster mother, 52, who has raised Mary and seven other foster children.**

*(Continued from page 1)*

stances, such as financial constraints that limit service options, or in settings such as residential homes, that might not be appropriate for certain therapies.

And these caregivers, being human, are capable of behaviors that run counter to what children with psychological and emotional problems need.

Just as flexibility, empathy, patience, open-mindedness, self-control, and honesty promote healing, so do criticism, hostility, inconsistency, selfishness, and other adverse behaviors aggravate a child's problems.

Not knowing where they'll be living from one year to the next is one of the most unsettling aspects of being a child in the placement system.

But for many, overcrowded juvenile court dockets, complex legal questions, and other factors add years to the process of finding them a permanent home.

In Allegheny County, where the child welfare system is considered typical of those throughout urban America, children spend an average of more than three years in foster care waiting to be placed in a permanent home, whether it means going back to their parents, being adoption,

or finding some other long-term arrangement.

Efforts to quicken the placement of these children are beginning to get more attention. The practice of "permanency planning" seeks to place a child in a permanent home within 6 to 18 months.

The idea is to speed up the system using family reunification and other strategies around the goal of getting children quickly settled in a permanent home so they can resume their childhood without the nagging insecurity of not knowing where they belong.

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