

Gymnasts Shine a Light on a System that Protects Adults Not Children

Last week's Congressional testimony by four American gymnasts shone a light on the cover-up of Larry Nassar's crimes by the FBI, USA Gymnastics and Olympic officials. Simone Biles concluded: "[I blame an entire system that enabled, perpetrated Nassar's abuse](#)".

NBC News cultural historian [Lynn Stuart Parramore elaborated](#): "If we're honest, however, it encompasses the entire society — reflecting a longstanding willful blindness to harm inflicted upon children by adults."

This blindness is reflected in numerous Minnesota parent-centered child welfare practices, including to deliberately not record the names of perpetrators in Family Assessment cases, which comprise 62% of child protection responses.

It seems that every time, so far, that a child abuse scandal like this breaks – think Jerry Sandusky at Penn State and Eric Dean here in Minnesota – institutions revert to business as usual after a brief period of public hand-wringing. Let's disrupt that pattern together.

When I listen to the last week's congressional testimony by the four gymnasts my first reaction is the fear that this will quickly fade into history. I'm sure there are others I'm not thinking of at the moment but I immediately went to Jerry Sandusky and Eric Dean. With Jerry Sandusky, the Penn State football team rebounded quickly and now that program is going on as if nothing ever happened. The horrible murder of five-year-old Eric Dean in Minnesota, as many of you know, prompted the Governor's Task Force, which resulted in changes in statute, and recommendations for wide ranging changes in child welfare practices. As I will discuss more in a moment, much of this has been rejected or ignored by the state and counties.

One might point to the Catholic Church's and Boy Scouts responses to sexual abuse of children by priests and Scout leaders as an exception, but we should be mindful that accountability only happened in these cases after both institutions were sued into bankruptcy. And, let's be honest, it's still too early to tell if the church and the Boy Scouts have truly repented and reformed.

Going back to the coverage of the congressional hearing, I found the comments by NBC news correspondent Lynn Stuart Parramore especially interesting. By the way there are links to her article and the other documents and reports I am referencing in the written narrative for this podcast.

Parramore quotes a book called "Childism" by the late psychotherapist Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. I'm not sure I'm ready for another "ism", but I agree with Young – Bruehl's basic point which is that "[childism, is a problem comparable to racism, sexism and homophobia](#)". I think that her term "child ism" never caught on, or that is never been succeeded by a similar term, is one piece of evidence that as a society we are pretty oblivious to how consistently we look the other way, you also situations and settings, when children are being harmed. I like to talk about this with both the gymnasts and the current practices in child welfare in Minnesota and elsewhere.

In gymnastics, a total of 265 women and girls came forward to document Nassar's abuse. The four gymnasts, McKayla Maroney All Raisman, Maggie Nichols and Simone Biles testified in

painful detail about their own experiences. In Biles' opening statement she said that Rhonda Faehn, then- head of the USA Gymnastics women program, learned of the abuse in 2015, according to reporting by [Ja'han Jones of MSNBC](#). The article doesn't specify how, but the FBI was informed about this also in 2015. Biles went on to say that in 2016, when she was a member of the United States Olympic team, neither the USGA, the USOPC, or the FBI contacted her about that. "While others had been informed and investigations were ongoing, I had been left to wonder why I was not told until after the Rio Games." This is stark reminder of how victims can be ignored, marginalized, and manipulated even when they are famous and successful. It has come out that 70 additional girls were molested by Nassar after the United States Gymnastic Association and the FBI were told about him.

It is difficult to repeat this, but compelling, to understand that, as reported by [CNN and others](#), gymnast Maroney testified "I told (the FBI Agent) that the first thing Larry Nassar ever said to me was to change into shorts with no underwear, because that would make it easier for him to work on me, and within minutes, he had his fingers in my vagina," Maroney said. She recalled other specific aspects of Nassar's abuse she shared with the FBI, including an instance where he gave her a sleeping pill and how she was "naked, completely alone with him on top of me, molesting me for hours."

The way that the FBI agents responded to her trauma is painfully similar to how children are often treated in child abuse cases.

"I began crying at the memory over the phone, and there was just dead silence," Maroney testified. "I was so shocked at the agent's silence and disregard for my trauma. After that minute of silence, he asked, 'Is that all?' Those words in itself was one of the worst moments of this entire process for me to have my abuse be minimized and disregarded by the people who were supposed to protect me."

Gymnast Raiman concluded her testimony by saying "It was like serving innocent children up to the pedophile on a silver platter."

In terms of accountability, FBI director Christopher Wray reported that one of the agents involved retired and the other was fired. This is not very reassuring, not much of a consequence for enabling Nassar to continue to grievously harm more children. If we were to be persuaded that the FBI was truly remorseful and concerned about accountability, Director Wray would have outlined specific steps that the agency is taking to make sure something like this doesn't happen again. That would for certain include a thorough and honest analysis of FBI training and its system of supervision and quality control, preferably handled by a trusted outside advisor. Without some thorough housecleaning with a new infrastructure to support change, we can be reasonably certain that no long-term improvements at the FBI will come out of this experience.

I'd like to shift gears now and connect the experience of these gymnasts to the parent-centered, anti-child practices that are still going on in child welfare both in Minnesota and nationally.

There was a Governor's Task Force on child protection in 2015 that attempted to change many practices that then-Governor Dayton and many members of that Task Force considered to be dangerous for and harmful to children. Many of you are aware of that so I won't go into process in detail, but in brief the Task Force was prompted by the terrible murder of five-year-old Eric

was important to child protection 15 times without meaningful action, before he was finally murdered by stepmother.

In terms of the outcomes from the Task Force, the brief version is that a few changes that were recommended by the task force were put into statute, and these have to a greater or lesser degree in implemented. Many of the changes, particularly on child safety, that were recommended by the Task Force but not put into statute have been rejected or ignored by the state and counties.

The Task Force was particularly concerned about practices that they thought increased the risk of harm to children. One was the policy that staff who receive maltreatment reports should not consider the history of past child protection cases or reports in deciding whether to screen in the case. Workers were also actively discouraged from doing collateral contacts to make decisions about whether to screen the case. State law was changed so that these two practices are no longer allowed. We assume that these changes have been implemented, though there is actually no way to know for sure what counties are doing respect.

In addition, the Task Force was worried that Minnesota was a screening in only 29% of maltreatment reports compared to a national average at that time of 62%. So it was placed in statute that the Department of Human Services is required to establish statewide screening standards and counties would be required to follow them. This was the first time that the Department established common standards for any part of the child welfare/foster care continuum. Since that happened the screening rate has increased to 42%, still below the national average but it means that an estimated 11,500 more children are getting child protection services them prior to the Task Force.

The Task Force was also concerned about older children. In a 2012 hearing on screening practices held by the Office of the Legislative Auditor, 50 child serving agencies testified that most counties refused to provide child protection services to children age 12 and over. Based on the Task Force recommendation, the Department addressed this issue explicitly in its updated Guidelines. However as in many other areas there is no information to know whether counties are actually following this policy.

There are a number of Task Force recommendations which the members felt strongly were putting children in harm's way but ended up not being placed in statute and which the department and counties subsequently rejected. Getting these changes been law is one of the ongoing goals of our organization.

One such recommendation was to train workers to do fact-finding not just in traditional investigations but Family Assessment cases as well. To the best of our knowledge this is not in the curriculum of new Child Welfare Training Academy. During the Task Force member testimony on this one workers testified for example "We are told during the initial visit to say that we are not here to ask questions but just to offer services." This approach is consistent with what we know about how this program works in other states. I think it's obvious that not asking questions generally let alone following a common, disciplined fact-finding protocol is going to keep the child protection worker from finding out information needed to keep the child safe.

Another related recommendation was to record in the state's computer system, SSIS, what the Family Assessment worker found during their conversation with the parents and other adults in the household. Specifically, the Task Force recommended that workers write out the information discovered including whether there was maltreatment and if so who were the victim and

perpetrator. The counties and the Department said that would basically gut the Family Assessment approach and have refused to do it. Again, the impact on child safety is obvious as it becomes impossible to know in the future whether the same person is repeatedly perping on children.

Perhaps the most well-known recommendation not being followed was to end the practice of interviewing children in the presence of the alleged perpetrators. The Department updated its guidelines to address this recommendation, but only stated that interviewing people children separately was permissible

The net result of this is that counties in the Department have successfully rejected the core Task Force recommendations related to child safety, and have continued most of the practices that were of concern.

So, how do we get at this? As I explained in a recent blog, is probably not through litigation. A Supreme Court case known as the DeShaney versus Winnebago has set the bar so high for proving malfeasance by county and state child protection agencies that, as we understand from talking with legal experts on, no cases ever gotten over it.

So that leaves political activism as the only way to have an impact on the practices of the state and counties, particularly by passing legislation forcing changes to these anti-child practices.. As many of you know, this our mission at Safe Passage for Children and we invite you to join us in making that vision a reality.

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