

## Which Trauma Should We Choose?

Minnesota still screens in significantly fewer maltreatment reports than most states. But some worry that helping more children will lead to removing more of them from their families, leading to significant trauma.

There is no disagreement that taking children from their parents is traumatic. But it is less so than being killed. Currently one Minnesota child is murdered by their caregivers every 6.7 weeks. Those who survive the maltreatment suffer lifelong adverse consequences, including difficulty in forming relationships, poor self-control, lower earnings, and chronic health problems.

The question is whether current policies strike a responsible balance between the trauma children experience from leaving their families compared to that of staying.

This is not a choice between being pro-family or pro-child. It is about making difficult decisions from the child's perspective so we give appropriate weight to their safety and well-being.

The backdrop for today's blog is that Safe Passage comes under fire regularly for our pro child legislative proposals, which address a number of current practices that we believe are putting children in harm's way. For example, Minnesota screens in fewer maltreatment reports than most states which means children who are in need of child protection services are not being responded to. Counties will say that they screen in only 43.8% of cases because that's the number that rise to the level of child maltreatment. This is circular logic. The actual question is whether the cases that are being screened out actually meet the criteria established in state law for what "counts as" child maltreatment. We think it's clear that many cases are being screened out that, if the standards written into legislation and the state official Guidelines were followed properly, would be screened in. We estimate that number is approximately 9,200 per year in Minnesota. That is based on the average screen-in rate for states as reported in the annual federal Child Maltreatment report which shows the average state screens in 54.5% of cases. So at 43.8% Minnesota screens in 10.7% fewer cases than the national average and since the total number of reports in 2019 was 85,917, the difference is 9,193 kids sitting out there who actually meet the criteria to be screened into child protection and should be getting some protection, but are being left to their own devices in Minnesota.

As an aside, you may wonder why I am using data from 2019. That's because the annual state, to report comes out usually 11 months after the end of the calendar year that it is reporting on. So should be due any week now. Unfortunately this means that the data is anywhere from nearly a year to two years old.

So our legislative proposals, which will be familiar to many of you, include putting quality assurance measures in place to ensure that maltreatment reports are actually being screened in as they should. There is such a process in place now where the state reviews 5% of screening decisions, but the state virtually never disagrees with accounting so it needs to be recalibrated at least. We also promote the idea that the state should report on its monthly public facing database the number of reports in every county and the number that were screened in an outside, so it would be easier to spot outliers without having to wait for the annual Department of Human Services Child Maltreatment Report.

In addition, we believe that the state should comply with a recommendation from the 2015 Governors Child Protection Task Force which was to report by County the number of children who were screened in once, twice, three times... N times so it will be possible to see the churning that is taking place and which counties are repeatedly screaming children out.

Some members of the child welfare community believe that it is their job to keep children with their families whenever possible. So they make the bar as high as possible for screening children in. Once they get screened in, they put multiple obstacles in place which make it hard to find out if children are safe. These include practices that we have discussed often before such as interviewing children in the presence of the alleged perpetrators. As we have discussed before, something like that would never be even considered if the victim were an adult. Then, workers are not trained to and are actually discouraged from asking questions, which means of course that they won't get information that is needed to find out if the child is safe.

The criticism we get for taking these positions includes that they are racist because there are too many families in the child welfare system who are Black, Indigenous, or other families of color. We have not yet heard anyone other than ourselves ask the question of how you would look at these practices from the child's point of view. Generally speaking, practices that keep families out of child protection inappropriately, practices that avoid information needed to know whether the child is safe, and family preservation practices overall are putting all children in harm's way. By family preservation we mean efforts to keep children with their families as long as possible and to return them from out of home care as quickly as possible, regardless of whether the families actually changed at all. We believe these current practices say to the child "You are on your own because we are really on the side of the parents. The situation has to be not only extreme but something that we can't pretend we don't know about before we are going to do anything. And by the way, if you are a child of color, particularly Black or Native, we are going to be particularly careful about getting you into the system because we already have too many kids that look like you."

As mentioned, there is no disagreement about the fact that being removed from one's biological family is traumatic for children. However, in public policy conversations and forums, this trauma is mentioned but the trauma of being severely harmed or killed in your home is seldom brought up. You can see this when you are lobbying at the legislature. When we bring up these issues legislators will invariably quickly respond to repeat the party line that removing children from their families is traumatizing, so you can tell they have been coached on this. So if we attempt to say that being killed is traumatizing too, we pretty much get brushed off. So legislators in Minnesota are pretty well indoctrinated with the idea that is favored by activists and leadership people within the counties in the state.

The irony is that there are ways to reduce racial disparities that aren't being fully utilized. Keep in mind that the purpose of child protection is not mainly to remove children from their homes for its own sake. It is to interrupt the abuse and make sure children are safe. I recommend that you look at the brief video from our October fundraiser of three foster parents who were panelists at a recent webinar. At the end Becky Gawboy brings up one potential solution. Becky was an after fostering 99 children, she ended her service by adopting 12 of her foster children! She reminded us that there used to be a program called whole family foster care where parents and children go into foster care together as a way to do parenting skills training 24/7 while making sure the children are safe. Becky said that in this setting you can either help parents get to the point where they can safely keep the kids, or figure out for sure that that's really never going to

happen I actually worked on this a number of years ago in my consulting business, and found that the funding streams to do this are already in place. It would not require new legislation or a new appropriation.

Also, as we have said many times, particularly in neglect cases, services like early learning scholarships and home visiting can provide the brain stimulation that infants and toddlers need while supporting the parents, and giving them time to work the case plan that they need to get their CHIPS case closed, and having an extra pair of eyes on the situation to enhance child safety. So let's promote more solutions like these to help address racial disparities and still keep children safe with their bio parents. As we have said elsewhere, these types of programs that involve brain stimulation for children and in home visiting have been shown by good quality research to reduce recidivism and child maltreatment by 25% to 50%. In the case of early head start and nurse home practitioner programs, they actually prevent child abuse and mapping, which is actually the outcome we all want.

But the thing that has always puzzled me is that in child welfare gatherings people will frequently cite the research on Adverse Childhood Experiences,, or ACES in favor of one or another policy. So everyone says they believe in ACES and understand the importance of the first 1000 days of a child's life in terms of brain development. That's the period of time when not only do children learn to bond with others, but they develop executive function, which means they can handle stress without going out of control, they develop their language and math skills and other basic building blocks of a successful life. But as we have shown the actual practice of child welfare is to leave children in settings where they are neglected and abused to the point where they have lifelong negative consequences. This is particularly true for neglect cases and even more so for infants and toddlers. Yet our practices are to avoid finding out about neglect as long as possible, and do as little as possible once we learn about it, which virtually assures that the maximum number of children will have seriously diminished life prospects for the rest of their lives.

So we come back to a familiar place which is to assert that the interests of parents and communities are not often aligned with those of children. Children are not property, they are not channel, they are not subject to a different set of rules than adults about when it is okay to assault them. Unfortunately our policies and practices do not support this reality so we need to continue to fight hard to change.

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