

The Voice of Early Childhood Development Advocates is Crucial to Child Safety

Child welfare and early childhood development advocates are both concerned about the lifelong impact of trauma, neglect, and abuse on brain development, especially in infants and toddlers.

But often our advocacy in child development arenas for child safety has been deflected with pointed reminders about the trauma caused by removing children from their families, and the importance of respecting families and communities.

Obviously, these things are both true.

But the trauma of separation does not outweigh that of being maimed or killed.

50% of child fatalities occur before the age of one. So sometimes it's necessary to intervene in families to preserve children's lives, and their prospects for developing normally. This doesn't always mean removing children, but it does mean interrupting the maltreatment.

Consistency requires that early childhood advocates elevate child safety to the top of its agenda.

The Safe Passage 2022 webinar series is starting anew on February 2nd with a preview of the upcoming state legislative session with lobbyist Kirsten Christopherson and her team. See the schedule for upcoming topics here. (put in a link to the list below)

- 2/16 Attorney Jeff Montpetit will talk about the impact of the recent state Supreme Court decision on the Eric Dean case on the potential for more legal actions in child protection
- 3/2 Marie Cohen, creator and writer of the Child Welfare Monitor, will discuss her blog and the impact it is having on child welfare practices nationally
- 3/16 Violence Free Minnesota manager Nikki Engel will share how her association represents the interests of domestic violence programs across the state
- 3/30 New Children's Home Society Executive Director Heidi Wiste will talk about her agency's mission as part of Lutheran Social Service, and current trends in adoptions
- 4/3 Lilia Pantaleeva, Executive Director of the Children's Law Center, will inform participants about her agency's mission and challenges

Narrative of Safe Passage podcast based on blog of 01/21/2022

When we talk about early childhood development we are including early learning professionals who work in early learning programs and advocate for early learning scholarships, researchers who explore the impact of trauma on brain development in infants and toddlers, as well as psychologists and counselors who are versed in Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACES, and clinicians who treat children who have been traumatized by abuse neglect and sexual abuse.

Obviously professionals in these roles are particularly concerned about preventing childhood trauma and child murders by caregivers. That's why it has been frustrating and confusing for me when I have been in conversations about aspects of child maltreatment with professionals in

this field and the conversations go sideways. I want to be talking about the fact that child welfare policies and become so heavily focused on the interests of parents and communities that we are routinely leaving children in high-risk situations, some of whom are getting killed and some of whom are being damaged for life, and sometimes the people I am talking to simply change the subject, or they bring out the concern that removing children from their bio homes is in itself traumatic, as if this meant that it would never be appropriate to get a kid out of a dangerous situation before it's too late. Or, they talk about the importance of respecting families and communities, which is shorthand for saying we want to eliminate racial bias from decision-making, but leaving out the consideration that it is also important to respect the child, and somewhere in the balance, to weigh the safety and very life of the child.

As I have gained experience I have learned to recognize this shift in the conversation happening more quickly. It's the same feeling you get for example in high school when someone doesn't want to be the one to tell you about a party not getting invited to is the evasiveness, the changing of the subject for no reason. Or having a person who is capable of nuanced thinking brings up some extreme scenarios.

I believe the underlying issue here is the very sensitive conversation we are having about racial discrimination in child protection and foster care. People tread lightly in these discussions, partly because it's often very difficult to know what is the best decision, particularly if they have not been in poverty themselves or are not a person of color. There are many dimensions to this issue, too many to cover one podcast, so let's zero in on ones that are relevant to this topic.

Let's begin by naming several tropes that are confusing the conversation. One is perpetuating the stereotype that bias in child protection decision-making is because social workers are young privileged White women who recently stumbled out of a wealthy suburb still blinking in the sunshine. In fact the last time I looked about 50% of the child protection workers in Hennepin County, Minnesota's largest County, were workers of color. That by the way is because the management and leadership of the county made a monumental effort several years ago to recruit and retain workers of color so kudos to them! Great job! From what I've been able to gather with conversations and looking at statistics, the decisions that child protection workers of color make are virtually indistinguishable from those being made by White social workers. That's because they are working in the same system of laws and practices, they got the same training, but most of all it's because of their heart. They all got into social work because they want to help people, and there are certain situations, the ones that literally wake you up in the middle of the night, where they couldn't live with themselves if they left children where they were.

The second stereotype is that it is rarely appropriate to remove children from BIPOC families which as you likely know stands for Black Indigenous and Persons of Color. This is inconsistent with the fact that children who are murdered by the caregivers are killed across every demographic. So in some circumstances it is necessary to intervene before it is too late, in every community or race. And a corollary to this is that it is virtually always better to place children with kin. We keep track of child murders in Minnesota and 1/5 of them in the last three years have been in kinship placements, two of them involving torture. By torture we mean the deliberate infliction of physical and psychological harm on the child over an extended period of time with the intention of ultimately killing them. So kinship placements are not a panacea. Both

kinship and traditional foster homes need to be recruited, vetted and monitored with care, which is not happening consistently across the state.

Sometimes when we talk about these issues we are reminded, fairly, that children of color, particularly Black and Indigenous, are removed from their homes at a highly disproportionate rate. We definitely recognize that and there are many things that need to be done to remove racial bias from decision-making, and I actually believe that can largely be accomplished using good management practices but that's a topic for another time. In general, as I have worked in large government systems over time, I have learned, and this is consistent with organizational development research, that when any large system is dysfunctional, it is going to make every error that it is possible to make. It's going to be out of whack in all directions at once. But that said, some types of dysfunction in large systems become more dominant, and in our child welfare system the dominant problem is that we are giving so much weight to the rights of parents that the child's best interest barely gets considered. If we manage this system well we can address all of these issues. We can give appropriate weight to the interests of children and at the same time not remove children that don't need to be removed. And we can do these things with consistency and reliability. We can also do a better job of supporting families in ways that improve their chances of keeping their children. These are not mutually exclusive goals, they are all issues that can be addressed in programs that are managed with quality and skill.

So this gets to the question of what to do about child safety and well-being in practical terms. First, regarding removing children from BIPOC families disproportionately, the situation is often presented as either leaving children with their bio families or removing them. But as I mentioned in the blog, the goal is not to remove children per se but to interrupt the maltreatment. In that case, there are other alternatives. Sometimes another adult can be inserted into the household for a period of time such as a relative or personal care attendant. This could be to act as a buffer, or another set of eyes on the situation so we know when things are moving in the wrong direction, such as a parent relapsing on drugs. Also there could be an active safety plan in which conditions are spelled out in advance that would trigger a change. For example if a person who has been abusing the children returns to the household, they could temporarily go to a relative. In neglect situations, children could be enrolled in high-quality childcare settings, using the early learning scholarships that children in child protection have priority to receive, and this would ensure that children, especially infants and toddlers, get the brain stimulation they need to develop normally, while at the same time buying time for the parents to work on their issues without losing the kids. These are some ways in which we can continue to hold up the importance of family preservation without making the kids pay the price for that policy.

So the bottom line is that, for the sake of children in really bad situations, it is really important for child development advocates and child safety advocates to be on the same page and work through these complex issues together. And that's not likely to happen until people in both fields acknowledge that we are submerged in cognitive dissonance on this issue of wanting child safety but being reluctant to intervene decisively when things turn deadly.

While it's not simple to sort out, I don't believe it's a hopeless task if we just go back to the basic principle of whether a policy or practice or individual decision is in the best interest of the child.

Actually, the field of early childhood development has made it much easier to apply this principle in a practical way because of the light they have shed on the long-term consequences of childhood trauma. This has made it clear why it is so important to protect children in a timely way. So in sorting out decisions we can simply start by asking whether the direction we are choosing is likely to have long-term permanent and severe negative consequences for the child. That's not a precise metric, but by just asking this question on a consistent basis in both fields we can make it feasible to sort out conflicting demands and start giving appropriate weight to the best interest of the child.

Rich Gehrman

Executive Director, Safe Passage for Children of Minnesota

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