

Progressives and Conservatives Converge on Anti-Child Welfare Agenda:

On the political left, the [UpEND movement](#) wants to abolish child welfare. This includes letting communities decide the fate of children who can't stay with their parents. Such a process, with no regulation or enforceable guidelines, could not be relied on to keep children safe or produce decisions in their best interests. It could easily open the door to anyone who desires access to children.

On the right, groups like the [Homeschool Legal Defense Association](#) resist any government involvement with families, overwhelming more moderate voices like the [Coalition for Responsible Home Schooling](#). One consequence is demonstrated by this [Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate study](#), which found that 36% of children removed from school were subjects of one or multiple credible child maltreatment reports.

While child protection and foster care need reforms, the solution is to improve, not abolish them.

Narrative for efforts by conservatives and progressives to abolish child welfare or render it ineffective:

For this podcast let's start first with concerns about homeschooling. As was mentioned in the blog, 36% of children in Connecticut removed from school were found to have one and in most cases multiple prior screened-in reports of child maltreatment. To be clear this was a follow-up study of children removed from schools so this does not include the entire homeschool population, i.e. it doesn't include children who never were in school to begin with or removed before the study was done. So 36% of children with screened in maltreatment reports could be high or low overall.

The obvious elephant-in-the-room question that this raises is how many children are being homeschooled because their parents are abusing them, and because homeschooling is a legal way to get children out of the sight of people who might see that a child is being maltreated. Or, worse yet, children who are being sex trafficked or videotaped being tortured or sexually assaulted for consumption on the black web, which, as I will touch upon momentarily, is a huge problem in itself.

If I were a homeschooling advocate, I would want to find ways to police the movement so homeschoolers who are simply not happy with their local schools or have a religious reason for doing this don't get tainted by the offenders in their midst. But the rhetoric used for example by the Homeschool Legal Defense Association on their website, which is hsllda.org, focuses so single-mindedly on freeing parents from government oversight that the possibilities of bad actors in their midst does not seem to be a topic of interest to them.

As I mentioned in the blog though, if you want something that will make you feel less discouraged about homeschooling, read the web site of the Coalition for Responsible Home Education which is simply CRHE.org. They have a long-standing project called Homeschooling's Invisible Children. It is a searchable data base that documents child abuse and neglect in homeschool settings. This group has children in mind. In the project's mission

statement it says “homeschooling offers abusive caregivers a powerful tool to conceal and escalate their abuse resulting in exceedingly harmful or fatal outcomes for children”.

Back to the Connecticut study, which also noted that none of the six districts in that state had any protocol for following up with homeschool children to assess academic progress let alone the potential for child maltreatment. This study by the Office of the Child Advocate found 10 other states with virtually no regulation of homeschooling.

The flavor of the language that these political activists use can be seen on the Home School Legal Defense Association website, which is similar in many respects to the language used by the progressive movement to abolish child welfare known as upEND, that’s small up and END in caps, which is upendmovement.org and you can potentially also subscribe to the upEND Twitter account.

In brief, for both the very progressive and very conservative groups, much of the language is about government so-called “interference” in families. The word children comes up in the context of families being where children belong. There is virtually no recognition that the interests of children are not always aligned with those of their parents or other adults in the community, or the children have rights of their own, both legally and morally. By the way, if every time the words “parents” or “families” come up you substitute the word adults, it will be clear to see that these movements are really about the interests of adults not children.

Not long ago both of these points of view would be considered fringe movements peopled by social outliers. But no more. The upEND movement includes a number of formerly mainstream child welfare researchers and organizations, including the Center for the Study of Social Policy. And as for homeschooling, Marie Cohen of the Child Welfare Monitor says that the number of children being homeschooled grew from 850,000 in 1999 to 1.7 million in 2016. To be fair, only a small percentage of these, one estimate is 15%, belong to the Home School Legal Defense Association, but by all accounts they represent the lion’s share of the political pressures exerted on state legislatures.

Going back to the upEND movement for a moment, let’s try to visualize what a community-based child protection system would look like. There was a New York Times story on 3-14-22 entitled “[Sex Trafficking Couple Used Loopholes in Foster Care System](#)” and if you can’t find it I put a link to it in the written narrative for this podcast on our website. It was about a Bronx couple that used foster care as a pipeline to feed their sex trafficking business. City workers were prohibited from checking family members not in the household, in this case a husband who allegedly was not living with the wife, against a sex predator registry. In fact the husband did live with the wife and was the trafficker, but he managed not to be around whenever a foster care worker made a visit. Had it been known that the couple was together it would have been legitimate or lawful to check his name. Because of this loophole they were able to get half a dozen girls for their sex business. In a community-based system similarly a check like this would be impossible, or presumably any other kind of check for that matter.

On a personal note, and I don’t usually go into this, I grew up in public housing. I can think of at least two people in my entry alone who had some problems with boundaries around sex and children. If I look more broadly at the people I knew, most of them were barely hanging on and

in no position to take care of more children, let alone participate in some lengthy community process to discern what to do with youngsters in their midst who were unable to stay with their parents. So you have to ask who would be interested in and motivated enough and simply able to attend meetings about what to do with children? Our organization, Safe Passage for Children, has made it our mission to improve child protection and foster care, so we are as aware as anyone of its limitations and faults. But to go to a completely unregulated system rather than fixing the one we have would put children at the mercy of a random and inconsistent process and, based on my lived experience in the projects and also in doing street work, would result in them too often ending up with people who use them for sex, or to make money through sex trafficking or selling drugs, or the kind of horrible process we keep reading about of people videotaping children who are being tortured or sexually assaulted for the dark web.

If you think these might be minor problems, we recommend to you a couple of New York Times articles. Nicholas Kristof wrote an extensive piece called the Children of Pornhub on December fourth 2020. If you want the link to it you can search out website for our blog of May 19, 2021 entitled “Kristof Is the Only National Newspaper Columnist Reporting on Child Abuse”. Our website is safepassageforchildren.org. Or, read the article “Child Abusers Run Rampant As Tech Companies Look the Other Way” in the November ninth 2019 in addition of the Times. There is a link to that as well, that’s in our blog of November 13, 2019 entitled Social Media Companies – Violent Pedophiles Best Friends”. Among other statistics the latter article reported 45 million uploads of child sex photos and videos in the previous year.

Regarding Kristof’s Pornhub article, that website, which emphasizes “wholesome porn” reported 3.5 billion hits on its website per month. But there is little regulation of assaults on children. For example Google returns 920 million hits on the phrase “young porn”, and millions as well with searches including the phrases young or extremely young boy or girl.

So if you have an unregulated process for figuring out what happens to children, practically anything can happen. In particular people who want to use children for evil purposes will have much freer access to them. This takes us almost back to the Renaissance, since child protection statutes began to emerge in the 1690s in English common law, and around the same time in the American colonies. Also, you may recall, that in 1874, Henry Bergh, the head of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, took on the case of eight-year old Mary Ellen McCormack, sometimes known as Mary Ellen Wilson, who was horribly beaten, starved and otherwise deprived by her foster mother in what is considered the first legally-prosecuted case of child maltreatment, and which led to the first laws specifically protecting children from abuse. So the upEND movement would take us back to at least the 1800s if not earlier in terms of society’s commitment to protect children and make decisions in their best interest.

The motivation for getting government out of child protection for progressives is largely stated as extreme frustration over the racial disparities in child protection and foster care. We share that frustration, along with many others who have not joined upEND. As is well known in Minnesota, Black children are proportionately approximately twice as likely and Indigenous children four times as likely to be screened into child protection as are white children.

The question is whether the upEND movement is focusing on the main factors that are driving this disproportionality. No one would deny that racial bias occurs in decision-making in child protection and foster care. If it didn't it would be the only societal institution that doesn't have this problem. But research suggests that an even greater contributing factor is concentrated poverty. An article by well-known researcher Emily Putnam Hornstein in 2013 entitled "Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk factors for involvement with child protective services" showed that, when controlling for poverty, Black children were actually slightly less likely to be referred to child protection.

A 2021 article by Richard Barth and others entitled "Research to Consider While Effectively Re-Designing Child Welfare Services" explores what the authors call 10 common myths about child protection and foster care. They cite studies showing that once Black children get over the threshold into child protection they are actually slightly less likely to have a confirmed case of child maltreatment or to end up in foster care. So if economic injustice is as great or a greater cause of racial disparities in child protection than bias within the system, the activist community on the left would do well to focus some of its attention on relieving systemic economic injustice as well.

Critics of the system also often say that foster care causes poor outcomes for children but Barth et. al. review evidence indicating rather that it's primarily what happens to children before they get to foster care, that cause the lasting damage, and that the majority of children who are or have been in foster care are either neutral or favorable about their experience. Incidentally, there has been a rebuttal to this article by Barth et. al. entitled "What Counts as Evidence in Child Welfare Research?" by Emiko A. Tajima, Angelique G. Day and others but there is a pay wall so we haven't been able to read it yet.

In sum, we think there are a couple of big problems with the political strategies being promoted by these two ends of the political spectrum. One is that they are not based on solid research or well-established facts. As we have discussed in our blog on repeating myths until they become facts, they simply repeat their assertions about the system over and over until they become accepted within their bubble of like-minded thinkers as the truth. Secondly we have concerns about the rhetoric from these two ends of the political spectrum. Their virulent attacks are directed not only at the system, but at people who have a different analysis or point of view. This is not healthy for a liberal, democratic society which thrives on the ability of individuals to think for themselves and express themselves freely, without being effectively shouted down in the public square. The disdain and frankly sometimes contempt with which people who hold these, in our opinion, rather extreme views consider their fellow citizens is disheartening, and in my view doesn't contribute to finding better solutions to the agreed-upon problems with the child welfare system.

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