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Children of Foster Care: Elevating their Voices

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CHILDREN OF FOSTER CARE:
ELEVATING THEIR VOICES

By

Nancy A. Cristadoro

An Internship Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts Specialization: Child Advocacy & Mediation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to discuss how through research and an internship with Douglas County Child Welfare, elevating children's voices in decisions of placement is a vital component of child welfare reform today. This paper examines some of the negative outcomes of the foster care system on children who age out of the system. The negative impact further deteriorates children's self esteem and increases the occurrence of homelessness and incarceration in our society. The internship further validated the difficulty inherent in including children in decisions of placements and the importance of allowing extra time, planning and changing mind sets in order to elevate the voice of one of the most vulnerable segments of our population, children of foster care.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	6
History.....	7
Statistics.....	8
Background of the Problem.....	9
Statement of the Problem: Give Children a Voice.....	10
Internship: Foster Care Liaison.....	12
Chapter Summary.....	12
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
Multiple Placements.....	16
Placement Instability.....	18
Self Esteem.....	18
Sense of Loss.....	22
Unwanted and Disconnected.....	23
Effective Management of Placements.....	24
Foster Parent Training and Success.....	26
Summary.....	27
INTERSHIP PROJECT.....	30
Surveys.....	30
Foster Families.....	31
Participants.....	31
Survey Questions.....	31
Case Worker Sensitivity.....	32
Findings.....	32
Obtaining Additional Services.....	33
Medical Passport Accurate and Up-to-Date.....	35
Connecting with Other Foster Families.....	35
Child’s Voice Being Heard.....	36
Relationship with County: Feeling Part of the Process.....	37
Prior Notice of Supervised Visits and Staff Visits.....	38
Training Opportunities.....	39
Resource to Child of Foster Care and Family Post Care.....	39
Suggested County Improvements/New Ideas.....	39
Summary.....	40
DISCUSSION.....	43
REFERENCES.....	47
APPENDIX.....	50
Appendix A.....	50

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

My journey began over twenty years ago when I completed a Bachelor's Degree in Human Development focusing on child abuse. I have always been keenly interested in advocating for those without a voice. From defenseless animals to voiceless children especially in the foster care system, I have always maintained great empathy for those who are unable to defend themselves. Among the many interesting experiences along my journey, one of the most enlightening has been service as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). As a CASA, one experiences first hand the trials of children within the foster care system. As an advocate for children in the foster care system, it is apparent how easily children can be overlooked by all those who are trying to help. As I pursued my studies in child advocacy, research revealed the ever lasting negative effects foster care can have on children such as homelessness and criminal activity, and the importance of giving children a voice in decision making became ever apparent. Similar to the value of restorative justice in reducing recidivism rates especially in juveniles. When the process can give the victim and offender or a family in trouble along with the children, the power to resolve their conflict by requiring the parties to take responsibility for their action and outcome it introduces an environment where learning and healing can begin. Avoiding removal of children from their homes and focusing energies on educating parents and preventing removals is the change that is needed. It is apparent to me that addressing critical needs within families to avoid removal and to keep families in tact should always be the main goal. When a family unit becomes dangerous and unsafe for children then and only then in extreme situations should a child be removed. I will continue my life's journey by being part of the movement to change the system created to protect and ensure the safety of children and working tirelessly to

elevate children's voices within the foster care system. The purpose of this paper is two fold: first to discuss the importance of providing children a voice in matters of placement. Secondly, in my capacity as intern to providing a needs assessment for Douglas County Human Services Child Welfare that evaluates the current foster care process and makes suggestions for improvement. The objective to develop recommendations intended towards increasing the child's voice; in order to increase the rate of success and improve the overall experience for children of foster care within the family and society.

History

According to Price's article *Child Welfare Reform* (2005) society did not give much consideration to protecting children's rights until the late 1870s. The needed awareness and passage of child protection laws began in New York with a 9 year old little girl named Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen was being abused by a caregiver and was discovered by a visiting nurse making rounds in a New York City tenement. The nurse reported the situation to police and charities. Her pleas went ignored. Out of desperation, she took her case to Henry Bergh, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It was Mr. Bergh who got the attention of a judge and attained permission to intervene on humanitarian grounds and have the child removed from the abusive situation. Ironically it was due to an organization that protected animals that lead to the legal protection of children (American Humane Society, 2009) and considered to be the very first victim's rights movement (CASA, 2006).

- 1912 United States Children's Bureau – first federal child welfare agency (Price, 2005)
- 1920 Creation of Juvenile Courts – government exercises greater supervision over foster homes (Price, 2005)
- 1935 Social Security Act of – Aid to Dependent Children/Aid to Families with Dependent Children Act (AFDC) (Price, 2005)
- 1960 Federal Government began extending financial aid to foster children – but gave no incentive for states to develop alternative to foster care (Price, 2005)

- 1962 Identification of the *battered child syndrome* by Denver physician Kempe – brought to light the concern of children hospitalized for injuries caused by abuse/neglect (Jost, 1991). Also led way to reporting requirements for all 50 states which require doctors, medical professionals to report abuse to police.
- 1974 Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) – provide federal funds while require reporting procedures. Later expanded to include those professionals licensed to care for or to educate children.
- 1970's Permanency is healthy for a child versus being moved over and over again with in the foster care system. The emphasis was to avoid of out of home care for children (Price, 2005) - a huge push to adopt children in foster care.
- 1980 Title IV-E Social Security Act – Adopt assistance program to aid families in adopting. Although Title IV-E was a good thing and it supported permanency for children outside of their family unit, it did not entice local government to make reasonable efforts to keep children with their original family unit.
- 1990s Interest in prevention versus intervention - provide better assessments and education to families by making reasonable efforts to keep them together. If the child was in danger intervention is still necessary and all efforts should be made to find kinship/friends to keep children with before placement in foster care.

The efforts of the 1990s and 2000s have collided with current societal events such drug epidemics as was seen with crack, and now methamphetamine and a rise in teen pregnancies (Jost, 1991). Today in many areas including Douglas County is a rise in the misuse of prescription drugs. When children must be removed from the home, the first focus should be on kinship placements and adoption versus out of home placement in foster care. Today child welfare groups favor a greater focus on providing services for families in crisis with the goal of keeping families together.

Statistics

The Children's Defense Fund data (2008, p.1) states every 36 seconds a child is confirmed abused or neglected. Child abuse and neglect is occurring in a society which supposedly values human life. There are an estimated "300,000 children yearly who enter foster care in the United States" (U.S. Department of Human Services, 2008, p.3). "Statistics reveal that 20,000 youth will age out of the foster care system every year. Of this group, 40% will have

failed to finish high school, 20% will be homeless, 42% will become parents, and fewer than 20% will become completely self-supporting” (Vacca, 2008, p.458). As compared to the national statistics that reflect “87% of the US population will have a high school degree by 19; compared with approximately 58% of all foster children who will have a degree by 19” (Colorado Judicial Institute(CJI), 2007 p.3). In most homes in the United States of America, a family will celebrate graduation from high school with the excitement of going on to college, throwing a party, even some receive extravagant gifts such as new cars. Conversely, more times than not a child of foster care upon graduating will be informed they are on their own, many times without having the basic life skills required to become successful adults. Walters (2006) found that the traumatic effects of abuse and neglect can cause major obstacles for children of foster care in attaining life skills that not only bring success in education but also as adults. Casey Family Programs (2009) report that although 70 percent of foster youth would like to attend college, only three percent will actually attend and graduate. Foster youth are so overwhelmed with just surviving that it becomes difficult to set such lofty goals.

Background of Problem

Although our society is one of the wealthiest on the globe our society allows children to lag behind in basic security and personal well-being (Casey Family Services, 2009). In an effort to protect these children, our society has kept this ever growing part of the population silent for too long. If the current welfare system remains stagnant in the United States, and no significant changes are made between the years 2005 and 2020, Casey Family Services (2009) project the following will happen: 22,500 children will die of child abuse and neglect, nearly 14 million children will be confirmed as victims of abuse and/or neglect; and 9 million children will experience the foster care system. Sadly, 300,000 children will age out of the system ill prepared

to live independently and as successful adults that contribute to society. To age out of the system means depending upon the age either 18 – 21 financial support is no longer provided by child welfare. In reference to our criminal justice system “1 in 4 youth (25 %) will be incarcerated within two years after leaving foster care” (Colorado Judicial Institute, 2007, p. 3).

Statement of Problem: Give Children a Voice

One of the most vulnerable populations in the United States is children who have been placed in the foster care system. These children have been removed from all things familiar including their parents, their homes, their friends, and their schools most times due to no fault of their own. The reasons for removing them from the parents are many, ranging from various degrees of neglect and abuse. According to the Colorado Judicial Institute (2007) project too often these children go unnoticed and misunderstood and are left without a voice of their own. When children are removed from their home, many professionals will come to their support including psychologists, caseworkers, lawyers, guardian at litum, doctors, policeman and judges. These professionals will do all they can to protect, support and find alternatives for the children. Too often however, children are lost in all the good intentions and associated efforts of those who are called upon to protect. The children’s best interests are often represented through laws, regulations and the professionals’ efforts without actually providing children a say or a voice in the process or decisions made. It is unfortunate and tragic that similar to our judicial system, the system designed to protect victims, in this case, our children, far too often re-victimizes them as a result of misdirected and sometimes misguided priorities.

Children have great insight and understand much more than society gives them credit for. Children’s human spirit should not be limited by the fears of adults. In the epic poem, “The Iliad”, Priam, the king of Troy and Achilles the greatest warrior of Homer’s Iliad engaged in an

intense battle against each other. The two bitter enemies meet face-to-face for the first time and experience an unexpected but quite marvelous encounter. Priam pleads with Achilles to return the corpse of Hector. In Van Ness & Strong's, *Restoring Justice* (1997) the encounter is compared to the restorative justice model and described as given all the possible outcomes, it is quite interesting that the two warriors become emotional and weep together over the loss of their deceased loved ones. Who could have anticipated such a tearful, intensely emotional result to unfold between these two powerful war lords? The vulnerability exhibited from such powerful warriors: anger, grief, pity, fear, admiration and guilt were all experienced (Van Ness and Strong, 1997, p. 68). Each of them felt as victim and yet they were able to resolve their differences. Even under the worst conditions, the human spirit will most often prevail and rise up in such situations to experience an optimum result. Van Ness and Strong (1997) compare this intense encounter to that of mediation. Where by the human spirit is without boundaries or limitations, unlike the conventional legal system which is limited by the numerous laws and regulations it enforces; these laws are a manifestation of humanity's shortcomings and not sourced from the strength of creativity or the unlimited potential of humanity. Victim offender mediation (VOM) as seen in the restorative justice model could be duplicated in the foster care process. When victims have a voice in the mediation process as they should in the foster care process this can produce an arena that empowers the child by providing a platform for them to have their say. The child who is caught in the foster care process should have a voice as an essential part of the process; very similar to the VOM process, which encourages the victim and seeks to increase personal remedy. When children of foster care are not given a voice in the process it can cause further placement instability creating multiple moves and experiences which further instill a sense of loss and disconnect adding to a deep lack of self esteem. Giving

children a say in the foster care process is a way to empower by allowing them to effect their own future.

Internship: Douglas County Child Welfare

As foster care liaison for Child Welfare in Douglas County, I met with each foster care family to discuss how things are going and how the county can improve upon the foster care experience. In fulfillment of the 150 hour internship, a needs assessment was conducted for the current foster family population. Along with conducting surveys with current foster families and wrote text for the child welfare portion of the Douglas County website. After text was written a work group was facilitated to further enhance the website text. The website, when it is up, will provide a rich internet based resource for foster families. The site will make available forms, educational opportunities and avenues to connect with other families for support and advocacy.

As liaison between Douglas County and foster families, my goal was to develop a communication feedback loop between children, foster families and Child Welfare Services. The program called for initiating and then maintaining contact with foster families and children to conduct a needs assessment and to communicate those needs back to Child Welfare. See attachment A for needs assessment. A primary objective of this initiative is improving the connection and relationships between foster care children and families with Child Welfare Services of Douglas County. The program further established the ground work for possible future development of foster care programs in the county. As liaison, I also worked with the County Trainer to assist foster families with their training needs.

Summary

Children of foster care are one of the most vulnerable subsets of our population which in the past have had no voice in the process designed to protect them. Research has found that

giving children a voice in the foster care process will increase their self esteem, give them a sense of control over their destiny, assist professionals in keeping their needs and wants in the forefront of all decisions made and could quite possibly eliminate multiple placements resulting from behavioral problems. The root of much behavioral problems stem from a lack of self-esteem which presents challenges for foster parents attempting to welcome children into their homes. Luke & Coyne (2008) believe that with this comes a unique opportunity to improve the self-esteem of children in their care and a key factor in preparing children for a successful future. Program changes must be designed and acted upon to reduce experiences which create a sense of loss while at the same time create enhanced environments where foster children can connect, can have educational continuity, can foster self-esteem and ultimately can set the foundation for a more successful adult life.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unrau, Y.A., Seita, J.R, & Putney, K.S. (2008) research, along with many other research, indicate that when children are removed from their original family unit it leaves a life long negative effect on their ability to become successful adults. In scenarios where children must be removed due to dangerous safety issues research is beginning to focus more on attachment theory, educational and relationship continuity and the importance this plays on building healthy self esteem in order to develop into happy contributing individuals thus avoiding the path of homelessness and the criminal justice system. One key element research found lacking is giving children of foster care a voice in the process. In the world of foster care, children are rarely asked what they want. Too often decisions are made without their involvement and often reflect the adults' own fears, bias and discomforts. Howard and Horner (2009) found that many times as professionals attempt to protect foster children from the harsh realities of their family dynamics, it can inadvertently allow the system to re-victimize children by not allowing them a voice in the process. Subject to the child's age and level of social and psychological development, the child knows better than anyone what is best for them. Children have a right to participate in the process. The question should not be if but rather how children should be involved in decisions about their placements. Even if the outcome is different than their expressed wishes, the process becomes a vehicle which can empower children and give them a sense of their own destiny and self esteem. Cases where the outcome may not be what the child wants, level setting expectations and communicating that their input was considered, can make a huge difference on outcomes for children of foster care. According to the National Humane Society, the United States is behind in its efforts to

implement this law into our society; encouraging young people to make decisions is something of a new philosophy (Howard and Horner, 2009). On a global level even the United Nations held a convention in 1989 on the Rights of the Child. The outcome was Article 12.1 which states:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Howard & Horner, 2009, p 11).

Many times a child is thought not to know what is best for them or shouldn't be put in those situations. Many times adults believe that young people are not capable of making decisions for themselves and therefore do not encourage children to participate in family decisions. Many times professionals involved in the process are concerned that biological parents will coerce and manipulate. These realities already exist during the foster care process. Fears such as young people don't have skills or confidence to make decisions or that adults are right and young people can't make correct decisions are based on outdated ideas. Decisions made in private rooms behind closed doors between case workers, guardian ad litmus, and judges become adult dominated good intentions but many times are without children's valuable input and unaware of how children feel about decisions at hand. Children of foster care once again are left feeling like a victim in the process. When decisions reflect children's opinions it is an empowering experience for children of foster care to know first hand their feelings were incorporated into the decision making process.

The CJI along with "Bridging the Gap" at Mile High United Way and the Center for Research Strategies collaboratively conducted a survey on how well youth perceive their voice to be represented within the court system. "Bridging the Gap" program focuses on improving

successful transitions of youth from foster care to adulthood. The intent of the study was to learn more about the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and needs of Colorado courts in relation to representing youth. Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) along with CJI (2007) found that children of foster care not only feel like an outsider in the process but are often wondering how individuals with whom they have never conversed let alone have no relationship can represent their interests. A main theme that permeated the entire survey process was that youth simply did not feel represented by the professionals who they felt understood them. Many of the youth interviewed felt that the people employed to represent them actually knew very little about them and gave cause to wonder how these individuals hired to represent them could serve as a meaningful voice. Buehler, Cox and Cuddeback (2003) research reflects many times children who are being represented in the legal system stated they were not even invited to attend their own court hearings and they expressed a position that they should have a voice in their placements no matter how young they are.

Multiple Placements

Research done by Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008) interviewed adults with childhood histories involving foster care and placement instability; they determined this was an area that re-victimized them as children and viewed it as a major flaw in the process which increased behavioral problems and poor academic performance. When children experience multiple placements it further deteriorates their self-esteem. Further research done through the Department of Social Services in Massachusetts by Hyde and Kammerer (2008) interviewed youth under their care which yielded the same assessments of the impact caused by multiple placements. In order to reduce the frequency of repeat placements, especially in situations resulting from behavioral problems, the challenge from the youth's perspective is a lack of

caregiver knowledge; basically not knowing how to respond to the child's anger and upset. Hyde and Kammerer (2008) and Buehler, Cox and Cuddeback (2008) found that adolescents within the foster care system believe that foster care givers do not know how to respond to their anger, grief, and frustration, which is often behaviorally acted out. Foster parents should expect that children of foster care will act out and have behavioral problems. They should also be educated and given tools on how to diffuse the pain these children are going through. Increased and focused training is recommended for caregivers to enable them to respond effectively to children of foster care who experience trauma (Hyde and Kammerer, 2008; Unrau, Seita & Putney, 2008; Price, 2009).

Research done by Hyde and Kammerer (2008) further substantiates children of foster care typically do not have a say in their placements, "Fifty-eight percent (58%) of children of foster care report not having any involvement in the decision to move" (p1257. They also indicate the need to not only focus on establishing a safe environment but also placing more importance on successful placement both from the perspective of the child and the foster family in order for "positive youth development" to occur (p.9). The protective process should not only include environmental factors but also protective attention to relationships with others. It is important to promote better placements in support of foster families and children and to manage that process for successful outcomes.

Unrau, Seita & Putney (2008) investigated research patterns of multiple moves, and found only a small sample that discussed the topic of not having any involvement in the decision to move. The lack of research further validates the need for more research specifically focusing on the children of foster care's perspective on the process. The CJI (2007) further found a lack of professionals who got to know children of foster care in their attempt to represent them in

court was concerning. Unrau, Seita & Putney found that “multiple placements for children of foster care create a time of shutting down emotionally, experiencing profound loss, feeling unwanted and disconnected” (2008, p1259) further strengthening a lack of self-esteem.

Placement Instability

The average individual has a difficult time fully appreciating the negative outcomes and impacts that can occur to personal self-esteem, education and behavior when children are relocated over and over again within the foster care system. Unrau, Seita, Putney (2008) wrote that placement instability has been a major root cause of increased behavioral problems within foster care. Although it is evident that there is an increase in behavioral problems associated with multiple placements, there is often a lack of research specifically focused on factors related to particular experiences of placement transition and subsequent child behavior or attachment

Allowing the foster care child to have a voice in decisions related to the placement process holds a promising outcome on their sense of self and a sense of power and control over their own destiny. Having a voice in the placement process gives them a sense of ownership in the process versus feeling like a vulnerable bystander sitting in the middle of courtroom theatrics with professionals making serious decisions about their life and future. Giving children a voice in the decision making process can also have a positive effect on behavioral problems which is a main reason for failed foster matches and multiple placements (Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, Reid, Leve, & Laurent,2008;Unrau, Seita, Putney, 2008;Brown, 2007).

Self-Esteem

A lack of self esteem is the focus of much research today however data linking it to the child in foster care is not in abundance. A parent’s poor attitude and abusive behavior towards their children have a powerful negative impact on self-esteem. Bojkova (2008) found that adults

who were verbally and physically abused as children self-reported not only lower levels of self-esteem but higher levels of depressive symptoms. Self esteem, as defined by Vygotsky by Fernhough (2008), is the evaluative component of the self-concept which originates in the internalization of social interactions Luke and Coyne (2008); this further explains the horrible impact that abuse, neglect and forced removal from the family unit have on children of foster care. Creating environments where children have a voice and are given a sense of power in the process could greatly enhance the foster care experience allowing for self esteem to develop and perhaps significantly improve the end result as an adult and their ability to successfully integrate and become a productive member of society. According to Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) the importance of fostering positive self-esteem within the foster care system find is a key outcome factor when looking at successful futures for children.

Luke & Coyne's (2008) research found that a parent's behavior has the power to influence self-esteem in a child as early as 18 months of age. There are many perspectives on fostering good self-esteem; one perspective is Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory. ZPD is a positive approach in which the actions of an adult are aimed at generating and supporting the child's own initiative (Zuckerman, 2007). A lack of research seems to reflect such. However, it becomes even more important when dealing with such a vulnerable

population.

Low self esteem issues can affect individuals their entire life and can present particular challenges for foster parents attempting to welcome children into their lives and homes. Parents' attitudes and behaviors towards their children have a powerful impact on children's self esteem. Luke & Coyne (2008) stress that foster parents have a unique opportunity to improve self-esteem of children in their care.

The quality of a child's attachment is directly related to self-esteem and has been found by Mennen and O'Keefe's research (2005) to predict how well they will function socially, behaviorally and cognitively. Attachment theory claims that the key developmental task of infancy is forming attachment to the mother or primary caregiver. Mennen and O'Keefe (2005) explain that:

Bowlby believed that early life experiences, particularly those that occur in the context with the parent child relationship, are believed to form the child's initial mental representation of self, others, and relationships with other. These mental representations or internal working models serve as perceptual filters, through which social stimuli are interpreted. They tend to persist over time guiding children's expectations and behaviors in relationships throughout life and serve as the foundation for emotional and social development (p 580).

When children experience a lack of attachment, as seen many times in institutional settings very similar to effects of neglect and abuse experienced by children of foster care, Meenen and O'Keefe further state the Bowlby defined individuals who experienced institutional deprivation as affectionless characters (2005, p. 52) solely interested in their own ends. Craine (2005) through research further explains that children who experience neglect and abuse many times are unable to form deep attachments and loving relationships later in life; perhaps this is the primary reason 40% go on to become members of the criminal justice system (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). Whether it is Vygotsky's ZPD, or Bowlby's attachment theory, many times these concepts are rendered irrelevant due to over reaching, basic issues for children to simply survive and to meet their immediate life issues.

The importance of attachment theory is further reason to prevent the removal of children from their original family unit, avoiding foster care if at all possible. However, when removal is necessary for the child's immediate safety, finding an out of home placement where long term attachment is possible in order to avoid some of the negative

effects that intervention has on abused and neglected children is an important consideration. Attachment theory is only one of many perspectives found in research literature to consider when addressing these issues. Luke and Coyne (2008) recommend widening this view to include the domain theory thus creating a dual influence model which includes both theories. In Gardiner and Kosmitzki's (2005) book *Lives Across Cultures*, the author stresses the importance of the developmental niche especially when children experience a negative life event and/or traumatic transition which negatively effect original family relationships and attachments. Gardiner and Kosmitzki found that research concluded "at-risk children, who are nestled or vicariously encircled in their family network, seemed to be coping and getting ahead" (p. 195) as compared to those who are removed from their family circles. Gardiner & Kosmitzki's research further emphasizes the need to place children either in kinship or permanent living situations versus temporary foster care.

Unfortunately in extreme child abuse and neglect cases, where the children's immediate safety is more important, placement in foster care is only viable option. Then the Domain Theory defined by Harter (Luke and Coyne, 2008) is even more important. The Domain Theory states that self esteem results from competence or success in a specific domain which the individual feels are important. Luke and Coyne (2008) further explain that the domain can be school, sports, grades, athletic abilities, social acceptance, behavioral conduct and physical appearance. When the Domain Theory is compared to Csikszentmihalyi's Optimal Experience Theory, the Domain Theory places greater emphasis on human development and the immediate experience as it relates to person-environment interaction and more specifically the flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi has

researched the flow experience for over 25 years. He discovered that Flow is when one is intrinsically motivated, in a task-focused state, characterized by full concentration which brings about a change in awareness of time, feelings of clarity and control.

Csikszentmihalyi sees this state of flow as crucial for human development. Rathunde (2001) found that flow is triggered by a good fit between a person's skills in an activity and the challenges afforded by that activity. The relationship between person and environment creates a total concentration. Optimal experience takes the domain specific theory a step further. Combining this research literature leads one to believe that creating environments where foster children are encouraged and given opportunities in their area of interest either through domain theory or optimal experience (flow) along with making the attachment theory the basis for child-care decisions would greatly enhance the foster care experience for our children and perhaps significantly improve the "end result" adult and their ability to successfully integrate and be productive in society.

Sense of Loss

Unrau, Seita, and Putney's (2008) found from testimony with adult interviews that were products of foster care that another negative effect on self-esteem tied to multiple placements of foster care children is a sense of loss. When children experience multiple moves in their childhood, they not only experience a sense of personal family loss but also a sense of loss of relationships, connections to friends and to school coupled with a sense of power loss and personal destiny. The adults interviewed by Unrau, Seita, and Putney, were quoted "they didn't know the who, what, where, when or why" moves were made (2008, p. 1259). Many children of foster care are not given information beforehand. It is unknown how long they would stay somewhere and with whom they would be living. One subject quoted in Unrau, Seita and

Putney's study as stating " I was leaving my brother, my friend and had no chance to say goodbye even to the foster parents" (p. 1259). Abrupt moves of this type instill in children a sense of loss, loss of friends, loss of siblings, loss of personal property and ultimately a loss of self esteem. Along with experiencing a sense of loss, children of foster care who have experienced multiple moves also feel unwanted and disconnected which further deepens the negative effect on self-esteem for children of foster care.

Unwanted and Disconnected

In Unrau, Seita and Putney's (2008) work it was revealed that all participants had mostly "negative memories of placements and how the negative experience impacted the quality of their lives many years later" (p. 1264). Children whose lives have been touched by foster care not only have to deal with the sense of loss experienced from being removed from their biological families but this creates a feeling of being unwanted. Multiple placements in the foster care system further perpetuates the cycle of feeling unwanted and disconnected from family, friends and society. Much of the research found that interviewed children of foster care stated they were moved abruptly many times and made to feel as if it didn't matter what they thought, leaving them alone and feeling unwanted (CJI, 2007). Research also found that the long term effects of multiple placements create a lack of general trust of others, further enhancing a sense of loss and loneliness. The foster care system often fails to prepare children for success in life as adults. Once again giving children a voice could create a sense of power by knowing that they were part of the decision-making process even if it didn't prevent them from being placed again in the system. Involving children in the conversation and decision making while discussing the reasons behind the move with the caseworker and foster families can help to prepare children for relocation and give them the benefit of a lessons learned scenario.

Effective Management of Placements

There are a number of ways to more effectively manage placements to enhance smoother transitions and hopefully reduce the incidence of moves for children of foster care:

- Educate and provide more support and training to caregivers - level set expectations
 - Honest communication - provide information ahead of time to prepare the youth for placements – no surprises. Children should know the reasons and have time to prepare for changes whenever possible. Secrets do not help.
 - Gradual transitions – allow for major transitions to happen gradually if possible
 - A lessons learned approach for all involved in the foster care process
 - Prevent continued behavioral issues
 - Allow caregivers to better understand the situation
- (Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk and Reid, 2009);(Buehler, Cox and Cuddeback 2008); (Hyde and Kammerer, 2008).

Unrau, Seita and Putney (2008), found that education can enlighten foster parents on how to effectively respond and deal with foster children who are experiencing loss and behavioral problems and can inform foster care practitioners and parents on how best to manage placement moves.

Honest communication with the foster family is important in order to prepare for a successful placement of the youth and to level set expectations for all concerned. Having realistic expectations regarding probable behavioral problems so that foster parents are not surprised when problems arise can assist in preparing a family to deal with those issues ahead of time. Preparation of foster caregiver families to anticipate behavioral problems is important due to the deep sense of loss and other issues that foster care children experience in order to set the foundation for success. All parties involved in providing care to children of foster care should only expect that these issues will arise and not be surprised by them. It is unrealistic to expect that when children are removed from their homes that their behavior will be anything but unusual. Abused and neglected children who are removed from their home and placed in foster

care are considered at best a vulnerable population group. Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, and Reid (2009), found that this population has already experienced either severe emotional and, or behavioral issues in life linked to maltreatment. Thus, the system should be responsible to prevent the child from sliding deeper into the realm of mistreatment through the experience of multiple failed placements.

A failed placement only adds to the emotional and behavioral difficulty foster children already have, not to mention the budgetary impacts to child welfare when repeat placements occur. Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk and Reid (2009) found that “one of the most frequently cited explanations for a failed foster placement is the inability of the foster parents to manage a child’s behavior problems” (p 234). Unrau, Seita and Putney (2008) emphasize that understanding the relationship between behavioral problems in children and the placement disruptions have given rise to a growing amount of research supporting the effectiveness of parental training. Many professional feel that foster care should be used as a last resort because of the far reaching negative effects removing children from their natural families can have on children of foster care. According to Turner, Director of Douglas County’s Youth Initiative WrapAround can help restore and heal the family unit as an alternative to intervention by child welfare. WrapAround services cost the county approximately \$3000 non-recurring as a prevention to foster care. Costs to Douglas County for intervention, meaning foster care, however, can cost from \$10,000 – \$17,000 per child annually. These numbers are consistent with Jost (2009) which that looked at child welfare throughout the years with such negative outcomes and feels strongly that programs need to be aimed at keeping families together. Prevention in terms of WrapAround means mobilizing family strengths and expertise in addressing their issues and allowing families to actively participate in the problem solving

facilitation which would include educating along with connecting with a continuum of community resources. Jost (2009) also found that intense short term in-home visits was successful in rebuilding the family unit thus avoiding foster care.

Foster Parent Training and Success

Price Chamberlain, Landsvert and Reid (2009) found an amalgamation of material on a national level for foster parents (p235). Federal policy requires certification training and follow-on yearly training for foster parents and provides only general guidelines for training content; as a result, there are vast differences in training content throughout the United States. Standardized training including content covering what has proven to be successful in the past should be incorporated into a curriculum to equip foster families with the necessary tools to deal with the anger and frustration of children of foster care. This training would provide experiences that enhance their natural abilities through flow or domain theory and most importantly could truly enhance the lives of children in foster care. Training for foster families should also include learning positive reinforcement without harsh punishment; close monitoring of the child at all times, especially with peers; how to avoid power struggles; and how to help your child of foster care manage peer relationships to improve success in school (Hyde and Kammerer, 2008). Unrau, Seita and Putney's research (2008) indicate that extra support and training for foster care families in how to deal with loss and trauma could greatly reduce children's behavioral problems, provided there was adequate child training and supervision.

Other indicators for successful foster families according to Brown (2007) and Buehler, Cox and Cuddeback (2009), who interviewed foster families, indicate that it takes certain personality traits and skills in order to be successful in raising foster children. These two

research reports found major areas within the families structures that indicated success with foster placements:

- Organized and yet flexible with the child,
- Receiving complete information regarding the foster child,
- Good relationship with the foster agency
- Individualized and community services and support
- Strong connections with other foster families
- Support of immediate and/or extended families
- Strong self care skills
- Faith or support from church
- Child centered motivation

Even when foster parents possess these characteristics as defined by Brown, many times youth still feel left out of the process. Although foster families have successful characteristics, it is still important to include foster children in the process. A main theme from CJI (2007) reveal that youth do not feel part of the process which is a message and an issue that needs to be used in educating judges, court staff and human services policy makers in implementing required changes in order to enhance self esteem for children of foster care.

Unrau, Seita, Putney found on the positive side, multiple moves can create resilience within foster care children when handled openly and honestly. Research indicated that many children of foster care glancing back as adults shared that knowing one adult who cared and didn't hold information back had a profound impact on them. When children had one advocate in their lives and were prepared for the move by open honest communication about the when and why of the move, it gave them hope and guarded optimism each time they moved. This approach also prepared them for challenges later in life (2008).

Summary

Research has provided important insights into the key elements and areas for reducing multiple placements. The process within the system intended to protect the child has kept the

child's voice out of the process which, in turn, can victimize them again by increasing placement instability, sense of loss, feeling of disconnect and ultimately a lack of self-esteem. Not allowing them to participate in the process does them a great disservice. Giving children of foster care a voice in the process can change how a child experiences the process and reduces the effects of multiple moves (Unrau, Seita & Putney, 2008). On a legislative level, finding ways to integrate the lessons learned from CJI study (2007) into professional protocols is the next step in the process to change the habits of those representing youth in foster care. There is need for a paradigm shift in this regard. Shaping public policy, enhancing judicial education and behavior, allocating more resources to child welfare to work on preventing abuse and out of home placements versus intervention, supporting foster families in their efforts to care for children of foster care and improving the environment and outcomes for foster children need to be discussed at higher levels within the government in order to rally the support needed to elevate the voice of children in foster care.

Without uniformity of procedures when processing foster care placements, Hyde & Kammerer found the need to do more qualitative research from the perspective of the adolescent in care, outcomes among youth who experience multiple placements, and the types of placements and transitions (2008). Ultimately, reducing the number of repeat placements for children of foster care is an important emphasis for the training of foster families, the children they serve and process improvements. Ultimately avoiding the need for children to be placed in foster care should be the most important goal for child welfare, emphasizing focused efforts on keeping families together through prevention versus interventions. When unsafe and dangerous situations arise for children and removal is necessary to keep them safe, all efforts must be made to find kinship placement or adoption.

Finding research that investigated factors related to the particular experience of placement transition and subsequent child behavior or attachment as directly related to foster care children was sparse (Unrau, Seita & Putney, 2008). There is a need for additional studies and research to understand youths' perspectives of multiple placement transition and subsequent behavioral or attachment issues. Another finding is that multiple placements for children of foster care as remembered by adults are significant losses in their lives which affected their ability to trust, build and maintain relationships and leaving emotional scars far into adulthood (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Although there is great importance on the issue of confidentiality in protecting the child, especially when they are experiencing the trauma associated with removal from their home, the reality is that obtaining information from these children is important if we wish as a society to improve the foster care experience and provide them a real voice in the process.

Chapter 3

INTERSHIP PROJECT

The internship provided was 150 hours of volunteer professional services as a liaison between foster care families and Child Welfare of Douglas County. Pat Sweeney, Manager of Child Welfare was contacted. Later learned through conversations with Sweeney, that Child Welfare was in need of a foster care liaison and had areas of concern due to a recent audit. The agreement would be to fulfill the role of foster care liaison providing a feedback communication loop between Child Welfare and foster care families would be created. Throughout the internship this was accomplished through visiting each family for an in-depth discussion and interview with survey questions with the purpose of providing a needs assessment. The needs assessment was as the end product presented to Sweeney at the completion of the internship.

Surveys

Information surveys were conducted with foster families in Douglas County regarding their foster care experience. There are a total of 12 foster families currently on the foster care roster. Ten families participated in the surveys. Of the two families that did not participate in the surveys, one family never responded and no attempt was made to contact the other family due to an ongoing legal investigation. Each survey session included a minimum of an hour meeting with the family in their home to discuss issues associated with foster care. The one exception was surveying a family during their lunch period at their place of work.

Foster Families

Meeting each of the families was an enlightening and inspiring experience. Each individual that was interviewed was intriguing and engaged not only in the interview but in their commitment to care for their children. Each foster parent surveyed was a treasure and it was a privilege to meet each one and to hear their story about their journey with children within the foster care system of Douglas County.

Information requested through surveys:

- Experience obtaining additional services such as medical, psychological and educational
- Medical passport accurate and up-to-date status
- Child's voice in decisions made
- Relationship with the county: feeling part of the process – treatment plan, family service plan & permanency goals
- Knowledge of visits beforehand from county staff and others
- Relationships with other foster families - currently connected or interested in connecting
- Resource to child and bio family post care
- Training Opportunities
- Suggested County process improvements/New ideas

Participants

In all but one situation, the foster mother was the one available for interview. One foster father participated in the interview process. This is understandable since in most cases it is the foster mother that is the primary care giver. The situation where the foster father participated, he did most of the care giving to a special needs foster child.

Survey Questions

Survey questions were developed from various sources. One source was from research that indicated certain foster parent characteristics were found in successful placement (Beuhler,

Cuddeback, 2008). Another source was information obtained from past audits conducted on Douglas County which reflected certain areas of concern. Other questions were developed from discussions with the manager expressing concerns in specific areas.

Caseworker Sensitivity

A consistent theme during all the interviews was the awareness on the part of each foster parent that caseworkers are all very busy and unable to provide the level of service the foster parent would like. Since the major motivation of the foster families is to assist children, a few interviewees stated many times “that it is all about the children” when referring to frustrations experienced through the process and with the caseworker. Although there were a few exceptions, most of those surveyed conveyed deep respect towards the caseworkers of Douglas County. A few of the caseworkers received accolades from the foster families surveyed.

Findings

Findings from the interviews will be discussed by topic in order to present solid ideas and suggested outcomes from the surveys. Since Douglas County has been able to effectively manage many of the child welfare cases either through the education of families on successful parenting skills or with alternative placement within the biological family/kinship structure, there hasn't been a large need for foster care as compared to other county child welfare agencies. It is important to note that the county is deeply even painfully aware of the growth and evolving nature of the situation occurring within the population of Douglas County. According to Douglas County's census, since year 2000, there has been a sixty-five percent population increase which translates into 115,375 person increase in the past 9 years (Information Resources

Group, 2009). During this same period, the expectation of child welfare has also increased. According to Laura Teague, Human Resources Manager of Douglas County Human Resources, staff has grown from 7 to 18 personnel during this same period. With the need for caseworkers to become more involved in each case and the ever growing population, this has placed a burden on the current system and existing resources. In general, according to the foster families interviewed, the foster children did quite well with each family. Of the families interviewed, one in particular had 90 foster children during their 23 years of participation. This particular family felt that only two placements were unsuccessful resulting in children being moved to other foster families. Overall the families felt like they were successful in their efforts to help the foster children for whom they were caring and it was a good experience.

Obtaining Additional Services

Additional services equate to medical care, including dental, counseling and any special educational needs a child might require after arrival at the foster family's home. The answers to this question were a mixed bag in terms of their ability to obtain required services in a timely manner. In about 50% of the cases, services were eventually provided but only after dealing with a long, frustrating bureaucratic process. The other 50% felt that if they asked their caseworker for services, it was provided in a reasonable manner. Most responses were quite positive but often had the footnote pointing to the need to be persistent, on top of situations and needing to be very proactive by calling the county often to get the paperwork handled. The families reported that as long as they would call multiple times and follow-up things would get done.

Many of the foster care givers also stated that when the county arranged appointments, the appointments would usually have to be rescheduled because it didn't fit in with their schedules. The foster parents provided feedback that they would much prefer making the appointments themselves to avoid this non-valued added effort. Whenever negative comments were made, the foster parents were quick to acknowledge the reality that county staff is overworked and just not able to handle all the demands corresponding to their work loads. It was mentioned a few times that it would be nice if they could actually talk to someone on the phone instead of leaving a message all the time. One foster parent was frustrated about finding a dental provider which accepted Medicaid close to their home, in Franktown. The parent was frustrated at having to drive to Denver to obtain dental care for her foster children.

One particular foster mother was very upset with their case worker. According to her, this caseworker had not submitted the paperwork for counseling and some sort of Medicaid support. Due to this, she felt pressured to get her child to the doctor without insurance coverage and paid out of pocket. Now 4 months out, she still hasn't been reimbursed for the medical expense of \$400. She said it isn't a lot but it still doesn't sit well with her. Another foster mother stated that at times the relationship feels adversarial; it seems like it is them against their case worker and that "attempting to obtain therapy and medications has been a real nightmare". The same foster mother experienced developmental issues with her foster son and had to do her own research without County assistance to get assistance. The majority of services ultimately came together well, although they expressed frustration due to the amount of time involved in getting things set up.

Medical Passport Accurate and Up-To-Date

This seems to be an area of opportunity for the county. According to the surveys conducted, most of the families never received a medical passport. Of those who reported, it was a respite care situation and very difficult to have a medical passport but on a few other occasions it involved not receiving knowledge of the need for medication for their foster child. One case in particular was a child who had been transferred to them from a psychiatric facility and the frustration they experienced looking for a Medicaid doctor during the transient period. After the child spent a few days with them, the child inquired where his meds were and of course the foster mother had no idea what he was talking about. After going around and around trying to sort through the bureaucratic maze a few weeks later, the foster parent did get the prescription written by the new doctor. Fortunately, a local pharmacist was able to give her a sample of the meds to keep the child on target. Some stated that they would get illegible info scribbled on a piece of paper or were asked where the passport was after never receiving one themselves.

Connecting with other Foster Families

There was expressed importance tied to connecting with other foster families as communicated by the families surveyed. One of the suggestions made from a foster mother was to link foster families up with other foster families who have had more experience in order to avoid issues up front, especially with teenagers. She felt that getting information and educated from mentors was more important than attending formal training. Other foster mothers were more than happy to be part of a support group to families. On the other hand, one particular family with three little children had no interest in adding anything more to her plate and was very connected to community through her church and circle of friends. Few of the families were

interested in monthly support meetings, some a few times a year and most were interested in meeting annually.

Child's Voice Being Heard

A child's voice being heard is a very important theme in my personal studies. Whether the decisions made are what the child wants or not, it is most important that the child feels as if they have a voice in the decision-making process and that their opinion matters. Having input in formulation of the final decision of their future is key in building a sense of self esteem for children of foster care (Colorado Judicial Institute, 2007). Although this has been a major focus during my internship for this project, it has been the most disappointing for me personally. The children of foster care were unable to be interviewed. Appointments were set during business hours when the foster parents had time to meet. In all the situations, the foster children were in school with the exception of one 3 year old and 18 month old child. During this particular visit, it appeared as if these children were bonded with their foster mother and yet independent enough to go off and play on their own while we were talking.

Although not having the ability to ask the foster children directly if their voice had been heard in the decision making process, the internship did offer the ability to ask the foster parents if they felt that the child's voice had been heard. A few of the foster mothers felt that their child's voice had been heard only because they themselves had communicated in the best interest of the child. In respite situations, the feeling was it was not necessary because it was a short term placement. The one surprising answer was from the family that did foster care for 23 years. The foster mother stated that the children who were in foster care shouldn't be asked and that they wouldn't know what was best for them. It was further discussed that even if the child didn't

actually know what was best for them, to ask the question could be an important step in making them feel part of the process.

On two occasions the foster mothers didn't know how they could involve the child's feedback because their children were so small. It was further discussed that even bringing a picture to family group conferences could help keep the focus on the best interest of the child versus all of the other competing agendas. A child can also write one sentence, or draw a picture in order to communicate. This is an area deserving more development and inquiry.

It is important to note that through surveying the foster families, without speaking directly to the children of foster care, the children's voices were being considered indirectly; Child Welfare seems to be doing an excellent job keeping the child involved in decisions using other measures. A few of the Caseworkers were very generous in allowing me to attend their visits with the foster families; in those instances, the caseworkers worked to keep the child engaged in discussion and decisions made during visits. Douglas County Child Welfare is progressively working with each caseworker in many ways to raise children's voices and to address their needs on a daily basis while also working at a higher level through efforts related to the 1451 collaboration group.

Relationship with County: Feeling part of the process

All but two of the foster families interviewed had direct issues with individual county staff. All of the families surveyed stated that they realized how busy the employees were while at the same time appreciated what they were trying to accomplish. Two foster families who were very disappointed in the process and the lack of follow through to the point that they had serious

reservations as to the maturity and experience of the caseworkers assigned. In these cases, the foster parents felt that they were not given truthful information about important situations and felt they were on opposite sides of the caseworkers. One family cited a situation where they called three months ahead of time to connect with respite but there was never a response. They recalled being at a county training event and being asked if anyone ever called them back. This gave them the impression that county workers really didn't care whether they received respite care or not as manifested by the lack of follow up response. The same two foster mothers felt they were on opposite sides of the fence when it came to making decisions for the child they were fostering. One foster situation, as reflected through the surveys, was feeling that they were not being told the truth. This particular foster mother lived very close to a relative who also fostered children. This relative was provided different information as to what was ok and what wasn't ok to divulge. Basically, she was being told she couldn't know anything while the relative was receiving information regarding their foster child's situation. Four of the families stated that the relationship was good but that the process to get things done was very slow and that things got confused in the beginning but ultimately straightened out.

Prior Notice of Supervised Visits and Staff Visits

All of the foster families stated their preference for being notified in advance of agency visits and that it wasn't a problem. One family felt that the county was being too accommodating towards the biological mother by switching her scheduled visits every other week. This was unacceptable to her because it further disrupted not only the foster child's schedule but also her own family schedule. She also felt that the county was insensitive to this and didn't consider their family's needs when constantly switching the scheduled time.

Training Opportunities

One family stated they did not know about the yearly 20 hour training required to maintain keep current licensure. Most of the families did not have issues with the yearly training requirement. Two families, however, felt that reimbursement for the annual training is appropriate or they felt that after providing foster care for more that 20 years they didn't need additional training. It was further discussed that although training was state mandated, Human Services has been very flexible with them in meeting their training requirement. A few of the families were very interested in attending training provided by the county. One was not interested because they lived over an hour away and found it difficult to attend weekend training while supervising teenagers.

Resource to Child of Foster Care and Family Post Care

Three foster families stated that they have continued to be a resource in support of their ex-foster child and their new families after leaving their care. They felt positive about it because they were still able to help. One foster mother stated that she was asked not to maintain contact with the child and understood that the kinship they were placed in wanted to start a new with the child and she respected that.

Suggested County Improvements/New Ideas:

Suggested county improvement and new ideas were either expressed during surveys conducted or apparent outcomes from concerns expressed by foster parents.

- Establishing a secure county blog for foster families to share ideas, support and concerns
- County website where all foster families could access the same information:

- Rates
- Forms
- Regulations, especially as regulations are changed or updated
- Training opportunities
- Respite connections
- Links for foster parent organizations and additional education (Web text developed and forwarded to web development team.)
- Fact sheet on each foster family for the biological family – provides fun, informative tidbits of information in order to put some of the biological families nerves to rest
- “Consent to treat” forms on hand and signed for emergency respite cases
- Foster Family Events – monthly, yearly events which encourage and allow families to share ideas and connect with each other. To include child care so that parents can break away for discussions
- Mentors for Foster Families – to provide insight and helpful information so as to avoid “re-inventing the wheel” regarding issues such as text messaging, Facebook and other issues that can develop into problems if not managed correctly.
- Foster child portal (secure site) – similar to Douglas County Schools student portals. These secure portals which can be set up to obtain information needed for the child such as medical passport, future court dates, forms needed, etc.
- Separate entrance into Human Services Building – in order to allow for a smooth transition during supervised visits. Avoid upset/violent biological parents.
- Provide financial support for training
- Employees should take smoking breaks 1 or 2 persons at a time to prevent appearance of group smoking event

Summary

Most of the families surveyed stated they were frustrated not dissatisfied with the process. They also expressed concern about creating ill will between them and their caseworker by responding too negatively to some of the questions. It became apparent there is a disconnect between the expectations of Douglas County as it pertains to foster families staying on top of all administrative paperwork and requirements as a pre-requisite for foster care and foster families impressions of the County in keeping up on their end of the administrative process. There were specific complaints made about the paperwork process: never receiving medical passports for children and/ or when they were received they were incomplete; lack of timeliness of paperwork

being submitted for referral of needed services; being notified about court hearing dates and never getting a real person on the phone.

It is my opinion that these complaints are not due to a lack of caseworker effort but rather a lack of support for the caseworkers. Along with providing additional administrative support for caseworkers and foster families, a significant improvement could be in developing a website abundant in resources for foster families which would include, to mention a few: making available forms, training opportunities, regulation updates, respite care, foster parent blog, and more.

Foster parents were generally pleased with caseworkers with very few exceptions. Of the few dissatisfied foster families concerns are listed as follows: feeling deceived, information not shared, being unavailable during a supervised visit with a potentially violent parent and failure to complete paperwork in a timely manner. Although this deserves further investigation, one might conclude this was due to a lack of experience and possibly a learning curve but still important for the department to take into account.

Overall the foster family experience with Douglas County Foster Care Program is a positive one, with the focus on the perspective, the child. Over and over again the foster parents stated how busy the caseworkers are and how they understood why things took so long such that they often had to be persistent in getting the information or support they needed. Many times this occurs because of all the various parties who need to sign off on documents for various reasons. These and more requirements occur behind the scene transparent to the foster families. As in any organization some staff are more organized than others and some staff are still experiencing a learning curve. Another reason this occurs is due to a lack of staffing. If a lack

of staffing has existed for a long period of time and has become the norm, it lowers the expectations of staff and clients. This does not mean that the current standard is okay but rather the administrative shortfall should be addressed.

It is my recommendation that, along with developing a rich internet based resource for foster families that an additional position allocated for serving the foster care population of Douglas County. It is my opinion that a .5 FTE position would significantly assist with communication efforts and administrative assistance in support of foster families. This would not only support the families but also alleviate some of the administrative challenges the caseworkers face and enable caseworkers to spend focused time on more immediate and urgent matters. This could create time for training and other opportunities to ultimately improve retention.

It has been a pleasure to have had the opportunity to obtain a small glimpse into the foster care process of Douglas County Child Welfare. I have truly appreciated the generosity of time of those who shared with me, especially Patrick Sweeney, LCSW, and Child Welfare Manager. My own considered opinion is that Douglas County is doing a great job to preserve and strengthen families as seen by the very low rate of foster care needed in the community. The child welfare team seems to work diligently to preserve the family unit through prevention versus intervention. After working within foster care and seeing with more clarity the importance of keeping families in tact in order to avoid the negative impact foster care has outcomes for children. Having alternatives to support families through such services as WrapAround or Differential Response in order to prevent the need for intervention is where I hope to focus my professional efforts.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

As a society the time has come to review how child welfare is working – good or bad – and consider ideas towards reform. When statistics tell us that foster care is producing significantly negative results, society needs to make adjustments; one such example: 25% of children who age out of the system enter the criminal justice system within two years of leaving. Another is research that points to the fact that many homeless individuals have passed through foster care. Perhaps we can all agree that as a metric, homelessness represents a failed result of governmental services rendered. Results and unintended consequences of the current process and approach say it is time to change how we approach the abused and neglected children of our society. As I approached Douglas County Child Welfare, it was exciting to think that being a foster care liaison could help children in need directly. The current process reinforces caseworkers to make quick judgments opting for intervention and child placement away from kinship relationships. This is not because they don't care but rather because of the ever growing population and associated demands placed on them. Budget cut backs hitting support services should encourage finding a way for the child to stay with their family, even if it is an aunt, grandfather or cousin. I participated in meetings that were determining placement of children, and it felt great to be the voice of the child and actually echo, what does the child want? What does the child need? I found it very satisfying to create a needs assessment which ultimately led to a recommendation that the county increase staff. One addition would be a position that focuses mainly on support to foster families and their children; part of this assignment would be developing text for a website that could serve as an important link for the families.

Ironically the major personal disappointment for me was the inability to speak to each child in order to find out how they felt about the system. I found it important that I ran into the same kind of obstacles found in research that effectively prevents children's voices from being heard. There is extra planning, approval and effort required to make any inroads towards changing the existing paradigm. Changing mind sets and attitudes in a manner that places the child's voice in the forefront of decisions instead of a side thought. If I were going to do this again, I would begin with developing a weekend event for children of foster care in order to get them involved from the very beginning. Having said that, I believe the first order of business is to develop a relationship with each family so as to establish a basis of trust. This is the base upon which to build a successful customized program. Another thought I had was to do a public service announcement focusing on the positive element of each of the foster families, their story should be told also.

As I approached this project, I was able to apply all the knowledge gained through my graduate program which included effective research techniques including use of open ended questions which got to the root of important issues for foster families. With over ten years of experience as an interviewer and recruiter, I was very comfortable in this role. Working in group meetings, I was also able to analyze information and ask important questions in order to keep children's voices in the forefront of the discussion. Facilitating the web development team was rewarding and quite appreciated by the manager of Child Welfare. I was able to write the text and keep the team focused on further refinement leaving them with basically the ability to go live once the web master could do it.

My moment of insight was towards the end of the internship. It was during a training session with the current director of child welfare in Broomfield and who was also the retired

director of child welfare from Arapahoe County. She explained that after spending 20 years as an advocate for foster care with primary recourse involving removal of children from their homes in order to protect them from abuse and neglect, she had come to realize what a negative effect this has had on the children we were trying to protect in our society. The majority of families want to do what is best for their kids. They want to learn and obtain tools they need for support. It is the minority of children who are in imminent danger for their safety. In those cases where there are no extreme safety hazards for children, the family should be left intact and other remedial actions need to be considered. Assessment criteria need to be reviewed and modified to focus on strengths of families and support systems surrounding them. Empowering families to problem solve and take responsibility for solutions instead of the authorities moving in and taking over should be a priority. This is similar to the concerns of restorative justice. When systems are created due to the negative aspects of humans, similar to our judicial system, it re-victimizes the parties involved in many ways. It is now known that the foster care system does actually re-victimize our children. Knowing that the system developed to protect has such negative outcomes is one of the most important wake up calls of our time. Getting involved early in order to prevent removal should be the goal versus later when the family situation has become so extreme and dangerous that removal must take place to protect the child. Keeping families intact through services such as WrapAround, family group conferencing and allowing for a differential government response versus how assessments are conducted today, all these should be the focus of any future process changes. This would also require more flexibility from the federal government in how it releases funds; current policy releases funding once children are removed. I would like to see the emphasis shift over to prevention in place of intervention. I

will work towards being part of that kind of solution going forward in my career. My newly obtained education reinforced by my internship has prepared me for the challenges ahead.

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Appendix A

Journal

Foster Care Liaison

Douglas County, Child Welfare

Journal & Log (162 hours)

7/15 9:30 - 3:00 (5.5)

Met with manager regarding internship. First day was meeting everyone, getting ID, computer access, parking, etc. Went through some of the foster training material to prepare for foster parent information night.

7/22 9:30 - 3:00 (5.5)

Went through title 7, child welfare code book, resources, and additional training material.. Read their policy and procedures manual also.

7/29 9:30 -3:00 (5.5)

Ran copies and put together packets for orientation night. Went out and bought water, set up for classes. Returned at 5:30 to assist with training and trainer was sick. Stayed until 6:30 to greet people and have them return the following scheduled training which was the following week.

8/17 9:30 - 2:30 (5)

Began meeting with manager and was quit excited about beginning my contacts with the foster families of Douglas County. I was able to call each family and at least leave a message and scheduled 6 appointments. I even have an appointment today at 12:30 and then was asked to attend staff meeting at 1:30.

The appoint was at participant #6 home off of Surry Ridge. As I approached their home she was cutting her husbands hair outside and their son was riding his tractor in the yard. Very modest comfortable family.

Participant #6 was very passionate about her foster care children and was very frustrated with Douglas county. Stated that many times they were at opposite sides of the table and didn't feel like they were on the same team. Participant #6 even went as far as to state the their particular case worker did not tell the truth and would tell different parties different things.

8/18 9:30 - 3:30 (6)

Started my day driving out to Franktown to meet with participant #10. Participant was in the middle of a crisis with older foster child. Messy trial between parents, trying to construe information to assist in case against her invalidating accusations of abuse from Dad. Implicating her husband. On the verge of returning her into the system. Discussed with manager and supervisor of caseworker. Conference call with participant #10 later in the day to show support. To try and prepare her for further investigation. By the time we called the sheriff had already showed up, participant didn't tell spouse.

Case worker seemed more concerned about participant not reporting, falling out of tree and leg burn than in keeping the child from being placed again. Made negative comment about foster mom overreacting. Disheartening. Supv. seemed more concerned about the bigger

picture. Manager made it clear that avoiding another placement was the concern. It felt really good being put in the middle of the action and being able to contribute somewhat.

8/19 9:30 - 4:00 (6.5)

Started day with interview in Highlands ranch with Participant #4. I am reminded with each visit of the courage and kindness these families have to take on these children. It is intriguing to see how they function through all the chaos and really lack of support from the county. Each of my visits, other than with participant #6, spoke very favorable of the case workers but with a lot of frustration with the process or lack thereof.

Participant #4 had a lot of frustration about the lack of communication. Not being told ahead of time about court dates, whether children are to spend the night or not with parents after a supervised visit, medical information, \$400 medical bill that she paid for because they took the kids to a doctor not in the provider. Still to be reimbursed.

Discussed with manager and supervisor. They explained that it may have happened in Feb but that they didn't get word of it until just a few weeks ago. Did not have a petty cash to reimburse. Discussed educating beforehand, stated that it could have been discussed in training but they will say it hadn't been. "Foster parents should never pay for anything".

1:30 interview in Franktown with participant #5 & #3. Details of interview found in interview notes.

Ideas from interview:

Parent Blog

Foster child portal

Family Cheat sheet for parents of foster children about the family their children are going to

8/21 9:30 - 3:00 (5.5)

Arrived at participant #8 with no answer at the door. Called and stated had a 104 temperature. Will follow up next week when feeling better.

Worked on interview questionnaires all morning and got them all typed up along with a new idea sheet and unresolved questions/concern sheet.

1451 Meeting today 2-3:00. IOG Sub-Committee - Collaborative Management

Multi-Agency Services

Probation

CASA

Women's Emergency shelter

Sheriff

along with other divisions represented. Had to leave at 3 would have liked to have stayed longer.

Norman Kirsch presented : Noted that committees need to be ready to incorporate children into their processes after asked if aged out children or adults who have been in the system are part of the process improvement committees.

8/24 9:00 - 2:30 (5.5)

9:00 left to go to CYA meeting at Human Services but ended up downtown versus on Potomac.

12:30 participant #2 interview in Longmont. The drive was beautiful in Longmont. Participant was a pleasure to talk with. Participant is a recovering alcoholic with a bio 15 f and a foster 15

f. Main issue was allowing bio to drive but unable to allow the foster f to drive unless they wanted to take out liability insurance on foster child. Very expensive! Suggested getting involved in gymnastics more as a privilege in lieu of driving.

Difficult for participant #2 to make it to Douglas County on weekends for training or even social events unless the entire family was invited. Detail of interview in interview notes.

8/25 8:00 - 5:00 (8)

9:00 appt with participant #1. First male interviewed on this project and it was interesting how different it went. It was much more business like and I left feeling ok about it but not touched by motives as seen with other foster participant interviewed. It is ashamed I have been unable to meet with the foster children. Sure glad this isn't during the snowy season the drive would be horrible these past few days.

I discussed outcome with Caseworker assigned and seemed uneasy about participant #1. Not about abuse or neglect but just uneasy. She revealed that he had negotiated 6000 mo knowing that they county was over the barrel about the child and would have to place out of state if this foster family didn't take him.

Spent the rest of the time writing reports and creating a thank you note to all. Followed up with participant #10, tried to call them yesterday but the phone kept ringing.

Impromptu Bag Lunch Meeting with Women's crisis center - every 4th Tuesday of month.

VERY INTERESTING TOPICS To be further discusses

1. Responsibility to report changes in circumstance in domestic/abuse cases

After a case has been closed and deemed safe for child crisis center may come to know that there has been a change in the living conditions such as restraining order dropped, etc. The crisis center doesn't feel as if they are responsible to report the director felt very strongly about reporting. Stated that in these types of situations mirror the situations for child fatalities in CO. To be discussed further.

2. Parent being held responsible for the safety of a child vs victim offender spectrum

Women's center looking at degrees of responsibility.

Director of Human Services brought up that the county needs to look at the imbalance of power in relationships that let to child injury.

3:00 - 5:00 Citizen Review Board meeting

discussed 1451 origination Collaborative Management Committee

saw movie about social workers

voted in documents

8/26/09 9:30 -2:30 (5)

Read articles about foster care.

Composed thank you notes for foster visits. (ran to store to buy thank you notes)

Worked on paper.

8/28 9:30 - 4:00 (6.5)

Began writing text for website. Accomplished three sections.

Received call from participant #7 and #11. Met with participant #11 at lunchtime lovely couple and then went on to Franktown to meet participant #7. They live way out on a dirt road but very nice. Reminded me of my own relative.

Very excited about the website. Plan on uploading foster forms, resource list, and training opportunities. I hope to have the time to create pre-made folders for respite care situation.

8/28 9:30 - 4:30 (7)

Began researching and writing text for website. Found a lot of good information especially from WA. Did some follow-up calls and was able to schedule meetings with participant #7r and #11.

Met participant #11 at their work in Centennial at 12:30. Both very engaged in the process. Taking training on line.

2:30 Franktown - Met participant #7. Very nice caring women currently busy with grandchildren and not as available to foster care as they have been in the past. had issues with the process.

8/31 9:30 - 2:30 (5)

Worked on website text and transcribing interview notes.

9/1 9:30 11:30 & 1:00 - 3:00 (5)

Worked on website text: foster care, teenage & adoption pages. Finished transcribing interview notes and got caught up on thank you notes.

Attended meeting 3-5.

9/3 9:30 -2:30 (5)

Worked on needs assessment and website text. A lot of internet research on how other county sites posted their information. Met with Manager 1:30.

9/4 9:30 - 2:30 (5)

9/9 8:30 - 4:00(7.5)

8:30 meeting classifying child abuse cases with the Child Abuse Services Team. (Federal mandate - whenever there are more than 50 child abuse cases per year a team of professionals must meet to determine level of severity. This determination is noted in the child abuse registry). It was a very interesting meeting, Sheriffs dept, CASA, Psychologist, Ped RN and Douglas County was represented. Each case worker entered and discussed their individual cases while the team determined the outcome.

1:00 - 4:00 CERT Team - 1451 work group

Worked on website text. Returned call to reschedule last interview with participant #8 family. It was an honor to be able to sit amongst individuals who had the authority to change the course of a young persons life. Each of the participants exhibited a desire to truly benefit the course of each of the juveniles lives. The panel consisted of a psychologist, representatives from school district, 3 from probation, myself and human services along with the caseworker assigned to each case. At time the guardian at litum was also present. More importantly the children were

represented. Two children were actually present with their families, one represented herself via phone from detention center and two of the children were not present for the wrap around meeting.

My contribution was very little. I whispered once to the person facilitating if the child would be asked what he would like and they did get to him towards the end. She was very non-threatening and encouraging, confident with a gentleness about her that made you want to share. In each case the children and families were listened to and understood and supported in where they wanted to go from this point forward. It was AMAZING to be part of the process. What a privilege it was. I hope to continue being part of the team.

9/11 9:00 - 3:00 (6)

Met with participant #8, once again what a privilege to meet such a kind mother. She sure cares about her little one and wants to adopt her. Has assisted in her development with discipline, eating disorders and love. The baby girl was friendly and very comfortable. Last time I met her she was real clingy and unsure. This is my final interview for the project. I will spend the rest of the day writing the needs assessment and corresponding via email about the web development team. Sure hope I can complete this extra part of the project. Sent email to web group to meet regarding text developed. Requested response by end of day Monday.

9/14 8:30 -2:30 (6)

Attending staff meeting. Very awkward. Staff not friendly sat at opposite end of table. When supervisors and Manager arrived much more comfortable. It was hard to not take it personally but my thought was I am here to assist for free and these people are being rude to me.

I was outraged for a moment and then just thought lucky for me I don't have to work here it is all my choice. Manager checked in with me before he left for the meeting to discuss fatalities in Douglas County. Interesting meeting discussing how to set up billing bio parents for services provided in foster care. Based on what they can afford and very flexible as long as the parents do communicate with the collection department. Laura asked a lot of good questions.

Worked on needs assessment and left.

9/15 (2.5)

Hadn't heard back from the employees on the web development team. emailed Manager how to proceed and then magically I heard back. Will meet on Thursday of this week. called and told him I would be working a little from home because there wasn't enough to keep me busy.

9/17 9:30 - 4:00 (6.5)

Put together packets for web meeting. Did research on foster rates CW 08-14-I, June 2008. Worked on needs assessment more research. Asked to watch child of client. Arrived in room with bag but case worker felt child needed to be left in room w/mother. Child to be removed at end of meeting.

9/18 9:00 - 4:00 (7)

Adoption Exchange All day seminar.

9/21 9:30 - 4:00 (6.5)

Worked on web text edits and assessment. Conducted supervised visit from 2 -3:45.

9/22 9:30 - 2:30 (5)

Attended lunch meeting with Women's Crisis Center to discuss conflict of interest in reporting possible abuse/neglect when living situations change for women and their children.

Also discussed emotional abuse. Manager explained injurious environment versus emotional abuse. Rather how incident affects the child. Makes all parties responsible for putting child into an injurious environment. Thus taking the emphasis of the battered mother/wife as a victim but rather also responsible for the safety of her child or lack there of. The staff from the women's crisis center were very appreciative to know the distinction and would keep in mind when counseling abused/battered women in their shelter.

Douglas County had a few questions of them regarding what they offered but offerings were only for abused or battered children versus the ability to use their services to prevent abuse/neglect.

Finished edits on web text for am meeting tomorrow.

9/23 9:30 - 2:30 (5)

Prepared for web development meeting. Met with team worked through revisions. Revised web.

9/25 9:30 - 2:30 (5)

Completed web edits and forwarded to team members. Reviewed survey info to make sure it was all incorp into needs assessment. Spent time writing assessment.

9/28 9:30- 2:30 (5)

Strictly worked on assessment. Talked to GAL to discuss when not to allow children to have a voice in the process of placement. told me to call him to set-up appt.

9/29 9:30 - 3:30 (6)

Finalized needs assessment and prepared for meeting tomorrow. Attended Jefferson County Governor's Task Force meeting from 1- 3:00. Very interesting. Whitaker, Dir. of something at CSU, heads the project to develop a data report from existing information in Trails? The sponsor of the report is the Core Mgt team. This the support agencies that fund child welfare. The team was attempting, at least my perspective, justify Core's existence. Understandably so, but spent more time focusing on pulling accurate core data versus defining pulling accurate success for children/families data.

I suggested to Pat to incorporate the principles of the Collaborative Management group which taps all agencies including probation and school district. To use those contacts in order to pull data on success related to those children who enter criminal justice system and those that graduate form HS. I also suggested that he try and find another grad student to assist with this as I would have loved to have got teeth around this project in the beginning. He told me to come back and do this for my PhD. If the county would support financially, then yes but I am taxed out financially and need to get a paying job at this point.

Later Manager and I discussed this again. After many years in Child Welfare. He retired as Dir of Child Welfare from Arapaho County (I think) and is doing this job because he loves the business. He is of the opinion that no matter what services we provide, ultimately if changes are made it would happen regardless of prevention/intervention. Pretty drastic opinion after spending so many years providing services to those in need. He believes it is genetic predisposition. Either families will clean up their act or they will not.

My opinion is he is partially correct but for those who are searching and would like to change, without getting support, how they supposed to learn the tools. Whether they embrace is up to them. But many times people do not know any better on how to parent etc.

9/30 9:30 -2:30 & 5:30 - 8:30 (8)

Today was very awkward. Now I know how interns have felt in the past in some of my jobs. Many times I have just left them alone and not included them in things. It is very awkward. Although I wasn't there to socialize or be part of their team at times it felt as if they were rude not including me. I also know they are under a lot of stress with their jobs. The majority of the case workers were exclusive, not wanting to share info or there cases with me. A few were helpful but those that were more helpful were also very busy. I also believe that they felt territorial about their jobs and didn't quit know what I was there for even though I did explain to them. Really Pat should share more info with them. Anyway it is over, and I am glad for this reason.

The opportunities to attend the meeting that the manager invited me to, I am very grateful for. They were really key experiences and also revealed the many things that Douglas County is doing to attempt to keep up with new treatment philosophies. Although I really question if the

info is being passed down to the caseworkers. One case worked after explaining my final paper, seemed upset and of course didn't agree that children should have a voice in the process. She thought that is elevates their expectations, and leads them to believe that they have power in the process when they really don't. It was very interesting, and unsettling. It also made me question my paper and my thinking. But later realized I am still on the correct train and thinking.

I went by to thank those who had spent time with me and tried to be pleasant and appreciative for everything.

I made more edits in the needs assessment and am so glad to turn it in. I have allowed it to drive me crazy with all the revisions. Because I had received so many complaints about the caseworkers, I didn't want to throw them under the bus but yet had to keep the project integrifal. Leaving it out to discuss separately wouldn't have been correct. I tried to word complaints as neutral to the process as possible. When I returned to meet Pat and Connie to present the needs assessment, it ended up being relaxed and actually fun.

The county trainer stated that she thinks like I do. Manager said he felt like we were beating up on him in a joking way. Most of the complaints they had already heard and my suggestions seemed to echo what Connie had been on Pat about already. The trainer is the retired Director of Arapahoe. Managed 25 supervisors, must be Arapahoe or Denver. Is currently Dir of Broomfield which she states is a very little county office. Contracts as foster care trainer and home study person. I was there in the evening to present the needs assessment and then to assist with the training session. They both complimented the needs assessment. Manager said that no other intern has done as much work as i have. It made me feel good as I didn't want to be a burden.

The foster care training was interesting and I learned a lot. I told trainer that I want to attend other trainings with her , and seemed very interested in having me assist her. We spoke afterwards about Douglas County and what a good old boys organization it has always been. Now that the new director is hired things are changing. The trainer also complained about the caseworkers and the lack of consistent supervisory expectations. Sated in her training, which I thought was interesting, that if the foster families didn't get the support they asked for to call her and she would deal with manager directly. She is truly an advocate for children, especially in foster care.

We went on to discuss the conflict I had from attending the Data meeting. She had known about it and also was afraid that they would be too focused on core services versus successes for families and children. She is involved in a state level task force which is looking at alternative treatments. She said that in the future CO will be engaged in new trends for family engagement in treatment plans. Called differential responses. Intake according to moderate/low would require no intervention but prevention and then basically "no finding" and then high would involve a different type of intervention. Only removing the child in very extreme dangerous situations.

She went on to agree with me about the incidence of criminal justice from foster care and further stated that they have found that most homeless have been touched by foster care in one way or another. She felt very responsible for this and said that what she worked at for 30 years was part of this outcome. This is what keeps her motivated in the system in order to assist in making changes. Very interesting and fun person. She gave me her contact and said she would definitely get a hold of me for other trainings to work with her.

It was wonderful to leave on such a positive engaged note. I will always remember my experience and hopefully be able to get a job someday with them.