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The Foster System's Impact on Child Development

The foster care system is designed to provide a temporary living arrangement for children who are suffering from inadequate parental care. The goal for most of the children who enter is reunification, or when a child is returned to his/her parents if they have improved their parenting skills. The system's primary concern is to protect children from abuse and neglect, but it is infamous for the traumatic impact it may have on the children. Joseph J. Doyle performed a study that suggested children fare better if they stay in reportedly troubled homes than those who enter the foster care system. He examined long-term results of juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, employment, and income. Although he placed caution on the interpretation of the results, he claimed that foster care did not seem to have highly beneficial effects for children on the margin of the system, or children whose case managers could have chosen family preservation over foster care. While accepting that foster care is a necessary and important system, this essay attempts to explain why foster care may not be the best option for all children through a developmental lens.

Compared to other children, foster kids are more likely to have come from impoverished circumstances (Haight, et al.), and children living in poverty are five times more likely to have experienced abuse or neglect ("Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect"). This added factor of abuse or neglect is what sends children into the foster system, but even without this factor,

impoverished children are already at a disadvantage. They suffer from food insecurity and how this impacts their physical health. They exhibit low academic achievement due to few resources and behavioral problems due to a lack of support. Parents of low socio-economic status (SES) are busy trying to support their family and may not be able to give their children the attention that parents of high SES give their kids. Poverty can also affect stress levels, which can affect an infant prenatally as well as postnatally. If a pregnant mother experiences a harmful amount of stress, it can lead to premature birth, low baby weight, and can affect how the child later copes with stress. Depending on the child's age when stressful events occur postnatally, it can have a multitude of negative impacts. An infant experiencing chronic stress may be apathetic and withdrawn, may not be able to feed, and may fail to survive, whereas an infant experiencing acute stress may respond by throwing temper tantrums and exhibit attention problems and withdrawal. An older child may also respond by becoming apathetic and may learn to freeze up as a coping mechanism. Chronic or repeated stress may cause an inability to regulate their behavior or emotions, which may lead to "motor hyperactivity, anxiety, mood swings, impulsiveness, and sleep problems." ("Developmental Issues for Young Children") Early stressful experiences alter neural circuits which influences how a genotype is expressed, allowing certain behaviors and restraining others. It can also alter different brain structures, such as the amygdala, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex, which influences the ability to learn new tasks and regulate future stress. Furthermore, stress can affect the immune system, which may lead to a number of diseases, including "cardiovascular disease, viral hepatitis, liver cancer, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, autoimmune diseases, poor dental health, and depression." (Shonkoff, et al.)

Maltreatment exacerbates the stress caused by poverty. Neglect is the main reason why foster children enter the system, as 62% of children have that listed as a reported cause (Children's Bureau). Parents are crucial to helping infants and young children regulate their emotions and teaching them to deal with positive stress, which involves stress that is temporary and comparatively mild (Shonkoff, et al.). Positive stress itself is important in child development, as it teaches the child how to cope with stress in the future. Researchers who studied the effects of maternal attention in rats have found that the "quality of nurturing affect neural function in pups and negatively affect cognition and the expression of psychopathology later in life" (Shonkoff, et al.). The level of licking and grooming that the mothers showed their offspring also affected stress responses. However, inattentive parents do not provide support in this area. Parental support is even more important when tolerable stress is involved, in which parental support is the key factor in determining if the event is "tolerable" or not. Tolerable stress is abnormal and includes "the death of a family member, a serious illness or injury, a contentious divorce, a natural disaster, or an act of terrorism". (Shonkoff, et al.) If adequate parental support is present, the child will learn how to adapt to these stressful circumstances. The presence of toxic stress in a child's life is almost always concurrent with the absence of parental regulation. As a result, the child may suffer the adverse behavioral and physical effects of toxic stress already discussed.

Children coming from such adverse experiences may benefit from social workers removing them from their homes, which cannot be denied. Staying further in an unstable home environment may result in even further delays in development. However, some may find the removal from their home and parents and the instability of the foster system as adding to their

trauma. Studies have shown that “children and caregivers, even in cases involving maltreatment, tend to form affective bonds” (Haight, et al.). Attachment refers to the close bond that occurs between two people. John Bowlby claimed that attachment relationships are biologically based and are necessary for survival. To cite an example, “toddler behaviors, monitoring the caregiver’s whereabouts, and caregiver behaviors, such as responding to the child’s distress, emerge with experience and appear to maximize the child’s learning and safety” (Haight, et al.). Young children who are separated from their attachment figures “not only experience significant emotional stress and sadness, but also may experience a decrease in the enrichment and structure important for continued social, cognitive, and communicative development” (Haight, et al.). The age of the child has an impact on how the child responds to separation. If the child and parent have had more time to develop a strong attachment, physical separation may have less of an impact on the child. If separation occurs within the first six months of the child’s life, the “pre-attachment phase” (Haight, et al.), that alone might not have an adverse effect on the child’s development, dependent upon how the child is treated after separation. A child between six months and three years old may experience more distress, especially due to the limited language skills and the child’s wariness of strangers, which is normal for children of this age. In contrast, children three years and older have the language skills to help them adapt to their new circumstances, do not rely on physical proximity for a sense of security, and may be able to form new attachments. (“Developmental Issues for Young Children”) Furthermore, children ages four and older have stronger Theory of Mind capabilities and the ability to understand someone else’s perspective, which informs socio-emotional development, cognitive development, and language development.

Haight and her colleagues reveal how the distinction between experience-expectant processes and experience-dependent processes informs how the development of new attachments with a foster parent may benefit the child and “partially correct” earlier trauma.

Experience-expectant processes are occurrences that are considered typical for a particular species, while experience-dependent processes are entirely reliant on varying experience. Since attachment is an experience-expectant process, it is crucial to development and it is necessary for children whose earlier attachment figures were abusive or neglectful. These earlier attachment figures may have led the children to believe they could not trust adults or they were not worthy of love. New attachments may remedy that and help them learn how to interact socially.

However, it has been noted that “caseworkers would sometimes deliberately move a child who was establishing strong bonds with a foster family, if that child was expected eventually to return home” (McDonald, et al.). Moving from home to home, as many children do, detrimentally affects the formation of strong attachment bonds and what children learn about relationships and social interactions.

Unfortunately, although the mean age of foster children entering the system as of 2019 was 7.1, the largest numbers of children entering were children under a year old at 19%, one-year-olds and two-year-olds each at 7%, and three-year-olds at 6% (Children’s Bureau). The category for children less than a year old was not broken down further into children younger than six months, but one can assume a significant portion of the percentage were between six months and a year. Therefore, a large number of children entering foster care are in the “attachment-in-the-making” phase, where children between six and eight months become wary of strangers, and the “clear-cut attachment” phase, where children between seven months and a

year become distinctly upset when separated from their attachment figure. A significant number of children entering foster care are between the ages of six months and 3 years, when separation from their attachment figure is especially upsetting and they might not be able to form a new secure attachment.

According to attachment theory as shown in Mary Ainsworth's strange situation study, there are four attachment styles that individuals fall under, including securely attached, in which the parent-child relationship is stable; insecure avoidant, in which the child seems indifferent toward the parent; insecure resistant, in which the child experiences discomfort upon separation and is not easily comforted upon the parent's return; and insecure disorganized, in which the child exhibits contradictory behavior regarding attachment. Disorganized attachment is associated with neglectful or abusive parents and parent psychopathology. This reaction to aversive parental behavior may harm a child's ability to form other relationships. Insecure attachment is also associated with the later development of psychosocial disorders, aggressive behavior, and difficulty in school. (Haight, et al.)

Insecure attachment has also been linked to delinquent behavior, which aligns with the results of Joseph J. Doyle's study that details higher delinquency rates in foster children. Children in foster care are 3 times more likely to display delinquent behavior than children in the general population (Doyle). Evidence shows that when a child experiences abuse or neglect, children "learn that hurting and harming others is 'normal'" and may learn to copy those behaviors (Asscher, et al.). Not all victims of abuse later become perpetrators; in fact, most of them do not, particularly not survivors of sexual abuse. However, there is an existing link between survivors of maltreatment, excepting sexual abuse, and delinquency. The association

with delinquency may be explained through a number of distorted developmental processes, such as the inability to regulate emotions, as discussed earlier, or moral disengagement, which stems from maltreated children displaying “a more intense reaction to and anticipation of rejection.” Delinquent behavior and risk-taking behavior may be a coping mechanism that formed as a response to violence. (Asscher, et al.) Children with a history of abuse are at higher risk of abusing alcohol at a young age, using tobacco and drugs, and becoming obese or promiscuous. Those who participate in delinquent behavior may experience trouble sustaining social relationships and are more likely to experience “school failure, gang membership, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, violent crime, incarceration, and becoming single parents.” (Shonkoff, et al.)

There are gender differences involved in the prevalence of maltreatment and its effects, which may blur the association slightly. For example, girls are more likely to be sexually abused, while boys are more likely to be victims of physical abuse. Among juvenile delinquents, more females had experienced all types of abuse, including neglect, physical and sexual abuse, etc., than males. Males were more likely to have committed a felony while females were more likely to have committed a misdemeanor, although there were no differences in the number of offenses committed. An individual with a past experience of sexual abuse were more likely to be a sexual offender, while an individual with a past of physical abuse were more likely to be a physical abuser. A history of any kind of abuse was a predictor for violent offenses in males, but only physical abuse was a predictor of violent offenses in females. (Asscher, et al.) Given all of these results, male survivors of abuse seem to be more likely to continue the cycle of abuse than

females, which may affect interpretation, but the cycle of abuse does exist across all genders and is predictive of an unproductive future in society.

Studies have shown that foster children perform below average in academics and are not as likely to pursue higher education, which limits their future opportunities. However, children placed in a foster family were found to do better and go farther than those in group homes, and those who were adopted did better than those still in the foster system, which demonstrates the importance of family structure and strong attachment on a child's development. (McDonald, et al.) Individuals who have grown up in neglectful environments where they do not communicate regularly experience delays in language and vocabulary development. ("Developmental Issues for Young Children") Although children who grew up in poverty, as many foster children have, experience affected language development, studies have shown that mothers who read to their children may benefit their child's literacy, but those raised in neglect may not have this experience. Once they enter foster care, it is not a guarantee that the child will be in an environment that supports their education. Education may not be a priority for those in group homes while employees of the system focus on placement, mental health, paperwork, etc. In group settings or in inattentive foster families, there might not be an authority figure telling the children to do their homework, to help them apply to colleges, or to model behavior that supports learning. (Krebs and Pitcoff) Furthermore, 33% of foster children changed elementary schools at least five times ("51 Useful Aging Out of Foster Care Statistics"), which calls for yet another adjustment for the child and makes them fall behind in their education. This lack of education, or this lower standard of education, affects the child's future and his/her ability to succeed in a highly demanding economy.

As a stable environment and reliable attachment figures are so central to a child's development and ability to function in society, a crucial question to ask is whether a child should be sent into foster care at all or if there should be even more focus on family preservation. Indeed, foster care is undeniably important for children with insecure attachments to their guardians and experiencing developmentally detrimental abuse and neglect. As discussed earlier, forming new, more secure attachments may alleviate the harm done to the child when they had distorted perceptions of attachment. However, children who are in foster care for only a short while actually fare worse than those in foster care for a longer period of time ("Developmental Issues for Young Children"). Foster care is intended to be temporary and reunification with the parents is nearly always the goal. However, those who are reunited too quickly with their parents are often again placed into foster care shortly after. This is why evidence suggests those on the margin of placement into foster care would most likely benefit from family preservation attempts and forego the stint in foster care. If the family attempted to better their relationship and treatment of the child, the separation would not have to occur and the trauma of the foster system would not have to be inflicted upon the child. Furthermore, those who are in the foster care system too long most likely undergo multiple placements and are affected by the instability. They also may be disadvantaged when it comes to the possibility of adoption (McDonald, et al.).

Many initiatives have been implemented in order to alleviate the negative effects of foster care, but problems still arise. In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Amendments were passed in order to emphasize reunification or adoption. It presented a set of goals, organized in a hierarchy. The primary goal was family preservation, or letting the child stay in their home. The second goal was reunification, the third, adoption, and the fourth was

guardianship. The fifth and final goal was long-term foster care. (McDonald, et al.) However, these efforts may need to be reinforced or adjusted, as the detrimental effects are still grossly impacting foster children and former foster children. Foster children exhibit more delinquent behavior, have more teen pregnancies, more marriages devoid of support, and are more likely to isolate themselves. A significant number of homeless people have spent time in foster care, which could be a result of a lack of support for those aging out of foster care or the adverse effects to a foster child's development. These risks are lessened if there is good quality of care during a child's time in the system. (McDonald, et al.) However, it is difficult to definitively say whether or not these outcomes are due to a child's experience in foster care or their experience before they entered the system. Children placed in foster care due to neglect or abuse experienced worse long-term outcomes than children placed due to death, incarceration, mental illness, or physical illness. Furthermore, those who experienced fewer placements and had a more stable environment fared better than those who moved around to multiple homes.

While foster care may detrimentally impact a child, it also has a societal and economic cost. In a nation where everyone is expected to contribute to society, going through the U.S. foster system places children at a disadvantage. Many of the children in foster care come from poverty, abuse, or neglect, and are then separated from their attachment figures and placed in a system that is unstable and oftentimes abusive. The resulting trauma from this accumulation of risks impacts their education, social relationships, employment, and other future outcomes. A disproportionate number of the homeless are former foster children, the rate of foster children who go to college is less than three percent, and fifty percent of foster children who age out of the system will be unemployed at age twenty-four (51 Useful Aging Out of Foster Care

Statistics”). Former foster children cannot participate in the economy while the federal government spends around \$4.4 billion to keep children in foster care (“Facts about Foster Care”) and the public spends around \$50,000 each year to keep each teen in the foster system, which is more money than it would require to send them to a private school (Krebs and Pitcoff). While the foster system is undeniably crucial for children in troubled homes, children on the margin of placement could greatly benefit from better family preservation tactics, and children who have to enter the system need greater stability and a better quality of care from their government-appointed caregivers.

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