Journal of Family Strengths

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 16

11-28-2011

Considering the Consequences of Child Welfare Service Decisions

Vincent J. Geremia
Kentucky Department for Community Based Services, vincent.geremia@ky.gov

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Recommended Citation
Geremia, Vincent J. (2011) "Considering the Consequences of Child Welfare Service Decisions," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 16.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol11/iss1/16

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In this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths*, Friedman's article "The Wall Is Around My Heart" underscores the importance of decision making in child welfare services. Child welfare systems need to approach decision making in a very careful manner, balancing the possible long-term consequences of preserving the socio-biological context of the child's family of origin with removing the child and pursuing permanency in an alternate care setting. The article further emphasizes the critical need for child welfare systems to employ family-based interventions that have been found most effective in helping families achieve real change to maladaptive patterns of child rearing behavior. In addition, child welfare systems need to facilitate therapeutic services that meet the unique reparative needs of children who have suffered child abuse and neglect, as well as the trauma of removal and substitute placement.

The critical impact of decisions made by child welfare professionals is immeasurable within the context of a child and his/her family, whether that setting is the child's family of origin or an alternate permanent family setting. Yet all too often, the decisions regarding which path to take in helping ensure the immediate and long-term safety and well-being of a child are based upon assessments that are not comprehensive, and therefore lack thorough and complete information surrounding the needs of the family and the individual needs of the child. Without this foundation of information, it is difficult to ascertain the most effective solution in appropriately addressing such critical needs.

This situation is of great importance for just a single child and family, yet is compounded tremendously by the magnitude of children and families regularly touched by child abuse and neglect in our country. As the author states, over three million children are reported as victims of child abuse/neglect in the U.S., one million of which are substantiated (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). When added to this the fact that 75% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse report having been victims of sexual abuse themselves, (Romano & De Luca, 1997); it is clear that cirumstances exist for the exponential increase of child maltreatment through subsequent generations.

In general, child welfare professionals receive extensive training on the identification of child abuse and neglect, as well as on the decision-making process in assessing information obtained during investigation and arriving at a determination regarding the allegations reported and the findings gathered. Indeed, this level of decision making is of utmost importance in establishing an immediate course of action following a report of child maltreatment—whether to substantiate or unsubstantiate,

and, of even greater consequence, whether to allow the child to remain in his/her family or to be removed for protection. Child welfare systems usually perform this decision-making process rather well.

It is at the next level where child welfare systems often face difficulty, the level at which the child welfare professional must make decisions regarding the best course of intervention and treatment services. The focus of such services is to change inappropriate behaviors and restore a family to an acceptable level of functioning, a level that promotes the safety, well-being, and permanency of the child and family. As difficult as completing an investigation may be, it is generally much more challenging and requires much more time and active intervention to effect positive and sustainable change within a family.

Child welfare systems, in order to be comprehensive and effective in child and family intervention, must attend to both the external and internal elements of safety. Although extremely important, child welfare too often focuses only on achieving the external safety of the child and family. This is somewhat understandable, as outward safety is the most tangible to establish. External safety is usually obvious due to direct observation and may be measured as well as documented through direct observation. However, this is often where child welfare falls short, as the system must go beyond the physically observable safety of a child and family and help ensure their internal safety—emotional and psychological safety. Internal safety is not nearly as recognizable or as easily measured and documented. It is often due to this lack of obvious need and difficulty in verifying success that child welfare professionals, policy makers, and funding sources may not be as inclined to focus efforts toward ensuring internal safety and continue to allocate more resources toward the achievement of external safety.

Friedman's article very poignantly illustrates the all-too-common emotional price of child maltreatment, as well as removal and placement in alternative care. Utilizing an actual case study of a victim of child maltreatment, the author skillfully speaks of the need to attend to the emotional internal safety needs of the victim. The article emphasizes that it is imperative to intervene in the cycle so often experienced by young victims—the cycle of repeating the pattern of victim and offender behavior themselves. It further underscores the necessity of assisting the victim in breaking this pattern of reactivity and preventing he/she from resorting to victim/offender behavior with those closest later in life, such as partners or the victim's own children.

With an ever-growing body of research that demonstrates the specific, long-term consequences and costs of child abuse and neglect

experiences, the child welfare communities will be joined by policy makers and funding sources in realizing the value of allocating resources that provide effective interventions to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect. It is in this way that the systems that serve children and families will be most successful in breaking the cyclical nature of child maltreatment, helping ensure the safety of children and families for future generations.

References

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