

Five Steps Toward Improving the Foster Care System

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As a former foster child, adoptee and professional in the child welfare field, I have lived or worked in the foster care system my entire life. My own disheartening experiences of living in care are shared by many foster youth who came before—and after—me. Outcomes for these youth remain discouragingly consistent. The role CASA volunteers play in the lives of these young people is like no other. Few strategies for addressing the challenges of children in care are as effective or have more influence. I have met countless CASA volunteers, supporters and staff across the country. One thing we cannot seem to keep from discussing is, “How can we make the system better?” I think we should be engaging in this conversation every day. I am honored to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on this question.

1. Keep children with their families whenever possible.

Easier said than done, but hundreds of thousands of young people are away from their families for causes that are not being adequately addressed in our society. They include poverty, marginalization and resulting factors such as substance abuse and mental illness. We know children of color are overrepresented in the foster care system, and we cannot separate the fact that their families are more likely to live in poverty and experience discrimination. Poverty means getting by without a car even if you live in a remote area. It means learning to live day to day without a checking account or credit card, perhaps without electricity or a phone. It may mean having to leave your children home alone while you go to work—even if you don’t want to. Until we more successfully address social conditions that are hurtful to all of us, children will be living out the consequences.

2. Be compassionate with parents.

What does it take for *you* to accept help from others? Most of us would agree that we must trust someone before we are able to accept their help. I feel a strong connection with parents involved in the dependency system. My own mother was 14 when she gave birth to me, and I did not see her from the time I was 4 until 22. After I met her as an adult, she asked me, “Why are you not angry with me?” I responded, “How could I be angry with you? You were 14!” I am not advocating that we absolve parents of responsibility. They have the responsibility to make the changes—if possible—to become safe and appropriate parents; to rebuild trust with their children and commit to healing the family. Recovering from addiction, ending the multi-generational cycle of abuse and accessing the resources that can help someone parent with mental illness are especially difficult challenges. Change takes time, and delays are not always due to a lack of desire. Our biases can inhibit our empathy for parents and the challenges they

face, but it helps to think of the difficulties we ourselves face when trying to make changes in our own lives. The awareness that we need to change is seldom enough to make change happen. Being more compassionate and affirming with the parents of the children we serve may not always lead to a better outcome. But helping parents to not feel judged can sometimes free them to acknowledge that although they are still mom or dad, they can't be the everyday parent. I have seen compassion strengthen parents in their ability to overcome adversity and find greater motivation to change.

3. Research existing relationships to get children out of foster care as quickly as possible.

We want children to return to their families as soon as possible. If they cannot return home, we want to move them out of limbo and into relational, physical and legal permanency. In other words, we want them to have someone they can count on, a place to call home and people they can claim—and who claim them—as family. Experience shows us that people who are known to our children are often the people who will provide them with permanency. You might not consider adopting a child you don't know, but what if I were to ask you to consider becoming the caregiver for your nephew, your daughter's best friend or a student you used to teach? You might feel an existing bond with the child or a sense of familial responsibility, and you might say yes. More and more CASA programs are assisting with child-specific recruitment of adoptive parents and guardians, delving deeply into the lives of youth to discover who they care about and who cares about them. This work is critical to getting children out of the system as soon as possible and connected with people who can provide a familiar and safe place for them.

4. Meet children where they are.

Some young people are angry with their parents and the world in general. They should be. They have not been protected and cared for the way children are entitled to be. That is why taking a "no-fault" approach is essential. Most youth experience sadness, despair and anger. How could we expect anything different? Youth express these emotions through tantrums, school difficulties, running away, getting involved with gangs or using drugs. These are fairly normative responses to what they have gone through. Their behaviors may leave us feeling frustrated and hopeless about their futures. But we must maintain hope—because many of our children have lost it. I have seen countless young people with these behaviors turn the corner after increased stability, security, positive relationships and services. It takes time. We cannot expect children to endure the levels of loss they have experienced and pull out of it within six months. It has been 30 years since I exited the foster care system, yet not a day goes by that I do not have some memory associated with my time in care.

5. Make decisions and implement them as though the child were a member of your own family.

Time does not move quickly for children when they are away from their families and living in a state of uncertainty. High caseloads and the bureaucracy of the system make it difficult to make

things happen as quickly as we would hope. And for youth removed from the home, reunification is predicated on whether the loved ones they were removed from will change the conditions which led to removal. Every day in foster care is like a week, every week like a month and every month a year. We will not always be able to address the needs of the children we serve as quickly as we want. At times we may even lose sight of their needs. This is why CASA programs are such critical and influential assets in the child welfare system. Magical things happen for children when someone gives them a voice. Isn't that what we want for every child?