

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

How Child Abuse Programs Hurt Poor Families

DOUGLAS BESHAROV

The past 20 years have seen an enormous expansion of programs to protect abused and neglected children. Thanks to these programs, child abuse deaths are down from 2,000 to 3,000 a year in 1975 to about 1,000 in 1985. But in its eagerness to protect children from dangerous parents, state and federal policy is hurting poor children and is weakening their families.

The problem is the misuse of foster care. Those children who need the most help—the victims of physical brutality—are often not removed from their abusive parents. At the same time, children and parents who need only social and educational reinforcement cannot receive such help. Instead, poor, socially deprived children are more likely to be placed in foster care than abused children. Once there, they languish for years in an emotionally damaging limbo. Child welfare policy must begin to differentiate between children in danger of serious injury and those who are not. For the abused child, foster care may be the only possible protection; but for the socially deprived child, home-based programs that compensate for parental inadequacies would be more effective and less traumatic. When we try to help these children, we should remember the ancient medical maxim: first, do no harm.

Child abuse and child neglect are serious national problems. But the words “abuse” and “neglect” are used by child welfare agencies to encompass much more than the brutally battered, sexually abused, or starved and sickly children that come to mind when we think of child maltreatment.

In 1979 and 1980, the federal government conducted a National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect, which collected data for 12 months from a representative sample of 26 counties in 10 states. The study found that only about 30 percent of all “maltreated” children are physically abused, and only about 10 percent of these children (three percent of the total) suffer an injury severe enough to require professional care. Thus, over 90 percent of the cases labeled “physical abuse” are really situations of excessive or unreasonable corporal punishment, which, although a matter of legitimate government concern, are unlikely to escalate into a serious assault against the child.

Sexual abuse makes up about seven percent of reported cases of maltreatment of children. This figure may be low; major efforts are being made to increase the reporting of suspected child sexual abuse.

Physical neglect makes up about 17 percent of all cases. The three largest categories are failure to provide medical care; abandonment and other refusals of custody; and failure to provide food, clothing, and hygiene. Physical neglect, of course, can be just as harmful as physical abuse. In fact, more children die of physical neglect than from physical abuse. But again, the number of cases where neglect has resulted in serious physical deprivation or injury is low, perhaps as low as four percent of neglect cases.

The remainder of cases, about half, are forms of *educational neglect* and *emotional maltreatment*. Educational neglect, at 27 percent, is the single largest category of cases. Emotional abuse, mainly behavior defined as “habitual scapegoating, belittling, and rejecting behavior,” accounts for about 20 percent of the total. And various forms of emotional neglect, defined as “inadequate nurturance” and “permitted maladaptive behavior,” compose nine percent of the total.

Almost 85 percent of all cases of “child maltreatment,” then, involve excessive corporal punishment, minor physical neglect, educational neglect, or emotional maltreatment. These are forms of real emotional or developmental harm to children, but they usually do not create the need for emergency government intervention.

Parental Deficiencies

In the overwhelming bulk of these cases, which are most accurately considered forms of “social deprivation,” the families are poor. About 30 percent of abused children live in single-parent households and are on public assistance; the comparable figure for neglected children is about 45 percent. This does not mean, however, that poverty causes parental abuse or neglect: fewer than one in five welfare families are reported for suspected abuse or neglect.

DOUGLAS BESHAROV is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He was the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Norman Polansky, Regents Professor of Social Work at the University of Georgia, is the foremost expert on the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment. He has concluded that: "Neglectful parents differ from other parents at the same socioeconomic level. . . . Neglectful parents suffer pervasive and profound character disorders, of which the two most frequent are the apathy-futility syndrome and the impulse-ridden character."

These parents are extremely difficult to reach, let alone successfully treat. Yet the children need not be removed from their custody; in fact, breaking up the family unit often makes the child's situation worse. Poor children can spend years in foster care as their parents' psychological disorders are "treated," usually ineffectively. Hundreds of thousands of poor children suffer more than if they were simply left at home.

Instead of placing these children in foster care, the child welfare programs would do better to try to compensate for the parents' inadequacies through home-based educational and social programs for the children. This is a less intrusive, more effective, and probably less expensive way to deal with the problem.

Permanent Foster Care

About 65 percent of reports of child abuse and neglect are deemed unfounded. And of the 600,000 substantiated cases, fewer than 20 percent result in the child's placement in foster care. But this is an enormous number, because the number of reports is so high. Last year, more than 120,000 children were placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect, up from 75,000 in 1963. Each year, more than 440,000 children spend at least some time in foster care.

Placement in foster care is sometimes necessary to prevent a child's serious injury or even death. Child protection agencies have been successfully sued for damages when children were subsequently abused because the agency failed to remove them from parental custody. But contrary to common assumption, cases of social deprivation, not cases of physical abuse, are the ones most likely to result in foster care. A national study by the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1979 found that social workers recommend foster care almost a third more often (31 percent versus 23 percent) in cases of neglect than abuse. According to a study of the records of the Family Division of D.C. Superior Court, in 1985, 74 percent of the neglected children brought before the court were placed in foster care, while only 41 percent of abused children were.

In theory, foster care is a short-term remedy designed to protect children from harm while parents have time to respond to treatment. The reality is far different. More than 50 percent of the children in foster care are in this "temporary" status for over two years; more than 30 percent are away from their parents for over six years.

A root cause of foster care limbo, like the initial decision to place the child, is the inability of existing treatment programs to break deep-seated patterns of child abuse and neglect among poor families. As the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect acknowledged, "Counseling is the service typically provided to neglectful families, although there is no evidence that this service is effective with chronically neglecting parents."



Foster care was ineffective even in the 19th century, as Charles Dickens vividly illustrated in this scene from *Oliver Twist*.

Neglected, socially deprived *children* are more likely to be placed in foster care than are abused children because their *parents* are deemed harder to treat than abusive parents. Many neglectful mothers, for example, fit into the "apathy-futility syndrome." Norman Polansky describes such women as:

passive, withdrawn, lacking in expression. . . . Their workers found them disorganized in their lifestyles and child-rearing; they were frustrating because, although they did not oppose the suggestions offered, neither did their care [of the child] improve. The agency personnel did not know what to make of them or how to treat them and neither did we.

Existing treatment programs are successful only with parents who are already motivated to accept help, or who can easily be encouraged to do so. They do not work for those who have serious personality problems.

On the other hand, the termination of parental rights—the solution for intractable cases of serious physical and sexual abuse—is also unlikely in cases of social deprivation. Since the damage to the child is cumulative, there is no particularly outrageous incident, such as a brutal beating, upon which to base a decision to terminate parental rights; nor have the parents evidenced an unequivocal unwillingness or absolute inability to care for the child. Most social workers and judges are unwilling to sever the parent-child tie on the ground of emotional or developmental deprivation.

As a result, these socially deprived children are trapped in a vicious cycle. Their parents cannot adequately care for them; they cannot be returned home; and they cannot be placed for adoption. Through it all, the children suffer an increasingly harmful foster care experience.

Long-term foster care can leave lasting psychological scars. For the parents, removing a child is psychologically devastating, and can do irreparable damage to their bond of affection and commitment. In addition, many forms of maltreatment stem from how the parent and child relate to each other. Separation obviously cannot aid in the resolution of such problems. The period of separation may so completely tear the already weak family fabric that the parents have no chance of coping with the children when they are returned.

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For the child, foster care is emotionally jarring. While in foster care, children are supposed to receive services to remedy the effects of past maltreatment. Few do. Worse, children who stay in foster care for more than a short time, especially if they are older, tend to be shifted through a sequence of ill-suited foster homes, denying them the consistent support and nurturing that they so desperately need. A study of foster children in Jackson County, Missouri (which includes Kansas City) found that 29 percent had been in four or more homes in less than five years. As a result, many graduates of the foster care system show severe emotional and behavioral problems.

This over-reaction to poverty-related "child maltreatment" can endanger children who are in real jeopardy. Inconsistent as it may seem, given the widescale misuse of foster care, child protection workers and judges are deeply conscious of its hazards and hesitate to use it except in the most extreme cases. Consequently, many children are left in the custody of parents who have repeatedly abused them.

One study of child abuse fatalities, for example, described how "In one family, two siblings of the victim had died mysterious deaths that were undiagnosed. In another family, a twin had died previously of abuse." Studies in several states have shown that 35 to 55 percent of all child fatalities attributed to abuse or neglect involve children already reported to a child protection agency. Thousands of other children receive serious injuries short of death even while under child protective supervision.

Eight-year-old Tammy Nelson was one of these children who died because the agency did not have the money to conduct a proper investigation.

[The Missouri Division of Family Services] allegedly received several hotline calls concerning the Nelson children, but it appears that only two were investigated... The callers informed D.F.S. that

Tammy Nelson was being sold by her mother to an older man for the purpose of having sex, and that Audrey Nelson, the child's mother, forced her children to watch her perform sex acts with various partners and perhaps forced them to participate. . . . However, the investigators failed to conduct a thorough investigation as required by statute. Both investigations basically consisted of a brief interview of Audrey Nelson and a brief interview of the children, possibly within hearing distance of Audrey. The children, as well as Audrey, denied the allegations of the callers. . . . The investigators seem not to have interviewed the children individually or apart from their mother, nor did they interview possible witnesses or request physical examinations for the children.

Shortly after this "investigation," Tammy was found murdered.

More resources could be focused on such physically endangered children if social welfare agencies faced the reality that in many cases of neglect and deprivation, society is better off doing nothing. Through some sort of tunnel vision, the system sees the *physical* improvement of the child's living conditions while in foster care as proof that the child is better off away from his parents. This ignores the often devastating effects of long-term foster care limbo on the child's *emotional* well-being. As child development experts Al Goldstein, Anna Freud, and Albert Solnit note, "by its intervention, the state may make a bad situation worse: indeed it may even turn a tolerable or even a good situation into a bad one."

Benefits of Development Programs

A U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect report sets out a more sensible policy:

It is unrealistic to hope that the outcome of treatment will be a 'model' family. Parents this dysfunctional will probably never be able to fulfill the needs of their children sufficiently to reach the primary goal of breaking the cycle of neglect. Rather, it is hoped that there will be enough improvement or stability to see the children through to adulthood without great damage being done to them.

Most socially deprived children, then, do not need to be taken away from their families. They need a network of in-home, child-oriented services that attempt to compensate for parental deficiencies. "Compensatory" services might include infant stimulation programs, Head Start, therapeutic day care, homemaker care, early childhood or child development programs, nutritional services, and youth counseling programs. Few child protective programs now offer such services in sufficient amount or quality. Less than six percent of all substantiated cases receive a referral to programs like day care or Head Start.

Yet the available evidence indicates that many child development efforts, such as preschool programs, can make lasting improvements in the social and educational functioning of the children they serve. In the best known program, the Perry Preschool Project of Ypsilanti, Michigan, researchers began tracking 123 three- and four-year-

old students in the 1960s to determine whether a five-day-a-week program, for one or two years, reinforced by teacher visits to the home, would make a difference in the lives of impoverished children.

The result was that the children who had the preschool experience fared much better than a control group without this exposure. Employment and postsecondary education rates for the Perry students were almost double that of the control group; the high school graduation rate was almost one-third higher; teenage pregnancy rates were almost half; and arrest rates were 40 percent lower. Many other preschool programs have also reported impressive success in raising the social and educational functioning of disadvantaged children.

Social Pay-offs

For the foreseeable future, the competition for reduced social service funds will be intense. Programs, like child protective services, that serve the politically powerless, are in the greatest jeopardy. So proposing an expansion of "compensatory services" for children may seem like whistling into the wind.

Foster care, however, is also expensive. Family foster care costs an average of \$10,000 a year per child. Institutional care costs about \$20,000 a year. Six years of one child's foster care placement (the national median), costs an average of \$68,000. Nationally, foster care costs states and the federal government almost \$3 billion a year.

For each child not placed in foster care, and instead provided with, for example, quality preschool services, there would be about an even trade-off in costs. Child development programs capable of "compensating" for parental inadequacies would be expensive—the Perry Preschool Project, for example, cost \$5,000 per child per year. Although this is about half the cost for family foster care, the substitution of the one for the other would not necessarily result in a large saving. A large proportion of children in foster care were on public assistance before their placement; when they are placed, the welfare grant and other cash and non-cash benefits to their parents are reduced.

There could be a major social pay-off, however, if poverty-related cases of emotional and social deprivation were handled without any recourse to foster care. This would reduce the foster care rolls by 30 to 50 percent and save as much as \$1 billion. More important, children would be provided the protection they need, and many children would avoid the harmful experience of foster care.

Furthermore, although the proposed approach would not in itself improve the system's fundamental inability to treat maltreating parents, it would encourage a greater—and long overdue—focus on meeting the child's long-term developmental needs.

Concentrating resources on at-home, compensatory programs for children would be a radical departure from current practice. But it would not require complicated statutes and might gain widespread official support. In the past, child protection professionals and agencies have felt

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threatened by proposals to reform foster care practices, and therefore often have lobbied strenuously against them. But they would be well positioned to provide the kinds of compensatory services that could be funded by the money saved by reducing the misuse of foster care.

No reform is possible, however, without first being honest about the problem, something child welfare professionals have been afraid to do. To make the case for change, they would have to tell the American public that almost 85 percent of the one million maltreated children we hear about have not been brutally battered, sexually abused, or physically endangered by serious neglect—even though it is these heartrending cases that have gained them continued increases in funding. Instead, they would have to argue for more social services for poor families—something for which there has been little public or political support.

Child welfare professionals would also have to tell the public how the system is harming poor children. And that will not be easy for them to do, because it might discredit their work. But if they do not educate the public, then socially deprived poor children will continue to be abused by the system that is meant to protect them. 