Envisioning a Thoughtful and Caring Child Welfare System

BY SIDNEY GOLDBERG

THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM in the United States is not living up to its name. Rather than nurturing the intellectual potential, capacity for joy, and emotional wellness of foster children, the system too often takes a narrow approach to maintaining only the children’s physical well-being.

I speak from my experience as a caseworker, administrator, and creator of a unique program in child welfare. Twenty-five years of butting up against the constraints of this system have made clear to me that the problem is structural. The occasional caseworker who would seek to nurture a child’s potential interests or passions would usually be thwarted by the limited paradigm around which the system is constructed. Year after year, most caseworkers go through the motions, while heeding the entrenched and narrow mandates set forth by their agencies as the lives of children under their care stagnate.

I believe another system is possible—one that starts from the foundational premise that all people are capable of building satisfying lives through the pursuit of their interests—and that is staffed by workers who treat children and their parents with deep care and respect. To create such a system, we will need to transform the entire structure and pedagogy of social work school, drawing on insights gained through a careful look at the problems with the current system.

Limiting Harm Is Not Enough

Let me start with a story from Chicago that gets at the heart of the problem. The story starts with a group of restless teenage boys, cloistered inside the dreary walls of a group home on the city’s South Side. The group home’s regimented routines served as a constant reminder of the system responsible for the teens’ confinement.

By the time I came to know the teenage residents of this group home, I had worked as a caseworker for twelve years in the Illinois child welfare system. I was painfully familiar with the lack of opportunities to build satisfying and productive lives for children once they were removed from their parents’ homes and placed in substitute care, and I wanted to do something about it. I had been promoted and was now part of a new division, targeted case management, whose primary goal was to work with the private sector to end the perpetual years of foster care in which huge numbers of youth found themselves. It was in the context of this new position that I became involved with this group home.

When one of the boys revealed an interest in studying art, I spoke with the group home’s administration about allowing him to attend classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. What would it take to build a foster care system that not only maintains children’s physical well-being but also nurtures their interests in art, science, sports, music, drama, and more? Art Class by George E. Miller II.

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Chicago. Since they would not allow the boy to travel to the Art Institute, a world-class art school and museum, the Art Institute agreed to come to the group home and provide weekly art classes for the boy and the other residents, all free of charge. What could have been a boon for this institution was greeted instead with steely opposition.

The group home’s response to my persistence in attempting to bring the Art Institute’s classes to their residents was a phone call from the director inviting me to a meeting. I arrived hoping to make a case for the importance of what I was trying to accomplish. But the director and a few other employees, including the staff psychiatrist, would have none of it. They lectured me on how I did not understand what these boys needed, which was surely not art classes, part-time jobs, nor any other such “trivial distractions.” And in any case, the director deemed the boys “not ready” for such things. Needless to say, the Art Institute was not allowed to offer classes at the group home.

A child’s foster care placement is supposed to eliminate the risk of harm that was assumed to have existed in the parents’ home. But another kind of harm, a harm very likely resulting in long-term developmental impairment, has been an issue that has not been addressed by most child welfare agencies. That is the harm that comes from the lack of recognition that foster children need to have access to the same kind of educational, social, and cultural opportunities that children living with their parents have. These opportunities provide the building blocks with which we construct our lives. They allow us to find and develop our interests—evolving interests through which we find direction in our lives.

A System Built on Low Expectations

My decades of work in the child welfare system have shown me that most foster children do not have access to even minimal educational, cultural, and vocational opportunities to nurture their interests.

Bernadette McCarthy, a former Deputy Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, has suggested that the appropriate focus on the child is lost because “perhaps, too much attention is placed on outcomes measured in statistics of reduced intakes and increased permanencies.” McCarthy, a perceptive and conscientious social worker with more than four decades of child welfare experience, started as a case-worker and later headed the statewide clinical and training divisions. Looking back at her experiences, she said, “The normal, daily life of the child is lost in the endless stream of conferences and staffings.”

I found through my discussions with children living in foster care that many had interests they had never mentioned because they considered the possibility of actually getting the chance to pursue them next to zero. Others were not immediately able to articulate their interests. But once they became familiar with a context within which to think about such things, they too began to identify areas of interest.

When I met with prominent Harvard developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan, he said that a majority of the caseworkers and counselors “do not have much expectation of really helping the child,” in part because they constantly see abused children from insecure homes and therefore “do not start with much optimism.” Part of the problem, he explained, is that caseworkers “are not judged on whether they are successful with the child but are judged if they make no errors, and their first and foremost goal is to protect their own dignity.” Kagan added that the caseworkers and counselors believe that the probability of foster children actually having a life full of joy is so low that they just attend to their physical well-being and concentrate on making no mistakes. This pattern leads many children to feel that the caseworkers and counselors do not really care about them and do not have faith in their ability to flourish.

I believe that an essential problem with the current child welfare paradigm is its reliance on a “therapy and treatment” mind-set—the idea among caseworkers that children fundamentally need treatment rather than a full childhood with opportunities to develop their own interests. Administrators’ low expectations of foster children’s abilities and
potential, though, do not completely explain the system’s longtime failure to provide the means for interest development. If caseworkers on the whole hold the mistaken belief that foster children lack the cognitive skills to engage in activities such as art, music, or science, how can they simultaneously hold the belief that these children have the skills to engage in counseling?

The Withholding of Arts Education

I recall the time a thirteen-year-old boy and his caseworker were visiting a state child welfare office on Chicago’s South Side, where we had a piano. This boy sat down at the piano and for several minutes played by ear. He clearly liked playing and possessed musical ability. After speaking with him, I spoke with his caseworker about possible piano instruction. She was strongly against this idea, saying he was a sex offender and “not ready” for piano instruction. I persisted in trying to have him receive piano instruction through DePaul University, the organization that was contracted to teach music for the program I had founded and administered. Even after I met with higher-level personnel at the boy’s group home, he was still not allowed to study piano. I was able to get a clothing store that was located near the boy’s group home to donate a suit, a shirt, and a tie for him, but the caseworker refused to take him to the store. He never received the free clothing. He must not have been deemed ready for clothing.

I had often heard from therapists and other social service personnel that both children and parents were “not ready” to pursue their interests or to receive vocational training. A young girl interested in voice instruction and in singing in a choir, a mother with a substance abuse problem and a desire to start vocational training, a father with an alcohol addiction and no marketable skills, were some of the many people who were deemed “not ready” to engage in the very activities that would help them build positive and productive lives. I wish more people would see the truth of Kagan’s assertion that children are always ready for art and music and that those who say otherwise “do not know what ready means and are using this as an excuse.”

It’s time to remake the child welfare system around a central ethic of care. To do so, we need to renew our sense of hope in all children’s ability to flourish, even amid difficult circumstances. In this Memphis-based mural by Jeff Zimmerman, *A Note of Hope*, children play in a world of love and sorrow, beauty and danger.
Another situation involved ten-year-old twins who “showed great interest and enthusiasm in their work” as students at The School of Ballet Chicago and, according to the school director, were blessed with natural dance ability. Placed initially with their aunt after having been removed from their mother’s custody, the twins were next, unwisely, re-placed from the aunt’s home to a nonrelative foster home. The new foster mother would not take them to ballet classes and said that all they needed was counseling. Even after many months of serious efforts to work with the foster mother; provision of door-to-door transportation; intervention by the state agency’s second in command, who spoke with the executive director of the private agency that was contracted to care for the twins; and a letter emphasizing the classes’ relevance and developmental significance from the former chairman of the Psychology Department of the University of Chicago, the twins were no longer to attend ballet classes.

Why would the administration of both these agencies oppose so very adamantly something so vital for these children? Is it that child welfare personnel do not want intruders to make the regular staff look bad by bringing about positive changes, as Kagan suggests?

Shifting the Structure

The pattern of withholding interest-development opportunities can be broken in several ways. Protocol and policy often change as the result of pressure generated by extensive media coverage in the wake of incidents involving extreme abuse or neglect. Thus, a steady uproar over the denial of these opportunities for foster children, combined with advocacy of interest-development needs, would be one such way. But such an uproar is unlikely because of the enduring acceptance of foster children’s poor adjustment. Stories of children who have been beaten to death or the discovery of children left alone without food attract media attention, but the ongoing denial of educational and cultural experiences to generations of foster children is something which many have grown to see as normal and unavoidable.

Another way in which this change might occur would be for graduate human services programs (social work and applied psychology) to begin to include normal human development in their curricula, with an emphasis on its vital place in the lives of foster children. Were that to occur, at least some caseworkers might become emboldened not only because of their better understanding, but also because of their assurance that the schools would be behind them, to slowly, and of their own initiative, attend to this matter.

I had often spoken with children in foster care about their interests and was successful in obtaining funds, both from the state child welfare agency and from private donations, to cover the cost of their music instruction and instrument rental. One music school to which I sent foster children agreed not to charge for their instruction. For years I had tried in vain to make this happen on a larger scale; my attempts fell on deaf ears. Finally, in early 1995, that changed.

Pathways to Development in Chicago

With the strong support of several higher-level state child welfare administrators at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, I created and ran a program that provided high-quality opportunities for children living in foster care. The program, from the start, consisted of five components, all intended to maximize children’s exposure to a variety of interest areas from which they would be able to choose one or two to pursue over a long period of time. The Pathways to Development Program began with about 300 children and, when I left the department in 2000, enrollment had reached approximately 1,000.

The program centered around weekly classes taught by widely respected organizations. Quality would not be debatable, though I was once told by a department division head that “these children do not need such good quality.” Classes in science, instrumental
music, African dance, drama, visual art, video production, photography, creative writing, and Ki-Aikido were held at various locations on Chicago’s South and West Sides. Teaching organizations included DePaul University, Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago, the Piven Theatre Workshop, and the Chicago Academy of Sciences. Ballet classes taught by Ballet Chicago were held at its downtown studio. In 2000 there were a total of forty-two classes. Some program participants sang in the Chicago Children’s Choir. A summer program at the Chicago Botanic Garden combined science and visual art classes. Transportation to and from classes was provided for many of the students.

Performing arts students’ regular attendance, together with their parents and foster parents, at professional performances was possible because of complimentary tickets that we diligently sought. In particular, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was extremely generous in this regard.

The program held three events each year for participants and others. Meant to inform them about and familiarize them with the purpose of the program and to build a connection to it, every event included professional performances, guest speakers, and an elaborate buffet. At year’s end we held a dinner at the Hyatt Regency, where Pathways students performed and showed their work; in 2000, the late famed bass-baritone William Warfield performed.

Pathways students’ art was displayed at several locations including the State of Illinois Building and at Whole Foods Market.

I made ongoing efforts to inform and educate child welfare personnel, parents, and foster parents about the significance of interest development and about the program. I spoke to groups of foster parents and eventually we had an instructional video about Pathways.

I attempted to recruit volunteers for the Pathways mentorship project but was only minimally successful in doing so because of the difficulty in finding people willing to do this. The idea was to connect Pathways students with adults who, through a wide range of activities within the context of a developing relationship, would help them learn more about their current interests and facilitate exploration into additional interest areas.

The purpose of the Pathways to Development Program has been to provide a means for foster children to identify at least one interest area to pursue over a long period of time and that would allow them to forge direction and purpose in their lives. Pathways’ relatively small enrollment allows a child with a particular talent to receive encouragement.

In 1988, the Illinois ACLU filed a class-action lawsuit against the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. As the lead attorney on this lawsuit, BH v. DCFS, Ben Wolf represents all foster children in that state. The suit addresses broad systemic problems, including extremely large caseload size, the lingering and lengthy time children spent in foster care, and the poor quality or lack of “health care, education and other essential services” these children received while there. The BH consent decree, originally entered in 1991, has led to significant positive changes in these areas and continues, under Wolf’s oversight, to be a driving force for additional improvements.

Wolf told me that although the BH consent decree has not led, until now, to any specific policy changes regarding foster children’s access to the opportunities I have been discussing, he credits, in part, their talks with the department in having created a favorable environment for The Pathways to Development Program. Wolf says that they “have consistently endorsed a focus on interest development” and that Pathways’ “effect on our clients was remarkable.” He says that “Children not only told us how much they looked forward to [the program’s offerings], they often seemed transformed by the opportunity to focus on something interesting and fun. Pathways gave many of them, for the first time in a long time, something to organize their hopes around, something to live for.”

What’s more, as an eleven-year-old Pathways visual art student happily related, “You find out things about yourself that you never thought you could do, until you do it.”
Expanding to New York City

In 2000, after having moved to New York City, I began efforts to establish the program there. With a $25,000 grant from the Child Welfare Fund the New York Pathways to Development Program got under way. The program was initially housed at the New York City Public Advocate's office and in 2002 began offering music and dance classes in Central Harlem.

A year later the program had expanded to Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx with classes in science, instrumental music, dance, New York City history, and healthful cooking. The Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, the New York Hall of Science, and the Natural Gourmet Cookery School were among the teaching organizations. The New York City Administration for Children's Services, with whom I had been collaborating, was interested in Pathways and wanted it housed at their downtown headquarters.

Toward the end of the second year, a foundation we had approached offered, with the city agency's approval, a large grant. But in order to increase the number of participants, the program would be unable to continue to contract with the teaching organizations already working with Pathways. The foundation's proposal, or more to the point, their ultimatum, was that future classes would be taught by college students, who could be paid a fraction of what we were paying the teaching organizations.

That would have amounted to nothing more than a farcical mishmash with just the opposite outcome from the one we sought. But as an Illinois division head had once admonished me, “These children do not need such good quality.”

Once it became apparent that there would be no way of changing this bureaucratic mind-set, I had no choice but to close down the New York program.

Pathways Chicago has also come to an end, a victim of Illinois's budget woes. This has not prevented Ballet Chicago from continuing to provide instruction to thirty-four of the fifty Pathways dance students. Run by its founder, Daniel Duell, a former longtime New York City Ballet principal dancer, and Patricia Blair, who danced with the Eglevsky Ballet, Ballet Chicago is now also paying for the children's ballet shoes and clothes. Blair told me that some of these students have studied with Ballet Chicago for ten years and are quite talented, and that all of them love dancing. She said many of the children have shown positive social changes, improved schoolwork, and better all-around focus. Ballet Chicago has begun to seek foundation funding to replace what it previously received from the state.

I recently spoke with an eleven-year-old girl who lives in foster care and has been a Ballet Chicago student for eight years. She told me that her life would not be complete were she not able to study ballet; being a ballerina has been her dream since age four. She said she has been learning to express herself and show how she feels through the ballet technique of George Balanchine, and that ballet study has taught her to keep on trying until she succeeds. For example, she told me that sometimes when she is having difficulties with her regular studies, she reminds herself how well she dances in order to keep going without giving up.

Another student, a ten-year-old who lives in foster care and has studied at Ballet Chicago for eight years, told me she is looking forward to advancing to the next level and receiving her point shoes—a confirmation of her hard work. She has performed in several performances of Ballet Chicago's Nutcracker and said she likes to make audiences happy.

Bringing Care into the Child Welfare System

The child welfare system is certainly no stranger to change—the appearance of change, that is. From the self-professed experts peddling their latest best practice miracle, to the changing of the guard at city and state agencies in response to media attention following a recent brouhaha, promises of change and reform abound. But this window dressing obscures the absence of real change, while keeping in place the current system, which
many value not for its transformative potential but for the ways in which it’s a cash cow. Making small changes that maintain the status quo protects the many high-level positions and big-dollar contracts. At the same time, the more sincere crowd can feel good in the mistaken belief that efforts to correct bad practice are under way. Real change would require a fundamental transformation in the way child welfare system employees think about and intervene with families. Such change can be achieved when child welfare personnel “care about and have faith in these children’s (and their parents’) ability to improve the quality of their lives,” as Jerome Kagan has said. The bottom line is that all services—all interventions—must evolve from a caring mind-set.

We are accustomed to hearing the idea of care bandied about by those who claim to care while behaving in an uncaring manner. So, what does it mean to care and what should be expected of the child welfare system and its personnel?

*The American Heritage Dictionary*, fifth edition, defines caring as “a concerned or troubled state of mind, as that arising from serious responsibility” and “close attention, as in doing something well or avoiding harm.” These simple definitions express the essence of what we need in order to achieve substantial change in the child welfare system.

The knowledge and belief that child welfare intervention constitutes a “serious responsibility” toward the involved families means that close and critical attention to what is really going on and to what is really and truly the best means of intervention is a must. In that way parents and children will receive the help they need to truly improve their situation and will certainly not be the recipient of misguided and superficial services that usually lead to further harm. And the expectation is that child welfare personnel will maintain a “concerned or troubled state of mind” so that ongoing contemplation, weighing and evaluating the particulars, will maximize appropriate assistance and minimize harm.

In doing so, a person will ask herself if what is or is not being provided is something that she would accept for her own family, her own children. These are not techniques or modes of intervention, but rather constitute the framework within which everything occurs.

Though the expectation is that people working in the child welfare system will be inclined toward a desire to help others, thereby making the caring mind-set an imperative, as inhabitants of this planet we all also had better subscribe to the idea that at times this philosophy translates into caring action.

This mind-set highly values empathic understanding of others’ situations, places great importance on opportunities for building a satisfying life through the desire for and the love of life-long learning, the exploration, pursuit, and development of interests, and the conviction that kindness and caring for one another are basic to the way we want to live. People newly arriving for work in the child welfare system with this mind-set will strive to do the right thing.

**Policy Proposals**

What needs to be done to achieve real and substantial change?

First, we need to implement an education system that, starting in early elementary school through college, focuses on the value of treating one another in a deeply caring way. This is certainly a difficult and uphill battle since, as Andrew Delbanco points out, most colleges are “unwilling even to tell [students] what’s worth thinking about.”

Second, colleges or community organizations should offer a two-year program exploring what it would mean to work and act out of an ethic of care. Included in the curriculum should be discussions about good parenting skills. This program should be made available to everyone, including those whose formal schooling has ended or who have never attended college.

Third, all child welfare personnel should participate in the above two-year program.

We can no longer tolerate a child welfare system that *does things to people*. It is not
only that simplistic and very wrong interpretations of parents' behavior must stop. This very mind-set, this very approach, to dealing with families as if they were somehow lesser individuals just waiting to receive their diagnoses is just not the way to help parents and children.

It takes knowledge, flexible and critical thinking, and sufficient time to work correctly with families. Why not hear from clients, present and former, about what their experience has been like and their ideas for change?

All families must be treated in the same manner as caseworkers themselves would wish to be treated. We also must differentiate between the majority of families in which no problems or less serious problems exist, and the rarer situations in which evidence points to the necessity of another kind of intervention, though still within a humane and caring context.

Child welfare has long been seen as the purview of social work. At first blush some may dismiss the idea that psychologists with doctorates in developmental psychology, for example, could or should make home visits and work with families. But, when we approach our work from a caring and noncompetitive perspective, this seems like a positive development.

Some state child welfare agencies have recently made the master of social work (MSW) degree a requirement for direct service positions. But this often only exacerbates the already mistaken and disrespectful approach child welfare clients are forced to endure. Many MSW holders view their clients as nothing more than a collection of symptoms to which they must apply interpretation and treatment. Making matters worse, most of these MSW social workers have not received training in behavioral science, do not keep up with research, nor do they have actual counseling skills. The MSW has often meant the semblance of additional authority and provided the rationale to treat families in a disdainful manner.

It is the absence of caring, as it has been described above, that has been responsible for the long-standing pattern of ineffective interventions, removal of children from their parents’ custody with insufficient reason, and the absence of the necessary opportunities for interest exploration and development for children living in foster care. Instead of spending time getting to know family members and trying to understand what has been going on, trying to determine if in fact child maltreatment does exist and if so, gaining an understanding of its true nature, what has usually occurred is that the family has been pathologized. Again, the addition of the MSW usually has only reinforced this approach.

The Child Is Not the Problem

A University of Chicago study entitled “Underperforming Schools and the Education of Vulnerable Children and Youth” discusses behavioral problems of maltreated and foster children. The study, which was based on interviews conducted by Chapin Hall, includes this assertion:

Social service professionals shared the view that some of the children with whom they work react to their life circumstances or changes in these circumstances with anger, aggressiveness, shame, or depression. These feelings lead to school-related problems such as skipping class, absenteeism, and acting out.

Here we witness the traditional and pervasive attitude I have been speaking about. These social service workers believe that children are presenting problems at school not because of anything related to school itself but rather because of their reaction to what has happened to them in the past. This mind-set does not rely on evidence and fails to consider more than one factor. In fact, Kagan points out that there is not one cause of this sort of behavior. First, he asserts, many of the children who tend to act out
have no motivation to act civilly because of a failure of family socialization. Second, they see that they are less competent than many others and are angry and anxious. Third, they do not see the reason for school. Finally, they recognize that they are members of a social category that is viewed as “undesirable” . . . if school provided some activity that was gratifying to them, they would behave better.

The child welfare worker must acknowledge and commit to the idea that the nature of his work entails a serious responsibility to proceed with the utmost care and caution so that only the most appropriate intervention will occur. While he should have an ever-expanding knowledge and understanding of behavioral science, he should not begin with the assumption that any pathology exists. An understanding that there may be no problem at all, that the problem may be tied to parental insufficient knowledge of one kind or another, or that the problem may involve one or a combination of factors, existential or economic, for example, is imperative. One must interact with families with the compassion necessary to provide help when help is genuinely needed and to refrain from doing so when it is not.

**Changing the Certification and Training Process**

It is no secret that many social work students view the MSW as a fast track to setting up shop as a therapist. Once they receive their degree and a license or two, they’re ready to go. Usually, though, unless they have received additional training, they lack the most basic counseling skills. Some find jobs in child welfare to bide their time until they become licensed. For many, social work school, as long as they focus on passing their exams, is merely another way to make a fast buck. In place of the current exams, emphasis should be placed on students’ demonstration of the capacity for altruistic caring, the ability to interact respectfully with clients, and a steadfast commitment to lifelong study of research-based and other related literature.

A new approach to acceptance to social work school should include a full semester of work during which potential students learn about the merits of dedicated and altruistic helping within a caring framework. Before their acceptance to the degree program they must demonstrate an understanding, sensitivity and commitment through discussion and actual hands-on work.

Not only must schools of social work adjust their curricula to focus on this caring approach, but they must show that they mean business by holding students accountable to this mind-set. Only students who have shown both the theoretical understanding and, even more important, the ability to interact with families in a caring mode, should be awarded an MSW.

Perhaps a strong argument can be made that it is not the pool of people with MSWs, psychologists, or even holders of any college degree at all from which we will find those best qualified for child welfare work. Perhaps we should consider an entirely different approach.

**Freestanding Child Welfare Schools**

To achieve real change the establishment of freestanding child welfare schools may be the way to go. These schools should be open to anyone, including former child welfare clients, who can commit to the caring approach and to ongoing critical study and contemplation of relevant fields of thought.

Their curriculum must include developmental psychology; an ongoing review of neuroscience; in-depth and ongoing discussion of what constitutes child maltreatment and what does not; modes of intervention; social, educational, economic, and existential factors in actual maltreatment and in situations that often are mistaken for maltreatment; cognitive behavioral/Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy methods; the ethics of child welfare work; and practical training in the development and use of empathic understanding. Students must learn that techniques are important but are not to be parroted or used mechanically,
out of context, and without reason. Rather, a down-to-earth, sincere, warm, and honest manner is essential. Students must become committed to the ideal that the less intrusion, the better.

Child welfare personnel and state, city, and federal elected officials must be invited to discussions with students and faculty, and great effort must be undertaken to educate these visitors about the caring approach. Various forms of political action by students, faculty, and parents must be employed to gain the necessary support for the acceptance of the caring approach by government and private agencies. While waiting for larger, systemic change, students might seek employment as child welfare workers and independently proceed according to their training.

Transforming the child welfare system and our broader society in these ways will require backbone, persistence, and courage, but I believe it is possible. Moving forward with conviction will ease the process. It’s time to see how remaking the child welfare system—and all our institutions—around a central ethic of care can transform our society.