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ABSTRACT

Empowerment as originally used referred to a political process in which systemic power was analyzed and redistributed. To translate concepts of empowerment into foster care terminology, an indifferent society fails to support families at risk, then increases their powerlessness by removing their children. Foster children are primarily children of the poor, who are often treated "poorly" by the system mandated to protect and nurture them. The reason that the concept of empowerment is a political one is that societal injustice demands political and economic action. Before thinking about empowerment for young people, the specific ways in which foster children and youth are disempowered must be considered. Foster children could be asked what they want in case review. It is not surprising that youth at age 17 or 18 cannot make good choices if they have not been allowed choices at age 10. It may be that in foster care research, researchers have been asking the wrong questions; foster children themselves should have input. Before anything else, it must be assured that children and youth in foster care are not harmed. Secondly, a supportive environment must be established. Empowerment is a political process aimed at analyzing and acquiring uses of influence. Ultimately the children in foster care must speak for themselves. (ABL)

EMPOWERING CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE: A FORUM

presented by

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at

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We are gathered in this forum to consider the empowerment of youth in foster care, more specifically whether social workers, administrators and foster parents can work collectively to liberate the growth potential of all children and youth in care; or whether we will be unwitting or willing participants in the societal and system forces which oppress and diminish the young people for whom we care. We will examine how we as professional caregivers may either derail the progress of youth, or planfully step aside, drop the reins, and offer them the opportunity for self expression, self fulfillment and self governance.

We have heard inspiring testimony from Brian Raychaba and Carleen Joseph of the Canadian Youth in Care Network. The conviction with which they speak is the function of the first stages of the empowerment process on which young people in care, world wide, have embarked.

First, what is empowerment? This term has been widely used, and even more widely misused in professional literature. It has been misused when applied to training, therapy and self help groups which promote personal fulfillment goals such as competence or assertiveness. **Empowerment** as originally used referred to a political process in which systemic power was analyzed and redistributed. According to Marguerite Smith, "Empowerment is a collaborative engagement with people whose lives have been diminished by powerful forces or groups in society in order to gain the political sophistication they need to change their landscape. In systems terms, the underlying assumption is that the focus of the problem is not with those who are oppressed, but rather is 'out there' in the environment" (Smith, 1983, p.1). Similarly Germain asserts that "victims of poverty are caught up in a cycle of powerlessness . . . it entraps the victims and sets in motion a malignant process, for the failure of the larger system to provide necessary support creates powerlessness in communities" (Germain, 1979, p. 8).

To translate those concepts into specific foster care terminology, an indifferent society fails to support families at risk, then increases their powerlessness by removing their children. Those who work with the children, and for the children, whether workers, foster parents, administrators, judges, teachers or therapists are also diminished by the lack of resources. This negative landscape of the system, diminishing dollars to meet ever increasing human needs, renders the carers powerless and inadequate. We are all caught on a treadmill, running faster and faster trying to stay in the same place. Rein, Nutt and Weiss state, "The modern foster care system appears almost to have been deliberately designed to assign a lower level of resources to the poor, who are trapped into its care" (Rein, Nutt and Weiss, 1974, p. 48).

So foster children are primarily children of the poor, who are often treated "poorly" by the system mandated to protect and nurture them. The reason that the concept of empowerment is a political one, is that societal injustice demands political and economic action.

Power is defined by Pinderhughes as "The capacity to influence the forces which affects one's life for one's own benefit" (Pinderhughes, 1983, p. 331). If we are to think seriously and productively about empowering young people in care, we must examine the ways in which they may be assisted to influence the forces which control their lives. This does not mean advocating **for** the child, unless he is too young to speak for himself. Rather, it means bracing ourselves for a radical shift in our manner of 'helping.' Rather than doing **for** them, we must instead give them the skills, then quietly step aside so that they can gain power for themselves. Perhaps we are standing behind, supporting them. Perhaps we offer technical assistance or consultation when asked. But to truly empower, we must stop making the decisions and plans for youth. Instead we can help strengthen them to demand and acquire what is their right -- equal resources; opportunity equal to that of other children not in care; just laws and choice to determine their lives.

Ethnic minority, especially Black and Native American children are still being needlessly removed from their homes because of (white) workers failure to recognize differences in parenting (Stehno, 1982). For example, the racial distribution in foster care in the USA indicates that minority children are over represented in child welfare systems. Currently, of approximately 275,000 children in care, thirty-two percent are Black, eight percent Hispanic, two per cent Native American, one percent Asian, one per cent unknown and two per cent other (Children's Bureau, 1989). In other words, nearly half the children in care in the US are non-white. When I visited in New Zealand a few years ago, Maori children were even more over represented in out of home placement, even though the Maori people comprised only about fifteen per cent of the entire population. In other words, the disempowerment of children in the child welfare system rather vividly reflects conditions of injustice and oppression in the larger society. If you are interested in learning about a true empowerment process, visit the forum and workshops given by the New Zealand delegation, Maori and Pakeha (white).

The best example of empowerment, and by far the most exciting part of this conference, is something we will not experience directly. It is the Youth Leadership Conference running concurrently with our adult program. In this process children and youth in care from around the world are meeting with powerful leaders, all former foster children who have become the authors of their own futures. Two of these leaders, Brian and Carleen, you have met at the plenary session. Other leaders such as Alison Polington, Maureen McDonald, Denise Spence, Rory Gleeson and Alex Saddington you can meet as moderators of the youth forums. Soon we will examine their accomplishments.

Before we can proceed with thinking about empowerment for young people, we must be very honest with ourselves and each other about the specific ways in which "the system," and poor practice, and human error disempowers and even brutalizes children and youth.

It has become a common place assumption, perhaps even a cliche, to talk about the sense of powerlessness of children in care. Many experts and researchers identify feelings of powerlessness, low self esteem (Duffin, 1985; Gil and Bogard, 1972; Hester, 1986) and feelings of being 'different' and set apart (Festinger, 1983).

All too often though, we regard these feelings as the result of parental maltreatment, rather than the result of negligence of the foster care system (McFadden, 1989). I would like to do a research project which compares feelings of self esteem and power in abused children, half of whom had stable foster placements in nurturing homes, and half of whom had multiple placements and indifferent or non existent services. I suspect that we would find that many of the feelings of powerlessness and low self esteem are associated with disempowerment in the system, rather than with only parental maltreatment.

Which brings us to the subject of "treatment." To many overburdened professionals, whether foster parents or social workers, therapy is viewed as a panacea which will help manage the child's behavior, dispel his anger, heal his wounds and turn him into an "easier" child. How disappointed we often are with therapists when they don't perform miracles with damaged kids. Is it the fault of the therapist? Or are we to blame for expecting therapy to do what it was never designed for.

Most therapists are unfamiliar with principles of empowerment, and work in ways which do not create an empowering climate. "Professionals can only do what they know -- treat. By taking a treatment approach they reinforce the societal view that there are two separate groups of children. The damage done by poor care of foster children operates to confirm this prediction. Professionals ,and the adjustment difficulties foster care children experience, and the poor system of provision they are enforced in, complement each other." (In other words,) "the systems makes both the children and their families sick" (Rein, Nutt and Weiss, 1974, p. 49). Glenn Hester, a former foster child, testified dramatically on this point at a hearing. "When I told of being bumped from foster homes to orphanages and institutions -- in the process being severely abused -- a few eyes lifted in the hearing room. I told how my moving from place to place destroyed my trust to the point that at age nine, a psychiatrist had diagnosed me as a child who neither loved nor trusted anyone. I told of my mental disorders and my experiences as an institutionalized mental patient. I feel I was suffering from mental illness caused by my ill fated experiences as a foster child" (Hester, p. 181).

Sometimes treatment robs children of their power. They do not choose to go. In sexual abuse situations they sometimes feel **forced** to reveal painful and shameful memories. Some children describe the process of disclosure and reiteration of events in therapy in terms of being victimized over and over again, as they reexperience earlier traumatic events. Whether this process is ultimately therapeutic for the child is somewhat irrelevant. The point is that it is one more 'helping'

procedure which diminishes the child's sense of power and self control.

In Brian Raychaba's report on a survey of sexually abused youth in placement he asserts, "We have to be party to our own healing . . . the treatment system is not child or young person focused. One individual felt that she needed a sense of empowerment. She needed a choice regarding who she would see and talk to. Timing is also important; a child or young person needs their own time and doesn't appreciate being pushed too fast and too far" (Raychaba, 1989, p. 4). According to Raychaba, young people may feel that treatment can over focus on the victim. "Another young woman told us how on her entrance into care it was her and not the abuser who was the focus of treatment. 'I was the problem, not the abuser'" (Raychaba, 1989, p. 4).

What an outrage that our adult ways of helping do not feel helpful to youth. What can youth accept as "treatment"? According to Raychaba they want **self help** groups. "A number disclosed for the first time in their own self help meeting" (Raychaba, 1989, p. 4).

If treatment, which we want to believe is helpful, feels disempowering to some young people, what of our other helpful interventions?

Children in a recent forum for foster children confided that they didn't like visits by the licensing workers, because it made the foster families nervous, and underscored their feelings of being different (Rice and McFadden, 1988). Now I am not suggesting for one minute that we discontinue licensing. It is the front line of child protection in out of home placement. But perhaps we can ask the children what might make them more comfortable, and explain to them why it is necessary, and that it is an expression of the agency's concern and caring.

Adolescents particularly feel disempowered by the existence of case records. They often fear that the record contains derogatory information about them and their families. They are very concerned about confidentiality and who has access to what information about them. One task of our Independent Living Project's final module for youth is for the youth to sit down with the worker and go over the history in the case record (McFadden, 1988). We need to demystify case records for youth. How would you feel if you knew that I had a "secret" file on you which you could not see?

Those of us who have worked to implement case review systems are proud of this tool of permanence planning designed to safeguard rights and prevent the dismal prospect of foster care drift. But how many of us have actually asked children what **they** want? The Children's Legal Center of London had the National Association of Young People in Care, NAYPIC, survey children in care. Some want for reasons of comfort or convenience, to have reviews held in the foster home. But mostly children want a voice! They want to attend a review and be on the

agenda. In the words of one child, "We never know what's going on or being said about us until we find out so quietly, behind your back, decisions are being made about your life. They might find a home for you to live in, but they have no right to decide about your future." Reasons given by agencies for excluding children included age, maturity, sensitive information and the need for private discussion between professionals (Children's Legal Center, 1984, p. 32).

When we work with young people in care, assisting in their preparation for emancipation at ages 17 or 18, we often find that they have difficulty in making decisions, setting goals or making good choices in personal relationships or use of leisure time. We should not be surprised, as this is the natural consequence of our system. If they have been denied choices at age 10, and have never participated in planning their lives as adolescents, how in God's name can we expect them to set goals at age 18 and function independently at age 19? By denying them genuine decision making earlier, have we not set them up to fail when they leave care?

Disempowerment is a more painful issue than the mere denial of choice. For many children in systems around the world, disempowerment is the license for adults to exploit, scapegoat or actively hurt them. In my research on the abuse of foster children by caregivers while in the system, I found that while some children are vulnerable because of personal characteristics, the overwhelming source of foster care abuse is slipshod agency practice such as failure to monitor foster homes, failure to train foster parents, failure to match the child with the family, inadequate home studies, and most serious of all, the chronic overloading of the "good homes" until their strengths dissolve under stress (McFadden, 1984). For the child who is victimized by the system designed to protect, we are speaking of extreme disempowerment carried to the point of destruction. The most poignant dedication of any book I have ever read is contained in Glenn Hester's Child of Rage. It says "For all the children who have been killed or abused in foster care or institutions."

Jean Dietz writes of "Foster Homes That Are Not Too Loving" in The Childrens Rights Movement. She tells the story of Larry, placed at age three, who lived in five foster homes, two institutions, two private schools before age eighteen. His father was dead, his mother in a mental hospital. Larry had close to 100 social workers but only one made a difference, Joe Leavy. In Larry's words, he was the only one who asked me what I wanted, and where I wanted to go. The state's duty was to provide human care to Larry, but he claims to have been half starved at times, that he has been beaten by foster mothers and is blind in one eye from a condition which could have been corrected had medical attention been provided. Larry's advice to social workers is simple. "If the children are old enough to talk, please ask them what they think. Listen. They will tell you the truth" (Dietz, 1977, p. 57).

At a recent youth meeting in Oregon, the conveners concluded that "the worst thing, or at least

the most frequent complaint we heard about foster care is that caseworkers and foster parents don't listen . . . They don't take us seriously "(Baries and Del Nera, p. 9).

When Brian Raychaba met with a group of young people in care who had been sexually abused earlier, he listened carefully and discovered that eleven of the twenty-one young people had been sexually abused while in care. For one young woman, her first experience of sexual abuse was in foster care.

I state this carefully and clearly. Not all foster homes maltreat children. Many foster parents do a heroically fine job under the worst of circumstances. That is not the point.

I was once asked, under oath as an expert witness in a foster care abuse case, what is an acceptable or tolerable abuse rate for children in their foster homes. The only decent and human answer is a zero per cent rate. The state can not be in the business of taking children from their parents if we can't promise them basic safety.

Actual or feared abuse haunts some children in care, and is destructively disempowering (Hester, 1981; Bush, 1982; Jones and Moses, 1984; Barnett, 1985; McFadden, 1984).

How can we build a basis for healthy physical and emotional well being when children fear for their very safety.

Let me return to Brian Raychaba's survey. I will admit it is a small sample, and probably did not follow a rigorous methodology. However it is in violent contrast to US research, a juxtaposition of incongruent opposites, when compared with many well know studies. Fanshel and Shinn (1978), Jones and Moses (1984), Maluccio and Fein (1985) and Festinger (1983) have never unearthed such horrifying data, as that which Brian found in his self help methodology.

Could it be that young people lied to Brian? I doubt it. Could it be that Canadians are more sexually abusive than citizens of the US? I doubt it.

Or could there be a remote possibility that American researchers have been asking the wrong questions? Could it be that youth in care are more likely to open up to Brian Raychaba than to a professor? What are we to conclude about all those studies which show that children do fairly well in foster care? If there are researchers in this room, I challenge you to think of ways in which we can generate the same candor in youth as groups like the National Association of Young People in Care, or the National Youth in Care Network. Any study of children in care should have a youth advisory board, and perhaps use youth as interviewers. One researcher who stands strongly for input from foster children is Malcolm Bush who writes "If clients (children) are to be involved in

making professional services more responsible to their needs, the way in which they participate in decision making must meet certain conditions. There must be options to choose from and the clients must know that options exist" (Bush and Gordon, 1982, p. 313).

Now we get to the heart of the topic, Empowering Youth in Foster care, as we move away from a past which has perpetuated pathology to a future which promotes competence.

First, before we do anything else, we must make sure that children and youth are safe from abuse by their caregivers. Before anything, first do no harm.

Second, whether we practice with tots or adolescents, we must do some things differently:

- •See them frequently
- •Build a relationship
- •Listen
- •Answer questions
- •Include them in planning
- •Teach them to make choices
- •Stop forcing therapy, testing, vocational plans or placement changes on children who don't understand, aren't ready or don't want this "help"
- •Don't talk behind their backs, or violate confidentiality
- •Don't make them feel different or awkward

Empowerment requires an environment that is supportive. Do start seeing the youth in a more positive light. Don't always overprotect them from their mistakes -- they will never learn without experiencing natural consequences of their behavior. Do help them to take a risk. Stand with them or behind them but let them do it for themselves. Good practice empowers children and makes the system work better for them. Malcolm Bush's (1982) research of children in care indicated that simple measures such as pre-placement visits, or being allowed to help choose their placement, or a policy of informed choice could reduce the number of placements that break down.

But empowerment of children and youth in care is not nearly so simple as changing our practice techniques to allow for more client input, or adapting our research methodologies to ask better questions.

At the bottom line, empowerment is a political process aimed at analyzing and acquiring uses of influence. For adults in foster care, IFCO is empowering. But our aim must not be simply to advocate on behalf of youth in care. Ultimately we must encourage and support and step aside to ensure that young people speak for themselves.

At the young peoples planning meeting held on campus in April, initially both youth and social workers were sitting around the conference table. As discussion began, I noticed that adults had many ideas, and were talking more than the youth. A simple ground rule changed the meeting to an empowerment model. Adults were asked to move from the table, and sit in an outer circle behind the youth. We would be there for support, but our role was only to provide technical assistance while the youth conducted their own planning.

How many adults here are honestly willing to relinquish some degree of control, to give up our right to be heard, so that youth can find the space in which to learn the uses of power? It is a process which we may need to build up to gradually. It is a process in which youth need to master a series of small steps in preparation for bigger steps, and leaps.

One such process is being implemented in Michigan in a planned sequence of preparation of youth for independent living. A team is formed, with the youth at the center. The foster parent, who has been trained to do so, assists the youth in organizing self help skills, making solid choices and learning from consequences; working toward employability, and planning for Leaving Home Again. The worker takes an active role in the preparation process. This includes helping the youth to assess strengths and needs, providing history about placement, and facilitating goal setting. Another part of the team is the Group Leader, who brings young people together to share their common concerns about Independent Living, and to practice mastering skills together. The youth monitors his own progress through use of manuals called GOALS, Going Out and Living Successfully.

In addition to this training process which can take place over several years, the Michigan Department of Social Services also sponsors Youth Conferences and a Youth Forum for 17-year olds. At five regional youth conferences last year, young people came together for several days in a hotel to attend workshops, get to know each other, and exchange ideas. At each of these conferences, a panel of youth representatives generated ideas on how to improve the foster care system. Selected panelists then attended the state level forum at which they presented their recommendations to legislators, DSS officials, representatives of the courts and the schools (Brown, 1989). Michigan youth have formed a group, TEAM, Incorporated, to begin planning and delivery service to emancipating teens. TEAM, Inc. members are at the IFCO Youth Leadership Conference to join forces with other youth leaders from the US and abroad.

They will meet with Alison Pollington and Alex Saddington from NAYPIC in England. NAYPIC has held speakouts for children in care, presented workshops to adults at the last IFCO conference, advocated for children maltreated in their foster homes, conducted surveys for the Childrens Legal Center and collaborated a popular magazine, Who Cares for and about young people in care. Members of NAYPIC have taken an active role in working for the passage of

foster care legislation in Parliament. As NAYPIC affects the political processes in the United Kingdom, it is pursuing empowerment in the truest sense of the word, that of analyzing and changing power.

In Canada, the National Youth In Care Network is pursuing power in much the same vein, but using slightly different methods. Brian Raychaba's book To Be On Our Own was used to describe the special needs of youth leaving the child welfare system. A similar report, this time on juvenile prostitution was used to influence legislation in the Canadian Parliament. Members of the National Youth in Care Network have met with youth across Canada to begin the empowerment process (McDonald, 1' 39). The latest preliminary data on sexual abuse in foster care are the direct outgrowth of such an empowerment meeting.

With the leadership of Alison Pollington of the International Network, young people in care will link hands and join forces, across the seas, across national boundaries. United, they may prod us in directions not yet imagined. How will we respond to their empowerment.

I will close with a challenge from Alex Saddington of London NAYPIC. "I believe that what social workers demand and expect for their own children should be what they demand and expect for children in care" (Saddington, p. 16).

Are the foster care systems of the world good enough for our own children? Aren't these children and young people really "our own"? Are we willing to let them begin to lead while we stand behind them with support, as we do with our own adolescents and young adults? It is time to stop the forces which disease children and youth in care. It is time to listen carefully, and then allow them to move ahead to the goal of empowerment.

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