

The Collective Parenting of Our Most Vulnerable Children

California and other states are developing programs to ensure that at-risk youngsters get the collaborative care required for immediate and long-term success.

By Miriam Aroni Krinsky

PARENTING IN A FAST-PACED SOCIETY IS ANYTHING but easy. We juggle the many pieces of our children's daily lives and struggle to address the often complex challenges our children face. We don't just take responsibility for one aspect of our children's multifaceted lives and pass the other issues off to someone else. We collect and assess all the critical information, and coordinate with everyone significant to our children's success.

If we acknowledge that this type of oversight is essential to the well-being of our own children, we must ask ourselves what happens to the children we collectively "parent"—the thousands of youth in foster care who often have no one to shepherd them through the confusing and sometimes contradictory systems that have a crucial impact on their lives. Too often the answer is that without someone to coordinate all these disparate elements, our most vulnerable children suffer in ways both large and small.

Our child welfare, court and government systems are separated into silos that often tend to children's needs one issue and one piece at a time. Rather than the centralized oversight most parents bring every day to the crises and challenges unfolding in their children's lives, our disjointed governmental parenting of foster youth results in a failure to share critical information and a lack of coordinated, thoughtful decision-making. We are too willing to accept the dismal outcomes that often flow from the inherent compartmentalization of the various government entities "raising" these children—physical and mental health and emotional needs left unattended; poor educational attainment; and adult lives of unemployment, homelessness and despair for far too many former foster youth.

The National Commission on Children observed in 1991: "If the nation had deliberately designed a system that would frustrate the professionals who staff it, anger the public who finance it and abandon the children who depend on it, it could not have done a better job than the present child-welfare system." Not enough has changed since that harsh assessment issued.

Even with advances in some arenas, we still see a lack of cohesive and collaborative parenting—and no collective sense of accountability—for the individual child. As a result, far too many problems are left unidentified or unresolved. The various arms of the government responsible for raising these youth operate in isolation—no one takes overall responsibility for ensuring the well-being and success of foster children.

The results of our shortcomings are visible daily. For example:

- A youth gets a traffic ticket, but there is no one to arrange transportation to her court appearance, so a warrant is issued for her arrest.
- A health or emotional problem affects a child's ability to perform in school, but no one advises the teacher and the child enters a downward spiral of educational failure.
- Social workers are unaware of a child's connection to a prior neighbor, mentor or teacher, and fail to nurture a relationship that might have provided a lifelong anchor for the child.

The only way to effect significant change is for all the systems and entities involved to come together at a leadership level and demand a more thoughtful, collaborative and productive way of doing business. Some states are modeling this new way of tending to the needs of our most vulnerable children.

Collaboration Is Critical

In Arizona, a ground breaking Children’s Cabinet ensures high-level leadership, visibility and support for addressing the needs of that state’s foster youth. The Children’s Cabinet was created with the express purpose of coordinating all government agencies that provide services to abused and neglected children. Similarly, in Minnesota the Children’s Justice Initiative bridges the gap between judicial and child welfare leaders, breaks down long-standing communication barriers and creates a vehicle for collaborative decision-making on behalf of children.

More recently, California created a Child Welfare Council that includes leaders from all branches of government, as well as child welfare, health, education and mental health leaders, foster youth and key stakeholders. The Council is co-led by the Secretary of Health and Human Services and a state Supreme Court Justice and meets quarterly to identify and resolve issues that inhibit improved outcomes for children in care. This new body is crafting an ambitious agenda of reform with the engagement of all branches of government and has direct reporting responsibility to the governor, Legislature and state Judicial Council.

We don’t parcel out the care of our own children—neither should we unduly segment the oversight and care we extend to the abused and neglected youth we as a whole undertake to raise. California’s new approach is a constructive step forward in creating a family “dinner table” where all key participants can come together and tend to the needs of our collective children.

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