

DON'T MAKE KIDS WAIT

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Waiting is painful, even torturous for adults. Ignorant of the outcome, one is likely to imagine every possibility, and especially the worst.

The tragedy at the Utah coal mine is still fresh in our minds. Remember the waiting, the pain of not knowing, even for those of us who were only spectators.

Imagine you are awaiting the results of your breast exam or prostate test. You call daily but they still don't have the results. What are you thinking, feeling?

Pretend you are working as a temp, hoping to get a full-time job so you can have access to benefits and support your family. The months slip by. You are doing a good job but are afraid even to inquire whether they plan to hire you. Nothing is happening. You are worried but try not to let it show.

Imagine that you are camping deep in the woods and the ranger comes to tell you they have an emergency phone call. He does not know what it is about, only that you need to come at once. The ranger station is 45 minutes away. What is going through your mind as you are driving to take the call?

Waiting is much worse for a child living in a home with no permanent commitment. Adults have other life experiences, memories of times when patience was rewarded with good results. Adults learn to hang in there on the big issues and "not to sweat the small stuff."

The foster child's whole life and future are on the line. He will not understand all the bureaucratic reasons we may provide to explain the delay. He is much more likely to interpret a lack of results as a lack of love. "If you loved me, you would promise to be there forever for me."

Children view the world differently. In some primitive cultures, when meeting a person for the first time, the pair will circle around. One will get behind the other in order to see what their "partner" sees, to see the world from the other person's point of view before saying hello. We need to do the same thing with our children in waiting, to try very hard to see the world the way they do.

Several years ago I received a phone call from a lady in a nearby Indiana city who said she wanted to volunteer for ACT, our organization to help foster children find permanence. I asked her why. She explained that they had had their foster son since he was six. He was now ten. Each time they tried to adopt, the caseworker and/or the court were not prepared. Four times they tried and four times the judge dismissed the case after a lapse of time, suggesting that they refile. She went on: "Two months ago I came home from court and my son again asked me: "Mommy, am I going to be adopted yet?" I

had to answer no, tried to explain, promised him we would keep trying. He went upstairs and hung himself.”

I was speechless, could not talk for a full minute. More than anything else it brought home to me how easy it is for us adults to miss the fear and pain that live behind a foster child’s mask.

Being parked in a foster home for an indefinite period is not safe. Waiting can cause serious psychological damage. From my clinical work with foster children, I have identified five emotional stages that these very vulnerable youngsters pass through.

1. HOPE. At first the child has hope. “Maybe this family will be the one. If only....” But in time, hope hurts.
2. FEAR. As hope fades, fear sets in. “What if it will always be like this? What if no one really wants me? What if I never have a home? What if....”
3. ANGER. After fear comes anger. The child gets mad and often expresses his feelings by acting out. Temper tantrums. Foot-dragging. Stealing. Destroying property. Failing “deliberately” in school to frustrate the foster parents.
4. DEPRESSION. The anger may fade into darkness. The child becomes quiet and sad.
5. INDIFFERENCE. In time, the depression may be replaced by a coldness, a lack of caring. “So what! What’s the use? Who cares? I don’t.”

Delay is destructive. The delay is not simply about some isolated anticipated event. The delay for the foster child, and the way the child perceives the delay, concerns his whole life. So what can we do to minimize delays?

Here are four obvious ways that can be implemented immediately. Three of them involve the two systems designed to protect our children in care. The fourth is something foster parents can do.

1. START IMMEDIATELY. Within 24 hours of removal, the caseworker should provide the birth parent(s) with a case plan for them to remedy the abuse or neglect. This is not brain surgery. What the caseworker needs to do is directly address the problems that led to the removal. If the housing is substandard, find new housing. If the parents have little parenting skill or the child was left alone, attend parent training classes. If boyfriend abused the child, get rid of the boyfriend. If one or both parents were on drugs, they may need to pass a few random drug screens. And so on. The plan can later be approved and/or improved in court, but the clock will already be ticking, either on the way to reunification or toward termination.

2. LOCATE ANY RELATIVES WITHIN TWO WEEKS. One major cause of delay is the eleventh-hour relative, sometimes referred to as kin-come-lately. Just when a termination of parental rights is about to happen, a relative from far away emerges. An uncle. A grandmother. A half-sibling. This throws a monkey wrench into the mix. The

proceedings come to a halt while this new matter is being considered. An immediate and thorough search for potential relative placements will avoid this delay.

3. FOLLOW THE DEADLINES. The court generally reviews the status of children in care every three months. If the birth parents do not appear to be making a reasonable effort for reunification by six months, the permanency plan can be changed to adoption. Federal law (ASFA) requires that a termination of parental rights be filed after 12-15 months. These deadlines are vitally important and need to be honored. One year is a very long time in the life of a child. When you're in third grade, it's a long time till lunch.

4. KEEP DAILY RECORDS. Foster parents can shorten the time in care by keeping written track of daily events. Maintain a daily journal. Record visitations (or failed visitations) and what happened. Keep track of school achievements and medical appointments. Make careful notes about any misbehaviors or incidents that may later evoke other interpretations.

If, as most of us would agree, delay is destructive, and further, there are obvious steps to take that would minimize delays, why aren't we doing something? Many reasons can be given, from bureaucracy to court continuances for trivial reasons, from casework overloads to a concern about giving the birth parents every opportunity to make an effort. Two reasons, however, stand out.

First, many of us remain ignorant about the seriously destructive psychological impact on the child of waiting in limbo. More so than for adults, waiting tears at a child's fabric of life. Hopefully, this article has provided some insight into the foster child's view.

Second, many caseworkers have argued with me that they need time to get the case plan right. Then the judge needs to approve the plan before the birth parents can get started. This is wrong. The best thing for caring birth parents is to give them an immediate opportunity to correct what went wrong.

If a child protection worker took my child, I would beg on the spot for a preliminary plan and I would begin at once to do what was required to get him back. There is no reason for the child welfare system to delay in providing the birth parents with a beginning remedy. The one thing you can be certain of if you wait too long to get it right is that you are already wrong.

from Adoption in Child Time

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