



## Children, Families, and Foster Care: Analysis

**E**very year, over 250,000 children are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect and placed in foster care. Often these children already have experienced multiple threats to their healthy development. These vulnerable children then enter a fragmented foster care system that lacks the necessary resources, technical proficiency, and interagency coordination to provide families with needed services and supports.

At any given time, over half a million children are in foster care. Many of these children are in state care for extended periods of time, bouncing from place to place. The instability of the foster care experience undermines efforts to promote the well-being of children while they are in care and to help children establish lasting bonds with caring adults. As a result, compared with other children, foster youth are much more likely to experience negative outcomes such as homelessness, involvement with the criminal justice system, and teen pregnancy. New initiatives such as the Child and Family Services Reviews and the Adoption and Safe Families Act hold promise for improving the lives of children in foster care, but much more must be done to ensure their healthy development.

▀ **Better Monitoring of Child Well-Being.** Children entering foster care are more likely to have physical and mental health problems and educational difficulties compared with other children. Yet, few states have the capacity to effectively assess the health and educational needs of children in foster care and monitor whether these needs are being met. As a result, the health and educational needs of foster children are often ignored. One report found 34% of children in foster care had not received any immunizations, and only 10% had received services to address developmental delays.

▀ **Greater Efforts to Strengthen and Support Families.** Strong and nurturing families are at the core of children's healthy development, but few families receive what they need to play this critical role. For example, one study found that a lack of substance-abuse-treatment programs and other services limited the ability of birth families to be reunified with their children. Other research has found that both foster parents and relative caregivers often do not receive the supports and services they need to nurture the children in their care.

▀ **Reforming the Child Welfare System.** The child welfare system comprises numerous, overlapping agencies, each responsible for providing services to children and families, often with minimal coordination. Negotiating multiple agencies, each with their own requirements, can be overwhelming for families. However, models for better integration and coordination of services exist. For example, some states have colocated public assistance and child welfare agencies, and have brought substance-abuse-treatment specialists into child welfare agencies.

Foster children are the nation's children, and we all bear a collective responsibility to ensure their healthy development while in state care. We can and should do more to return these children to wholeness, but it will require everyone who touches the lives of children in foster care—friends, families, communities, caseworkers, courts, and policymakers—to claim shared responsibility for the quality of those lives.

# Recommendations

## 1 - Health Assessments

Child welfare agencies should ensure that all children in foster care receive health screenings at entry, receive comprehensive pediatric assessments within 30 days of placement, are assigned to a permanent “medical home,” and receive ongoing assessments and related treatment.

## 2 - Measures of Well-Being

States should quantitatively measure how well the health and educational needs of children in foster care are being met and include these measures in their administrative data systems.

## 3 - Specialized Services

States should use existing programs to provide specialized services for children of different ages in foster care, such as providing very young children with greater access to early-childhood preschool programs, and providing older children with educational and transitional supports until age 21.

## 4 - Cultural Competency

Child welfare agencies should enhance their cultural competency by recruiting bilingual and culturally proficient workers and foster families, ensuring that workers are sensitive to cultural differences, and incorporating assessments of cultural competency skills into worker performance evaluations.

## 5 - Services for Birth Families

Child welfare agencies should improve services to birth families by building partnerships with community-based organizations and integrating family-focused models, such as family group conferencing and mediation, into child welfare practice.

## 6 - Services for Foster Families

Child welfare agencies should develop an array of supports and services tailored to the needs of nonrelated foster families and kin caregivers, such as foster parent training and respite care, and ensure that their workforce is adequately trained to identify and respond to these families’ needs.

## 7 - Support to Preserve Permanency

Child welfare agencies should continue to support families following a permanent placement to promote children’s well-being after exiting the system, whether that happens through reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship.

## 8 - Enhanced Accountability

To enhance accountability, states should strengthen public oversight by effectively utilizing their external review boards and ensure that adequate investments are made to fully implement their performance-improvement plans.

## 9 - Flexible Financing

The federal government should extend the flexibility and reach of federal foster care funds by reauthorizing and expanding the number of waivers available to the states and revising outdated eligibility requirements.

## 10 - Coordinating Services

State child welfare agencies should improve strategies to coordinate service delivery to children and families, including the appropriate sharing of information across programs and services.

## 11 - Transforming Frontline Practice

The courts and child welfare agencies should restructure their organizations and adopt practices that support individualized planning and build continuity into the relationships between judges, caseworkers, children, and families in foster care.

## Article Summaries

### **Safety and Stability for Foster Children: A Developmental Perspective**

*Brenda Jones-Harden*

Children in foster care face multiple challenges to their healthy development. This article discusses the importance of safety and stability to healthy child development and reviews the research on the risks associated with maltreatment and the foster care experience. The author finds that although abuse, neglect, and the foster care experience itself can adversely affect child development, providing stable and nurturing families and implementing developmentally sensitive practices, such as ongoing assessments and coordinated systems of care, can facilitate healthy development.

### **Safety and Stability for Foster Children: The Policy Context**

*MaryLee Allen and Mary Bissell*

Federal laws have had a major influence on foster care policy. This article reviews the history of federal foster care policy and describes the complex array of federal policies that shape foster care. The article discusses key changes in foster care policy instituted by the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, and concludes with policy recommendations, such as addressing service gaps and enhancing accountability, that are needed to improve the lives of children in foster care.

### **Meeting the Challenges of Contemporary Foster Care**

*Sandra Stukes Chipungu and Tricia B. Bent-Goodley*

Over the past two decades, the foster care system has experienced an unprecedented rise in the number of children in out-of-home care and ongoing organizational impediments that complicate efforts to serve the children in care. This article provides a demographic profile of children in foster care and describes the current status of the foster care system. It also discusses promising policies and practices, aimed at

strengthening families, supporting case workers, and infusing cultural competency throughout the system, that can improve the foster care system in the coming years.

### **Family Reunification**

*Fred Wulczyn*

Most children will leave foster care to be reunified with their birth parents. Yet, relatively little is known about the reunification process. This article analyzes new data and finds that in recent years there have been significant changes in how and when children exit the foster care system. Reunification now takes longer to happen than in years past, whereas adoptions happen earlier. Moreover, nearly 30% of children who are reunified, reenter the foster care system within 10 years. The article closes with a discussion of changes in policy and practice that hold promise for improving the safety and stability of reunified families, such as instituting better measures of state performance and continuing to provide supports to families after a child returns home.

### **When Children Cannot Return Home: Adoption and Guardianship**

*Mark F. Testa*

Securing alternative permanent families for children who cannot return to their birth parents is a primary goal of the child welfare system. This article discusses recent efforts to increase the number of children achieving permanency through adoption and legal guardianship. Nationally, these efforts have resulted in an 80% increase in the number of foster children who are adopted. Moreover, innovative initiatives to promote legal guardianship in selected jurisdictions have also helped thousands of children achieve permanency. The article closes with a discussion of how widespread implementation of these policies and practices may ultimately transform the foster care system.

## The Evolution of Kinship Care Policy and Practice

*Rob Geen*

Kinship care has become the preferred placement option for foster children. However, despite the growing reliance on kin caregivers, kinship care policies have evolved with little coherent guidance. This article examines recent trends in kinship care. It finds that kin foster parents tend to be older, have lower incomes, and receive less supervision and fewer services than non-kin caregivers. Thus kin caregivers may not receive the support they need to nurture the children in their care, even though their needs for support may be substantial. In closing, the author calls for a more thoughtful consideration of the uniqueness of kinship care in developing policies and practices

## Providing Better Opportunities for Older Children in the Child Welfare System

*Ruth Massinga and Peter J. Pecora*

Nearly half of children in foster care are over age 11, and in 2001, 20% of the children leaving foster care were over age 16. This article discusses the unique needs of older children in foster care and the challenges they face in successfully transitioning out of the system. Although former foster youth are at higher risk for a number of negative outcomes, the article discusses steps that can be taken to better serve older children while they are in care and to provide them with better opportunities as they transition out of the system. The article closes with a review of

promising programs, such as life skills training, linking children with mentors, and improving access to higher education, that hold promise for improving the lives of older children in foster care.

## Five Commentaries: Looking to the Future

In this section, experts representing various perspectives and backgrounds respond to the question: “How can the child welfare system be improved to better support families and promote the healthy development of children in foster care?”

- ▶ *Susan H. Badeau*, child welfare policy consultant currently serving as deputy director of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, and a foster and adoptive parent.
- ▶ *Alfred G. Pérez*, policy analyst at the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.
- ▶ *Will Lightbourne*, director of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.
- ▶ *Ernestine S. Gray*, judge on the Orleans Parish Juvenile Court in New Orleans.
- ▶ *Layla P. Suleiman Gonzalez*, assistant professor for the Education Policy Studies and Research Department in the School of Education at DePaul University.

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