

Why Child Welfare is Always in Crisis

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On a too-regular basis the public is shocked by revelations of children who are not adequately protected by the child welfare system, or are harmed in its care. Programs are criticized, responsible ministers pilloried, and, inevitably, more public money is poured into the child welfare system. Yet the scandals recur, again and again. The reputation of the system is such that the incompetent, uncaring or venal child welfare worker has become a staple of TV script-writing.

This is unfair, of course, but why, one might ask, are the problems in child welfare so seemingly intractable? It is true that many child welfare programs are badly run. Social workers are not, by and large, easy to manage, nor do they always make great managers once promoted from the field. But even if this were not the case, it is unlikely that problems in child welfare would cease, because the model on which it rests is flawed.

The child welfare profession is in a sense a victim of its own success. Decades of lobbying have created laws that, while varying in format from province to province, all have the effect of making government both the parent of last resort and protector of all children in the realm.

Neither function is within government's actual capacities. While it would be ideal if child welfare authorities could prevent all mistreatment of children in their homes, to do so would require a 1984-esque level of intrusiveness that is neither possible nor desirable in a modern democracy. In the long run, children would be better protected by a system that reinforces parent accountability for behaviour towards their children, rather than relying on often-unrealistic expectations of government.

Moreover, when children are placed in government's care they are usually consigned to an overstretched foster care system. The foster care model presumes government can rent quality parent resources to fulfill its role as substitute parent. In fact, foster care relies on a dwindling supply of stay-at-home parents, and maintaining consistent quality in foster homes is extremely difficult for child welfare authorities. While many foster parents do their best for children in their care, the system as a whole does not provide the stable, nurturing home environments that children need.

To begin to fix its problems, child welfare needs to better distinguish between abuse and neglect, and between minor and substantial mistreatment. Deficient rather than abusive parenting – poor nutritional choices, for example - should be dealt with through voluntary social services like parent training. This change alone would reduce the intake of child welfare.

The threshold for more aggressive intervention should be criminal behaviour by parents. The current system is inequitable, and not in the child's favour. Punch your neighbor and the police will come; beat your child and government sends a social worker. Child abuse should be a trigger for criminal prosecution, not social work intervention.

As for foster care, this system would shrink significantly if the current strong bias against adoption was reversed and the adoption of permanent wards actively encouraged. Orphanages, residential schools and foster care are all discredited substitutes for a stable home environment. Adoption is an age-old human remedy for the absence of competent parents. Governments should embrace it, rather than shun it.

More resources for the same child welfare system will not fix the problem. We need a fundamental rethink of government's role in families, along with new policies to reinforce the responsibility and accountability of parents for adequate care of their children. Child welfare as we know it has failed to protect children. It is past due time to move on to another approach.

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