September 2015

Foster Care: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol2/iss1/21
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by Stephen Combs

Instructor’s Notes

This assignment required students to fully explore all sides of an issue while maintaining a neutral point of view. Why might such an exploration be important both inside and outside of the classroom? What other writing genres might require such a stance? What factors would be important when selecting sources for this specific genre?

Writers’ Biography

Stephen Combs is a second-year Finance major from Miamisburg, Ohio. Stephen takes academics very seriously. As far as writing goes, he enjoys blogging and writing an occasional poem or two but is not a big fan of academic writing. However, Stephen enjoys a good challenge, and academic writing provides that for him. In his spare time, he enjoys playing most every sport in existence, working, playing the ukulele, and hanging out with friends and family.

Foster Care: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Opinions pertaining to out-of-home care, better known as foster care, tend to vary significantly in the United States. The need for such a system is undeniable, yet many wonder if the federal government is doing too much or too little. Some previously fostered children become valued members of society, while many others find themselves in prisons or on the street. The United States government provides funding and services in order to improve the living situation of maltreated children. One of the ways in which they do this is by placing the mistreated children in foster homes and paying caregivers to provide for the well being of the child or children. The creation of foster care system took place in the early 1960s. However, it was not until the 1970s that the United States government put emphasis on expanding their role in child welfare by
implementing policy framework and providing funding (Courtney, Flynn, Beaupré 164). Though there are several strict governmental policies that exist with the intention to protect and enhance the well being of maltreated children, the outcome of the lives of fostered children is wide-ranged.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 requires all professionals who interact with children to report guardian behavior or signs of guardian behavior that could be considered neglect or child abuse to child protection authorities (Courtney, Flynn, Beaupré 164). Such reports lead to investigation of the suspect situation. The investigation, done by a child protection agency of some sort, results in either no governmental action or the issuance of the maltreated child into the foster care system (Courtney, Flynn, Beaupré 164). According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, concerned citizens filed 1,820,892 maltreated child reports in 2012, and 678,810 of them uncovered victims of abuse and/or neglect (19). This means that there are approximately nine victimized children for every one thousand total children in the United States. Every one of these abused and/or neglected children is in need of governmental assistance to improve their living situation. Foster care exists to achieve just that, to improve the living situation of maltreated children.

The courts handle the permanent planning for children removed from a living situation that involved maltreatment. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272) is the policy that set the precedent of the court handling the placement of soon to be foster children (Courtney, Flynn, Beaupré 165). If no responsible family member steps up to take custody, the court assigns the victimized child to one of two types of out-of-home options, the first of which is residential care (del Valle 162). Residential care consists of a group of fostered children living together beneath one roof. The homes in which they live in are staffed by paid staff and/or volunteers. Family care is the other variation of out-of-home care. In this style of foster care, a non-kin family assumes the responsibility of caring for the previously neglected youth (del Valle 162). The length of time a child stays in foster care is impossible to predict. The courts may only be place the child in foster care for a few hours or the remainder of their childhood. The state children’s welfare agency is required to work
on the child’s behalf with an overarching goal to achieve one of two outcomes: either the family will be reunified or a complete termination of parental rights will take place (Chittom, Lynn-nore, Wagner, Geraldine 1). With the termination of parental rights, the possibility of adoption is opened.

There are many horror stories and criticisms of foster care as a whole, but judging by the statistics, success often occurs. Fifty-one percent of the children who exited foster care in 2012 left because they had the opportunity to reunite with their parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway 1). Reuniting the child with their family is typically the primary goal of caseworkers (Courtney, Flynn, Beaupré 165). In addition, about half of the children who left foster care in the same year were only a part of the out-of-home system for less than a year (Child Welfare Information Gateway 1). In January of 2000, the Department of Health and Human Services announced the implementation of a new set of guidelines known as the Child and Family Service Reviews. The purpose of these new regulations was to improve the odds of positive outcomes among foster care and other child welfare programs (Chittom, Lynn-nore, Wagner, Geraldine 1). Whether or not these additional rules are doing an adequate job is vague. Regardless, foster care has made a positive impact on the lives of many.

Babe Ruth (one of the greatest professional players of all time) and Eddie Murphy (famous actor/comedian) both spent time in foster homes. Both of them went on to make a positive name for themselves in society. Babe Ruth and Eddie Murphy are by no means the only success stories to come out of foster care. One previously fostered child named Sara declared, “Foster care was one of the best things that ever happened to me” (“Foster Care Success Stories”1). Sara is currently a successful model (“Foster Care Success Stories” 1).

Sadly, not every fostered child receives the same results as Eddie Murphy, Babe Ruth, or Sara. The placement of an adolescent into residential or family foster care does not guarantee future health and happiness for previously victimized children. Courtney et al. gave the statistic, “24,000 foster youth who ‘age out’ of care each year are expected to make it on their own long before the vast majority of their peers” (1). “Aging out” too soon is not the only issue that reduces the chances of success in the world for foster children. Some never get over the physical, emotional, and mental trauma
they at one time faced (Pecora 6). Others are placed in homes in which their foster parents take very little interest in them (Combs). Occasionally their “caregivers” will even neglect them (Combs).

In the words of Peter Pecora, “Youth in foster care and adults who formerly were placed in care (foster care alumni) have disproportionately high rates of emotional and behavioral disorders” (6). Most every child who was previously or is currently a part of the foster care system has lived a tremendously tough life, filled with emotional scars (Pecora 6). Unfortunately, in addition to the baggage the child carries into the out-of-home living situation, mental and behavioral health of fostered children often tend to decrease during the time spent in foster care (Cunningham and Finlay 765). The level of severity among these cases varies greatly. It could be as minor as a below normal self-esteem, or as major as complete defiance to all authority to the point of violence. However, the issues are severe enough that approximately eighty percent of foster children who have a mental or behavioral condition are in need of intervention (Pecora 6).

Other children who were rescued from unhealthy situations and placed into the foster care system bounce from one physically unhealthy situation to another, meaning the child goes from being victimized in their original home to being abused in their assigned foster home. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, foster parents neglect their foster children in less than one percent of out-of-home care situations (50). This statistic baffled Eastway Corporation counselor, Anna Combs. In her seven years as a counselor, she has encountered many neglected foster kids. The foster parent(s) of these children provide a roof for them, but that is about as far as the caring goes. These insufficient caregivers misuse the money they receive for fostering the children on themselves or on their biological children.

Few would argue the fact that foster children tend to struggle in the academic realm. A 2007 study performed by Courtney et al. consisted of interviewing young, previously fostered adults (5). The study found that only who had a high school diploma or GED (Courtney et al. 5). In the same study, only point nine percent indicated they had a two-year college degree, and not one person interviewed had a four-year college degree (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, and Keller 5). Though education is not
the only sign of success, these statistics certainly are disturbing. In America’s current economic state, jobs are scarce. With little to no higher education, finding a suitable workplace is practically impossible.

Foster care is a prominent part of modern society; it is so prominent that the US government has established many rules, regulations, and processes pertaining to it. With the number of currently fostered children increasing each year, it is apparent that there will always be a need for such a system. Foster care, as a whole, is difficult to label. It is easy to point out and focus on either positives or negatives. Foster care has helped and continues to help many people. Most likely, it has saved lives. On the other hand, foster care has given and continues to give many children psychological disorders or assisted in the worsening of previously established psychological disorders in an abundance of other children. Some previously fostered adults achieve great successes. Many others are either homeless or in jail. The outcomes of the lives of foster children are truly all over the board.

Works Cited

Combs, Anna. Phone interview. February 10.