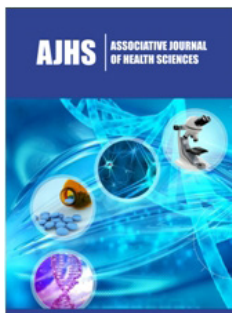


Foster Care: A System of Trauma

Geraldine Atkins-Siddiq*


Assistant Professor, Director of Field, Wesley College of Health and Behavioral Sciences, USA

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***Corresponding author:** Geraldine Atkins-Siddiq, Assistant Professor, Director of Field, Wesley College of Health and Behavioral Sciences, USA

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Abstract

Foster care has been an integral part of society in various forms. The concept of foster care was notably advanced in 1853 by Charles Loring Brace, a minister and director of the New York Children's Aid Society [1]. As a minister and director of the New York Children's Aid Society, Brace recognized the urgent need to address the plight of immigrant, orphaned, and abandoned children who found themselves homeless and destitute on the streets of New York City [1]. As a result, he spearheaded the "free foster home movement" to provide these children with safe and nurturing environments in private homes, marking a crucial turning point in child welfare practices. By establishing a network of volunteer foster families, Brace aimed to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable children and offer them a chance at a brighter future. The early days of foster care were characterized by a grassroots approach, with community members rallying together to support orphaned and abandoned children. Motivated by altruism and compassion, foster families opened their homes and hearts to provide care and stability to those in need. As we understand it today, the concept of foster care has evolved significantly since its inception in the mid-19th century.

This article addresses the often-overlooked emotional hardships faced by children in foster care and the significant psychological trauma they carry into adulthood. This focus is crucial as it frequently goes unnoticed in research and public discourse [2].

Keywords: Foster care; Trauma; Child welfare; Childhood experiences; Support systems

Introduction

Before we delve into the concept of foster care and trauma, let us define trauma. Trauma is a profoundly distressful or disturbing emotional and physical experience [3]. This trauma is experienced by many children who are placed in foster care in some way. Foster care was initially established to assist, help, and provide for children who have been abandoned in some way. This article will highlight past studies' common oversight, where the focus was primarily on the child's behavior while in foster care, without fully considering the effects of separation from their biological homes and the potential atrocities they may have faced before and during foster care [4]. This lack of attention to the child's voice and emotional well-being often results in suppressed feelings that persist into adulthood [5]. Adults who have lived through the system face significant disparities and risks to their well-being, leading to difficulties in forming trusting relationships, whether with foster or biological family members [6].

In response to the trauma, there has been growing recognition of the need for trauma-informed approaches to foster care. Increasing awareness of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the long-term impact of trauma on children's development has prompted a paradigm shift in how foster care is conceptualized and practiced. These children will experience many types of trauma, such as sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, neglect, and separation. This trauma will affect the children in many ways. Trauma can affect children's brains, bodies, behavior, and ways of thinking. Ongoing trauma often disrupts children's sense of security, safety, and understanding of themselves and alters the way they see and respond to people and situations in their lives. Approximately one in four children in foster care will show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder [7].

Children who have experienced trauma-especially ongoing trauma-may have developed unhealthy habits and behaviors, including increased aggression and distrusting or disobeying

adults. These behaviors may have helped protect the children from neglect or abuse in the past and may be firmly rooted. Addressing and overcoming them will take time, patience, and often therapeutic support.

The article also advocates for prioritizing the psychological needs of adults who were formerly in foster care, emphasizing the importance of addressing trauma from the onset of their foster care experience and continuing into adulthood. The foster care system, if not handled properly, can increase the likelihood of psychological issues in adults who have experienced foster placement [8].

Denise's Story

Denise went into foster care at the age of eight. It did not take long to figure out that the adults in the home did not care about her like her mother did. She was immediately traumatized more, first by the abrupt separation from her family by the woman who was her biological aunt calling her names and embarrassing her in front of everyone in the house. She and her brother were constantly called names and had to endure hearing their aunt say very nasty things about their mom. This all started on the very first day she entered the home. Denise tried as she grew to trust and talk to people about what she was experiencing physically and mentally. Unfortunately, each person gave a little information to take that information and used it against her, teasing her about what she disclosed to them. Denise has experienced so much trauma in her life. She believed that if she started making friends and acting like she was confident she would be. She spent years pretending nothing was wrong, changing herself so no one would see the real her and how she felt. She often did things she did not want to do in hopes that the people she was around would like and eventually love her. Instead, she found deceit, lies, and unfaithfulness toward her. She did not want to be alone, therefore, she continued to hang around those people. Regardless of how Denise was treated and made fun of, she continued to be nice to those people but never disclosed what she was experiencing. Even now, Denise doubts herself and her abilities; even when she has completed tasks, she didn't think she could complete, she still does not believe she is intelligent enough. She does not believe she is worthy of anything good. Denise believes what she experienced is due to something she did when she was young. Denise found herself in relationships that exacerbated her distrust of people. Unfortunately, those individuals lied and abused her in different ways. As a result, she tried many times to commit suicide; however, she was never successful. Denise stated, "I did not want to do it, but I was holding so much inside with no one to talk to. I started getting physically sick. I had to stop, not so much because I was getting sick, but because I had children that depended completely on me." Denise is now a middle-aged woman who stated, "I wish I had someone to talk to about what I go through in my head. I would not have done some of the things I did have someone taken the time to listen and understand." She stated she believes "if she had a chance to speak with a therapist when she was first separated from her family until she aged out of the system, she would not be so distrustful of people." Denise sometimes gets angry because none of the adults in her life took the time to talk to her, nor did they recommend she speak with a therapist. Denise

realizes that at the onset of being placed in foster care, there were not many resources available, and there was not as much known about the effects of foster care as there are now. However, she recognizes that she has significant developmental deficiencies because of the separation from her family and introduction into a world of trauma. She believes she missed out on being a child and reaching milestones properly due to the trauma she suffered beginning in foster care. Since she was not treated for the trauma, thoughts of suicide, mistrust, stress, abuse, and depression have haunted her. She continues to have no release, even when she decides to speak with a therapist. She believes that she will continue to have destructive behaviors until she finds a therapist that she trusts wholeheartedly. She still feels alone and does not feel like she fits in anywhere, but she continues moving forward because she must. Denise has such a complex story; however, she revealed only a little of her experience. "If you only knew, and that is a story for another time."

Denise's narrative illustrates the long-lasting impact of trauma experienced during foster care. Her entry into foster care was marked by abrupt separation from her family and exposure to a hostile environment. Despite her attempts to seek help and trust others, she faced betrayal and manipulation, leading her to suppress her feelings and pretend everything was fine [9].

As Denise grew older, the trauma continued to affect her profoundly. She struggled with self-doubt, believing she was not intelligent or deserving due to her childhood experiences. The lack of proper support and counseling during her time in foster care contributed to her feelings of distrust towards others and her difficulty in forming meaningful relationships [10].

Recommendations

This section outlines critical steps to improve the foster care system and better support the emotional well-being of children in care. These include comprehensive training for social workers on the impact of trauma, integrating trauma-informed practices into the system, and prioritizing positive and supportive relationships with children in care [11]. By implementing these recommendations, the foster care system can become more trauma-informed, supportive, and empowering for the children it serves. This approach helps children heal from past traumas and promotes their overall well-being, equipping them to successfully navigate life beyond the foster care system [11].

Modern foster care systems prioritize the holistic well-being of children, recognizing the importance of addressing their emotional, psychological, and developmental needs. Trauma-informed care principles guide interventions that create supportive and nurturing environments that promote healing and resilience. Moreover, efforts to improve the foster care system have extended beyond individual interventions to encompass systemic reforms and community-wide initiatives. Collaborative partnerships between government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and advocacy groups have led to innovative approaches to enhance the quality of care and support available to children in foster care.

Looking ahead, the future of foster care holds promise for continued innovation and progress. By building on the foundation laid by pioneers like Charles Loring Brace and embracing a holistic, trauma-informed approach, we can create a foster care system that truly meets the diverse needs of children and families in crisis. Through collective action and unwavering commitment to the well-being of our most vulnerable youth, we can ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential, regardless of their circumstances [12]. Moreover, this article offers actionable recommendations to enhance the foster care system's response to the emotional needs of children in care. By understanding the profound impact of trauma, social workers can be better equipped to identify signs of distress and implement trauma-informed practices. Integrating trauma-informed approaches into policies and procedures can mitigate the risk of re-traumatization, fostering resilience and empowerment in children who have experienced adversity.

Central to these recommendations is emphasizing building positive and supportive relationships between social workers and children in care. By prioritizing open communication and active listening, social workers can create an environment where children feel safe to express their emotions and traumatic experiences without fear of judgment or dismissal. Additionally, recognizing the importance of understanding each child's unique history and needs allows for a more personalized approach to care, fostering a sense of agency and belonging. Furthermore, early intervention is paramount in addressing trauma and preventing its long-term consequences. By providing timely psychological support and counseling services, the foster care system can mitigate the risk of developmental deficiencies and lasting mental health struggles. Through these interventions, children in care can receive the necessary tools and resources to heal from their past traumas and thrive in adulthood [13]. Outcomes in adulthood after long-term foster care: A sibling approach.

Additionally, it is imperative to acknowledge the intersectionality of trauma within the foster care system. Children from marginalized communities, such as racial or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and those with disabilities, often face compounded challenges and vulnerabilities within the foster care system. Therefore, interventions and support services must be culturally competent and sensitive to the diverse needs and experiences of all children in care [14]. The impact of sociosexualization and sexual identity development on the sexual well-being of youth formerly in the foster care system.

As a result, collaboration among various stakeholders, including social workers, mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers, is essential for creating a comprehensive and integrated support network for children in foster care. Interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the gaps between child welfare, education, and mental health services can ensure continuity of care and holistic support for children as they transition through different stages of their foster care journey [5]. In addition to individualized interventions, systemic changes within the foster care system need to address underlying issues that perpetuate

trauma and instability for children in care. These changes include reducing placement disruptions, improving the quality of foster care placements, and strengthening support services for biological families to prevent unnecessary removals whenever possible. Moreover, investing in preventative measures, such as family preservation programs and community-based support networks, can help mitigate the need for foster care placements and promote family stability [15].

Education and awareness initiatives to reduce stigma and misconceptions surrounding foster care are also crucial. By fostering a more compassionate and understanding society, we can create a supportive environment for children in care to thrive and overcome their challenges. Public advocacy and policy reforms are essential for driving systemic change and prioritizing the rights and well-being of children in foster care. These initiatives can include community workshops, school programs, and media campaigns that highlight the realities and challenges of foster care and the resilience and potential of children in these situations. Public advocacy and policy reforms are essential for driving systemic change and prioritizing the rights and well-being of children in foster care. This involves lobbying for better funding for foster care programs, improving the training and support for foster parents, and ensuring that the legal framework protects children's rights in care. Collaboration with stakeholders such as social workers, educators, healthcare providers, and the foster care community is also vital in creating a holistic support system that addresses the diverse needs of these children. By implementing these strategies, we can help ensure that every child in foster care has the opportunity to lead a fulfilling and successful life [16].

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the hidden trauma of foster care requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses individualized interventions, systemic reforms, and social change efforts. By prioritizing the emotional and psychological needs of children in care, we can create a foster care system that is responsive to their immediate needs and empowers them to heal, grow, and succeed in life. It is incumbent upon all of us—policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and community members—to work together towards creating a more nurturing and supportive environment for children in foster care, ensuring that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential despite the adversities they have faced [17].

Furthermore, the involvement of former foster youth in policymaking and program development is vital [18]. Their lived experiences provide invaluable insights into the challenges and needs of those in the system. By including their voices, we can develop more effective and compassionate strategies that truly address the root causes of trauma and instability in foster care [18]. Mentorship programs, peer support networks, and community engagement initiatives are additional ways to empower foster youth and help them build resilience and self-esteem.

Collaboration across various sectors, including healthcare, education, social services, and the justice system, is necessary to create a coordinated and comprehensive support network for foster

children. This holistic approach ensures that all aspects of a child's well-being are addressed, including their physical health, emotional stability, and educational opportunities. Training for foster parents and caregivers in trauma-informed care is also crucial, as it equips them with the skills and knowledge to provide a safe and nurturing environment [19,20].

Ultimately, the success of these efforts depends on a shared commitment to change. We can transform the foster care system into a foundation of strength and opportunity by raising awareness, advocating for better policies, and supporting innovative programs. This transformation is not only a moral imperative but also a societal investment, as children who are well-supported in their development are more likely to become healthy, productive adults. Together, we can create a world where every child, regardless of their circumstances, has the chance to flourish and lead a fulfilling life.

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