

practice. Elective courses were rich and varied: I took a course in international development that inspired me to eventually volunteer in Lima, Peru. While in Lima, I was able to participate in my Elective course discussion group by way of a local internet café connection.

The program exceeded my expectations in ways I would never have anticipated. Course work was far more demanding than I had expected. The time I saved in travel was otherwise spent obsessing over on-line discussions that were occurring 24 hours a day, from various time zones. I needed little computer experience, but was grateful for

being a visual learner, and for a fast typing speed. This October, I graduated from Dalhousie University. I have never been to Halifax, but Dalhousie's Distance learning took me on an adventure that will be treasured.

#### About the Author:

Lorraine Campbell is a supervisor at the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CCAST) where she currently supervises a team working with adolescents. She is also the emergency after-hours supervisor. In 2010, she will celebrate her 20th year with CCAST.

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## Message from the Executive Director

Almost every article in newspapers today bemoans the current economic state in Ontario, Canada and the world. Against this backdrop of bad news, child welfare workers have an important role in helping children and families cope with the effects of a sluggish economy. Child welfare work becomes more necessary as the strains and stresses of job losses, financial insecurity, homelessness and hunger threaten to bend and then break vulnerable families challenged by worsening economic conditions.

Yet, amongst the economic uncertainty, plant closings and layoffs, Ontarians continue their daily activities, our children and youth still attend school and for many, life goes on. Child protection workers continue to use their clinical skills and expertise to support families and help children in these challenging times. They protect children and support families by providing the supports children and youth need to become thriving adults and the services parents need to become better caregivers.

While we might despair when considering the current economic situation, while we are frustrated with the difficulty in obtaining enough resources for the work of member agencies, and while we brace for the impact of these financial stresses on children and families, it is important to balance this frustration with opportunities and successes.

The Ontario Government announced three new Education Championship Teams in addition to the four teams already in place to help Crown wards succeed at college or university. As part of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the government also announced an annual investment of \$19 million to support Crown wards in making the transition to independence. Social workers were recognized for their tireless efforts on behalf of children and families during Social Work Week. Agencies that provide services to Franco-Ontarians in the language of their choice were acknowledged during Francophonie Week. On Family Day, Ontarians recognized the needs of children, especially Crown wards, to have families and the needs of families, especially those vulnerable families most affected by the economy, to have access to community services and supports.

As front-line service providers whose mandate is to protect children from abuse and neglect, Ontario's Children's Aid Societies know first-hand the impact of economic uncertainty, plant closures, job loss and family stress on the well-being of children and youth. OACAS made recommendations to government in the *Pre-Budget Consultation: Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs* to ensure children and families are not further disadvantaged in the current economic climate.

This edition of the *Journal* presents articles on research, programs and services for youth and children in care such as: an analysis of the system of care for youth in Ontario; a study on young adults in care in the Midwestern United States; parents creating change in child protection in Ontario; on-line learning and anti-oppression in child welfare.

Jeanette Lewis  
 Executive Director

## It's About Time: Rethinking our System of Care for Youth

By Virginia Rowden

*"There's a billion people on the planet. What does any one life really mean? But in a family, you're promising to care about everything. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things... all of it, all of the time, every day. You're saying 'Your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go unwitnessed because I will be your witness'."*<sup>1</sup>

*Our kids need a witness.*

In 1985, the Child and Family Services Act introduced the concept of "extended care" which gave CASs the legislative mandate to provide services to "former Crown wards" up to the age of 21 years.

That was twenty-four years ago. At that time it may have been reasonable to think that youth aged 18 would be ready to be "launched" on their own. I remember being a front-line worker with a caseload of youth and worrying about where they would find room and board, where they might get a job, who might "look out" for them. The 1985 CFSA amendments were a positive change, they allowed a continuation of support for those youth who had left foster care and still maintained a connection to the CAS. The changes also provided some opportunity for youth to continue with school, as long as they were also able to set up their residence, establish credit sufficient to get a phone and pay utilities. While the CASs could do this, there was no policy to require them to offer this to youth.

In 1994, the Extended Care and Maintenance policy was introduced to ensure that all youth were offered the opportunity of extended care. Also it was to provide an alternative to welfare, and later when the Conservative government cut welfare rates, the ECM rate was preserved to provide an incentive for connection to the CAS rather than the local welfare office. The program best supported those who were continuing with education. Youth who had found

employment could only receive ECM if their income fell below minimum wage, and if it exceeded this amount the ECM rate was clawed back. Youth who needed to complete their high school education were required to do so from a base of "independent living".

Youth have been advocating for changes to the care system for over 20 years. Their common position has been – **treat us as you would your own kids**. More recently they challenged the government and CASs to revisit policies and programs for youth in care, using one key overriding principle "**what would a good parent do?**" When recently asked about services that would assist their transition out of the care system, youth pushed back and stated categorically: "You are asking the wrong question! Don't ask how to better prepare for termination. Ask us what we need to help us grow up."

In 2006<sup>2</sup>, over 300 youth in care told government and CASs about the things that most worried them. The fear of leaving care was the most predominant concern. Financial, emotional and educational support were at the top of the list, but in the words of a very wise young person "If you don't deal with the issue of age, there is little point in making other changes. We're just not ready."

Since 2006, many CASs have listened to the recommendations of youth and changes have been made to financial support; more resources have been made available by both government and CASs to post-secondary support. A number of agencies have also changed service models in an attempt

<sup>1</sup>From the motion picture, "Shall We Dance" 2004. Miramax Films. Note adjustment "family" rather than "marriage".

<sup>2</sup>Youth Leaving Care: An OACAS Survey of Youth and CAS Staff. April 2006.

## Going the Distance: An On-line Experience

By Lorraine Campbell

A life-long learner eager to return to school, I knew that acquiring my Master of Social Work degree would pose a number of challenges. As a single parent with three children, a full-time career in child protection, as well as a second part-time job in the field, I was hard-pressed to eke out another free minute in my day. My tenacity and curiosity trumped these momentary complexities as I began to research various graduate social work programs. Finding the time not to mention the mighty tuition fee would somehow come I reasoned, once I found the program.

I began my research with the familiar York University where I had acquired two undergraduate degrees some years earlier. Part-time graduate studies were available, but the notion of a long and dreary commute following a full day's work while pre-fixing dinner for the kids before heading out exhausted me. Then a colleague recalled that some Canadian universities offered undergraduate social work programs on-line, and that perhaps there might be a graduate program available.

Now this was more like it: with no travel time, and working from the comfort of my home at my own pace and in the wee hours of the night, I would sail through the program! Moreover, with no overhead to pay, no student to house, utility expenses or lecture halls to build, surely the tuition fees would be lower and thus more affordable. I was beginning to take a real shine to on-line learning and began my search for a graduate program with zeal.

As I researched on-line learning, I discovered that Dalhousie University had been offering an On-Line Distance Graduate Degree Program in social work for a couple of years. Moreover, they had a stream of study that focused on the field of child welfare, my career interest. I began the rather onerous application process that clearly stipulated that no advanced standing would be granted for any work or earlier academic experience. Moreover, there was a

prescribed order in which courses were to be taken, and at least one course had to be taken at another university. A practicum entailing 650 hours in the field was mandatory, and had to be arranged by the student and required preapproval by the university. Tuition fees for each class also had an additional technology fee attached, which placed the cost of the program higher than an in-class program. Of course, a computer also needed to be purchased.

The subsequent three years of study were the most rewarding in my academic career. I had the privileged of being taught on-line by some of the most cutting edge professors in Canada. Not only were students located across the country, professors were also recruited nationally. My surprise at finding my professors working at a local children's mental health agency was only surpassed by learning her colleague - and my Agency's partner in providing services to our adolescents - also taught "at" Dalhousie.

With an emphasis on anti-oppressive practice and postmodernism, each class challenged us to reflect upon our assumptions and to deconstruct our own mainstream view of social work. Moreover, my fellow classmates were for the most part seasoned practitioners, who shared their lived experiences; we cross-country students were made richer by sharing our experiences working in rural, urban and remote northern communities. The diversity of the student body was such that without visual knowledge of each other, we didn't necessarily know the ethnicity, physical ability, (or even gender at times) of our classmates. For three years I thought Jamie was a guy, until she talked about her impending maternity leave. Nonetheless, common themes of lack of resources, difficult working conditions, oppressed and racialized communities surfaced in each course, in each corner of Canada. Course work involved numerous papers, discussions, tests and group PowerPoint presentations. A rich field placement experience helped me fuse theory to

The averages shown in the chart below show most participants answered either "agree" or "strongly agree" to the evaluation questions.

**It appears there is an overall strong satisfaction with the training content.**

Course Title	# of Participants	Average Rating
1. Collaborations in Child Welfare: Past, Present and Future	204	94.44%
2. Protecting Children and Strengthening Families-Part 1	151	97.92%
3. Protecting Children and Strengthening Families-Part 2	90	99.01%
4. Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs	34	99.88%
5. Engaging Families	15	100 %

**Foundations of Child Welfare**

<b>Child Welfare Professional Series</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborations in Child Welfare Past, Present and Future</li> <li>• Protecting Children and Strengthening Families Part 1</li> <li>• Protecting Children and Strengthening Families Part 11</li> <li>• Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs</li> <li>• Engaging Families</li> <li>• Permanency Planning and Continuity of Care</li> <li>• Legal and Court Processes</li> <li>• Wellness and Self Care</li> </ul>
<b>Resource Family Series</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ontario Looking After Children</li> <li>• Understanding PRIDE</li> </ul>
<b>Advanced Child Welfare Practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forensic Interviewing</li> <li>• Advanced Child Protection Assessment</li> <li>• Advanced Service Planning</li> <li>• Critical Decision Making in Child Protection</li> <li>• Protection Investigations within the Context of Custody and Access</li> <li>• Working with High Risk Infants and Their Families</li> <li>• Working with Adolescents</li> </ul>
<b>Management and Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management, Leadership and Administration within Child Welfare</li> <li>• Managing Work Through Other People</li> <li>• Transfer of Learning</li> <li>• Supervising and Managing Group Performance: Developing Productive Work Teams</li> <li>• Organizational Culture and Leadership</li> <li>• Clinical Supervision</li> <li>• Supervising Investigative Forensic Interviews</li> <li>• Project Management</li> </ul>
<b>Specialized Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SAFE</li> <li>• Adoption</li> <li>• Children's Service</li> </ul>
<b>Trainer Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory Train the Trainer</li> <li>• Advanced Train the Trainer</li> <li>• PRIDE Team Training</li> <li>• Clinical Supervision Train the Trainer</li> <li>• Regional Trainer Development</li> </ul>
<b>Resource Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PRIDE Pre Service (Modules 1-9 and Digital Pre-Service)</li> </ul>

to provide better emotional support – largely through Independence Workers and peer support programs. The fundamental issue is still not addressed. It's not about planning a better system for discharge, it about providing the best support possible to grow up.

It's time to deal with the construct we are using to fashion our "system of care" - it's an antique system and by its design creates uncertainty, anxiety, dysfunction, inability to form relationships and is just hurtful. For kids who come into CAS care for the long term, they are clear: the child welfare system has nothing to do with permanency; it is about preparation to be terminated, detached, ejected, rejected...and way before they are ready to leave.

The ages that define "independence" date back to 1897, when revisions to the Children's Protection Act made Children's Aid Societies the legal guardians of all girls under age thirteen, and the new age limit for commitment to the Refuge was set - for girls - at between thirteen and eighteen years.

From the Archives of Ontario:

*... the Industrial Refuge for Girls opened in 1880 as a separate unit of the Andrew Mercer Reformatory for Women. Although separate from the Reformatory, the Refuge was administered by the same Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent, and shared the Reformatory's accountant, surgeon and school-mistress. Responsibility for the inspection of the Refuge, as well as for providing rules and regulations with respect to its management, discipline and policing, rested with the Ontario Inspector of Prisons and Public Charities.*

*The Industrial Refuge for Girls closed in 1905. At that time, homes were found for a majority of the girls, while others were placed with relatives. A few were transferred to various other custodial institutions.*

This appears to be when the age of 18 surfaced, and it continues to guide our system of care. Also from this era:

- the start of the Klondike Gold Rush
- Charles Tupper became Prime Minister, and also Wilfred Laurier in the same year
- Ford's Quadricycle - which pre-dated the automobile
- Nicholas II of Russia's coronation in Moscow
- the premiere of Puccini's La Boheme in Turin
- Oscar Wilde's play Salome which premiered in Paris
- the first modern Olympics since the Roman emperor Theodosius I banned the Ancient Games in AD 393 as part of the Christian campaign against paganism, and
- the "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" letter was published in the New York Sun

And women did not have the vote.

It is time to deal with "age" in the statute (CFSA) and there are a number of Ontario precedents for doing so (drivers licensing, mandatory school age, smoking, drinking, consent to sexual activity). Ontario also needs to step up and align with the UN Convention regarding the age of protection. We should be supporting kids until they finish school, rather than rushing them out the door before they are ready. While we can hold out for legislative change, it may not come, and even if it does, it may be years away. There is so much we can do in the absence of amendments.

Essentially, we have a sequence of "encouraging get ready to leave care" otherwise felt by children and youth as a steady and consistent push over a series of steep cliffs. Not only should the ages of protection and extended care be changed but we need to change the philosophy of care. It is possible to move to a policy of treating long-term foster care as a permanency option for those children and youth who are not likely to go on to adoption. It is possible to proceed with adoption

after Crown wardship ends. This requires a change in philosophy and eliminating “programming detachment”.

It would mean a shift:

FROM	TO
<p><b>At 16 years ...</b></p> <p>Children and youth are advised (or find out) that they can leave care at 16.</p> <p>The <b>message</b> to youth: “You’re 16. You need to get ready, in less than 2 years you have to be out on your own.”</p> <p>OR:</p> <p>If they do leave at 16, and terminate wardship they CANNOT re-enter the care system. (which they could if they left at 18)</p> <p>The <b>message</b> to youth who “check out”: if you leave now you can never come back. Sorry.</p>	<p>The concept of “emancipation” is not introduced. Young people stay with their foster family for at least another 5 years.</p> <p>If youth leave care, then the door is open to return. As it would be in a family.</p> <p>The liability of having a youth “out of control of the society” is acknowledged, but is not the rationale for terminating wardship.</p> <p><b>The message to youth:</b> Your place is with family. Focus on your studies, get a part-time job that will give you work experience, some spending money and hopefully help you decide what you want to do when you finish school.</p> <p>If you mess up, you can come back.</p>
<p><b>At 17 years ...</b></p> <p>Children and youth are recruited into independent living programs that “program” them to get ready to be out on their own by 17 years or certainly before their 18th birthday.</p> <p>The <b>message</b> to youth: “Learn fast about how to manage on your own. You can’t stay here beyond your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.”</p>	<p>Child welfare programs are <b>not</b> about preparing for leaving care. They <b>are</b> about relationships – family, peers, and other positive relationships. Supports need to be provided to maintain the family-based placement. If in foster care, the foster parents are the “responsible adults” charged with caring. As it would be in a family.</p> <p>In terms of milestones, the future focus is not about transitioning out of care, it’s about educational achievement.</p> <p><b>The message to youth:</b> Focus on school, balance work and studies. You are part of our family – be a contributing member. What do we need to do to help you succeed? Help with school? Dealing with relationships? With finding a part-time job?</p>

Advertorial

## Transforming Knowledge into Skills

**OACAS Education Services provides a unique program with the necessary knowledge, competencies and tools for child welfare professionals, managers and resource families in Ontario to make critical decisions about child safety while simultaneously working alongside families towards better outcomes for children.**

### Education Services’ Curricula

OACAS Education Services curricula emphasizes the powerful application of child focused, family centred, strengths based practices that protect children and respect families. Through a unique blend of presentations, case studies, small group discussions, and self-study assignments, OACAS courses are designed to generate practical and action-oriented knowledge about child welfare in Ontario. Critical themes and relevant issues pertaining to the daily practice of child welfare are examined. The programs provide the opportunity to become a reflective professional, an innovative leader or a strong resource family in the province of Ontario.

The curricula promote current research related to child safety and well-being, diversity and anti-oppression, collaboration, resiliency, community development, and permanency planning. Supplementary research materials are provided to learners after the course has been completed. OACAS believes education in child welfare is not a one time event but rather an ongoing learning process.

**OACAS trainers** are highly skilled, experienced and knowledgeable about child welfare practice. Their role is to ignite a creative and positive learning environment in the classroom, or virtually--online. OACAS believes that the transfer of learning from the classroom to the work environment is vital to the professional development of participants. OACAS demonstrates a commitment to the “transfer of learning” approach by providing a team of training specialists who offer customized support to a group of professionals, an individual child welfare organization, or to a specific region in the province.

**Learners** in this unique program receive the necessary knowledge, develop the competencies and

leave with the tools to perform the core responsibilities of a child welfare professional, manager or resource family in Ontario. The purposeful teaching approach equips learners with the tools to make critical decisions about child safety while simultaneously working along side families towards better outcomes for children.

Learners receive certificates of competencies which can be presented in court as a demonstration of knowledge and skill acquisition related to performing investigations, collaborating with families, understanding the complexities of working with maltreated children and their families, and understanding the legal mandate that governs the practice of child welfare in Ontario.

### Participants' Evaluation of Child Welfare Professional Series

In preliminary analysis of data collected between January 1 and February 20, 2009, participants of the Child Welfare Professional Series were asked to rate six questions regarding course content. The results show that participants felt the content was relevant, easy to understand and would help facilitate transfer of learning into practice.

Participants were asked to rate the following questions with "strongly disagree", "disagree", "agree" and "strongly agree":

1. The content of this session met my learning expectation.
2. I will be able to incorporate this new learning into my practice.
3. The information was easy to understand.
4. The content provided relevant knowledge for current practice issues.
5. The materials (curriculum, handouts, PowerPoint presentation, etc.) provided were sensitive to cross-cultural learning needs.

The training will help to facilitate transfer of learning into practice.

It appears there is an overall strong satisfaction with the training content.

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FROM	TO
<p><b>At 18 years ....</b></p> <p>ECM allowance at \$900+ becomes an incentive to disengage at 17 or 18 years old, if they have not done so already.</p> <p>For youth who continue on with foster parents, they must negotiate a rate. The foster parent faces a significant reduction and youth often feel they are left begging to stay. Those that do are subjected to police reference checks.</p> <p>For youth ECM rates are a mix of “freedom”, but also being pushed out. Seems like a lot of money, until they are out trying to manage rent, food, transportation, utilities, laundry, etc.</p> <p>The research shows that when youth stay in foster care until 21, they do better – in school, jobs, health, relationships.<sup>3</sup></p>	<p>Life in the family-based setting continues uninterrupted. As it would be in a family. You don't move because you had a birthday.</p> <p>Foster parents continue to get the foster care rate, because they continue to parent. Youth are <u>not</u> offered ECM rates, and the idea of independence is not introduced while the youth is in high school. It's about finishing basic education and exploring options for post-secondary, including trades, apprenticeship, community college or university.</p> <p>The foster family plays a role in helping the youth to complete school, and plan for more independent lifestyle - as it would be in a family.</p> <p>The concept of ECM is not completely eliminated, but is not the primary model of service.</p> <p><b>The message to youth:</b> It's important that you stay at home until you are ready to move out. At a minimum, this is your home until you are 21.</p> <p>At 18, the status of Crown Wardship no longer exists. For many youth in care, the “access” with biological family prohibited adoption. At 18 years of age, this barrier no longer exists. At age 18, <b>adoption is an option.</b></p>
<p><b>18 - 21 years ...</b></p> <p>Few youth in care live in foster care while they attend post-secondary because most have already “aged out”. Only 42% of youth in care have graduated by the age of 20.<sup>4</sup></p> <p>The small number of youth on ECM who do attend post-secondary “figure out” how to apply to post secondary on their own and have few if any family contacts and/or supports during the school year, and during the holiday period.</p>	<p>In the spirit of “family”, young people in care should be supported to go to school in the same way as a family would help out. If they attend college or university in their home town, the expectation is that they live at home (foster home). Foster parents would support their foster child (youth) at home. It would NOT be reasonable for the youth to have an apartment paid for them in the same town or city (most families could simply not afford that).</p> <p>If youth go to school out of town and the cost and time of commuting is prohibitive, then foster parents would help the youth find a place to stay, and the ECM allowance would help pay the student's living expenses. HELP – not completely pay. Before leaving home – just as in a family – the parents would help the student work out a budget, find an apartment, get a part-time job, and would help with applications for university, for OSAP etc.</p> <p><b>The message to youth:</b> Education is important, as is learning to balance work and school. Education is very valuable. As a youth from the child welfare system, you have special help now through OSAP, and we will continue to support you. It is not entirely a “free ride”, you have to contribute too.</p>
<p><sup>3</sup>See: When should the state cease parenting? Issue Brief, Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky and Harold Pollack Chapin Hall, December 2007.</p> <p><sup>4</sup>Gateway to Success: OACAS Survey of the Educational Status of Crown Wards March 2008.</p>	

FROM	TO
Money became an incentive to leave care: \$663 - 950/mo ECM and another \$3300 through the OCBe. While it sounds like a lot of cash, it's hardly enough to survive.	The OCBe leaving care allowance is put in trust until the youth is finished high school and starts to plan their move to a more independent lifestyle.  <b>The message to youth:</b> It's a Trust Fund, as if it was created by a benevolent aunt or uncle to help open doors to new opportunities.
21 = I have no support.	The family relationship is established, firm and lasting. 21 is not termination. The door is open and youth can plan a semi-independent lifestyle. Part-time job, school, contributing to the family.  And, at 21 adoption is an option. <sup>5</sup>  <b>The message to youth:</b> We are your family, we will support you. The door is open.

The basic approach would be to change the message – one that currently is of cumulative rejection.

Children and youth in care fear the milestones that others celebrate. We start worrying them with "independence training" in their early teens. Youth tell us that they are preoccupied with these terminations, and fearful of being on their own. This interferes with them getting on with school, making friends, building positive connections. One way to control life is to take charge – and many youth do this by leaving on "their terms", almost always too early.

Another helpful analogy....

Imagine you have just been hired. Your employer says "Welcome aboard. We're a tight team here – we do great work, we value you and we look forward to you giving us your best – and we will give you great opportunities. But by the way, you have a 4 month contract. And even if you are the best person we have ever had at our company we WILL be terminating your employment after 4 months. Yup – that's right – we want 110%. And we will terminate you."

Your reaction? Dismay, despair, panic, anger, and ... start looking for your next job NOW! Detach!!!

So here are some radical thoughts.

- What if we eliminated ECM as the primary program for youth in care, and used it only as a last resort?
- What if we refresh other aspects of foster care?
  - ◊ We treat the fostering situation as the "permanency plan" and have young people stay in family based care (the SAME family) until they are finished school.
  - ◊ We assume that most are not finished high school until 20 (which is a bit optimistic based on current statistics which tell us that less than half have completed high school by the age of 20.)
  - ◊ If youth need to do the "victory lap" like many other kids, they are still at "home" and not struggling to survive.

<sup>5</sup>See: Patrick O'Brien, You Gotta Believe <http://www.yougottabelieve.org/>

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group of parents and professionals. While the study explores familial experience with the mandated aspects of child protection, it is not intended to cover all non-voluntary circumstances. While this current study may not be applicable to other situations, lessons can still be drawn from it (DeLong, Black and Wideman, 2005; Ungar, 2007). The steps taken in the study are outlined and could be replicated in another geographical area. At some point, should the study be replicated, the additional findings might be compared using meta-analysis approach (DeLong, Black and Wideman, 2005).

While this study pushed the envelope of parent involvement in the research process there is always room to improve. Future studies should include parents in the writing of the research proposal, assisting with the research literature review or writing a specific conclusion. To make these changes more feasible the research study should consider financial reimbursement for the parents' time and expertise.

#### **Discussion: Implications of the study for anti-oppressive child protection practice**

Parents in this study did not recall needing more control. What they wanted most was to be heard, to have a chance for change for their children and to find a way to counterbalance the professional power exerted over them. They wanted help with housing, life skills, racial equality and a connection to others who had a similar experience. The parent participants wanted to have their rights explained more clearly. All of the parents' desires through the child protection experience suggest a need for an anti-oppressive approach to practice (Campbell, 2004; Dominelli, 2004; Potts and Brown, 2005; Strega, 2005a; Swan, 2009). Parents in this study needed personal help, structural changes and someone to listen to them in order to meet the challenges of parenting. This study highlights the need for further engagement of parents with social workers to create structural change. Parents and social workers in this study are in harmony that change needs to occur. The question now is whether

there is commitment to follow through with more of this research and work?

Perhaps conviction to social justice is the first step that will encourage change both in the research process and child protection practice. To secure an anti-oppressive approach to child protection the call to action is now. How will we know when we have arrived at a collegial approach to child protection service? We will know when parents have penned literature that is quoted in evidence-informed practice; when parents have a presence on CASs boards of directors; when diversity committees include parents as colleagues; when it becomes second nature to include parents as colleagues in research, training and policy development.

#### **Summary**

This exploratory study filled two identified gaps in the research literature: one substantive and the other related to the research process. The substantive gap to be addressed is the identification of success stories of parents who were previously court ordered into service and who are now parenting free from child protection interference. Secondly, this study will also be an addition to the limited number of studies that involve parents at a collegial level of participation in the research process (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). The social justice agenda of parent participation in child protection reform is advanced by heavily involving parents in all aspects of the research process. In fact, the study encouraged parents and professionals to reach beyond the limits of collaboration and work in a collegial manner to discuss necessary changes in Ontario's child protection system. In the end this study was an opportunity to "give voice to a story that has not been fully told" (Thomas, 2005, p.242).

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- What about stronger support to kin relationships, even if that is not the primary home?
- What about legal guardianship?
- What if we consider that adoption is an option – for older teens, and for your adults?

For a 14 year old in care, the idea of staying at home until 21 is a lot different than having to become independent at 17. Let's think about **what a good parent would do**.

The legislation does not prescribe how CASs provide extended care, it just says they **may** extend care. Let's focus on the "caring".

#### **About Author**

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## **Emergent Literacy in Pre-School Children: Findings from the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) Project**

By Shaye Moffat and Cynthia Vincent

Literacy is a major part of the basic foundation for lifelong learning. All future academic learning stems from the initial basis of building letters into words, and then words into sentences. Literacy is taught from the initial entry into school, and is a priority for future academic progression.

#### **What is emergent literacy?**

The term emergent literacy encompasses everything that comes before an individual actually learns how to read. This includes concepts such as language acquisition, the understanding that letters create words, and that words can be put together to make sentences. It also includes the idea that different letters make different sounds, and that reading happens from left to right.

Emergent literacy may be somewhat genetically influenced, although it has also been demonstrated that one's environment influences it. In fact, most often a child's initial contact with literacy occurs in the home environment through shared-reading experiences with adults. It is within this environment

that children's views of literacy are most often defined, and therefore it is vital that children are given these opportunities to explore literacy in a safe and warm environment.

#### **Why is emergent literacy important?**

As children progress in their schooling, their initial literacy level is built upon for all of their future learning. All subjects require a degree of literacy, and children who struggle with reading will continue to lag behind in other areas of academia as well. Children become literate by using their acquired knowledge of the oral language and applying it to the processes of reading and writing. Consequently it is essential for the foundations of literacy to be laid out for future success.

#### **What does the research say about emergent literacy?**

Research clearly demonstrates the vital importance of emergent literacy-inducing activities. Since the preschool age group has not yet entered into an

academic environment, it is important for them to have opportunities to become familiar with literacy within their own homes. In fact, the home setting is an effective atmosphere for promoting emergent literacy, since it provides the child with a safe and comfortable background for learning. This is why many school environments are made to mimic the home setting.

When children are placed in out-of-home care it is often due to neglect or parental incapacity; therefore they may not have had the same opportunities to learn in a normal home learning environment. For this reason, children placed in out-of-home care may be at an immediate disadvantage for emergent literacy and language acquisition due to the various pre-care barriers facing them. These barriers include a lack of access to literacy-inducing materials, less modeling of literacy activities by adults, and less interpersonal interactions with family members with books and literacy. Once in care, these children may face placement instability, frequent school changes, as well as less access to literary materials. This population of in-care children already face a potential disadvantage when compared to children residing in their biological homes. Studies have demonstrated higher rates of learning disabilities, achievement problems, special education placement, language disorders, grade retention, adaptive behaviour deficits, and mild mental retardation in maltreated children in foster care (Evans, 2001).

Emergent literacy research highlights the importance of many different activities that are important for later learning. These include parent-child book reading, meaningful conversations and interactions, high parental expectations and interactions, and emotionally healthy and secure family environments (Bennett, et al, 2002).

#### What was the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent of literacy-promoting activities that are being engaged in within foster homes in the province of Ontario. It was hypothesized that the more frequent

that emergent literacy-promoting activities were provided to preschool children, the more likely their future literary and academic success would be.

#### Who were our participants?

The participants in this study were a sample of 114 preschool children between the ages of 1 and 4 years of age, who were in-care in the province of Ontario, and who took part in the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) project. The OnLAC sample was composed of 54 percent male and 56 percent female participants, and the majority (91 percent) were in foster care, with an additional 9 percent living in kinship care. The children had been placed in care for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to physical, emotional or sexual harm, neglect, abandonment, problematic behaviours and domestic violence.

We compared this in-care group of children with participants from Cycle 1 (1994-1995) of the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY; Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, 1995), in which 4,403 parents of children between one and four years of age gave answers to the literacy-promoting activities scale in the NLSCY.

#### What did we compare?

We choose to examine the sample of preschool children in two age groups. First, we looked at children who were between 1 and 2 years of age, and secondly, we examined the children between 3 and 4 years of age. The emergent literacy-promoting activities being engaged in with the foster parents were analysed by looking at five variables within the Assessment and Action Record (AAR-C2) and NLSCY for 3-4 year olds, and four variables found within the 1 to 2 age group of the AAR-C2 and NLSCY. The items were answered by the main caregiver within the context of a conversation with the child's social worker for the AAR-C2 questions only.

professional group. Each group session lasted approximately two hours in length. A prepared research interview guide was used as a framework for the group dialogue. The first focus group involved parents discussing their experiences with child protection services. Members of two facilitation teams assisted with the discussion. The location of the parent focus group was in a community room situated within an elementary school. The school had a drop-in parenting center which was used to provide child care for the participants and facilitation team members. Transportation was provided for anyone who wished to attend the focus group.

Two weeks later a focus group was conducted with professionals discussing their reactions to the recommendations of change proposed by the parents. This group was held at a women's shelter. The location was selected because it was seen as a community hub, was available free of charge, was a place where professionals were used to meeting, was a safe environment for the facilitation team members, it was child friendly to offer child care services and most importantly, the location represented a reminder of a service that was often used in conjunction with child protection services. The final group was designed to bring parents and professionals together to discuss their ideas on how the current system of child protection can be improved. Although the literature suggests there is a lack of dialogue between families and professionals when introducing change or reform within the child protection system, there is a body of literature recommending dialogue between families, communities and professionals (Callahan and Lumb, 1995; Cameron and Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2000; Mannes, Roehlkepartain, and Benson, 2005; McKenzie and Seidl, 1995; O'Connor, Morgenstern, Gibson and Nakashian, 2005; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, and Dominelli, 2002). The joint parent and professional group was in response to this literature.

#### Findings: Sincere Appetite for Change

Parents suggested eleven recommendations, all of which were supported by the professional participants. These findings suggest that parents and professionals in this study are like-minded in terms of making changes to the child protection system. Further, the study findings suggest there is a need for social workers and parents to continue their discourse about the protection of children. Parents made the following recommendations for change to the current child protection system:

1. Have two social workers assigned to a case to avoid prejudice perceptions about parents.
2. Compile a parent's rights booklet.
3. Engage in cultural diversity training for social work staff.
4. Hold fathers more accountable for family issues.
5. Locate extended family quicker when looking for foster care placements.
6. Design a program to help teen parents and their parents raise children together.
7. Educate young girls early about self respect to prevent involvement in violent relationships.
8. Teach parents about life skills.
9. Put a package together that outlines all of the support programs available to parents and highlight the ones you expect parents to take.
10. Develop a support group so parents can meet to discuss their experiences with other parents.
11. Create safe chat rooms where parents, children and youth can communicate with others who have similar situations.

There was a balance of negative and positive comments made by parents about the service they received.

#### Limitations

As with any interpretive study the issue of generalization is a concern (Ungar, 2007). The study provides insights into the child protection system through a limited but rich dialogue with a small



A position taken in this study is that there is a gap in child protection research literature and primarily it is that parents have been excluded as primary creators of knowledge. This social exclusion argument is suggested after examining the role parents have played in the research process historically. This study advocates that parents can and should be colleagues in the research process.

### **Methodology: Research is Both a Change Process and Product**

The study expanded the parameters of collaboration and embraces a collegial approach toward research. As such the study is designed to meaningfully involve parents in the research agenda by including them as co-researchers. "It is research that takes seriously and seeks to make the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced and who is entitled to engage in these processes" (Brown and Strega, 2005, p. 7). Principles associated with participatory action research (PAR) are used to focus the inquiry and provide boundaries for data collection, analysis and dissemination (Morse, 1998).

In keeping with the principles of PAR, parents were included in all aspects of the study, including the role of co-researchers. Arguments have been made (Beresford, 1999, 2003; Cameron, 2003; Dumbrill and Maiter, 2004; Thorpe, 2007) that expert knowledge in child protection can and should include parents as service users; for they know best what is needed to help their situations. To strengthen the position that parents make legitimate researchers, Dumbrill and Maiter (2004) suggest, "That if child protection clients were experts on their own needs, they must also be expert evaluators of the services designed to meet these needs" (p. 18). Failure to recognize parents as equal creators of scientific knowledge appears incompatible with values associated with social work and social justice (Beresford, 1999; O'Connor, Morgenstern, Gibson and Nakashian, 2005). What was unique in this child protection study was the role of parents as researchers.

Participant recruitment followed a non-probability theoretical sampling strategy (Charmaz, 2004; Dey, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006; Macnaghten and Myers, 2004; Morgan, 1997; Rubin and Babbie, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Recruitment was based on individuals having experience with child protection services. Individuals were selected based on their association with child protection, not because they were representative of a larger population. Parents qualified to participate in the study: (1) If they had previously been ordered to participate in child protection services through a court order known as a supervision order. (2) If the supervision order was six months in length or longer. (3) If the family file was open after the amended Child and Family Services Act, 2000. (4) If they had maintained a one-year period free from child protection services. In total eight parents participated in the study.

The only criterion to participate as a professional participant was to have case involvement with the child welfare system. Why invite professionals into the discussion at all? At first glance it may seem contradictory to include professionals in a grassroots, social change study; however, I have learned from previous research (Leslie, 2005; Pain and Francis, 2003) that exclusion of a wider network can stymie social change. There are research studies specific to the field of child protection that suggest the importance of families, communities and professionals working together to improve the health and well-being of children (Callahan and Lumb, 1995; Cameron and Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2000; Mannes, Roehlkepartain, and Benson, 2005; McKenzie and Seidl, 1995; O'Connor, Morgenstern, Gibson and Nakashian, 2005; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, and Dominelli, 2002). In a collaborative model of research, families and service providers come together with the notion that ameliorating child abuse is a collective responsibility (Barter, 2004; Beresford, 2003; Cameron, 2003; Kufeldt and McKenzie, 2003; Wharf, 2002). In total, thirteen professionals participated in the study representing child welfare, family law and addiction services.

Three focus groups were conducted a parent only group, a professional only group and a joint parent/

### **What were the study's findings?**

The study demonstrated that pre-school children in-care were being afforded many opportunities to participate in literacy-promoting activities within their current foster placements. In fact, for the 1-2 year-old age group, 77 percent of foster parents reported reading to their child on a daily basis, compared to the NLSCY group in which only 27 percent reported doing so everyday. Likewise, for the 3-4 year olds, 76 percent of foster parents reported that they read to their child everyday, whereas for the NLSCY comparison group, the percentage of parents who engaged in daily reading with their child was 63 percent. These same trends continued for the other various indicators.

In regard to how often the child looked at books, magazines, or comics on their own at home, 80 percent of the 1-2 year olds in-care were reported as doing so on a daily basis, whereas for the NLSCY group, only 32 percent reported their child as engaging in this activity every day. For the 3-4 year old age-group, 82 percent of children were reported as reading on their own on a daily basis, compared to 72 percent for the NLSCY comparison group.

Finally, regarding how often the child in-care used pens or markers to engage in pretend writing, the foster parents of the 1-2 year-old in-care group reported that 35 percent did on a daily basis. This is in comparison to the NLSCY group, in which only 29 percent engaged in pretend writing everyday. For the 3-4 year old age group, foster parents reported that 61 percent of the children in their care pretended to write everyday, whereas the comparison group from the NLSCY reported that 71 percent of children pretended to write everyday.

### **What can be done to encourage emergent literacy?**

Emergent literacy is an extremely important educational concept that needs to be considered and highlighted within the child welfare system. Research demonstrates that early childhood literacy

impacts the future educational outcomes of children, consequently it is imperative that every child be provided with opportunities to engage at an early age. It is important that current and potential foster parents understand this learning relationship, and do whatever they can to engage in literacy-promoting activities with the children in their care.

High expectations, encouragement and positive reinforcement of literary interactions for children are avenues that aid in later literacy acquisition, and are therefore important assets for parents to use. Children should be encouraged to participate in literacy-promoting activities, such as visiting libraries and bookmobiles, as well as conversing with adults about books and reading. Families and friends can be encouraged to give books as gifts, which can foster interest and enthusiasm for reading and learning within the child.

Foremost in encouraging emergent literacy is to provide children with role models to follow. Parents who include literacy in their own day-to-day routines pass on the importance of reading and writing to the children in their care.

### **Conclusions**

Literacy is a skill that is continually built upon for all future learning and academic proficiency. It is important for children to see the skills inherent to reading and writing used continuously in their home environments, since this is the venue for much of their early learning. Parents and caregivers can do much to involve the children in their care with literacy and advocate for the importance of this lifelong skill.

### **About the Authors:**

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## Should the State Parent Youth Adults? Evidence from the Midwest Study<sup>i</sup>

By Mark E. Courtney

When children are removed from their homes due to parental abuse or neglect and placed into out-of-home care, the state public child welfare agency, under the supervision of the juvenile court, takes on the role of parent. While a child is in out-of-home care, the public agency is responsible for ensuring their day-to-day care and supervision. This state responsibility continues until the child is returned home, placed with another family through adoption or guardianship, runs away from care and cannot be found, or moves to another care system through institutionalization (i.e., is incarcerated or placed in a psychiatric facility). If youth in out-of-home care do not exit care via any of these routes, they eventually reach the age at which the public agency is allowed under state law to "emancipate" them to independent living, regardless of the wishes of the youth. From the perspective of the state agency, discharging a youth to emancipated status means that the state ceases to bear any legal parental responsibility towards the youth's care and supervision. Thus, while a public child welfare agency may voluntarily decide to provide a variety of services to youth after discharge from care, the agency is not obligated to do so and the juvenile court cannot compel the agency to do so. Put

simply, when youth "age out" of the foster care system in the U.S., the state ceases to be their parent. In all but a few jurisdictions, states

relinquish their parental responsibilities when youth reach the age of majority; the federal government currently only reimburses states for the costs of foster care through age 18 under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act.

In recent years, child welfare practitioners and policymakers have begun to question the wisdom of federal policy that ends reimbursement to states for foster care at age 18. Reflecting continuing interest by policymakers in improving prospects for foster youth in transition, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Public Law 110-351) was signed into law by President Bush in October 2008. The new law amends Title IV-E by giving states an option to extend foster care to age 21 with continuing federal financial support.

Whether states will exercise this option may depend in part on whether policymakers believe that remaining in care past 18 is of benefit to foster youth.

<sup>i</sup>This paper is based on the following report: Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., and Pollack, H. (2007). *When Should the State Cease Parenting? Evidence from the Midwest Study*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The report is available at: [http://www.chapinhall.org/article\\_abstract.aspx?ar=1355](http://www.chapinhall.org/article_abstract.aspx?ar=1355).

opportunity for eight parents and thirteen professionals to voice their collective views on changes they would make to the child protection system.

The findings suggest the study was timely in light of the newly amended Child and Family Services Act, 2006 in Ontario. Parents and professionals alike came forward with suggestions for change that now fall within the realm of the new Act. These suggestions are identified and discussed in this study.

### Purpose of the Study: Advancing Social Justice through Inclusion

*"We are no longer just the 'patients', the 'cases', the diagnostic categories. We come claiming the right for things to be different... We come with contributions to make" (Beresford, 2004, p. 3).*

The child protection system in Ontario is currently struggling and has been characterized as being preoccupied with the provision of reactive services (Barter, 2004b; Cameron, 2003; McKenzie and Trocmé, 2003; Peirson, Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2003; Wharf, 2002). Forensic social work practices have prevailed over traditional social justice models of empowerment, prevention, and community capacity building approaches to child protection (CASW, 2003; Peirson, Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2003). Proponents of anti-oppressive social work practices suggest the impact of this amended child welfare reform is an inverse relationship between the level of family surveillance and the degree of satisfaction with social justice for children. In fact, as risk management increases, issues of social justice decrease (Barter, 2004b; Cameron, 2003; Lawrence, 2004; Peirson, Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2003; Sharland, 1999).

How parents claim a voice in a system, which by its mandated design, is based on power differentials against them (Barter, 1997, 2001; OACAS, 2006a; Wharf, 2002), is explored through involving them in a research facilitation team, focus groups to discuss

analysis of content and focus group consultation with child protection workers. This study is about elevating the voice of parents in the child protection reform process. It is a discussion about change at multiple levels from the personal to the broader structural. More importantly, the study is about adjusting how the child protection field views parents: from liability to resource.

### Literature Review: Finding the Voices of Parents in Research

The aim of the literature review was to investigate the degree to which parents were engaged in the child protection research process. The review was concerned with evaluating the scope of power that parents have in the research process. It is clear from reviewing the literature concerning child abuse that parents have a voice but it is often as subjects of research (Cadzow, Armstrong and Fraser, 1999; Cameron and Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2000; DiLauro, 2004; Manji, Maiter, and Palmer, 2005; Strega, 2005a). When parents have been consulted about child protection services however, their voice has often been in the form of consumer feedback (Cameron, 2003; Dumbrill, 2006; Rutman, Strega, Callahan, and Dominelli, 2002; Callahan and Lumb, 1995). A more intense form of power in the research process occurred when parents became co-researchers and engaged in pivotal decision making steps (Dumbrill and Maiter, 2004; McKenzie and Seidl, 1995). As the degree of inclusiveness in the research process increased it became more difficult to find research that asks parents to be colleagues (Thomas, 2005). Of course there is a body of literature that is about parents in which they are outside the research process all together (DiLauro, 2004; Miller, Fox and Garcia-Beckwith, 1999; Trocmé, et al, 2005; Trocmé, et al, 2003; Leschied, Whitehead, Hurley and Chiodo, 2004). The argument made here is that the more involvement parents have in the process, the more potential there is to exercise power over how their situations will change (Adams, 2003; Beresford, 1999, 2003; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Freire, 2005).

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#### From EMERGING PERSPECTIVES ON ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

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## Adjusting the Lens: Parents Create Change in Ontario's Child Protection System

By Dr. Bernadette Gallagher

### Abstract

This study explored the potential for parents to create social change in Ontario's current system of child protection. Concepts of social justice and participatory action research (PAR) were used to focus the inquiry and provided boundaries for data collection, analysis and dissemination (Morse, 1998). Participants in the study included (1) parents, referred to as an adult caregiver inclusive of extended family raising children; who have successfully completed a supervision court order and (2) professionals associated with child protection.

The following two research questions were explored: what advice do court ordered parents give on how to create a less bureaucratic system of child protection in Ontario? Secondly, how can professionals be engaged to work with parents to bring about the recommended changes? A research facilitation team of parents as co-researchers participated in the study's design and provided on-going consultation during data collection and analysis. Data emerged from three focus groups; a parent group, a professional group and one involving both parents and professionals. Of significance in the study is the

### The Midwest Study

The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth ("Midwest Study") provides evidence of the potential benefits to foster youth of extending the provision of foster care past age 18. The Midwest Study is a collaborative effort among the public child welfare agencies in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin Survey Center (UWSC), and Partners for Our Children (POC) at the University of Washington, Seattle.

The Midwest Study is following the progress of foster youth in the three states who entered care prior to their 16th birthday, had been in out-of-home care for at least one year at the time of baseline interviews, and whose primary reason for placement was abuse and/or neglect. Baseline interviews were conducted with 732 youth in the three states between May 2002 and March 2003 when all of the youth were 17 or 18 years old. Eighty-two percent (n = 603) of these 732 youth were re-interviewed between March and December 2004, when nearly all were 19 years old. A third wave of survey data was collected between March 2006 and January 2007 (n = 591) when nearly all of the young people were 21 years old. The Midwest Study describes the experiences of foster youth in transition to adulthood between ages 17 and 21 across a broad range of indicators of well-being.

Policy variation across the states involved in the Midwest Study allows for an examination of the potential effects of supporting states to extend foster care past 18. Foster youth in Iowa and Wisconsin are generally discharged from care around the time of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and almost never after age 18, whereas Illinois' foster youth are allowed to remain in care until their 21st birthday. While some anecdotal reports suggest that many foster youth would not choose to remain under the care and supervision of the public child welfare agency and juvenile court past 18, our study findings from Illinois suggest the opposite; most of the young people in Illinois remained in care past their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday with many remaining to age 21. The

differing state policies lead to vastly different care experiences; Illinois youth remained in care an average of over 20 months longer than their peers in Iowa and Wisconsin.

What do our study findings suggest regarding the potential benefits of extending foster care past age 18?

### Higher Education

Our data suggest that foster youth often carry pre-existing educational fee deficits into their early adult years. Nearly one-quarter of the young adults in the Midwest Study had not obtained a high school diploma or a GED by age 21. In fact, these young adults were more than twice as likely not to have a high school diploma or GED as their peers. Conversely, only 30 percent of the young adults in the Midwest Study had completed any college compared with 53 percent of 21 year olds nationally.

To provide a test of the effect of allowing youth to remain in care past age 18 on college enrollment and attainment, we compared between states the percentage of youth at 21 who had (1) ever been enrolled in college and (2) had completed at least one year of college. Youth in Illinois are 1.9 times more likely (58 percent versus 30 percent) to have completed at least some college and 2.2 times more likely (38 percent versus 17percent) to have completed one year of college than their peers in Iowa and Wisconsin. We also conducted multivariate statistical models of both of these higher education outcomes, controlling for the characteristics of the youth in the study as assessed during our baseline interviews at age 17-18. These analyses also show strong between-state effects on the likelihood of college participation by the foster youth in the Midwest Study. Even after controlling for observed differences in the characteristics of the youth in our study, the estimated odds of foster youth in Illinois attending college by age 21 were about four times greater than those of foster youth in Iowa and Wisconsin; the estimated odds of foster youth in Illinois having completed at least one year

of college by age 21 were approximately 3.5 times higher than those of foster youth in the other two states.

### Earnings

Data from the Midwest Study provide a sobering view of the employment and earnings of foster youth in transition to adulthood. When interviewed at age 21, only about half were currently working, which is lower than the employment rate among 21 year olds nationally. Although more than three-quarters of the young adults in the Midwest Study interviewed at age 21 reported having any income from employment during the past year, their earnings were very low. Median earnings among those who had been employed were just \$5,450.

We chose to examine the potential relationship between remaining in care and earnings by estimating the effect of each additional year of care on self-reported earnings during the 12 months prior to our interviews at age 21. First, we estimated a statistical model of earnings in the year prior to the wave three interviews, controlling for the characteristics of the youth in the study as assessed during our baseline interviews at age 17-18, and focusing on the effect of each additional year that a youth remained in care on their later earnings. We found that each additional year of care was associated with a \$470 increase in annual earnings. Using an alternative estimator of the relationship between remaining in care and earnings, one that attempts to control for unmeasured differences between youth that are associated both with their likelihood to remain in care and their likelihood of having earnings, we found that each additional year of care was associated with an increase of \$924 in annual earnings.

### Pregnancy

Despite declining overall pregnancy rates among adolescents, teenage pregnancy and childbearing remain significant problems, particularly among youth in foster care; 71 percent of the young women in the Midwest Study had been pregnant by age 21, and half of those had been pregnant by age 19, rates

much higher than for the general population. Considerable costs are associated with teen pregnancy, both to the young women involved and to their children, implying that delayed pregnancy among female foster youth making the transition to adulthood should be considered a worthwhile goal.

In order to assess the relationship between remaining in care and the timing of pregnancies among the young women in our study, we estimated a multivariate statistical model of the timing of pregnancies between our first wave of interviews at age 17-18 and our last interviews at age 21. These statistical models allowed us to assess the association, if any, between being in state-supervised out-of-home care and becoming pregnant, while controlling for the baseline characteristics of the young women in our study. Our analyses suggest that being in care is associated with a 38 percent reduction in the rate at which the young women in our study become pregnant between ages 17-18 and 19.

### Implications

Our findings provide support for state-level efforts to implement the recent amendments of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act that provide federal funding for states that choose to allow young people to remain in state care past age 18. In Illinois, where remaining in care until age 21 is already an option, foster youth are more likely to pursue higher education. This policy also seems to be associated with higher earnings and delayed pregnancy. As states decide to opt in to these new provisions of federal law, it will be important to evaluate the effects of variations in how states extend foster care to young adults in order to improve policy and practice directed towards this group of young adults.

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Individually, systems such as child welfare, criminal justice and education, struggle with oppression. As a result of the relationship between these systems, they each impact the outcomes of the others. For example, the child welfare system receives a significant portion of its referrals from the education system. In both systems, racialized children are negatively perceived and thus negatively impacted. The bureaucratic culture in social services, which renders criticism and challenge between services unwelcomed and unsolicited, contributes to these oppressive outcomes. The result is that each system remains unchallenged about its oppressiveness and marginalized groups continue to experience oppression. The structural and institutional issues currently found in child welfare need to be addressed collectively and collaboratively in order for substantial change to occur.

#### Why Now?

There is no shortage of research that demonstrates how child welfare practice often contributes to oppressive outcomes. Through the adoption of an anti-oppression framework, the system can begin to recognize and address the negative impacts on marginalized groups. The legislative and policy framework created through the Child Welfare Transformation initiative provides an ideal context within which to integrate an anti-oppression framework. Such a framework will also compliment and enhance other provincial initiatives such as the continuing efforts to develop a Collaborative Model for Child Welfare Practice and the collective commitment to the promotion of evidence informed and strengths based practice.

The ultimate measure of Child Welfare Transformation will be its ability to support a new kind of engagement with families and, through this, better outcomes for children and youth. We would suggest that better outcomes cannot and will not be achieved without the introduction of a new kind of practice: one whose purpose is to work in partnership with those who are marginalized and oppressed and one that recognizes and seeks to

address the structural roots of that oppression. Without such a systemic shift, marginalized communities will continue to respond with discontent and distrust of the child welfare system and the child welfare system, in turn, will continue to contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups.

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## OACAS Celebrates National Social Worker Week

National Social Work Week (NSWW) is celebrated annually across Canada during the month of March.

The Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) recognizes the social workers in child welfare who provide services and supports to children, youth and their families. Their tireless efforts on behalf of children and youth are appreciated. Social workers providing child protection services have a repertoire of clinical skills and experience to improve the well-being of the children and youth they serve.



**Ontario Association of Social Workers**  
**L'Association des travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux de l'Ontario**

March 2009

In recognition of National Social Work Month, the Ontario Association of Social Workers salutes Ontario social workers in child welfare. We commend your tireless efforts to protect and improve the safety and well-being of at-risk children and youth, and the critical role you play in supporting vulnerable families in difficult times.

The enthusiasm, passion and dedication you demonstrate in providing services and supports to children, youth and their families are especially noteworthy.

Social workers providing child protection services possess a highly valued repertoire of clinical skills, expertise and knowledge regarding factors that have resulted in contact with the child welfare system. You give the assistance and guidance children and youth need to successfully transition to adulthood.

As social workers, you help families deal with life stressors and challenges. Ultimately, you make a significant contribution to the lives of children and families. Your impact is meaningful and long-lasting and your commitment is inspiring.

OASW extends best wishes to all social workers in child welfare during National Social Work Month and throughout the year.

Sincerely,

*Joan MacKenzie Davies*

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## Anti-Oppression in Child Welfare: Laying The Foundation For Change

By the Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable

*An Excerpt from the discussion paper:*

### Anti-Oppression and Child Welfare

The child welfare system continues to be implicated in the oppression experienced by marginalized groups in society. Marginalized groups include those who are First Nations, Aboriginal, not white, single mothers, people living below the poverty line, people with disabilities, immigrants, people for whom English is a second language, people who do not identify as heterosexual, etc. Their experience is marginal in that it does not reflect the dominant or mainstream experience which is centred within the child welfare system and the larger social context.

Historically, we have the example of the Sixties Scoop which saw First Nations and Aboriginal children stolen from their families and cultures, with devastating impact, the extent of which most of us can never fully appreciate. Today, one of the most critical impacts and indicators of the oppressiveness of the child welfare system is the over-representation of marginalized groups within the system. For example, Aboriginal youth aged 0-19 represented less than 3 percent of the total child population in Ontario (Census 2006), but 14.4 percent of the numbers of children in care (OACAS, 2008). In an urban centre of Ontario, where the Black population totals 8 percent, Black youth represent 65 percent of the youth in group care.

Although the child welfare system is made up of individuals who want to make a positive impact, some theorists argue that the nature of child welfare practice is in itself oppressive. Through the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), child welfare workers are entrusted by the state with the legal authority and mandate to protect children from maltreatment and abuse by their caregivers. With that authority, child welfare workers have the ability to apply sanctions

on service users if they are not compliant with direction and orders. Further, child welfare agencies have the support of other state agencies such as the police and the court, all of which can be used to add further reinforcement to these sanctions.

In exercising their authority, child welfare workers, if not critically examining their own lens, can create a power-over relationship between themselves and the service user. The outcome, however unintended, can often be an oppressive experience.

Dumbrill (2003) observes that the practice of child welfare predominantly adopts a power over approach to practice, rather than a power with approach. The power over approach allows agencies and workers to use their social positions to control the power dynamics of relationships. Conversely, the power with approach relinquishes a certain amount of power and privilege so that more collaborative, open and empowering relationships can be constructed.

When the power-over approach to practice is exercised by an agency and its workers, it often forces the caregiver(s) to play the game with the child welfare system and its counterparts. In such a scenario, playing the game can include how the caregiver(s) provide workers with information and answers that they feel will help protect their children and themselves from the child welfare system, even if that involves lying or deception (Dumbrill, 2003). Turnell (1997) goes so far as to suggest that child welfares statutory capacity to initiate investigations, remove children, etc., actually precludes any ability to have a power-neutral relationship between an agency and the parent.

The power-over dynamic is further solidified by the ability of the child welfare system to draw upon the extensive network of resources at its disposal. A child welfare agency will have substantially greater

resources or access to resources than will the children and families it is involved with. Additionally, workers have the ability to control what information can be made available to a child or caregiver(s). This often prevents children and families from challenging the child welfare agency or the legal system, while conversely reinforcing the power being exercised by the workers and the agency (Dumbrill, 2003).

Turnell (1997) observes that at the roots of child welfare is a history of paternalism, where the professional assesses the nature of the problem, the risk and harm to the child. The professional then formulates the solution required to resolve the problem. Through this process, and using the granted authority, the worker is seen as the expert. This approach to practice is often seen in the context of a service users access to information and when workers use their social position to take on the role of the expert as it relates to the life of a service user.

### The System

The child welfare system is often criticized for using dominant or mainstream values which further institutionalize the othering of the marginalized groups. Some critics wonder if the system is even capable of doing what most assume it is doing: keeping children safe. Certainly, the literature would suggest that the system is not designed to keep children safe from the social and structural problems which pose a profoundly more universal risk to their health, well-being and, indeed, survival than that posed by those parents who are truly unable to safely parent their children. Yet, child welfare continues to intervene as experts only after there has been a perceived parental failure.

In the role of expert, the child welfare system and its representatives employ the values of the dominant group to evaluate and make judgments. Service users who do not share the same set of cultural values are defined as different and those differences are perceived as inferior within child welfare. The over-representation of marginalized people in the system is a direct result of the values placed on difference.

As a part of the process of defining service users, the system has relied upon binary language such as good/bad, fit/unfit, safe/dangerous, and normal/abnormal. Those defined as abnormal are a threat to the dominant social order. Karen Swift (1995) argues that the attempt of child welfare to help children has its origins in an effort to reduce threats to the existing social order. Dumbrill (2003) supports Swift in suggesting that the over-representation of marginalized children and families in child welfare is further proof of how difference is defined as inferior within child welfare.

The structure of child welfare practice also serves to reinforce oppression. Child welfare agencies, like other human service organizations, work and operate within a bureaucratic framework. Workers are subjected to the formal rules set by management or the government. Fleming et al (2003) call this corporate [agency] influence on workers a form of cultural engineering whereby organizations ultimately control workers, regardless of their personal values. Weinberg (2006) argues that those workers, for example, who would like to address systemic oppression and marginalization, are caught between an ethic that informs social work as a vehicle of social justice, and a bureaucratic regime in which workers are responsible for social regulation and the discipline of others.

Expanding upon Weinbergs idea, a similar argument could be made about the impact of the larger social service system on any attempts by individual workers or particular systems to address oppression or make change. The constraints of conformity prevent workers or individual systems from challenging the status quo which, in turn, reinforces oppression. The constraints usually manifest in the form of sanctions or discipline for disrupting the social order. Yet, when we consider the impact that each system has upon the other, it is clear that challenging the status quo will be necessary to change the outcomes of oppression.

It is difficult to talk about the need for an anti-oppression perspective in child welfare without addressing the same need in other systems.