

“They Ain’t Your Blood” Kids’ Experience in Foster Care

If you had a choice and could raise children with their birth family or in foster care, you’d want for their birth family to be an option you could rely on. The profundity of children’s longing to be with their birth family cannot be overstated. In interviews with those foster children ages 12-17 who require intensive services, children state in many ways their longing to be regular kids living with, as they call it, “blood.”

Kids’ own words are worth hearing:

Most families are in it (foster care) for the money. The county doesn’t inspect very well. There are roaches and broken beds.

Some kids want parents. I didn’t want any other parents; I want only my own parents to tell me what to do.

Because our parents messed up, we have to take the punishment.

I feel safer at CPS than at group homes. At group homes, there is a mix of gangs who don’t like each other. There are too many fights. Staff egg on kids and make them mad.

At Christmas, the (foster) family are hugging on each other. But they ain’t your blood. Kids get mad and run away at holidays so they don’t have to deal with it.

Mental health asks you questions; they write it down; then they leave.

The only way to see your social worker is to mess up. You need to see your social worker once a week, not once a month.

Social workers just listen to the foster parents.

Foster parents make kids scared.

At group homes, kids give each other headaches. They set each other up.

I felt like I was in jail when my foster mother grounded me for a month. My bedroom had bars. There was no TV. I told my social worker I wanted to move, but I had to stay for about a year because she said there was no place else available.

Kids might have a view of their own situation which does not square with the view of their caregivers or social workers, but their view is legitimate and profoundly important. While they are quick to recite a litany of complaints about foster care, they also have no problem recalling people along the way who were kind to them.

If there are overall impressions left after these interviews, they are these:

No system, no matter how good, can ever make up for the deprivation of parental love and care in the earliest years of a child's life.

No child can develop appropriately when they are tossed from pillar to post with no sense of predictability or stability.

Great social work when a kid has been in the system for years can never overcome inadequate social work on the front end.

There are many excellent social workers, mental health practitioners, caregivers, judges, etc., who do their best to help kids. But they are mired in a system which is so swamped that the best work is pulled down by a sea of too-fast-to-make-sense work.

Mental health needs of children need to be recognized and addressed early on and in tandem with other decisions being made about a child's life.

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