

We are Overdue for a Revolution in Child Welfare

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Although child welfare reform has been a topic of conversation for many years, what is often meant by “reform” is evolutionary or incremental change, which are efforts to make the current system better, but not fundamentally different. But many systems leaders who operate significantly improved versions of the current system agree that it still falls short of meeting the needs of families.

The Biden administration engenders the slogan: Build Back Better. And many longtime advocates for change within our system are watching to see if the envisioned rebuild will make a profound difference in how our child welfare systems operate.

We are overdue for revolutionary change, and we need a way of helping to keep families together that goes beyond doing things a little bit better, but rather

develops a new, different and transformational approach. The good news is that there is momentum in our field for real and sustained changes to our work, as evidenced by a mounting chorus of voices calling for change. The great news is that now more than ever, these voices include families and youth who have been impacted by the system and their voices are finally being heard. We believe that when we work together with families, we are engaging in revolutionary work and are coming closer to a tipping point of change.

When it comes to system reform, there are varying positions — sometimes hotly debated — on how that reform should happen. Some child welfare scholars and advocates believe that the infrastructure of child welfare should remain, but prevention should be invested in more heavily than intervention and racial equity should be prioritized. Other advocates believe that racism is so deeply embedded in the infrastructure of child welfare that reform requires upending and rebuilding it in an entirely new way.

Whichever position you hold, it is clear that revolutionary action is needed to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. We believe that the options of fixing what exists now (evolutionary change) and building a new way of work (revolutionary change) are not mutually exclusive. Even if we dismantle the system and start anew, parts of our old system will come with us. Many of our child welfare professionals will become a part of this new system, and the potential biases within the workforce will take time to leave behind. This is where evolutionary change is critical; it builds the workforce's resilience and capacity for change by shifting mindsets.

A new way forward will not just build a better version of the current system, it will begin from a different premise. Instead of building a system that keeps children safe from their families, it will be one based on keeping children safely with their families. The rearranging of a few words sheds light on a shift that asks us to reconsider the fundamental purpose for which the system exists. We know now that children cannot have protection without connection.

We begin to see the foundation of a revolutionary approach revealed when we understand a child's need for an uninterrupted sense of belonging. When that need is deeply understood, the focus is on bringing everything we have to bear to keep families together. To create a revolutionary shift, child welfare must move from rescuing and redistributing children away from their families who are struggling to supporting parents and families to stay safely connected.

Through the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, the federal government tipped the financial scales toward separating families. We must continue to shift our funding sources away from being solely accessible when children are separated from their families and become available to support parents so they can address their own trauma and interrupt intergenerational cycles.

There will be situations in which a child is not safe at home and swift action may be needed. However, even in this situation, instead of blaming, shaming, punishing parents and removing their children, there are other options. Instead of removal of a child to foster care with unknown and unrelated adults, could we ask:

- 1) What can we do to remove the danger instead of the child?
- 2) Can someone the child/family knows move into the home to remove the danger?
- 3) Can the caregiver and child go live with a relative/fictive kin?
- 4) Could the child move temporarily to live with a relative or fictive kin? Rather, could we be asking, “What would it take to keep this family together?” and then do that!

The history of federal child welfare policy is littered with examples of evolutionary change.

The Aid to Families with Dependent Children of 1935 was created to help families who were poor, but some felt it disincentivized working and incentivized living off the system. So, an evolutionary policy was enacted, known as the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) of 1997. This created work requirements and time limited social services.

The Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act of 1974. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. All reforms that tinkered with the same underlying process built too heavily on family separation. Even the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (FFPSA) is incremental change; although a step in the right direction, it provides limited flexibility and access to funding for primary prevention.

Although we believe that our system has not yet bravely and consistently implemented revolutionary change efforts, we understand and see a place for evolutionary change. If we want to see a real and sustained difference in outcomes for families, evolutionary change is important, but revolutionary change is imperative.

To the new leaders of the Biden administration, who have identified the need to rebuild several sectors of our country, we urge you to include revolutionizing child welfare into your new vision. Children need an uninterrupted sense of belonging to thrive, so we implore you to build on the Family First Prevention and Services Act to allow the funding flexibility needed to strengthen, not separate, families.

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For many years, child welfare has been seen as merely a child protection/child-saving entity, with a limited focus on family well-being. Our new leaders should chart and steer us onto a new path which provides a clear mission to strengthen families, keeping them well, safe and together. We believe that this is the way to *Build Back Better*.

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