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THE PATTTERNS THAT DISCONNECT [1]

A year ago, Rose's four children, ages 6 through 12, were placed in foster care, following an anonymous complaint that she often left them alone at night to indulge in drug use. Now a court hearing is approaching and the foster care workers in charge of the children's placement are meeting to decide what recommendations to make to the judge.

Rose, who is in her late twenties, lives in the same neighborhood -one of New York's public-housing projects- in which she was raised. She has recently completed a drug rehabilitation program and is ready to move to a larger apartment—the two primary conditions set a year ago for her regaining custody of the children. However, Tom, the worker in this case, does not feel that Rose is ready to take the children back, because she misses some of the scheduled visits and looks disinterested in her kids when she does attend. Nobody in the meeting brings up the name of Elisa Izquierdo, but the public outcry over the now-famous case of the 6-'ear-old's death at the hands of her mother still echoes in the room. Rose does not seem *that* disturbed, but who knows?

The foster care staff conclude that although a recommendation to terminate Rose's parental rights is out of the question, because she has complied with the conditions set in the original plan, the agency cannot "go for reunification" in the hearing. Instead, the agency will have to ask for a continuation of the foster care placement, and then work harder to "recommit" Rose to her children.

Both the agency's dilemma and its "resolution" are typical of foster care. Time and again, agencies and courts postpone either a decision to reunite families or to break them up permanently -extending "temporary" placements for yet another 6, maybe 12, months. As a result, many children end up barred from returning to their families and also from being adopted into another family. The financial cost for cities and states is great; the emotional cost exacted from children, families and workers is even greater.

I participated in the staff meeting about Rose's children as a consultant invited to help the staff review and improve their work with families. After they decided on their recommendation to the court, I suggested we watch a videotape of the agency's first meeting with Rose after the children's placement a year ago.

The videotape shows Rose, her four children, the foster mother and Tom all sitting around a table. Sobbing, Rose talks about her feelings of emptiness since her children were taken from her. "Each time I walk into the apartment ... I was used to doing things for my children ... now I feel like a hole inside of me ~..." Rose's 7-year-old daughter, Alisha, leans against her side, sucking her thumb; the three boys, elbows on the table and chins resting on their hands, look anxiously at Rose and at Tom. The foster mother nods sympathetically.

"I understand your feelings," says Tom. "But before we get into that, let me ask you if there is any service that we could provide you?" Composing herself, Rose follows suit "Well, I could use a larger apartment"

The conversation suddenly shifts from Rose's longing for her children to the topic of housing,

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and from there to other services that Tom's agency can offer to Rose or refer her to. Eventually, Rose accepts that she might benefit from a drug rehabilitation program. Her feelings of emptiness are not brought up again; she and Tom never "get into that." The meeting ends with the agreement that Rose will focus on drug rehabilitation and housing. And, by implication, that she will *not* focus on her children. For the sake of her recovery, Rose is being granted a leave of absence from parenting. The half-spoken message is, "Don't worry about the children; we'll take care of them. You just focus on those other things, shape up and then you'll become a mother again."

This message, which is pervasive in the institutional culture of foster care, belies what both psychological theory and common sense teach us: attachments do not work like mechanical devices that can switched off and on at will, but rather in the manner of muscles, which wither when not exercised. Rose will be allowed to hold on to the *title* of parent without having to cope with the responsibility or the rewards of *being* a parent as long as she visits her children once or twice a month. But prevented from parenting, Rose will gradually lose confidence in her ability to parent and the motivation to reconnect.

"So," I ask Tom, "do you remember what made you change the subject, from Rose's longing for her children to the services that the agency had to offer?" Tom remembers thinking that he needed to write up a "service plan" detailing the steps Rose would take to regain custody of the children. The plan could only feature Rose as a recipient of services; it had no room for Rose as a mother; the part of Rose that longed for her children.

In New York, as in most other places, foster care services are split into two separate tracks: services specifically aimed at sheltering the child, such as home, education, and health care, and separate services aimed at correcting the deficit of the parent (usually single, female, young and poor, like Rose), such as drug rehabilitation and assistance with housing. The child is to be "stabilized" in his or her track until the mother completes her own, or fails to, in which case parental rights may be terminated. She is not to exercise any aspect of the parental role -no involvement with the child's school or with schoolwork, no concern for the child's health or emotional needs, no guidance of the child's social life. She is not even expected to see the child much; the standard frequency is one hour, every other week, in an agency and under the supervision of the workers.

So Tom's change of subject away from the mother's longing was no error. It was not that he inadvertently *missed* the opportunity to enhance Rose's relationship with her children. He deliberately *avoided* it, as prescribed by standard foster care practice. Everything that Tom might have done to nurture the relationship would have disturbed the structure of the foster care system.

When I asked Tom and his colleagues why foster care is designed to exclude parents completely from their children's lives, Elisa Izquierdo's name did come up -surely keeping parents at a distance prevents from physically hurting their children. But this only explains the reluctance to facilitate private, face-to-face encounters. It does not explain why parents and children are not encouraged to meet in the company of others or to talk over the phone. Or why biological parents are kept away not only from their children, but also from the foster parents raising them, the teachers educating them and the medical personnel caring for their health.

The discouragement of even these "safer" forms of parental participations based on the premise that foster care practice must prevent not only the possibility of physical harm, but the possibility of bad feelings as well. Workers and their supervisors think that the child might "feel rejected by the parent," "be given unrealistic promises of a prompt return" or "wait for a phone

call that does not come." And if the visit is uneventful and positive, it might trigger the child's "separation anxiety".

But rejection, disappointment, sadness, mutual animosity and, of course, separation anxiety are natural ingredients of the foster care situation, and of life. Trying to protect children and adults from experiencing those feelings amounts to desensitizing them to each other, thus destroying the very fabric of their relational system. Children who are not allowed to experience firsthand the unreliability of a parent are also denied the chance to demand her accountability; the parent who is protected from her children's demands is also deprived of an opportunity to become more responsible and compassionate toward them.

The pervasive use of a strategy of mutual desensitization betrays a disdain for the value of family relations. For all the focus on the "best interest of the child," children are often treated as distractions from the parents' worthier goals or as a carrot that may help coerce the parent into compliance. Because family relations are devalued, the concern about the risks involved in maintaining them is not balanced by a concern about the risks of not maintaining them. Foster care is practiced as though parents can become better parents; without actually parenting, and children can maintain a "virtual attachment" to them in the meantime. But isolation begets disaffection, and as the ties that bind parent and child dissolve, they become attached to separate realities. Rose's children have, by now, "stabilized" in their foster home, while Rose has adjusted to life as a childless woman. A tragic consequence of isolation is, ironically, an aggravation of the long-term risk for the child: children who are thrown together with their parents after a long period of estrangement are more likely to get hurt, casualties of the breakdown of the mutual accommodation that makes empathy and compassion possible.

The good news is that a growing number of foster care agencies are exploring ways of developing more humane services in which family relationships are nurtured rather than discounted where a mother's attachment to her children is seen as an asset rather than a distracting nuisance. As a consultant to some of these agencies, I have found that once the value of family connectedness is recognized, the "interventions" are not that complicated to design. Service plans become guided by questions such as: How many activities may involve the parent? How much contact can be allowed? How much emotional upheaval can be accepted as a normal part of the process? How many decisions about the child can be left to the discretion of biological and foster parents, working together>

When agencies nurture family relations, written communications to the parents become more inviting; meeting space is reorganized to accommodate larger groups of people and some meetings may take place at people's home, rather- than at the agency. In their conversations with parents, workers learn to listen to parents' feelings of loss, encourage their longing for their children and support their sense of responsibility.

These and other innovations are changing the foster care agencies, but not in time for Rose's family. Following the court hearing, a six-month extension of placement was ordered. Tom met once again with Rose, her children and the foster mother to discuss how to accelerate the process of reunification. This time, Rose could only think that her reunion with the children might "jeopardize her recover." The foster mother appeared more annoyed than sympathetic, the children bored rather than anxious. Alisha was still sucking her thumb, but now she was leaning against her foster mother.