

TUNE IN TO THE
SOUND OF DEMOCRACY

Justice Talking Radio Transcript

Foster Care: Broken Families, Broken Systems—Air Date: 6/19/06

Children, already victims of repeated abuse and prolonged neglect, find themselves moved from family to family and separated from siblings by overworked state foster care systems. With more than 500,000 children in foster care in the United States, fewer and fewer families willing to offer care, and state funding priorities moving in other directions, serious problems are likely to continue for some time. Join us on this edition of Justice Talking as we look at America's foster care system and ask what can be done to meet the needs of the nation's most vulnerable children.

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MARGOT ADLER: I'm Margot Adler. On today's show: foster care in America. Horror stories about children in foster care can make headlines, but what do we really know about the system that takes care of half-a-million children?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We have a stereotype about the children coming into foster care. We assume that they are brutally abused, tortured, and raped, that their parents are hopelessly addicted, and in a minority of cases, a small minority, that is true. But far more common are cases in which a family's poverty is confused with neglect.

MARGOT ADLER: More about the realities of foster care from young people who've been in the system, a mother whose son was taken from her by social services, a mom who has fostered 75 children, and a Michigan Supreme Court justice who is working to change the system. But first the news.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. What do Eddie Murphy, Marilyn Monroe and Cher have in common? They were raised for at least part of their lives not by their parents but by other family members or by foster parents. Today we'll talk about foster care, who's affected and recommendations for reform. Throughout the program, you'll hear people refer to the term "in care" which is shorthand for foster care.

Because today's program is about foster care, we decided to start by talking with someone who has been in the system, someone who can tell us what it is like to be a foster child. There is a group called Foster Club, a national network for youth in foster care, and through that group I reached Teresa who lives in Minnesota. Teresa is 20 years old and she officially aged out of foster care when she turned 18. She lived with four different families during the five years she spent in foster care as a teenager. She is now in college and helps young people in foster care who are aging out of the system. She advises them on how to make the transition to living on their own. I asked Teresa to tell me about the challenges of being a teenager in foster care.

THERESA: I was born and raised in a Chinese family and I spoke Cantonese fluently and I spoke a little bit of Taiwanese with my grandma, but when I was in care, I began to feel like I lost that part of me, that identity.

MARGOT ADLER: As I understand it, you've been talking with other teenagers who are going to age out of foster care to help them to prepare for that transition, and so talk about what that transition means.

THERESA: I think with myself and with thousands of youth I have worked with, a lot of the difficulties we face...transitioning is very similar. We do not get any emotional support and we don't have people to fall back on when for some reason we run out of money or whatnot. And I think just having someone there to listen to you when, you know, you fall apart or you break down, is especially important for the first year of college when it's a transitioning phase for everyone. And for me, I didn't really have a strong relationship with the family I aged out in, so when I went to college I had a little bit of support from them, but later I felt like I was very cut off because my foster mom basically told me to not call anymore and not be part of the family. I think that's a very real and a very harsh reality for a lot of foster kids out there.

MARGOT ADLER: Well, as you were talking to me about this, I started thinking about going to college for the first time, and I started thinking about how usually you go home to visit your parents during vacations, and usually you go home during the summers, and I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about going to college and the differences that you experienced compared to other kids.

THERESA: Well, with other peers my age I always feel like, you know, during vacation or, you know, Christmas break, summertime, whatever you want to call it, they always do have that home to go to. They buy their ticket or get that ride from their parent or whatever and just zip back home, and for me it's kind of like I always have to find some kind of alternate plan. I need to find a friend I'm going to stay with or I need to find some kind of internship

that I'm going to be working with where housing will be provided. When you are on your own and you need to make the first month's rent, the last month's rent, you know, put in a security deposit and sometimes you need a cosigner, a lot of foster youth, or former foster youth I should say, don't have that.

MARGOT ADLER: Now you attend McAllister College. What are your career plans?

THERESA: I feel that my career goal is really connected with my foster care experience. When I was in foster care I met with different psychologists and I met this one woman—she's phenomenal and she has been my therapist I think for six years or more now—and she was that one person while I was in care that really listened and really cared for me. And so I was thinking that I'll probably become a clinical psychologist and work with youth that have been through depression and trauma and everything they have to deal with just because of being in the system.

MARGOT ADLER: Teresa, I wish you the best of luck. Thanks for talking with us.

THERESA: Thank you.

MARGOT ADLER: Teresa spent five years of her life in foster care. She is a junior in college in Minnesota majoring in psychology and Asian studies. Later in the show, we'll talk about the state of the foster care system.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I believe the system is broken. This problem has been hidden in the United States of America until very recently, and I think that in advocating for a solution to this problem we in the justice system who have responsibility for this program can do nothing more important than trying to move this from the bottom of the judicial branch food chain to the top.

MARGOT ADLER: We'll also hear from a woman whose son was taken away from her by social services and how she got him back, and we visit a magazine written by and for young people who have been in foster care.

MARGOT ADLER: We've heard from a young woman who has been on the inside of the foster care system as a foster child. Now I want to introduce you to Sue Badeau, who also knows the foster care system intimately, this time as a foster mom. She has been a foster parent to more than 75 children. She has also been a child advocate for many years and served as deputy director of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. She came to our studio to talk about her personal experience in the system, and to give us a better understanding of how foster care works.

Now, you've adopted 20 children and you have two biological children as well. That's astounding. I mean, I can't even imagine that. I mean, I have to tell you, I have trouble dealing with my one child. So, first of all, how did that happen?

SUE BADEAU: Well, one child is difficult. I remember those days, so hats off to every parent no matter how many children they have. But we had our first child born to us. We did adopt a child and had our second birth child, adopted another child and then got more into the foster care world, and, in fact, for a brief period of time, we professionally ran a group home that was part of the Boys Town system of group homes, and during that time we had six teenage boys in our care as well as our, at that time, four young children. So we learned that we actually liked the dynamics of having a lot of kids around and that we felt competent and comfortable at it. So when we decided to leave the group home, we decided to keep our license as foster parents and continue being foster parents and gradually to adopt more of the children as well.

MARGOT ADLER: So let's step back for a moment. Tell us a little about foster kids in America. How many are in the system?

SUE BADEAU: Today or any given day like today, there's a little over half-a-million children, anywhere between 500 and 550,000, in our foster care system in the United States. And that includes children who come in today and who leave today. So throughout the course of the year, it's actually over 900,000 children who will have spent at least day or more in foster care during the course of the year.

MARGOT ADLER: And how old are most of these kids?

SUE BADEAU: They really range from infants through to the oldest adolescents, but the average age today is around ten years old, and you're going to find that more than half of the children are ten years old and older. A lot of the children are 12, 13, 14 and above.

MARGOT ADLER: Now how does the process start, and how do kids get into the foster care system?

SUE BADEAU: Well, it's possible for a family to voluntarily call social services and say: I'm really struggling, I need help. That's not the typical way that most children actually get into the system. Most of the time, it starts when somebody else makes that call. It could be because of perceived abuse or neglect, it could be because the child has bruises, comes into an emergency room. But more likely...more of the children who do come to the attention of the system are not the abused children. They are children whose category for coming in is called "neglect," and that is anything from not having been fed to not being brought to medical appointments or school, to being improperly cared for any way, to being in the home of a person with an addiction who kind of forgets to take care of the child. So there are a number of issues that all kind of are encapsulated in that one term "neglect."

MARGOT ADLER: And how long do kids stay in the system?

SUE BADEAU: The statistic that you normally will hear and that most of the data will back up is approximately three years at the average, but we know that there are many children who will stay almost their entire childhood.

MARGOT ADLER: We keep on hearing about kids with multiple foster care families. In other words, they go to one, they end up with another, they're moved around. First of all, what's the average in regard to that?

SUE BADEAU: From the best that we can determine, the average is about three moves for every child. Now bear in mind that the children we had, the older adolescents we had, I did a little survey to figure out how many moves they had, and they had an average of 11. So I think older children get...or the more types of special needs they have, you're going to see these numbers of moves be upwards of double digits.

MARGOT ADLER: Now given the number of children that you've adopted and the number of children that you have been a foster mother to, am I right to imagine that they're of different races and ethnic backgrounds?

SUE BADEAU: That's right.

MARGOT ADLER: When children are placed with families, is race considered?

SUE BADEAU: Race is and should be considered, along with culture, everything related to the child's needs, everything related to what makes this child who he or she is. And how is anyone going to appropriately meet all of those needs? It's not intended to be the sole deciding factor—race or any other single element of who that child is—but it certainly is a consideration.

MARGOT ADLER: What can you tell us about how well children do in foster care?

SUE BADEAU: The studies that we know of children who actually leave the foster care system, particularly without getting a permanent stable family, show us that they do have a lot of challenges ahead. They don't do as well in school; they often are more likely to drop out, they are less likely to go on to post-secondary school; they're more likely to show up in our homeless population or our prison population. Having said that, there are lots of children who have experience in foster care who do really well and who are very bright and who can do well in college and who can get good jobs and who can have stable family lives. So I don't want to stigmatize children, but I do want to say that that a life of moving around from foster home to foster home, changing schools multiple times, never having that stability, it does contribute to a high risk for challenging outcomes in their adult life.

MARGOT ADLER: Sue Badeau has been a child advocate for many years and served as deputy director of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. Thank you so much for talking with us.

SUE BADEAU: Thank you for taking a look at this important issue.

MARGOT ADLER: You can learn more about foster care in America at our website, justicetalking.org. Coming up on Justice Talking, two passionate advocates tell us what needs to be done with the foster care system, a system they say is broken.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I was horrified to find out that 18-year-olds are left on their own. I would never have dreamed of doing that to my own children.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We have got to stop putting children into a system that churns out walking wounded four times out of five.

MARGOT ADLER: Don't go away.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. On today's show we are looking at foster care in America. No one disagrees that the system is overwhelmed. More than 900,000 kids spend at least one day in foster care a year. But what should be done? Justice Maura Corrigan and Richard Wexler join me now to talk about what's wrong with our child welfare system, a system that was designed to protect kids, but with questionable success. Justice Maura Corrigan serves on the Michigan Supreme Court. She was a member of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. Richard Wexler is the executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. I want to welcome you both to Justice Talking.

Justice Corrigan, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, almost half of the children in foster care spend at least two years there. On average, foster kids have three different foster placements. Does this tell us the system is broken?

MAURA CORRIGAN: I believe the system is broken. I've encountered numerous children in foster care in my home state and met them through my work on the Pew Commission. This problem has been hidden in the United States of America until very recently, and I think that in advocating for a solution to this problem, we in the justice system who have responsibility for this program can do nothing more important than trying to move this from the bottom of the judicial branch food chain to the top.

MARGOT ADLER: What about you, Richard? How would you answer that?

RICHARD WEXLER: It is absolutely broken, almost every place in the country. There are a few model systems in the country and there is a great deal that can be learned from them, but in most cases it is severely broken, as much so as it was 30 years ago. What I have learned in 30 years is that there are ways to fix it that are somewhat different than I think what some of the conventional wisdom holds.

MARGOT ADLER: Justice Corrigan, you served as a member of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. What did the Commission try to achieve? What did it achieve?

MAURA CORRIGAN: The first thing we did was recommend ways to repair the federal financing scheme that affects children in foster care. The second area that we touched on was the problem of court delays, and we made recommendations about how the courts in the United States, state courts, essentially, should proceed to correct and repair the delays in delivering justice in children's cases. We're making very good headway on the recommendations. Congress, at the end of January, voted \$100 million to help state courts for the first time work on collaboration with other agencies and work on technology systems which are primitive. And on the court side, state courts have embraced our recommendations. And I'm pleased to tell you that currently our data shows that 17 different states have now started state commissions like the Pew Commissions to start tackling in a collaborative way their foster care problems in their individual states. So we are making systemic progress on the foster care issue.

MARGOT ADLER: And more broadly, besides delays, what should the role of the courts be in the foster care system? What needs to change?

MAURA CORRIGAN: What has happened, I call it "the silo effect." We in the United States, we're very strong on the division in the branches of government, so we operate in silos. We have the judicial branch, the executive branch, the legislative branch and often never the twain shall meet. What really needs to change in the case of children is that we cooperate across the branches of government and between public and private agencies, and work collaboratively to solve the problems of the individual child and the family that is coming before the court. This is something we haven't done. Judges stick with judges, social workers in the executive branch stick with social workers, and this has been a problem. So one of the principle recommendations of Pew and one of the things we're starting to see is collaboration.

MARGOT ADLER: Richard, when it comes to the courts, what needs to change?

RICHARD WEXLER: The most important thing actually for the courts is something very different, although all of those changes, those incremental changes, will make a small difference. I think you need to understand who these kids are. We have a stereotype about the children coming into foster care. We assume that they are brutally abused, tortured, raped, that their parents are hopelessly addicted, and in a minority of cases, a small minority, that is true. But far more common are cases in which a family's poverty is confused with neglect. The most important change we need is a strong institutional provider of defense counsel for birth parents because that's the best way to protect their children from needless placement in foster care and all of the tragedies that result. Right now in many states there is no defense counsel for birth parents early on in the proceedings. In others it's some overwhelmed public defender who has absolutely no chance against the state, and judges, too often, are terrified not to rubber stamp recommendations for removal, because if that child dies after being returned to his own home, that judge's career may be over.

MARGOT ADLER: So let's talk for a minute about neglect. First of all, how do we define neglect?

RICHARD WEXLER: Well, that's one of the biggest problems. Your typical state neglect statute, not all of them, but typically, defines neglect roughly as lack of adequate food, clothing, shelter or supervision, and that of course is also the perfect definition of poverty. Now neglect can include some terrible, horrible things done to children by terrible parents. It can include starving a child to death on purpose, but it also can include the food stamps running out at the end of the month.

MARGOT ADLER: So let me give you, Richard, three examples and tell me what you think should be done with this child and if the child should be removed from the home. A child who's living with a parent who's addicted to drugs and is unable to provide for the child.

RICHARD WEXLER: Okay, in that situation what you want is family drug treatment as your first option, where, for example, if it needs to be inpatient, the parent and the child can live together. And let me explain why because a lot of people are going to say well, why in the world would you want to help some mother who chose drugs over her own child? The reason is not for the sake of the mother, but for the sake of that child. There is a study from Florida involving children born with cocaine in their systems. One group was placed in foster care, the other group left with mothers, birth mothers able to care for them. At six months they were measured using the normal measures of infant development consistently. The infants left with the birth mothers did better, where the foster children the separation from the mothers was more toxic than the cocaine.

MARGOT ADLER: So for the sake of the children, in that case, you suggested option one should be drug treatment. Let's take example two. What about cases of physical or sexual abuse?

RICHARD WEXLER: It depends on what you mean by physical abuse. If you mean, for example, a case where nothing has ever happened before but a teenager begins insulting her mother in the worst, most vile ways and dad loses it and slaps her, that's a situation for help for the family. If you mean a father is torturing a child, beating him or her for the sheer sadistic joy of it, you take that child away and you don't turn back. And that would be the case in most cases of what most people think of as sexual abuse.

MARGOT ADLER: And a third example: a poor family, there's no heat, there's no food, it's cold, there's hardly any clothing. What do you do?

RICHARD WEXLER: Provide the heat, the food and the clothing.

MARGOT ADLER: What do you think in general should be the criteria for removing a child from his or her home and terminating a parent's right?

RICHARD WEXLER: The cases of sexual abuse, the rape, the sexual torture of children, those are easy. You take the child away, you don't turn back. The cases of brutal beatings, the

cases of deliberate starvation, the cases where you have genuinely tried drug treatment and the birth parent isn't interested in that treatment or simply doesn't succeed at treatment over and over again—those are the cases where you go for termination of parental rights without even so much as a second thought. You will also find those are a very small percentage of cases in the system.

MARGOT ADLER: I know that you've talked about something called “Intensive Family Preservation Programs,” and you've said that they have a better record of safety than foster care. Are you saying that the foster care system is actually dangerous for our nation's kids?

RICHARD WEXLER: Yes, I am. It is dangerous emotionally and sometimes in other ways as well. The overwhelming majority of foster parents try to do the best they can for the children in their care, like the overwhelming majority of parents period, but the abusive minority is significant. One recent study of foster care alumni found that one-third of them said they had been abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home. The study didn't even ask about one of the most common forms of abuse, foster children abusing each other. The emotional devastation is even worse. This same study found that only 20 percent of the alumni are doing well. We have got to stop putting children into a system that churns out walking wounded four times out of five.

MARGOT ADLER: Maura, did you want to respond to what Richard said?

MAURA CORRIGAN: I agree with Richard as well that we have numerous foster parents who are doing a very fine job with children in foster care, but some of the data that we've accumulated in Michigan reflects significant problems with placements of children. For example, we've just received a study from Wayne State University Psychology Department that reflects between age 13 and 18. Our Southeast Michigan Wayne County-based children in foster care are in 5.8 different placements while they're in foster care. That is ridiculous. That is intolerable. There shouldn't be that number of moves. And we need to do a great deal to reform how children are treated when they are not in an adoptive home or when they are not reunified with their family. We need to increase the options about subsidized guardianships for family members, for aunts and uncles, for grandmas, grandpas who can take children when the birth parent is disabled. We need to do a far better job on parent recruitment than we're doing both for adoptive parents and for foster parents. But the primary value must be the safety and the permanency for every child in the system.

MARGOT ADLER: Looking at kids who are available for adoption, particularly older boys are less likely to be adopted. Why is that? Let's start with you, Maura.

MAURA CORRIGAN: I think that there are some myths surrounding children in foster care about the behavioral problems that there are with those children. And we've done some searches on data in our state. Let me say this, what we know about adoptability: At any given time in Michigan, we have 6,000 children available for adoption. They're roughly split between the over-tens and the under-tens. We have approximately 75 percent of the under ten-year-olds who are ultimately adopted from the system, but once you hit the age

of 11, your odds of actually being adopted are astronomically small, and Michigan is doing better than many other states. We are very concerned about those children who are then relegated to permanent foster care until they're 18, at which point they're unceremoniously dumped out of the system onto the street to be on their own.

And again, when you talk about passion for an issue, I was horrified to find out that 18-year-olds are left on their own. I would never have dreamed of doing that to my own children, and the thought that they're just on the street is just astonishing. And predictably more than half of those children return to the system within two years of aging out. So this is a problem we must address.

MARGOT ADLER: And that means to jail, I would assume.

MAURA CORRIGAN: Well, it means to jail or into our mental health system, because when you're isolated in that fashion you develop mental problems.

MARGOT ADLER: Richard Wexler, your thoughts on adoption and so forth.

RICHARD WEXLER: Well, first, I think the best way to solve the problem of aging out is to prevent so many children from aging in. Again, the needless removal of the children drives everything else. In terms of those whom we already have in, of course, we have an enormous responsibility not to simply dump them out at age 18. It's also telling, by the way, where a lot of those young people go—back to the birth parents whose parental rights were terminated. And since that's where so many are going, again, we need to reconsider how we deal with birth parents. As far as adoption goes, we've gone through about a decade now where we've looked at adoption as the panacea, and that's had some very unfortunate side-effects including creating more legal orphans, children with no ties to birth parents, and yet very little hope of being adopted either.

MARGOT ADLER: What would each of you do to improve the foster care system? Let's start with you, Justice Corrigan.

MAURA CORRIGAN: If I had a magic wand and enough money to do it, I would, in the first place, increase the age limit of children in foster care so that they remained in care until they were 21 years old. I would increase the qualifications of the child protective services workers so that they would come into the system with a masters level degree and they would not be overwhelmed. I would reduce the caseload size for both attorneys and social workers who are in this system. Going at the beginning, I concur with Richard's point and strenuously agree that we need early prevention efforts so that we can get at the situation affecting that child early on and attempt to alleviate the problem that that child is facing in a family setting with family members who will help. I'd incorporate across the board problem-solving court solutions. In drug dependency courts I would wave a magic wand and let every court in the United States become a problem-solving court.

MARGOT ADLER: Richard Wexler, your magic wand.

RICHARD WEXLER: I would rebuild the system to emphasize safe, proven programs to keep families together, because the primary values of the system must be safety and permanence, and the systems that have emphasized this family preservation approach are the ones that have done the best to insure that kind of safety. And one of the ways I would work to do this is to do something that actually the State of Michigan has just done and let every state do it, and that is make the funding more flexible. We have an absurd system in this country where the federal government reserves billions of dollars solely for use on foster care and nothing else, and it's an open-ended entitlement. The more children who are eligible that you put in foster care, you get a percentage of what you pay back for each and every one of those children if they're eligible. The State of Michigan has said that's crazy. We are going to accept a federal offer for a waiver. We'll take this money as a lump sum and we'll use it on safe, proven programs to keep families together and other initiatives as well as foster care. I would give every state the option to do that as well.

MARGOT ADLER: Richard Wexler is the executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. Justice Moira Corrigan serves on the Michigan Supreme Court. She was a member of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. Thank you both so much for being on our show.

MAURA CORRIGAN: You're very welcome, Margot.

RICHARD WEXLER: Thank you very much.

MARGOT ADLER: You can learn more about the Pew Commission's recommendations for foster care reform at justicetalking.org. Coming up, a mother tells us what it was like to have her son taken away by social services, and how she got him back.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I remembered from the sixties how to stay numb, and I would just do a little drugs here and there and that's what I started doing. And eventually it got the better of me and I just went over the deep end, and then he was removed from me because of my drug use.

MARGOT ADLER: Don't go away.

MARGOT ADLER: This is Justice Talking. I'm Margot Adler. At any given time, there are about a half-a-million children in foster care. African-American children are four times as likely as white children to be in foster care, and they are often placed with foster parents of a different race. Many of these parents don't know how to take care of black children's hair, but some are trying to learn. Chana Joffe-Walt has this report from Washington State.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: The women arrive at this African-American hair salon armed with notepads and pens. About 20 foster moms, most of whom are white, have got black foster kids at home. They've come to this salon in Renton, Washington outside Seattle to learn

the basics of African-American hair care. To start, the salon stylist asks everyone to take a turn introducing themselves.

LEE: Hi, my name's Lee and I'm fostering a little three-month-old baby and she's African-American and I have no idea how to take care of her hair. It's already getting little, I guess, dreads in it, and I feel terrible, so...

KATHERINE: My name is Katherine and I have twin girls. They have Mohawks at the moment—only hair down the middle.

JULIE: My name's Julie and I need lots of help. I just got a little three-year-old. Her hair was completely dry, damaged, with ringworm, and I need help.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: Once they've gone all the way around the circle, Teresa, one of the stylists, says the major difference between white and black hair is texture. She draws some squiggly lines on a whiteboard to represent strands of hair. With white hair, you want to take the oil out, Teresa says. In black hair, you want to put it back in. The moms furiously take notes and copy down their own squiggly lines. But Teresa announces the only way to learn is to see it done, and she leads everyone to the back of the salon where they crowd around the sinks. She demonstrates washing hair on a twelve-year-old bi-racial girl. Teresa's hands move fast around the girl's thick, bushy hair to get it wet.

THERESA: She's going to need some help because she's got so much hair, and she's going to have to learn how to manage this hair on her own one day anyway. But for a long time, she's going to need help.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: Yolanda Miazette is perched on a stool watching from the back of the room. She's a Washington State social worker. Miazette is African-American. She says over the years she's seen lots of foster kids with bad hair.

YOLANDA MIAZETTE: The hair wouldn't be combed, their hair would be matted together, lots of rubberbands in their hair, very, very dry. Foster parents often of other races and cultures and backgrounds will cut African-American girls' hair off because they don't know how to manage it.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: Miazette is still seeing hair problems because so many foster parents with African-American foster kids aren't black. In Seattle's King County, African-Americans make up only eight percent of the total population, but over a quarter of the kids here in foster care are black. After three shampoos, Teresa has gotten the soap and water all the way through the model's thick hair. She tells the moms that you only need to wash African-American hair once, maybe twice a week.

“Remember, we're trying to keep the oils in,” she says. Over the sink she tugs a comb through the 12-year-old's wet knots. One mom, Susan Dennings, leans over to ask the girl if it hurts. She says no, she's used to it. Dennings says her six-year-old screams every time a comb comes near her.

SUSAN DENNINGS: My main concern is how we get through this without too much pain, because obviously I don't want to hurt her, and it hurts me when I know I'm hurting her.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: Physical pain is not Dennings' only worry either. Recently, her daughter's been complaining that she has the wrong kind of hair.

SUSAN DENNINGS: She has a small number of contacts and friends at school who look like her, but generally they don't. So her biggest desire right now is to have straight, blonde hair like Cinderella.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: For some, the idea that children of color want to look like Cinderella is disturbing. Teresa the stylist says it's up to parents regardless of their race to help kids feel proud of who they are. She knows from personal experience—she's biracial. Her father's African-American and her mother is white.

THERESA: Just knowing that my mother, you know, took the time to learn how to do my hair—my mother was the one who taught me how to braid—you know, it just shows that they care enough to go the extra step to learn about their culture. It's important, and being there is a big statement for us.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: In class, the model's hair has been combed, blow-dried, sectioned off and combed again. Teresa massages in some oil and starts pressing the hair to keep it straight one small chunk at a time. As the class winds down, foster mom Julie says she'll have to change her own routine to use the skills she learned today.

JULIE: I'm like, okay, I've gotta get up an extra half-hour early to have time to comb out her hair.

THERESA: How much time do you spend on your own hair?

JULIE: Like three minutes. I just blow-dry it, and that's it. And I have an eight-year-old daughter and she has just long, straight hair and she just, you know, it's just simple, so this is all new.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: While change is daunting, Julie says she hopes it can help her daughter.

JULIE: She may not even remember me or anything, but in the long run, you know, she's going to feel good about herself now, so.

CHANA JOFFE-WALT: Yolanda Miazette, the State social worker, says making kids feel good about themselves is the whole point. For Justice Talking, I'm Chana Joffe-Walt in Linton, Washington.

MARGOT ADLER: Lynne Miller is a parent advocate for the Seaman Society for Children and Families in New York City. Her son was placed in foster care because of her drug use. She cleaned up her life and worked with her son's foster family to eventually get him back. Welcome to Justice Talking, Lynne.

LYNNE MILLER: Thank you very much.

MARGOT ADLER: Why don't we start with right now: How old is your son and how long has he been living with you?

LYNNE MILLER: He's 15. He's been home, oh, eight years. He's doing really well. He just got accepted to the Science Institute at Tottenville High School. I am just very proud of him. And we still see his foster family, by the way, we have a great relationship. He goes on vacations with them during the year, and he spends weekends sometimes. They are my resource when I can't get home in time from work, and he still considers their adopted daughters his sisters, so we have an extended family.

MARGOT ADLER: Now tell me a little bit about what happened to you when you got pregnant and after you had your son.

LYNNE MILLER: Well, the day I found out I was pregnant, they called me to tell me the father of my baby was in a coma. And 11 days later he died, so he never knew I was pregnant and my son never knew his father. So I started spotting and I went to the doctor and he said you're going to have to control yourself if you want to keep the baby. And Dennis was the only one of my four children I actually picked to have. I decided that it's time to have another baby. I have three older children, so I did not want to lose him. So I suppressed all my emotions and I just functioned barely. And I got through it, I made it through the pregnancy and he survived and he thrived, he did well. And when he was four my mother died, who I had a very close relationship with in my adult life, and it was just like a big gaping hole opened up in my life. And I remembered from the sixties how to stay numb, and I would just do a little drugs here and there and that's what I started doing and eventually it got the better of me and I just went over the deep end. And then he was removed from me because of my drug use.

MARGOT ADLER: And what was it like having your son taken away from you?

LYNNE MILLER: It was horrifying. I thought my life was over. And at one point I was actually going to voluntarily surrender my rights to the foster mother because I thought this woman and her husband and their family can take so much better care of my son. I had lost my job because of layoffs. At one point I really wanted to just die, and I had a case worker—my third caseworker I believe it is—who said to me, well why would you give your rights to your son when you can get him back? And I said well, nobody's told me how. They just told me find a program and get in it. But I didn't know what a program was. I had never been in trouble in my whole life. And she said I'll help you. And she

laid it out for me from step one to step ten, and I said, wow, if somebody had been there the first time and told me that, my son would've been home a year-and-a-half ago.

MARGOT ADLER: How many foster families did your son live with?

LYNNE MILLER: One.

MARGOT ADLER: Only one.

LYNNE MILLER: He was lucky.

MARGOT ADLER: And what was your relationship with them?

LYNNE MILLER: At first, I was not very nice I must admit. The first time I heard him call her “mom” I lost my mind. Then the caseworker took me aside and explained to me she has other children in the house and they call her mom and it just assimilates the child better. It makes him not feel so out of place. And I'm not a stupid person and I did understand. I just didn't like it. But after a few months of visiting and speaking with this woman, she was really a nice woman. She did it out of love. She didn't do it for money.

MARGOT ADLER: But then this woman who was the foster parent helped you get your son back?

LYNNE MILLER: She told me at one point, as long as she sees that I'm really working to get my son back, she has no problem being there as a support system for me. And like if I want to go to one of his school functions, she'll come and get me and take me with them. But if she sees I'm not trying, she's not going to work with me at all. And I admire that about her because she was honest with me and up-front.

MARGOT ADLER: And so then you had more incentive to try.

LYNNE MILLER: Yes. Oh, definitely. And even when I, at one point, told her, I said you know, maybe I'll sign my rights away. She told me not to do that, to think about it first.

MARGOT ADLER: What was the most difficult thing in reestablishing a relationship with your son?

LYNNE MILLER: Getting him to tell me how angry he was at me, because I knew he was but he didn't want to talk about it because I think he was afraid that if he did say something I wouldn't take him back, or they would get mad that he told something. So one day when it was getting close to time to bring him home, I said: “You must be really, really mad at me. And, you know, it's okay. So if you want to tell me or you want to hit me or you want to do something go ahead.” So he pushed me. And he pushed me really hard and he said, “I am so mad at you, I wanna hurt you.”

And I said that's okay, you're allowed to have those feelings because I hurt you. And I think that started our road to recovery. And we never did have family therapy together, but I used to bring him with me to my program, and he met my one-on-one counselor and sometimes we sat with her just to say hi, and I think she just did a little family therapy on her own there, and things just...they just went really well. When he first came home, though, there were nightmares and acting out, but that was to be expected, and I kept him in therapy so it would help him. And over the years things just...we have a really great relationship.

MARGOT ADLER: Lynne Miller and her son now live in New York. He spent more than two years in the foster care system. Thanks so much for being with us, Lynne.

LYNNE MILLER: Oh, my pleasure.

MARGOT ADLER: Every kid who has a foster care experience has their own story to tell: how they got into foster care, what happened when they got there, and how it shaped who they are. Represent is a magazine written by and for youth in foster care. It includes personal stories and practical advice about how to navigate the system. I went to their office in New York City to talk with one of the editors, Nora McCarthy, and two of the writers, Jarel Melendez and Natasha Santos. I asked Nora to tell me how the magazine got started.

NORA MCCARTHY: Well, we've been publishing another magazine by teenagers for the last 25 years, and in the early nineties a tremendous number of kids were coming into foster care so all of a sudden we have a lot of foster youth working on the other magazine. And a lot of their issues were very particular to foster care like dealing with group homes and foster parents and being separated from their family. Those were just unique and separate kinds of issues. And so as their issues became a larger part of the other magazine, we thought that they needed their own voice and that their voice needed to go directly to foster youth. And so we started Represent, which was, at that time, called Foster Care Youth United in order to unite and give a sense of community to kids who had been pulled out of their families. "Represent" is kind of like stand up and represent yourself, represent your community and who you are. And that's kind of what the magazine is about. It's about not being ashamed of being in foster care and representing what it really means to be a youth in care when there are so many stereotypes.

MARGOT ADLER: One of the things foster kids have in common is the experience of living in multiple households with multiple families, whether they are strangers or relatives, which is also called "kinship care."

JAREL MELENDEZ: Well, in a nutshell, my foster care experience was a 360. I lived in kinship foster care at the age of five and I was in kinship up until the age of 10-11. Then from kinship I got into one foster home and I remain there for approximately five years, and then that foster home...

MARGOT ADLER: After moving in and out of different homes, Jarel Melendez was adopted by his grandmother when he was 18 years old. He's now 20. He's been writing for Represent for the past two years. I asked him why the magazine is important to kids like him who are or have been in foster care.

JAREL MELENDEZ: It gives them inspiration and hope. I mean they say that we're just like them. We're no different than them. The social workers and all the legal people and the agency and whatever, they're not like them. They read about them, but they're not them. We are them. You know, we've been in situations very similar to them, some more harsh, some more worse, some more better, but we're them. We are their voice, so they will see that oh, wow, you know, he made it through the system, I can make it too. We're their inspiration; we're their hope, their role models. We're going to make an impact; we're going to leave an impression that youth in care...that we're something. We're not what statistics show, that we're drop-outs, we're homeless, no. We're so much more than that. We're educated, we're making moves, we're doing wonderful things...lawyers, doctors... we're doing that, you know.

MARGOT ADLER: Jarel is going to Baruch College in New York in September. He's hoping to create a support group for gay youth in foster care. Represent magazine has between 20 and 30 writers throughout the year. Most are in their teens and early 20s, and most of them aren't aspiring journalists. Natasha Santos is 18 years old and has been writing for Represent magazine for four years. Natasha lived in three foster homes beginning when she was eight years old. She was adopted when she was 15. I asked her to tell me why she came to Represent and why it is important to her.

NATASHA SANTOS: I always enjoyed writing and everything, but I didn't actually join Represent because I thought I was a great writer. I mean, I wanted to write because I just felt like I had something to say, and I wanted everyone to listen to me. I had to be listened to.

MARGOT ADLER: What do you think are the most interesting articles that the writers produce?

NATASHA SANTOS: I like the personal stories. I guess that's kind of what makes people read it because it's good to look back and see wow, that person who's going through it...I went through it and this is what I did and this is what she did. And, wow, I'm not alone in this and we did it together and we both turned out this way or you turned out that way or we're different or we're the same. I like reading that and like seeing myself in other people's writings. Represent, I guess, is us representing the voices in foster care, all the voices that haven't been heard. I don't want to say that I'm representing all the kids that haven't been heard, but I hope I'm representing a portion. I hope.

MARGOT ADLER: She went on to say that for her Represent has been a meeting place, a place where she can connect with others like her, a place that has helped her find her voice. Although Natasha didn't start out interested in being a journalist, she is now planning to get

a masters degree in journalism. You can listen to Natasha read one of her articles on our website, justicetalking.org.

MARGOT ADLER: Have you had an experience with the foster care system? You can tell us your story at our website, justicetalking.org. While there you can also listen to past shows or sign up for our podcasting service. Thanks for joining me. I hope you'll tune in next week. I'm Margot Adler.
