



STRENGTH-BASED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

INSTEAD OF ‘HARD TO PLACE CHILD’ ‘SAFE AND NURTURING FAMILIES CAN BE HARD TO FIND’

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This series focuses on words or expressions considered “strength-based” to help foster or resource, adoptive and kinship parents and child welfare agency staff describe and discuss children and families from a positive and person-first perspective. Here’s a quick look at our suggestions so far:

- Replace the word “homes” with “families” because it is not the homes that help or hurt children but the families living there who do; homes don’t have feelings and behaviors, but family members do. Also, replace “cases” with children, youth, individuals and families because, again, cases don’t have feelings and behaviors.
- Replace “home studies” with “family assessments.” It is families and agency staff who need to mutually assess teamwork strengths and needs to foster, adopt or provide kinship care.
- Programs as well as practices can benefit from a strength-based perspective. It’s important to respectfully write and talk about children who have been commercially sexually exploited. For example, both legislation and the media use person-first language of “young people who have been sexually exploited” instead of “child prostitutes.”
- “Family time” should replace “visitation.” It provides an example of how to achieve reunification.

Family foster care and adoption programs have a long history of referring to children as “hard to place.” We can Google those words to find child welfare literature dating back 50 years. Most of the articles seem to come from the adoption field. Prior to the 1970s, adoption was seen mostly as a service to provide white babies for white infertile couples. The focus then changed to find, instead, families for children — but not all children. A 1981 article in *Pediatrics* magazine was titled “Adoption of the Hard to Place Child.” It emphasized the need for specially trained staff, agencies and families for these children, with support from informed pediatricians. The label “hard to place” included the following categories of children:

- Being older than 4
- Boys
- Black and other racial or ethnic minorities
- Disabled
- Handicapped
- Having one or more physical, emotional or social disability
- Having “the alphabet soup” of mental health diagnoses: ADD, ADHD, ODD, CD, GAD, FAS, etc.
- Sibling groups

Research in the 1970s promoted the concept of “permanency” by explaining that children require parental continuity and commitment, and the legal and social status that comes from having a family of one’s own. This should begin with “reasonable efforts” to keep children and birth parents together or provide resources for adoption, as mandated by the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272).

When child protective services and the courts decide it is not safe for children and parents to stay together, the care of these children is outsourced to relatives or foster families. When these families do not have the ability, resources or willingness to keep the children safe and connected, the children are outsourced to another family, then another and another. The idea of children being “hard to place” spilled over to foster care. Each year, thousands of young people grow up in foster care and then end up in long-term foster care, now euphemistically referred to as Another Planned Permanency Living Arrangement (APPLA). However, APPLA is not an acceptable

permanency option. It sanctions young people with loss and trauma histories to leave foster-care status without being connected to at least one adult relationship that is safe, nurturing and enduring. Thus, the goal isn't permanency — it is the possibility of being homeless, trafficked or worse. "Aging out" is not an expression much less an option that any of us would use for our birth children as they transition to young adult living.

When we use the expression "hard to place," we make children responsible for not being connected to families that are safe, nurturing and enduring. How can children be responsible for feelings and behaviors created by loss, trauma histories and multiple "placements?" Aren't their feelings and resulting behaviors reasonable given their loss and trauma histories? Doesn't labeling children "hard to place" blame the victim?

Strength-based language recommends we stop using "placed" or "placement" and reframe it by saying that children are "joining a new family." Children who have experienced the trauma of abuse, neglect, separation, multiple moves and the unfulfilled promise of "forever families" have feelings that result in behaviors that, yes, can be challenging for family life. But there has to be an alternative to the "place and pray" approach where children are placed like objects, with the family and whoever does the placing praying it will work out.

In the 19th century, posters announced the arrival of "Orphan Train" children who were put up on train platforms and theater stages — thus "up for adoption." Now we feature children in magazines and ads for "Wednesday's Child." (Has anyone looked at the "Wednesday's Child" poem: "Monday's

child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace, Wednesday's child is full of woe, Thursday's child has far to go, Friday's child is loving and giving, Saturday's child works hard for a living. And a child that's born on the Sabbath day is fair and wise, good and gay." Could we agree this is discriminatory in so many ways — about what "fair" means, that not everyone celebrates Sabbath, that child labor is illegal, and

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"gay" has a totally different connotation from when this poem was created in the 1870s?

Are we telling children that not one family wants them because of their characteristics? We can no longer make gender, age, ethnicity or behavior of children the defining variable in whether they are joined with families that will be safe, nurturing and enduring.

There must be a mandate for policy and practice standards that makes reunification with parents or kin, or adoption by foster or other parents, timely and lasting. For example, in the 1980s, the federal government supported a demonstration education project titled "Project CARR — Community Approach to Retention and Recruitment." Child welfare agency leaders convened community leaders with this challenge: if teachers are not responsible for putting books in classrooms, and coaches are not responsible for putting sports equipment in gyms, then the community must provide these resources if they want children to get a decent education.

Let's make a community commitment that:

- Families are the best place for almost all children to grow up. Not a succession of multiple families, but in one family that is safe, nurturing, validating and lasting.
- Children who have specific and sometimes extraordinary needs deserve families with specific and extraordinary strengths and skill.

- All families — birth, kinship, foster and adoptive — require specific and extraordinary agency and community supports.

We know exactly how to retain, recruit, develop and support resource families; there are models of practice to do this. In 1991, the National Commission on Family Foster Care — convened by CWLA and the NFPA — published A Blueprint for Fostering Infants, Children, and Youth in the 1990s. In 2013, CWLA published A National Blueprint for Excellence mandating that all children have the right to grow up safely, in loving families, with everything they need to flourish — and with connections to their culture, ethnicity, race and language. Is it possible to convene agency, community leaders, foster parent associations and parent advocacy groups to create strategic plans to make "hard to place" children, APPLA, "aging out" and "Wednesday's Child" as obsolete as the 19th century Orphan Trains?

What about convening child welfare agencies and their communities to

create strategic plans to ensure that children are no longer labeled “hard to place” because supported safe and nurturing families can be found? Can families, individuals, communities,

to no more deficit words and expressions for children and families? Child welfare services in our communities can be reimagined to realign the focus of child welfare to do exactly what the

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providers and other organizations create the greatest opportunities for all children and youth to thrive as contributing members of their community? Yes, these are terrible times for too many families and an overburdened workforce. The pandemic, poverty, racial injustice and virtual schools are causing misery for many. There is an expression: the best ship in a storm is leadership. Can our community leaders, along with parent, foster parent and kinship advocacy groups, commit

words propose: ensure that children and their families fare well.

For more information on a community approach to the development and support of resource families, email eileen.pasztor@csulb.edu. •

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One Simple Wish: A Foster Child's Wish Come True

Terrence, 31, is a first generation home owner — actually he is “first generation” in a lot of things. With each accomplishment, he takes a few extra moments to really think about how meaningful it is and to fully appreciate each milestone. Terrence explains, “Buying my own house means that I have my own safe space, something that is mine.” The symbolism this wish represents for Terrence is beautiful. As someone who grew up with constant uprooting, he struggled to be able to call anywhere home and now, he finally has created his own (first) forever home. Terrence lived with his mom early on in life and then moved in with an aunt before entering foster care as a young teen. After entering foster care, he lived in more than 20 different placements, both respite and congregate care. He eventually aged out, but he remembers struggling with many things while in care, such as feeling that the area he was in didn't embrace his cultural and subcultural backgrounds. Today, Terrence is a graduate of Boise State University and is planning to return to school to complete his master's degree in social work. As a safety assessor in child welfare, he wants to give back and help empower young people who are going through things he so intimately remembers from his time in care.



One Simple Wish enables everyone to make a difference in the lives of foster children and at-risk youth by allowing them to grant their wishes through One Simple Wish's website at www.onesimplewish.org. If you are interested in granting a wish or have a foster child who would like to submit a wish, write to info@onesimplewish.org.