



Foster Care and Community Failure

Foster care protects children after crisis, but stronger relationships can help families before separation becomes necessary.

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PARENTING

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Foster care, at its core, is meant to protect children. But it only comes into play after something has already started to fall apart.

In other words, foster care is an intervention, not a preventive measure, and the foster system steps in when families can no longer safely stay together. Understanding foster care this way changes the questions we should ask. Instead of considering only how we can improve the foster care system, we should also ask how families and communities can help ensure fewer children ever need it.

National data show that **neglect** is by far the top reason children enter foster care. In 2024, neglect accounted for 55% of U.S. child removals. While every family's circumstances are different, this trend often reflects more than the failures of individual parents. In many cases, it also reveals the absence of the extended family, trusted neighbors, and community support that can help struggling families before crises escalate.

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that absence isn't just a social concern, but a spiritual one. It reveals a gap in the kind of covenant responsibility that calls people to notice and care for one another before a crisis begins. This gap can be an uncomfortable truth to face, especially when children are involved, but it is not a problem we should ignore.

Safety vs. Continuity

Removing a child from an unsafe home can save a life. But the act of removing a child can itself cause trauma. Children develop their sense of **safety and identity** through steady, consistent relationships. When even short separations occur, children's emotional development and sense of security can suffer. For many foster youth, the loss of family means lost history and belonging too. Imagine a child who only knows a series of foster homes. No "hometown" and no consistent siblings around the dinner table. To this child, a new foster house is just another stop, which cannot truly feel like a home.

Foster parents frequently provide extraordinary care, offering children patience, structure, and real stability—often more than the child has ever encountered. These efforts genuinely matter, and foster parents' willingness to open their homes and create placements that make kids who land there feel safe should be celebrated.

But even when a foster parent has the best intentions, they cannot recreate a child's shared history. Foster parents simply can't replicate a grandmother who remembers a version of the child's mother that no one else saw, or older siblings who already knew the child's story before they had words for it themselves.

In other words, foster care is an intervention, not a preventive measure.

While foster care provides physical safety and opportunities for healing, it often cannot act as a complete substitute for the continuity of family, history, and community that children need to thrive. Even in the best placements, the child's life is unavoidably interrupted in some way, which doesn't always resolve when a child grows up.

The Echoes Into Adulthood

Many adults who grew up in foster care carry effects of separation throughout their lives. While unique to each individual who experiences the foster system, questions about origin often remain years later—not all of which are about pain. Some are quieter than that, more about identity than injury, because understanding where we come from is part of understanding who we are.

Who do I look like?

Why did this happen the way it did?

Do I have siblings somewhere who don't know I exist?

For some, these questions lead to years of searching for their biological family—trying to put together their story, just to confirm that they came from somewhere real, that there were people who knew them before the system did. And, with all they have faced, adults in this position may not know where to begin, nor have the tools or resources to go about a search like this.

There are entire organizations, networks, and services that help former foster youth reconnect with biological relatives: DNA testing kits, reunion registries, [people-search databases](#), and even internet groups where adults search for siblings they were separated from in childhood.

That should tell us something about the lack of identity foster alumni face. They're not only looking for information, but are trying to recover a perception of identity, find belonging, and looking for a bond that was never replaced, and often can't be replaced—at least, not fully. But answers can help.

Kinship Care

As of 2024, **over 40%** of foster children in the United States are placed with relatives or close family friends. These placements, referred to as kinship care, are no longer a marginal alternative. Kinship placements often preserve something the system itself cannot duplicate, as children placed with relatives experience greater placement stability, fewer school disruptions, and better educational results than those placed with non-relative foster families. They are also more likely to maintain connections to siblings, cultural heritage, and extended family networks.

These outcomes show that children benefit not simply from being cared for, but from remaining connected to people who already know them.

Kinship care reveals both the strength and the limits of the system. When aspects of family networks remain, children are often buffered from some of the worst disruptions that accompany removal. And when those networks are unsupported, even kinship placements strain under pressure.

This shifts the conversation in an important direction. Improving foster care will always matter, but so will strengthening the relationships that make kinship care possible before families reach a breaking point.

Systems vs. Relationships

Unfortunately, any system large enough to make an impact must function at scale, which changes what care looks like in practice. Decisions must be documented, legal standards consistently applied, and thousands of cases managed across communities with very different circumstances, sometimes by people who have never met each other or the families they're deciding about. Children can become part of a process, and families can become case files. That framework is necessary, but often it is too far removed to resolve all issues at hand.

The people within that system often do remarkable work. Caseworkers regularly carry overwhelming caseloads while navigating heartbreaking situations, and foster parents open their homes to children they have never met. Their compassion and sacrifice deserve recognition, and without the structure, the inconsistency would cause different harm.

Even so, caseworkers are still operating inside a framework that wasn't designed to center relationships and personalize outcomes. It was designed to manage risk. Those aren't the same goal, and the gap between them shows up in ways that are hard to measure but easier to feel.

No public institution can build the kind of lifelong relationships that children need to flourish. Systems, by design, cannot replace relationships, or create a sense of belonging that a human needs. This limitation is not a failure of foster care, but reflects the reality that the foster care system is designed to respond to broken relationships, not to replace them.

And that raises a more difficult question.

What is the Goal?

If relationships are what children ultimately need, why are they so often missing before the system has to intervene? When a family starts to fall apart, there are often few people close enough to notice. And fewer still who feel like it's their place to say anything.

However, after these tragedies occur, many may wonder where the extended family members were. The neighbors? The community that could have stepped in sooner? This doesn't just reveal individual failure, but collective absence.

Perhaps that is the harder challenge foster care exposes. The child welfare system exists because some relationships have already broken down.

Foster care was never meant to bear the full weight of meaningful, personal family connection.

The goal isn't to get rid of foster care, or to diminish the extraordinary work of foster parents or caseworkers, who often step into unimaginably difficult circumstances with compassion and sacrifice. Rather, it recognizes that they are being asked to repair losses that began long before they arrived. The foster system is necessary, and when homes become unsafe, it can save children's lives. But we can appreciate the foster system while still understanding its limits— foster care was never

meant to bear the full weight of meaningful, personal family connection. That work belongs to families, neighbors, and communities willing to know one another well enough to notice hardship before it becomes tragedy.

We are stewards of one another, called to notice and act in the ordinary moments of life.

For Latter-day Saints, this idea should feel familiar: people are responsible for one another not just in principle, but through everyday care and paying attention to each other's struggles. It starts with whether we're willing to be the kind of families, neighbors, and communities that don't disappear when things get hard.

Because once relationships get replaced by systems, you can manage the outcome. But you can't recover what was lost. And the people who know that best are the ones still looking.

Ultimately, the goal isn't to eliminate foster care but to create communities in which fewer children ever need it. Gospel teachings compel us to act early. This might include mentoring a child, noticing neighbors in need, supporting grandma raising grandkids, or becoming a licensed foster parent. By supporting at-risk youth, we can help ensure that the day a caseworker knocks on a door never comes.

About the author

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