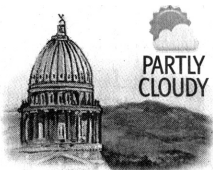


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GUEST OPINION SOCIAL WORK

Giving foster kids a 'normal' childhood should be paramount

BY KEVIN HARPER

For foster kids, the tragedy of a childhood spent in foster care is that they don't have modeled for them what a normal family is like. This is a recipe for repeating the pattern of dysfunctional family life in their adulthood.



One of our foster daughters recently shared that she's afraid to be part of a family. She'd never been in one for long, and it scared her.

What's so scary about a family? Doesn't everyone long for one?

How could you long for something you've never experienced? Truffles are highly sought after by the culinary elite, but for the average American, they might be a little off-putting — at best, a curiosity. But isn't a family just as

much a curiosity to these kids as truffles to the average American? Needing a family, and realizing you need one, are two different things.

A family, to these kids, doesn't mean what it does to you and me, like stability and love demonstrated through lifetime relationships.

No, a family to foster kids might mean having to get to know a whole new set of friends in school, church, and neighborhood. Why bother investing in new friendships when you've been in three placements in three years? They don't see the value of thinking past tomorrow about lifetime connections.

Don't forget that for teens, a family also means accountability and authority, not things that any teen likes, much less from strangers.

To them, family means having parents who might actually love them enough to say no. Who wants that?

So what does normal even mean to them? Foster kids are being parented by a "team," as we like to euphemize it in social work circles. Let's just call it what it is: a committee. We all know how wonderful committees are for developing deep relationships. Right?

As necessary as this teamwork is between social workers, judges, guardians ad litem, foster parents, birth parents, administrators, teachers, counselors, etc., it is pretentious for us to — well, pretend — that this can ever be normal, much less ideal.

Yet the term "normalization" has become a sort of buzzword. People talk about helping kids

"normalize" their experiences, or giving them time to process this or that disruption to their lives so they can "normalize" it. But we need to be careful not to flip this term on its head.

Do we use it to describe the process of making kids believe their abnormal experiences are somehow "normal?" Or do we use it to describe the process of giving them truly normal experiences, like birthday parties at friends' houses?

The job of foster parents, for those who would take on this mission, is to buffer our "parenting by committee" so they can experience a more normal childhood. That means keeping bureaucracy in the background as much as is possible. This isn't about providing three square meals and a bed. We're there to provide relation-

ship. Love. Family.

Agencies nationwide are getting better at recognizing the need for foster kids to have a more normal childhood.

Laws are being passed and academia is coming around to stress the importance of "normalization." But let's never lose sight of how abnormal a foster care experience really is. We don't want kids to "normalize" the abnormal. Instead, we want to make foster care as close as possible to normal. Those are two different things.

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