

A Multifaceted Approach to Addressing the Disproportional Representation of Children of Different Racial and Ethnic Origins in the Child Welfare System

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The disproportional representation of children of different racial and ethnic origins has been a major concern for child welfare professionals for decades. By 2000, children of color accounted for 6 out of 10 of the more than 550,000 children in foster care, yet they comprise only 3 out of 10 of all children in this country (Derezotes & Hill, in press; Bartholet, 1999; McCabe et al., 1999).

The persistence of this problem may be due, at least in part, to differing perspectives on the issues. Within the child welfare field there are two perspectives regarding the causes for disproportional representation. Some see it as appropriate. They believe that because families comprising racial and ethnic minorities have higher levels of poverty, more single parents, and higher rates of joblessness, they are perceived to be at greater risk of child maltreatment and in greater need of child welfare services than nonminority families (Giles & Franklyn-Stokes, 1989; McCabe et al., 1999). Others consider disproportional representation a systemic problem, because minorities are not believed to maltreat their children more than whites. Representatives of this perspective believe that changes are needed to change child welfare policies and practices to reduce disproportionality (Holton, 1990; Hill, 1999; Morton, 1999; Roberts, 2002).

One coordinated effort designed to examine and address issues of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system is the Race Matters Consortium, a diverse group of child welfare experts representing different aspects of the child welfare field: research, policy, administration, practice, and advocacy interests. Originating through the efforts of the Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Westat; and Casey Family Programs, the Consortium is a completely voluntary effort in which participants systematically examine the causes of disproportional representation as well as methods that might eliminate underlying problems.

The Consortium model looks at issues affecting minority children at key points at which decisions are made in the child

welfare system (Derezotes & Poertner, in press). Are children of different races and ethnic backgrounds exposed to the same types of maltreatment? Are children of color overreported? Are white children underreported? What are comparative investigation and substantiation rates? How many children of different racial types receive services in their home? Who enters out-of-home placement? The decision-point approach addresses these problems by identifying the rates of maltreatment experienced among children of different races as well as the differential treatment paths and modalities for children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

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To date, the Consortium has been successful in a number of efforts: the execution of two forums examining disproportionality; the development of agreed upon definitions of relevant terms; the creation of a model for systematic review of the various factors impacting children and families of color; the completion of a book examining the overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system (Derezotes & Poertner, in press); participation and presentations in other national efforts examining these issues; and the development and maintenance of three work groups designed to address policy, research, and social marketing concerns.

These and similar types of collaborations provide a necessary vehicle for interested professionals to work together to examine the issues discussed here. To prevent disproportionality, its source must first be identified. For example, several studies have shown that disproportional treatment of children of different racial and ethnic groups exists in the child welfare system (Capellari, Eckenrode, & Powers, 1993; Courtney, et al., 1996; Garland & Besinger, 1997; McCabe, et al., 1999; Wulczyn, Brunner, & Goerge, 1999). To understand how this might occur, we suggest that one look to the differences in children's services, which are asked to respond to various federal and state policies, agency/site administrative rules, child welfare practices, community structures and resources, and family and individual dynamics.

A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO DISPROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Federal and State Policies Guide Practice

As new policies are crafted, practices change according to new regulations and types of funding. In addition, private agencies and regional state offices will have their own implementation guidelines that influence the way workers execute their jobs. Moreover, communities are set up in very different ways and have a disparity of resources from one to another.

How does community composition impact a family's experiences within the child welfare system? Families are diverse. How are child protection investigations completed to reflect this diversity? It is imperative that professionals, who are called to be concerned about providing the best services available for children and families of all races, develop and maintain skills essential to cross-cultural practice.

Helping professionals need to be aware of their own behaviors, habits, and customs that are culturally based, so that a broader understanding of cultural differences may occur. Developing a basic knowledge of a client's culture, cultivating an ability to recognize what one personally does not know, and gaining awareness of how to obtain relevant information are starting points. Once foundations are in place, professionals will benefit from their own genuine respectful curiosity about the client as well as emerging skills for working collaboratively in relationship with others rather than from a position of pow-

er. These practices are not only relevant for direct practice but are also critical in the development, application, and implementation of policy and administrative practices. However, if systems are designed using policies that reflect biased attitudes, whether intended or not, such biases are often passed on throughout the system.

One way to help eliminate bias is to master effective cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communicators respect individuals from other cultures, make continued and sincere attempts to understand the world from others' points of view, are open to new learning, are flexible, have a sense of humor, tolerate ambiguity well, and approach others with a desire to learn (Giles & Franklyn-Stokes, 1989). This can be particularly crucial for individuals who provide services in prevention and child protective services, because they are the first individuals to make contact with families in need of assistance. It is the ability of these workers, in the initial phases of service provision, to assess the strengths and needs of the family accurately and objectively within the family's own context. This offers the child and the entire family an opportunity to receive the most appropriate services as well as the best chance to remain intact.

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