

A LINE ON LIFE

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Orphanages vs. Welfare Mothers *

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As part of the Republican "*Contract with America*," Newt Gingrich, United States House majority leader, proposed that children of welfare mothers be placed in orphanages. Even without this proposal, some 500,000 children are already in out-of-home care funded by the government. In addition, five million more children receive financial support from AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). Two basic assumptions are made about these children.

1. Out-of-home care will be better than welfare mothers can provide.
2. Cutting the emotional bonds between mother and child is in the best interest of the child.

Children born to poor teenage mothers are at higher risk than children born to older parents with adequate finances. There are many obstacles that women on financial aid face in providing "*good enough*" care for their children. Definitely, home removal is more favorable than an unsafe, abusive, neglectful or emotionally damaging environment that cannot be changed by skillful intervention. However, in many cases – rather than taking children away from their parents – this environment can be improved with expert intervention. Even if the children are removed, the option of placing them with caring relatives would be preferable to orphanages. Without adequate therapeutic training, child-care workers are no more likely to meet the children's needs than the original parents.



In contrast to Gingrich's basic assumptions, cutting the primary attachment between parent and child can have profound negative effects on the development of the child. All of us need physical and emotional connections with other humans. The most basic connections are between parents and their children. If these are cut, other close relationships are needed. The effects of cutting these connections depends on a host of factors – the strength of the original bond, the child's age, circumstances of the child's removal, the time gap between home removal and placement, and many more factors. The stronger the bond is between children and their parents, the more traumatic the separation will be.

Even defective families can be preserved and strengthened with skilled home-based intervention. When this intervention is appropriate, it can be more beneficial and cost-effective than out-of-home placement. For example, if one million children were placed in orphanages, the estimated cost is 36.5 *billion* dollars!

The proposal seems to be aimed at **unwed teenage mothers**. However, the 1993 Census reveals that the average age of welfare recipients is 30. Of the 3.8 million mothers who received welfare benefits, only 8% – about 32,000 – were unmarried and under 18.

Gingrich's proposal assumes that our current welfare system encourages poor, unmarried women to have illegitimate children. Many factors influence unwed motherhood. However, studies indicate that "*neither the receipt nor the level of AFDC is related to the birth rate of unmarried adolescents.*" In 1993, the Census indicated that some states with the highest benefit rates (e.g., California) had the lowest birth rates for unwed teens, while other state that offer minimal benefits (e.g., Georgia) have some of the highest birth

rates for unwed teens. Although many people assume that illegitimacy has increased only with the poor, between 1979 and 1992, the rates have doubled for *both* the poor and the non-poor.

Gingrich argues that welfare encourages recipients to remain on welfare. This might have been true in the past, and there is always a proportion who will take advantage of the system. However, about 70% of welfare recipients leave the system within two years. The majority of them have a basic education and 38% finish high school. Another 19% have at least a year of college, and 15% continue their educational growth.

The image of "*welfare mothers*" as poor, unwed teenagers who are inept, irresponsible and producing babies for monetary gain is a **stereotype** based on faulty or incomplete information. It is just as much a symptom of prejudice as declaring that "*Blacks are lazy*" or "*women are irrational*." Stereotypes are alluring for several reasons. They reduce complexity, and they channel our fears toward an easy target. Stereotypes are used to justify social policy – like removing children from their homes.

Rather than relying on over-simplified stereotypes, we need to separate fact from fiction.

It is an over-simplification to assume that orphanages necessarily are an improvement over an impoverished single-parent home with inadequate childcare. It is difficult to find child-care workers who can establish strong, stable emotional bonds to replace those that the child has lost. Close emotional bonds between humans are not interchangeable – they are *person-specific*. If new bonds are not created, displaced children will continue to seek reunion with their parents – even if the treatment they received from their parents was far from ideal.

Although our welfare system is far from perfect, it helps the major portion of the clients it serves. (Psychologically, our attention is usually drawn to the problems with any system rather than its successes.) The promotion of orphanages to reduce teen pregnancies is over-simplified. It ignores the complex interaction of many social, economic, psychological and cultural factors that create these problems.

Does this country need a system of orphanages? Or – if such a system is developed – will it cause another set of problems that are worse than the ones we were trying to solve?

* Adapted from Craig N. Shealy, "From *Boys Town* to *Oliver Twist*: Separating Fact from Fiction in Welfare Reform and Out-of-Home Placement of Children and Youth," *American Psychologist*, August, 1995, pages 565-580.