



A Collection of Editorials
by *Esther Wattenberg*

As the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare entered its 20th year of operations, we wanted to take the opportunity to look at how the field of child welfare practice has evolved and changed in the face of the many challenges it has been presented with in the last two decades. There are many ways to go about this task: timelines, narratives, interviews. But we wanted to address the last 20 years in the field of child welfare from a more personal lens, one that would reflect the struggles and successes particular to Minnesota from a unique perspective. And we could think of no better way to do this than through the editorial writings of our founding Director, Professor Esther Wattenberg. Anyone who knows Esther, has seen her speak in public, or has read her writing knows she has an exceptional talent for succinctly, astutely, and, when necessary, sharply getting to the heart of challenging issues in the field. She poses thought provoking questions, encourages critical thinking and discourse, and challenges everyone from community members to practitioners to politicians to take responsibility for the outcomes of vulnerable children in our society.

In this commemorative publication, we have printed a selection of Esther's editorial writings, both published and unpublished, over the past 20 years. We feel that these articles provide an interesting representation of the challenges and triumphs of the field during this time period, presented in the way only Esther can: with critical thought, razor sharp wit, and always a call to action. In this day and age of digital communications where the 140 character sound bite often prevails, Esther reminds us of the mighty power of the pen. May the courage and conviction portrayed through her writings challenge us all to think critically, engage in public discourse, and hold accountable those responsible for the well-being of our children.

I hope you enjoy reading these as much as I enjoyed putting them together.



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Table of Contents

Introduction, <i>Tracy Crudo</i>	2
Esther Wattenberg Editorials	
Child Welfare System, Under Fire, Staggers On <i>Printed in the New York Times, Letter to Editor, March 26, 1995</i>	4
Legislative Abuse, Neglect, and Abandonment: Children are the First Victims of the New Order <i>Submitted to New York Times OP-ED Editorial, September 26, 1995</i>	5
Open Hearings Don't Make Children Safer <i>Printed in the Star Tribune, February 15, 1997</i>	6
Commentary on "Mother of Slain Baby May Lose Other Kids" and "Murder Charges Filed in Beating of 8 Year Old" <i>(Star Tribune Articles, 11/2 and 11/9, 1999) Submitted to Star Tribune, November 10, 1999</i>	7
Re: <i>Star Tribune</i> Editorial— "Child protection: Another baby, the same old question" <i>Submitted to the Star Tribune, May 1, 2001</i>	8
Keep Safe the Child Protection System <i>Printed in Letter to the Editor – Counterpoint section of the Star Tribune, December 10, 2001</i>	9
Commentary on "Tell the Rest of the Story on Kids in Out-of-Home Placement" <i>(Star Tribune, Editorial Counterpoint, January 13, 2004) Submitted to the Star Tribune, January 14, 2004</i>	10
Family-Support Infrastructure is Crumbling <i>Printed in the Star Tribune, May 5, 2004</i>	11
Response to article: "New York's High Court Limits Use of Foster Care After Domestic Abuse" <i>(New York Times, October 27, 2004) Submitted to the New York Times, Letter to the Editor, October 28, 2004</i>	12
Three Intertwined Systems <i>Submitted to the Star Tribune, Letter to the Editor, December 11, 2008</i>	12
Comment on Education Reform <i>Submitted to the Star Tribune, Opinion Exchange, March 17, 2010</i>	13
Putting Socks on the Octopus <i>Submitted to the Star Tribune, Opinion Exchange, March 12, 2012</i>	14

Child Welfare System, Under Fire, Stagers On

Printed in the New York Times, Letter to Editor, March 26, 1995

The bleak profile of the fate of children in a recent experiment with orphanages is a reminder that large-scale institutional care is not a permissible solution for poor children.

Unfortunately, Richard Wexler, in “A Warehouse Is Not A Home” (Op-Ed, March 18) moved from this accurate account of New York’s disastrous 1987-89 experiment with “congregate care” to an assertion that is oversimplified and incorrect. He fixes that blame for the increasing number of children enmeshed in the child welfare system on the routine, heartless removal of children from loving parents only because they are poor. The facts are otherwise.

Rather than repeating an old canard that wicked social workers snatch children from loving parents to feed the maw of the foster care system, we should all be focused on the fact that a lack of financial support has strangled the child welfare system.

Yes, poverty is a pervasive condition of reports of neglected children flooding the child welfare system. But the circumstances of poverty are compounded by parents who are mentally ill, and struggling with alcohol, drug addiction and other disabilities. The blunt truth is that even with these hazardous situations for children, only a small portion, where “imminent harm” can be demonstrated, are accepted for investigation and possibly for services.

Routing, careless removal of children from loving families? To the contrary, it is the unresponsive nature of the child welfare system to the conditions of neglect that requires attention. Numerous scholars have issued studies noting the escalating reports from school social workers, physicians, child care providers and neighbors of children suffering from a lack of basic human needs – food, clothing and shelter – and the small proportion who are received for child protection attention. Only reports of children in imminent danger can be accepted for investigation and services. This is a way of controlling the vast number of reports for investigation, a costly

budget item. Children suffering from the mute condition of neglect do not rise to the level of life-threatening circumstances. They will in time, but not until the toll of cumulative deprivation exacts its price in poor health, poor schooling, poor futures.

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This inattention from the child welfare system is a realistic adaptation to shrinking resources. What it reflects is the political indifference to homelessness, hunger, and dangerous neighborhoods. Rather than repeating an old canard that wicked social workers snatch children from loving parents to feed the maw of the foster care system, we should all be focused on the fact that a lack of financial support has strangled the child welfare system. Only a very small proportion of eligible families, estimated at 20 percent, are receiving family preservation services.

Although there is widespread consensus that the family is the fundamental resource for the care and nurturing of children, and our national policy has written this into law (the Family Preservation and Family Support Act, 1993), an expanded budget is required for this task of shoring up poor families. The political environment on this score is disheartening. ↴



Legislative Abuse, Neglect, and Abandonment: Children are the First Victims of the New Order

Submitted to *New York Times OP-ED Editorial*, September 26, 1995

The cut and slash frenzy of Congress in its rush to dismantle the social safety net of the past 60 years has obscured the question which should have a premier place on the political agenda: What are the consequences for children?

The old lions of the progressive wing of the Democratic party, Senators Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Ted Kennedy, have roared their warning: The new majority in Congress has abandoned children.

As the federal safety net for children is being shredded, a few others have added their voices. Senator Paul Wellstone, along with a small handful of bipartisan colleagues, has tried again and again to insert damage control amendments. To no avail. As it stands now, states will have wide discretionary powers to deny children food, shelter, clothing, if they are unlucky enough to be born to undeserving women (unmarried, uneducated, unemployed, and unattached to a wage-earning man).

To grasp the enormity of the assault on children, consider the wide range of programs to be run over by the Republican juggernaut: AFDC (the primary income for basic human needs of poor children) to be trashed; legal services, decimated; programs for handicapped children, slashed; housing subsidies and energy assistance programs depleted; health care under Medicaid, endangered; and now the final blow, an attack on children in low-income working families. The Earned Income Tax Credit is slated for a \$23 billion dollar cut. Families earning \$15,000 a year will pay higher taxes, while those making \$115,000 get substantial tax breaks.

The depth and comprehensive nature of this mayhem is staggering. It is strange that the new majority in Congress that has made “family values” a campaign issue has failed miserably to pay attention to the fate children will suffer, as a consequence of its sweeping legislative reforms.

Now, an urgent question should be raised. Why were there no hearings on the impact of withdrawing the federal role in the economic and social safety net for the nation’s children? Why was there not one day assigned to provide some understanding on how welfare reform will impact the child welfare system?

History will record that 42 days of hearings were held on Whitewater, Waco, and Ruby Ridge, but not one day on the consequences for children, when the radical revolutionaries (self-described) of the new majority finish their job of hacking to pieces 60 years of social and economic protections for vulnerable children.

Make no mistake. As the entitlements disappear – grants are cut; housing costs cannot be met; utilities are shut off; food is scarce – children will be huddling at the doorstep of child protection. While some conservatives might give a nod of approval to this outcome as the necessary “kick in the pants” for poor parents to get going, fiscal conservatives should consider this:

Make no mistake. As the entitlements disappear – grants are cut; housing costs cannot be met; utilities are shut off; food is scarce – children will be huddling at the doorstep of child protection.

It now costs 11 times as much to provide care when a child is placed outside a family in a foster home or institution than it costs for a child to live with their family on AFDC.

What is going on here? Why is the new majority allowed to be so disengaged from reality and the consequences of its actions? Why do we permit Congress to be self-absorbed in their massive denial that children will suffer? Why do we permit them to distort the facts? Why have we become such a tranquilized nation?

Where is the furious indignation? How much suffering, neglect, injury, are we willing to tolerate as every protective feature for children has been withdrawn from federal oversight? If, in pro-family language, we proclaim that children give meaning to life (who would disagree?), then why, at the very least, are we not demanding a bracing encounter with truth: Hearings on the proposals of the new majority. Otherwise, the spectacle of breadlines and shelters will be joined by orphanages and children with begging bowls. Welcome to the 19th Century.

What kind of ideological glue has Congress been sniffing? 🐾

Open Hearings Don't Make Children Safer

Printed in the *Star Tribune*, February 15, 1997

As one of the five members of the Minnesota Supreme Court's Task Force on Foster Care and Adoption who voted against the open hearings recommendation, I am compelled to take issue with the *Star Tribune's* Feb. 2 editorial "Protecting Children", which endorsed open public hearings of child protection court cases.

Some searching questions are in order.

Where is the evidence that the "salutary power of the public's gaze" on the despair and suffering of abused and neglected children will reinforce accountability? Is there any documentation that open hearings improve the behavior of judges unprepared for the complexities of child welfare law, ameliorate the poor judgment of some social workers, improve the selection and training of guardians ad litem, or change the priorities of the overburdened county attorney's offices?

There is not a shred of evidence to support these assumptions. The Michigan experience of open hearings has had very little public effect. We have experience with open public hearings in criminal cases, where a child has been murdered or seriously injured, but these have had little impact on the tangled web of the child protection system which enmeshes social workers, judges, lawyers and guardians ad litem in a dense thicket of laws and regulations. The assumption that open hearings produce accountability, whatever that abstract term means, is unfounded.

Will open hearings protect the safety of children? To the contrary, as the public testimony on this issue revealed, children will suffer yet another blow to the terrible misfortune of having been born into a family that has failed to nurture them. When the ruinous circumstances of abuse and neglect are scrutinized by the media, school-aged children will not escape the shame and ridicule of their peers. Data privacy has always existed as an important feature of a child protection system for good reason; the rules protect the best interests of children. One should note that the survey conducted by the Task Force, as well as public testimony on this issue, did not support shredding data privacy laws. The testimony from rural counties was especially poignant on the probable effect of public exposure of private family troubles. We would be asking children to bear the burden of our zeal in pursuing accountability.

Will open hearings engage the public in a vigorous demand for reform? Doubtful. Media scrutiny in Michigan did not bring a wave of child protection reform.

In Minnesota, we have had a succession of child welfare reform commissions, task forces and select committees. Their long lists of recommendations to improve child protection have been admired, but untouched. There is very good reason: Reform is costly.


The public may be outraged by an unresponsive child protection system, but when shown the bill for an improved system that would require smaller caseloads, more training, and increased services, the same public has traditionally said, "No, thank you."

Instead, the response has typically been monitoring through an ever-increasing burden of regulations. Child protection reform is laden with unfunded mandates. We are left with a blizzard of "paper trails" to document efforts to satisfy that abstraction of "accountability".

The child protection system is choking on paper, with less and less time available for direct work with families to protect the safety of children, or to plan for alternatives when the risk for children is too high for them to remain at home.

Reforming child protection is a fearful undertaking. Reforms arouse the passions of ideology: "child rescue" vs. "family preservation". Moreover, reforms raise anxieties about the safety of children; fears among families that their right to privacy will be invaded; anger among child protection workers that they are singled out for the deficiencies in the judicial system; depression among public defenders for their added duties in an already overburdened system. Keeping an eye on the well-being of children in this turbulent environment is not easy.

The recommendation for open hearings is a needless distraction from the genuine crisis, which we are reluctant to face. Public systems of child welfare, and the courts, are starved for resources.

One cannot escape the irony of the open hearings recommendation. It is an open invitation to more litigation. And that is where the dwindling resources of public systems will be diverted. 

Commentary on “Mother of Slain Baby May Lose Other Kids” and “Murder Charges Filed in Beating of 8 Year Old”

(Star Tribune Articles, 11/2 and 11/9, 1999) Submitted to Star Tribune, November 10, 1999

How do you protect children from the violent and brutal men entangled in the lives of mothers? This is the fundamental question that is raised in the nightmare tragedies of the infant, Lamart Wallace, Jr., murdered, while his family was under “protective supervision” of the County (“Mother of Slain Baby May Lose Other Kids,” *Star Tribune*, November 2), and Brenda Swearingen, a school-age child, beaten to death, while assigned by the court to the legal custody of her great aunt. In a brief moment, when disclosure follows murder, we catch a horrifying glimpse into two families where violence rules, children are driven to distraction by barely functioning caretakers, and abusive men stalk these households with uncontrolled rage. Where was the child protection system, our designated agency responsible for the safety of children? What went wrong?

The tragic fate of these children will now enter the formal records of fatality review teams, but the official investigations do not absolve the community from facing unnerving questions.

The tragic fate of these children will now enter the formal records of fatality review teams, but the official investigations do not absolve the community from facing unnerving questions. Who committed fatal errors of judgment in protecting Lamart and Brenda?

After an intense period of searching for the culprit in the dense and complicated bureaucracies of both the child protection system and the court system, we may arrive at the truth.

But a cautionary note should be sounded: decisions in these intricate systems are not always straightforward. They are frequently saturated with ideology. Common sense and common decency are often left in the dust.

Advocates of protecting women in domestic violence situations will see Idella Kennedy, Lamart’s mother (and the mother of six surviving children), as an example of a helpless victim, powerless in the face of a brutal partner. In this view, she cannot be held accountable for the safety of her children. However, child protection will view this mother in another light: a mother who is palpably unfit

because she has placed her own interests above those of her children – a violation of the maternal code. The ideological clash provides uncertain decisions.

There are children living in terror, abuse, and neglect, and they are known to those who see these children on a regular basis. Kin and friends, neighbors and daycare providers, all of us, should be part of a young child’s protection system.

Consider the placement of Brenda and her siblings with a relative, a preferred option for permanent placement of a child by both State statutes and those of the Indian Child Welfare Act. There will be those advocates who will assert that legal custody with relatives assures a safe and loving family. They may protest follow-up monitoring of the well-being of these children as unnecessary scrutiny and policing of poor families. Others will maintain that continuing supervision of relative care is an indispensable responsibility of the system. Another example of ideological difference.

And what about the court system which controls many decisions about family life and operates under its own ideology. Judges interpret the law, guided by rules of evidence and perhaps their own personal beliefs. Wallace, the infant’s father, was convicted in 1997 of assaulting mother and child. The judge ordered probation and “anger management.” Too little, too late?

Now consider the community’s response. Certainly there is outrage that the system has failed in its primary responsibility – to protect abused and neglected children. However, the community’s outrage is often tempered by ambivalence toward the powers vested in a child protection system. There is a genuine fear of a too intrusive agency, forcing their presence into the privacy of family affairs and having the awesome power to remove children. At other times there is anger that the agency has failed in its mission to protect children.


With these conflicting ideologies, are there no guidelines for responding to children in imminent harm? The blunt truth is that we are all responsible for

Mother of Slain Baby cont.

the killing of the innocents – an infant and a young school-aged child. We will, in time, identify the flaws in a child protection and court system, but the community responsibility cannot be evaded. There are children living in terror, abuse, and neglect, and they are known to those who see these children on a regular basis. Kin and friends, neighbors and daycare providers, all of us, should be part of a young child's protection system.

Attention should be paid by the entire community. Here is a short list of signals of alarm: when the mother's or caretaker's partner is violent, abusive, controlling and

has a past criminal record which includes physical force; there is a pattern of threat to murder caretaker and/or children; there has been a substantial increase in substance abuse, and no adult is around to protect the children; the father/partner stalks the family, violating a court order; when there is a diagnosed mental illness and medication has been abandoned.

Child welfare is a system with profound discontents and intractable situations, but at least we should know this – protecting children is everybody's business. 

Re: *Star Tribune* Editorial— “Child protection: Another baby, the same old question”

Submitted to the Star Tribune, May 1, 2001

After a painful scrutiny of the gaps in a child protection system, the editorial, “Child protection: Another baby, the same old question,” ends with a provocative question: When will we have the sort of system that might have saved Lathen Q. McDonald, Jr., seven months old, from being beaten to death, allegedly by a father known to have a violent and abusive past?


The short, sharp answer is “not in the foreseeable future.” The plain fact is there are limits to the public responsibility for the ways families function. And the role of the community in keeping an eye on a high risk family is uncertain. Surveillance, in the name of prevention, is a tricky affair.

It is doubtful that the community will appoint block captains to scrutinize and report on high risk pregnancies (the prevention strategy of the Chinese system in their one child, one family rule). Nor are we likely to approve of the lifetime surveillance of a high risk family by community outreach workers in community agencies, the

church, and an assortment of advocates. Civil libertarians will claim the right of even risky families to be left alone until maltreatment occurs.

What will be required is the development of a partnership between the public and community sector that can identify a child in imminent harm and then intervene within our framework of laws and good practices.

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Perhaps, then, we will have a common agreement and some accumulated wisdom to enable us to distinguish those families who can look after their child's well-being from those who are “untreatable.” 

Keep Safe the Child Protection System

Printed in Letter to the Editor – Counterpoint section of the *Star Tribune*, December 10, 2001


Your editorial, “Foster Care, Facing the Race Factor At Last,” (Editorial Page, *Star Tribune*, December 9, 2001), provides a valuable summary of the search for an explanation of the “racially lopsided” child protection system.

Still, it is time for the voices deploring the disproportionate presence of African-American children in out-of-home care to move on. A decade of studies has “admired” the problem and struggled to define “root causes.” Attention should now be focused on remediation efforts. There is plenty of work for a wide range of community institutions that deal with poverty, deteriorating neighborhoods, family turmoil, discrimination in housing, and bias in the helping system.

There is a special obligation, however, for the coming legislative session to step up to the plate. Despite the revenue crisis facing the state, the social service system should be exempted from proposed cuts. Let us take the case of kinship care, a policy initiated and supported by the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the 87 county social service systems.

More than a third of African-American children are cared for by grandmothers and maternal aunts. This kinship network sprang into action for children who were declared in “imminent harm” by the court system. Large sibling groups, difficult adolescents, and distressed infants and toddlers are being care for by relatives. Here, it is possible that the disproportionate care of African-American children by family members works to their advantage. The important issue here is that support for these overburdened families should be expanded, not curtailed.

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Certainly, strong family networks can protect a child against multiple risks. Let us see if the legislature is up to the fiscal challenge of taking this issue seriously. 



Commentary on “Tell the Rest of the Story on Kids in Out-of-Home Placement”

(Star Tribune, Editorial Counterpoint, January 13, 2004) Submitted to the Star Tribune, January 14, 2004

Assistant Commissioner Maria Gomez, Minnesota Department of Human Services, provided an accurate and clarifying statement on Minnesota’s Child Welfare system (“Tell the Rest of the Story on Kids in Out-of-Home Placement,” *Star Tribune*, Editorial Counterpoint, January 13, 2004).

Minnesota rightfully deserves its place among the best of the child welfare systems in the nation. But that place is now in jeopardy.

Cuts to social services rarely make the headlines. The cuts are like invisible wounds—known only to caseworkers and families, scrounging for support services and dealing with ever-growing waiting lists for scarce resources.

The social service system, which stands at the core of safety and well-being for children in high-risk families, is crumbling. Local property taxes, in Minnesota the chief source of funding for social services, have been sharply reduced by levy limits imposed by the State.

Minnesota’s first-class reputation rested on the development of a broad spectrum of social services – assessment of infants and toddlers born to high-risk parents; respite care for relatives who care for children;

home visiting to strengthen support for families dealing with children with serious behavior problems; mental health services for mothers struggling with depression. This safety net is now being shredded.

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Vulnerable rural children, in high-risk families, suffer disproportionately. The social service safety net for poor children in poor rural counties is especially hard-hit, because the rural county tax base is steadily eroding.

Where are the advocates for children in rural poor counties? Why isn’t the legislature stepping up to the plate to achieve a truly fair system, with a compensatory fund for poor counties? (If we can do it for roads and bridges, shouldn’t we be doing it for children in abuse and neglect situations?) Where is the Governor’s attention?

In the Governor’s 18 new proposed initiatives, not one is related to the social service system. Nor is there a recognition that an unequal burden rests on rural counties to fulfill the numerous state and federal mandates to protect children from harm. 🏠



Family-Support Infrastructure is Crumbling

Printed in the Star Tribune, May 5, 2004

At the heart of the harrowing lives of children in, “The Lost Youth of Leech Lake,” is an urgent question: Can anything be done to prevent another generation from suffering blighted futures?

This haunting question is not new. It has insinuated itself in almost every tribal and non-tribal encounter with the troubled and stressful lives of young families in the region. Recently, more than a hundred leaders in both tribal and non-tribal organizations met to “Listen to the Heartbeat of the Region.” They reviewed an account of the condition of their children and the struggle of anguished families dealing with the lethal combination of alcohol and illegal drug use, the surging wave of gang violence, and pervasive poverty. A unified conclusion was reached: too many of the community’s children are living

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in foster homes, group homes, and correctional facilities. Although there were many unresolved tensions between the tribe and the county and their cross-cutting systems of schools, child welfare services, probation and corrections, children separated from families require urgent attention.

Moreover, deep-end costs are devastating, both to fractured families and sparse county budgets. More than 80 percent, \$2,589,994, is expended on out-of-home placement services. Prevention and early intervention programs have slipped to the margin.

To be fair, there is a history of fragmented responses to child welfare issues, in this region. Indeed, the human services landscape in Cass County is littered with a wide range of initiatives, programs, and demonstrations funded by foundations and public dollars. Some of them are exemplary, but funding runs out (the home-visiting program for fragile families has just come to an end). Often these become the flotsam and jetsam of isolated and disconnected solutions to complex problems. There is an attempt to provide direction and stability, under the


state-sponsored “Children’s Initiative.” Yet, the deep-seated problems of children suffering from the trauma of missing parents, neglect, abuse, and imminent harm persist. These are conditions that require long-term and multi-faceted responses. There are no quick fixes.

The overburdened and understaffed child protection and court systems, both tribal and non-tribal, cannot provide these essential family preservation tasks.

Now we come to an inescapable conclusion. There is a peculiar avoidance of a straightforward observation: the infrastructure that is required to hold faltering families together is crumbling. Basic human needs for housing, heat, light, food, transportation, jobs are in short supply. To compound this issue, tribal families from the metro region who have reached the end of their five-year eligibility for income support, under the family assistance program, are now moving back to the reservation. A well-developed foster care system to nurture disturbed and distressed children who cannot remain at home is missing. Remedial services for child victims of fetal alcohol syndrome are sparse. Respite care for frantic grandmothers dealing with violent and abusive children is not available. Engaging a recovering parent in a plan to care for their child, safely, takes time and skill. The overburdened and understaffed child protection and court systems, both tribal and non-tribal, cannot provide these essential family preservation tasks.

In this budget-slashing environment, the social services safety net for poor children in poor rural counties such as Cass County is especially hard-hit. The rural county tax base is steadily eroding, and the state and federal dollars are declining.

Cuts to social services rarely make the headlines. The cuts are like invisible wounds – known only to caseworkers and families scrounging for support services and dealing with ever-growing waiting lists for scarce resources, such as substance abuse treatment.

We now return to the question, “What can be done for the Darryls, Sierras, and Taras, ‘the lost youth of Leech Lake’?” This daunting challenge requires attention from all of us. 

Response to article: “New York’s High Court Limits Use of Foster Care After Domestic Abuse”

(New York Times, October 27, 2004) Submitted to the New York Times, Letter to the Editor, October 28, 2004

The ruling that children cannot be removed from parents merely because the child witnessed domestic violence should meet with strong approval.

This ruling underscores the importance of paying attention to the unintended harm that comes to children, when they are removed from parents, even in circumstances that have high-risk for children.

The implication for Child Welfare cases comes at a crucial time, when we are seeing a rise in terminations of parental rights for children in the malevolent circumstances of domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental illness of their parents.

We have been paying attention to child safety, and now a more nuanced judgment is needed: the devastating toll

We have been paying attention to child safety, and now a more nuanced judgment is needed: the devastating toll of separating children, where there is evidence of strong attachment to their parents.

of separating children, where there is evidence of strong attachment to their parents.

For young, school-aged children, removal from home is a life-shaping trauma. Chief Judge Judith Kaye is right on the mark in her observation that the court “must balance that risk against the harm removal might bring, and it must determine factually which course is in the child’s best interest. ↴

Three Intertwined Systems

Submitted to the Star Tribune, Letter to the Editor, December 11, 2008

By accident or design, the editorial page (Monday, December 1, 2008) touched on three separate but intertwined problems that threaten the safety and well-being of our communities: large numbers of youth who fail to graduate from high school (“Hennepin County takes lesson to heart”); the decline in funding for abused and neglected children (“Hennepin County’s safety net for kids is fraying”); and homeless teenagers (“The number of teens who are homeless is a moral outrage”).

The identification of the three systems responsible for these high-risk

Children – education, child welfare, and housing – explains, in part, the need for partnerships and collaborations. That is the easy part: identifying the issues. For some, it is known as the stage of “admiring the problem.”

Now comes the hard part. How to respond? “Begin at the beginning” will be the message of some close observers of children suspended from Kindergarten. What was the origin of this startling phenomenon (more than 45% of children in some neighborhoods were not ready 4 K)?

Who are the responders who first see the unloved, unprotected, and neglected child? Then, what resources are available to make sure these children will be ready

Who are the responders who first see the unloved, unprotected, and neglected child? Then, what resources are available to make sure these children will be ready 4 K?

4 K? The list is well known among social workers and planners: therapeutic nursery schools; home-visiting; substance abuse and mental health treatment centers; programs meeting basic human needs; and so on. The hard part is not preparing the list, but searching for fiscal support among local, state, and federal sources.

The social support systems are nearing collapse. Now that should be on the agenda for a bailout. ↴

Comment on Education Reform

Submitted to the *Star Tribune*, *Opinion Exchange*, March 17, 2010

Gaining a foothold in the tempestuous world of school reform is not easy. In the *Star Tribune* editorial pages (March 16th), there was support for an Obama proposal, a two-pronged initiative: improve teaching so that all high school graduates will be ready for college or a career; and punish low-performing schools by replacing principals, teachers, and closing schools altogether. In the same editorial pages, there is a counterpoint: “The Teachers Union is Not an Obstacle.”

Missing from this exchange is an unacknowledged truth: while the teacher must be prepared to teach, the child must be ready to learn. It is rare to see the debate on school reform framed in this way.

Missing from this exchange is an unacknowledged truth: while the teacher must be prepared to teach, the child must be ready to learn. It is rare to see the debate on school reform framed in this way. The dominant narrative on improving schools places the responsibility chiefly on the shoulders of teachers. The condition of the child in the classroom is largely disconnected from policies designed to put students on track for college or a career.

Who is listening to the teacher’s report to the school social worker: “this child has cockroaches coming out of his shoes . . . his clothes are so smelly children won’t sit next to him.” In this message, is there a recognition that in this school district, as in many others, 80% of the children are on subsidized or free lunches? Students are homeless—living in a car, an abandoned house, bus station, or doubling up with another poor family. Can you reasonably expect that children living at three different addresses in the school year will be on the track to college or a career?

Linking a teacher’s performance with a child’s readiness to learn is a toxic subject. There are powerful distractions that affect a child’s concentration on school performance. Foreclosures and loss of income fracture a child’s confidence in a family’s protective capacity. These children




are worried about their parents’ survival. The enormity of a family’s descent into poverty is disclosed in the fact that 28% of the state’s children live in families where no parent has a full time, year round job.

The discovery of children not ready to learn starts early in their school career. A glance at the data on children showing up “not ready for kindergarten,” estimated at almost 50%, should focus our attention on children not prepared for a future with the lofty goal of college or a career.

Here are the words of a smart and experienced kindergarten teacher: “They are sad, mad, bad . . . it’s not that they can’t add.” They know their colors, shapes, numbers and letters, but they are assaultive, a danger to other children and themselves. Who are these children who will be expelled, suspended, or isolated from the kindergarten room?

As a matter of fact, we know the risk factors that surround these children: poverty, unresponsive parents; and unpredictable family environments. These circumstances will shift the odds for adverse outcomes.

In any debate on education reform, consider this: a well-trained teacher is only part of the solution. The child has to be ready to learn. For that, every teacher will need a support system of school social workers, “homeless liaisons,” and public health nurses to assure a child’s well-being, the precursor to a successful school experience. 

Putting Socks on the Octopus

Submitted to the Star Tribune, Opinion Exchange, March 12, 2012

Now comes yet another initiative to respond to the grim statistic – nearly half of Minnesota children are not ready for kindergarten [“Blunt, honest talk helps one district drive toward success,” *Star Tribune*, March 12, 2012.]

A cascade of initiatives has emerged to restore Minnesota’s reputation as a well-educated state. The McKnight Foundation recently announced a \$6 million grant to develop new reading models. This extends the reach of multi-million dollar grants that are already surging throughout the state to close the achievement gap between white and children of color. Minnesota’s “movers and shakers” – CEO’s of prime corporations, directors of foundations, and leaders in the public and private sphere devoted to education – created an organization known as “Strive” to provide muscle for the race to the top to achieve education success for every Minnesota child. Governor Dayton has created an Early Learning Council and the idea of a “Children’s Cabinet” is taking shape.

What is this astonishing array of power, privilege, and interests doing? “Putting Socks on the Octopus” is the short answer, an acknowledgment of the complexity of the search for the keys to successful educational experiences for all Minnesota’s children.

The launching pad for educational success is created in the life-shaping exchanges between mother and infant known as “attachment.”

Most strategic discussions begin with the intimidating forecast of the economists: a child’s fate is determined by the accident of birth. Changing the odds is the name of the game.

What are the chances of educational success for a child born to an impoverished, poorly educated, very young mother living in a family environment of substance abuse and domestic violence surrounded by the hazards of daily life in a crumbling neighborhood?

Constructing a pathway to literacy for this child exposes the landscape of initiatives needed to prepare a child for a successful school experience: early learning games for the child who cannot sit still; networks of

reading specialists to assure the growth and development of literacy skills by the third grade; multi-cultural learning spaces; math and science tutors for juniors; the availability of a “compassionate school” with a psychiatric social worker on staff who responds to the emotional turmoil of children traumatized by the despair of parents trapped in the loss of a home and jobs.

In the cascade of responses tumbling out of our planning programs, we should leave plenty of room to consider the promise and rewards of developing “attachment”: the invaluable exchange between an attentive mother and a responsive infant that is the foundation for learning readiness.

In sum, Minnesota’s 338 school districts are responding with a variety of strategies to deal with the hurdles on their race to the top.

And yet, there is a startling omission from these attempts to “put socks on the octopus”: attention to the earliest years of a child’s development.

The launching pad for educational success is created in the life-shaping exchanges between mother and infant known as “attachment.” This observation is derived from a generation of highly regarded studies pursued by eminent leaders in the field of child development. The phenomenon of a loving and responsive exchange between mother and infant is the foundation for confidence, optimism, and the zest for learning. The neuroscientists have alerted us to the maturing brain and the significance of the early period for growth and development in intellectual skills. Here is the beginning of launching the platform for assuring literacy.

Minnesota can claim a good share of fame in recognizing the indispensable role of “attachment,” as a foundation for educational success. The work of University of Minnesota scholars, Alan Sroufe, Byron Egeland, Marti Erickson, and Dante Cicchetti, is widely recognized in this field, nationally and internationally.

In the cascade of responses tumbling out of our planning programs, we should leave plenty of room

to consider the promise and rewards of developing “attachment”: the invaluable exchange between an attentive mother and a responsive infant that is the foundation for learning readiness.

Here comes a very large sock to put on that slippery octopus, known as “closing the achievement gap” – an early childhood agenda:

- Support paid maternity leave as a state goal;
- Fully fund child care programs. (Note that the waiting lists for Early Head Start and Head Start are more than 7,000. For child care assistance programs, more than 4,000 are on a waiting list.);
- Create therapeutic nursery schools for every infant and toddler with incomplete “attachment skills.”

Finally, we should embrace a prevention strategy: “Who first sees the child with a problematic future?” Now let us summon our response. 📌



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In the past year, Professor Wattenberg has coordinated a series of “Reflective Seminars” for child welfare supervisors and other practitioners. Topics have included: “Trauma-Informed Practice” (March 15, 2011); “Double-Jeopardy—Depressed Mothers and Their Very Young Children: A remarkable Prospect for Change,” (June 15, 2011); and “Vulnerable Children in High-Risk Families. . . Messages from Resilience Research” (December 9, 2011). For summaries and other materials from these seminars, visit: www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw.cascw/events/past_events/. The next in this series of “Reflective Seminars” is being planned for June 7, 2012 and is entitled, “The Role of Supportive Housing in Improving Responses to High-Risk, Young Parents and Adolescents in Cross-Sector Involvement.”

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