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Blood, Sweat, and Tears in the Foster Care System

By Emma Weiland

Throughout high school I worked as chapter president with a program called Best Buddies. Best Buddies is a program that matches a volunteer with a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). They create a one-to-one friendship and attend events to create a level of inclusion. As president, I would have to create events that would accommodate everyone, whether it was activities everyone could do or how everyone was going to get home if it was after school. One of the main issues we came across was the kids with IDD getting rides to and from events, which would cause kids to miss activities, or the chapter not being able to hold them.

A situation that stands out to me is a boy that had down syndrome and would come to almost all our events. One day we started to not be able to communicate with his parents, the child stopped showing up to events, and we got very worried. Later that month, we found out that he was placed into foster care and his foster family wanted no part in his extracurriculars. This caused him to get very anxious and out of a routine that he enjoyed. It was very hard to watch a happy child become very confused about what is happening, anxious, and begin to decline because his foster parents were doing the bare minimum when it came to his different kind of therapies. That child is the reason that I feel so strongly about the foster care system having more training to be better for all kids but mainly ones with intellectual disabilities.

Foster care is a government child welfare system that tries to provide homes for kids that are living in unsafe conditions. Now it has become something that there is no training for because there are so many children being put into the system. Foster parents are being forced to take kids to get them out of bad situations; sometimes it puts kids into a worse situation. The lack of structure in the households they are put into messes with their routine. This is especially true for children with disabilities because they

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need to maintain a consistent lifestyle. Children with intellectual disabilities in foster care should receive foster parents that are properly trained to take care of them rather than typical foster parents of kids without disabilities, specifically training to address mental health issues, medical care, and lack of structure.

Some people believe that it does not matter whether children with disabilities in foster care deserve more care compared to other children because at least these children are in a home with a family. Some people might say that it is better than nothing or at least someone cares about them. Children with disabilities have more medication that they must take that are based around the disabilities they have. People also believe that because these kids are in the government system, they would be able to get the care that most insurances would not cover. People would also say that the government would require them to take children with disabilities to therapy and appointments. There are many reasons of why people believe it is better for children to be in foster care.

While the foster care system is a great idea, the way they execute it is not what everyone thinks. Foster parents are not properly trained for every situation that arises, especially for children with disabilities. When a child gets placed, the parents normally get a phone call a couple hours ahead of time. Foster parents normally have no idea what they are getting into other than the gender and age of the child so they can try and set up a room that is age appropriate. Normally when children are placed, the social services believes that they are in good hands, but the parents might not have the training that is necessary to take care of children with intellectual disabilities.

Firstly, children in foster care face a severe decline in their mental health for several reasons. A main reason that children with disabilities are more susceptible to mental illnesses is because they are at a higher risk to be maltreated than children without disabilities. They are also more likely to have restrictive placements or experience instability such as a lack of permanency plans or kin placements (Lee). Kids

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with and without disabilities go through a lot when in foster care and most of them are physically or sexually abused or physically neglected (McWey). Children's mental health also depended on their placement types. Studies have found that if the caregiver and adolescent relationship is strong, it will strengthen the child's mental health. For example, if a mother and child have a good relationship it leads to better internal and external mental health symptoms (McWey). Further research supports the relationship between parents and children correlate with their mental health.

Furthermore, in a multi-informant study from the BMC Health Services, they wanted to discover what services were available for youth in foster care that had mental health issues. Within two and a half years they surveyed 405 people between the ages eleven to seventeen. They started out with a mental health questionnaire, and they were asked what services they use that Child Protective Services provides. The results they found were 48.8% of youths showed evidence of mental health problems and 74.5% of those families had contact with services (Larsen). This study informs readers that the chance of the youths to use the services depends on what service they need, demographics, and the placement in which they are living.

Children with disabilities need more medical attention and are on more medication than children without disabilities. They have to go to multiple different types of therapies multiple times a week on top of the multiple different doctors they have to see monthly. Within the foster system they use the term "special needs" very loosely and what this term means changes between every state. It could be anything from children with special health care needs including mental, physical, or behavioral challenges to people that might be at risk to children that are older than seven years old because that is above the average age for adoption (McAuliffe). When foster parents get the call saying that they are getting a special needs child, they really cannot prepare their schedules properly because of the lack of a definition in the term "special needs."

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Also, children with special needs have less anxiety when they are communicating with people they know and are familiar with how to react in certain situations. Since they are in the foster system, they have to use government issued insurance which would be Medicare and Medicaid. The access to care is the ability to see a qualified health provider within a reasonable period of time; however, because so many people are on Medicare it is harder to get in to see the doctors (Bullinger). The Affordable Care Act became a law in 2010, passed by Barack Obama to expand insurance coverage and try to slow down the rising costs of health care. The act now has had several court cases to challenge the validity and provide alternatives to the Affordable Care Act (Bullinger). While they are trying to make insurance better for children in foster care, it is still a work in progress.

Lastly, a child with disabilities requires more structure to live their daily life; their anxiety is heightened, and they could possibly have panic attacks. When dealing with children with intellectual disabilities, they focus on the transition to make sure that the child can easily move homes. However, they go through all of the training to try and easily move children, so they don't have worry about what happens once they are in the home. There are also children that fall through the cracks and are not able to get the right transitional help they deserve because they need to be put into a home as quickly as possible (Barron). While they are trying to train parents to be better with transitioning children from their homes to foster homes, they need to train for what their future duties as parents need to do in everyday life with their new child.

Overall, the inequity of being in the foster care system is enough to put children with mental disability at a disadvantage; adding intellectual disabilities into the situation makes a more difficult time for a child in the foster care system. While doing my research, I found that the topic of disabilities in foster care was not something that is commonly talked about. I realized that even though there are several different sources talking about foster care none of them directly talked about the disabilities in foster care children. If the foster care system parents do not get the training they need to help the kids with

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disabilities, it will cause kids to have worsening mental health and higher levels of anxiety. In the end, while putting my paper together I realized that it is very difficult to pull several different articles that talk about foster care and relate them to disabilities.

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