Children's Services
PRACTICE NOTES
For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers
From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

Volume 6, Number 2 • May 2001

Children's Services Practice Notes is a newsletter for North Carolina's child welfare workers produced four times a year by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families and the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing recent research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!
If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please do so! Address your comments to:

John McMahon
Jordan Institute for Families
UNC–CH School of Social Work
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550
State Courier Number: 17-61-04
E-mail: johnmcmahon@mindspring.com

Newsletter Staff
Lane Cooke, MSW, Advisor
John McMahon, MA, Writer/Editor
Amy Ramirez, Asst. Editor
Daniel Brezenoff, Writer

Visit Our Website
To read this or past issues of *Practice Notes* online, go to <http://www.sowo.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/cspn.htm>.

AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

What can front line child welfare workers do to improve things for African American families?

The number of African American children in foster care is out of proportion with their numbers in the general population. Of the nearly 11,000 children in out-of-home care in North Carolina, almost half are African American, although blacks make up approximately 27% of the population 19-and-under across the state.

Some people believe the cause of this situation is a complex web of economic and societal factors that extend far beyond the child welfare system. They argue that, because these factors put black families at risk, it makes sense that black families have a higher degree of involvement with child welfare. Given the circumstances, the argument goes, the system is serving African Americans well.

To support this conclusion, they point to the tangible benefits the system provides black children. Studies have shown that receiving child welfare services reduces a black child's risk of incarceration and death by homicide and increases his chances of receiving mental health and medical care when he needs it.

Others strongly disagree with this view. They believe the child welfare system is failing black families. To support their view they point not only to the numbers of black children in foster care, but to the overall experience African Americans have in the system. Studies have shown that, compared to others, black parents are more likely to have their children placed in out-of-home care, to receive fewer services, and to have their parental rights terminated.

Once in foster care, black children generally spend more time there than other kids. They experience fewer visits with their parents and siblings. If the plan is adoption, African American children usually wait longer for an adoptive home.

All these things, critics say, are clear signs something is wrong with our system. To fix it they call for progressive, culturally sensitive laws, policies, and practices. If the system reformed itself, they argue, the number of African Americans in foster care would decline to reflect their numbers in the general population.

Practice Notes cannot resolve this debate. It can, however, provide you with facts about kids of color in foster care in North Carolina, discuss laws and policies related to this topic, and suggest strategies for working with African American families and children.

We hope this information will inspire you to reflect on how this issue relates to your practice, to discuss it with your peers, and to reaffirm your commitment to make a difference in your community every day. □

OVERREPRESENTATION AND NC'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

An Interview with Chuck Harris, Chief of Children's Services, N.C. Division of Social Services

When people talk about the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care, they often think of it as a systems issue. To explore this situation at this level more fully, *Practice Notes* contacted Chuck Harris, who has been Chief of the Children's Services Section in the North Carolina Division of Social Services since 1994.

CSPN: Mr. Harris, what do you want to say to social workers and supervisors about the experience African Americans tend to have in North Carolina's child welfare system?

This is a major issue, a major challenge for our system, and something that should be a very, very high priority for us. I think there are a couple things that are important for us to do about this issue.

The first is to acknowledge the overrepresentation of African Americans in foster care. When we look at the data I think we have to conclude that there must be some important issue that must be resolved. We shouldn't be okay with the fact that we have this dynamic in our system. We must work on it at the family, county, and state levels. Our numbers in North Carolina have been improving (*see page 3*), but there is lots more to be done.

The second thing for me is really about how we approach any family that's involved with the child welfare system. For me it's an issue of respect. There are important differences among different types of families in terms of how they function, how they communicate. For workers the important thing is to recognize and appreciate those differences, and then to approach those families with respect, no matter what the circumstances.

And finally I think the child welfare system must take a hard look at itself.

CSPN: How do you think the child welfare system in North Carolina contributes to this problem?

In North Carolina I think what we've done, statutorily, is set the standard for abuse pretty high and the standard for neglect very low. When you couple that with all the research that shows that minority families, particularly African American families, are disproportionately represented among poor families, then it becomes very worrisome.

Under the North Carolina statute for termination of parental rights, we've got an important principle that in essence says "we will not terminate parental rights based solely on a family's poverty."

But we don't have anything like that when it comes to substantiating abuse and neglect. So when you put those things together, it makes me real worried that sometimes what we do is remove children from families primarily because the family is poor, and mired in poverty, with all that typically brings. So we bring a child into foster care and expect the family to get out of poverty before the children can be returned.

Chuck Harris

I think we've got to really take a hard look—and I'm talking about us here at the state level, I'm not being critical of county DSS social workers—we've got to take a hard look at the investigatory process and what kind of principles we can put in place to try and reduce the likelihood that kids are substantiated or enter foster care primarily because of family poverty. We need to look at the kinds of services that might keep those families intact and how to make those services attractive and accessible to these families.

CSPN: Are you doing anything now in this area?

We have been working with five counties to try to understand what a different kind of approach to the more poverty-driven kind of reports might look like. We're looking at what partnerships we might be able to form with family resource centers and others to respond to those reports in a way that might elicit better cooperation from families and in fact achieve better safety for children.

We're looking at a less investigatory kind of approach, one where we would not even be requiring that a case decision about substantiation be made. We hope to pilot this new approach in those five counties, look at their experience, and explore ways to apply what we learn there to our policy and our practice in general. As we do this we're going to be careful—we absolutely cannot take our eye off the fact that the thing we are focused on is child safety.

But to some extent we've gotten to a point as a system where we think the investigatory approach is always the best way to assure child safety. And I think the overrepresentation of African American children ought to make us ask ourselves—is this really the case? Are there situations where a different kind of approach might actually help us do a better job of assuring child safety?

I think that's the question we really need to be asking ourselves. □

DATA ON KIDS OF COLOR IN FOSTER CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina data reveal a significant difference in the way white children and children of color experience our child welfare system. This statement is supported by a comparision of the rate at which black and white children enter foster care and the length of time they stay there.

Figure one illustrates the disproportionate number of black children entering county DSS placement authority, or foster care. Though they account for only 27% of the population 19 years old and younger, black children consistently make up more than 40% of all new foster care placements. However, figure one does suggest this overrepresentation is being addressed. Black children accounted for 49% of all new placements in 1995–96. Since that time there has been a slight but steady decline: in 1999-00 black children accounted for 41% of all new placements.

Figures two and three show that once they enter foster care, African American children tend to stay there longer than do Caucasian children. But these figures also show North Carolina is improving in this area. In 1995–96 the median time spent in foster care was 92 days (or 24%) longer for black children than it was for white children. By 1998–99 most black children in the state had stays in foster care that were only 70 days (or 20%) longer than the stays of most white kids.

Please note that since this is statewide data, it does not reflect county-specific differences. Rates of entry into placement authority and lengths of stay in foster care for black children are higher/longer in some areas of the state and lower in others.

In general, however, these figures suggest that, though we still have a lot of work to do in this area, North Carolina is improving its service to African American families and children.

Figure 1

Percentages of Children Initially Entering Placement Authority (PA) by Race and Year of Placement

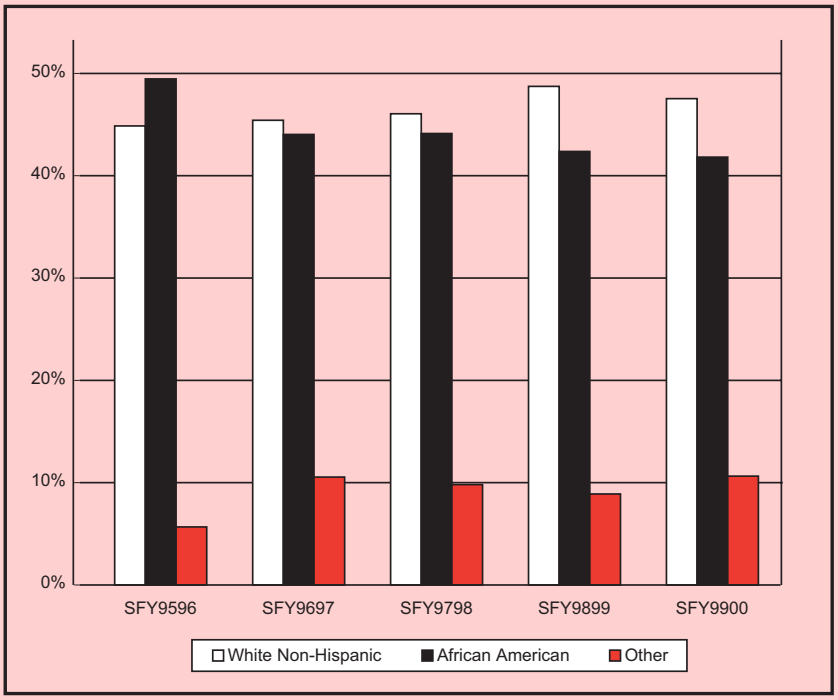


Figure 2

Median Days in PA by Race for All Initial Entries, Statewide

	95–96	96–97	97–98	98–99
White	385	366	349	348
African American	477	482	441	418
Other	438	338	336	335

Figure 3

Difference in Length of Time in PA between African American and White Children, Statewide

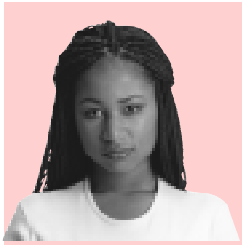
	95–96	96–97	97–98	98–99
Days	92	116	92	70

Source for Figures 1–3: North Carolina Division of Social Services (2001), Raleigh, NC.

The NC Dept. of Health and Human Services does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, or disability in employment or the provision of services. 3,200 copies printed at a cost of $2,222 or $0.65 /copy.

UNDERSTANDING THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

African American children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. Researchers and practitioners have offered many theories as to the causes of this situation. Some focus on poverty. Others see laws and policies as the culprit. Others blame a racist society.



Why are there so many African American children in foster care?

Why are there so many African American children in foster care? Unfortunately there is no short, easy explanation. We still lack the objective information to completely understand the roots of this problem. It is almost certain, however, that each of the following contributes in some way to this serious situation. Though this list is not comprehensive, it is a good place to begin exploring why so many African American children enter and remain in foster care.

POVERTY

Poverty is strongly correlated with reports of abuse and neglect. For example, the National Center for Children in Poverty found in 1990 that "the incidence of child abuse and neglect, as well as the severity of the maltreatment reported, is much greater for children from low-income families than for others." Since a significant number of African Americans live below the poverty line (24% in 1999, according to the US Census), one might see the numbers of black children in foster care simply as a result of poverty.

Yet if poverty is a cause of the high number of child welfare interventions among blacks, one would expect to find poor whites and others disproportionately represented among the child welfare population as well. In his work on this topic Pelton (1994) did find that as a group the poor are overrepresented in child welfare. Indeed, Pelton found that children in families with incomes below $15,000 were five times more likely to be victimized by their parents than those with incomes above that level.

But Courtney and colleagues (1996) found that even among poor families, African Americans were more likely to be reported and substantiated for physical abuse. For example, although more Latino children are born into poverty in New York than black children, as a proportion of the total population, far more black children are placed in foster care (Child Welfare Watch, 1998).

These findings suggest that poverty is not the only factor involved.

LAWS AND POLICIES

Others see federal laws and policies as a cause of the disproportionate number of African American children in foster care.

Adoption and Safe Families Act. For example, some believe the **Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997** (ASFA) has done more harm than good for African American families. Intended to reduce the amount of time children spend in foster care, this law contains provisions that allow states to pursue termination of parental rights sooner so that children can be adopted.

One such provision compels states to seek termination of parental rights for any child who has been in foster care 15 of the past 22 months. Some see this provision as unfair to African Americans. "Quite simply," says Thomas D. Morton, president and CEO of the Child Welfare Institute in Atlanta, "the child most likely to have been in care 15 out of the past 22 months is African American" (Kellam, 1999).

cont. p. 5

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES AND CHILD WELFARE

- Reported more often to social services for child abuse and neglect.
- More likely to have charges of abuse and neglect substantiated.
- Receive fewer preventive services.
- More likely to have their children placed in out-of-home care.
- Children stay in foster care longer.
- Black children overrepresented among those awaiting adoption.
- Fewer prospective African-American adoptive families.
- Receive fewer services overall.
- Social workers have fewer face-to-face contacts with black families.
- Black foster parents and kinship providers receive fewer services.
- Fewer visits occur between black parents, children, and siblings.
- Higher occurrence of termination of parental rights.
- Less legal representation.
- Black children involved in more transracial adoptions.

Source: Review of research literature by Connie Polk, NC Division of Social Services (2000).

Jacquelyn Bailey Kidd, of the National Center on Permanency for African American Children, also objects to ASFA's emphasis on one year to permanence. She asks, "What's the rush? This is just creating legal orphans" (Kidd, 2000). Kidd also finds fault with the provision in ASFA requiring criminal records checks of prospective foster or adoptive parents, arguing this has a disproportionately negative affect on African American families, since in general blacks are more likely to have criminal records. In this way, ASFA could possibly be preventing same-race and kinship/foster placements.

But ASFA is too recent to be the primary cause of the racial disparity in foster care; the growth in the numbers of African Americans in care was noticed well before 1997. Lawrence-Webb (1997) argues that the Flemming rule, a policy designed to combat discrimination during the Eisenhower presidency, is one of the major reasons for the current overrepresentation of black children in care.

The Flemming Rule. The Flemming rule was created in response to the tendency of welfare agencies, particularly in the South, to ignore African American children in need. One way the agencies justified this was by citing an "immoral" life-style, which usually meant that the children's father was not living in the home, or was not married to their mother.

To correct this racist practice, the Flemming rule mandated that, rather than ignoring "unsuitable" families, the state had to provide services to all needy families. But in the effort to guarantee blacks access to *cont. p. 8*

OVERREPRESENTATION MAY NOT BE THE PROBLEM MANY BELIEVE IT IS

Richard Barth, Ph.D.

Conventional wisdom says that the fact that African American children are disproportionately represented in foster care is a problem, an indication that the child welfare system isn't working fairly or well.

Richard Barth and his colleagues challenge this way of thinking. After a thorough review of the literature related to this issue, they propose an explanation of the overrepresentation of black children in foster care that does not place much blame on the child welfare system itself. Instead, they attribute this phenomenon to a combination of factors, including substantially greater risks of child abuse and neglect for African American children; a higher incidence of abuse and neglect among African Americans (despite some mediating factors); substance abuse, incarceration, and higher mortality rates for African American parents; small differences in the way black children are treated in child welfare's decision making process; and substantial differences in the likelihood that African American children will experience long stays in foster care. (This last factor may be partially attributable to more African American children living with relatives, which is often considered to be a culturally-responsive placement).

As children are exposed to each of these factors, the number entering the system grows. The result is disproportionate representation of African American children in the child welfare system.

Barth and colleagues also find no evidence that would lead them to think this disproportionality is not, generally, in the best interests of the children served. To support this conclusion they point to studies that show that black children benefit significantly from receiving child welfare services (i.e., reduced mortality and incarceration rates and increased access to services). Disproportionality would be a problem, they say, if the system was not providing children with what they ***need*** to be safe. But it is.

Though the conclusions Barth and colleagues have reached are not shared by everyone working in child welfare, we should consider them for two reasons. First, because they weigh scientific evidence from hundreds of studies, these researchers gain a perspective on this issue that is not available to those of us confronting it on a case-by-case, family-by-family basis. Second, based on this same objective evaluation, they tell us something people in child welfare don't hear very often: we're doing the right thing. Regardless of the race or culture of our clients, the services we provide are needed, and they do make a positive difference in the lives of children. □

Source: Barth, R. P., Miller, J. M., Green, R. L., & Baumgartner, J. N. (2000). *Children of color in the child welfare system: Toward explaining their disproportionate involvement in comparison to their numbers in the general population*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC, School of Social Work, Jordan Institute for Families (unpublished report).

UNDERSTANDING OVERREPRESENTATION

from page 5

services, the Flemming rule may have gone too far. Once a family accepted public assistance, "unsuitability" or "immorality" of parents became cause for bringing children into the child welfare system. According to Lawrence-Webb, this rule created "a service system from which [African-Americans] could not withdraw once the neglect label was invoked" (p. 21).

Lawrence-Webb makes a compelling argument. Though the racism found in the 1950's is rare today, agencies continue to pursue neglect charges for what they perceive to be immoral behavior by parents (Lawrence-Webb, 1997). African Americans are incarcerated more often than whites (Genty, 1998), and more likely to live in single-parent homes, two characteristics that are considered by some to be immoral. And the families accepting welfare assistance, who are disproportionately black, remain vulnerable to long legal battles over neglect charges.

MEPA and Amendments to MEPA. Seeing social service agency policies that favored same-race adoption as partly responsible for the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care, federal legislators passed the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA). MEPA barred the practice of "categorically deny[ing] to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or foster parent solely on the basis of race." In 1996 congress used the "Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provision" (IEP) of the Small Business Job Protection Act to further restrict race-based adoption and foster placement. Current law prohibits the denial or delay of adoption or foster placement based on race.

Hollingsworth (1998) criticizes MEPA and IEP as simplistic attempts to reduce the number of black children in foster care through unnecessary transracial adoptions. Rather than promote transracial adoptions, Hollingsworth suggests a more successful strategy would be to increase the numbers of available black foster and adoptive parents, improve the provision of preventive and supportive services to African Americans, expand the definition of permanency further to include kinship care, and improve services to families, especially services that address issues of poverty.

Hollingsworth writes, "The direction of public policies currently is to speed up the transracial adoption of children of color without first correcting the resource deficiencies that cause the children to be in out-of-home care. Such policies ignore the complexities of this situation and risk giving one group (those desiring to adopt young children) an advantage while failing to protect those who are among the most vulnerable (poor children and families)" (p. 112).

RACISM

Racism is another factor that contributes to the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system in several ways.

Few would dispute that racism exists in society at large, and that the stresses of everyday living are therefore higher for minorities than they are for those who belong to the majority. Conceivably this additional stress could contribute to a higher incidence of child maltreatment among minorities. But if this were the case, we would see overrepresentation in the child welfare system of all minority groups, and we do not.

Much more likely, however, is that conscious or unconscious stereotypes and beliefs about African Americans lead professionals and others in society to scrutinize them more when it comes to issues of child maltreatment. For example, in 1990 Chasnoff and colleagues conducted a study of drug use during pregnancy. They found that although white and black women were equally likely to test positive (15.4% vs. 14.1%) for drugs, African American women were ten times as likely to be reported to health authorities after delivery. To explain this difference, the researchers speculated that physicians believed that drug use is most likely to occur in minority, poor, urban populations, and therefore were more likely to suspect, test, and report African American women than Caucasian women.

Consciously or unconsciously, racism may come from within the child welfare system, which may in turn lead to more children of color entering foster care. Predominantly staffed and run by Caucasians, critics say the system does not understand and is not set up to support and serve African Americans and other minorities. As a result, they charge, the system hurts families.

According to the advocacy group Child Welfare Watch (1998), the "prevalence of this perception should serve as a warning to those *cont. p. 9*

who believe race is not a significant factor defining the methods and style of our child welfare system, and as a call to action for those who do understand its significance. Those of us involved in child welfare and other social service systems must ask ourselves again and again: Are my decisions influenced by racism and/or class bias? If so, how can I change it? These questions need to be asked by African Americans and Latinos as well as whites."

CONCLUSION

There is no simple explanation of why African American children are overrepresented in our child welfare system. In addition to racism, laws and policies, and poverty, those seeking to understand this situation must contend with a host of other factors affecting black families, including single motherhood, substance abuse, inadequate housing, incarceration, lack of appropriate social support systems, teenage pregnancy, and violence (Brown & Bailey-Etta, 1997).

Yet we need not wait for a perfect understanding of the causes of this problem before seeking a solution to it. Rather than blaming the system or society at large, each of us should strive to understand and respect the cultures of those we serve, recognize the strength that resides in every family, and challenge racism when we meet it in our institutions, our peers and clients, and ourselves.

References

Brown, A. W. & Bailey-Etta, B. (1997). *An out-of-home care system in crisis: Implications for African American children in the child welfare system*. Child Welfare, (76)1, 65-83.

Chasnoff, I. J., Landress, H. J., & Barrett, M. E. (1990). The prevalence of illicit-drug and alcohol use during pregnancy and discrepancies in mandatory reporting in Pinel County, Florida. *New England Journal of Medicine, 322*, 1202-1206.

Child Welfare Watch. (1998, Spring/Summer). Introduction: The race factor in child welfare, Child Welfare Watch, 3. <http://www.citylimits.org/cuf/childwelfare/cww_03.htm#1>.

Courtney, M., Barth, R., Berrick, J. D., Brooks, D., Needell, B., & Park, L. (1996). Race and child welfare services: Past research and future directions. *Child Welfare, 75*, 99–133.

Genty, P. (1998). Permanency planning in the context of parental incarceration: Legal issues and recommendations. *Child Welfare, 77*, 543–560.

Hollingsworth, L. D. (1998). Promoting same-race adoption for children of color. *Social Work, 43*(2), 104–115.

Kellam, S. (1999). *The color of care*. Connect for Kids web site. <http://www.connectforkids.org/>

Kidd, J. B. (2000, March). *Improving outcomes for families and children of color*. Workshop conducted at the 2000 North Carolina Children's Services Conference, Charlotte, NC. Children of Color.

Lawrence-Webb, C. (1997). African American children in the modern child welfare system: A legacy of the Flemming rule. *Child Welfare, 76*, 9–29.

Pelton, L. H. (1994). The role of material factors in child abuse and neglect. In Melton, G. B. & Barry, F. D. (Eds.). *Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect*. New York: Guilford Publications. pp. 131–181.

WORKING WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

SOCIAL WORKERS

Denby and Alford (1996) suggest asking these questions when intervening with families:

- Is the family's behavior or parenting practice being assessed in relation to the dominant culture's behavior and parenting practices? To what degree is the assessment of the family informed by knowledge of African American culture?
- To what degree does my intervention empower the family, allowing them the freedom to use discipline styles that fit with their culture?
- How important are traditionally-defined African American discipline styles to this family? Which do they subscribe to?
- What are the benefits and costs of particular methods of discipline? Do other black families use these same methods? Which traditionally-defined black discipline styles have no merit?
- Is there a danger of serious or chronic physical harm to the children?

ADMINISTRATORS

Denby and Alford recommend agency administrators:

- Ensure that courses for parents recognize that black caregivers must perform "dual socialization"—that is, socialization into the dominant culture as well as traditional African American culture
- Offer training programs designed to educate practitioners about African American parenting styles, and about diverse forms of discipline, not just those accepted by the dominant culture
- Make every effort to recruit and retain a staff that reflects the diverse ethnic and cultural makeup of the populations served
- Monitor agency practices and policies to make sure they encourage partnership with families
- Encourage social work practice that is strengths-based, promotes family empowerment and self-determination
- Challenge dominant social norms that stigmatize African American parenting styles

The strength-based perspective is inherent in this kind of thinking. A parent struggling economically and besieged by other stresses may sometimes seem less than attentive or patient with children. But it is important to remind ourselves that parents are only human, that they have managed to care for their children under difficult conditions, and that they therefore must have great strength and wisdom, even if it is not immediately apparent to us.

Source: Denby, R. & Alford, K. (1996). Understanding African American discipline styles: Suggestions for effective social work intervention. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 4*, 81–98.

ADDRESSING THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Of the nearly 11,000 children in out-of-home care in North Carolina, almost half are African American, although blacks make up approximately 27% of the population 19-and-under across the state. On average, black children stay in the system over five months longer than whites (Jackson, 2001). If a child's plan is adoption, African-Americans tend to wait longer for an adoptive home.

To join with a family different from themselves, social workers need to make a long-term commitment to learn about that family's culture.

This problem did not crop up over night—it has been with us for more than 20 years. It cannot be fixed over night. Yet reason and the experience of practitioners and researchers passionate about meeting the needs of black children and families tell us that there are areas where we can address this problem. Three important ones are: enhancing our ability to join with black families, improving our delivery of services to them, and recruiting black foster and adoptive parents.

JOINING WITH BLACK FAMILIES

One of the recurring themes among those critical of our child welfare system is the way it assesses families of color. Most child welfare workers in North Carolina are white and middle class. Yet many families referred for abuse and neglect are black and poor. In addition, the parents in these families are often young, unmarried, female, and struggling with issues such as inadequate housing, unsafe neighborhoods, inadequate day care, substance abuse, and unemployment.

From the first knock on the door, the differences between social workers and their clients—let alone the abuse or neglect referral that is the reason for the visit—foster mutual mistrust and understanding. Ignorance and fear of cultural differences can further complicate matters.

Yet social workers are responsible for getting to know these families well enough to assess the safety of their children and provide them with the services they need.

Some workers attempt to bridge this divide with a commitment to treat white families and families of color the same. Although the desire to treat all families fairly is laudable, overlooking a family's race or culture (or the "color blind" approach) may do more harm than good. This approach may lead social workers to inadvertently assume that the values and behaviors of the dominant (white) culture are "right" for everyone. This can lead to misunderstandings about things such as discipline styles or the seriousness of a family's situation (Family Tree, 2001).

The color blind approach may also cause people to assume members of minority cultures who fail to meet the cultural expectations of the dominant group do so because of some cultural deficiency, lack of desire to achieve, or because of pathology. Subtle or unconscious assumptions such as these, in addition to being wrong ("the system" often works only for the most assimilated of the minority group), can distance clients and social workers (Family Tree, 2001). A product of this distance may be an increased likelihood that minority children will be removed from their families.

To effectively join with a family that is culturally or racially different from themselves, social workers need to make a long-term commitment to learn about that family's culture. To do this, social workers should be prepared to spend extra time with families to learn how they see things and to take extra care not to make assumptions. In addition, social workers should make an effort to place themselves in the context of the African American community outside of work hours. Attending church and community events is a good way to do this.

Another way to gain strength in joining with black families is to seek out the natural leaders in their *cont. p. 11*

DON'T OVERLOOK STRENGTHS IN BLACK FAMILIES HEADED BY SINGLE PARENTS

"Because of broadly accepted cultural assumptions that urban, single-parent households are much more likely to be weak and dysfunctional, single black mothers regularly bear the full brunt of child welfare intervention, charges Esmeralda Simmons, executive director for the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn. She says policy makers and child protection officials need to understand that black families are far more flexible and resourceful—even in times of stress and adversity—than is conventionally believed. "Our definition of family includes extended family, our children's friends, elder siblings as the head of the household—all of this is acceptable, and it is a major strength of families at risk" (Child Welfare Watch, 1998).

community. If you do not know who these people are, ask people in your agency or in black neighborhoods. Because they are "gatepersons" for the community, knowing these leaders may prove helpful in overcoming distrust and other barriers between you and black families.

Developing relationships with people who work in family resource centers, community housing projects, city or county recreation departments, or Head Start programs is also a good way to build your understanding of and comfort in your African American community.

Experienced social workers have also emphasized how important it is for all child welfare workers to spend time reflecting on their personal beliefs, values, and life experiences, as these personal factors are sure to influence their work with families. As one social worker put it, "the better you understand your strengths and limitations, the better equipped you are to work effectively with families different from you." The sidebar at right is one tool social workers can use to guide this kind of self-evaluation.

Taking these steps should help you form relationships and recognize and build on family strengths that will allow you to avoid removing black children from their families and communities needlessly.

PAYING ATTENTION TO WHO GETS SERVICES

North Carolina data finds that whites are roughly twice as likely as blacks to receive either preventive or reunification services (Jackson, 2001). Another study (not in North Carolina) found that in the first three months after placement of their children, white parents had twice as many contacts with the agency as did black parents (Hollingsworth, 1998).

This discrepancy has at least two causes. For their part, African American families may resist involvement with DSS or any other official institution out of distrust. From a historical perspective, there is a sound basis for this distrust. Take, for example, the Tuskegee study (1928–1972), in which U.S. government-sponsored researchers allowed black men suffering from syphillis (some in Pitt County, NC) to go untreated so researchers could study the progress of the disease.

Even if blacks are unaware of abuses such as this, they are aware of the disproportionate numbers in which African Americans are entering our prison and child welfare systems. To counter this distrust, social workers should consider pursuing some of the strategies suggested in the section on joining with black families.

cont. p. 12

SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR THOSE WHO WORK WITH AFRICAN AMERICANS AND OTHER MINORITIES

The following self-assessment, excerpted from the article *Cultural Competence in Child Welfare* by Anna R. McPhatter, is one way of evaluating where you are as a practitioner and a person when it comes to spending time with those who are different from yourself.

1. How much personal/social time do I spend with people who are culturally similar to or different from me?
2. When I am with culturally different people, do I reflect my own cultural preferences or do I spend time openly learning about the unique aspects of another person's culture?
3. How comfortable am I in [being immersed in a different culture], especially when I am in the numerical minority? What feelings and behaviors do I experience or exhibit in this situation?
4. How much time do I spend engaged in cross-cultural professional exchanges? Is this time spent in superficial, cordial activity, or do I undertake the risk of engaging in serious discourse that may divulge my fears and lack of knowledge?
5. How much work have I actually done to increase my knowledge and understanding of culturally and ethnically distinct groups? Does this work include only an occasional workshop in which I am required to participate? What are my deficiencies and gaps in knowledge about important cultural issues?
6. What is my commitment to becoming culturally competent? What personal and professional sacrifices am I willing to make in the short term for the long-term benefit of all children and families?
7. To what extent have I nondefensively extended myself in approaching professional colleagues with the goal of bridging cultural differences?
8. Am I willing to discontinue representing myself as knowledgeable and as having expertise in areas of cultural diversity that I have not actually achieved?
9. If I am unwilling to commit to a path leading to cultural competence, will I take the moral and ethical high ground and discontinue providing services to people I am unwilling learning about?

Source: McPhatter, A. R. (1997). Cultural competence in child welfare: What is it? How do we achieve it? What happens without it? *Child Welfare, 76*(1), 255–278.

ADDRESSING OVERREPRESENTATION *from page 11*

The failure to provide services to black families may also be due to shortcomings in child welfare policy or practice. To address this, individuals should scrutinize policies or practices that discourage black families from having contact with their agency or that unfairly exclude them from preventive and reunification services.

RECRUITING AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

To recruit and retain adoptive African American families, policies and procedures must be sensitive to their needs and cultural context. McRoy and Oglesby (1997) suggest agencies make use of what research tells us about the types of families most likely to adopt children with special needs. For example, minority single parents have been found to be very likely to consider adopting children with disabilities and older children [Rodriguez & Meyer, 1990]. Thus, it would be helpful to "encourage prospective single-parent adopters by adapting policies and practices to reflect the characteristics of these applicants."

McRoy and Oglesby also encourage agencies to modify their procedures to screen in, rather than screen out, prospective adopters. They recommend responding quickly to all inquiries and adjusting office hours, group meeting times, and procedures for child-specific recruitment to the needs of African American families. An example of changes along this line would be sending out a two-page application in response to phone inquiries, rather than a longer application and supporting forms, and then to follow up soon after with a call to the prospective parent. □

References

Child Welfare Watch. (1998, Spring/Summer). Introduction: *The race factor in child welfare*, Child Welfare Watch, 3. <http://www.citylimits.org/cuf/child_welfare/cww_03.htm#1>

Denby, R. & Alford, K. (1996). Understanding African American discipline styles: Suggestions for effective social work intervention. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 4*, 81–98.

Family Tree. (2001, March 29). *Transracial adoption: Adopting a child of another race or culture*. <http://www.homes4kids.org/transrac.htm>

Hollingsworth, L. D. (1998). Promoting same-race adoption for children of color. *Social Work, 43*(2), 104–115.

Jackson, D. (2001). Why are so many African-American children languishing in the state's foster care system? *Independent Weekly* (3-21-01).

McRoy, R. G. & Oglesby, Z. (1997). Achieving same-race adoptive placements for African American children: Culturally sensitive practice approaches. *Child Welfare, 76*(1), 85.

Child's Services Practice Notes

Family & Children's Resource Program
Jordan Institute for Families
UNC–School of Social Work
Campus Box 3550
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550
State Courier # 17-61-04