Critical Issues in Foster Care

Lessons The Children's Ark Learned From Barbara and Nathan

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Nathan[2] *was a tall, slightly clumsy, blue-eyed blond who had much to teach us. He came to The Children's Ark at about 9 months of age with his mother, Barbara, from a small farming town outside of Spokane, Washington. Barbara's commitment to her son and to doing all she needed to do to regain custody of him was impressive. She was admitted to the program while it was still residential. Participation, therefore, meant moving a number of miles to Spokane, leaving everything she knew, everything she owned, and a husband behind. Nathan had been placed with his father's sister, also from the small farming town, thus acceptance into The Children's Ark meant a move for Nathan as well—but come they did.*

Although Barbara's husband certainly looked the small-town, farm-boy type, Barbara herself seemed much more street-life hardened. She had obviously been around the block; she was tough, rough, and savvy. Just beneath the surface, however, was a tenderness and vulnerability that hinted at the intense pain underlying it all. It did not take long for her to reveal the tragic and deeply moving image that haunted her: As a young child Barbara was molested repeatedly by her stepfather. On a weekend visit with her birth father, she finally revealed the truth to him. With the young Barbara in tow, her birth father stormed to the home of his former wife and her new husband and confronted them on the front porch. As Barbara describes how her mother stood on the porch facing her with her stepfather behind the screen door, her voice drops almost to a whisper and tears fill her eyes. Barbara's mother listened to her former husband's accusations, looked Barbara in the eyes, hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked slowly into the house and back to her husband, letting the screen door slam behind them. Her choice was clear.

Barbara's experience of being molested by her stepfather and then virtually abandoned in her pain by her mother would most certainly have presented intensive threats to her basic sense of security. Clinical treatment providers and attachment researchers alike have recognized that a mother's history of insecurity and maltreatment is likely to be perpetuated with her own children unless the mother is provided with the support necessary to resolve these early issues (Kretchmar, Worsham, & Swenson, 2005; Oliver, 1993; Oppenheim & Goldsmith, 2007). The Children's Ark—an innovative, attachment-based alternative to traditional foster care—offered this kind of support. This article describes how the intervention provided by The Children's Ark altered the pathway for Barbara and Nathan, although not necessarily in ways first anticipated. Illustrated through Nathan's actions, it presents insights about ways to respond to several critical issues for children in foster care.

[1]This article was informed by Janet Mann's direct experience with Barbara and Nathan and also by descriptive research on The Children's Ark undertaken by Nancy L. Worsham and Molly D. Kretchmar. Portions of this article have been presented at various training workshops, including at Project Same Page, which was supported by the Paul Allen Foundation. In addition to Janet's family, who were critical in the success of Nathan's journey, Janet extends her gratitude to her clinical colleagues, Sandra Powell, Glen Cooper, Bert Powell, and particularly Kent Hoffman, who spent many hours supervising Janet on the effective use of videotape.
[2]To protect the privacy of the child and mother represented in this article, their names have been changed.

The Children's Ark: An Overview

The Children's Ark was founded in 1994 by Paul and Janet Mann who then had more than 6 years of experience as foster parents and had provided care for more than 40 infants and children. Although they have now adopted a day-treatment model at the Ark, it began as a residential program. Mothers who had lost custody were invited to live full time with their children in a safe and structured environment, in which they retained the

Abstract

Using an attachment theory framework, this article explores several critical issues in foster care as reflected in the case of Barbara and her 9-month-old son, Nathan. Barbara and Nathan participated in The Children's Ark, an innovative intervention for families in foster care that allowed mothers who had lost custody of their children to live, full time, with them. Barbara's experience at the Ark powerfully illustrates the intergenerational effects of early maltreatment as well as the pain of confronting that past. Nathan's experience demonstrated the critical need for security, which, because of her past, Barbara struggled to provide. Over time, Barbara came to realize that it was in Nathan's best interests to relinquish custody so that he could be moved to a permanent placement, another critical need. Finally, this article illustrates how a carefully planned transition allowed Nathan, at age 2 years, to have some understanding of what was happening and to eventually claim his new caregiver.

Photo: Brett Hendricks

With the help of individual, corporate, and foundation donors, the Manns renovated this historic home to become The Children's Ark. The inviting domestic architecture creates the feeling of a family home rather than a social services building.

primary caregiving responsibilities under the supervision of the Ark staff. In designing the Ark, the Manns were greatly influenced by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982); they kept children with their mothers, hoping to strengthen the attachment relationship, and they provided a stable placement in order to minimize the devastating effects of repeated separations from caregivers, created when children are moved repeatedly (Dozier, Dozier, & Manni, 2002; Kenrick, 2000).

The residential component of the Ark was structured to accommodate four infant–mother dyads at one time and included many features of a traditional family environment. In addition to being the primary caretakers of their children, mothers were expected to contribute to the daily functioning of the Ark household (e.g., cooking nutritious meals, planning budgets). The Ark also had a deliberate and intensive therapeutic component. The mothers participated in individual therapy once or twice a week and in family therapy (with the entire Ark "family") once a week. On a daily basis, mothers were asked to explore the personal issues that made parenting difficult. Janet Mann and her staff would continually challenge the mothers to be aware of their behaviors with their children (e.g., "Did you see what you just did?") and to examine their motivations (e.g., "Why did you respond that way?"). Janet often used videotape to capture mother–child interactions, which she would then review with the mothers. The mothers also worked with a public health nurse and an occupational therapist to learn about their babies' development and how to better identify and respond to their babies' cues. In Paul Mann's words, the Ark combined "the protection and nurturing of a foster family home for young children with a residential support and education program for their mothers" (P. Mann, personal communication, 1998). (See Kretchmar et al., 2005, and Worsham & Kretchmar, 1999, for more complete descriptions of the Ark.)

Critical Issues for Children in Foster Care

Policymakers and professionals who work in foster care and families and children who experience foster care have identified various challenges that face the foster care system. These challenges include providing clear communication, securing appropriate and timely placements, and identifying adequate support for families trying to regain custody (Allen & Bissell, 2004; Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004; Ellerman, 2007; Jones Harden, 2004). This article does not provide an exhaustive account of the many concerns that have been articulated in the literature but instead focuses on several critical issues that particularly affect children in foster care: safety and basic security, permanence, and transitions.

The Need for Safety and Basic Security

Children typically are not removed from their parents' custody unless significant concerns for their welfare are documented. Although neglect is the most common reason children enter foster care, various forms of child maltreatment (e.g., neglect, physical abuse) are often overlapping. It is likely that many children in foster care have experienced multiple forms of maltreatment (Stukes Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Being neglected or otherwise maltreated can pose overwhelming threats to a young child's attachment system. In fact, attachment researchers have discovered that the majority of infants and young children who are reared under maltreating circumstances develop disorganized/disoriented attachment relationships with their caregivers (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). Disorganized attachment is thought to represent "fright without solution": The primary caregiver, who should be the source of comfort, is either helpless to provide that comfort or is also the source of fear (Main & Hesse, 1990). In Main and Hesse's words, "The infant is presented with an irresolvable paradox wherein the haven of safety is at once the source of alarm" (p. 180). For infants, this paradoxical need to both approach and avoid the caregiver renders them virtually paralyzed in getting attachment needs met. Indeed, disorganized/disoriented attachment is thought to reflect profound insecurity. Over time, children with disorganized attachments often exhibit significant behavior problems and ongoing relationship disturbances, meaning that they may become more difficult to place in foster or adoptive homes and may experience more disrupted placements (Barth et al., 2007; Jones Harden, 2004).

When removed from the care of their parent(s), maltreated children undergo another attachment-related trauma: that of separation. Even under conditions of maltreatment, infants and young children show a remarkable capacity to develop an emotional bond with their caregivers and are likely to experience confusion, loss, and even grief upon separation (Bowlby, 1973). In 2005, only about 24% of foster children were placed with a relative, whereas 64% were placed in a completely unfamiliar environment (i.e., a nonrelative foster family home, group home, or institution; USDHHS, 2006). Furthermore, the temporary nature of many foster care placements often precludes young children from experiencing any long-term secure bond that might mitigate their early insecurity. One critical issue, then, is to provide foster children with stable, sensitive, secure-base caregiving, which over time can modify even insecure attachment patterns (J. Mann & Kretchmar, 2006; Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2004).

As described previously, The Children's Ark sought to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for the children in its care. Well versed in attachment theory and also trained in the Circle of Security protocol (see Cooper, Hoffman, Powell, & Marvin, 2005), the Ark staff understood the essential

need of the young child to feel safe, accepted, and valued (see also J. Mann & Kretchmar, 2006). What became clear to the Ark staff was the need for the mothers, themselves, to feel safe and validated. As one treatment provider stated: The mothers "haven't given up that longing for that sense of secure base, longing for a sense of feeling seen and understood, and like they mattered" (S. Powell, personal communication, February 13, 1997). For both Barbara and Nathan, the secure base provided through the Ark altered their life trajectories in significant ways.

The Need for Permanence

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), signed into law in 1997, requires states to engage in permanency planning within 12 months of the time children are placed into foster care. ASFA committed funds to support time-limited family reunification, including the provision of resources such as mental health counseling and substance abuse treatment (Allen & Bissell, 2004). Even with these resources, families who have lost custody of their children may be a long way from resolving the myriad issues that have disrupted their parenting. Children are sometimes prematurely returned to their parents, only to end up back in the foster care system. In designing the Ark, the Manns' primary goals were (a) to "move children to permanent placements as quickly as possible with as little damage as possible" (J. Mann, personal communication, February 10, 1997) and (b) to move mothers toward self-sufficiency. An ideal outcome would be to have mothers justifiably regain custody and retain that custody over time.

As their work at the Ark evolved, it became clear to Janet that helping the mothers learn to provide good care for their children was "not an information issue" (J. Mann, personal communication, April 2001) but instead involved personal examination and awareness, which was often a painful and time-intensive process (Kretchmar et al., 2005). Moreover, on the basis of her experience, Janet became convinced that "parents have the right to the truth about what is involved in shifting to a place that will change how they parent, and they have the right to decide whether or not it is work they feel capable and desirous of doing" (personal communication, March 24, 2008). Janet's experience with Barbara exemplified these insights.

PHOTO: BRETT HENDRICKS

Janet Mann engaged with a child in the toddler playroom of The Children's Ark.

As the months passed at The Children's Ark, the influence of Barbara's story on her relationship with her son began to unfold. Unbeknownst to her, she was passing on to her son her own picture of how the world works. Nathan's normal need for closeness or intimacy from his mother stirred up in her the fear and anxiety of her own experiences. No matter how hard she tried not to show it to him, he read her like a book, and adjusted his behavior accordingly. We videotaped their interactions frequently, and went over them numerous times with Barbara in hopes of finding a way to capture "the dance" that had developed between her and her son. One day I decided to watch a short tape in slow motion, and there it was: their heads moving in perfect synchrony! Whenever Barbara looked at Nathan, he turned his head away; conversely, whenever Nathan looked at Barbara, she turned her head away. It was a dance indeed. I decided to show the tape to Barbara in slow motion to see if she could see and, more important, tolerate it. I showed it to her and asked her what she saw. She asked to see it again, and then again. Finally, after the fourth viewing her eyes lit up, her excitement escalated, and she exclaimed, "Oh my god, I see it, I see it." When I asked her what she saw, she said that every time Nathan moved his hand toward her, she moved her hand away, and vice versa. Heads and hands in perfect synchrony! I asked her what she thought it meant. Very soberly, she answered that she did not know, but that she wanted to see it again. We started through again, and at a moment when the camera zoomed in on Nathan's face, Barbara asked me to freeze the frame. Barbara stared at her son's face, which seemed to register hypervigilance, hope, and fear all at the same time. Still staring and with tears running down her cheeks, she finally said, "I know how he feels. I never wanted him to feel the way I felt."

If the lesson was not clear enough yet, Nathan started demonstrating his dilemma in yet another—more dramatic—way. Nathan loved books. He often grabbed one from the bookshelf and ran to any available lap in hopes of getting it read to him. He luckily had a number of loving laps available to him most of the time. His typical form was to head—book in tow—with determination and at full speed directly into the arms of any willing "receiver," almost as if thinking to collect a hug along the way. When the receiver was Barbara, however, his approach was very different. He began to move toward her in his usual form, but once within about five feet of her, he turned around and backed into her lap!

Barbara came to see, over time, the cost to her son of her own unresolved grief and loss. However, for her, walking through the pain to the other side was too much: "I want to parent my son, but I don't want to do what I need to do to be able to parent him." After about 10 months at The Children's Ark, Barbara left the program, leaving Nathan behind.

Barbara was one of several Ark mothers who made the courageous decision to voluntarily relinquish custody of their children. Although this was not necessarily the optimal outcome first imagined, the Ark staff quickly recognized that this outcome was far better for children than to have them languish in foster care while their parents continued to fight for custody. For Barbara, the realization that what Nathan needed from her as a parent was something that was just too painful to provide allowed her to relinquish custody with dignity, based on the knowledge that she was acting in Nathan's best interests. For Nathan, this meant that plans for a permanent home and caregiver could be pursued without further delay.

Photo: Brett Hendricks

View of the babies' nap room at The Children's Ark. Each crib is personalized for a particular child with familiar, comforting objects.

The Need for Thoughtful Transitions

Children in foster care are often moved repeatedly. Approximately 15% of foster children experience three or more placements in the first 12 months of foster care (Bass et al., 2004). Multiple placements mean multiple separation and loss experiences, which only serve to further compromise children's attachment systems. The loss experience is frequently compounded by transitions that are abrupt and done with little explanation. A recent qualitative study of foster children found that "transitions" was one of the primary factors identified as influencing children's mental health (Ellermann, 2007). All three groups interviewed for this study—professionals, foster parents, and foster children—regarded transitions as being poorly carried out. One foster child described transitions as "scary" and felt unprepared for what to expect in the new home: "All we do is get put into a car and drove [sic] to their house and then dropped off. And we are told 'this is where you are staying' " (Ellermann, 2007, pp. 26–27). Professionals and foster parents concurred, each stating that foster children and foster parents need to be better prepared for transitions. The thoughtfulness with which Janet facilitated the transition for Nathan illustrates both the challenges of this process and the potential for ultimate success.

Nathan was in my care for a number of months. I eventually moved him out of the area to his grandmother's.[3] Nathan's transition to his new home and caretaker was carefully thought out and executed. Once again, he was a master teacher.

Because Nathan's grandmother worked, she felt that she could not take the time off to come to Spokane for a visit. I determined to make at least one visit there before beginning the transition in earnest. Nathan and I flew to his grandmother's for a weekend visit. Grandmother had his room all set up with a crib. I took his favorite blanket, his favorite stuffed animal, and his pillow so that he would feel at home and have familiar things—and even smells—around him. Nathan went down for the night quite well, and I settled into the hide-a-bed in the living room. In the morning when Nathan awoke, he began calling my name. Grandmother got him up and told him that she would take him to me. Before leaving the room, he pulled all his things—blanket, stuffed animal, and pillow—out of the crib between the bars, and dragged them all through the house as he padded along in his search for me. I greeted him happily, and congratulated him on what a fine job he had done in his new room and his new bed. Nathan looked all around the room with determination and single-mindedness until he found what he was searching for: my suitcase. He stuffed all of his precious belongings into my suitcase and slammed it shut! He was not yet 2 years old, just barely verbal, but his message was clear.

The following week I packed up all his belongings, including toys and some food, and drove him the 5 hours to his new home. I had bought him a little duffle bag just his size, and had him help me pack the sheets, blanket, pillow, and favorite animal from his crib. I had him carry it to the car and put it next to his car seat. When we arrived at Grandmother's, I again had him carry his little duffle bag into the house. Together we made up his new crib with everything familiar, talking the whole time about how this was his new bed in his new home and so forth. I talked also about how his grandmother was going to take care of him now and always be there for him. Nathan had little to say that first day. As the days passed in that first week, however, he increasingly commented with a resounding "no" when I talked about his new life. I stayed in the area for a full 5 days, not in the house with him, but nearby. I came to see him each day, but was careful to slowly affirm with my words and actions that this was now his home and I was the visitor. I was careful not to caretake him, but to always defer to Grandmother. I did not feed him, bathe him, or in any other way meet his physical needs, but was always there to emotionally support him and "approve" of Grandmother. If he came to me asking for a drink of water, I took him by the hand and led him to her, saying, "Let's ask

[3]Nathan's grandmother was Barbara's former stepmother, who also had custody of Nathan's older sister.

Learn More

Tulane Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health
www.infantinstitute.com/index.html

The Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health, a section of Tulane University Health Sciences Center Department of Psychiatry and Neurology, is dedicated to the discovery, dissemination, and application of knowledge to promote social and emotional competence in young children locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. The multidisciplinary faculty conducts research, policymaker education, and the Harris Training Program in Infant Mental Health. The Web site includes a "10 Things You Should Know About Infant Mental Health" FAQ.

Books:

Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., Powell, B., & Marvin, R. (2005). The Circle of Security Intervention: Differential diagnosis and differential treatment. In L. J. Berlin, Y. Ziv, L. Amaya-Jackson, & M. T. Greenberg (Eds.), *Enhancing early attachments: Theory, research, intervention, and policy* (pp. 127–151). New York: Guilford.

O'Connor, T. G., & Zeanah, C. H. (2003). Attachment disorders: Assessment strategies and treatment approaches. *Attachment & Human Development, 5*, 223–244.

Siegel, D. J., & Hartzell, M. (2003). *Parenting from the inside out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive*. New York: Putnam.

Grandmother." If he needed help finding something or making a toy work, I suggested, "Let's see if Grandmother can help us." If he wanted to watch one of his favorite videos (which we brought with us), I said, "Let's see if Grandmother wants to watch it with us." I was careful always to include Grandmother, and to give him the message that I approved of and enjoyed Grandmother. Whenever possible I slipped in the message that Grandmother was going to take care of him now, and that although I would always be his Janet, Grandmother was the one who would always be there for him from now on. I explained in detail each day how the day would go and when I would be coming and going.

After this initial 5-day visit, I returned to Spokane. I came back 1 week later, and then every 2 weeks, slowly reducing the number of days I stayed. Event ually I spread the visits out even further, coming twice a month and then only once a month. During my first 11 trips to see Nathan, no matter how much time had lapsed between visits, if I was present in the house Nathan sought me out if he was distressed, hurt, or needed help. He seemed increasingly comfortable over time with Grandmother and his new home, but his persistent seeking of me when vulnerable told me that he had not yet really shifted caregivers. Patiently we persevered.

The occasion of my 12th visit to see Nathan was his older sister's birthday party (she also was living with Grandmother). The living room was full of people: new aunts and uncles and cousins. Nathan seemed small and lost wandering among them. I was seated in my usual chair where I was available to Nathan, but in no way interfering with his access to Grandmother. As Nathan stumbled about the room, he walked right into the legs of Uncle Fred. Although not hurt, Nathan was clearly startled and disorganized by the encounter. He looked about for comfort. Seated in my chair, I was but a few feet away and in direct sight. Instead of coming to me as usual, however, Nathan moved around Uncle Fred and a number of other new relatives and the dining room table until he reached Grandmother's waiting arms. "At last," I thought, "finally he is home!"

Nathan was one of the more fortunate of the more than 500,000 children in foster care in the United States (USDHHS, 2006). His early experience in a maltreating environment,[4] coupled with his clearly insecure and probably disorganized attachment relationship with his mother, certainly placed him at risk. The loving care he received at The Children's Ark allowed him to experience a basic sense of trust and security, which helped him learn new ways to "be in relationship" (Mann & Kretchmar, 2006). The support his mother received to reflect on her own issues and to ultimately come to the decision to relinquish custody meant that Nathan could be moved to a permanent home more quickly. Finally, the thoughtfulness of the transition allowed him, even at age 2, to have some understanding of what was happening, to have his feelings validated, to receive support from a familiar secure base (i.e., Janet), and to eventually claim his new caregiver.

I continue to visit Nathan, although only when I am otherwise in the area. He is 6 now, and very tall and handsome indeed. Grandmother has done a fine job with him, and he has adjusted well. He sees both his biological mother and father on occasion, as both have moved to the area. He is clear on who everyone is and where he belongs. Yet when I come for a visit he still runs to me with open arms and spends most of our time cuddled on my lap, long arms and legs draped around me, refusing to rise to any incentive to move. I believe that my presence still stirs in him a whole body memory—perhaps his first—of what it means to be welcomed, held, adored, and safe.

[4]At 7 weeks, Nathan was removed from his parents' custody because of domestic violence concerns and because his older sister was also in foster care.

Janet C. Mann, *with her husband, Paul, founded The Children's Ark in 1994 where she continues to serve as its director. Since 1988, Mrs. Mann and her husband have loved, nurtured, and transitioned to permanent homes over 120 foster children. For the past 15 years she has trained in the areas of object relations theory, attachment theory, brain development, and child development. In December of 2005 she completed an advanced postgraduate training in infant mental health assessment, and in January of 2008 she passed Level One certification in Circle of Security Assessment and Treatment Planning. The Manns have been the recipients of numerous awards, including the first annual Foster Parent Leadership Award from Children's Administration, Region One in 2007.*

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