
Bookworm's Corner

Book Review

Krebs, N. & Pitcoff, P. (2006). *Beyond the Foster Care System: The future for teens*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Press.

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In *Beyond the Foster Care System: The future for teens* Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff provide significant insight into the current foster care system's inability to prepare teens for adulthood. The authors illustrate some of the inadequate policies and programs currently in place through the revealing stories of teens transitioning from foster care to adulthood. A compelling argument is made suggesting that expectations for teens in foster care are far too low and efforts need to be made to empower these individuals through new policies and programs that have historically been absent from the field of child welfare. By chronicling the challenges and barriers of the foster youth the authors provide a face to the current foster care crisis in the United States.

The contents are presented in eight chapters, each of which introduces a number of policy and practice challenges through the personal accounts of youth. The stories portray an inflexible system, in which many professionals have become both desensitized and overwhelmed by the pressures and expectations of their responsibilities. A common theme in most accounts was the system's inability to tap into the personal resources of youth, such as their insight, resilience, and intellect, to not only better prepare themselves for independence, but also to utilize the experience and insight of the teens in developing more effective independent living policies.

The story of Teresa is an unfortunate account that provides a unique view of the child welfare system through the eyes of a lawyer new to foster care. This lawyer would later help to create an agency solely devoted to educating and advocating for teens in foster care. Teresa is a young lady living in a group home who has two family members who both have a strong desire and willingness to provide care for her. Teresa is never united with either family member due in large part to the unwillingness of the professionals working the case to make the necessary accommodations for the family members. A determination was eventually made that it would be in Teresa's best interest to remain in her group home. It was in this same group home that Teresa would later become the victim of sexual assault.

The stories of Carlos and Jenny shed light on the fact that many teens in foster care often times are not made aware of their rights to things such as education, privacy, employment, and family. These accounts also point to the fact that most foster youth know that they need things such as education and independent living skills; however, current efforts to provide such things are inadequate at best.

We meet Xaranda, and a group of young ladies who will eventually become her colleagues, in chapter 4. The experiences of this group of young ladies truly serve as the most inspiring and revealing aspect of the text. Their story provide significant insight into the unjust

and discriminatory policies facing teen mothers in foster care, but equally as important the accounts illustrate the levels of resiliency, creativity, and competence that teens in foster care possess. Xaranda is a pregnant teen, who like many other pregnant teens in foster care, finds herself nearing her due date without knowing where she and her baby will be placed, or if they will even be placed together. She contacts the Youth Advocacy Center in hopes of attaining assistance in securing a placement for both she and her baby. She would eventually become a very influential member of a group of young mothers in foster care who would work diligently to confront child welfare administrators and policy makers on a number of obstacles and injustices that they and numerous other teen mothers have encountered. The authors do a remarkable job of illustrating the irony in that many child welfare professionals likely felt that these young ladies were not capable of caring for their children, however, these same individuals were successful enough in their advocacy efforts that they would compile enough evidence to consider a class action law suit against the state due to their unjust policies concerning teen mothers in foster care.

We meet Leonard at one of the Youth Advocacy Center workshops educating teens on the importance of advocating for their rights. Shortly after emancipating from foster care Leonard finds himself, homeless, unemployed, and alone. The irony in Leonard's story is that he was largely considered one of the "good kids in foster care," who had a lot going for him. Leonard's descent is an unfortunate illustration of just how difficult it is for teens leaving the foster care system, as they often times have little or no support and only enough resources to sustain for a short period of time.

Two chapters are dedicated to further explaining the importance of teaching teens to advocate for themselves, as well introducing some of the unique methods that the Youth Advocacy Center has utilized in educating and empowering youth. A very strong argument is made to allow teens to investigate and figure out on their own whether or not to pursue certain goals and careers. The authors explain that it is very common for teens in foster care to be discouraged from certain careers that professionals and foster parents consider too lofty or unattainable.

The foster care system is largely considered to be a system that is both inflexible and stagnant. The authors provide an account that exhibits some of the foster care system's resistance to change, through a series of exchanges that took place with a group of administrators and social workers at a foster care agency. The staff members were reluctant to embrace a new and unfamiliar program, even though the existing programs were clearly ineffective and outdated. This account is likely far too familiar to many child welfare professionals, foster parents, and child care administrators.

Krebs and Pitcoff do an astounding job of exposing some of the most pressing issues facing teens in foster care through the stories and experiences they have encountered, however, little existing research on outcomes of emancipated foster youth is presented in the text to support their arguments. The use of existing literature would have likely served as a strong complement to the teen's accounts, due in large part to the fact that the research coincides with the stories presented. According to the Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study when compared to the general population former foster children have significantly higher unemployment rates (12.9% vs. 3.7%), graduate college at much lower rates (10.8% vs. 24.4%), and are nearly twice as likely to become parents as teenagers (Pecora et al., 2006). Similarly, findings from another foster care alumni study found that over 23% of alumni had not completed high school, and less than half were currently employed. Nearly a third of alumni in this same

study had been arrested in the past year, and they were far more likely than then the general population to be victims of crime (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). While the authors do not utilize the existing research to strengthen their argument, there is no question that both foster youth and professionals in the field would argue that Krebs and Pitcoff provide an accurate assessment of the current state of foster care in the United States. *Beyond the Foster Care System* serves as an aide and wake up call to professionals and policy makers in the foster care system. The unique and insightful stories would also serve as a helpful resource for anyone who has an interest in the aging out process or teens in foster care. In chronicling the experiences and challenges of foster youth the text is highly effective in providing a voice to a population that is often times underserved, overlooked, and underestimated.

References

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- Courtney, M. & Dworsky, A. (2006). Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the United States. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11 (3), 209-219.