

The History of Foster Care: Wrap-Around Services in Foster Care in the US

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Before the Civil War, homeless and orphaned children were bought and sold as indentured servants. It wasn't until the mid-eighteenth century that the congregate living movement said that homeless children should be mass housed in orphanages that were funded by donations and charities. The first orphanage in North America opened in Georgia (The New Georgia Encyclopedia, 2012), and the first public orphanage opened in South Carolina (City of Charleston, 2012). Today, approximately 800,000 are present in the child welfare system. Of those 800,000, 500,000 of those are in the foster care system (Snowden, Leon & Sieracki, 2008). With so many children going through the foster care system, it is easy for children to get lost and forgotten in the system. It is important that these children are kept up with and taken care of. Wrap-around services do just that! According to NetworkTherapy, wrap-around services are defined as "a unique set of community services and natural supports for a child/adolescent with serious emotional disturbances based on a definable planning process, individualized for the child and family to achieve a positive set of outcomes" (NetworkTherapy.com, 2012). Not only do children in foster care need a case worker to keep up with them, but they need individualized treatment. It is very important that the child's best interests are kept in mind, and that the child's family is included in the process. The ultimate goal is for the child to be put in a home where s/he will be happy and cared for, whether that is being adopted into a good home, or going back into parent custody. That is why wrap-around services are important. Case workers work with children and parents to get that child into the best place possible. Over the years, there have been many great improvements in the wrap-around services offered in the foster care system.

The first time an improvement was made in wrap-around services was in 1864, with the establishment of the Boston Children's Aid Society (BCAS). Before this, it was believed that children did not have rights, but needs, and it was not standard for children to be returned to their

biological parents. The BCAS, though, provided temporary reformatory care for children and tried to seek out the biological families of children in order to return them. Later, it also provided homes for destitute children (Boston Children's Aid Society, 1916). By 1900, BCAS had closed its three homes and started to provide foster and medical care for needy children. Not only did BCAS work to get children back to their biological parents, but they also continued the wrap-around services and extended them to the families. The BCAS worked with the single mothers of returned children to help them find suitable jobs so they could support their children. This was a big step in a positive direction for wrap-around services. Even with the development of the BCAS, though, there were many children in the foster care system that were not properly looked after and that were never placed into decent homes. Andrew Bridge is a prime example of the holes in wrap-around services. Throughout his memoir, Bridge tells his story of his eleven years in foster care. From age seven, until he aged out at eighteen, Bridge was in foster care. He rarely saw his case worker or his mother, and was placed in a foster home with a family that was not caring (Bridge, 2008).

In the 1960's and 1970's, there was a shift in how people viewed and cared for children. Foster children were no longer believed to not have rights, and wrap-around services became more essential. In the late 1970's, there was a lot of criticism going around about the foster care system because of the rising number of children entering foster care and the length of stay also increasing. Children were not being adopted nor were they being returned to their families; kids were just "drifting" through the system. On June 17th, 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) was enacted. This act aimed to "establish a program of adoption assistance, strengthen the program of foster care assistance for needy and dependent children, and improve the child welfare, social services, and aid to families" (Child Welfare Information

Gateway, n.d.). The AACWA required agencies to make reasonable efforts to keep families together and to reunite families that had been torn apart. It also put in place alternative permanency outcomes for children who could not be returned to their biological families. This improvement in the wrap-around services in foster care lead to a decrease in the number of children in the foster care system (Tatara, 1993) and a decline in the overall length of stay in the system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997).

It was feared in the early 1990's that children were being put into foster care when they could remain at home or be returned to their families. The public thought that the foster care system was not doing everything in its power to unify foster children with their families. In reaction to this, Congress enacted the Family Preservation and Family Support Program in 1993 to give funding to states for family preservation and family support services that were community-based ("family" being defined as birthparents, extended family members, and adoptive parents). Family preservation was defined as a "service programs designed to help children ...where appropriate, return to families from which they have been removed; or be placed for adoption, with a legal guardian, or, if adoption or legal guardianship is determined not to be safe and appropriate for a child, in some other planned, permanent living arrangement" (42 U.S.C. 629A). Family support services were defined as "services to promote the safety and well-being of children and families... (and) to increase the strength and stability of families (including adoptive, foster, and extended families)" (42 U.S.C. 629A). This program has been a great improvement to wrap-around services in the foster care system because it makes funding available for reunification services while children are in care, family preservation services following reunification or adoption, and post-adoption services for children and their adoptive families. This creates a greater ability to provide children with the care they need.

A study was done in 1996 in Florida; it examined individualized wrap-around services in the foster care system and its effects on outcomes and adjustment on children with emotional and behavioral disturbances. One hundred and thirty two children (ages 7-15) received wrap-around services, with the goal of showing that wrap-around services helped stabilize placement in foster care and to create permanency plans. The children in this study showed improved emotional and behavioral stability and ability to adjust, supporting the efficacy of wrap-around services in improving placement outcomes in the foster care system (Clark, 1996). With positive results from this study, there was relief among the public. Wrap-around services are shown to improve the life of children in foster care. To help protect the children in foster care and promote wrap-around services, congress made the most significant changes to child welfare law and wrap-around services by enacting the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) on November 19th, 1997. The purpose of this act was to promote the adoption in foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). ASFA aimed to accelerate permanent placement by requiring states to initiate court proceedings to free a child for adoption once a child had been waiting in foster care for fifteen months, and required permanency hearings to be held no later than twelve months after entering foster care. With these requirements in place, children in the foster care system were no longer left to drift through the system and were able to live better lives with good families.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was enacted in response to the life of children who aged out of foster care and had to go live on their own. Many young adults who aged out of foster care did not have any personal, financial, social, or health care support. In March 2000, close to 5,000 young people were in supervised independent living situations, preparing to live on their own. Close to 8,000 youth, however, had aged out of foster care during the preceding six

months and another 2,600 youth had run away and their status was unknown (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001c). Often times, youth who leave foster care are not prepared to live on their own. Building on the Independent Living Program, the Foster Care Independence Act requires states to provide youth ages 18 to 21 who were previously in foster care with services to help them make the transition to self-sufficiency; they offer education, training, and services so they can obtain employment; provide personal and emotional support through mentors and dedicated adults; and provide financial, housing, counseling, employment, education, and other supports and services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001b).

One very important person that improved the way wrap-around services are delivered to children in the foster care system is Andrew Bridge. At age seven, Bridge was taken from his mother and put into the custody of the state. He stayed in the foster care system until he aged out at eighteen. In his memoir, Bridge describes the family he was placed with. Only on very rare occasions did he see his case worker, and the family was not very welcoming, even after he had gained permanency status. Bridge's hard life led him to strive for greatness. He attended Harvard Law School and began a career representing impoverished children, with a special interest in children left in the custody of the state (Bridge, 2008). While working for the Alliance for Children's Rights, he sued Los Angeles County over its practice of taking children from their parents, putting them in foster care, and then not visiting them to assure safety and welfare. In 2003, the trial was settled, and it was made mandatory that case workers visit the children once a month. This was a big success in the area of wrap-around services because it made visits to children mandatory, and this helps children feel more safe, and it gives the case workers better insight so they can decide whether the child is in a proper home or not.

In 2006, E.J. Bruns did a study of youth in foster care: thirty three in wrap-around vs. thirty two receiving “usual” service. After eighteen months, twenty seven of the thirty three children receiving extensive wrap-around services were able to move to less restrictive environments, compared to only twelve in the other group. More positive outcomes were also found for the wraparound cohort on school attendance, school disciplinary actions, and grade point averages. No significant differences were found in favor of the other group (Bruns, 2006). Since the opening of the first orphanage in Georgia, foster care has come a long way. With all the new acts and legislation in place, case workers are able to better take care of the children in the foster care system. These regulations allow for more complete wrap-around services, and that allows for more children to live happier and healthier lives with good families.

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