

THE DISCHARGE PHASE OF FOSTER HOME PLACEMENT*

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IN the Children's Service Bureau of the Brooklyn Jewish Youth Services, discharge from agency care does not always mean termination of contact between client and agency. A planned discharge from agency care is the joint responsibility of the parents and the agency. We would fail in our responsibility to our clients and to the community if we discharged children from our care to emotionally and socially inadequate parents and forgot about them. Sometimes we succeed in helping the parent accept continuation of placement for his child as the more constructive plan. If we do not succeed, then it becomes our responsibility to remain in the situation and to help the family either stay together or to separate again with more awareness of need for placement. The nature of continued contact encompasses the whole texture of the family's experience before and during placement and the extent to which agency was able to help.

Planned discharge from agency care with time limited continued agency contact, falls into three categories, namely, discharge to own parents, to another agency for institutional care, and to self

when the youngster has attained self-support. Our continued contact in the first and third categories depends on the client's need for and use of help.

In the practice of our agency, the inter-relatedness of diagnostic and evaluative processes leading to discharge is emerging with increased sharpness. We find that discharge from agency care reflects the agency's clarity or lack of it as far as the total management of each situation is concerned.

In our society the desirable goals for child placement agencies are conceptually defined and geared to the eventual reunion of the family. It is not always possible at intake to project value judgments into the future, nor is it dynamically right. We cannot know "for sure" at intake that the family can use help to again function adequately. But I think we ought to have more courage during the lifetime of placement to use our diagnostic understanding of the parent-child relationship, if necessary, to depart from, or at least to modify the conventional goal of a child's return to his family. The degree of responsibility a child placement agency can take whenever discharge plans are contemplated is under constant scrutiny. I shall not enlarge on discharge of children

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to own families after a relatively short placement experience due to hospitalization of the mother. Even though placement might last one or two years, the child remains confident of his eventual return to his family. In these cases the discharge plans are realistically geared to specific recommendations, and it is relatively easy to help parent and child through the last phase of placement. This last phase includes gradually increased visits to the parental home for reasons that are self-evident.

By mutual agreement, agency might remain in the situation for two to three months after the discharge of the child. In most of these cases, some supportive help in the readjustment to and with the family is needed, especially when the "honeymoon" is over. The parent who during his hospitalization could not actively participate in his child's placement experience is often too eager or guilty or fearful and needs our help to find a workable balance. These are the happy endings.

I had to brace myself, I guess, with the comparatively uncomplicated discharge plans because not every discharge from agency care is indicative of strong, positive child-parent relationship. We in child placement agencies see our major responsibility to the child who will need placement until he can take over for himself. If we fail him, we fail society.

The severely damaged child of immature parents who themselves were deprived of good parental care is known to all child placement agencies. It would lead me far astray to describe the never-ending conflict of these children in relation to their parents. It is no coincidence that we have been swinging from one extreme to the other in various attempts to determine the role of the parent of the child in placement. Nor is it coincidental that we use the term "role."

Because the child never had the deep felt security of "belonging," these parents remain unreal to the child and so are his fantasies about "going home." There is, for the agency, the knowledge that these children have no parental home to which to return. Social planning is geared toward future independence; casework process is focused on helping the child accept his reality situation. Yet with all our clarity and planning, often including psychotherapy, we are sometimes faced with a deep resistance in the child *really* to accept the inevitable.

There is a direct relationship between the degree of parental rejection and the intensity of a child's denial of it. When Shelly at the age of five years asked her worker "how many foster homes does the agency have," and the answer was "one hundred," she quickly determined that she could be through all of them in one hundred weeks—and then, "My mother will *have to* take me home." That was ten years ago. Shelly subsequently settled down in a long time foster home, responded positively to the real warmth and acceptance of her foster mother and was well liked in school and in the neighborhood. She loved her caseworker, spoke often of her mother in the most negative way and seemed, after six years in placement, to have come to terms with her mother's rejection of her. Yet, we had to discharge her on a trial basis to her parents. Convinced of her own value and with sufficient ego-strength, Shelly had to find out "for sure" whether or not she could *now* change her mother's feelings for her. She came back.

Discharge on a trial basis because of unresolved problems in the parent-child relationship, strongly discouraged by the agency, is often the only way we know at present of helping the rejected child to a more constructive use of placement

until emotionally and vocationally ready for the journey into independence. It would indeed be presumptuous to assume that we can completely resolve all the conflicts our Shellys take with them into adulthood. What we *can do* and *must do* is to help them equip themselves adequately for the future. Psychotherapy is often offered and continued after discharge so that they can better be prepared for meeting life's vicissitudes without falling apart. Group therapy as another means of "getting ready" is another form of preparation. Our agency has for the last three years added group therapy for boys between 15 and 18 years of age.

The practical preparations for discharge to self, as the last phase of placement, are given by securing employment after graduation or, if indicated, helping the youngster to earn his living in accordance with his capacities.

The parents or relatives are out of the picture as far as discharge is concerned in such instances. Psychologically they have been out for a long time even though they might have been visiting. It is again the same group of vague, ineffective, immature parents who defy our casework help. It therefore becomes our paramount responsibility to see these youngsters through until they can stand on their own feet. This is of course a complicated process due to the confusing fact that they do have, in a sense, "interested" parents. The parent group I am talking about are those who cannot be helped to completely withdraw or to give up visiting privileges, nor can they use help to assume responsibility for their children. During placement of their child, they are neither overtly rejecting nor are they threatened by their child's stronger ties to the foster family. Some try to gain prestige with the foster family through their children and one often wonders whether sibling rivalry

does not enter into the picture. The father who said to his son's foster parents in a voice full of envy, "I never had it so good with my own parents as my son has it in your house" is certainly a poor risk in terms of contemplated discharge.

Within the scope of practical planning for a child who will not return to his family is the emotionally charged preparation for discharge from dependency on agency. This is a long and painful process because it touches off long dormant anxieties. Considering the dependency needs of youngsters who came into care with deeply ingrained feelings of insecurity, the approaching end of placement easily lends itself to reappraisal of their potential for independence.

For the youngster of sixteen or seventeen who has no parental home to which to return, the threat of being left to fend for himself in another year or two is overwhelming. Again one can only gauge the youngster's use of his placement experience by the degree to which he could be helped to achieve a sense of his own potential for growth and change.

When preparation for future independence begins, the fairly well adjusted child of sixteen might at first balk at the idea of earning his allowance, but will next summer look forward to part or full support of himself during the vacation period. He sees himself on his way toward independence and needs to test himself while he still feels the financial security of the agency for another year or so. During the last year of care, this youngster is already deeply and actively involving himself in plans for his future.

This then leads me to our active After Care. A college education, continued financial contribution toward termination of psychotherapy, a special training course are in many cases a shared

financial responsibility between the self-supporting discharged client and the agency. If no financial help from agency is needed and the client has achieved sufficient strength and complete economic independence, casework help is available as long as it serves a constructive purpose and does not deteriorate into another form of emotional dependency.

We have found it more effective to make a referral to another agency if the dependency needs of discharged former foster children carry over into adulthood.

The young adult who continues to live with his foster family after complete discharge from care might continue to have a loose connection with his own family. But, his choice is a clear indication of a true psychological separation, not necessarily a total repudiation of his own origin. Did agency do right by the parent whose child chose the foster family? Present practices of child placement agencies in working with parents are geared to constant reevaluation of the parents' potential for personality growth, for self-rehabilitation. Some parents can be helped to achieve a deeper understanding of inherent personality problems which prevented them from moving in either direction. Here again it is a question of choice of method in helping the many parents who are, so to speak, suspended or arrested in passivity. The parent who accepts the separation from his child psychologically, and often as self-punishment, will sporadically project these feelings on to agency. Inductive methods in the casework approach have often succeeded in breaking through the defenses of a parent so that he can be helped to a beginning trust in his capacity for change.

I am thinking of the recent discharge of two girls, ten and thirteen years old, to their father after five years of foster home care. Mr. R, always a model boy,

the pride of his mother, had disappointed her when he failed in college. He also failed in his marriage. He fathered an illegitimate child while still married. Mrs. R, unstable at the time of marriage, depressed, over-dependent on her mother and two married sisters, had several hospitalizations of short duration before her husband's open infidelity brought on the final breakdown. Mr. R was blamed for his wife's permanent hospitalization and the need for his children's placement.

Mr. R was one of the agency's most difficult clients. A broken fingernail, a spot on one of his daughter's dresses, a B in a report card, were to him signs of severe neglect of his children. At the same time, Mr. R accused agency of using his inability to take care of his children as an excuse for the "shabby" treatment his children and he had to take from the agency. And, he repeated, there is nothing he can do to terminate this intolerable situation. For several years it became a ritual for Mr. R to demonstrate his devotion to his children by criticizing what the agency was giving them. There was no question about his real devotion. However, we had to actively mobilize it for Mr. R, as he seemed unable to move out of his futile documentations of his concern. A skillful worker eventually saw through Mr. R's projections and recognized his intense fears of failing as a father. She helped him to accept, work through, and subsequently move out of his fear of failing.

Mr. R was helped to define his goals in terms of choice for himself. He was assured of our sincere desire to help him retain his rightful place with his two girls. He knew also that his interferences in the foster home were creating confusion for the children who often found themselves "guilty" of liking their foster father. We asked him for

his more helpful cooperation so that his children could use their placement experience constructively, as he was so sure of their need for placement. Mr. R began to challenge whether that was so. He subsequently secured an annulment of his marriage on the basis that his wife had been in several mental hospitals prior to marriage without his knowledge. Mr. R could then be helped to free himself from his mother's influence, realizing that her insistence on his doing nothing about dissolving his marriage was motivated by her lifelong control over him, and by her fear of losing him. He also could take responsibility for his lifelong submission to his mother and then accept his behavior philosophically. "I guess I must have felt it was better to give in than to develop an ulcer."

Mr. R suddenly "produced" a nice woman who had been his secret love. He did not rush into marriage this time. He agreed with us that his children and his fiancée should get to know each other. In the ensuing process, everybody participated in the contemplated discharge. When the children went home to Mr. R and his new wife, the agency's offer of continued contact during the initial adjustment period was accepted as "natural."

In this case the impact of discharge from agency care was dissipated during the slow process of Mr. R's discovery of his potential for responsible parenthood and by the gradualness of a healthy ending process with all. It was no surprise that after discharge this family could function so well as a unit. Mr. and Mrs. R, as well as the children, knew each other pretty well before they became a united family. For the sake of balancing the picture of discharge to own family, I want to say that the agency determines the duration of continued contact with the family in accordance with need. We often have to help the

family to consider return to placement as the better plan for the total family. It often happens after the child's discharge that the parents' anxiety and guilt become strongly threatening factors in the re-alignment of relationships.

When the G. sisters went home, Mrs. G needed more help during the first year of reunion than during six years of the girls' placement. The younger girl during her placement experience gave the impression of a lovely, fairly well adjusted child, bright, responsive. She was happy to go home, knowing that her parents were on public assistance and willing to do without the "luxuries" she had in her foster home.

Retaliation against her mother, suppressed for the duration of placement, exploded as soon as the child dared to "risk war." Mrs. G could not move: the girl would challenge her with remarks like: "Why don't you place me again—you know the ropes—just say you can't stand the sight of me."

Mrs. G felt that replacement would confirm the child's fear of rejection. She was determined to keep the child. Mrs. G had to be helped to understand and live with an angry child. The girl's reaching out to her mother in the only way she knew, unhealthy as this way was, still represented hope of finding acceptance. Psychotherapy for the child had to be secured through a resource outside of the agency. The mother was seen regularly at the agency and for one year after the discharge of the children she needed constant support while the child was in treatment. There was recognition on the agency's part that Mrs. G was too paralyzed by her fears and self-accusations to consider a referral to a family agency. There was also her need to prove to the placement agency, and primarily to herself, her active fight to keep the child with her. Mrs. G herself was once in placement with us.

In conclusion, discharge from agency care after a long placement experience contains all the elements of endings and new beginnings. The child who brought into placement positive experiences with his family, and is thus equipped to transfer his self-confidence into new relationships, will leave placement with a confirmation of his capacity to meet challenges, new adjustments. Ending of a positive life experience, regardless of the pain inherent in endings, always leaves the healthy foster child with a feeling of strength, a sense of his capacity for relationships, an awareness of his responsibility towards himself and others.

The emotionally damaged child—as most of our children are—needs all the supportive help toward enabling him to face independence with less mortification. Part of this ongoing enabling process can be accomplished through his relationships with the caseworker, but half of the battle is won if this child can find real acceptance in his foster home. If we succeed in helping the child come out of his lostness and find new objects for identification, we might expect modification of earlier personality problems, behavior patterns, and more readiness to come to terms with parental rejection. For the majority of our children, discharge from agency care, though anxiety provoking, can be experienced as personal achievement, if the agency succeeds in sustaining the child in the foster home which we have carefully chosen as the place for him to have his “second chance.” By sustaining, I mean intensive help, constant awareness of danger signs, and most of all—a thorough knowledge of the total child with his rational and irrational components. We often in the past have erred in assuming that we “save” a child by helping him free himself totally from

his own rejecting family, to the point of rejecting his own origin. Rationally this approach made sense because we assumed that the totally rejected child, through new relationships, can be helped to deny his origin. We know, or are beginning to know, *now* that total condemnation of his origin can bring the child dangerously close to self-depreciation, self-rejection, which is no healthy equipment for life. These children bring into their placement the burden of coming from an emotional “nowhere” and are being helped during placement to the extent of their capacity and limitations. Part of that helping process is focused on ventilation of their anguish at parents who were not adequate parents. But in this help, the agency carries, also in a symbolic way, parental responsibilities. We therefore consider it important enough to continue, if indicated, with casework help, job referrals, and financial support for psychotherapy after discharge from active care so that the enabling process can go on until the former foster child can function with greater confidence in himself.

We consider it equally important to help own parents and their children find a workable balance after discharge from care. Discharge to own parents, carefully planned, and evaluated in gradually increasing visits by the child to the parental home do not always meet the expectations of everlasting bliss. During the lifetime of placement, as we all know, “going home” looks to the child and the parents like the happy ending to all past, present and future problems in living. To make it a happy ending in a more realistic way, our agency acts on the conviction that inherent in our placement service is our responsibility to sustain the reunited family through their new beginning with one another.