

## **Creating a World of Difference for Children**

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With more than 500,000 children in foster care in the United States, it's not surprising that cultural issues erupt. We live in a country which is rich in diversity. The assortment of colors, languages, lifestyles, religious beliefs, traditions, customs, ages and income levels, among other differences, pose both a boon and a bane in everyday life, including, the extensive child protection system.

So much of who we are is defined by the many "badges" we wear. Unfortunately, for far too many children who are represented in the child welfare system, some of those badges carry negative connotations. Even in situations in which the children are not perceived negatively, per se, our ignorance of their cultural connections may potentially create more damage than the issue which initially brought them to the attention of the system.

For example, 11-year-old Sarah, an African American child, was placed in the home of a loving white foster family. They noted that she always sat alone by the side of the pool when her foster mom took the kids out for a day at the water park. Sarah was perceived as shy and aloof by friends of the foster family who happened to be present. The real issue was that Sarah's hair is naturally coarse, and she remembered the one and only time she got it wet without the benefit of a moisturizing cream, pressing comb and other implements necessary to manage her ethnic hairstyle. The tangles had to be cut out of it, because it was impossible to comb through. She also remembered how hurt she felt when her white playmates made fun of the way her hair kinked up as opposed to hanging straight as theirs did after swimming. Such situations may seem trivial at first blush, but they can create emotional scars that last a lifetime.

Another child, 17-year-old Joey, has been questioning his sexual identity. He is attracted to a male friend. He has not acted upon his feelings, but is afraid to discuss any of this with anyone he knows, especially his caseworker, who prides himself on being a "man's man" and will only talk sports and cars with Joey on his visits. Joey fears being ridiculed or worse yet, ostracized for not being a "typical guy."

Foster parents, advocates and others who provide professional services to children must exceed minimum levels of understanding and compassion. It is not enough to merely be sensitive to the basic differences that children bring to the foster care system. It is more important to recognize on a cognitive level, the unique nuances which are caused by those differences. Ideally, every adult in the child-serving system should be trained to recognize when differences impact negatively upon a child. At a minimum, the adult should be able to identify logical interventions to resolve the difficulty.

The adult should also be able to discern his or her own inability to be effective in a certain set of circumstances, in which case he or she should know how to contact

someone who can act on that child's behalf. It's the old adage of "knowing what we don't know and being willing to acknowledge our own shortcomings."

We are framed by our own unique experiences. We bring our own biases, beliefs and experiences into any interactions we have with others. Usually, this isn't problematic, but on those occasions when conflicts do arise, we must be willing to exercise diligence, either by stepping "up" or stepping aside, to minimize the likelihood of causing more damage to an already fragile child.

Twelve-year-old Shayna is in foster care because she had an eating disorder and was diagnosed as "failure to thrive." After she was brought into care, she bonded with her foster family and quickly gained weight and self-esteem. After a few months, her mother argues that she opposed Shayna going to church with her foster family and insisted that she attend another religious institution with Shayna's maternal grandparents.

Shayne protested, because she enjoyed attending with her foster family. The foster family protested, because much of their weekly activities centered around their church, and they warned the caseworker that if Shayna could not attend with them, she would have to be removed from their home despite how well she was doing in placement. Shayna's mother argued that her residual parental rights were being violated.

Shayna's Guardian ad Litem was asked to make a recommendation, which he did. He feared that sending Shayna to church with her grandparents might allow the possibility of unsafe and unsupervised visits with Mom. His recommendation was against removing Shayna from the foster home, but rather to find a compromise with Mom which allowed Shayne to attend at least one service a week in a church of Mom's professed religion, near her foster home, though not necessarily the one Shayna's grandparents attended. The cultural collision in this case was averted by the competence of a Guardian ad Litem who was sensitive to the unique religious and legal aspects, as well as the child development issues presented in the case.

Two years ago, the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association determined that the volunteers who represented children on behalf of the National CASA Association needed to be aware of issues which potentially set children apart in foster care. The goal was to not focus on differences to the extent that they further labeled children, but rather to view those differences within the context of their value to each individual child. It was designed to develop an appreciation for those things which render each child unique and special. National CASA Association has since developed a video and training curriculum. It allows participants to explore cultural perspectives which enhance each volunteer's insights about how differences play a role in their interactions with, and on behalf of, children.

If we are to create a world of difference for children, then we must be sensitive to their differences, not in a way that sets them apart, but rather in a way which helps them feel accepted, included, and valued.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Helen Jones-Kelley is a licensed attorney residing in Clayton, Ohio, with her husband, Tom. She is the mother of a step son and four daughters, one of whom she fostered. She is the director of Montgomery County Children Services and serves on the Child Welfare League of America's national advisory council of executives and the Walter Trieschmann Center's National Advisory Board. She serves on the board of the Dave Thomas National Center on Adoption among a list of several other boards. She served as president of the board of the National CASA Association and is currently a member of its diversity committee. Last year she was appointed to co-chair the statewide Advisory Council on Children, Youth, and Families in Ohio.