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What It Means to Abolish Child Welfare As We Know It

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A family holding hands. Photo courtesy of Center for the Study of Social Policy

The trauma and harm to families and communities caused by intrusive child welfare system interventions is well documented by multiple sources – to the degree that many argue the system can be more accurately viewed as the [family policing system](#), [family regulation system](#), or [foster care industrial complex](#). In our paper *It Is Not a Broken System, It Is a System That Needs to be Broken*, we outline research that shows that the act of forcible separation of children from their parents is a source of significant and lifelong trauma. As we summarized in the article, “trauma associated with separation has been shown to result in cognitive delays, depression, increased aggression, behavioral problems, poor educational achievement, and other harmful outcomes.”

Youth and parents who have experienced child welfare services regularly testify to the harm of separation and the failures of and trauma created by both short- and long-term involvement with the foster care system. Advocates and those working to reform child welfare from both within the system and without, regularly document this harm. For example, in the most recent court report, *M.D. ex re Stukenberg v. Abbott*, a consent decree focused on reforming Texas’ child welfare system, the federal court monitor stated on page 11: “The Texas child welfare system continues to expose children in permanent managing conservatorship to an unreasonable risk of serious harm.”

It is within the context of this knowledge and understanding and our many years of concerted reform efforts that we have launched the upEND movement, an emerging collaborative aimed at creating a society in which the forcible separation of children

from their families is no longer an acceptable solution when help is needed. This movement seeks to protect the health of children, which requires us to center our work around keeping them with their families and communities.

Despite system acknowledgment and efforts to keep children with their families, supporting families is not the organizing priority of child welfare interventions. The upEND movement seeks to change that. It values families and requires an investment in what they need to be successful. To meaningfully do that, we need to reimagine the supports families have and the systems that provide them.

The upEND movement is rooted in the deep history of the [disproportionate harm the system has and continues to cause Black children and families](#). Not only does the child welfare system have a history of disproportionately surveilling and separating Black children from their families and communities, research points to the ways that the system [criminalizes and polices Black mothers](#), is more likely to substantiate cases against Black families, and [penalizes poor families for issues related to poverty and material hardships](#). [Even child welfare reforms](#) that attempt to change how services are delivered within the system still reproduce the system's coercive power, further marginalizing families and communities already disenfranchised by structural racism.



It's time to change how we support kids

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There are more than 400,000 children in foster care, forcibly separated from their families for periods ranging from a few days to many years. Given the decades of reforms and the number of children who still experience maltreatment whether in care or not, the number of children who leave the foster care system as adults with no permanent connections and diminished prospects for their futures, and the pleas from parents and communities that their voices and needs have been ignored, the only logical conclusion is that fundamental change is needed.

Abolition of child welfare does not mean abandoning the need to protect children. It means building new ways of protecting and supporting families that also dismantle coercive systems of surveillance and punishment. It means engaging in the work of building radically different systems of care that recognize the basic need of children to be with their families in safe and supportive communities. This work must be done with families at the forefront.

Abolition is a process, and we recognize that the child welfare system will continue to exist and intervene in families' lives for some time. But we must begin the work now to diminish the need for harmful interventions by building the supports for families and communities to be successful. The upEND movement will contribute to the research, policies, practices and collaborative imagining of something beyond the current child welfare system. We will work together with advocates, system leaders, researchers, parents, youth, community leaders and others to craft the road to abolition — to work now to build the necessary community, financial and material supports for families to remain safe and healthy together, to ensure that power in decision-making rests with families and communities, and to dismantle policies and practices that disproportionately harm the safety and integrity of families.

The road to abolition is not intended to dismantle the child welfare system and leave nothing in its place. We are arguing the opposite. Prison abolitionist and scholar [Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes](#) the concept of abolition is about presence not absence. It is, as organizer and educator [Mariame Kaba describes](#), a positive vision that works toward building (not simply tearing down) the supports families and communities need to truly thrive.

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The road to abolition means giving families and communities access to mental health services, to jobs that pay living wages, to well-funded public schools, to health care, to homes – especially homes free from environmental toxins – to child care, and to community-based interventions to stop harm from occurring in the first place. When harm does occur, mechanisms of support should be designed to not cause more harm by separating families, punishing parents and fragmenting communities. Rather, they should support families in figuring out what is needed for healing, safety, and the prevention of future harm.

This work is fueled by the voices of parents who testify that the system that seeks to help them often causes greater harm. We understand the desire to believe the system helps children rather than harms them. And we understand the desire to believe the current system treats children equitably. But these desires do not match reality and ignore the voices of families and youth whose lives have been forever changed by the child welfare system.

The call for abolition is a collaborative one, [led by the families and youth who have been impacted by this system](#). We join with them in the work to build a new future – a new vision for the safety and care of children and families outside the confines of oppressive and carceral systems. We have planned a two-day convening of the upEND movement on Oct. 20 and Oct. 21 to imagine and think together about what care can truly look like. [We invite you to join us](#) and to learn more about all that abolition can create.

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