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## Opinion

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# 'Family Regulation,' Not 'Child Welfare': Abolition Starts with Changing our Language

BY EMMA WILLIAMS

In a recent webinar about racism and policing hosted by the [Northwestern Prison Education Program](#), abolitionist scholar and educator Erica Meiners noted that “avoiding the state’s language is a key tool for practitioners of reform and abolition.” Perhaps an area where this point is most salient is the debate over how to talk about the child welfare system.

Parents, attorneys, advocates, abolitionists, and reformers of all stripes agree: The child welfare system has a stronghold over the public eye. Attorney Tanya Gassenheimer, an advocate at Chicago’s [Shriver Center on Poverty Law](#), refers to the system as a “shadow system” for two reasons: First, people who are involved in and critical of the system may not speak out due to the shame and stigma the system makes them feel for having their parenting – a very personal and intimate aspect of individuals’ and families’ identities – called into question. Parents face this stigma all while having to fight the system’s very real and traumatizing threat of permanently separating them from their children. The system may also retaliate if and when parents speak out while they are in one of these fights for the future of their families.

Second, those who are not involved in the system often know little about it but have high confidence in it. An agency whose mission is to protect children from harm and maltreatment naturally evokes consequential public sympathy. Opposing an agency that has such a benevolent public image requires a substantial, grassroots movement led by impacted families who can correct the narrative. The first step to building such momentum is changing the way we talk about the child welfare system.

We must divest from the inaccurate and misleading framing that the state offers us: This system does not generate children’s welfare or protection. “Child welfare system” is an ahistorical and inaccurate term: Parents, advocates, and social workers inside and outside the agency lament the lack of welfare services that the system is able to offer. “Child protection system” is inaccurate at best and harmful at worst: It paints the agency as an intervening body that shields children from the harms of their families, demonizing families before an intervention has even begun.

Some advocates who are similarly critical of the system opt for “child removal system” or “foster system,” but I want to challenge us to think beyond these terms: This system is harmful even when children are not removed or placed in foster care. It is harmful even when children are removed and then quickly reunited with their families, when a parent’s rights are never terminated, and when an investigation is never indicated. Being [strip-searched by a strange adult](#) – whether they find evidence of child maltreatment or not – is always traumatic.

We must denounce the idea that this system ever brings about a more just, safe, or equitable world for children, no matter the outcome of its involvement with a family. We can start by naming what this system actually does: it regulates families.



# It's time to change how we support kids



The family regulation system, a term initially offered in my Oberlin College Honors Thesis “[Dreaming of Abolitionist Futures, Reconceptualizing Child Welfare: Keeping Kids Safe in the Age of Abolition](#),” and popularized by the [Movement for Family Power](#) and scholar [Dorothy Roberts](#), offers two important interventions to the movement. First, we must recall that children do not exist in a vacuum. This system not only impacts children but also the entire ecosystem around them; thus any language must center the family, as the family is the site of the trauma that the system inflicts.

Second, we must focus on the action that is truly at the center of the modern system: regulation. You can argue that the system is punitive, or destructive, and so you can refer to it as the “family punishment system” or the “family destruction system.” But what I believe is most powerful about strategically utilizing our language is that we can find a word that encapsulates every outcome of the system, since not every intervention results in punishment or destruction. Thinking about how to accurately describe this system also forces us to reckon with difficult questions: What of the families who were grateful for and felt benefitted by an intervention? What of the families who did not receive an intervention but wished they did? Whether the system was helpful to a family or not, it advanced a normative model of what a “healthy” and “happy” family looked like, and that process – pleasant or unpleasant, peaceful or violent – is regulatory.

The myths of child welfare and child protection are alluring. In this movement, we can agree that we want to protect children against the dangers that this world serves up to them – most expansively poverty, racism, and sexism – and we promote their welfare. But using strategic language reminds us that the state has misappropriated these ideas and repackaged them as systems that look a lot more like what we’re fighting against: surveillance, regulation, policing, and punishment.

As Princeton professor Ruha Benjamin says, one of the greatest injustices of policing and punitive systems is that “[many people are forced to live in someone else’s imagination](#).” We must reject the state’s imagination: a world where “protection” and “welfare” mean surveillance, punishment, and family regulation. By explicitly naming the carcerality of the systems we live in, we can reserve terms like “welfare” and “protection” for systems that actually keep us safe.

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