

Relationships: The Roots of Well-being

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I have a magnificent Japanese maple tree in my front yard. She is glorious in every season, from the moment her first cranberry-hued buds appear announcing the advent of spring, through the lush emerald-tones of her leafy summer apparel. As autumn approaches she is resplendent in her royal crimson gown, flecked with golden threads. Even in winter, when her bare, black branches form a stark contrast with the slate gray sky, she remains lovely, occasionally sparkling as frost, ice or fluffy white snow adorn her branches. Sitting on my front porch, hot or ice coffee in hand depending on the season, soaking in her beauty before starting my day is one of my favorite self-care activities.

Storms are frequent in our Philadelphia neighborhood, and every time the remnant of a hurricane barrels up from the south or a frigid nor'easter marches through from the north, I watch in awe as my tree bends, sways, tremors and shakes off the assault of the brutal weather. And every time I worry that she might topple over, she somehow

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survives, shakes off her branches and stands proud ready to take on another day.

Other trees in our neighborhood aren't always so lucky. After every major weather event, broken branches are scattered like kindling across the landscape, many are completely uprooted. Each time a storm passes and our tree remains standing, my husband and I breathe a sigh of relief mingled with gratitude and say to each other, "Yup, she sure has a strong root system."

This picture of a beloved tree surviving storm after storm of life and continuing to soldier on, displaying her seasonally changing yet unceasingly predictable colors is the best definition of resilience and well-being I have ever seen.

In adoption, and indeed, throughout child welfare, we often talk about safety, permanency and well-being as three separate but equally desirable outcomes for the children we serve. Yet in truth, a child cannot grow and thrive, never mind survive the terrifying and persistent storms of life without all three, inextricably knit together—like a root system.

Trees do not have singular roots, they have root systems which are deep, broad and complex in nature. Root systems holds trees firm in the face of brutal storms and gale-force winds. Root systems are what we all need to hold our lives firm in the face of the brutal storms and gale-force winds that besiege and beset us in life. Children and youth—including those on the brink of adulthood - need roots most of all. Sounds simple. Yet so many children's root systems have been ripped out from

under them as a result of trauma. Then, when the storms of life come along they are tossed about like tumbleweed rather than holding fast like the tree in our yard.

This can be true for children who experience many forms of trauma, including surviving a school shooting, living through a violent act of nature such as a hurricane or tornado, or growing up in a neighborhood where gun violence is an everyday occurrence. And this is especially true for children who experience out-of-home placement in foster care or juvenile justice systems. First, they often experience traumatic events in their life-before-the-system such as domestic violence, abuse, neglect or abandonment. Then, they experience the profound grief associated with being separated from their birth parents, as well as grandparents, siblings, school, friends, neighbors, church and others who are significant in their lives.

All too often, in our culture, we are eager to fit them with wings and launch them into the world, hoping that by providing them with a few life skills, a little education and opportunities for employment, they will fly high and soar.

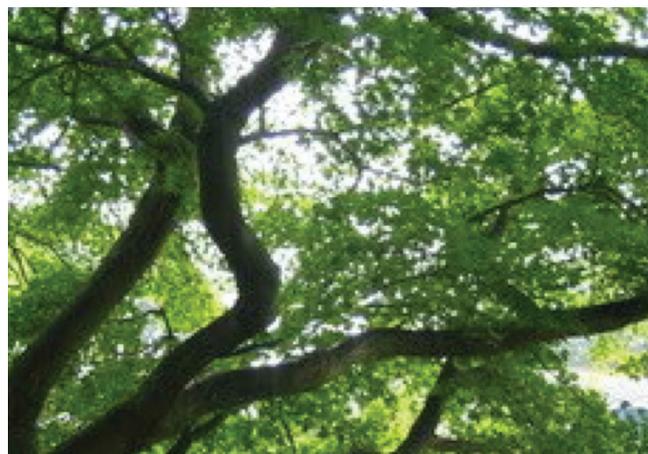
The good news is, often they do.

The question is, what happens on the windy days of life? Do they have roots that will help them weather the storms?

Children who have experienced trauma need roots in a family, in their culture and in a community.

The good news is that even when root systems have been wounded by trauma, loss, disruption and separation, they can also be strengthened. Each of us can play a role in helping children develop the sturdy root systems that will serve them well in every storm life brings their way.

Just as a tree's root system provides nourishment, nurtures growth, screens out harmful toxins and stores food for winter-survival, so a young person's root system needs to have the capacity to nurture, nourish, support and strengthen him or her across all life domains and through all seasons of life. The Youth Transition Funders Group developed a



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framework for well-being for young people who have experienced foster care or other out-of-home experiences which posits that **“positive social, emotional, and physical well-being are core aspects of a young person’s development. To be healthy and well, young people need to be able to develop and maintain relationships and social networks, and successfully interact within their community. Young people also need to be able to effectively recognize, understand, and express emotions and to channel those emotions into healthy behaviors. In addition, young people need to be physically healthy and fit and be able to make safe and constructive life choices.”** (Langford, Badeau, & Legters, 2015).

We strengthen children’s root systems when we understand that growth, healing and thriving occur in—and only in—the context of relationships. Youth cannot be sent away into “treatment” to be healed and then offered relationship. All treatment options and opportunities must begin by assessing the current status of the child’s existing root system of relationships and working with and from the foundation of these relationships to restore, heal, strengthen and increase the relationships that will enable the young person to grow, develop and thrive.

We strengthen children’s root systems when we work to ensure that every child is entitled to a safe, stable, permanent, legal family of their own—beginning with their family of origin (including siblings, extended family and kin) and when needed adding more family through guardianship or adoption.



Roots: Who are the key family members and relationships that have contributed to my identity and sense of self?

Trunk: What strengths did I gain from my family and relationships?

Branches: Who are the key family and relationships who support my pursuit of goals and dreams?

Root systems are never strengthened by cutting off and discarding critical portions. Similarly, children and youth must be given opportunities to maintain contact and meaningful connection with important people from their past while also branching out to develop capacity for new attachments and healthy relationships for their future. We can never satisfy ourselves by saying that some children are “unadoptable,” “too old,” “too disabled” or even “too competent” to need a family.

We strengthen children’s root systems when we welcome children who have experienced trauma into our neighborhoods and communities and never consider any child a “throw-away.” When we ask, “what happened to this child?” rather than “what’s wrong with this child?” (Bloom, 1997; Bloom, Forderaro, Ryan, & S.E.L.F., 2006) when we encounter troubling behaviors. When we refuse to lock children away in jails without making every effort to provide trauma-responsive, healing treatment for them first. In our schools, the child who bullies may need our help and love just as much

as the child who is bullied. Instead of “zero-tolerance” we need trauma-responsive policies in our schools and communities that offer help, hope and healing to all children and reaches out in a supportive way to all families. This concept of hospitality as a welcoming and loving response to those who are cut-off or alone is universally taught by all religions and embraced by all systems of ethics, morals and values.

We strengthen children’s root systems when we give them opportunities to learn about, embrace and be proud of their own identity (including gender identity and sexual orientation), cultural and religious heritage and provide positive adult role models who share the same culture and/or identity and who can help them navigate and mine the rich and fertile soil of the fullness of their heritage and identity.

Finally, we strengthen children’s root systems when we provide all of the necessary supports and tools that will enable them to enhance their own capacity for growth and well-being. This is of particular importance to children who join their families through adoption and to the adoptive families. Post-adoption supports are vital tools necessary to ensuring the long-term health, safety, growth, development, resilience and lifelong well-being of all family members within the adoption constellation. By attending to their needs across all life domains, engaging them in planning for their own future and honoring their voices while also providing constructive and respectful guidance especially during periods of transition, we can help them not only weather life’s storms, but fully reach their potential in every season of life.

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Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- Understanding and valuing the concept of supporting an entire root system for children and youth who are adopted is the first step in nurturing healthy well-being. More research, however, is needed in order to assist child welfare and adoption agencies and professionals to understand the mechanics of how to put this value-based theory into practice. A few of the critical questions that research can help address include:
 - What are the best-practices for helping youth stay connected to birth family members before and post-adoption?
 - What are the implications for these practices when the young person has experienced significant trauma in connection with birth family relationships?
 - What are best practices for supporting adoptive families, post-permanency, as they seek to navigate meeting the present and future needs of the adoptee while also being attentive to and respectful of past relationships that are important to the youth?

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

- Child Welfare policy should allow for continued contact between youth and biological family members over time even if and when parental rights are terminated. Caveats for safety can be implemented without compromising on the over-riding need for a sense of history, identity and roots.

- Child welfare policy should provide for training of all foster parents, adoptive parents, caseworkers, group home and independent living staff in adolescent brain development, impact of trauma on adolescents and necessity of permanent lifetime relationships throughout adulthood to develop and sustain well-being
- Child welfare policy should allow for adoptive parents to return to the agency for post-adoption/post-permanency support months or even years after the adoption without having to relinquish their rights or disrupt the adoption.
- Policy should be clear that no youth exits care without identifying at least one link to a lasting relationship with a caring adult

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- Youth should be provided with information about stages of development and the impact of trauma so they can be better equipped to navigate their own life path
- Open adoption or similar strategies which allow youth to maintain relationships with birth family, former foster families and other critical people in their lives while also pursuing and benefiting from the lifetime permanence of adoption should be routine practice available to all young people.

References

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Sue Badeau is a nationally known speaker, writer and consultant with a heart for children and families. After receiving a degree in Early Childhood Education from Smith College, Sue worked for many years in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. She serves on several national boards and was formerly president of the North American Council on Adoptable Children. Sue writes and speaks extensively to public & private agencies, courts, parent groups and churches.

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