

In Foster Care, Who is in Limbo?

Photos courtesy of Patrick Cox.



“The simulation became so real and emotional for everyone involved. It gave a new perspective to the foster care process.”
— participant

With these opening words, 90 people at the recent Christian Alliance for Orphans conference struggled for more than an hour, leaving their comfort zones, as they collectively entered into foster care as a birth parent, a foster parent or a vulnerable child. The role play began light-hearted enough. Some participants chose to be “birth parents” by raising their hand and lining up against the wall; others chose to be “foster parents.” They circled together and discussed, “What does quality foster care look like and how can we help each other when a child enters our care?”

The remaining participants became “children.” When asked by the facilitator, “Choose your own birth parent,” most opened up in laughter and searched for the perfect parent!

Within 10 minutes, the room dynamics changed considerably. Birth parents had to choose their addiction from a set of addiction cards. Nationally, the primary presenting reason children enter care is due to a caregiver’s out of control addiction and no capable, willing relative to take in their child. A birth parent in this role play might

choose cocaine, for example, and then read to everyone their story of addiction.

I don’t remember when life was good. I’m in the gutter every day with a dead end job and a dead end life. My children yell and scream and can’t comfort me. I need comfort, and I need to feel comfort now. I don’t care anymore. I really don’t. I don’t care at all.

The room turned tense. In this most difficult section, birth parents whispered into their children’s ears: “I don’t want you;” “I can’t protect you;” or “Don’t tell anyone our family secret.”

If we consider those three statements, don’t they encompass the root reason most children enter care? How would a child feel but deflated, isolated and in shock, being removed? While a safe environment for our Life in Limbo participants, the 400,000 children in foster care are traumatized at this point, as their new reality sets in.

At the CAFO conference, the parents then blindfolded their children and facilitators placed them into foster homes. Of course, in

most communities, there are fewer homes than children, so further loss and uncertainty arose as an exhausted system of care was, again, severely strained. Sibling groups were broken up, some children were waiting as the facilitators pleaded for more available beds.

The longing was real, with the foster parents sitting children down in chairs — their “foster homes” — and having to answer the question from the children, “When am I going home?”

Why would the “children” ask this poignant question? Weren’t they relieved to be done with the abuse or the severe neglect? The draw of attachment to family seemed stronger for many. Or, as one “birth parent” stated, “The most powerful part was having to tell my children I couldn’t protect them, yet they still wanted to be with me.”

In the role play, participants at CAFO now had a chance to see birth parents in a state of denial or acceptance of their addiction. The parents played activities, similar to “minute to win it” where losing meant more shame, isolation and denial. Or, winning, meeting their treatment plan and finding reason for hope. Children cheered their parents on and, the enlightened foster parents cheered as well, seeing the children in great need of a healthy birth parent.

Exhausted, the participants began to understand how difficult Life in Limbo must be. As one participant stated, “I appreciated how the role play gave me even more empathy.” Such was a primary goal whether the role play is performed for caregivers, caseworkers or the general public.

The other goal was to teach foster parents how to ask for support and nurture each other. Each child decided on their age and was given a character sketch. One example shows how difficult turmoil is on these children’s lives.

No one wants you. You want attention real bad. You thrive on negative attention. You live to irritate others. Tantrums, attitudes and irritating



Fostering Great Ideas, we created Life in Limbo role play because empathy is not only the starting point to helping the children in care, but is the necessary ingredient all along the journey. Otherwise, don’t we become hardened, controlling, quickly exhausted, and done with the rash of behaviors whose emotional root is un-processed trauma and loss — a longing that won’t go away?

behaviors last as long as you feel attention is on you! Punishing you only works sometimes. Do you like to be punished? Can you embrace love when it is given to you?

Foster parents took the challenge as the children role played these sketches. The foster parents met and asked, “How will I support this child, regardless of behavior?” Yet, as you might guess, some had to let the children in their care go. As done so often, letting go required use of a trash bag — the children felt disposable, as many do when moving in foster care.

Because these participants have great compassion for those living in limbo, they persevered and cherished the experience. At the end, 70 percent stated this role play has “definitely moved me to do more for children in need.” And, as this role play has now gone to eight states and into 12 organizations in the last year, my hope is that “Life in Limbo: a role play about foster care” will become a blessing to many more. Limbo is a starting point, or as one participant stated, “The most

powerful part was seeing the emotions that all parties feel in the child welfare system.” From here, we can visualize more discussions on the concepts of child well-being, sibling and birth parent attachment, and empathy for all parties involved.

Limbo is a learning tool. Let’s leave your comfort zone and enter into foster care for the next hour and half. We’ll begin with the question, “In foster care, who is in limbo?” ❁

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