



# Policy Statement - Poverty and the Child Welfare System\*

Authors / Darlene Allen, Michelle Chalmers, Addie Ellis, Darla Henry

Approved by Family Builders Network on October 13, 2017

## **The Issue**

Living in poverty is not a character flaw; nor does it cause abuse and neglect. However, poverty *is* widely recognized as both a risk factor for, and a predictor of, abuse and neglect. Children from families living in poverty are a disproportionately represented in out-of-home care.

Parenting effectively in the context of scarcity requires creativity. Parents pool and share resources and skills with friends and family, and sometimes access public and charitable systems for help. Accessing these systems places families who are living in poverty under additional scrutiny from social workers, educators, and others who are mandated reporters.

Further, parenting while living in poverty is often stressful and people under extreme stress are not always capable of sustaining the patience, focus, and attention required to parent children.

The intersection of the child welfare system and families in poverty is complex, but we must be clear that poverty ought not be an accepted primary reason for removal of a child from his or her family. Innovative interventions that maintain the parent-child relationship are always preferable, whenever possible without risk of imminent harm. In those situations when a child has to be removed, it is unacceptable for placement and system interventions to result in the creation, reinforcement, or sustaining of childhood and generational poverty.

## **Practice and policy values**

### ***Training and Workforce Development***

Child welfare professionals and policy makers should be knowledgeable regarding the ways poverty impacts family life, and the ways that social and economic structures and practices create and otherwise impact poverty.

### ***Decision Making in Child Welfare***

Implicit Bias is a significant factor in disproportionate numbers of children living in poverty ending up in foster care placement. Too often, child welfare decisions are made with a perspective that pathologizes parents for the very things they must do to take care of their children.

### ***Funding***

Significant public resources are spent to sustain the current system of removal and placement of children away from their families. Family Builders supports innovations and systems transformation that reallocate funds to pay for targeted assistance and practical interventions that support family preservation, creating and sustaining family connections, and supporting reconnections to birth family.

### ***Service Array***

In order for foster care to be a genuinely helpful intervention, it must provide stability, relational permanence, uninterrupted education, and opportunities for successful development of self-reliance skills.

### ***Reversing the Cycle***

Youth aging out of foster care must have the skills, training, and resources necessary to establish themselves as adults. Minus these assets, the child welfare system is guilty of sustaining intergenerational poverty and, potentially, intergenerational child welfare involvement.

\* This position statement is about the intersection of poverty and the child welfare system. Disproportionality, race, and culture in child welfare are covered in other position statements. Family Builders Network notes that any discussion of poverty without race, implicit bias, and systemic inequality oversimplifies the complex interplay that lies at the foundation of the child welfare system and contributes to negative child welfare outcomes.