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Who Are The Real Parents of American's Children

by O. Virginia Phillips

Not a single day passes without the ever-present reminder that young people, our hope of the future, are in serious danger. Thousands of children are without permanent homes. In 1990, there were 407,000 children in foster care nationwide, with an additional 210,000 under the care of child welfare agencies in some capacity. The numbers are not declining, but growing. The number of young people arrested for violent crime, rape, robbery, aggravated assault or murder jumped by 48 percent from 1985 to 1990. The teen violent-death rate rose 18 percent. Actions to reverse these trends are expected to cost millions of dollars. The Federal government is reacting to the dilemma of impermanence for children by pouring more dollars into family preservation programs. While this is one solution for some, there is a bigger picture that will be overlooked, because our society's definition of what a family should be is obsolete, and has been for centuries. It does not meet the needs of children. The "ideal" family is still a version of middle-class America: a nuclear unit, with a mother, father and two children, preferably a boy and a girl. This definition paints a picture of stability, security, love and affection, but this assumption does not always prove true. This version of family never met the needs of African Americans, Hispanics or Native Americans. These groups, in an assimilative process, have adopted this narrow definition to their own detriment.

On the other hand, the Extended Family is a support system that has kept minority families healthy and whole, even serving as a model for any family of any culture until the 1950s and 60s. During this period, family values in this country changed radically. The so-called dominant culture moved away from the concept of valuing grandparents as childcare givers, neighbors as child protectors, and neighborhoods as places of safety, and moved to the suburbs in record numbers, leaving roots that were deeply bred. As a result, artificial communities sprang up. The system that held Americans together from its beginning crashed. With the introduction of integration, African Americans borrowed a value system that doesn't work for their families and children.

The Extended Family Value System supports the following tenets: every child deserves a family, and once a child is attached to a family, the family serves as the child's parents, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. It doesn't matter if their last name is different: the importance is in the bonding. The process is not formal or institutionalized. The child welfare system of permanency is formal, dictating that, in order for a child to be happy, he/she should be adopted into a family and given the same last name. But bonding is a process that African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans, before assimilation, regarded as a natural process. It evolves out of their great regard for children and the continuation of their culture.

Before assimilation, material wealth was secondary to these cultural groups. African Americans would always remind their children that families were formed to strengthen the race and provide a future for children. The psychological attachment to children came from the African belief that "the village raises the child," and all children, regardless of their parentage, are "our children." Formal adoption was and still is foreign to the African American Extended Family Support System. The very system that degraded our African forefathers and mothers has been re-institutionalized in America, under the sophisticated heading of Adoption. The psychological stigma remains, hovering beneath the surface, that we are selling our children.

The Extended Family System weakened 30 years ago because we failed to honor it as a system that worked. Adoption and foster care have failed because they have no innate respect for the rights or the feelings of children. We remove children haphazardly, not only from their own homes but even from homes where they are loved, because those homes aren't licensed. Children have the right to be nurtured and have feelings about who they want to be nurtured by.

Is there a solution to the child welfare system? Yes. There are several solutions, not just one. No single system can work for all. Not only should there be a regard for ethnic differences, but each child is different individually as well. Some children need several parent figures. In fact, all children need a nurturing system of adults and other children.

In the old Extended Family System, a parent wasn't made to feel guilty if he/she could not rear the child. The grandmother or aunt reared the child. The focus was on the best parenting system for the child and not the adult. In our society, we are still blaming the parent who cannot successfully parent, while forgetting that the child has a right to be parented.

I propose an Extended Family System in which a continuum of child-oriented programs is established. After all, nurtured children usually produce nurturing adults. Our practices today are the outcome of the early values instilled in our child-welfare practitioners. The system reflects a gross lack of understanding of the different needs of children who are born into different family systems. The Extended Family

system involves caring for the child by whomever is best qualified, whether in the child's own extended family, culture or neighborhood.

Before a family is provided family preservation support, an assessment should be made of the current family unit. Do they really want responsibility for the child? If they don't, they ought not be forced to help the children. Instead, the system should identify and provide a neighborhood support advocate who knows the family and has a desire to help. There should be a simultaneous search for support persons, biological relatives, church members the child knows. In the African American community there is often a church person willing to keep the child. As part of the Family Preservation Movement, a component should be in place to train willing neighborhood families to keep children within their neighborhood, if the child feels safe there. The system has been so punitive toward relatives of children in the welfare system, it will take time and consistent input from the culturally-different community. In the long run, it will cost less and the children will be better cared