



BIG QUESTIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE: HOW DO WE GET UPSTREAM?

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Hello, I'm John Kelly, host of the weekly podcast, and this is a special bonus series we call Big Questions for Child Welfare. Molly Tierney and Daniel Heimpel have known each other for years. Tierney is the child welfare lead for Accenture, who led Baltimore's child welfare agency for 10 years. Heimpel as the founder of Fostering Media Connections. In a series of podcast conversations, the two friends discussed several of the weighty issues facing child welfare today, including questions about its very existence as we know it. On today's episode, Tierney and Heimpel talk about the growing call for child welfare to paddle upstream, investing more money and keeping families together and less on splitting them apart. What will it take to improve our prevention of abuse and neglect in America? And should that work be done by child welfare agencies or other parts of the government or something entirely different? Enjoy the conversation.

Hi, Molly.

Hey, Daniel. How are you?

I'm very good. It's nice to be on the line with you again, talking about prevention. And as we talk about prevention and moving upstream, as John's intro to us, we were riffing a little bit on the abolition argument. And where in your mind does that come into this whole conversation of prevention?

I think it's been really interesting to see this argument pop up in circles that are conversing about child welfare. And the thing that strikes

me is there's something like it's polarizing. And our country has been in such a polarized place for recent years.

And I worry that it's going to send people to extremes, that people are going to hear the abolitionist argument as "get rid of the whole thing, just toss it." And that's going to push some people to the other side of the pole, which is going to hear that to mean we intend to leave children in harm's way. Nope. I want to invite you to think about abolishment in a more nuanced way. I think about child welfare as the work has to be, get the right kids in in the wrong kids out. And I was director of a child welfare agency for a long time. And what I said all the time was, I don't want to take in my kids. But I will, if that's what needs doing. And like many child welfare directors, I have very clear and heart wrenching, painful memories of visiting little bodies in emergency rooms that were so broken that they were going to be hospitalized for months before I could get them in a home. And those things, I hate to say it, they're still going to happen and we're going to need to have a 911 operation for children in this country. The challenge is, of course, that child welfare has become an anti-poverty program. And the thing is, it can be abolished for 80, 90 percent of the kids that are coming in that the trick is how do we for those kids figure out a way to keep them at home before we even open up a child welfare case for them and then get the, you know, 10 percent of kids for whom there really some catastrophic, gruesome, terrible thing happened and it was the right thing to do to rush in and save them.

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And so I feel like disaggregating that in our minds is an important thing to do, because if we just hate this abolishment argument and allow everyone to get pushed to the polls, we're just going to be screaming polar opposites on each other and really missed the opportunity to lean into prevention.

You know, I think what you're bringing up to one degree is the 911. What's the policing function of the child welfare system? And there's always been a problem when you're both executioner of one of the harshest interventions in legal or quasi legal practice in America, which is separation of child and family, and then also simultaneously being the resource for preventative services. So there's an inherent problem when we talk about prevention around the perception of what a child welfare system is and does and to the degree it can be the arbiter and the doer of preventative services. You talk about the safety net or a poverty program being the child welfare system, because we don't have these more robust other systems. I wonder, recently we've obviously seen that big stimulus bill go through That includes temporary but portends really enormous changes, this child tax credit.

We've talked a lot about family first and lack of material support for families who are, quote unquote in crisis. But this is where huge swaths of American families. And I just wonder to what degree you think that help folks like you in the child welfare space do a better job of preventing kids from unnecessarily entering the system?

Well, certainly, I think all of the data suggests that poverty is a huge driver of reports of neglect. Right, because there are this field cannot tell the difference between poverty and neglect. And so I think, well, if we could clear that up by making sure it was more likely the case that families could make their ends meet, then I think it could have a huge impact on pressure that these safety net programs are under in terms of folks entitled to those services. What does it mean for the child welfare system? I mean, we'll see what happens after 2021. We'll see if this becomes permanent. But I mean, right now on the table, we have family first is our great prevention strategy. Right. I mean, our great federal prevention initiative. So what are your thoughts on its ability to move systems

upriver in a real way?

I think it's really tricky because, you know, the Families First, Families First is so important and the most important legislation for child welfare to come around in decades, without a doubt. And I think the things that are going to be important that we focus on where families first is the nature of the funnel to the clearinghouse.

Right, and sort of what's getting in and what's not getting into that clearinghouse in terms of programs that are who will be eligible for federal funding. And, you know, honoring that evidence-based practices have an important role to play, as do promising ones. Right. So, I mean, to say, you know, evidence-based practices or heavily researched and proprietary and to pull them off, they have to be implemented with precision. Promising practices, which I've had equally great success with are that little thing that was opened up in that neighborhood that's really struggling by that little community-based organization. They just understand something about this neighborhood and that's really working the availability for that kind of presence as we think about prevention matters in the context of Family First. I also think figuring out a way that child welfare agencies can get access to federal funds for families before they open a child welfare case. That's really the nut that has to be cracked because you still have to open a child welfare case in order to get any of those funds. And as you aptly noted, that once your case is open, you are in both the prevention side, but also in the policing side of child welfare. And how can we get access to those kinds of resources before a case has to get open would be a real preventative act.

Does that make sense? Yeah. I mean, the question, though, being is, is that even a function of child welfare? Right. I mean, would child welfare again be the best agency or the best set of people, right. To be the ones overseeing the child maltreatment prevention apparatus, or is that something that should be living in larger funding streams? I don't know. You could think about Medicaid and you could think about how different systems would come into that. But is there a quarterback role for the child welfare system? What is the true role beyond what's envisioned in Family First to get to that unleashing a fund prior. And remember,



the mechanism for doing so in New York City, for example, was they had a block grant from the state, but they also had a waiver which allowed them to move money around and move it further into these quote unquote, enrichment centers, which are really primary prevention. I mean, way up street. What is the role of child welfare in quarterbacking that? Or is also child welfare be directly involved in that primary prevention?

You know, it's such a great question. I think, you know, I often. Needed to say in my own leadership roles, if the jurisdiction I'm in is expecting child welfare to keep children safe then we're baked. We should give up the fight because it's not possible from where child welfare stands for it alone to do this thing. And the flipside of that is, you know, the Biden administration's approach is the well-being of children.

Is everyone's job like it's not a thing that can sit as an afterthought inside a child welfare agency, because that's how I worry about it, is if prevention sits only in child welfare and everyone thinks, "oh, it's their job," it's going to be that thing we never quite get to. Because you're always answering the Batphone when you've got a 911 problem that's always going to win. Right. And so the idea that we could figure out a way to spin out of the debate of where should have said doesn't belong to police discipline, medicates belong in the health system, doesn't belong in child welfare? Like what if it's just its own thing? What if it's a thing in and of itself that to which all other entities understand they have a contribution to make, be that policing, housing, any infrastructure, social services, any kind of service that government is providing, if it could understand at its core, everyone is contributing to this.

Yeah, I mean, look at Los Angeles County. They've got a county wide mission statement which says that child well-being is a focus, which makes it part of the mission of every single child and family services agency within county government. I mean, you could imagine something at that level. You could imagine a prevention czar or a prevention cabinet or child cabinet level position to try to coalesce all those various agencies around the thing.

I agree with you, it shouldn't sit in one place. But to this question of, again, my mind, which is obviously doesn't have reconciled all of the different ways to do this as yours or as anybody, really. We don't we haven't figured this out yet. But I mean, a clear problem is just what happened was where my mind goes. Well, should it be another agency that's taking on some part of this? And I think that you talk a lot about is what the role data can play in exchange of data across agencies can play in terms of prevention. So I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

I think that's going to make or break us. You know, I feel like there's still this. A significant portion of decision makers in government who are of a generation that have the presumption of privacy. Right, and they feel very strongly about protecting that. The newer generation don't have the presumption of privacy, they like have a conceptual framework for virtual communities where it doesn't feel unsafe to them, it doesn't feel risky to them. But decision makers are largely still in the camp of it's high risk. And I feel like moving decision makers to understand the consequences of not sharing data are falling to children and families. There's too much that's knowable that we don't know just because we've decided we can't share. So that means to me things like when I was director, we had a spate of deaths of infants and I was participated on one of those in the Jurisdictional Review Committee.

That's interdisciplinary committee from many places. And we're supposed to be looking at this epidemiologically. And what we noticed is a pattern. The pattern of these infant deaths was that the mothers of these babies were all under the age of 16 when they had those kids. And I thought, it's great, it's leaping off the page with statistical clarity, here's all I need. Every time a hospital has a live birth to a mom that's under the age of 16, I still don't really know. And I'm going to send help because no matter what is going to be hard for that kid, we can help. I can send we can figure out how to get home visiting involved and we can figure out case management support. Parents weren't fair and hospitals went crazy. They were pulling out all their lawyers, insisting we cannot share this information. And it was heartbreaking. Again,



because I thought statistical clarity, this is a great example of it's knowable, you know it. And for some reason you've decided not to share and that now we've got a 15 year old going home with the baby without maybe the help that they need. I could go on and on.

That example alone, obviously. Now that brings up the orgo of predictive analytics or analytics that help triage need and figure out where to send resources. But again, is that the business of the child welfare system? Because your mechanism as Molly, child welfare director in Baltimore is to send a social worker out. And have that social worker offer to say, hey, I can hook you up with home visiting. But regardless, you raise the specter of surveillance, which obviously is something that is problematic. So how do you kind of mitigate? There's two things here to talk about data sharing. But then what is the response was, you know, what is the known knowns that you now have access to?

That's right. And so I think the matter of let's share data to prevent imagine that we've put prevention some other place. Imagine that we have prevention somewhere that is not in such child welfare. That is a sort of comprehensive approach to the well-being of kids. I think that there's shared data so that you can learn when is the moment to introduce protective factors. And like a protective factor for infant mortality is when a mom is on both food stamps and WIC. Great. That means when you have a mom on food stamps and she's not on WIC, what can we just get her on WIC? Like, that's a great example of let's just do that. What is critically important about that is the orientation of these agencies for data sharing back and forth. Right. So that that's the thing that's not happening is you have to fight, scramble to get any information. And if we got to the presumption of nope, all data belongs to the mayor, all data belongs to the governor. And we have to be able to throw it on a page so that data engineers can look at it and say, hey, here's your pattern. Right. The pattern is in this zip code, kids attendance plummets in fourth grade. Great. I'm so glad we know that now. Now we know what we got to put on the billboards. What do we have to put in the little tray liners of the McDonald's in this

neighborhood? What do we have to get the teacher talking about in second and third grade? Wouldn't be the preacher's name from the pulpit. How do we move information that can continue to turn? The problem is we guess of that stuff now. Well, we can't see this stuff at a community level to learn where's the moment, where's the location that we could introduce things that would turn families and communities in a more positive direction, instead of having that crashed through the doors of child welfare. I'm thinking about a lot of things, but pardon my technical language. How do you cut through the bullshit of lawyers protecting data from being shared? Have you seen any examples where that's being done effectively? Either just cross to systems, which I know you know about from Baltimore, but across multiple systems? How is that actually done? I see your point, but how do you actually do it? Right. It's a great insight into the two challenges with data sharing.

There's a technical challenge, right? How am I going to plug up the extension cord, the two-week extension cord, so that information goes from you to me in a way that it's usable and presentable for both of us? Like that's a problem, that there are all kinds of tools and platforms that enable that technical ability enormously important. I just want to put a pin in this enormously important that child welfare, for instance, begins to make those decisions. I worry that child welfare is drifting away from those decisions when, say, in the development of these new case management systems, these sewer systems that we say, oh, we're just going to start with one model more than where the rest of it later. We're only going to do investigations. We're only going to do license our foster parents. And we're not thinking about from the beginning a framework that has everything, talking to everything else, that has a child welfare system able to communicate with the school system, with the hospitals, with public safety, with whoever else they need to be talking to and modules that are talking to each other. I think the I worry that this I'm going to do it one module at a time is going to create a technical hurdle that's going to be too hard to get over whether the desire to see with what I think the language they use in technology, which is nimble and that you create things like piece by piece.



So was there sort of a conceptual problem there and just it's construction?

I don't think it's a conceptual problem because the federal government said, yeah, we want this modular. And I think it actually is a smart way to do it. It's an implementation question when you say, all right, well, I'm just going to do this module and I'm going to only do this module in isolation. I'm only going to think about this thing right now instead of I'm going to have a modular approach. And part of my big plan for a modular approach includes every time I go to module, it has to be ready to talk to other things. That's what I worry about, that stuff, because, you know, people are after well, let's get an early win. Let me hurry up and get a module in. I'll be able to say we accomplished something and we'll be able to check a box and they're kicking the can forward in a way that's going to hurt him later. The second thing you're talking about, which is governance. Right, because I can have all the great extension cords plugged up for us to share information. But if we haven't stacked hands and agreed to the rules of engagement, then no one's going to turn the faucet on. Right. And I do think that will depend significantly on leadership. Think the individuals in decision making chairs, because all those attorneys who say, no, darling, they work for somebody. Right. And the somebodies they work for need to say, I understand this is new and different. I understand it might feel like we're going out on a limb. But you know what? What we're doing now is not working. We have to get out on a limb that is going to enable us to understand more so that we can do more for the families that we're serving.

Have you seen an example of somebody doing that really well? I think there's you mentioned once in Oklahoma governor's office that there was a move to sort of make an argument about who owns the data.

Oklahoma's tackling that question some very impressive ways. I think honestly, I think there are they are one to watch. I think there are more and more places that are doing it on smaller scale. Right. Looking at their data sharing information in a way that is getting them to task, getting them to know during covid, which are the families that most need me to reach out to them

because we don't want them isolated, which are the families that most need that. They can use data to get to that information. I think we're getting smarter about that. I don't know of a place that's doing it on the scale that we need to get to. So, as we think about this big changing year, right, we've got we talked a little bit about some of the pressure getting relieved in terms of anti-poverty campaigns or just support for family campaigns from the federal government through this child tax credit change.

And in the child welfare space, we discussed to some degree, you know, the limitations of family first in terms of getting really upstream, we've also kind of discussed, well, what is the coupling mechanism, right? Or how does the coupling of child welfare to its police function impede or potentially impede its preventative function? And we've talked about the data element. And I think if we're thinking about. We want this year to be transformative. Because we are we want it to be transformative, we've got all of the pieces to make it, we start to about abolition. You know, there's there's a big movement to rethink child welfare. What do you want to leave people with that they can think about and that they can start working towards whether they're within child welfare systems, in other systems that touch child welfare systems in the advocacy world or in the political world, who can use their bits of power to move towards something that that stops kids from unnecessarily entering a system that invariably is not as good as home.

I appreciate the question. I think one of the most important things child welfare will do is redistribute power. Right now, the power is held only by the agency. Sometimes power is yielded to foster parent the folks who are recipients of child welfare interventions, as you and I have to known, because the last couple of times we talk together, we've been talking to get we've been talking about this, that we're more likely to be intervening with black and brown families.

I think the redistribution of power to those families is going to be the thing that enables child welfare to understand how it could change. And anyone that's engaged in child welfare now could simply make sure that that question is on the table. Right. So, for instance, when we're



selecting among practice models. Right. When we're building a seamless solution, even if we're just building a model, when we're thinking about how we might use data or anything you're doing, there's going to be talk about, well, how is that helping the case worker? There's when we talk about how is that going to improve our data, there's going to be talk about how are we going to get more foster parents. And I think if there is not as loud a question of and how is that reaching biological parents. Right. How is it positioning them to be decision makers in the lives of their children? How is it measuring their strengths, their abilities to solve their own problems? How is it giving them smarter, faster, better access to resources? You know, a great example is everybody's out there right now, busy, busy building foster parent portals. And don't get me wrong, I was a foster parent. It's important. I want a lot more information from the agency than I was getting.

But I think why aren't we talking about biological parents? Why are we talking about the rush we have once a kid is in foster care? It's so easy to help that foster parent to get the what they need to fund that war. We need to start asking questions about if we would do that for foster parents. We do it for caseworkers. What are we doing for biological parents? What are we done to reposition them at this table, their absence from this table? And we think about them just going into court. They don't get to speak in court. Everybody else gets to talk or anything. If we're not repositioning biological parents as players, as major players, and then I'm not sure how we reinvent this. I don't see how we get to that. So I think anyone that is involved in the system could be asking that all the time and how we're biological parents to sit at this table no matter what your table is. How are biological parents being given?

This is just a reflection on that before we close. This is just that in my career at fostering media connections, covering all the child welfare news my eyes could handle with a great team doing the same thing. It never has been louder. The biological parent perspective and the requisite the biological parents have this real seat at the table, at least rhetorically, than I've ever seen it before.

So to your point, it feels like the moment has more plausibility and we'll talk about this in another session than it did when you gave your TED talk in 2014. You know, I think that we've come as a field to recognize that more. But whether or not that goes beyond just rhetorical recognition, what you're talking about is going to be the big question. And I think ultimately, to your point, will be the trigger for our ability to either do prevention or not to do prevention. So, Molly, I just am so thankful to see you again and talk to you again. These sessions are really great for me. I can get a lock out the world and just think about these big issues with you. And it's important and also, to some degree, fun. So I appreciate it. Thank you.

It is a pleasure to spend time with you, Dan.

And thanks to Molly Tierney of Accenture and Daniel Heimpel, fostering media connections for the conversation today. The Imprint weekly podcast is a production of Fostering Media Connections, a California based nonprofit. This podcast is produced and mixed by Christina who also arranged the music for this episode. If you enjoyed it, we greatly appreciate it. If you consider subscribing or giving us a five-star rating on Apple, Spotify or wherever you download your podcasts, you can follow the Imprint on Twitter and Facebook by searching the handle @theimprintnews and visit us on the Web at imprintnews.org or email us a tips@imprintnews.org.

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