



Self-Sabotage in Foster Care Placements

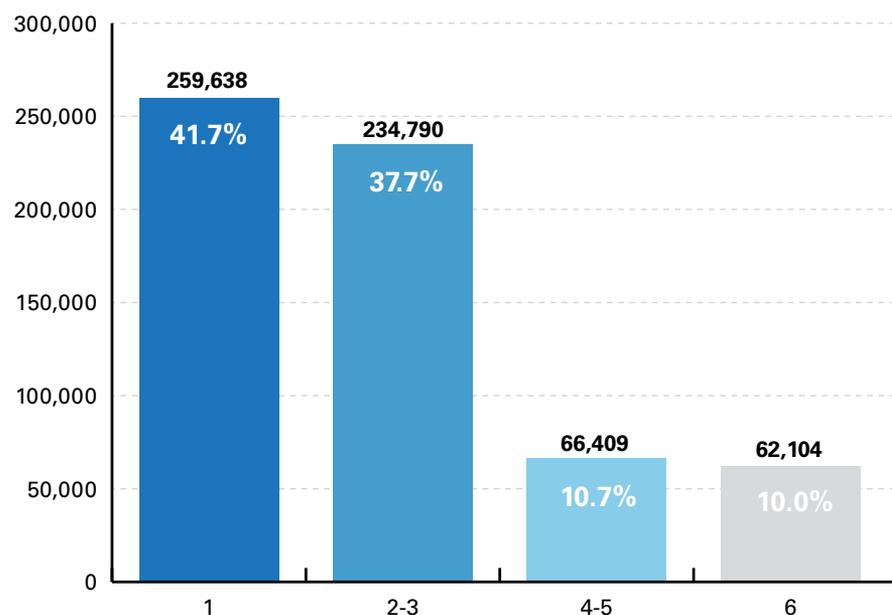
We like to think that we consistently act in our own best interests. But sometimes, for a variety of reasons, we find ourselves behaving in ways that interfere with our long-term goals. Human communication, including self-communication, is inherently imbued with the potential for misunderstanding, and therefore results may be second best or even detrimental. Self-sabotage affects people in politics, education, sports, science, business, and yes, human services.

A positive foster care placement is one in which both the foster parents and child feel emotionally safe and connected. Though many foster parents strive to create such an environment, some children in foster care sabotage their placements. This article briefly looks at two aspects of this issue: First, how and why do children sabotage their own placements? Second, within normative legal parameters, how can human service staff address this?

How and Why Do Children Sabotage Their Foster Placements?

Self-sabotage may occur for a variety of reasons. It may happen if the foster child misperceives a communication from a foster parent or someone else in the foster family, interpreting their words or behavior in a way that seems threatening. Given the child's developmental level and limited social repertoire, the child may lack the necessary sophistication to distinguish between a simple misunderstanding, a misinterpretation of intent, or a communication that was in fact negative or spiteful. Fearing danger, the child may unnecessarily have a fight-or-flight

FIGURE 1: CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN FY 2012: NUMBER OF CHILDREN BY NUMBER OF PLACEMENTS²



Placement: The number of places the child has lived, including the current setting, during the current removal episode. Does not include trial home visits. **Children:** Number of children served during FY 2012. Does not include children over 18 at the end of FY 2012. **Source:** Calculation of Mary Eschelbach Hansen from public use AFCARS Foster Care file.

reaction. A foster child who fears rejection may choose to behave in a way that preemptively rejects the foster parent. Alternatively, foster children may unconsciously fashion impediments to success that can later be used as excuses for their poor performance. They may also punish themselves, either physically or psychologically, in order to avoid embarrassment, gain social acceptance, or simply to appear hardened and tough. Similarly, they may harm themselves for perceived offenses, thereby reconstructing a sense of justice and evading punishment from others, especially authority figures. Last, self-destructive behaviors

may involve pursuing goals that are unproductive or likely to fail. For all of the aforementioned reasons, self-sabotaging behavior may temporarily alleviate a child's perceived discomfort, while inadvertently jeopardizing their long-term needs.

What Can Human Service Staff Do?

The impact of self-sabotaging a placement is often the replacement of a child (see Figure 1), and multiple placements frequently result in behavioral and education problems.¹ Legally, children in out-of-home placements

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Time at APHSA: I arrived at APHSA in October 2014.

Life Before APHSA: Before working at APHSA, I was an administrative assistant for the executive director at Wiley Rein LLP, a law firm located in Washington, D.C. While working at Wiley Rein, I was afforded the opportunity to work closely with attorneys, paralegals, and the Conflict Risk Management team. My experience there was very rewarding.

Priorities at APHSA: My priorities here at APHSA are to establish professional relationships with staff and affiliate members, to learn how the AAICPC affiliate functions, and to execute innovative ways to effectively contribute to APHSA's vision and mission. I love that the reality of my

daily tasks is a key ingredient to helping make people's lives better.

What I Can Do for Our Members: As I continue to get acclimated to the association's organizational structure and goals, I will strive to provide members with excellent customer service, a high degree of professionalism, and to demonstrate the initiative to solve any issue they may have.

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When Not Working: When I'm not working, I enjoy spending time with my family, reading, cooking, shopping, or attending a Zumba class. I love to maximize my day.

Motto to Live By: Through consistency desired results are produced! 📌

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are typically visited at least monthly by their caseworker. Sadly, these visits are often carried out in a perfunctory manner that limits their utility as an opportunity to prevent or resolve difficulties. One of the principal jobs of all human service staff, especially those in the foster care field, is to make every effort to make these face-to-face visits meaningful, and to keep lines of communication open.

Ultimately, good casework and foster parenting are a matter of effective communication (verbal, non-verbal, written, or simple listening). Caseworkers must exercise good judgment as to which components of communication are best suited for a particular situation. Then, after ensuring that the communication has been clear, the next step is to confirm that everyone's intentions and goals are compatible. If misperception is one of the causes of self-sabotage, then

one of the countermeasures is creating mutual understanding.

Foster care is always a team effort—including the child's lawyer and the court. Positive communication within a team keeps everyone on the same page, working to reach common goals despite different perspectives. For the sake of the child, all team members must understand the role they play and leave little room for misunderstanding and self-destruction.

In the end, self-sabotage in the foster care setting is frequently a by-product of a child's impulsivity and illusions. And foster children are no different than anyone else—it is not all that difficult to deceive ourselves. 📌

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Reference Notes

1. Obradović, J., Long, J. D., Cutuli, J. J., Chan, A., Hinz, E., Heistad, D., & Masten, A. S. (2009). Academic achievement of homeless and highly mobile children in an urban school district: Longitudinal evidence on risk, growth, and resilience.
2. The data used in this publication were made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, and have been used with permission. Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) were originally collected by the Children's Bureau. Funding for the project was provided by the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The collector of the original data, the funder, the Archive, Cornell University, and their agents or employees bear no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.