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Stories of Mothers and Child Welfare (FULL REPORT)

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Partnerships for Children and Families Project

Stories of Mothers and Child Welfare

G. Cameron
S. Hoy

August 2003



Life Stories of Mothers and Child Welfare

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Reasons for Listening to Mothers' Stories

As researchers and as service providers, it is easy to behave as if we have an accurate, and perhaps even superior, understanding of the people who use our services. In the official conversations where important decisions affecting these people's lives are made, it is our voices, and our determinations about what aspects of others' lives are important to consider and which behaviours are appropriate, that are privileged. Our educational and work environments, and our professional and personal self interests, combine to make us publically confident in our judgements and unquestioning about our right to decide. Our benevolence is taken for granted.

Our portraits of families using child protection services and what they need to do in their lives provide important illustrations of this privileged discourse. Of specific concern is that our professional images of these families are particularly harsh and colour our expectations and interventions. For example, in her recent analysis of the literature, Nancy Freymond (2003a) found that the most common labels applied to these parents, particularly to mothers, included "untreatable", "multi-problem", "inaccessible", "unresponsive", "hard-to-reach", "inadequate", "dangerous", "unwilling" or "unable" to provide care for their children. Her analysis revealed that the literature focuses on these mothers living in poverty, being single parents and socially isolated, experiencing disruptions in all aspects of family relations, having had abusive childhoods, having insecure attachments with their children, having chaotic, abusive and unstable relationships with male partners, struggling with addictions, having infantile personalities, low self esteem, and poor impulse control, and struggling with depression and other forms of mental illness. She concludes that mothers involved with child welfare are portrayed "as having

difficulties of such magnitude that the likelihood of any substantial change is remote”. (pp. 19-20).

Finally, she makes an argument which is fundamental to the purposes of this research:

“The child welfare system is conditioned by the biased understanding of the lives of biological mothers. The ways that mothers ... understand their world, and their behaviour in it, do not fit neatly into the contexts of child welfare. Mothers do not merely absorb and comply with the advice of professionals. They attempt to interpret and to incorporate that advice into their daily living contexts. When child welfare expectations contradict what is ‘common sense’ in the world of biological mothers, the expectations are met with frustrations and resistance.” (p. 1)

The challenge of understanding the lives of parents and children involved with child welfare from a more complete and compassionate perspective is exacerbated by the extreme portraits presented as the norm for these families in the popular media. Few groups evoke less sympathy than the people who the broader public imagine these parents to be. This “hard” perspective in turn expects the public child protection authorities to be “hard” with these “bad parents”. To illustrate such negative public portraits, two feature articles in the Kitchener Waterloo newspaper *The Record* (“Help When,” 2000; “Setting Limits,” 2000) included the following case scenarios to describe these families and the nature of child welfare work:

Scenario one: ...four hungry kids under the age of six...surrounded by guns, crack, and cocaine and stolen property at a filthy crack house...two sets of parents who were dealing cocaine while their grandmother sold stolen property [children taken into care and later returned to parents]

Scenario two: ...the baby boy had 15 fractured ribs, two skull fractures, haemorrhaging in his eyes, a broken collar bone and a spinal injury ...had been severely shaken and had his head smashed against the wall by teenage parents [taken into care and adopted; second child also apprehended and adopted by same family]

Scenario three: ...crying quietly, the five year old girl had a broken femur and extensive bruising...”Mommy throws things around when she is angry...I run and hide... but this time she found me” [in foster care and the mother has supervised access]

Scenario four: ...a nine year old boy who was not going to school and was covered in bruises and welts... his father was arrested and charged, beat the kid with a broomstick. [child in care and then agreement to stay with mother]

Scenario five: ...the Kitchener father was forcing his teenage son to take part in anal and oral sex ...[father before the courts...family sold home because not enough income with Dad gone]

Scenario six: ...a [six year old boy] with marks on his face and neck. He also had cuts in his mouth... when someone banged the boy's head against a toilet [in care and investigation continues]

Scenario seven: ...found a grandmother and two children -one a baby- who had retreated to a single room because the rest of the living space was flooded with human sewage spilling from a blocked, overflowing toilet [moving quickly to remove the children until the family found a better home]

Scenario eight: ...they found a baby and a young boy in a vermin-infested house ...contacted by hospital staff who had treated the kid's mother for rat bites ...found the children in a bedroom surrounded by animal faeces and dead mice [parents agreed to have their children cared for by grandparents until the family found better housing]

Scenario nine: ...teenager obsessed with Satan, hanging around grave yards and threatening to injure his school principal when he was made a crown ward ...requested by his grandmother...who had raised him...several generations of mental illness ...unstable mother...teen suicidal [crown ward and grandmother still involved with teen]

Scenario ten: ...two crack addicted parents ...two year old boy ...no obvious signs of neglect ...hard to prove addiction ...dad had been sexually abused... mom a street person ...abused by men ...smoking crack and drinking heavily [kid into care for one year but through being given another 'chance' by judge and social worker kid home under supervision...Dad treated for addictions...under agency supervision...regular urine tests on demand] ["She saved my life...I believe they really care about keeping families together"]

The dominant public image of these parents is that they are bad, even criminal, parents who care little for their own children and who are doing serious, often intentional, harm to their own children. We learn that our priority must be to protect children from serious harm in their own homes and that firm authority and coercive power is required to protect children. Finally, we

are told that child protection work is extremely difficult and vitally important.

One of our motivations is to challenge the usefulness of this dominant discourse about child welfare parents and their family life. If we accept such profiles, any ambitions to create productive helping partnerships with such parents would be unrealistic.

A recent large sample survey in Ontario (Trocme & Chamberland, 2003), based upon established protection categories and upon assessments by child protection workers, estimated that only 24% of families presented a severe risk of “harm” to their children [severe physical harm (4%), neglect of a child under three (10%), sexual abuse (10%)]. Staying within the conventional frame of reference, these authors suggest that many of the remaining 75% of families should be understood through the somewhat broader lens of endangered or compromised child development.

Still remaining within the dominant framework, a January 2002 paper issued by the Ministers of Social Services from across Canada [conference paper] concluded that:

Service responses may be ‘geared up’ for a response to an abuse allegation when neglect and emotional harm are actually the primary source of referrals and the primary reason for case openings. ... [Studies] draw a connection between the incidence of neglect, income levels and the stresses of being a single parent. Child welfare agencies are less equipped to address issues of poverty and lack of community based support for single parents feeling isolated than they are prepared to investigate and respond to allegations of abuse. (p. 17)

Significant in all of these discussions of reforming Canada’s child welfare “system” is the total absence of the voices of parents and children. Do we not believe that they have useful insights into their own lives and what has happened to them during their child welfare involvements? Of course, child welfare’s historical and continuing project of the oversight of

“immoral” and “dangerous” parents and the “rescue and reform” of children [Freymond, 2003a] makes the inclusion of such voices incongruous.

As part of the Partnerships for Children and Families Project’s larger investigation of the daily living realities and service experiences of families involved with child welfare and children’s mental health services, this study presents the life stories of 16 mother’s who’ve had open child protection cases at local child welfare agencies. The core assumptions behind this investigation include: (1) that the official portrait of who these women are and what their lives are like is at best incomplete, and probably erroneous in important aspects; (2) that useful insights will come from these mothers’ understanding of the nature and effectiveness of their families’ involvement with child protection services; (3) that these stories can assist in promoting a helpful dialogue between professional and mothers’ perspectives; and, finally, (4) that these stories will generate insights into productive avenues for innovation and experimentation in improving how we try to protect children and help families in distress.

In addition, our original premise was that the public profile of families involved with child protective services is excessively cruel and a barrier to being more helpful to these children and parents. The most common public and, to a marginally lesser extent, the professional portraits of these families are so far removed from the images emerging in Partnerships for Children and Families research, including when a family has a child placed in care, that they are both misleading and prejudicial. It is destructive to present extreme situations as typical examples. It is limiting to focus exclusively on parents’ and families’ dysfunctions.

Our final assumption in undertaking this research is that these mothers’ stories would not

be only of woe and difficulties, but also about pleasures and aspirations. Not only of struggle, but also about overcoming. Not only about challenges, but also about capacity. Our contention is that a more balanced portrait will improve our understanding and point to new opportunities for creating productive helping relationships.

Our final premise for this research is a moral argument. It is offensive to relate to these women only in terms of our professional assessment categories and our service exigencies: as cases, investigating allegations of neglect or abuse, uncovering mothers' personal issues, seeing mothers only in light of their responsibilities for children. This study, as well as other parts of the Partnerships for Children and Families Project research (Frensch, & Cameron, 2003), illustrate the many obstacles impeding service providers from understanding these women as people, beyond the parts of their lives caught in their professional lenses. Yet these women's stories are of ways of living shared by generations and communities of people. And they talk about life experiences, expectations and opportunities quite different from those of many researchers and service providers. These are gaps which are challenging to bridge. There is both an ethical imperative as well as practical value in trying to understand how these women make sense of their own lives. And an importance in approaching these stories as if we do not already know.

Study Methods

The report is based on life story interviews with 16 mothers with recently closed child protection cases at two child protection agencies in southern Ontario. A total sample of 120 families with a recently closed child protection file were randomly selected for the broader study. Participants from this sample were able to choose among various interview strategies used in the

broader study. The only constraint on these selection processes was to include a proportion of mothers in each interview strategy similar to the proportion of mothers in the host agency who have experienced having a child placed in care.

Mothers were interviewed on average three times representing about 5-6 hours of conversation with each mother. Most interviews took place in the respondent's home. A very simple interview strategy was used involving a preamble asking each mother to imagine that a movie or book of their life was being made and to decide what was in the story. The story could begin in the present or past and should include what they thought would be most important if they wanted someone to understand their life. Mothers were asked where they'd like the story to begin and neutral probes were used to encourage them to discuss this topic. The interviewer kept a list of additional topics mentioned during the discussion and returned to them later in the interview. Otherwise, the mother was asked what came next in the story. Respondents were given a visual aid identifying a range of possible topics which they might choose to include in their story. Each interview was audio taped and listened to by the interviewer prior to the next interview to identify possible focuses for this discussion. Each interview proceeded on the basis of informed consent and participants were given a gift of \$100 for consenting to be interviewed.

The tapes for each mother's interviews were transcribed and transcripts averaged about 120-150 pages for the three interviews combined. Each respondent received a copy of this transcript for their own use and was encouraged to contact the research team with any additions or corrections she wished to make.

Two broad analytic strategies were used with these stories. First, the main topics in each

story were encapsulated in an approximately 15 page summary story using almost exclusively the respondent's own words. Each respondent also received a copy of this summary to verify its appropriateness. Two groups with 8-10 parents in each group who've been involved with child protection services [about half of whom had stories in this study], and two groups of 7-10 child protection service providers in each group, read all of these 16 story summaries. Each of these groups met for 3-4 hours to share their reactions to the stories. These group discussions were audio taped and their main themes summarized. Parent and service provider perceptions of the 16 stories are compared in this study. Members of the research team also read all of the summaries and met as a group with an outside facilitator to share their reactions to the stories. This discussion also was audio taped and transcribed. The intent of this analytic method was to maintain the integrity of each story and to generate reactions to the whole stories without losing a sense of the individuals talking.

The second analytic strategy involved building a thematic coding schema from the original transcripts which were then coded using the N-Vivo qualitative data management software. The major patterns within each part of this coding framework then were identified and summarized with illustrations from the transcripts.

A specific choice in presenting the results of these analyses was required when it became apparent that organizing the discussion around our coding schema reduced the 16 women to analytic categories. It was decided that, to the extent possible, maintaining their individual identities and their "humanity" was critical in this study. As a result, in this volume, in each section of the discussion organized around the broad groupings in the coding schema, the

appropriate portion of each mother's story is told separately. In each section, women are referred to by name¹ and the emphasis is upon the commonalities among the people in the stories rather than upon analytic dimension. While this approach adds to the length of this volume, it respects an essential motivation for the study, a desire to hear how mothers understand their own lives and to meet them as people who have many things going on in their lives.

Even this approach was too reductionist to be completely satisfactory. A decision was made to prepare a parallel volume (Cornfield, Cameron, & Hoy, 2003) including each of the 16 story summaries in the mothers's words in its entirety. Only a minimal amount of researcher general discussion and interpretation is added to this presentation. This format gives a superior sense of the women's lives in this study, but presents the reader with greater challenges of synthesis and interpretation.

There are several strengths to this study. It focuses on the lives of these mothers and not upon their status as child protection "clients". Whether mother's chose to include their child welfare involvements as part of their story [almost all did] was left up to them. This approach allows us to see aspects of these women's lives less accessible if our attention is concentrated on the child protection mandate. In addition, the five to six hours of conversation with each woman provided quite extensive information on her struggles, successes, fears and hopes.

While clearly these stories represent stories typical of many women involved with child protection agencies, and can be very helpful in generating insights into such circumstances, these remain stories about only these sixteen women involved with child protection agencies in one part

¹ A fictitious name assigned for the study.

of Southern Ontario. We should not presume that a similar mix of stories would be told by other women, even those living in the same communities. In addition, while several of these stories were told by First Nation women, this study contains very limited information on the experiences of women from other “minority” cultures.

Finally, these stories are constructions. They represent how these women chose to present themselves to particular interviewers under somewhat artificial conditions. Under different circumstances, and talking to someone other than a researcher, modified versions of these representations of self would emerge. These stories are not presented as complete or definitive statements of what is taking place in these women’s lives. They are not presented as the “truth” of how particular occurrences transpired. What these stories do communicate is how these women chose to present themselves under the circumstances of this research and how they represent and make sense of important aspects of their lives.

Organization of the Volume

The discussion of the mothers’ stories in this volume is organized around five broad topics: (1) Lives of Lesser Privilege; (2) Mothers’ Childhoods; (3) Partner and Family Relations; (4) Experiences with Children’s Aid Societies; and (5) Personal Challenges and Heroine’s Stories. Within each section, the relevant parts of each of the 16 stories is told followed by the authors’ commentary on the stories. These sections are followed by a discussion of four parent and service provider focus groups’ reactions to the life stories. The volume concludes with an examination of some implications for helping from the study.

(1) Lives of Lesser Privilege

From its earliest days until the present, Anglo-American child protection systems have focussed their attention on the most impoverished segments of the population as well as on immigrant and other “marginalised” groupings (Cameron, Freymond, Cornfield, & Palmer, 2001). Rationales for the disproportionate involvement of these groups included maintaining economic productivity, public safety, and proper moral standards as well as rescuing children from “dangerous and unwholesome” environments (Freymond, 2003a). The stories in this section, as well as the findings from other portions of the Partnerships for Children and Families research, confirm a continuing disproportionate focus on disadvantage families.

Privilege in this discussion refers to access to valued educational and employment opportunities and to sufficiency of financial resources to provide sufficient access to daily living resources. Lesser is in comparison to the educational, employment and financial circumstances of members of the research team and to many child protection personnel in contact with these women. Both concepts refer to living conditions for these women during childhood as well as adult life. It is impossible to read these stories without confronting the ongoing pressures of living with lesser privilege and the extraordinary efforts required to survive and overcome such obstacles.

Amber

During Amber’s childhood, her father went to jail for several years for drug trafficking. After her parents separation Amber, “*bounced around*” a lot between family members and foster homes. When Amber was 14 she was living on the street, sleeping on park benches and in parks.

She would sneak into bars and drink and use drugs. Amber recalls that she was close to the sex trade but she couldn't bring herself to get into prostitution.

At age 16, Amber was living at home with her mother again but was forced to leave because of the sexual advances of her mom's partner. She moved to Alberta to live with her stepfather. In Alberta Amber met her first long-term partner, Andrew. Amber stayed at home with the children while Andrew worked. She left with their two children after Andrew was unfaithful. Despite the separation, their relationship remained amicable and Amber received consistent financial support from Andrew.

Amber describes:

...Like I know I can phone him right now and say 'hey, I'm in a bind, you know, is there any possible way you can help me or talk to me or something' and the next thing you know I'll have five or six hundred dollars in my bank account. Christmas time it took me a while to figure out where the money was coming from but he knew my bank account because of my kids, eh. And he would slip the money in to help me out. I never had a problem with child support, never went to court over it. You know? Like he'd phone me and say I've got so much money for you, it's in the account. Never had to deal with lawyers.

Amber developed a second long term relationship. Wayne would steal Amber's pay cheques and "blow it on women and drugs and stuff like that". Wayne was physically, emotionally, and financially abusive towards Amber. The couple's daughter was born premature and had health problems. At the time, money was tight because Amber was not working and Wayne wasn't helping much with the finances. Amber recalls she stayed at the Ronald McDonald House during her daughter's hospital stays, and she was thankful that the staff provided her with food vouchers. When Amber returned home with her daughter, Wayne became increasingly

physically abusive. After a year, her friends made an “intervention to remove Amber from the abusive relationship. Amber recalls the incident:

In the door they came either the boxes, started throwing things in boxes and my best friend ended up pinning me down on the couch, took my bank card and my bank book and went down there and withdrew every penny I had out of the bank account plus the overdraft out of my husband’s account. She says hey, he’s taking all your money, he’s banking all this money. You deserve it, we’re getting you put of town. I’m like whoa, they made arrangements to send me on the bus and they sent me to another city. I was terrified, terrified for my life.

Amber moved to Ontario with her children and lived with her mother-in-law until she found a part-time job and began receiving social assistance for the first time. She saved her money and they moved into their own apartment. After another relationship ended, Amber was living alone because her two children had move to Alberta, and her daughter Erin was taken into care by the CAS. At first, Amber recalls being scared to be alone without her children and a male partner. However, looking back she sees this time as an opportunity to “*straighten out and review*” her situation. She recalls they she didn’t have much time for dating because she was working so much in the service industry:

All I did was work, work, work. I didn’t have time and I didn’t want to date...I went out with a few guys and they’re like oh, she’s good and she’s got money, she’ll help me out and you know. I wasn’t into that. Like I dated one guy and I was stuck in a situation so I ended up living over at his apartment for a while and it just went to pot because he didn’t pay his bills, he knew I would pay them because it would drive nuts, you know, why have your power cut off and the cable. I said no way, you know, like get it together. I’m not going to be paying for you all the time, I’ve got no money.

When Erin returned home, Amber went to social services to ask for help with her finances but they told her that she was making too much money for them to assist her. Amber’s income was under \$10,000 a year. She appealed this decision and was given some income support. That

same year, Amber lost her apartment over a dispute with a landlord. She moved from place to place until she could afford to get another apartment.

Recently, Amber has moved in with her partner Adam. The couple live in Adam's house with Amber's daughter and a boarder. Adam and Amber argued often about Amber's job at a bar. Adam doesn't like the "flirting" the job entails, the drug use at the bar, or the late hours. So, Amber quit her job at the bar and now works for a temp agency. Amber describes how she made the decision to leave her job at the bar:

Well, Adam kind of helped me make that decision. He's tolerated me working in the bar for the past year that I've know him. And of course you've got to put up with all the crap that goes on in a bar too you know, like the guys get obnoxious and they figure oh, okay, I tipped you so well all night or you know, and they figure they can get something out of you some way or another. Plus there's a lot of drugs in the bar. Where I work every time you turn around there's drugs....

She adds:

If I missed the bus I'd have to take the cab. From home it's 15 dollars and from the school it's 20. A lot of times I couldn't afford it. I'd get to work and I'd have to borrow it out of the till and then all day bust my butt making tips to cover to put it back in the till.

Yet, Amber has doubts about her decision to quit her job:

I'm so scared. I'm so used to the past 10 years of being on my own where I've always had money in my pocket...and it was my money. I didn't have to pay for anybody, bills are always paid, you know, and not having the worry. Well, I had stresses, you know, working week to week trying to pay my bills and yeah now I don't know, he [Adam] calls me all the time and tells me not to worry. Like he makes a pretty good dollars himself but he pays, you know, his child support and comes off his pay so it reduces his pay in half but we're still surviving. The way we're going to work it right now is he wants me to stick with the [temp agency] you know, work he said go to work three days a week. You know, you got pay every day and you gas, cigarettes, whatever we need for the house, whatever bills that he can pay for me and he'll pay the rest He's always he's got this attitude or whatever, he's the man of the family he should be paying the rent or the

mortgage, anything to do with the vehicles, insurance and big bills that if he can afford.

Despite Amber's worries about her employment situation, she has aspirations to go to college and complete a Native counseling degree and eventually work with Native teens. Over the past number of years Amber has been steadily working towards such a goal. She describes her experience of finishing her Grade 12:

I went and it took me almost six years, you know, to get my grade 12 and I have a learning disability to begin with. So, it was very tough. Like, you know, when it comes to exams and that they let me write it in separate room with a dictionary and a tutor. Yeah, it was great, it was excellent and yeah, that was I think the biggest achievement I made in my life because when we went up to the graduation and you had your program book and that and I didn't even notice my name was in there on the honour role to receive a certificate for honours.

Since that time, Amber has continued to take home schooling courses on such topics as nutrition and health. She finds that home schooling works well for her because of her life and the nature of her learning disability.

Amber also has aspirations for her children to have access to education and a chance at a better life. She wants her children to be registered as 'status Indians' so they can have a more secure future. She says:

My children, if I get it, they're registered. Maybe it'll help them to go through college. They're still young and they can still go to school. It will give them something to look forward in the future because there's nothing out there anymore. And for them to go to school, it's going to cost them thousands of dollars to get an education and I don't want to see them go downhill because of something they can't have. You know? I don't care about me, I've gone this far in life of living and working and paying taxes and struggling but my children have a future ahead of them. I would like to see them have something better than what I've gone through in life. I don't you know, I protect them very much. You know, I don't want to see them go through what I've gone through. You Know? I would like to see get an education when she's 20, not when she's 40 like me.

Amy

Amy dropped out of high school because of the culture shock of moving from a smaller city to a large city. She went to work in her parents' restaurant until she had her first child. Amy had one child with her first husband, and left him when the child was one year old. Ed was cheating on Amy and was physically, emotionally, and financially abusive.

When Amy met her current partner Phil, they were both single parents living on social assistance. They lived separately, but saw each other often. When Amy gave birth to their child Tiffany, social services stopped sending social assistance cheques. Amy describes the situation:

I was single mom and he was on as a single parent and we were spending a lot of time at each other's house but we weren't living together and I think that's what got them pissed because that's when I got pregnant with Tiffany and they said to me that I no longer had a right to collect a cheque as a single parent when I gave birth to Tiffany.

The couple feels social service forced them to move in together and combine their families. Blending the families was stressful, and the couple split up for a period of time. After a year, Amy and her children moved back in with Phil's family and found Amy a job. The couple decided that Amy should work while Phil stayed with the children because Amy felt the working at home was too stressful. Also, Phil was having a hard time finding a job because he had stayed at home with the kids for several years. Amy found work in a poultry factory and injured her back on the job. She has been receiving worker's compensation for the past three years.

Due to Amy's injuries, Phil looked for a job to support the family. Currently, Phil works full time for a courier company. Amy notes that financially they are, "*doing a lot better now*". With five children, their grocery bills are substantial. Amy estimates the family spends \$1200-

\$1400 on food a month. She notes that the bills are high because they like to buy fresh fruit and healthy foods, which often cost more.

Amy stays at home with the children and she finds this to be a very stressful job. After a day at home she says she feels, “*just frazzled you know, by the end of the day. I’m just frazzled...*”. She describes what some typical days at home are like:

Mondays are usually a pretty heavy day because the house is a mess from the weekend. So, I have to get everybody in gear and they have to help me a lot now because there’s many things I can’t do. And so we spend most of Monday doing chores and everything and we all every night we try to sit down to dinner all of us together. We’ve tried to make that a goal. When we bought the house, that was why we bought the big table was because we were all eating dinner at separate times. Tuesdays and Thursdays are laundry days and we’re getting to the point now that Keri, our 15 year old, sometimes she’ll cook us supper to give me a break and but we’ve got chore lists and everything so every day is pretty planned out before it gets here, you know.

To relieve stress and to earn money on the side, Amy makes a variety of crafts and sells them at craft shows and churches. As well, Amy spends a lot of her time working on courses for a medical transcription and legal assistant program she is enrolled in. She is doing very well in the program and hopes to complete the courses and begin a career in medical transcription. She explains that the benefit of this type of work is that it can be done at home, allowing Amy to set her own hours each day. This will allow her to continue with her work at home and work around her back pain.

Annette

Growing up, Annette was the target of her father’s abuse. Annette performed very well in school, but the stress from her home life eventually caught up with her school life. In grade eight her grades plummeted. Despite these difficulties, Annette worked hard to finish high school,

because she planned to leave home when she received her diploma. Annette recalls her graduation from high school:

...that was one of the happiest days of life, to get that diploma in my hands. I carried that everywhere. I didn't care how wrinkly it got, but that was my ticket to freedom. And I graduated in June and I hitchhiked up here in October. And that was an experience itself. The best thing I ever done. Because my mom says, you get on that highway, and you don't look back. You look back, you're going to come back. And I didn't look back once, only to see if there were more traffic coming, but that's about it. And, I've been a survivor since.

After graduating from high school, Annette hitchhiked from her Maritime home province to Ontario. Along the way, a friendly truck driver gave her fifty dollars. Once she reached her destination, she used this fifty dollars to stay in a hotel. Immediately, Annette went job hunting. On her second day in the city she found a job doing piece work for \$5.69 an hour. Within two weeks she was making \$22.00 an hour. Annette bought herself a car and sent money home to her family. After three years in that position, Annette began getting nosebleeds and losing weight from the chemical fumes and lack of ventilation in the factory. Annette's doctor instructed her to leave the job in the factory due to the health concerns.

After working in a series of the other factory jobs, Annette became pregnant and she chose to stay home and raise her son. When her unemployment benefits ran out, Annette became depressed due to the lack of income and not working. With the encouragement of a social service worker, Annette enrolled in *Focus for Change*, a government program that helps single moms upgrade their educational and employment skills. Annette refreshed her grade 11 and 12 and was about to enter a Personal Support Worker program at a local college when she was in a car accident and injured her back. She was forced to put off attending college. Annette began

looking for work again when she became pregnant with her second son.

Currently, Annette receives social assistance as well as support from the father (Jerry) of her second child. CAS has encouraged Annette to revoke Jerry's rights to see his child due to his tendency towards violent behaviour. In response, Jerry has refused to give her anymore money until Annette pursues child support through the courts. The rent for Annette's apartment is \$700. She has lived in this apartment for 7 ½ years and enjoys redecorating the apartment to reduce stress. After paying the rent, Annette and her children \$140 to survive on for twenty days.

Annette manages to survive on social assistance through budgeting which can often take significant time and effort:

I don't have much, so I try to spread it out. I'm an excellent budgeter. If I have to walk two miles to get something on sale I will. And then I'll go and get the rest at another place that's on sale. A lot of people don't agree with my pulling a wagon and pushing a stroller with a knapsack on my back, but that's pride. Knowing that I saved 25 dollars to go out and buy him a new pair of shoes or a new jacket, and then I compare to the other people that I've talked to and they're like, no, they gotta go out and buy the most expensive, like name brand foods, and they end up halfway through the month with no money.

Next year, Annette plans to secure quality day care for her youngest child and return to work in a factory to save money to attend college. However, she thinks that finding work in a factory may be difficult now because many of the factories she used to work at have closed down and moved to the United States. Despite the obstacles, Annette remains positive about her future:

I'm a never-giver-upper. I'm determined that everybody around me is going to be happy, including myself, and um, happiness awaits me...but in my definition of determined means someone who's not going to quit, somebody who does not give up and wants the best and will do their best. And hopefully the best comes out of it and if not, if it's wrong, you try again until you get it right.

Chen

Chen immigrated to Canada from Laos with her family when she was 5 years old. Chen recalls that she “*didn’t pick up school easily*”. She says that she learned at a much slower rate than her classmates. In grade 5, Chen was moved to a “special class”. She would return to the “regular” classroom for grades seven and eight; but she struggled. Chen went to a “special school” for high school. She became pregnant with her first child during high school. With the help of her parents, she was able to take care of her baby as well as graduate high school. She recalls that she worked hard to graduate. Classmates called her a “goody-two-shoes” because she studied so hard.

After high school, Chen had her second child. Around that time, she worked for a year doing data entry. Her mother provided child care while she worked. Chen found managing full-time work and taken care of her children to be exhausting. An employment counselor recommended that she get some computer training because of her desire to work in office administration. She went for testing to get into college computer classes and the college told her she was performing at a grade 3 or 4 level. Despite performing at these levels, Chen began taking the computer courses. She has struggled with many of the courses, and has had to drop a few because of the suffered from post-partum depression. She passed several classes and did very well in a word processing course. However, she is unsure she will continue with the courses because of their cost and level of difficulty.

Currently, Chen receives disability benefits because she has been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Her mother lives with her to make sure she takes her medication, and to help with the children. They live in an apartment with Chen’s two children. Chen also receives income

from the work she does for a home-based cosmetics company. She enjoys this work and values the flexibility of the position. Chen has applied for jobs at a few retail stores without success. She aspires to work in an office but she doubts her chances. She states, “ *I don’t think they’re going to hire me. I’m not good enough.*”

Donna

Growing up, Donna recalls that she did not see much of her father because he worked seven days a week at the service station that he owned. Donna’s mom stayed home with the children. Donna’s experiences during elementary school were mostly negative. She recalls struggling with her school work due to what she believes was undiagnosed Attention Deficiency Hyper Activity Disorder:

Oh, I struggled really hard just to get passing grades all the way through. No matter how hard I tried studying it just my mind just couldn’t process the information. I got by, by memorizing mostly.

Donna also recalls being bullied and how these experiences caused her to dread going to school:

I remember one time it was my birthday and I was having a party and was walking with the kids and the bullies followed us home. Didn’t even live anywhere near me but just because it was my birthday they went out of their way to follow me home and they were tripping me all the way home and punching me and throwing snow at me and whatnot because my birthday is in January and it was just it was humiliating and it was just I hated it. I was terrified to get up in the morning. In fact now that I remember I even started to have it affected my nerves back then. I would wake up in the middle of the night every night for I don’t know how long feeling sick to my stomach and I was terrified of throwing up. I hated throwing up. That was a really bad phobia for me for a really long time and I’d wake up every night having to go and get my mom to come and sleep with me and I was just wanted to die.

During high school, Donna developed more friendships. She felt more accepted by her

peers, and her social experiences at school greatly improved. Academics still posed a challenge for Donna because of the problems she had in focusing attention on her studies. She dropped out high school in grade 12.

At age 18, Donna moved in with her boyfriend who she would eventually marry. He began to drink more often and the relationship became increasingly abusive. Donna recalls that the part-time job she had in a clothing store at a shopping mall changed her life because it allowed her to gain independence through earning money and developing friendships with her co-workers. Donna started staying at her girlfriend's house and eventually left her husband.

Donna was working full-time in the clothing store and living on her own when she met Arnold. Donna became pregnant and the couple moved in together in a short period of time. Donna describes Arnold as a younger man that was not ready for the responsibilities of fatherhood. Arnold did not keep up with the bills and he preferred to spend time with his buddies that with his wife and child.

Donna left Arnold after 2 years, began receiving social assistance, and went to an adult education center to finish grade 12. She graduated with honours. Shortly after graduation, she acquired a job with a large insurance company. She describes how she struggled with this position:

It finally felt like I accomplished something and then I started working at [insurance company]...but again struggled with working. There would always... I'd always have bad days where I couldn't concentrate or couldn't focus and that would, you know, get me into trouble kind of thing and I went I was in three different departments while I was there for approximately two years and then it was like oh and then I went from one job to the next job to the next job. I can't even tell you how many jobs I had.

Donna left the office job and worked full-time in a nursing home, however she was experiencing persistent pain in her neck and back. She lasted only a few weeks in a factory job because of the pain. Donna has been plagued by chronic pain and illness since that time. She describes her health problems:

I had a bad car accident when I was seventeen. I was driving and from that time on I've been suffering from chronic neck and back problems and it was just the last three to four years that I have noticed a considerable increase in problems with pain that and was two years no, this coming November I was diagnosed with fibro myalgia. Now, one doctor says that and another doctor says I was misdiagnosed and it's mio-facial pain syndrome. So, with dealing with that on a daily basis by the time (son) had started grade seven I was extremely ill.

Currently, Donna and her son survive on \$700 a month from the Ontario Disability Support Program. She recently separated from Mark, her husband of 11 years, and is living in parent's house. She describes the last two years of her life as: *"the worst years of my life"* because of her health problems, the many appointments and encounters with medical and social service professionals, the financial difficulties that have resulted, and the problems she has had with her son's behaviour. She experiences chronic pain 24 hours a day.

Donna moved in with her parents because she feels she cannot support herself and her son with her disability cheque, and she sometimes needs assistance at home because of her illness. She does not have medical benefits and her husband's apprenticeship and previous workplaces did not offer medical benefits. The couple is selling their possessions and their house to pay off the debt they have incurred. Their debt is from medical costs as well as from what Donna describes as Mark's financial irresponsibility:

Well, he doesn't see a problem with not paying your bills for a few months here and there. He doesn't see...he doesn't understand the sense of paying bills first

then buying toys kind of thing. He feels that his philosophy is how does he put it, 'I know we have no money but I'm going to live my life without having fun either'. So, even though he may be overdrawn on his bank account but he might still take out another 50 dollars or something like that and go to play golf or something even though, you know, some bills aren't paid and we're overdrawn on our bank account. And I don't agree with that. I wasn't raised like that. You pay your bills first then if you have anything left over to do anything with then fine. Bills always come first.

Mark agreed to attend budget counseling to keep Donna in his life, but Donna says that he never did, and he has not paid their phone and cable bills in several months. Given her current health and financial circumstances, Donna is not very hopeful for her near future. Donna remarks that she was once a hopeful, and positive person, but the negative experiences with health and social services in the past two years have left her frustrated and despondent.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was two years old when her dad left the family. Over the majority of Elizabeth's child and teenage years, her mom brought the children along with her as she moved from place to place. Elizabeth recalls "resenting" her mom for the frequent moves because this meant continuous change and instability. As a result of the constant school changes, Elizabeth recalls how her academics and social life suffered:

I was lucky to get a D. Cause most of my grades were like C's and D's. Ya like I said, I was always the new one at school and so in each new place I'd have to go to a new school sometimes I'd be lucky enough to stay close enough to the same area um, except, ya and um, it was hard. I didn't like it at all. It was hard to have you know, you see other friends who have gone to school everyday and every year they go to the same school and so they have this bond with certain people and they have like a friend that they grow up with, like a best friend that they grow up with and so I was always the new one who was left out and there'd be everyone who had their own little groups or whatever and I'd be out on the side kind of trying to fit in but not really fitting in?

Elizabeth's mom worked "long hard hours" to support her children through her work on a series of secretarial positions. At one point, Elizabeth recalls helping her mom clean offices in the evenings. Outside of work, Elizabeth recalls that her mom brought various men, drugs, and alcohol into the home.

At the age of sixteen, Elizabeth left home and school. Economically, Elizabeth used a variety of means to survive during this time. She received social assistance when she could get it, made small drug deals, and offered "favours" to people. She recalls:

I lived to party. Out of school. Didn't care about nothing, didn't care. I had no care for me, no care for you, no care for you know, buddy down the road. I stopped talking to my mother totally. I never called her I never did nothing. Um, well I had social assistance that I was getting wherever. I had the money from that and then um, sometimes I'd do favours for people and then I'd get money for that. And then I'd go help in a dope deal or something like that and I'd get money or drugs for that so. And most of the times um, I didn't even need money to go out. If I had five dollars in my pocket I was laughing.

For several years Elizabeth describes her life as quite transient and she became heavily involved with drugs. She met her first husband, Steven, during her work in a traveling carnival. After the carnival season she moved to a small town with Steven, cut down on her drug and alcohol use, and worked two part-time jobs. She worked as a waitress/bartender in a bar and as a cook in a restaurant. Due to a violent incident at the bar, Elizabeth chose to become a full-time short order cook. Elizabeth then changed jobs to work full-time in a factory. Elizabeth worked full-time and supported her child and her partner who wasn't working. She also paid a babysitter at one point because her partner would not look after the child. After four years, this position ended in 1992 when Elizabeth injured at work. The repetitive nature of the factory job caused tendinitis in her hands. Elizabeth became bored and depressed because she could not work. She

left her husband and child, and returned to drinking and using drugs more heavily, as well as overeating. Elizabeth became involved with another man, Ben, who was “*very abusive emotionally and financially*”. Elizabeth recalls that Ben was “*a control freak*” who controlled the money in the relationship.

Today, Elizabeth has left Ben and she feels more in control of her life. Elizabeth currently lives with her daughter and a girlfriend in the back of a house, in a noisy neighbourhood that has a lot of drug dealing and prostitution. She would like to move. She describes the neighbourhood:

This neighbourhood sucks. I hate it. They call this back alley here in the backyard there's an alley ya it's that way um, they call it crack alley. Uh there's a crack dealer that lives over there. If had known this I wouldn't have moved to this neighbourhood. There's a crack dealer that lives down the alley, there's a girl that runs an escort service out of her home down the alley. A bar is on that end by the [coffee shop] the Legion that doesn't bother me, they're just a bunch of old farts, right? But that, you know what I mean, I used to go to the legion myself too but um, ya but and so you have a crack dealer down the alley what kind of people are you to attract, right? That bar um, a lot of people who do drugs go in that bar. What kind of people are you going to attract and it's just a nastiness. Like I've had 2 different occasions where walking in this neighbourhood only at like 9:30 at night where somebody has stopped me and you know, picked me up and everything and another time where someone followed me and so I freak out. And this is only at like 9:30 at night.

Elizabeth shops at second hand stores, gets drug samples at the hospital because she doesn't have health coverage, and she advocated for her children to be enrolled into Brownies and Guides at no charge. A previous CAS worker gave her bus tickets so that she could have transportation to various CAS associated appointments, but Elizabeth has found that the most recent worker will not offer such assistance.

Elizabeth revealed the stress and chaotic nature of her daily living is taking a toll on her:

...there's still stressful stuff that goes on like all the time. It's just like if I'm not dealing with CAS then I'm dealing with Ben or something you know. Ben is always bringing up stuff and saying that I'm doing this and that I'm not doing it and a lot of things. A lot of stress and it's a wonder I haven't gone out and drank a bottle of booze or whatever because believe me, sometimes I just get to the end that I want to.

Elizabeth moves an average of two times a year. She estimates that she has moved 11 times in the past 5 years. She is currently in the process of moving to live in a trailer for the summer. At the end of the summer she plans to move in with her mother in a different city until she receives subsidized housing (she is 11th on the waiting list).

Elizabeth has some hopes and aspirations for her future. She wants her children to finish high school and possibly pursue a post-secondary education. She feels that life may have been easier for her if she had finished high school and attended post-secondary education like her brother. Elizabeth would like to work a part time job but currently feels constrained by the various appointments because of her involvement with the CAS. Elizabeth wants to eventually own a car and a home and settle down in one place.

Janet

Janet describes her childhood as a "*relatively normal*". She says that her family has provided her with both emotional and financial support throughout her life. She recalls that she was an average student throughout primary and secondary school. Janet graduated high school, and married Max. After her marriage to Max ended, Janet and Jenny stayed with her mom for a few months until Janet could afford an apartment. Janet then moved in with a new partner - Sam. Janet received social assistance until Jenny entered junior kindergarten. When Jenny entered school, Janet decided to go back to school as well. She trained as a hair stylist and cut hair for a

while. Janet “got bored” of hairdressing began working part-time as a driver for CAS and also worked part-time driving a cab. Both Janet and Sam worked twelve hour days, five or six days a week.

The couple was managing their finances until Sam’s three children from Alberta moved in. Sam and Janet purchased the children’s plane tickets, and paid for school supplies, food, and entertainment. The family had to move from their apartment into a house. They took in a boarder so they could afford the rent on the house. The couple went into \$7000 of debt at that time. Janet recalls that it was stressful for the family to be living with the three new members that no one had met her before. One of the children, John, had difficulties at school and Janet bore the responsibility of helping him meet his needs. She recalls:

Well John had a lot of learning disabilities. He had a double hearing problem. Always running him to the doctor, always being at the school and he was in a special ed class it was a nightmare because I basically was the one who did it all.

During that time, Janet worked full-time driving a van for people with disabilities. Janet was injured in at work and received worker’s compensation. Her worker’s compensation was eventually cut off and the couple had very little money to support the family. Their difficult financial situation and John’s behaviour caused things to be tense in the household. Sam and Janet were “yelling and screaming at each other all the time”. The couple split up for a year.

After a year apart, Janet and Sam moved into an apartment they could afford and tried to get their finances in order. Soon after, Sam’s other son Bobby moved in with Sam and Janet. The couple began fighting again because of the stress caused by their financial situation and Bobby’s health and behaviour problems. Bobby eventually moved out of their home. During that

time, Janet claimed personal bankruptcy. She recalls the experience of claiming bankruptcy:

It's horrible. Still dealing with it. I'm not even discharged yet. Knowing that I've screwed up my credit. It kind of wasn't my fault though....just like with the workers compensation thing you know just things got out of hand and couldn't pay, couldn't back to work and just didn't have the money to pay the things that I bought. When you're used to living one way and all of the sudden that changes, you find it hard to adjust...

Janet no longer has a relationship with Sam. She lives with Jenny in an apartment. Their income is a combination of worker's compensation and child support. Janet is almost finished a Personal Support Worker program and expects to be employed as a PSW in a hospital or nursing home setting.

Janet also has aspirations for her daughter. Jenny has been having personal difficulties lately and Janet hopes that her daughter can overcome these and succeed in school:

There's a few things she's talked about that she'd like to do and I just hope that she can get her grades up enough to be able to do these things. She just needs to get herself out of this rut. Like I don't know what else to do for her so. You know I guess until she sees where she's at and where she needs to go.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a nineteen year old woman who lives with her 2 year old daughter Rachel, and her grandparents in an older, detached home. Jennifer has lived with her grandparents since she was a child. With the income she receives from social assistance, Jennifer pays her grandparents for rent and food. Most days, Jennifer takes care of Rachel, cooks for the family, cleans the house, and spends time with her boyfriend. Jennifer finds great joy playing with Rachel and teaching her new words and numbers. She describes a typical morning:

We'd be up around eight o'clock. And if I don't wake her up, she'll wake me up. Our beds are side by side and she'll get up out of her bed and she'll come and

kiss me. Automatically, the first thing she'll do is I don't have to worry about her getting into my CD's or anything. She'll come right away and she'll give me like two kisses on the cheek and she'll be up on my bed so that's good. So, but I'm awake and then we go downstairs. I usually like wash her face and that, you know, get the goop stuff in her eyes and that and after I do that then she's still in her pyjamas and that because I like to change her after she eats, like her outfit. So but change her diaper because she's still in a diaper and then I feed her and get her stuff ready while she plays in like the living room and watches cartoons. So, I put her in the high chair and put the bib on her and she eats because she eats by herself now. because she can use a spoon and so on. Sometimes she if she doesn't want it she'll like throw some of it so you can tell when she's done but then after that then I wash her up again and then I usually put her clothes on her because I usually don't give her a bath when she first wakes up.. I give it to her in the afternoon because I figure, you know, let her play for a while. She'll probably end up getting dirty somehow. Might as well do it in the afternoon. So then she just plays or I'll take her outside like after she's dressed and that. I'll get her shoes on and we'll go outside.

Jennifer works on home schooling herself when Rachel is sleeping. Currently, she is taking grade 10 Math and grade 10 English. Jennifer says she never liked school because she was picked on by other students. To avoid the teasing of her classmates, Jennifer would often skip school. Jennifer's grandmother called the police several times because her truancy. She moved from school to school, and dropped out of school in grade 9. Jennifer has found home schooling suits her life better than traditional school. As a result, she is achieving much higher grades in her home schooling program than in the traditional school setting and enjoying her school work now. Jennifer does regret leaving the school system because she would have been finished by now. She feels strongly that her daughter should finish school.

Jennifer has a few shorter term goals. In the next few years she would like to get her drivers license and complete her high school diploma. Her long term aspirations are to study to become an accountant and save up money to buy a house with her boyfriend.

Julie

Julie's childhood involved continually moving from place to place. Julie's biological father was looking for her, so when he got closer, her mom would move with the children. At 17, she became pregnant with her first child. She moved in with the father of her child. When she was pregnant with her second child she left the children's father because he was physically abusive. She moved into an apartment above her mom but was kicked out because her mom kept the rent money Julie gave her, rather than paying the landlord. She moved around to different friends' homes and began to drink heavily.

When Julie was pregnant with her third child she lived in a group home for young pregnant mothers. Julie would have a fourth child before she turned 23. Currently, the CAS has removed two of her children from her home for the long term. Julie and her two youngest children live in a very cramped, and cluttered basement apartment. Julie works full-time, 6 days a week as a waitress.

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn grew up in a middle class neighbourhood. Her dad worked in sales and her mother was a teacher. Both Kaitlyn and her brother attended university. Kaitlyn enrolled in a Bachelor of Science program with hopes of becoming a doctor. However, she left university after one term because she felt pressured by her boyfriend and she didn't feel prepared to focus on school at that time. Dan had a grade nine education and worked as a truck driver. Kaitlyn recalls that Dan was "jealous" of her education and of the males living in the same residence building as her.

After Kaitlyn left university, she married Dan and they had two children shortly after their marriage. Kaitlyn took a few bookkeeping and accounting courses in college and went to work in an office. She worked for that employer for 12 ½ years. Financially speaking, Kaitlyn and Dan did fairly well. Kaitlyn recalls:

We had fun, we owned boats and dirt bikes and seadoos and trailers. We've always been camping. You know, his family and us did stuff. We used to work... I did work because I couldn't sit at home and stuff but my pay, he could pay the bills and whatever I made was the accessories, I guess. You know, so we camped, we fished, we boated, we got seadoos at one time, they got stolen and we never did replace them. We just didn't worry about it.

In 1996, Dan was diagnosed with cancer and given 2 months to live. It was Dan's suggestion that Kaitlyn go back to school when he passed away. After Dan's passing, Kaitlyn immediately enrolled in school to become a nurse. She recalls what school was like as she was grieving:

School was like an automatic pilot type deal. I went there, I did the stuff. I still did not put a hundred percent of what I could into it but then I just couldn't feel like it, I didn't feel like it. My marks were okay. I passed along. You know, I mean they were in the 80's, 90's, 70's so they weren't bad marks. I mean we have to have a 65 to pass. So, they're you know, they stayed up there but still, you know, you come home and you have the kids and worry about them and doing your homework, it got tiring and then I was still trying antidepressants helped but they kind of left you I felt they kind of left you dead-feeling which is what they're supposed to do I guess but it was hard to feel emotion one way or the other.

The family was left with \$50,000 in insurance after Dan passed away, but not much of this was left after outstanding debts and the funeral were paid for. Kaitlyn recalls that she also spent a lot of money shopping at that time because she coped with her grief through shopping, as well as through eating.

Kaitlyn is now in her final semester of a three-year nursing diploma. Finances have been

tight since she went back to school. At one point, she worked part-time and attended classes. Her schedule became too busy to work and she was laid off. Kaitlyn took out RRSP money to fund her education and the family currently survives on widow's and orphan's benefits, and the child tax credit. Kaitlyn notes that it isn't much, but they get by. Kaitlyn makes ends meet by sticking to a tight budget. When she needs to, she will use a food bank and ask her family for financial assistance. She describes:

I have used them [food banks], yes. Not to often but occasionally I have had to go down there and use it. If I really get desperate and have no money at one time I could ask dad and he would go and buy me some groceries or my mother-in-law. Say look, I'm totally out of groceries, I have nothing left in this house could you pick me up some essential things and she'll say well, meet me here at [grocery store] and then she'd try and put more in my cart than I want because of my pride I used to not be able to do that but I've learned to ask for help when I need it now. So, I always stick to milk, bread, the cold meat for lunches where she'd try to are you sure you don't need chips? Are you sure you don't need this? Well, you don't need that stuff but she would want to throw it in anyway.

Both Kaitlyn parents have helped her out financially. A year ago, her father passed away and his estate still pays the \$30 000 in tuition fees for her son's military school. As well, Kaitlyn's mom worked for the Housing Authority for many years, and Kaitlyn thinks that she got into a subsidized apartment quicker because of this family connection. It has been an adjustment living in subsidized housing for Kaitlyn. She describes her neighbourhood:

I don't know if refined is the proper word or not. Not to be stereotypical but you do have the occasional family where they don't work and that's why they're on subsidized housing and the kids are tend to just run wild. You do have others that have really done nice things for their houses and they're just doing their best but, you know, just can't make it very well, like single mothers. You know? And then there's other ones where you wonder why they're in this neighbourhood. I mean both parents work and there's two incomes, obviously they can it's geared to income so if you're making more money you're paying market rent value which I

would once start working I'll have to do until I decide to move out of here. If we're in the old neighbourhood and (daughter) went outside and her friends were there she'd say hey, wait up and then run up and have a conversation whereas here it's like they yell back and forth and have the whole conversation the whole end of the street back and forth. And they're cutting across the grass and just over there you would get called Mrs and you say you can call me by my first name. Here they just automatically call you by your first name. It's just a different totally different level.

And, Kaitlyn worries how the neighbourhood may affect her children:

...the kids don't care, they'll just dodge right out in front of your car and carry on like that...like a lot of it goes some of the values I've taught (daughter) and she starts to pick up on it which is hard because it's environment based but as I said I don't know I don't know the reasoning, whether it's parents that just don't care or just feel it's a crescent and it's safe but you know, it's hard to get certain things installed in your kids at times.

Since she began school, Kaitlyn's life has been very hectic. Currently, she is doing four twelve- hour hospital shifts for her school placement. She requires child care for her daughter so this means driving her daughter to stay with her mother in a town an hour outside the city. Her mother also comes to stay with her for a few days while she works. Both Kaitlyn and her daughter figure skate each week, so Kaitlyn must also fit that into her tight schedule. Her busy schedule often means very little spare time and a lack of sleep. Kaitlyn notes that juggling home life, school, and work is time-consuming, and stressful. She explains how she regrets that she rarely has time to clean her home:

I used to have a lot cleaner house than this. It's still cluttered and that but it's better than it was. And I just I'm going into work tonight and then I'll work on it I have to plan this things, you know, working and school and skating, it's like okay, let me see. You were here this morning. I have to sleep tonight a little bit because I'm going in for 12 hour shift overnight and then I'll sleep tomorrow for a little bit because I worked all night. Thursday and Friday I have off so I'll, you know, do up laundry, do up the dishes. Friday I have to get my mother, clean up

the house. She's helpful too. She's if I clean up all this stuff and put it away by the time she comes back she's going to wash this floor actually for me and then I work Saturday during the day. Sunday during the day. Monday night, Tuesday night again, take her back home. Then we're into Thanksgiving and then my son gets to come home for the first time since he's been away and I get to actually see him and talk to him, you know. Then it really becomes hectic for that weekend and then start all over again.

Kaitlyn anticipates finishing school and finding a job that will pay her well enough to support her family. She looks forward to when her life is not so busy, and she hopes to save money to buy a house. Kaitlyn notes that since her husband died she has found it hard to look too far into the future:

I don't know. I haven't looked that far ahead. I mean when my husband died and you lose all your dreams of old age and stuff and I haven't even planned again. I'm not planning that far ahead. I'm not looking that far ahead. The closest I'm looking for at the moment is getting a job, writing my RN exam. So that takes me to roughly March of next year. That's it.

Karen

Karen left her adoptive parents' home at fourteen and moved around from foster homes to friends' homes. At 17, she moved out on her own. Karen dropped out of school while she was in grade 11. She describes how her experience of high school:

...There's a lot of pressure, to kind of fit in. And everything else. And ah...to me, like...um, highschool was kind of hard for me. Cause I didn't have a lot of friends. And um.. I only had maybe...like, one or two close friends, and that was it. And um...I just ah...I guess, the only thing with highschool, is that I was...too concentrating on how people thought of me, and how I was trying to fit in with people, other than my schoolwork, which made it hard. And that's why I didn't go back to school, after that.

At nineteen, Karen had her first child. The father of her child left, and Karen received social assistance. Karen soon met another man and lived with him for six years. They also had a

child together. Karen worked in housekeeping and in the kitchen of a retirement home. Her partner, Bill, also worked full-time. Karen recalls that it was difficult, financially to live with Bill:

Well, he worked. My ex worked. Um, but he wasn't too generous though. Cause he...before when I was working, cause I was working[...]like, my money would be going for the groceries, and whatever the kids needed. He would make it hard for me, because he would never...sometimes he'd pay the rent, sometimes it...you know, he was late, and...um...because he had to have this drinking, that's where most of his money went to...he wasn't always...didn't really help out too much.

Bill's drinking increased and he became increasingly violent towards Karen. Karen lived in a shelter for two months and returned to Bill. Shortly after, she left Bill for good, and spent another week in a shelter.

Karen is now living with a new partner. Both Karen and her partner Taylor work outside the home. Karen has worked in a retirement home, as a maintenance person in her building, as well as various jobs that were 'under the table'. Currently, Karen works night shift, six days a week at a coffee shop. On a typical day, Taylor works nine to five, they have dinner, and then Karen goes to work until 1:30 a.m. She returns home by cab, falls asleep by 3 a.m., and gets the children up for school at 7:30 a.m. Karen then walks her children to school and returns home for some rest and does house work. When the children return from school they do their homework, and Karen prepares dinner for the children and Tyler, and then she is off to work again.

Financially, money is tight because Karen and Tyler pay \$1000 in rent. Karen notes that while she has never been what she considers poor, making ends meet has been challenging. Karen recalls that she learned how to live on a tight budget while she received social assistance. At that time, she would budget for the month and when she came up short she would get food from the food bank or occasionally borrow money from her parents. Today, Karen says she still manages

her finances carefully.

In the future, Karen would like to go back to school and finish her grade 12. However, right now she thinks that it would be too much to work to go to school, manage the children, take care of her home, and pay the bills. She would like to work in a job that involves helping others - perhaps people from the Native community. She would like to have enough money saved to buy a house.

Marie

Marie recalls she grew up feeling her family was rich compared to her friends and neighbours. Marie says that she and her four siblings always had food, clothing, and went to school cleaner than many of her classmates. Marie's dad drove truck and wasn't home very often. Her mother stayed at home and looked after the home and children. Marie didn't like school. She describes how she wanted to follow in her mom's footsteps:

I basically hated school because I'm a French, I was going French school with a French background but hated speaking French. I was your basic major average child. I didn't work too hard mind you all my reports got aim to do much better. But I was your basic 50's and if I passed that was good and that my growing up my ideal growing up was being just like my mom. I wanted a family and a marriage and to have my own home and I just basically just followed in my mother's footsteps.

During high school, Marie worked as a switchboard operator. Marie struggled in her last year of school and did not receive her diploma. She went to work with her sister in an office doing administrative work. Soon, she married her first husband, Jim. Jim had finished a college electronics program and was offered a technician job in Alberta. The couple moved west for Jim's new position and lived in an apartment. Marie worked part-time in a store and managed

the apartment complex they lived in. After two years, the couple purchased a home in the country with a significant amount of property. The couple had a child and moved into a bigger house in a small town. Marie stayed home to raise their child and was relatively happy living in the small town.

Marie describes Jim as a “workaholic” and a “good provider” . The family did well financially, but Jim was rarely home. She had an affair with another man and eventually left Jim with her daughter and move to Ontario. Marie and David were married. The couple currently live in a detached home, in a well-kept neighbourhood in a small town in Ontario. Financially, the family is stable. Like Jim, Dave is also a “workaholic”. He works long hours as an industrial mechanic. Over the years, Marie has worked in the home, as well as in a variety of part-time jobs. She says that she works for the extra money and to get out of the house. Marie currently works par-time in a grocery store and helps manage the small computer business the couple runs out of their home. Marie enjoys her part-time job but is tired of running the computer business.

Despite keeping busy with her work outside the home, Marie feels lonely and bored because her husband is rarely home and the children are older now and do not require the attention they once did. She wonders if she will have to become more “career focused” when the children leave home.

Pamela

Pamela and her daughter Megan live in a subsidized townhouse. Pamela received the townhouse shortly after her involvement with protests over the sale of Ontario Housing. Pamela insists they live only on the main floor of the townhouse so if they need to escape they will not be

trapped. Her concerns are based on her experiences with her ex-husband (Megan's father).

Brian, has a history of violence, stalking, and kidnaping. The townhouse is cluttered and poorly ventilated. Thick drapes prevent anyone (specifically Brian) from seeing into the home, and they make the inside of the home dark.

Pamela should receive \$300 a month for child support, but Brian does not pay her.

Pamela's income was a combination of social assistance and her income from a part-time job as a store clerk. However, her social assistance has been cut off because Megan is currently in the care of the CAS. Pamela describes her current financial situation:

I was being supplemented by mother's allowance up until January and because my daughter doesn't live here I don't get that anymore, so I'm working par-time. I'm poor now. Not only that, F & CS was charging me 221 dollars a month to take care of her. Meanwhile I'm not receiving welfare and mu hours got lowered. But anyways when [worker] helped me with that. Now they're only charging me 30 a month. Which I haven't paid because I'm used to getting 800 to 1000 a month, now I'm getting 600. My rent's a third of that and groceries and bills and taking my daughter out. Last week it's like okay hon, we can go for Timmy's, but let's just walk around [store] and see if I can buy anything because I have credit card. But I don't get paid until Monday, so take it easy all right? Anyways I'm not whining too bad. I don't know was going to happen when she comes home. I don't know if I can work more hours. [Grocery store] opened up over here, it's 24 hours. I could go get a job, but can I? I have a teen.

Pamela may not be able to work full-time when her daughter returns, because CAS feels Megan requires extra supervision due to her bi-polar disorder. Pamela and Megan have arguments over financial issues. Pamela feels like she provides Megan with all the material things that she can afford and borrows money from her parents to do so. She says that she doesn't want to live like a "poor person" as her mom did, so she scrimps on some things so that she afford things like a good steak or a school trip for her daughter. However, Megan wants what other

children have and is aware that her family has less than others. Pamela provides an example of this:

[Megan says:]Well we're too poor, you always tell me how poor we are. [Pamela speaking]No...I didn't tell her the finances, but on the other hand, I tried to, like taking her to [city close by]. You think I got the money to be driving, you're going to have to fork over to be responsible for money. She didn't see it like that. She saw that we were poor and couldn't afford... before I was working, she would throw school trips in the garbage. I would retrieve one one time and said come on, I'm working at [the store] now and you deserve a break too.

Pamela's own experiences at school were difficult. Her father was a truck driver and the family moved around a lot, so she found it difficult to make friends. Children picked on her because of her orthodontic apparatus. She recalls:

I wore it [head brace] and straightened out my bottom teeth, so I guess I was picked on a lot. I hate name-calling, but that's my experience. I became a really fast runner because I would be the last one out of the neighbourhood to go to school. I would live for school at 5 to. And I 'd run all the way there and get there by the time the bell rang.

Pamela's work history begins after she graduated high school. She briefly attending a college program in Dicta typing. She dropped out of the program because of boredom and because her father told her that she would have to pay her parents back for the tuition. She has worked as a lunch room supervisor at Megan's school, in her aunt's restaurant, in the kitchen of a few restaurants, at a pizza place, and then in a factory. Her mother provided daycare until she received subsidized day care. For the past three years, Pamela has worked as a store clerk in a small meat/grocery store. She enjoys the position because of the interactions with customers. She works a variety of shifts throughout the week , and a full day on Saturdays. Pamela is glad that she doesn't work full-time because she feels too busy between the house work, her work at

the store, appointments, and her volunteer position on the neighbourhood association. She often feels overwhelmed and tired because of her commitments and because of her depression.

Pamela's aspirations for the future are to raise her daughter the best she can, to be able to afford a house some day, and afford to take a trip to the Mediterranean.

Rebecca

Rebecca had completed grade 12 and was working in a restaurant when she met Matt.

Rebecca and Matt were married and they had 6 children together. Both Rebecca and Matt have worked outside the home to financially support the family. The family's living conditions have been fairly cramped for many years. For fourteen years the family lived in a two bedroom trailer.

Rebecca recalls their time in the trailer park:

I can't believe I did it, looking back. I mean...I find when I'm going through things, I'm dealing with it, I can handle it. But when you look back, I just kind of shake my head, and it's like...I can't believe I did that. And it was getting stressful, with...the...three girls, and the three boys, shared a room each. And then, Matt and I would be out in the living room, on the pull out couch. I found that hard, because we had no privacy, and I had no room to retreat to.

While they live in the trailer, Rebecca and Matt started their own automotive repair business. At one point, the family moved into the room above the auto shop because Rebecca found that driving between home and the business, as well as managing the everyday family responsibilities was taking up too much time and energy. Moving into the shop was more convenient, and made it easier to manage both work and family activities. Their business failed in 1996. They avoided bankruptcy and managed to slowly pay off their debts. Rebecca says that their financial situation has been "really, really tough".

With the help of Rebecca's aunt, the couple purchased the house they now reside in. The

house is a semi-detached, with five bedrooms. Currently, there are seven family members (the oldest daughter has moved out) and three pets sharing the house. Both Rebecca and Matt work full-time, shift work. Rebecca works the 11 p.m. to 9 a.m. night shift at a group home for people with disabilities. She has worked for this community organization for the past five years. For four of the five years, the job involved staying awake during the night to ensure that the clients who lived in the group home were safe, and offering personal care for the clients in the morning. Matt also works varying shifts. Rebecca says she has essentially been a single parent for many years because Matt is either at work, or sleeping while the children are home.

A typical day for Rebecca is long and busy, as she is responsible for the majority of the work at home. Rebecca describes what a typical day looks like for her when she comes home after an overnight shift:

I'd come home, and...some of them would get up at six o'clock. They just can't sleep longer...if they still didn't have their lunches made, sometimes I would help them, other times, I would just sit there, and kind of...supervise. And encourage them to get ready faster. And be out the door so I could go to bed.

And then,

...I either, head to bed and read for a bit, or play on the computer, or...give it an hour's worth of housework or something. Sleep until...one or two. I'd getting about three hours of sleep...solid sleep.

Usually around...it ended up being around ten o'clock that I'd actually fall asleep. ...I'd wake up around one, usually, after two or three hours, solid sleep, and then...And then, sometimes I would stay in bed until three. When they started coming home...That was...noisy. Cause the first ones would come home, and it would be fine. And then you add a few more kids, and...they decided to annoy each other. You know, and in the mean time, you'd be getting...sometimes I'd be really organized and getting snacks out for them. Or trying to get supper done, or something. So that was always...I found that the highest...I think...one of the highest stress times during the day.

...usually try to have supper over by 5:30, and then everybody has half an hour to do their chores. And then at six o'clock, they were supposed to be back at the table, and doing their homework.

...by nine o'clock, they're all in bed. Or supposed to be quiet. And I'm in bed by...eight or eight thirty. So I usually send the little ones...Name off to bed. Say goodnight to them.

Rebecca sleeps until 11:00 p.m., and then heads to work for 11:30 p.m. And her day starts again. Rebecca estimates that for the past several years she has been getting average of four hours of sleep each day. Her sleep is often broken up by what is going on in her work or home life. Rebecca also has worked Sundays at her mother's restaurant. This schedule left Rebecca exhausted and stressed out. She says:

Physically, I was exhausted all the time. Emotionally, I was...I don't think that I felt like I could be there for the kids, emotionally, when they had problem, cause I was just too tired to deal with anything myself.

Rebecca also notes that she has gained weight due to her busy schedule. Over the past 2 months Rebecca has been getting about an hour more of sleep because she now works the "sleep shift" at work. This means she can sleep for about five hours at work. As well, Matt's new shift at work allows him to start work later so he is around the home more than in the past.

Rebecca says that she has coped with the stress of her life by trying to spend time with her friends from work. As well, she receives 12 sick days a year and she makes sure to take them to get some relief from her hectic schedule. Rebecca says that she dreams of a getaway vacation in Hawaii.

Sandy

During Sandy's childhood, her mother worked nights and was not home very often. She

suspects her mom may have worked in the sex trade. Sandy recalls that her mom was “*very poor*”. Her oldest brother quit school at age 16 to take care of his siblings, and to work to support the family financially. The family’s finances improved when their future stepfather, who worked as a teacher, moved in. There were eight people in the blended family and they shared a two-bedroom apartment.

In the summers, the family rented a summer cottage and picked cherries during the day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. to pay for the cottage and for extra money. All of the children would help out. At 13, Sandy began working part-time during the summer in a tobacco farm. The following year this position became a full-time summer job. She worked 12 hour days during the summer to pay for her school supplies and clothing. The job ran into the school year by 2 weeks, so Sandy would have to miss the first 2 weeks of classes each fall and catch up on the missed work.

In high school, Sandy moved from her mother’s home, to her father’s, and then to her brother’s home. Throughout the series of moves she managed to be popular at school and maintain friendships, but she struggled academically. Sandy recalls:

Most of my grades were basically a bare minimal type of pass. You’re probably looking at the late 60's well, up in the 60's, early 70 marks but it what I worked I had to really struggle. I spent all my time at night studying. I spent my noon hours in the library studying. I never, ever stopped studying. I was always studying. I never had lunch, anything. I'd just study.

She explains why she put so much effort into her studies:

...to feel that I could accomplish something in life because I was always told that I'll never make it anywhere or be anything or do anything or and that was one of the struggles I had was to be able to accomplish my schooling.

Sandy became one of the few members of her family to graduate from high school. Upon

graduation, Sandy worked as an administrative assistant in a lawyer's office. She got her own apartment and stayed in that position for 3 years. Sandy's next job was in a fibre glass factory. She began to drink increasingly with her friends from work. She says that her drinking eventually became a problem. After a few years in the factory, Sandy had to have an operation on her nose because of the fibre glass she was inhaling in her workplace. She left that position and worked at a mail company, baby-sat, and other jobs to support her family. After losing the job at the mail company, Sandy went back to school for some computer classes. At one point, Sandy and her husband both worked full-time and were also superintendents of their building. Sandy describes that time as "very, very stressful".

Four years ago, Sandy and her husband had financial troubles because Derrick would work 6 month of the year and be laid off for the next six months. The couple declared bankruptcy. Sandy recalls what that time was like for them:

We had credit cards, we've had finance companies, we had people that we owed money to, just all kinds of stuff. We got into debt basically over our head. Our car we had paid cash for. I went to bingo one night, won money to be able to buy a car and we lost it. We lost the car, we lost our whole bedroom outfit that I had that was pine that I loved very, very much. We had the option on making some payments on some furniture that we wanted to keep so we kept just sort of some basics and got rid of the other stuff. We had lost practically everything and had to start over again.

Currently, Sandy and her husband Derrick continue to work long hours to support themselves and their daughter. The couple live in a townhouse unit that costs \$900 in rent each month. Derrick works shift work, 50 hours a week. Sandy babysits 2 children from the early morning until the end of the day. On top of babysitting, she works in sales for a home-based cosmetics company. This involves delivering books, orders, and collecting money. Sometimes

she does 20-25 orders a day. On Tuesday and Thursday nights she delivers papers. Sandy says that her life is “hectic and chaotic”. She describes how she often feels stressed out:

I get very angry. I sometimes yell at the children but I mean it's like you guys have to stop this, I can't drive like this. I mean I just I can't. Like and I come home and sometimes I'm just a bundle of nerves, like you know and I've got to take the time and sort of take a deep breath, sit down and, you know, sort of blow it up.

Sandy and Derrick would like to be able to buy a house one day. She hopes that in the near future, things will settle down and she will have time for herself. She notes that a big part of her life has been “*work, work, work*”. Sandy describes how she has put a great deal of effort into everything she has achieved:

...what I worked for and I had in life I had to struggle for. Nothing comes easy for me, nothing has every come easy in my life for me and that's some of the regrets that I do have is that I hear these people saying my parent can give a down payment on a house, they can do this for me, they can do that and it's like, well that will never happen with me. Everything I get I have to work for.

Susan

Religion was a strong presence in Susan’s childhood. Her family moved around to various places doing religious “training”. When Susan was 13, the family settled in Ontario. She attended a Christian school for 5 years. At her request, her parents allowed her to attend public school. Susan felt she had led a relatively sheltered life up to that point.. In high school, she did well academically because the Christian school was two grades ahead of the public school. Socially, she became involved with drugs and sex. In her final year of high school Susan became pregnant with her first child. She dropped out of school to have her child. Susan went back to school for two credits and would like to finish her remaining two credits through correspondence.

Susan had three more children. The fathers of her children do not see the children or pay regular child support. Susan says one father pays her some money every four months, but only to avoid his license being taken away. She has survived on mother's allowance and baby bonus. Susan notes that her income was often insufficient, and so her parents would assist her financially, where they could. She would either borrow money from her parents, or they would pay her to work in their business or cut their grass.

Currently, Susan receives unemployment insurance because she is on maternity leave from her job at a donut shop. She has been working at the donut shop for less than a year. Susan lives with her fiancée, Nick, who works in construction. At that time, her baby bonus was revoked and she could not afford to keep her apartment without Nick's assistance. The couple has had significant financial struggles. Susan had very little income while the children were removed, and they had to pay lawyer's fees. They also have other outstanding debts. Susan describes their recent financial problems:

...during the summer we were having a hard time paying the bills and so twice yeah, it was only twice the bill was late and then they had to it was up for disconnection when I'd go down and pay it, right. So, that was it, pretty much behind. And then they requested a security deposit of three hundred dollars before they would or they were going to cut the hydro off. So, we had to pay that and now the next bill came in for the next month which we can't pay because we had to pay the three hundred dollar deposit.

Susan recalls that when the children returned from care, they wanted more material things because the foster parents bought the children things Susan could not afford:

I just thought they got spoiled and they're going to expect so much when they come back. Right? Because they weren't used to it before and now for the four month they got used to it so they kind of expect it right and (son) says to me well, when he first came back he said to me that I can just go to the machine and get

money out. So, he thinks that just, yeah it's just there and just go get some money out and buy me this, right. Like foster parents make a lot of money even just having the children in care so they can afford all these luxuries, right.

Each day, Susan walks two of her children to school and takes care of the other two children during the day. One child is an infant and still breast-feeding, and the other is a toddler. Supper time is “hectic” because her sons tend to fight, and all of the children are home while she prepares dinner. Nick usually comes home around 5 p.m. or 6 p.m., but sometimes later.

Recently, the couple’s financial situation has been improving, and Susan hopes things will continue to improve. Once her maternity leave is over she would like to make use of her training as a hair stylist, and open a hair styling business at home. Susan and Nick are hoping they can make enough money to save for a wedding and for the purchase of a house.

Discussion

One social worker reading these stories offered the following reaction:

I was struck by the lack of resources these women had...the cycle of poverty and the impact of coming from a chaotic family of origin. I couldn't help thinking about how much I have benefitted from my parents' financial situation growing up. My Dad is also a truck driver, like many women in this sample, but both my parents came from relatively stable families. They have supported me financially [when I was a student] in some way for a long time. These women's stories made me think how easily life could be different and how income inequality...impacts on these women and children.”

Kaitlyn’s and Marie’s stories are the exceptions among these women. Kaitlyn came from a middle class home and the only one of these women who attended university. She left university to get married and was relatively well off financially until her husband died. Through access to insurance money, inheritances and family assistance, she was able to pursue options such as

sending her son with ADHD to a private school and to return to college herself. Her story is unique in its expectation that her upcoming career will lift her out of impoverishment. However, even Kaitlyn lived on a low monthly income and in subsidized housing when she became involved with child welfare. While Marie did not finish highschool and has done office and factory work, both of her marriages allowed her to live in her own house without serious financial strain.

All of these women at some point have been single mothers and typically this coincided with a substantial drop in their income. Most have been on social assistance at one time. About half of the women did not complete highschool. Only Kaitlyn was close to finishing a college degree. Amy, Annette, and Elizabeth talk about job provoked illness or injury. Amy, Annette, Chen, Donna, Elizabeth, Jennifer, Janet, Kaitlyn, and Susan lived on fixed incomes such as Employment Insurance, Worker's Compensation, Widow's and Orphan's Benefits, a disability pension or social assistance at the time of the interviews. Amber, Julie, Karen, Pamela, Rebecca, and Sandy worked outside the home as waitresses, secretaries, hair dressers and factory workers. Long hours of work, shift work, low pay, and limited benefits were common for those working outside the home and for the partners of these women. Every woman with the exception of Marie described living with very tight finances and several talked about going into bankruptcy at some point. Only Marie and Rebecca own their own homes and, for Rebecca, the purchase of her modest house became possible when her aunts paid a sizeable down payment to allow her family to move from their cramped trailer where her, her husband and their six kids had been living. Rented space was modest and sometimes in neighbourhoods considered harmful by the mothers. Almost all of these women described financial and living circumstances which left them very

vulnerable to disruptions.

Particularly striking was the level of daily living stress described by some of these women. As they invested so much of themselves into working to pay the bills, caring for their children, keeping their families together and maintaining a home. Karen, after leaving her adoptive home and moving through several foster homes when she was fourteen, was living on her own at a young age. She and her partner work overlapping shifts six days a week, trading off care of the children. Between getting her two boys off to school in the morning and doing housework late at night when she returns from work, Karen does not get many hours of sleep during the week. She describes their efforts as “running really hard just to live on the margins.” Rebecca, with her six children, talks about working overnight shifts for years while her partner worked different hours, and getting by on only a few hours of broken sleep a night during this time. She too worked six days a week. Sandy also talks about working very long hours at a variety of low paying jobs while she cares for her “hyperactive and aggressive” young daughter and babysits two neighbour children during the week. Her husband often works six days a week and helps out with some of Rebecca’s odd jobs. Not surprisingly, Rebecca and Sandy talk about being emotionally and physically exhausted. These women did not have access to surplus time or money to invest in self care.

While service providers are generally aware of the lack of financial resources and, to a lesser extent, the daily living stress engendered for these mothers, few are likely to have thought of the consequences of our child protection systems unwavering and long standing “surveillance” of impoverished and “dangerous” classes. In one of the service provider focus groups made up of

service providers that read these 16 stories, after listening to two hours of discussion in which issues of lesser privilege were not commented on at all, the group facilitator asked why this might be so. The unchallenged response was striking: “It’s so common that we just take it for granted.” In our individual interviews with service providers about families (Frensch, & Cameron, 2003), issues of access to sufficient resources and parents’ struggles of daily living were very much in the background. Typically, if a family could maintain a physical domicile and provide food, no more attention was paid to these issues. Of particular concern is that, in the official child protection paradigm governing service providers optics and strategies, insufficiency of resources or difficulties coping with limited opportunities are “demerit points” [risk factors which endanger children] for parents, rather than signals that supportive help might be welcome and useful.

Yet it seems evident that having access to fewer developmental opportunities, and struggling to survive living circumstances which at times have been exceedingly harsh, colour all important aspects of parent and child well being as well as family life. Even the narrowest concept of child protection will not be successful in dismissing the central importance of these living realities. Holding individual mothers in such circumstances accountable for their children’s care and well being is insufficient and frequently cruel as a response. Whatever our preferences, the evidence is that these are challenges faced by generations and communities of people. In addition, these are the environments that most of the children who are to be “protected” will grow up in.

If our “child and family welfare system” (Cameron, Freymond, et al., 2001) is to credit the realities of lives of lesser privilege, this would require legitimizing the provision of useful

resources and shared responsibility for child care. Increasing access to food and financial resources, child care and respite services, as well as educational and employment supports and opportunities are obvious candidates for consideration. It would also require innovations with powering sharing “child protection mandates” (Cameron & Freymond, 2003) with a variety of formal and informal organizations and groups. From our perspective, such reforms would also stress the collective empowerment of parents and communities to provide for themselves by creating space and supports for women such as these, and other members of their families, to meet and collaborate with each other.²

What is less clear is whether a child protection system which has remained relatively unchanged in its core philosophies and core service methods for over a hundred years can be transformed to accommodate a much broader range of differential response to families. However, unless ways are found to move our thinking beyond our conventional “child protection” paradigm, we are not going to move out of our current “unhappy impasse”. After one hundred years, there is little potential in the “Anglo-American model of child protection” that we’ve not already seen (Cameron, Freymond, et al., 2001).

2

These possibilities are discussed in greater length in the concluding section of this volume

(2) Mothers' Childhoods

Mothers and mothering receive much of the attention in child welfare interventions. Our research shows that, even when there is a long term partner in the home, the male partner only becomes a focus of the child welfare investigation if he is a perpetrator of child or partner abuse (Frensch & Cameron, 2003). Even with a partner at home, the mother often is held accountable for controlling or removing the “danger” he might pose for her children. Mothers are the primary

care givers of the children in every separate investigation in the Partnerships for Children and Families research. They provide the continuity in children's lives as biological fathers are frequently absent in these stories. Equally important, even for the children who have been in care, the overwhelming majority of the children in our research continued to live in their mother's home and to depend upon them for their sense of belonging...the well being of these women is central to these families. Yet many of these women tell truly horrendous stories of what they have had to overcome in their own childhoods and how this has impacted on their adult lives.

Pam

Pam's father was a truck driver and he was away from home a lot. Pam was fond of the trips she took with her dad and happy for how he paid to have her teeth straightened. When Pam's was at home he was sometimes a frightening disciplinarian:

He wasn't there and when he came home he strapped us with the belt...because we were bad while he was gone...the last belt I got...must've been grade 8...because I can remember being in school in the 70's when you had...our shorts on...and I had marks on my butt from where the belt had cut into me and I was sitting there like this trying to make sure no one saw...

Pam's mom was sick a lot and hospitalized for pancreatic cancer and depression. Pam also describes her mother as a "chronic" poor person:

My mom's a chronic poor person...don't drink all the milk! You know how expensive milk is...she used to get powdered milk and mix it with 2 percent...to this day I can't drink milk

Pam's parents have been married for 39 years. Pam remembers her dad being away a lot and really bossy when he was at home. Pam explains what marriage came to mean to her and how it filtered into her own relationship:

...fighting and arguing and giving up some control and living with another person...all that happens and uh, actually when he hit me (Pam's partner), I knew that my dad hit my mom when I was younger, so I was hoping that he'd stop (Pam's partner)...Do not want a partner who's gone all the time. No truck driver. Don't want to move, just want to stay with my friends, community, my house with the picket fence and that's it.

Pam learned to avoid her dad when he was home and her mom would often turn the attention away from herself and on the kids:

...dad would start coming on to mom so she'd say but Pamela did this...to get the focus off her...so now we know why we got hit all those years ago...

Pam recalls that when she was a child she dreamed of being a nurse and having thirteen children, until she became a teenager. Pam's dad wanted her to finish high school and was adamant that she stay in school:

My dad bought me a nurse's watch...my dad didn't finish grade 8 which I didn't know...uncles and aunts of mine never finished grade 4, she was in the opportunity class and she learned how to sew or something...My dad says you're not getting out of school until you're done high school...

Pam's role model was her grandmother, on her father's side, because she was a "working woman" who was orderly and even took care of Pam's family for two months. Pam followed in her grandmother's footsteps and was working full-time when she was 18 years old. Pam's siblings described their childhood as the "Brady Brunch", with Pam taking care of everyone:

I was a good mother to my mother, sister and brother...Sherry went to my mom quite a bit and if mom had a problem, she'd come to me. And Trent, my mom couldn't get him to take out the garbage...She'd say to me, tell your brother to take out the garbage. I'd go to his room and say why didn't you take out the garbage?

School was difficult for Pam because she was teased and beaten up. Pam moved when she was young and did not fit in her new surroundings. Pam recalls:

We moved down to [United States] for a year in grade 5...I ended up going to court because I got in a fight in school...we didn't talk like them and they'd pick on my brother and sister...grade 6 we moved to [Ontario city 3]. Grade 7 we moved to [City 1] and stayed there until I moved here [City 2] as a young adult and then my parents moved back here too, to take my grandmother...

Despite the difficulties Pam had with other children and moving, she says she was a quick learner:

I was six or five, and they were 4 and 3, and I'm teaching them how to speak properly...I learned to read really well with the speech class and it really helped me. And the phonics class, and being able to sound out my words and that. To this day I read...and um, I taught my mom. And my brother and my sister...

Pam remembers her dad recovering from excessive drinking, but this was not a frequent occurrence. After Pam's marriage ended, her mom and dad were there to help her out, babysitting her daughter and taking her to Sunday school.

As an adult, Pam's dad continues to have a certain amount of control over her:

...And when I was an adult...I disagreed with my father...He raised his fist at me...And I wasn't back talking, I wasn't sassing, and yet he raised his fist to me. And I screamed...and I'm thinking...I'm out of here. And I retreated...So that's control...

As an adult, her dad's control causes her to question her own judgement:

...Last fall...I charged my daughter with break and entry...to get her off the street. And my dad phoned and said you need to get your daughter a lawyer and I said I can't, I'm the one that charged her...He said you're the one who took her out of jail, so you take care of her...So by the end of the conversation I said I can't do this...Can't my mother do this?...what about my sister?...Alright, I'll call around tomorrow and see what I can find. So my cousin and aunt are sitting there, and by the end of the conversation they're saying how much control does this man have over you?

Pam's dad has also influenced her parenting because as an adult, she is more like her dad than her mom:

I'm more like my father than my mother. Because my mother is the behind the scenes manipulator, whereas I'm the out front, in your face, and my dad's like that. He's like that and he doesn't manipulate from behind...and he's got more of a sense of humour than my mom. But my mom I think has dark humour like Megan and I. Like we think some things are funny...But I think we get my dad's sense of humour too...

There have been several times when Pam's dad has become involved with trying to help Pam's daughter. They have let her move in, have bailed her out of jail, and tried to help Pam control her behaviour. Pam believes her battle with depression stems from her mom:

I think she's I think actually with knowing what I know now and being like cocky or whatever with my mom, I think she's battled depression. I think my daughter, myself, I think we got it from somewhere.

Pam says that she also became very "pill phobic" because of her mom's habits.

Chen

Chen is originally from Laos, but she came to Canada at five years old. Chen did not do well in school and she found a "regular" school setting difficult:

I didn't pick up school easily. Like in grade four or five I started struggling with it. I don't know if the teacher knows that I have special needs and learning disability but I think I do because I have to go to another school that is much easier. Like when I go to the high school, it's easier. I do really well in it. But when I go to a regular school, I have difficulty.

Chen had a lot of friends and they thought she studied too hard, in fact, they called Chen "Goody Two Shoes":

...they wanted to have fun, they don't want to study...they just kind of make fun of me. They say you study too hard, Goody Two Shoes or something. They all see me have a book, my now in the book...It kind of got me upset because they called me Goody Two Shoes...I just ignored them...

Chen graduated high school and had her first child at eighteen years old. Chen was not

ready to be a mother, but abortion and adoption were not an option in her family. Her parents were shocked and Chen was scared:

...my parents were shocked. The said "you're pregnant? You're too young" I was scared...my family doesn't believe in abortion. Adoption is worse than that. I wouldn't want to give up. When I see the baby, I'm going to want to keep it. So I knew I was going to keep the baby...[he] felt so precious and so cute and I can't believe I have a baby. It's so cute.

Following the birth of Chen's first child, she suffered from post-partum depression and was later diagnosed with schizophrenia. Chen was very worried about her new baby:

It's so small, he was a really tiny baby. Only five pounds...He was about three weeks early...When I born him he didn't want to eat, so I had to bring him back to the hospital. That's what made have depression in the first place too because I was worried about him being in the hospital, if he was going to die, if they would be able to feed him.

Chen is depressed and hearing voices, so her parents take her to the hospital to see a doctor:

I was diagnosed with post-partum depression in 1993 with my first child. Nobody, my family didn't know about it, like they didn't know about the illness I had so they took me to the hospital and the doctor said I had [depression]. When they first found out I had it, they were all upset. They don't know that it will get well because they say I'll always have to be on medication for life, forever. (Who were you living with at the time?) My parents...I was hearing voices, I thought, like my mom gave medicine to my baby and I thought it was going to kill her. I was having thoughts that were not true...I heard voices, I thought people were talking to me on the T.V.

Two years after the birth of her baby and on regular medication, Chen went out on to college to become a medical secretary, but her struggle with school was not over. She was going to upgrade but because she suffered ongoing post-partum depression she had to cancel the classes numerous times. Chen took some computer courses and has not finished college because she is

finding it too costly:

I take a computer course [at local college], I have trouble with it too. I have a hard time when they're explaining how to do the work. I didn't get a diploma because I'm not done yet, but I'm have some difficulties. I think I'm not going to go to school anymore because it's a waste of money. One course is almost \$200, and I took about eight, nine, ten courses...

Although Chen's struggle with medication and school continues, her family never stops helping and supporting her. When Chen found out she was pregnant, she lived at home during her pregnancy and for the first few years of her child's life. After the birth of Chen's second child she moved into her own place and her mom moved in with her, to help with the kids and to help her continue taking her medication regularly. Chen's dad helped by taking her to appointments and bringing her things she might need (i.e. medication).

Chen remembers arguments between her mom and dad, "my mom gets mad at my dad and she leaves him for a while and comes back". Chen also misses playing with her sister and her friends.

Susan

There were a lot of kids in Susan's family. She has one sister and four step siblings from her parent's previous marriages. Susan lived on a farm for eight years when she was younger. She says she liked being close to the horses and chickens. Susan's dad was abusive for about 10 years. Her parents became Christians and the abuse stopped. Susan moved around a lot with her family to Christian camps:

My dad was abusive. I don't remember it, but it was when [my parents] first got together...then they became Christians and...he stopped drinking. We went to a Pentecostal church...When we moved here, we lived on a base...It's not really a boot camp...I can't even explain it. We went to Hawaii in '86 so it would have

been about '87 [when] we came back here and we were living in an apartment building. And then after that, they bought the house...

Susan went to a Christian school for about five years, until she convinced her parents to let her go to a regular high school. Life at home involved following dad's rules, "he was pretty much in control, his rules, his house". Susan rebelled while in the regular high school:

So all the people at high school are, you know, that's when I started doing drugs and, you know, maybe my mom and dad should have left me in the other school when that happened...it was just experimenting because I really didn't know what it was, you know. Yeah, I went through a rebellious stage. Like most people go through their rebellious stage when they're 13 or 14, I was 17. Just normal teenaged things, you know. My parents couldn't tell me what to do.

At nineteen years old, Susan was pregnant and couldn't finish her last semester of high school. When Susan's son was three months old, her dad kicked them out, so Susan stayed with her boyfriend's parents for two months until she moved into her own apartment. Shortly after the move, Susan became pregnant a second time.

In Susan's adult life, she talks to her mom and dad every day. They have been supportive of her, both financially and emotionally. Susan's mom and dad have stood by her during her involvement with the Children's Aid Society, helping by supervising Susan's visit at their house.

Marie

Marie had a happy childhood. She grew up with two brothers and three sisters. Marie always felt lucky compared to her friends, who she says had parents who were alcoholics and spent time in bars. Marie's family lived on the outskirts of a small town, so Marie did not have a lot of girlfriends to play with so she played with her siblings. It was not until she was an adult that she discovered her mom was an alcoholic. Marie's dad was a truck driver, a "workaholic",

and would drive truck at night, so he slept most of the day. Marie's dad would sleep on the couch, so everyone had to be quiet around him

Marie had a "normal" relationship with her dad and only remembers one time when her dad carried out any discipline:

...he never did any disciplining, very, very, little, I only remember the one time my father actually didn't even discipline me because...my brother and [I]...were making noise ans...he did slap...my older brother in the leg to be quiet...but he literally pushed me away and hit him...and my brother happened to grab a hold of my leg and like I was pinned so I kind of turned and he broke my leg...and ever since then, everybody was kind of more terrified of...hurting me...

Marie's parents were "very loving" and affectionate". Marie wanted to grow up and be just like her mom: married with children. When Marie was still in high school, her older sister, Patty got married and had a baby. Marie would baby-sit for her sister and dream of the day she would have a husband and a baby. Marie did not like speaking French and she hated going to a French school. Marie felt passing was good enough:

...I basically hated school...I was going [to] French school with a French background but hated speaking French...I was your basic major average child. I didn't work too hard...I was your basic 50's and if I passed that was good...

Marie did not finish high school and feels lucky to have so many siblings to help her find jobs:

...I went all the way to grade 12...didn't get my diploma though...I have one credit missing...The year I got out of high school I worked with my sister...in an office doing...book work. Prior to that, when I was still in high school, I was a switchboard operator at the sanatorium...My sister worked there too. So, I happened to be lucky, I had a big family so it got me all these jobs...and I think still today if you don't know somebody that's B you know, you're not going to get a very good job or you're very lucky...

Marie was a "very straight kind of girl", who experimented only briefly with marijuana and

drinking. Before Marie's dad died, she knew that he did not approve of her first husband and when Marie got married she moved to Alberta and she missed her family:

...I always had family. I think the worst time...that bothered me the most being away from my family was the holidays...I used to call them on Christmas and of course New Year's Day and everybody's having a big party and the only one that's not there is me...my family was so far away and I remember there were times when the kids were put to bed I used to sit and talk to my sister on the phone for hours. My husband used to be out...making the money and I used to spend it on the phone talking to my sister...

Although Marie shares her mother's passive temper, the two women are very different and Marie is not very close to her in adulthood:

I've never really lived here that much and whenever I do go up, the first person that I go to visit is my sister Patty. My sister Patty and I are very, very close...I don't go to my mom because...I don't hear what I want to hear from my mom...

Julie

Julie had a difficult childhood and both her mom and dad were accused by each other of being abusive. Julie was threatened as a child that she would be dropped off at Children's Aid and actually was left there on one occasion:

I don't know if we went into care but if we did anything bad we were really threatened that we were going to be dropped off at Children's Aid. I know my mom dropped me off a couple of times, I don't know what age I was, but she just left me there and came back a couple hours later.

Julie moved a lot as a child because her mom kept her away from her dad:

We lived out in BC, then we came back here, then we moved back to BC we came back here, we moved to [Quebec City], we came back here and we've been in one, two, three, four, five places. My biological father was looking for me and every time he got closer we'd move...I've heard stories. I've met him once that I know of.

Julie's mom married her step-dad when Julie was eleven or twelve years old. Julie's mom

and step-dad would drink excessively, until they were abusing each other. When Julie was thirteen and her brother was eleven years old, they would try to stop the fights:

...they'd drink with friends and they'd drink until they were beating the crap out of each other. My brother and I had seen it all. Then all of a sudden, my brother and I got certain age...I would have been 13 so my brother would have 11, when we started getting involved in the fights where we'd jump in, you know, you're hitting my mom or whatever. Or if we saw mom hit dad first and the other way around.

Julie had her first child, Scott, when she was seventeen and her life went “downhill” when she had her kids. Her partner was abusing Julie by the time Scott was three months old:

I was spending too much with my son is what I was always told. When Scott was about six months old, I ended up in the hospital because I was thrown across the room, with a miscarriage...

Julie was losing everything and she had to fight her way back:

I had lost my best friend at the same time, which was my aunt, she died of cancer. I found out I was pregnant once again, that would be with Blake. And then I was abused too many times, too long. I was always told, you know, I was good for nothing, nobody would ever want me. I started to fight back. I left. I didn't even tell him I was pregnant with Blake.

Janet

Janet had a “relatively” normal childhood, with her parents divorcing when she was seven years old. Janet moved back and forth between her parents until she moved out on her own:

Still stayed in contact with my father and left home when I was 14, moved in with my dad, stayed with him for a couple of years moved back here and then from there I left my mom and I moved in with what is now my ex-husband for 3 years. I had a happy, happy childhood. I can't say that I had a crappy childhood because I didn't.

Janet remembers only vaguely going to a psychologist or a social worker after the divorce

and enjoyed it because she got to do crafts. Janet also vaguely remembers some involvement with Children's Aid Society, mostly concerning her sister.

Janet did okay in school and got "half decent" grades. Janet did not belong to any clubs, she spent most of her time with her friends. Janet went to church regularly, despite the fact that she didn't think it was important.

When Janet was twelve or thirteen years old, she went through a rebellious stage:

I was never home. [We got] caught smoking and hooking off school and all them wicked things...Drinking, well maybe not 12 and 13, but definitely 14. I guess we were just kids wanting to do grownup things. Stupid as they are.

Janet started dating Sam at twelve years old and dated him on and off until she was fourteen. When Janet was seventeen she moved [to another Ontario city] to live with another man and that relationship lasted six years.

In adulthood, Janet is close with her mom, dad, and oldest sister. Janet has a unique relationship with her dad because they can talk about "anything". Janet's greatest support is her mom and she enjoys her sister's opinions because they offer different perspectives.

Donna

Donna's dad owned his own service station and was rarely at home. Her mom stayed at home with the kids. Donna's mom and dad would have the occasional "whopping" argument, but they also liked to curl together and they socialized a lot with friends. They have just celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary.

Donna says that she knows that her dad loves her, although he hasn't been very good at showing it. Donna and her mom "hated" each other and their arguments would often end up in a

screaming, yelling match:

There was no compassion or love in this family...she just figured I was a problem child and any problems I had I bought on myself so there was a lot of yelling all the time and when I did something really bad or whatever she would take the fly swatter to me...there was one time I remember I was real bad, it was the summer time and I had shorts on and I had welts on my legs...

Growing up, Donna felt like an only child, however, she had one older brother and one older sister but they moved out when Donna was young:

My older brother and sister had moved out of the house when I was very young...My sister was 13 years older than me and my brother is nine years older than me...my brother got married when he was 16...She moved out, got her own apartment and she had a good...solid job. Even though my mother said my sister was like a little mother to me because she would take me everywhere when I was younger I don't remember that...

Donna had a really “rough childhood” and her lack of memory concerning being sexually molested by a babysitter’s husband continues to cause her emotional harm. Donna suffers from clinical depression and anxiety that has escalated over the years:

...but one thing I do remember and I'm not quite sure how old I was but I was molested as a child. A babysitter's husband...his wife, is she would leave the room the he would...call me over and start fondling me and that...and the one thing that bothered me for years and years until my mid-20's is my mother completely blocked it out of her mind to the point where she told me for years it never happened and I was crazy and just making this things up...And then one day she finally did remember it so...her acknowledgment certainly helped me deal with it on that level as far as my relationship with my mother...I've been suffering with clinical depression my entire life mostly and anxiety and it's just escalated over the years because so many different things...

Donna had a tough time in school because she was “picked on” by other kids. Donna reached a point when she was terrified to go to school:

...I was...the typical kid that was the one that the bullies always picked on and always beat up and...I was terrified to go to school every day...because I never

knew when I was going to get beat up...mostly this was in junior high...In fact now I remember...if affected my nerves back then. I would wake up in the middle of the night every night for I don't know how long feeling sick to my stomach and I was terrified of throwing up. I hated throwing up. That was a really bad phobia for me a really long time and I'd wake up every night having to go and get my mom to come and sleep with me and...I just wanted to die...nine or ten give or take.

In high school, things got a little better for Donna. In grade 11, Donna started to become popular with her friends but she struggled to pass in her class. By grade 12, Donna had convinced her parents to let her to quit school.

Donna's new popularity with her friends took her out of the house more often and she developed a "passion for roller-skating". It was in grade eleven that Donna started dating her first boyfriend:

...roller-skating was my passion...I went for years up in [town] at the arena here during the summer...around the same time I got my license...there were a lot of kids from town here that would go down to [a larger roller skating rink] and...I gained a lot of friends...which helped my self esteem and confidence so started hanging out a lot there...and that's how I met my first real boyfriend there.

Donna was in a bad car accident at age 17 and has been suffering chronic neck and back pain ever since. Donna is now thirty-nine years old and in chronic pain twenty-four hours a day. Donna left home when she was 18 years old and moved in with her boyfriend, five years after they were married and later were divorced.

Donna's extended family gets together for "special occasions". Donna does not have contact with her brother and sister and she gets along best with her cousins.

Donna's mom's attitude towards her changed after she left her husband:

Finally I got enough courage to leave that relationship and told my mother what really happened and then her attitude towards me changed, not realizing she just

thought I wanted my freedom and I wanted to be single again and have fun and I...

Donna currently lives at her mom and dad's house, initially because of being ill:

...My mother has become very dependent on me...[she] went into the hospital for the third time. She was extremely sick...She was having anxiety attacks at the time, crying all the time so I was focussing a lot on her...she also doesn't like me going out very much, she hates being alone...Like I'm lucky if I can get out for one hour...Other than that, forget it. It's doctor's appointments, counsellors or, you know...I don't even go shopping or anything. My life deals with 95 percent medical every day from the time I get up to the time I go to sleep...

Rebecca

Rebecca is the youngest of seven kids. She says she was raised in a happy, Mennonite family. Growing up in a Mennonite family meant a lot of "do's and don'ts":

Okay, um...growing up as a Mennonite. It's hard to explain to someone, if you haven't come from it. But it, basically, it feels like a list of do's and don'ts. You know you're not allowed to do this, you're not allowed to do that. But it's not really explained why you're not allowed. Like I said, no drinking, no dancing, no smoking. Those were things that weren't allowed. And, it was a guilt trip. If you did something out of...that weren't supposed to. You were always...felt guilty about it. At least...I did. (So how did the guilty trip work?) Like, your parents would be displeased with you. You know, that I'm just doing it for my family. But ah, I felt that...if I didn't do something, if I didn't obey my dad and mom, I wouldn't have their love.

Rebecca remembers her mom's "yucky" oatmeal, a clean house and good healthy meals.

Rebecca only had one spanking from her mom and dad as a child, but her mom was not very affectionate:

...when I was a young kid...you know how you always did the projects in school for Mother's Day? And she never seemed to appreciate those. So, that hurt. And then yet, I remember this one pincushion that I made...and I was so proud of it, cause I hate doing crafts to begin with. So I thought that if I do something good, then you know, I was pretty proud of it. And I took it home for Mother's Day, and

she said, oh, you know, thank you. And then, I thought, oh, she really doesn't like it. And then years later, she made a comment, like, oh yeah, that was such a nice present. But she's not an emotional person. She doesn't display her emotions very easily.

Rebecca's mom and dad divorced approximately sixteen years ago and Rebecca resented her dad for the break-up:

My parents were separated and divorced...ah man, sixteen years ago? His [Rebecca's father] whole attitude had just changed, and I remember thinking that I did not trust him. I never saw dad for a period there. I guess I was really bitter against dad, because I didn't think too highly of someone having an affair on their spouse...I was hurt. I said forget it.

Rebecca went through a rebellious phase where she did not want to live at home and she would purposely get into trouble:

For about two years, I did not want to live at home. I was about twelve. That age, right in there. Between twelve and fourteen, was pretty rough, emotionally...I was always rebellious. Very quietly rebellious though, not um...getting into trouble with the law like my older siblings. Just, the sneaky things. Not things that they'd really notice, but...just more of the attitude. They'd say it was black, I'd say it was white.

Rebecca has two older sisters and two older brothers and three of her siblings also went through a rebellious period and had a lot of problems. Rebecca's older sister spent time in juvenile detention for getting in trouble with the law:

Juvenile detention. I wonder if it was because, she went to the psychiatric hospital...now this must have been when she was sixteen, cause she was working at a variety store in (town) and...the story I heard now, as an adult was, my older brother...rob, he's the third child, ah, he was in a lot more stuff. He made Laura rob the store, take the cash out the till, and give it to him. (So she would have been working there, and she stole the money...) Yeah. He basically made her. He threatened her. To take the money...My oldest sister Heather, she's ten years older than my next brother Stan, he was...the good son. And then Rob, he was the black sheep of the family, always into trouble. Always rebellious. Him and dad would be battling constantly. But he was my big brother. He was my protector. I

think he had always been just a difficult child. And they're always had a hard time with him. And...once he got into...I mean, living in that restricted life...of all the do's and don't's, and then you get out into the...you got into high school, and into the real world, and I think he just, got into drugs. Um..got into the wrong crowd, and started. And I'm not even sure what happened. (Was he arrested, or...) As far as I know, he has a record. It was about ten years I think, with him. Off and on trouble. You know, he gave dad and mom a run for their money. I don't know how they survived through...you know, the three middle siblings, giving them a hassle. Mom was always crying, you know. Upset. (You were good kids? Stan and yourself?) Yeah, ah, we behaved ourselves, and we graduated from high school. We were the only two.

Rebecca got involved with the church youth group and became very involved in the church activities. When Rebecca was 18 years old, she married Matt and they are still together.

Rebecca has remained in contact with her oldest sister, however, she has not seen her dad in two years. Rebecca also realizes that as an adult she is starting to act a lot like her mom and it's causing problems. Rebecca says she has become strict and critical in her parenting, similar to her mom:

I guess, with a lot of it, ah, is with my parenting techniques. It's been coming out quite strongly lately, with my kids telling me...what I'm like as a parent. And I realize, I'm a lot like my mother. And, I hated the way she was so critical, but...I'm like that. Which my kids keep telling me, you know. All you ever do is work...I am very strict with the kids. And maybe...maybe I'm not fair, cause I don't listen to their side of the story. But I mean, I grew up, under that, what your parents say, you do. You don't mouth back to them, you don't even question them

Jennifer

Jennifer's mom and dad were divorced when she was very young and she says that her mom became a "mean drunk". Jennifer's mom was twenty years old when she was married and had four kids; Jennifer is the oldest. Jennifer did not live with her mom but her mom had a great

deal of contact with Children's Aid:

She was a mean drunk. Like not to us kids but to everybody else. My mom said that like when before dad and her divorced, mu mother was terrified of bars. She wouldn't like drink at all but then when they had a divorce then mu mom started drinking and she said the only reason that she drank was that's the only time she could be mean. She said she was hurting inside so much that the only time that she could get her anger out or even be the slightest bit mean is when she drank. Someone was constantly calling on my mom. And my mom, she's like a spotless freak. And they kept bothering her too. Someone was calling on her and that. And so my mom moved west. She was sick of it. She was totally sick and tired of Children's Services coming over to her house.

Jennifer and her mom lived with her grandparents until Jennifer was three or four years old and then Jennifer's mom moved to British Columbia. Jennifer and her dad continued to stay living at her grandparents. Jennifer did not want to live with her mom and her brothers and her sisters were too young to decide:

No. They didn't get a choice because they weren't old enough. I was. I don't like [mom's] boyfriend [Luke] at all. All my brothers call him dad. Because well my mom lied and didn't tell the two boys about my dad. He's really strict with them, he smacks them and throws them in their room when they don't barely do nothing. I guess my mom's not really getting along either. He comes home and he goes straight to their room and he doesn't even talk to her. And when they do talk he doesn't even look at her or anything and things like that.

Jennifer got along well with her grandparents until she started to miss school. When Jennifer decided not to go to school, she and her grandparents would argue and they would often phone the police:

I didn't go to school but that was when I was way younger. I never liked school. I never ever wanted to go because I barely had any friends and when I did have friends, they were boys because I was a tomboy...so I didn't want to go. I never got charges. Just that the cops would always be at my house because like not going to school and like arguing with my grandma basically because she'd say that I can go to my friend's house and then I'd get ready, then she'd say I couldn't, things like that. So, that would make me mad so we would just yell at

each other and then one of us would call the cops. If I didn't end up calling the cops, she would.

Jennifer changed school and things started to get better between her and her grandparents,

Two years later, Jennifer met Tony and the arguing started again with her grandparents:

But once I started going to [different school] everything was fine. Like there was no arguing for like two or three years because I could go places and I had a lot more friends than I did before. So I was basically never home. And when I was home there would be no arguing or anything. I wasn't even in a bad mood really for like a couple of years and then all of the sudden I started going out with Tony and then two years after that, that's when it started happening again...Like someone telling me what I can and cannot do.

When Jennifer was sixteen years old, she gave birth to Rachael.

Jennifer's mom calls her everyday now and Jennifer is close to her brothers. Jennifer is very close to her grandparents and gets a lot of support from them. However, Jennifer struggles with raising her daughter while she lives with her grandparents:

I would like to move out and that...It's hard too because I'm saying Rachael you can't have that and I'm turning around and my grandma's giving it to her. So, I find that it's hard for me to like no and mean no and things like that. So, I move out then I can like draw a better routine and, you know, when I say no, I can actually like mean it...

Jennifer hopes to one day own her grandparents house and they have said they would give it to Jennifer if they give the house away.

Kaitlyn

When Kaitlyn was eight years old her family moved to a small community where she spent the rest of her childhood. Kaitlyn remembers happy family vacations:

We went on family vacations together. I can't tell you too much about them but we had a tent trailer that we pulled behind and we went down east or out west, you know, different places like that.

Kaitlyn enjoyed sports and did well in school:

Because of my skating, I didn't get involved so much in the sports of the school because you can't do everything. I quit skating when I was 16 and then I started playing ringette for the next few years. I played slow pitch when the slow pitch league started up. I wasn't a very studier person. A lot of it was done really rushed or quick or not at all. I still ended up with good marks so that wasn't a problem.

Kaitlyn graduated from high school and spent a few months in university in general science. Kaitlyn has one brother, who is two years older than her. Kaitlyn's mom was an alcoholic and spent time in a psychiatric hospital for her drinking. Kaitlyn's mom and dad would have occasional fights about her mom's drinking and her mom would deny it:

I can't say for sure. I really don't know. She drank. She was an alcoholic. I don't know why. She blamed it on work, but the truth is I still don't know why. (How often would she drink?) Oh, every night, every day. She'd come home, have a beer until suppertime, hit the rye, conk out by eight o'clock...She'd be fine. Like she wasn't abusive or verbal or loud or anything like that. She'd just go to bed. She still denies she's an alcoholic or has been an alcoholic.

Kaitlyn's mom and dad divorced when she was nineteen. The divorce was a difficult time for Kaitlyn:

[When my parents separated] it was a hard time because [my brother] was away at university and rented a house up there with a bunch of other guys and had a place to be. Mom moved into this apartment...above part of a house. Dad moved to a little tiny house out in the country that only had one bedroom and here I was stuck with nowhere to live type of deal.

At the time of her parents divorce, Kaitlyn was dating Dan and she lived with him and his parents for a short time. Kaitlyn and Dan were married when Kaitlyn turned twenty years old and Dan died in 1998.

Kaitlyn does not want to follow in her mother's footsteps:

I don't want to turn out the way she [mother] is. She has a lot of problems now. I a lot of them would attribute to her lifestyle, her smoking, her drinking, the whole bit in her younger life...This is something that I can control even though it can be a hereditary factor, whereas mom also has a breast cancer and that's a hereditary factor that I cannot control so...

Kaitlyn's mom is still an alcoholic and Kaitlyn is still resentful that her mom was drunk at her wedding. However, they still have a close connection and her mom babysits her daughter every week while Kaitlyn goes to college. Kaitlyn's family is very supportive and she feels that they are proud of her accomplishments of going back to school.

Amy

Amy's mom gave birth to Amy when she was eighteen years old and Amy was taken by Children's Aid because her mom was an "unfit mother". When Amy was two she was back living with her mom and when Amy was three her mom got married:

...by the time I turned three my mom had married another man and moved out west and I do have memories at that age...and most of them were good...my stepfather and her fought continually but she was very good to me...and this short of meanness never happened until I turned six and we moved back here. (Did she split with...your step-dad at that time?) Yeah...and she got back with all her friends it was like a strange person... She just acted totally different.

Amy did not have a "father-daughter" relationship with her dad as he had problems of his own:

...We did but not a father-daughter relationship...He was in and out of prison most of his life. The first time that he got put in prison they... robbed a ...truck...and when they went to get away, they ran into a train and he ended up paralysed from the waist down...I don't think he knew how to be a dad...

Amy's mom struggled with substance abuse problems and was very abusive:

She would get very, very angry and physically abusive...There was no grey, you know, it was always one extreme to the other...[mother] would do everything you

wanted and give you everything you wanted...that usually followed a really bad spat...you know, if there was like a fair, she would just take me to the fair for the day and have a wonderful day...

When Amy was eleven years old her mom moved in with Amy's "wonderful stepfather", but the substance abuse did not end:

She didn't marry him then, that's just when they moved together and I think they were together probably 13 or 14 years before they got married...things were...a little bit chaotic. He partied too so...my mom would be popping beans and going at 600 miles an hour in one direction and Larry, my dad, he'd be smoking pot and be going at negative five...it went on for a couple of years. /another thing my parents did that really made it hard for me...was when I was 11, they started getting me high with them...

Despite the substance abuse issues, Amy's step dad was also positive influence in her life:

At first he didn't contribute a lot...Mom had bought so many men home by that point I really thought that he was just staying for coffee and leaving and he stayed...my survival instinct was get rid of him...but he didn't go...I constantly would play little games with the two of them so they would fight...But then after a few years I realized he was giving me something I never had...being a dad...he was out playing ball with me, coming to my ball games, coaching me and I never had...a dad and he was so mild compared to my mother.

Life continued like this for a few years, when Amy's step dad hurt his back, everything changed:

...the place where my dad was working here, 500 pounds of lead fell on his back and he was really badly injured...and he had to go away to a [rehabilitation centre] and then they retrained him so he went to college and then my parents changed. They started to grow up...and that was a really hard situation for me. By then I was 15, 16 and my mom decided then that she wanted to be my mom instead of my friend...They moved me to [larger city]...Her and dad were both going to school and they weren't doing drugs...she was like well, where are you going and who are you going with and what are you doing and all of the sudden I had curfews which I'd never had...so I was like what are you talking about...

Amy moved from living with her parents in a large city to living with her grandmother in a

small city and found the transition too tough to keep up with school. Amy quit school and did not return until later in her life.

In adulthood, Amy's parents were helpful to her, helping her get out of an abusive relationship and letting her move back home. Amy's mom became sick with bipolar disorder and was very dependent on Amy and continued to try to control her. After Amy gave birth to her daughter, their relationship changed:

...after I had Lisa, that's when I think mom and I started getting really close...once I could see and trust her with Lisa I think that's when I started to get rid of the chip on my shoulder. I wasn't the only person in the world that had a bad childhood...

In the last five years, Amy's mom has started to act like a mom to Amy, nurturing her and really being there for her. With four kids Amy "would not have made it if it weren't for her parents". Amy's mom was recently killed in a car accident. Amy is having a tough time coping with her mom's death:

...I'm not coping with my mom's passing very good...Everybody says oh, you're doing so well but they're not in the bedroom when I cry...when my grandmother died, see, that's when I learned to appreciate my mom...and so then when [mom] died, you know, that was just...like a double loss...We fought like cats and dogs and we got on like two friends instead of just you know, the mother and daughter...

Amy remains close to her step dad, who is moving on with his life and plans to remarry in two years.

Amy's says her parenting has been directly affected by her mom's parenting:

And my mom, she was very physically over physical. She had a very bad temper, didn't know how to draw the line and that's the only thing, it's made me afraid to smack my children period and I think that I would have a little bit more weight as a children if I could give them that smack now and then...

Amy also suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder:

I remember when I was growing up, everyday when I came home from school there would be a list of chores to do but on top of that every room she's have little notes stuck to the mirror, if you use this sink, clean the spots off the tap and she was very fanatical. And what we didn't realize was that she was bipolar. You know, and that's what all these stupid obsessive things were coming from, right? And now I have OCD and that's you know, the chemical I inherited from her.

Sandy

Sandy's mom and dad were both alcoholics and her dad was abusive to her mom. Sandy remembers a particular time when her mom was hurt from the abuse:

...she couldn't handle the beatings or anything anymore from him and I always had this vision in my head at one time. I don't know if it's a real thing...but I remember my mom being taken away in an ambulance and covered...

Her parents divorced by the time Sandy was four years old. Her mom was poor and

Sandy suspects a prostitute, until she married her stepfather:

...my mom was never around...I have a feeling that she was a prostitute we had read in the papers, my sister and I...something to do with this guy that we always had to go see in the apartment building...He was providing my mom with food and stuff for us kids...we saw he was arrested in the paper two years later...he was a pimp...She could have been a cocktail waitress. She could have been out cleaning all night but...my brother had taken us outside when my mom was in the park, our eldest...he pulled my sister and I out of bed and dragged us out to the back park of the apartment building...he said this is what your mother is, this is what she's doing...My mom was with another man naked in the park...when you're nine, what do you think of something like that?

Sandy's dad was a truck driver and she did not see him for several years and the reunion was a not happy one:

He was out of our life for quite a few years, from the time I was four years old...My brother knocked at the door and said I'm your son. And the first words

that came out of my dad's mouth were you're no son of mine, you're a hypocrite because my brother had long hair...

Sandy was sexually abused by her oldest brother. He was responsible for caring for the family with her mom and step dad being out most of the time:

...When I was nine years old I was sexually abused by my brother. That happened on several occasions...I don't remember a lot...It was dreadful. My brother would pick out my clothes for me...my oldest brother...who did abuse...he would be there to feed all of us, serve breakfast, get our clothes ready, put us on the bed...

Sandy was also responsible for taking care of her younger siblings:

...When my brother was born in '70, this stepbrother that's between the two parents but they weren't married, we used to have to look after him constantly...He had colic, he had to be walked up the floors at night and then I remember one day I passed out in school.

Sandy's mom and step dad also drink together and would become quite violent:

I never saw it until...after my stepfather and my mom actually got together...Then I saw a lot of abuse...one night I went up into my mom's room. She had been yelling and he was ready to strangle her. I had pulled...Jerry off of her and of course I got whipped down the stairs...any conflicts was always me to get thrown against the wall or punched out...every time he drank he became violent...

In the summer months, Sandy's family would go and pick cherries in a small town. The summers spent picking cherries are fond memories for Sandy. Sandy and her sister stayed out as late as they could at night to avoid going home. They never had any privacy because Sandy's mom would take in borders, despite how many people were living in Sandy's home.

Sandy started dating at fifteen and wanted to be married by the time she was eighteen years old. Sandy did not get married until she was in her mid-twenties. Just before Sandy's graduation, her brother passed away:

I had a brother at 21 died..he was my life...He was my protection all through my

life and then I lost him at 17...it was through a truck accident with my stepfather driving and a train came in...It was so heartbreaking. I couldn't believe he was dead...I still find it hard today.

Sandy now has close ties with only a few of her family members. Sandy still does not often “feel loved”. She took her oldest brother to court for sexually abusing her but she did not get the results she was looking for. Her relationship with most of her siblings are strained. Sandy does have a relationship with her half brother:

My brother because I've been through a lot with him, my youngest brother that just got out of rehab. And, you know, it's like we laugh together, we cry together, we whatever.

Every week, there is a family get together usually including Sandy, her husband, her daughter, her mom, her step dad, and her younger half-brother. Sandy now feels close to her mom and her step dad and they are very attached to her child. Sandy realized that she wanted a relationship with her mom:

I guess I basically...always realized that I needed to have my mother...I don't believe that any one should ever break relationships with their parents...I want to have a sense of closeness to people in my family...I have basically lacked that all my life...relationships are important, they are very important because if I don't feel close to a person, I feel like I'm worthless...

Sandy recognizes that there are generational influences from her family:

...my mom still isn't a very loving or affection person...she must have had an awful childhood too because she said her father was very, very strict with her...I could never show affection...[and] within the last probably 10, 15 years...I've learnt...through the counselling and everything I've been through...to be a lot more affectionate...

Sandy's counselling has helped her to confront some of the ways she was raised and how she wants to raise her kids:

Yes. I've learnt that through the counselling and everything I've been through. I learn how to hug her and kiss her and whatever and I've learnt to be a lot more affectionate with my husband as well. Yeah. But it took some training to be able to do that all over again.

Amber

Amber is of Native background and she describes her family as “very dysfunctional”.

Amber's mom and dad were very abusive to each other, and to their kids. Amber continues to go to counselling because of her father's abuse:

He was a pretty abusive man. I go to counselling for it and my head's still screwed up...He hit me in the face and I went through most of my life hiding behind it with drugs, alcohol, just blocking it out.

Amber was very protective of her sisters and protected them from any abuse:

Yeah, yeah. I've always when I was young, I don't know, I guess I was mother hen. I always looked after my sisters. I'm the oldest so I always looked after them and protected them and took the blame, you know. You know? I took the blame if there was a beating to be done.

After Amber's mom and dad broke up, her dad went to jail for thirteen years for drug trafficking and her mom tried to give her kids up for adoption:

I do remember our mom trying to give us up for adoption. I hated my mom for years for that. It's like, why give us up? We're supposed to be your babies...I still hurt from it...

To be accepted into a foster home, Amber and her siblings would have had to be separated, so all four kids moved to Amber's grandmother's house, where Amber got familiar with what she refers to as the “the Native lifestyle”:

When I went to live with my grandmother, that's where it really kicked in of looking after everybody because we were alone and we were given up. I looked after my sisters; actually there was 17 of us under that roof, all the cousins dumped on her. Native community thing so...I couldn't believe that. I don't know

where we all slept. There were kids everything, bodies everywhere and some of us were doubled up in beds. From there I learned how to just be a little mother hen and look after things...I've always thought if I ever had children and got married, my children weren't going to be raised like that...

Amber eventually left her grandmother's to go back and live with her mom, but it was not working out:

And then I had enough of that and I ran away from home, couldn't take it. My mom was bringing home men all the time when we did live with my mom so...I was 11 when that happened...We lived outside of [large city], out in the country so I walked the highway. I was picked up by a police and they brought me to a foster home, temporary foster home until they found me a permanent. And from there they moved me to another foster home and these were excellent, excellent people that they moved me to.

Amber stayed at her foster home until she became pregnant and they sent her to a home for unwed mothers. Following the birth of her baby, Amber had no choices in her future:

So, my mom ended up having custody of me and she shipped me off to my aunt and I stayed there for about a month and I guess they got me into [unwed mother's home] here. And I was there until, you know, until the baby was born and that and then I went back...went back to [aunt's house]. The baby stayed behind in the hospital but I refused to sign the papers. I was confused as to what to do. But no, my mom and my aunt ended up taking me back. I didn't sign the papers and they took me to court and, you know, had the baby given up...I wanted to keep him. You know? It would have been somebody to love. Even though I couldn't provide for him, I was only 14, you don't get help when you're 14, you know, but to me, it was somebody to love and somebody can love me back...so I went and walked out the door. And my uncle caught up to me and he started slapping me around that. They ended up taking me to the hospital...the hospital wouldn't even acknowledge that I was being slapped around...they were believing my mom and my uncle and aunt. So, I stayed there at home for about a week and then I was thrown out the door.

Amber was fourteen years old and living on the streets. She slept on park benches and under trees. When her mom went to work, Amber would sneak in the house to steal food. Amber's mom caught her stealing food one day and they had a big fight. Amber started living in

the downtown area and she lived there for two years before returning to her mom's house:

I moved from the residential living in the street to downtown. It wasn't pleasant. I learnt to sneak in the bars really young and drink and do my thing, drugs, alcohol and you know, close to the prostitution world but it never happened. I couldn't bring myself to do it, you know at that age...that went on for two years...

Amber went back to school and things were going well with her mom until her mom started dating someone new and Amber was on the move again:

But my mom started dating again and went out with this guy and he was...I don't know where these men come from. You know, he was starting to push me around and making sexual advances at me when he was drunk and stuff like that and I just blew up, I couldn't handle it. And my stepfather found out and he was moving out west so he made an offer I couldn't refuse. You come out west with me, I'll provide you food, home, clothing, schooling, all you have to do is keep the house clean and raise your brother - because my brother and I were always close, my step brother. So, I went out there...Actually, that was probably one of the best times where I felt comfortable living at home. But my stepfather has always treated me well. We had a falling out and I ended up moving out and he came back down east and I stayed out west...

Amber no longer keeps in contact with her dad, but she is trying to rebuild a relationship with her mom. Amber says she is beginning to understand her mom's and dad's experiences:

And my mom, we're starting to rebuild our relationship and she's starting to tell me about her past and where she came from, growing up in foster homes herself. You know? And then my dad growing up in foster homes and detention centres and I guess that kind of helps after I get over my stuff and counselling and I try to look at all viewpoints.

Amber no longer keeps in contact with one of her sisters and is still very angry with her:

I went down to Saskatchewan to visit my stepfather and when I come back, because I was only gone for a week and when I came back I found out she [sister] had slept with my future husband. To this day I won't even go near my sister. I'm still very angry, very hurt, very you know, I won't let anybody I won't even let my children near her.

Amber is also making an effort to get back in touch with her Native background and bring

that culture into her life.

Karen

Karen is also an aboriginal woman. She was given up for adoption when she was two or three years old. Her mother gave birth to Karen when she was fifteen years old and Karen's only memory of her mother is watching her drive away with the social workers. Karen has attempted to find her mother through contacts with her reserve but she has had no luck with finding her.

Karen's two brothers were adopted by the same family, so all three siblings stayed together. Karen also had one brother and one sister who were biological children to her adoptive parents. Karen's adopted family lived on a farm and were "very Christian people". Karen was never able to establish close bonds with her adopted family and always felt second to the biological children:

...I know that I had always questioned my mom, like, I used to get upset with her, because I was adopted, and I wanted to know about my mom, and...you know, she was trying to be my mom. Um, I never really, like, had a closeness with adoptive mother. It was never really there. I guess what I'm trying to say, is that I wasn't too close with my family.

Karen's oldest adopted brother sexually abused her for years. Karen's adopted parents did not believe her and Children's Aid was brought in:

I went to the doctor's, and I thought there was something wrong with me. And when I told them what happened, they called the police and what not.. And they went to my parents, and they talked to my parents about it, and they were in denial about it. The Children's Aid Society was brought in cause I refused to stay at home. About fourteen. My brother was about...I don't know, about four years older than me. But um...I'm not, like I'm...trying not to ah...place blame on my parents, but I'm angry and upset that they weren't open to us, and explain to us, about those things that they needed to...We just went to church every Sunday.

Karen went to stay at a friend's house. She did not want to return to her adopted family.

Karen's adopted brother was arrested and her adoptive parents were very angry with her. The Children's Aid Society found Karen a foster home. Karen was in and out of three foster homes.

Karen started running away from the foster homes and ended up getting into trouble:

...when I was about fifteen or sixteen, I had an incident where...I ran from my foster home...I took off with one of my friends, and we got in trouble with the law. We just kinda stole something that we weren't supposed to...and ah...I...because I ran away, I needed a place to stay, so...I stayed at a place, for...this person I knew and he wasn't a good person. But it was the only place I knew, without sleeping on the streets. I...so I stayed there...but um, I was raped there. But, when I had to give my report to the police, about what happened, I was afraid about telling them that...you know, I was drinking and that, because I thought well...they would think I was lying about this. But I wasn't. And that's the only reason why he wasn't charged. Is because ah...when I was on the stand. They um...they were asking questions, if I was ah...drinking or on drugs, and that's the only reason why he didn't get charged.

When Karen was sixteen she quit school and she was living on her own at seventeen years old. Shortly after moving out on her own Karen became pregnant. The father wanted nothing to do with Karen. At eighteen, she was on her own with a new baby.

Karen's adopted family is still not a priority in her life. She talks to her mom about four times a year.

Annette

Annette's mom and dad "should never have been together". Her dad drank and was violent and her mom was quiet, shy and put up with everything. A typical day would involve Annette's dad smashing things, throwing things, drinking ten beers and going somewhere, and it was Annette's job to make sure he got home safely.

Annette would get between her mom and dad so that her dad could not hit her mom:

He's done enough to her oh yeah. And I used to get in front of him so he couldn't

hit her. I didn't mind them smacks because I knew my mom wasn't going to get them, but when he'd start coming at her with objects, like he'd smash an ashtray on the table and he'd go after her with that and I'd get in the middle. He went after her with brooms, mops, anything he could get his hands on. Frying pans, pots, if his supper wasn't on the table when he walked in, and my mom would say I'll go the store and get you a six-pack.

Annette's mom would not leave her dad because she did not have the support. Annette's dad was very strict with her and she got the brunt of his violent side:

Oh my God, where I do start? Um, it first started out hammering me with a belt with studs and he said that wasn't working. I think I was 8 or 9. If I couldn't do the job to perfection, he's a welder. If he gave me the welder to do something and I messed it all up, I'd get a swat upside the head, or I'd get something thrown at me...and then it progressed. I wasn't allowed to touch the stove when I was 12. They were gone all day, almost all night, and I was crying for french fries, so I put some french fries, like the fat on the stove, I was just about to put the french fries in, my dad walks in the house, picks up the fat and starts chasing me with it. I ran through the snow, knee-deep snow, running away from this man...twelve years old. That's when it all really got bad. I had to get out of there. The cops got involved, nobody would do nothing, they were scared of my father. So I started seeing counsellors when I was 13...they wanted me to just to confront my father, and I said that was so silly for you to say that.

Annette wanted to leave home but she had three siblings in the house to whom she wanted to stay close. Annette's dad also hit her brother, who killed himself because "he couldn't take it anymore". Annette's grades at school dropped from 95 % to 18 % and the teachers and principal wanted Annette to leave the house. When Annette was thirteen years old, she was sexually abused by an uncle and received no support from her mom:

When I was a child, yeah, my uncle. And um, he was going to teach me how to drive. I was 13 or 14, we were down on the sand bar and my friend was in the back and I was in the driver's seat and next thing you know, there's hands where they shouldn't be and stuff like that and I told him stop...He shouldn't be doing this. And I went home that night, I was very distraught, I was crying, I told my mom, I need to talk to you. [she said] 'I don't want to hear it. It didn't happen, you're making all this stuff up'. Well it took him to rape two other girls, actually

go and rape them, in order for him to get put in jail...

Feeling that her mom was a prisoner in her own home, Annette started living for “both of them”:

My main thing that helped me was my mom. Knowing my mom couldn't do anything, she was under lock and key. At a young age, I said I was going to start living for her, because my hope, was starting to disappear...[The] first time I got on a slide at a kid's park, I was 24 years old. My mom's never done that, and I didn't want to do it. And I got on the slide and went down for the both of us...

When Annette was sixteen, she left home and it was the best decision she made:

When I left home, it was the happiest day of my life. I knew I had no boundaries...I figured, hey, this is a big world, I can go out and be whoever I want. I work hard, I should be able to get there...I graduated in June and I hitchhiked up here [to Ontario] in October. And that was an experience in itself. The best thing I ever done. Because my mom says, you get on that highway, and you don't look back. You look back, you're going to come back. And I didn't look back once, only to see if there was more traffic coming, but that's about it. And I've been a survivor since...

Annette has not seen her family for thirteen years. Her dad apologized to her on the phone two years ago for the things he had done to her. Annette plans to have a very different life for her child:

Because comparing my life to his life, there's no comparison. There will never be any, you know what I mean? He won't be sitting here in twenty years going 'you wouldn't believe the things I went through'. If anything he'll be sitting here saying 'I had the best mommy in the world'...

Annette realizes that alcoholism runs throughout her family. Many members of her mother's family were alcoholics. Annette also says that she believes that the men she dated resemble her father:

And that's when I started dating again, and every person I ever come across ends up like my dad, which I still to this day...I don't understand. Because they'll

seem so nice when you first meet them.. They'll give you the world, they'll do anything for you, and as soon as they know you have a brain on your own, you're ordered around...They [partners] demanded too much from me, almost like my dad.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth grew up in a small town in Ontario. Her dad left when she was two and she has not had contact with him since. She went to live with her grandmother. Her grandmother died when she was six years old. From the period from birth to sixteen years old she moved thirty-three times.

Elizabeth's mom worked a lot and there were many men in and out of the house. When Elizabeth was eight years old her mother moved in with someone:

Um, my mom worked a lot. She worked long hard hours. Like my mom's always provided...she was with a lot of different male friends, so it was on a continuous basis. She lived with a man when I was about 8, around that age, I'm not quite sure. And that's when my stepbrother, David was born. And we lived with Tom (stepfather) for quiet some time. He was very abusive towards her. There were strippers, bikers, like around the house all the time. Um, drinking, drugs, like done openly, freely. Probably...well my real dad left when I was 2, so probably around 4 and that age um, you know there was always Harleys in and out of the house and you know bikers constantly you know, she got a big cuff in the head and...it was done openly...

Elizabeth had a tough time at school because of all the moving around:

It was always hard for me. I was always the new kid at school. I got teased and picked on. School? I didn't do really well at all. I was lucky to get a D. Cause most of my grades were like C's and D's. I wasn't very impressive or anything. Ya, like I said, I was always the new one at school and so in each place I'd have to go to a new school.

When Elizabeth was fifteen years old, she went through a rebellious stage. She drank, did drugs, and had no self-esteem. Elizabeth did not care what happened to herself. On her sixteenth

birthday, Elizabeth's mom told her she had to leave if she did not straighten up. Elizabeth called her step dad and moved in with him:

And he said 'well pack your bags, I'm coming to get ya' so he came and got me and I went and stayed there...that was the worst mistake of my entire life...there'd be frequent like drugs anytime we wanted. Cocaine, like there's a silver teapot sitting on the buffet with a big rock cocaine sitting on there so I could scrape it off and do it whenever...I got like hits of acid like 90. Mushrooms whenever I wanted it, you know...on a daily basis...um, I left there when I was 17 and then just continued moving, you know, staying in rooming places, or with a guy that I met, I'd stay with them for a while...Um, I don't remember all of it really. It was just a blur. I remember some things like going to the bars when I was 17 and getting pissed...so I'd like to go stay with so and so and do whatever for a week or two and go stay with whoever and I just kind of went from one thing to another. One guy pretty much to another...

Elizabeth's next move was to join the travelling circus. Through the circus, Elizabeth met a man and moved away with him to be married. After Elizabeth got married, her mom and her started talking again and their relationship has improved:

It's changed now...we can talk to each other more openly on most things. Um, you know and uh I've realized that you know, she really does love me and cause I didn't feel that before. She wouldn't go out of her way to you know, talk to me or make sure everything's alright and if she doesn't hear from me like very weekend then she's like worried you know...

She is also close to her mother's current partner and hopes to move soon to live closer to them. Elizabeth says she sees some similarities between herself and her mother, for example, when Elizabeth was partying and leaving her kids with a babysitter. Elizabeth also dated many men and she has moved eleven times.

Discussion

There is variation in the stories these women told of growing up. Once again, Marie and Kaitlyn, this time joined by Janet are the exceptions describing relatively stable childhood homes.

Even in these stories, Marie and Kaitlyn talk about alcoholic mothers and both Janet and Kaitlyn lived through the divorce of their parents. All three maintained a relationship with both parents while they were alive.

Pam , Chen, Susan, and Rebecca tell of ongoing conflict in the home, troubles in school, being out on their own at a fairly young age, having children when they were young, and brothers and sisters getting into trouble with the law and at school. Particularly striking, however, was that all four women describe receiving substantial help from their parents when they were parents themselves and all have close and frequent relationships with parents or other extended family members.

However, Julie, Donna, Jennifer, Amy, Sandy, Amber, Karen, Annette, and Elizabeth tell childhood stories which are at times particularly horrible. Julie lived in an unstable home with an addicted, violent, and abusive mother and her various partners. Jennifer's mother was a "mean drunk" who moved to British Columbia to evade child welfare inquiries. She stayed to live with her grandparents, getting into trouble at school and becoming pregnant at sixteen. Amy was in foster care as an infant and returned to live with a mother with substance abuse problems who was very abusive of her. Her mom brought lots of men home. Her mother and step dad fought constantly. Her mom was diagnosed as bipolar. Sandy's mom was in the sex trade and her mom, dad, and step dad were abusive and violent alcoholics. She was sexually abused by her brother, and on her own at a young age. Amber came from "a very dysfunctional family" and was in a foster home at eleven and pregnant at fourteen. She was living on her own on the streets at fourteen "close to prostitution". Karen was adopted at two and, after being sexually molested by

an adopted brother, moved through three foster homes until living on her own at seventeen.

Annette's dad was a drunk and very dangerously abusive. She left home at sixteen and hitchhiked on her own to Ontario. Her brother committed suicide and she was sexually abused by her uncle.

Elizabeth moved 33 times by the time she was sixteen. Her mom worked hard to provide but had serious addiction problems and brought a continuous stream of men home. Her step dad was a "outlaw biker" and violent. Elizabeth was introduced to drugs at an early age developing her own addiction problems and on her own in the world "not giving a shit what happened to her" at sixteen.

The two First Nations' women's stories, Amber and Karen, have unique themes requiring attention. Besides being about very difficult personal journeys, these are also tales of collapsed communities. The parents of these two women were themselves "products" of foster care and detention homes. Janet's First Nation step son had a similar story. These stories illustrate the challenges facing many First Nation communities (Mandell, Clouston Carlson, Fine, & Blackstock, 2003) which have prompted a call for community healing as essential to Aboriginal child welfare. These stories, and the stories of the other women as well, need to be seen as more than individual tribulations. These are circumstances shared by communities of people and community capacity building has to be part of our responses.

None of us could live through some of these occurrences and emerge unscathed. This is a reality recognized by many service providers (Frensch, & Cameron, 2003); however, in their emphasis on "mothers dealing with their personal issues", the limitations posed by time and resource constrains on these women, and the great amount of time and effort such "healing"

efforts require, are often not recognized.

These women did express appreciation when they had access to a supportive counsellor, but more often talked about “just having to get on with their lives” and finding ways to manage what is happening today. Particularly important in understanding these stories is the great persistence and courage many of these women have shown in “over coming” such obstacles. As we shall see later, most of them are “still standing and trying”, despite the many reasons life has given them to give up. There is desire and strength in these stories usually not recognized in official child protection dialogue about these women nor enhanced by our helping models. Recently, one of the authors went on a five day Buddhist Nei Quann silent retreat where the focus was on “walking in the shoes” of another person with whom the participants had chronic difficulties. Upon realizing that this person “never had chance in life”, the retreat facilitator asked this disturbing question:”What chance would you give someone who had never had a chance?” disturbing because the honest answer was none at all!

What chance we would give these women? Can we conceive of a child and family welfare system in which they would have claims upon our compassion and assistance outside of their identities as mothers? Where their lives have value also? Our official child protection framework focuses on the childhood struggles of these women primarily as demerit points in a formal risk accounting system. Only a very narrow definition of the interests of children is of interest. That is a perspective that is practically, ethically, and critically out of balance.

Besides assisting these women with “healing” and enhancing their educational and care opportunities, these stories point to a need for a community to share the responsibility for

buffering their children from dangers and enhancing their well being. In addition, the Partnerships for Children and Families Project research indicates that interventions focussed on children is a substantially neglected helping strategy in child welfare. It would make sense to incorporate a range of practical programs with a demonstrated capacity to enhance parenting efforts and bring lasting benefits to their children (Cameron, O'Reilly, Laurendeau, & Chamberland, 2001; Nelson, Laurendeau, Chamberland, & Peirson, 2001). Our helping strategies need to accommodate the reality that, in almost all instances, these mothers and these families will continue to provide care and a sense of belonging for their children.

A pivotal commonality for many of these stories, particularly surprising in stories of very abusive childhoods, is the central role that relations with parents, especially with mothers, and other family members have for most of these women and their families. Chen's parents' ongoing support enable her to keep her children. Susan talks to her mom and dad everyday. They help her out with money and "stuck with me when my kids were in care". Donna and her son live with her parents. Jennifer talks to her mom everyday, lives near her dad, is emotionally close with her brothers, and lives with her grandparents. Kaitlyn's mom's childcare enables her to go to college, as does financial and emotional support from other family members. Amy's bipolar mom was particularly nurturing to her in the last five years before she died. She states that she could not have made it with four kids without the support of her parents. Sandy gets together with her mom, step dad, and brother regularly. Amber is trying to rebuild her relationship with her mom. Elizabeth talks most days with her mom and believes that her mom really loves her. She wants to move with her kids to live closer to her mom and her step dad. Stories told by Karen, Julie, and

Annette of having no connection to family seem lonely in comparison.

There is an endurance and continuity of family in these stories that is central to understanding the lives of many of these women. There are strengths in these family networks that often go unrecognized in our focus on past troubles. Connections among members of these families remain important long after social services have gone away.

(3) Partner and Family Relations

Along with mothers and mothering, family functioning receives a major proportion of the attention in child welfare investigations and interventions. The literature is replete with descriptions of the “dysfunctional” nature of these families, including absent and irresponsible fathers, violence and conflict between partners, multiple partners, drug and alcohol abuse, neglected and abused children, unstable families, frequent moves, inadequate parenting, and so on. These family characteristics are presented as very harmful to children and provide the rationale for child protection interventions into homes.

These women’s stories do little to dispel such images; many of these characteristics are

dramatically evident in many of their families. It is not hard to understand why there would be concern for the children in some of these homes. Yet there is another story fundamental to understanding and helping told by these mothers. It is a tale about the continuity and central importance of family in the lives of these women and their children, and their persistent desire and effort, to have a family and a home. These contrasting stories co-exist and need to be understood in relationship to each other as we hear about ways of living that may be very different from our own.

Pamela

Pamela was working two jobs and then quit one when she met her husband. Pamela met Brian at the end of February and was married to him in April. When Pamela was pregnant, the abuse began:

...he choked me when I was pregnant, he beat me when I was pregnant. When I got gestational diabetes when I was pregnant...he was very controlling and I was not allowed to eat certain things...He hit me once every three months or [so]...When my daughter was 8 months old she was in the walker and he assaulted me in front of her...And I'm like crawling up the stairs begging him not to come after me...I got the baby in the crib and I came down and talked to him and I can't remember if he hit me anymore that day...

When Pamela's daughter was one year old, she left Brian and went to her parents home. Pamela and her daughter stayed at a battered women's shelter. After Pamela and Brian went to counselling, she tried to return to the marriage and make it work:

I went back to him in June for a couple weeks, then I left again. When I went to counselling and they said there's dynamic a here...you have to realise there's mental abuse...So I went back to him for two weeks and I saw the mental abuse that was going on and I thought no I don't want my daughter to live through that...he said to me...I'll never hit you again, but by god will you need a spanking...that was it...Matter of fact I went to the crisis clinic with my child...and

I had her assessed...she was just yakking away and they said, you know she's really talking...mommy talks, daddy hits, kids shut up...

After leaving Brian for the second time, Pamela went to stay with her parent's again and applied for Ontario housing. Brian was in and out of Pamela's life, until the situation between them became intolerable:

...after I left him he got charged with impaired driving and he picked my daughter up one time at my mom's while I was working and my mom says...he was driving and he smelled like beer...She wasn't even two years old yet...he said I want to see her. And I said no, absolutely not...you...are unsafe with her...he threatened to kill me. So I got the cops involved...And September of 1988 I went to court...the reign of terror really started then. I had to change my phone number...I kept getting hang up phone calls. I knew it was him...I had to unplug the phone. And then it's like I can't do that, what if he shows up here and I want to call 911...my grandmother gave me one of those new fangled cordless ones...I could shut off so I wouldn't hear it ring...And we didn't sleep upstairs...We slept here...I was on guard...I slept down there for two years...that way if he came in the back door I'd go out the front door. And my tires were slashed, I was robbed, all sorts of things in that time...I know he was responsible...I was at work...and I looked outside and I thought I saw my brother-in-law walk by. I go to the door and sure enough it was...the cops were there before all the air was out...[of] my tires...He got away with it...

Pamela and Brian got divorced and Brian agreed not to see their daughter again. Pamela dated a few different men and is currently with Jake. Pamela fell in love with his sense of humour and she says that they can talk about their dreams of owning a home together. Brian got

remarried and Pamela did not hear from him again until their daughter, Megan, was six years old:

So she was outside, and all of a sudden she comes in and says mommy there's a man out there and he came up and said he's my dad. And I said go to your room and I went to the door and said go away. He says come on, I just want to see my kid...boom I'm in the court house getting a restraining order. I'm going to a lawyer...I'm on the phone, I'm getting educated and finding out who can help me...

Megan has been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and dyslexia; which creates difficulties at

school:

...she used to get picked on...because she's dyslexic, she was in special ed...she'd cry and say they were teasing her and calling her names and I'd just hold her and I'd try to talk to her and tell her...Don't give them that much power over you to hurt your feelings...but they didn't put her in enrichment because she couldn't read or write, and they had to write their own plays. I'm saying put her in. She'll tell me, I'll write it...So she takes it as I'm too stupid...and I'd get mad at them and say why do you even come to us and build her hopes up...

During primary school, Megan could not come home for lunch because her dad stalked her. Brian has attempted to abduct Megan and has been caught trying to take his children from another woman over the U.S. border. Pam thinks that Megan probably fears her father coming to get her. Pam has come home to Megan watching TV with a knife under her chair.

Pamela says that Megan was a “super kid” until “the hormones kicked in”. In grade three, Megan was suspended from school for violence. As a child, Pamela took Megan into a clinic for an assessment. They said that Megan said, “*Mommy talks, daddy hits, kids shut up. They don't talk.*” By grade eight, Pam had kicked Megan out of the house as a result of her anger and acting out:

...the end of grade 8 I kicked her out in May...She trashed the place...the coffee table...she just took it and threw the coffee table...She ripped things off the wall...I was saying you need to calm down, get in the car...she wouldn't get in the car, she ran away to her friend's house...she came back a couple days later and I was saying no this is unacceptable...And I called my mom and...I said I don't know what to do with this kid. And she said...It's all your fault...I freaked...and we packed my kid up and took her to my mother. Lock stock and barrel, and a rabbit as well. I said you think I'm such a bad mother...then you friggin' raise her...

Megan stayed with Pam's parents for a short while and then moved back in with Pam. Things were fine until Megan started hanging out with a “bad group”. Megan was charged with break and enter and shoplifting, and she continued to not listen to Pam's rules of the house. Pam

and Megan got in to an argument:

I said to her look, I am so frustrated with you. I can't take much more...and the next day she didn't come home that night because she stayed at a friend's. She didn't tell me or call me. She comes home the next day says oh I left so and so at so and so's house...I said look it, give me their numbers, I will phone them I will go get it. You are not getting the phone. And I whacked her and then we were fighting, and she's pretty good scrapper. So I said I don't like this, this is ridiculous. This is not who I am and if this is who you are, get fuck out of my house...I left the house, when I came back she was gone with a note...I'm at my friend's with a phone number.

Pamela says that she believes that “everybody is a good parent unless they abuse or neglect their children”. Pamela thinks that she has done the best she could do with Megan, and she sees her role as mother making Megan's life better than her own - just as her parents made her life better than theirs.

When Megan lived with her grandparents, Pamela's father hit Megan. Megan called the police but no charges were laid. Pamela admits hitting Megan last fall when they argued and Pamela asked Megan to leave home.

Pamela describes Megan as being artistic and having a “flair for drama”. Pamela recalls, that in second grade, they were going to put Megan in an enrichment program for plays because she was so dramatic. But the school reneged on this arrangement because Megan couldn't read and write and the program required kids to write their own plays. Pamela tried to make her daughter feel better, but she was really angry with the teachers for getting Megan's hopes up.

Pamela worries that Megan does not have a positive male role model in her life. She said that professionals have recently described Megan as “very male attention seeking” and “sexually oriented”. Pamela says she noticed this behaviour starting at a young age, and as Megan hit

puberty. Pamela would come home to boys in the house. Pamela said, "I always knew I would end up having a daughter pregnant at 16..."

Megan is now fifteen. This past year has been particularly difficult for Megan. She was hospitalised on New Years Eve for threatening suicide, and has been involved with a variety of residential mental health services. Megan has a history of depression, self-harm, and threatening suicide. Just recently, Pamela found a razor in Megan's room.

Chen

Chen does not have a current partner in her life. Chen has always liked children and she says she misses the times when her children were babies. Chen helps her kids with school and tries to help them learn, and she says she really enjoys reading to them. Chen's typical day is getting the kids off the school and getting ready for them to return home. She has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and her mom lives with her so that she can keep her two children at home. Her children were in a foster home while she was in the hospital.

She sees her two boys quite differently:

My older son, he's quieter than the second one and he's shy. Like my second son is more outgoing. He's not shy, he's not as quiet and that's a difference...the older boy, Daniel, he's really good at drawing. He draws really good dinosaurs with animals. He gets a book and copies and he's really good. Since kindergarten he's really good. Maybe he'll be an artist...

She worries whether her children have learning difficulties and will be able to handle school:

But I'm concerned though about whether he's going to have learning disabilities because his alphabet is all mixed up yet...Because all of a sudden he has problems. Or they're just behind a little bit...he had good schooling actually.

Chen had concerns about Daniel when he was an infant:

When I born him, he didn't want to eat, so I had to bring him back to the hospital. That's what made me have depression in the first place too because I was worried about him being in the hospital, if he was going to die, if they would be able to feed him. He wouldn't eat anything at all. And he was having jaundice, his face was so yellow.

Chen was only seventeen when she had her first child and needed lots of help to learn how to care for him:

My mom helped me take care of my first child and she took care of most everything. The second child I did for myself. But she usually would feed it, take a bath with him. My first child...I was living with her, but she was kind of like wasting it, because she's out doing most of the stuff...after having my first child and I don't know what to do, if I'd be able to raise it on my own but eventually when I came home the public health nurse came over and they helped me. They helped me how to prepare the bottles before feeding and how to make the formula. They helped me for about a year and that helped.

Susan

Susan's four children have different fathers. The first three men did not want the responsibility of children. When Susan's children were young, she tried to encourage a relationship between the kids and their fathers, but she no longer has contact with any of the men. Susan was nineteen years old when she had her son Adam and her relationship was over when Adam's father found out she was pregnant. Susan then moved in with Owen's father and that relationship ended when she discovered he was cheating on her. Susan was with Sarah's dad for three years, and he was abusive:

...It was off and on. He was there, he wasn't there, he was there...It was okay in the beginning. And then, you know, we just fight too much....a lot of pushing and shoving and that sort of stuff. One time I did [get seriously hurt]... I had hand marks around my neck...he got charged and he beat the charge. I called the cops but the cops actually laid the charges because I had marks.

Susan's youngest child was planned with her current fiancée, Nick. Nick has no previous children and wanted a child with Susan. Susan thinks they have a good relationship but things between them were tense when the Children's Aid Society removed the kids because her house was "full of dogs and dirt". Under the supervision order, Nick was required to attend an anger management group which he has almost finished and Susan went to various counsellors and programs. Once the kids were returned home, Susan and Nick got along better again. Money remains tight. They plan to be married once their finances improve.

Susan talks about having a lot of difficulties with the kids since they were put in foster care and returned to her. The kids feel they do not have to listen to Susan and their behaviours have regressed. Susan says her youngest Sarah uses baby talk. Before living in foster care, Sarah talked using sentences. The kids also had to get accustomed to living with one another again because they were not in the same foster placement. Susan finds supertime quite hectic because everyone is home and things are very chaotic. Susan says they both yell at the kids but she notices that yelling does not often work:

Everybody yells at their kids. I yell at them a lot, but yelling doesn't make them do anything any faster...His yelling is a little bit sterner than mine so they kind of just jump...My mother never smacked me...I used to get put over my dad's knee when I did something wrong...Nick was physically disciplining the kids...before... Just a smack, yeah, the same as I was doing

Susan is currently on maternity leave with her new daughter and is happy to have her kids back in the house. She wants to make sure they do not get taken away again. She talks about caring for her newborn and her three years old:

The last three nights she's been really good. She slept pretty much all night. But

before that yeah I was up in the middle of the night or up all night with her sometimes. Usually in the afternoons my daughter, she's three, if I can get her to sit quietly on the couch, she usually falls asleep.

Her two boys are the most rambunctious: "Very stressful because the boys fight a lot but they're boys, right. They just think nothing is fair in life because he has more cereal than I do or something." They acted out when she moved in with her current partner, Nick:

Well, in the beginning of our relationship they acted out a little bit. Like that was one of the CAS concerns because the kids had punctured holes in the walls. Now, I think it was jealousy...maybe the kids thought that he was taking me away from them right because we were only together for two months and they took apart their head board and it's got kind of like a half circle of little dowels at the end of it and they took that and they beat like a thousand holes in the walls and I'm pretty positive it had to do with jealousy right because they haven't done anything like that since.

The boys are also "special needs children":

Well, I had two boys that have always had special needs. [The eldest son] at first couldn't talk for a lot time so...I was able to get them...like because I was on mother's allowance at the time subsidy pays for it. Like it's all subsidized and because he was a special needs I was able to get him into a daycare without having to go to work or school...He was just partially deaf in his ears because I had tubes put in his ears when he was two and right after I did that he started talking a little bit more, you could understand him...when I was at the daycare the speech therapy said his tonsils looked a little too big...for his mouth. So, I got his tonsils taken out and after that...he started talking fine.

Susan talks about her other three children:

[Second boy] is a smart boy. The only thing he's got is his speech pronouncing S's and F's...but...we'll be sitting down here doing [first son's] homework and [second son] is giving him the answers...[First daughter's]...very smart. She was talking...full sentences at about 18 months...before [going into care] she was never scared of the dark. I always just put her to bed and closed the door and whatever. Now she screams if you shut her door...I don't know if when she went into care they just assumed that she's young, she probably sleeps with her door open and they just left it open. Now she can't have it shut.

Life in the house is stressful when everyone's at home:

Not so much during the day when the boys are at school but at night around suppertime it's pretty hectic because you've got them they just don't know how to play quietly, you know, they're yelling and screaming and fighting and boys are boys, right. They fight constantly...Being a mom...it's a good feeling. Like when I first had [first son] everybody kept saying how does it feel to be a mom, and I said well, when he starts calling me mom I'll let you know because I didn't feel like a mom, right, because he was only a baby. I was just looking after him, right. When he started calling me mom, you know...

Marie

Marie's first love was in high school. Marie said Ted he broke her heart, and her next boyfriend was Ted's friend Jim. Marie and Jim got married and moved to Alberta for ten years. Marie and Jim lived on a farm, in a nice house, but their relationship lacked intimacy. Once their daughter was born, things between them became even more distant:

Everything was going well...until we moved to the acreage and Kelly was born...in way I blame it [on] when Kelly was born but maybe it might have started earlier than that but I didn't really see it because when you're working and...you come home and you're tired so you don't really expect a whole lot from your husband...I used to tell Jim whenever we used to have conversations, you know, all I need is a little bit of tender loving care...

Marie felt resentful towards Jim's female friend that he remained in close contact with, but she was too afraid to be alone to leave the marriage until she met Dave. Marie left Jim and moved in with Dave; she later married Dave and Marie remains married to him.

When the kids were small, Marie was very involved in their school, she helped out in the kindergarten class. When Marie left Jim, she left the kids with him because she did not want to take them to an environment she was unsure of. Every second weekend Marie drove to pick the kids up for a visit. It was difficult because the kids were confused and caught in the middle of

Marie and Jim:

There were still some tough times because whenever I'd pick up the kids I'd see certain things that if I were at home, you know, they'd be better dressed or their hair would be combed...He didn't have the time.

After a while, the kids did not want to live with Jim, so Marie went to court. The results were joint custody between herself and Jim.

Marie also parented Dave's daughter, Laura, who lived with them. Laura was three at that time:

Laura was easy going at that age...I found her needing...a mom real bad...because she hadn't seen her mother for quite a few months.

When Laura was ten, her biological mother decided to take Marie and Dave to court to get custody of Laura. Marie and Dave agreed to send Laura to live with her mother:

...she was determined to get her daughter...we [were] tired of fighting, we [didn't have] any money...so we sent her back the same year Mike went back...it was supposed to be only a one year trial.

Living with her mother, Laura started to get into trouble: "school, attitude, fighting, going out all night, not coming back, sneaking out". Laura's mother could not handle her, so she sent her back to Marie and Dave. Marie and Dave continued to have problems with Laura, so they went to counselling. When this did not help, they sent Laura back to her mother's. Laura is currently living with her mother:

I feel that I'm a failure as a parent... I'm disappointed in Laura, disappointed in myself that I'm not able to...get her motivated...

During all this time, Marie's son, Mike, had moved in with her and Dave and they were having trouble with him. Mike would not do any chores, and he and Dave were not getting along.

Dave wanted Mike to move back in with Jim, and Marie felt she needed to stand by her marriage; so Mike moved back with his dad:

When Mike started...giving us problems...Dave did not want to deal with the issues...my kids aren't going to live with me the rest of my life, my husband is...And I want to keep this one...

Marie's kids, Kelly and Mike, are currently working with their dad; Kelly is in college and Mike is in high school.

Dave had given Laura the strap and she mentioned it to a friend at school. A child protection worker came to the house to talk to them. Their case was closed quite quickly.

Marie does not sympathize with the perspective that Laura has been traumatized by what has happened to her in her homes:

...the counselor said, she's traumatized with all the stuff that's gone on in her life. Like come on, it wasn't that bad...she was shuffled of course every second weekend; she had a different home; like how many...people that have that moved a lot. Yeah, you ended up with pretty near new friends not every year but close to it...it seemed when we moved a lot but you make new friends. Like people who have military lives have new friends on a regular basis. You don't see the people in military going crazy... you know, they're not traumatized. You know like and I don't know what went on at her mother's place so I don't know...Like she wanted to live there so bad to be pretty good stuff.

Julie

Julie lives in a small apartment with her three year old daughter and her newborn daughter. Her boyfriend who does not live with her is the father of her youngest. A neighbour called Children's Aid recently and her old child protection worker visited and said she would be coming back every week. Julie's relationship with the father of her oldest son Scott turned abusive when he was only a few months old:

When Scott was about six months old, I ended up in hospital because I was thrown across the room with a miscarriage...I was pregnant once again...with Blake...And then I was abused one too many times...told I was good for nothing, nobody would ever want me...I didn't even tell him I was pregnant with Blake...he eventually found out...we were going through court...I had intern custody and I moved into an apartment with my mother.

This arrangement did not work well:

I guess it was the postpartum depression...I started going downhill...giving my mom the rent. My mom spending it on other things so I lost my apartment...Children's Aid was called on me...my worker telling me I'm not getting the boy's back [her aunt had taken them for the weekend]...I started drinking...Blake was eight months old when they took him from me...all I did was drink and hang about with the wrong crowd for a while.

Julie gave her aunt custody of the two boys “almost a year ago”. Julie was asked if they were crown wards:

They were and then I thought because of having the girls that it would be best for them to stay with my aunt until I got a good job, place where I could support them all...[So there is a possibility the boys will come back?]...eventually yes...She's got full custody and I get them every second weekend. Well, I see them every weekend and weekdays anyway...they haven't been adopted, no...

When Julie was pregnant with her oldest daughter Michelle, she was obliged by Children's Aid to live at a “women 's shelter for young mothers...the hell house they called it”. She began having regular visits with her two boys during this time. She was tested for alcohol abuse a few weeks before Michelle, who is now three, was born and no future problems were foreseen. She quit drinking when she moved from her friend's house and Julie says that she now has a drink only at “Christmas, birthdays or whatever.”

Janet

Janet got married to a man when she was nineteen. This relationship lasted for three

years. Janet says that it was not a bad relationship; it just fell apart after giving birth to their daughter. Janet had discovered her husband had been unfaithful and she felt there seemed to be nothing to work towards. He has not remained a significant part of her daughter, Jenny's, life.

Janet's next relationship did not last long because of her boyfriend's drinking. When he drank, he turned violent, so Janet left him. The following relationship has been the longest relationship Janet has been in. Janet met Sam when she was twelve or thirteen years old and she dated him on and off until she moved in with Sam after her other two relationships:

I met him when I was 12 or 13 and we started dating on and off. He's 5 years older than I am. That lasted up until the time I moved to my dad's, at 14. And then he went his way and obviously I went mine and then when I came back, I think I was about 17 when I came back and he wasn't around. I think he had moved out west so there was no contact with him. And then I moved to [another Ontario city] to live with my ex-husband [Max] and we were together for about 6 years. When I left [city] in 1986, I came back and I'd heard through the grapevine that Sam was back in town, so I contacted him and we started seeing one another again on and off for about a year. Then we broke up and then I dated somebody else for 5 years. Broke it off with him and got back in contact with Sam and we started dating again. I can't remember what year it was, but we eventually moved in together. We lived together for on and off for 10 years.

Janet and Sam were getting along fine for about four years until his children from a previous relationship moved in:

Stupid me talked his sister-in-law into getting a phone number of where the kids were. She knew where they were. So we got this phone number and he called out there [Alberta] and started talking to them and then it was arranged that they'd come...they are Native children...I think they were living on the reserve at the time...with their mother and then it was arranged that we flew them here. All 3 of them here for 3 weeks. [They were] 14, 13 and 12, and Jenny would have been like 12 by then. What a nightmare...for kids that have never ever met their father, they expect an awful lot. We went into a lot of debt while they were here. Like a lot. Probably about \$7,000. Well probably close to \$2,500 just to fly them here and then you know they all needed stuff to go back to school and food while they were here, entertainment while they were here. Didn't take long. And then they

went back and 2 weeks later the oldest one decided that he was coming to live with us.

For the next several years, Janet and Sam had his children moving in and out of their house. Janet says it was a struggle to manage Sam's youngest son Bobby. Bobby has behaviour problems and learning disabilities and Janet says this was a challenge to her because she didn't know much about learning disabilities before meeting Bobby. After unsuccessfully requesting help from Children's Aid with Bobby, Sam lost his temper and hit his son. This resulted in a child protection investigation and Bobby ended up in a foster home for a couple of months and when he returned their case was closed at the agency. The family turmoil caused a lot of problems for Janet and Sam and also for Janet's daughter:

I ended up having to seek counselling. So did my daughter. The breakup with Sam and I. That was just more or less the icing on the cake.

Currently, Janet and Sam do not live together but they are still friends. Janet recently met a man on internet and she will be meeting him in person very soon.

Much of Janet's experience of family has come from her relationship with Sam. Max, Jenny's father, has not been in Jenny's life. Janet recalls that Max was a "doting father" when Jenny was born, and then he "discarded her like a piece of garbage". Janet said Max's treatment of Jenny "ripped her heart out" and she "probably still hates him for it to this day."

Jenny is now sixteen, and Janet says she did not see her dad for the first seven years of her life, and the past eight years have involved only yearly visits. Jenny is struggling with the break-up of Sam and Janet. She is absent from school, her grades are dropping and she's on anti-depressants. Janet describes her concern over some of the difficulties Jenny has faced:

...the beginning of the year she had a gang of girls threaten to kill her and just...it's just been a nightmare since she's been at that school. She's been there for 2 years and it's just...the teachers are very lax in wanting to help. I spent like 5 month trying to get hold of guidance counselor to ask them to take her out of advanced and put her in general. Oh don't worry about it, don't worry about it, don't worry about it. Oh yeah well when her marks are only 50 you know where she's not even passing I have a right to be concerned.

Jenny is also dealing with her dad having a new family, where she feels that she has no place:

...Well when Max moved in with his girlfriend, his girlfriend has two kids...He chose her two kids over his own flesh and blood. He can't and refuses to take time and effort to come and see her. I understand he lives 3 hours away who cares you know. If he wanted to see her bad enough he'd make the time and take the effort to do it. And he doesn't. So I get to deal with that and sometimes I'd just like to choke him and say you know like look at what you're doing to her. Can't you understand she needs you and wants you? Like we've had this conversation a million times and he just doesn't get it or chooses just to ignore it. The last time we had a conversation, he decided to get on the phone and cry to me why don't I have a relationship with my daughter? Well let's you know maybe is lack os communication. The fact that you never see her or talk to her too much...I said, you should have thought about that years ago when you chose to center your life around [new girlfriend] and her kids and now this new baby.

Sam continues to do things with Jenny and be a part of her life. Janet is focusing on getting Jenny back on track, happy and healthy again. She wishes that Jenny could accept the kind of relationship she has with her biological father and not let it bother her so much.

Janet recalls that when Jenny was younger they had a lot of fun together, going to the park and spending time together. Janet was happy to have stayed home with Jenny until she went to school because she taught her the alphabet, numbers, and how to print her name. Janet is proud of how smart Jenny is. Today, Janet describes her relationship with Jenny as having a little bit of tension right now, but she attributes this to Jenny being a teenager. Jenny doesn't talk to Janet

about her feelings much, but Janet says Jenny does open up to her therapist.

Donna

Donna moved in with her boyfriend when she was eighteen years old and they got married five years later, despite the problems in their relationship. After getting married, Donna says her partner became angrier and angrier:

...After a few years he seemed to like his beer a little more than in the beginning and as the years went by the more angrier he seemed to get...to the point where in the end it got really, really bad...I didn't have enough courage to actually leave him until about six months before I did it slowly, very slowly...In the March prior to that I got a job out at [shopping mall] out at [clothing store] and when I got that job my life changed because I started having my own life, meeting people and making my own money and starting to have a life whereas before that I had no life, only with him and his friends. So, when I started making new friends I ended up getting very close...with one girl that worked there...and instead of going home at night I would always go there and stay [at her apartment] as long as I could and...

Donna got up the courage to leave the marriage and it ended badly:

I took the car home, got my other car and went over to my girlfriend's and I picked her up and we went out for a while and on our way back I was going through the parking lot of the mall and he'd come right behind us and was squealing his tires and I stopped and got out. He got out and he started yelling and screaming and during that time he blurted out that he had have an affair with the girl I was with one night while I was at work. I just went nuts but before he told me that he had grabbed me by the neck, threw me over the car, that type of thing but then when he told me about...what he did with my girlfriend...I just couldn't believe it

A year and a half later, Donna met Arnold and Donna became pregnant. Donna says that Arnold was not ready to be a father; he still wanted to have fun:

...I wanted to be a good mother and I wanted to provide a life for my son and I had very high expectation for that and...even before that I was still very responsible with my money and bills and everything always came first before any toys or social life...He didn't want to be responsible for, you know, bills and what

not...And he wanted to spend a lot more time with his buddies [rather] than be home with a wife and kid.

Donna and Arnold split up when their son, Luke was almost a year old. When Luke was two years old, Donna met Mark and they have been married for eleven years. Mark is very irresponsible with money:

[Mark's] certainly not abusive, by no means. He seldom drinks. You know, he drinks sociably but not much at all. I've never seem him drunk, never. He doesn't like getting drunk. He doesn't even see the sense of getting drunk...He's very hard working and responsible as far as work ethic goes but when it comes to common sense and responsibility with money forget it...his philosophy is...I know we have no money but I'm not going to live my life without having fun either...So, even though he may be overdrawn on his bank account...he might still take out fifty dollars or something like that and go to play golf or something...even though, you know, some bills aren't paid...and I don't agree with that...

If Mark's irresponsible behaviour continues, Donna says that she does not see them making their "60th wedding anniversary".

Donna's son, Luke, has always been very "active". By the time he was five or six years old, they were involved with a children's mental health center, working on behavioural strategies and giving him medication. Donna kept in contact with the school to attempt to monitor his medication, but she did not get any help from the school. Luke's behaviour continued to spiral downward. By the end of seventh grade he was seeing a psychiatrist who put him on new medication. Donna recalls that his problems at school did not get better, rather, they got worse. Luke was getting more frustrated and angry. The psychiatrist prescribed him anti-depressants.

Donna recalls:

But as the days went on all I could see was that kid getting more and more isolated, more depressed, more angry, more hurt and...So, for several weeks leading up to this every time we'd see [psychiatrist] Luke would say I want to go

in the hospital...because he was getting to the point where he would cry himself to sleep at night thinking...when are we going to find a doctor to help us, mom? I want to be normal and this and that and going on and it was killing me...he kept talking about wanting to die. I want to die...

This prescription did not help Luke and Donna knew she had to do something drastic:

Donna arranged to have Luke placed in the hospital. Donna thought Luke would finally get the help he needed, but it turned out to be Donna's "worst nightmare":

Luke called me I don't know how many times [the next] day crying mommy, get me out of here...I said I'll be out there 5:30 on the dot, I promise and he kept saying that all the other kids got to go home on weekend passes, that he was going to be there by himself...It was breaking my heart and here I didn't know but I could have been up there all day with him. They didn't tell me. They just gave me this stupid schedule...I finally get up at 5:30 and the kid is just flying higher than a kite. He still hasn't had no medication. They never gave him anything at night to sleep...I noticed he had bandages on his hand. I asked him what happened. He said one of the other kids attacked him...

Donna took Luke out of the hospital and changed his school. Luke continued to have problems with school and drinking:

...a gang of kids that hang out in the streets...initiated him to the point where we're trying to lay charges...they made him push a penny down the sidewalk downtown and while he was doing that they were kicking him and hitting him with a skateboard and whatnot...He come home on Friday at lunchtime pissed to the eyeballs...He was [13] at the time. He just turned 14...He could have killed himself.

Currently, Donna is trying desperately to get Luke into an appropriate program:

I am trying desperately. I've had my application in for [program] since before the end of the school year last year...I always get the run around from them. She's told me to call [children's mental centre] again, try and get my name reactivated there...she told me while I was there to try and talk to [psychologist] personally. Well, she didn't have time for me that day and I left a message for her to call me immediately, ASAP. I still haven't got a call back...

Donna says that Luke is going through a really rough time right now and she thinks he

needs his father. Luke is fourteen and he can't get himself out of bed in the morning, remember to take his pills, or organize his books. She remarks that, "he can't do anything for himself". Donna also says that Luke is a "smart kid" who has trouble learning. She thinks that with assistance, Luke could be more successful at school.

They received a visit from Children's Aid after her son entered the suicide unit at the hospital. Despite her hope for some useful assistance from them, she was disappointed and her case was open only briefly.

Recently, Luke started grade nine in a modified program and seems to be doing better, but he has skipped a few classes and was beaten up at school. Luke told Donna that the "penny incident" really humiliated him, and he really wants to be more popular at school. Donna describes how her relationship with Luke is deteriorating:

...my son and I are ending up hating each other and it's coming to the point now where I'm even considering foster care because I'm terrified to see him coming home from school every day because from the time he gets home from school until the time he goes to sleep at night it's just a disaster..he's very needy and very demanding and he's also developed this attitude that no matter who it is, where he is, what it is or how it is or whatever, as far as he's concerned every one should do as he says when he wants...

Rebecca

Rebecca and her husband Matt come from different backgrounds. Rebecca says that Matt grew up in a very "relaxed" family and that did not spend time in church. Whereas, Rebecca's family was strict and religious. Today, Matt and Rebecca both value the role their faith plays in their lives. Rebecca enjoys the intimacy of being married and having a best friend around all the time. When asked what makes her life good, Rebecca says it's the same things that makes her life

bad: her husband and children. Family is very important to Rebecca. She has close relationships with her extended family, and she spends most of her vacation days with family.

Rebecca fondly recalls the birth of their first child:

...I just adored Anne. I remember, being at home one time, we went home to visit, and ah...now whether it was my older sister, that we kind of have a running battle, but I remember, I was with Anne all the time. And, my sister, wanted to hold her, so that was fine. And then she went outside with her. And I thought, how dare her, leave the house with my daughter. A little bit possessive. And then, I was pregnant with ah...my second child, when Anne was about five months old. I remember thinking...you know, I love Anne so much. Am I going to love this child as much? And then he was born, no problem.

Rebecca explains herself as “Mother” first and foremost. She describes the experience of having children:

...They're darling little angels when they're sleeping. Um...just seeing them, you know, you see the best and the worst of yourself. Your personality. You know. Between the six of them, I think they've got...all the worst, and all the best of me. And you know, they're funny at times. You just...have you cracking up, laughing away. They're really fun to be with. And then they're...little annoyance, at times. They know how to push your buttons pretty good.

Rebecca says that she enjoys being a parent, but some days it was too much to handle for her, because the children came so close together. Rebecca thinks that she has been a “fairly good” parent to her children. She is proud of her children because they have strong morals, and show respect for others. She tries to spend time with her children, and she worries that maybe she works too much. Rebecca says that there is probably room for improvement in her parenting techniques. She describes how she is aware that she parents a lot like her own parents did:

I am very strict with the kids. And maybe...maybe I'm not fair, cause I don't listen to their side of the story. But I mean, I grew up, under that, what your parents say, you do. You don't mouth back to them, you don't even question them. I mean...simple thing, like ah...two of the kids had a day off, because a

transformer blew at their school, so they stayed home for the day. And I said, well, you get to do chores. You get to help out. And their comment was, well, why should we? It's not our fault that we got a day off school. Excuse me, my march break was spring cleaning. Like, that's what we did. And you had no questions about...like, you had no questions about not doing it.

Rebecca and Matt both believe in using spanking to discipline a child until the age of eight, then they use grounding and removal of privileges. Rebecca says that the teen years have been a “roller coaster” for her family. Rebecca describes her thirteen year old son as “selfish”, and that he always wants his own way. Rebecca’s oldest daughter Anne has moved out. At seventeen, Rebecca says that Anne is “coming into her own”. Anne criticizes her dad a lot for his drinking and Rebecca feels she has to defend her husband. Rebecca thinks that Anne resents having had to take care of her siblings and “protect” them from their father’s drinking. However, Rebecca says that her relationship with Anne is quite good. She describes their relationship as more of a friendship now, than a traditional mother-daughter relationship. Rebecca suspects that Anne may have witnessed more of Matt’s drinking than her.

Because of their work schedules, Rebecca feels she has been “single parenting” for the past five years. Rebecca recalls going through a period with the kids where she had “no control”, and she was tired all the time:

I would see the kids behaviour. Whether it's the age, or...them going into their teen years. Um...but I just felt like I had no control anymore. And...you know, they haven't gotten into any major trouble, thank goodness. I dealt with things one day at a time...Physically, I was exhausted all the time. Emotionally, I was..I don't think that I felt like I could be there for the kids, emotionally, when they had a problem, cause I was just too tired to deal with anything myself.

There was a time when Rebecca left Matt:

...I'd walk into the bedroom, and you could just smell the booze on him. And

sometimes, I wouldn't even bother sleeping in there...When we were living at the trailer park, you know, Matt went to his single friend's trailer. And he wouldn't show up for a 24/36 hour period. Cause he kept drinking, playing on the computer. He was never violent...I actually left him. I left with the kids...it wasn't that long ago, it was three years ago. It was the weekend we were supposed to move into the house. The kids and I stayed here, for about a month, by ourselves. ...I was such an emotional wreck, I didn't know how to deal with anything anymore.

Rebecca is happier now and Matt and Rebecca are working on how to discipline the kids:

Yeah. I think it's going better. I mean, you still fall into your old patterns of behaviour, but...and the things started to relax...I think it's lot better. He's um...he's a real yeller at the kids. And, he was getting degrading, sometimes, when he was yelling at them. Sometimes he'd be very degrading with them. And, he stopped a lot of that. Every once in a while, it slips out. And ah, he tries to spend time with them.

Matt has started drinking again and Rebecca is very conflicted over whether to tell her child protection worker. Their daughter called the Children's Aid Society when she heard her dad was drinking again. This is the second time their case has been open. The first investigation was around Matt hitting their son Jacob in the face with a wire. This resulted in Matt being asked to leave the home for about a year.

Jennifer

Jennifer and Tony have been together for four years. Jennifer and Tony went through a period where they became very jealous of one another and began fighting almost daily. They went to couples counselling and Jennifer says that their relationship is improving:

Well, now we're getting along way better. Like we talk better to each other, doing more family things like swimming. Rachael is in dancing. So, we're doing a lot more things. We go for like walks or things like that...We've both went to couples counselling together and it's way better now because we listen to each other more and if I want to go someplace, he'll let me.

Jennifer and Tony enjoy going to the movies and to bingo together. Their child, Rachael, was born premature when Jennifer was sixteen and stayed in the hospital for two months after birth. Jennifer really enjoys being with Rachael who is now two years old. Jennifer gets very involved in participating in different activities with her daughter. They regularly go to the park and other community events. Jennifer recalls when she and Tony took Rachael to see firecrackers:

I was sitting on Tony's lap and Rachael was sitting on my lap. She was laying in my arms like this. I had the blanket on, I had her wrapped up. My hands were freezing. I had to make sure her hands were underneath. I was just like shaking...And I said I don't care if I'm freezing. I'm making sure she's like not cold....I didn't care if I froze. I'm like I know I'm here shaking making sure she is warm...

Jennifer says that Rachael behaves well at home but she doesn't play well with other kids. Jennifer has recently noticed Rachael is playing better now with her cousins who live next door. Rachael has had problems with her speech. She was using a few words, but not stringing enough words together for a child her age. Jennifer began taking Rachael to a resource centre that offers childcare and speech therapy. Jennifer was surprised by how small Rachael was compared to other children her age. Jennifer thinks that socializing with other children has helped Rachael with her speech as she can now string two words together.

Jennifer recalls that she had trouble with Rachael when she got her back from her foster placement:

When I first brought her home, I couldn't do anything. Like I couldn't go anywhere. It was hard for me to cook or do the dishes or anything because she'd be holding my leg. She'd be like really clingy like I could like walk with her sticking to my leg. She was like clinging to that for like a long time. Like if I leave or anything or come back, automatically she wants up. I don't mind that,

but like for an hour, constant mom, mom, mom. Like constantly and she doesn't want nothing, just wants me...And everywhere I go she had to go and things like that. But all of the sudden she started throwing temper tantrums. Like if I don't give her something she wants then she's on the floor like kicking and screaming and all that...It's hard but I won't give in because that's just teaching her that when I give in that 'oh, if I do this, I'll get what I want'.

Things are getting easier and Jennifer's goal is to encourage Rachael to go to school:

Well, like that Rachael would grow up happy and live in a nice place. Like learn respect and morals and things like that. She has a good life and she's happy...and has children and all that, goes to school. I hope she goes to school. She will be going to school...I want to teach her math.

Jennifer and Rachael spend time with Tony in the evenings. Jennifer would like to have another baby, but does not think it is a good idea due to the involvement of the Children's Aid Society:

So, if I moved out then I can like draw a better routine and, you know, when I say no, I can actually like mean...I would like to have [another] baby right now but I'm not going to because of Children Services. I don't know, then they'd be on my back even more. So, I'm not going to bother. Not right now. I'm going to wait until I'm like moved out, settled down, I have a job, and Rachael is in school and that.

Children's Aid has been involved since Jennifer gave birth to Rachael when she was sixteen. After a home inspection, Rachael was placed in a foster home for about six months and there is still a supervision order in place that Jennifer hopes will end soon.

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn and Dan were married in 1984. Kaitlyn went to university for a few months but quit after pressure from Dan. They had a good marriage that included camping trips, riding dirt bikes, and seadoos. Dan was diagnosed with cancer in 1994 and he died in 1998. Kaitlyn had a terrible time coping with her loss:

I think I was working on autopilot and because it's a great loss. And then the disciplining of the children and I kind of let them get away with lots of things because I felt guilty that they had lost their dad. And so they kind of took advantage of that too, as children tend to do. The only thing I had to do were things I had to do. Like when I ran out of clothes you had to do laundry, you know. No dishes left to eat off of, you had to do dishes type deal.

It has been three years since Dan's death and Kaitlyn is starting to put her life back together again. She is feeling better and has met a "gentleman friend".

Following Dan's death, Kaitlyn had difficulty with her parenting:

It's tough. You try to listen to them, you know, but you're going through your own pain and they're going through their pain. Meals were more easy like let's go out here to eat or let's go to [fast food restaurant] or something like that because I couldn't be bothered to cook so and that also wasted a lot of the money too.

Kaitlyn's son, John, is her "problem child". She describes:

Well, besides taking my car, the other thing that happened in the house, being too lazy to go downstairs, he actually stood at the top of the stairs once and urinated to the bottom of the stairs in the basement, which did not impress me much. Just starting to hang out with the wrong group and, you know, a lot of people were not allowed in the house because of the things John was doing, like Erin's friends weren't allowed in the house because of things he was doing...

Adjusting to medication was difficult for John:

The first time he went through grade nine and then [the ADHD drugs] started to cause psycho-social personality changes in him, really bad. And that kind of blew his whole year for him, because he was passing everything up until that point. Then he went off the drug and he changed back and has never been on medication since...He's still repeating grade nine...He's in it for the third time...I mean what do you do with a boy that has ADHD and is hitting puberty and plus his dad dying on him. I mean that's three big things to throw at a kid so, you know.

John is now in military school financed by a family inheritance and seems to be doing well.

Kaitlyn says that John has been given a leadership role at his school, and he is doing well with it.

After her dad's death, Kaitlyn's daughter Erin became really "clingy". Kaitlyn said that Erin would often sleep with her, but she has stopped doing that now. Erin is now doing well, she gets good grades in school and is involved in extracurricular activities:

She's getting better marks in school this year. She actually sits down and does homework. Everybody, like my mother and myself or whoever is here we help her out and get her doing it. She's getting much more polite again and things like that. She's a pretty outgoing kid so she always had her friends and out doing stuff...But Erin was more of an outgoing kid. She was more with her friends and did things. They lived around the same place we did so we were out playing or she'd go over to her friends or they'd come over. Yeah. She was always a pretty good kid.

Erin's main difficult is feeling lonely:

She's having problems at this moment, a little bit of abandonment feelings because John is away at school all the time, I'm working these weird shifts...she's gone through counselling through the school board a couple times, through music and art and whatever they do.

Kaitlyn and Erin spend enjoy spending time together:

I got Erin involved in figure skating. Actually we both figure skate now. We go twice a week and skate for the time being...we take figure skate lessons. And it's very good. I'm also on the board of directors there for the Skating Club, which is just a new thing...And it's also good for Erin, to raise her self esteem, her self confidence, you know, get her involved in a sport...

Children's Aid became involved over concerns that John might be behaving inappropriately with Erin. These allegations proved not to be true but Kaitlyn agreed to continue on a "volunteer" basis with the agency around concerns over her depression associated with her husband's death and the unkept state of her house.

Amy

Amy was married in 1986 and a year later had a daughter, Lisa. A year later, Amy and her

husband Ed were separated. Ed was cheating on Amy and was very “emotionally abusive” to her; he was controlling and pushed her around. Amy’s next partner, Carl, said all the “right things” to her. Slowly, Carl alienated Amy from her friends and family and, in a very short time, he turned abusive:

He got charged with criminal counts of assault against me..I was hospitalized...He beat me up so bad one time that he broke all the...blood vessels in my eyes...I had just gotten out of the hospital where I had major surgery done on my stomach and the night that I come home he threw a scalding cup of coffee on me, pushed me down the stairs...and he bit my shoulder...He was a very bad alcoholic and I told my mom was going on...my mom and dad a week later showed up in the middle of the night with a U-Haul truck and I waited until they pulled in the driveway and I woke Carl up and I said you’ve got to go my mom and dad are here and I’m leaving...

Amy stayed away from Carl for a year and he managed to convince he had changed so she went back to Carl, however, it did not work. Amy continues to get “shivers” when she thinks of him:

I’d go to sleep and all of the sudden I’d feel somebody get into bed with me...I would lock my doors...He would smash out windows...and I would call the police and...every single time they were the ones that charged him...my whole house was trashed...My daughter collected...music boxes...They were all smashed...He had chopped up my kitchen table...I called the police.

Amy says that when she met Phil and it was “love at first sight”. Phil had come from an abusive relationship and had three children who he stayed home to care for. Finances were getting tight with Amy and Phil living apart, so they decided to combine their families. It was difficult for Amy because Phil’s children “took out all their anger they felt towards their mother” on her:

...and I said to Phil...they’re your kids and you’re going to look after them...they really didn’t want Phil and I together...they were going to do whatever it took and

they went through that for about two and a half years where...I would come into a room and they would pretend I didn't exist...

Phil preferred to not know what was happening with the kids:

Phil has always been great around the house...but...I felt that I had to do it all emotionally...Phil does not deal with anything emotional so he just sweeps it under the carpet and says tomorrow will be a better day, deal with it...

Things were getting harder with the kids:

...things were still getting very progressively worse with the...two oldest girls...Liz is now 18 and Keri is 16. And Liz left home when she was 15...She just went from place to place...Finally she settled in with another family so it was okay...some of the stress disintegrated...Liz was gone that time for about a year and when she came back, the other daughter started...really badly...Chad, who I have yet to talk about...doesn't remember much of his life with his mom...yet he still has that abandonment issue...My daughter Lisa, she's the opposite. Ed comes to the door and she says, you're not a very good dad...Chad's daddy...does everything with me and until you do the things you're supposed to do, I'm going to spend my weekends with Phil...Tiffany is the same personality, very strong, she says what she's got to say and...not in the way Keri does...Keri is walking down the street and there's a fat lady, she'll look at the fat lady and say are you ever fat, lady. Like it's embarrassing to be with her because she's so verbally assaultive but...their mom was very verbally and physically abusive to them...

With all the chaos in the household, Amy had difficulty relating to her own daughter:

...Lisa, she's enough to drive you insane...She's an in your face kid...Everybody hates me, nobody likes me...things got so bad at one point with Phil's kids, I actually had to allow my daughter to go live with my mother for a year to try and get Phil's kids under control and that didn't really help...I didn't exist to my mother anymore, it was just Lisa, Lisa. And I'd think that sounds stupid, you're an adult, you know?

Two years later, Amy and Phil separated because the “pressure was too much”. Amy and

Phil did get back together and they decided Phil would stay home and Amy would work:

...things got worse with me home with the kids...I finally decided to be the one to go to work and Phil stayed home...that worked out a lot better. It meant that we lived on a lot less because you know women make lower wages than men...

Despite all the difficulties with the family, Amy loves Phil's kids like her own. She says that she values being open and honest with her children. She believes this is especially important in a blended family.

Amy says that she and Phil have different philosophies regarding how to parent. Amy and Phil discipline the kids differently. Amy explains:

...I truly believe, especially at 5, 6, 7, 8 a spanking gets their attention but I am unable to do it...Phil will hit them in the head and then I'll have to bitch, don't hit them in the head, you'll turn them into retards. I think with 16 and 18 year olds it's absolutely of no value to hit them...they're young adults. How would he like it if he went to work and somebody smacked him for not doing his job right?...When they're younger you do it to get their attention...when they're older, you're just inflicting pain...[Phil] was raised in a way that physical discipline was very much but not to the point where they overused it so he finds it to be positive...

Amy tells Phil in private that she sometimes thinks he is too harsh with the children. Amy doesn't want to be physical with the children like her mother was with her. She is "paranoid" that she will be a failure as a mom. She says she wants to prove everyone wrong and be a good mom to the five children. Amy says that she wants to be, "the best parent I can."

Amy and Phil are still together and Amy believes they are getting along well. Phil was involved with the Children's Aid in the Maritimes where Amy claims that the children's mother was abusive to her kids. As soon as they decided to live together, they began getting inquiries from Children's Aid. Amy asked unsuccessfully for help from the agency several times and things got worse afterwards. They ended up requesting that their daughter Keri be taken into care because Phil was afraid he might abuse her. Keri has run away several times and has been brought home drunk in a police cruiser. She has also really struggled at school. Amy notes that Keri was also

the most helpful child around the house. Amy thinks much of Keri's difficulties stem from the fact that she feels abandoned by her biological mother. Amy thinks that all of Phil's children have struggled with dealing with the fact that their mom left them:

The kids are getting older so some of it's getting easier. But now because they didn't get the help they needed then, they're going to carry baggage into their grownup lives and that's really sad. You know, it's really sad that children have to grow up and not be able to reach out and get the help that they need to become productive young people...and you know those two girls are very unproductive. They don't do well in school. They turn their nose up at authority at all costs. They're not loyal because they don't feel like their mother was loyal to them so why should they be loyal to the rest of the world? It's getting a little bit better and I'm not saying the girls don't love me or I don't they do but it could have been so much better, you know.

Sandy

From the age of twenty-one until twenty-four, Sandy lived with a man who was abusive:

I lived with him...He drank constantly. He would go away on the weekends, he would smoke marijuana...It just got to the point where he would...be very, very abusive...threatening to throw me down probably a flight of 14, 15 steps. It almost happened...

Sandy went back to her mom's house for a short time before she moved in with a guy for one night who tried to stab her. Sandy went back to her mom's house and met Derrick when she was twenty-four and they married when she was twenty-six years old.

The first two years of their marriage was "dreadful" because Sandy says she could not cope with being married:

We went to a marriage counsellor...even though I was married and I was so happy...I couldn't cope...with being married...I've had something taken away from me...I have never, ever been able to regain back any of my sexuality until after I married Derrick and when we had problems, it was basically due to sexual..stuff...

Derrick also had issues he had to deal with:

He was going through court case with his ex-wife when I met him...He had a son that died. His wife had stabbed the baby when he was six month old...His father would drink constantly and...Derrick...would get punched in the nose. He had his nose broken a few times. He's had all kinds of things happen to him...his mother would drink too...I think he said he was 16 when his mom...died of bone marrow cancer. So, it was a very hard thing for my husband...to deal with losing his mother at 16 and of course being in the house alone with his father was not so great...

Sandy and Derrick are still married and Sandy is very happy to be sharing her life with

him:

...if I didn't have a husband like Derrick or anything, I'm sure that my life...wouldn't be good at all. I mean I would probably be rock bottom...it uplifts you in life when you can sit down and chat about things...I have a husband who is very dedicated and when we took our vows it was like he married me forever or forget it. I don't ever want to back out my marriage...I feel that I have a very stable marriage...

Derrick had really wanted a child, however Sandy was unsure. Sandy was afraid to treat her children the way she had been treated as a child. When Sandy ended up pregnant she was ecstatic, however, at thirty-eight weeks she miscarried her baby. Sandy and Derrick went through difficult time and they attended grieving classes. Some time later, Sandy and Derrick decided to have another baby:

Macy was born [in] October...It was wonderful, I couldn't believe it...the child came flying out and my brother was there and Derrick was there and my mother was there...it was so wonderful...

Sandy recalls that Macy was a difficult baby and was later diagnosed with ADHD:

She never slept through the night until she was two. We had a problem with her ongoing with ear infection ever since she was very little. Every time I laid her down she would cry...I would be lucky if I got four hours of sleep and I was working 60 hours a week...I have practically raised Macy at nights all alone...I finally had to give up my job on the second year...I'm really, really depressed and

everything is starting to get to me...So, I quit my job...And then I went to computer classes and I upgraded myself and it was great...Macy at six months old was put on hydro chlorate which is a drug...to make her sleep. And it never worked. When we went through ten bottles of that and she barely slept...and...well, she was just recently diagnosed with ADHD so we figured she's had that since she's been very young...

Sandy is always trying to help Macy in various ways:

...the book I'm reading, "The Explosive Child" is very, very descriptive of what I do go through with her...There are different cases with different children. There are some which get very violent, which I have had from my daughter. I actually had a baseball thrown down at me...it's very hard thing to...cope with...I've done a lot of disciplinary that they've asked me to do and still I'm finding it very, very difficult...It's not that I believe I have an evil child...It's just I'm having a hard time controlling my child at times. She can be very, very loving, she can be very affectionate, she can be very quiet but there are those exploding moments that she does have that are very, very traumatic...

Despite their struggles, Sandy feels blessed to have Macy in her life:

She's a very beautiful child. I feel that I'm very blessed to have her...I lost my first one and you don't realize how lucky you are until that happens to you...Just to be able to have her...is a blessing...I have a child I love very much...

Sandy's involvement with Children's Aid was very brief when Sandy called to complain about her daughter being sexually molested by her niece. When this could not be substantiated the case was closed.

Amber

At 13, Amber was raped and became pregnant. The child was put up for adoption, and Amber has not seen him since. Amber says that this child is a "big piece of her heart" and she is still hurt about having to give him away. When people ask her how many children she has, she always says four, including her first born, because she says she knows he will be around someday.

When Amber moved to Alberta, she met Andrew and they moved in together:

...and I ended up getting pregnant, with my first daughter [Kathleen]...and we stuck it out that I was still living with friends and their parents and we built our money up. Like Andrew, he dropped out of school and went out and got a job, an apprenticeship job...Because he was raised, you know, where you get a girl pregnant, you stick it out. You know, they come from a Catholic background too, like me and it's like you don't give the baby up, you don't have an abortion or anything. And we stuck it out.

Amber and Andrew had two children together. Amber stayed at home with their child and Andrew worked outside the home. Amber's younger sister needed a place to stay so she moved in with Amber and Andrew temporarily. Amber was pregnant with her second child when she found out that Andrew and her sister had slept together:

Now I was pregnant with Chris, my second one in the relationship. I went down to Saskatchewan to visit my stepfather. I was only gone for a week and when I came back I found out she [sister] had slept with Andrew. I tried to stick it out, tried to work it out and it didn't work. It didn't feel right. On his part it was an accident because him and I never drank. After we had the kids we never drank, partied, nothing. So, I guess she got into a bottle of wine, she talked him into going to the liquor store and got a bottle of wine and it went from there...

Shortly after her second child was born, Amber left Andrew because she could not get over his infidelity. They were fighting constantly and Amber felt it was harmful to the kids. Amber and Andrew remain friends.

A year after the relationship ended, Amber met Wayne. Amber and Wayne were married for eleven years. Seven years into the relationship, Wayne cheated on Amber with Andrew's girlfriend. Both Andrew's girlfriend and Amber ended up pregnant with Wayne's children. Amber gave birth to Erin prematurely:

I was five months [pregnant] when [Erin] came along. Yeah, we had to get flown to [Alberta city]...Four months...they put me in the Ronald McDonald house because of the situation, you know, with Erin with her heart and it wasn't properly developed. Her stomach wasn't developed, you know, she had no nails,

no hair. Her eyelids were like paper thin, you could see her eyes and everything. Wayne came down and see me and I ended up tossing him out of the hospital. Get away from me, you know? He showed up, he was drunk, you know, he had just come from the strip joint and he comes to see his newborn and it's like go away.

Amber recalls watching Erin for months while she was in the hospital and the doctors were still unsure if Erin would survive:

...the doctor says well, it doesn't matter, 50-50 either way. He let her go home and she pulled through. Like I slept on the couch for months with her on my chest and I wouldn't let her go. Erin and I are very, very close.

As Erin's condition stabilized, Amber made the decision to leave Wayne:

...I up and left. I had enough because like our relationship started getting very abusive. Wayne started slapping me around and...even on our wedding night he slapped me around, you know. It's all I've ever known is men slapping me around up until about a year ago or so...

Amber started dating Adam and she was with him for five years; they broke up due to his drinking:

...but he drank all the time at home and he would get authoritative with the kids and like I ended up losing two children moving back to their father because they couldn't handle it.

Amber's two children from Andrew went to live with him because of Adam's drinking.

Erin was living with her father - Wayne.

Four or five years later, Amber met Alex through a mutual friend and they believe they were "meant for each other":

Alex and I both believe that we're meant for each other. It's like we'd sit down and talk sometimes and he'd go 'do you believe in fate?' Yeah, destiny and soul mates. It's like we can read each other you know, even though we can fight like cats and dogs at the best of times, we always end up sitting down and talking about it in the end any way...

Alex had been in many relationships where he has been cheated on, so Amber sometimes feels like she has no “freedom”. Amber plans to marry Alex in the future:

I know he bought me a diamond ring...When we were arguing and that he threw it in my face and I looked at him and laughed and said I already knew anyways...I'm in no hurry for it. He knows my goal and my dream is to be married. I've never walked down the aisle. You know. He knows that's a dream for me. It's one of my goals in life is to be married, have a home, finish my education and then from there who cares...ride away in the sunset on the bike.

Amber's son Chris has ADHD and started to get rebellious, when he was around twelve years old. Chris's behaviour got worse when Adam moved in. One night he stayed out overnight and the police had to be called to find him. Amber said that she was surprised by this behaviour because her son had been well-behaved and they had a very close relationship. Amber has ideas about what may have been going on her son at that time:

...it's behaviour problems. You know, he's angry, I made him move to Ontario, changed his life, changed his school, his friend, you know, and then there's a new man in my life and I started getting counselling because I had blocked out so much of my childhood. And I started having flashbacks and just acting irrational and I started drinking again and started to get into the drugs and because I didn't know what was happening with me and finally I had a big breakdown and ended up in the hospital.

Erin is thirteen years old and has been bounced back and forth between Amber and Wayne:

...where her father gets all mad and frustrated at me and take her back...she's going to get all screwed up in the head from it...Since we've been to court [visitation] is every second weekend...You know, I'd phone up and say hey, there's a good movie on, you know, could I pick her up and take her out for dinner and movie because we do that a lot, I take her out a lot and do things.

Amber feels strongly that she doesn't want Erin to go through what she went through

growing up. She says that she is just establishing a relationship with her own mother, and she doesn't want her children to do the same. Amber wants to maintain a good relationship with her children now. She makes sure to let her kids know she loves them, no matter how many mistakes they may make.

A major fight with her son brought Children's Aid into her home after she threatened suicide. For a period of time, she was not allowed to see her daughter. She finds it very hard to listen to "a 13 year old mouthing off at her." Amber feels her family does not have a normal life because of the agency involvement that she thinks will go on for another year.

Amber says that she enjoys taking Erin out and baking and doing crafts together. She is happy that Erin is proud of her Native heritage. Amber thinks that much of Erin's behaviour problems stem from the fact that she wants to live with Amber, rather than her dad and step-mom. She feels that by taking her daughter into care, the CAS has ruined her relationship with her daughter:

My daughter and I are very close and because of the situation it put a big rift between us too and I've got to rebuild that again. You know, it's come to the point where my daughter just lays on the couch and doesn't want to do a thing. You know, and if I ask her hey, come and help me do the dishes and she'll put a stink up. She never used to that ever...they fought me tooth and nail, the whole family against me to get her and now that she's having a behaviour problem they don't want her. I'm the one who has to take her and fix all this up.

Two of Amber's kids are grown up now, Kathleen is twenty-two and Chris is twenty years old. Amber is a grandma and loves it. Amber feels judged by the social worker for Erin's behaviour. She feels that Erin's behaviour has a lot to do with her age and Amber thinks she should get some credit for raising her other two children well:

She's 13 so she's going through that. I'm trying to explain to the social worker like I went through two other children through the same thing. I know how to handle that. The other two are fine. You know? It's like yeah, okay, my son may do a little drugs here and there. He knows better now around me. But my oldest daughter doesn't even drink, she doesn't even smoke cigarettes. I think I did pretty good...They have a good outlook on life. You know, I've taught them that, you respect people around you. And if you treat them good you'll get the same thing back you know. And I've taught them their Native values too. You know, it's like what else do you want me to give? What else do you want me to give? You know, you can only give so much.

Karen

Karen was with her son's father for a few months, however, when she became pregnant with Jeremy, he left and wanted nothing to do with her. Karen said she managed fairly well being a single mom because she had support from friends and the Native community. She did not receive support from her adoptive family:

...not so much my parents, because at that time, I wasn't even on talking terms with my parents...Like, I started getting in contact with them, maybe...ah...about five years ago, I started talking to them again. It was just when I um...oh...before I was pregnant with Trevor. My second son. And I started contact with them...they weren't too supportive, because they wanted me to be married.

After Jeremy was born, she met Bill. Despite the fact that Karen and Bill agreed to have a child, Bill was not interested in family life. A year after her second child, Trevor, was born, Bill became more aggressive; he drank more often and often did not come home:

Well, he went into drinking, and doing drugs, hanging out with his friends. He'd never come home...that kind of...like, things like that...the relationship started getting off, like, really bad, it's cause he started to get violent with me. Like he'd do this, when he was drinking. Like, he'd come home at four in the morning, and...just kind of start a fight with me, and like, there was violence with that. Every weekend, he'd be drinking. Sometimes during the week too...it's kind of hard to explain why his feelings changed.

Karen says that Bill was not violent in front of the children. He would physically abuse

her when he came home from bars late at night. Karen left the relationship and stayed in a shelter with her two sons. After two months, Karen agreed to move back with Bill. It was not long before the relationship resumed it's old patterns and Karen left Bill again:

The same cycle as it was before. When I left to go to the shelter, and I stayed in the shelter again the second time...And um, I stayed there, and that's when I had made up my mind, that was it. That this was final. This was the last time that I'd be doing this. And um...but he had still...like, he would still come back to the house, and harass me.

Karen has been involved with child welfare services since she was adopted when she was two years old. She was also in foster care at fourteen. Her most recent involvement with CAS occurred during her abusive relationship with Bill and continues on a “voluntary” basis. Karen says she would like to have a “stable environment” for herself and her children.

Recently, Karen has entered into a new relationship with Tyler. She is very happy and predicts the relationship will last. Karen says that family is the most important thing in her life:

...both [oldest and youngest sons], they were the best experience. Like, they were the best thing in my life. Cause ah, it changed me, from what I was before...I feel happier, and besides...I wanted...the family life. To have that lifestyle.

Annette

Annette's relationship with the father of her first child, Ken, was unstable. Annette says that Ken was young, and not ready to be a father. As soon as Annette found out she was pregnant, he ended the relationship. Ken assumed Annette had “trapped him”. After Ken, Annette started dating Jerry. Their relationship lasted for three and a half years. Annette became pregnant and suffered a difficult pregnancy. Jerry did not want the baby and he became very abusive:

The day after the bombing. September 12...my girlfriend, I called her up, she says I'm having a barbecue, bring the kids over. I come back at 8:30 or so, last time I looked on the clock on the truck, which I think was about ten minutes fast, and I got out of the truck to get the children and I was pushed so hard that I flew almost to the end of the pavement.

Annette has been in four abusive relationships. She says that in “her head that she is never good enough”. Her father was extremely abusive to Annette’s mom and to Annette and her siblings. Annette says that in the past she has tried to do everything her partners want of her:

I tried to change myself. If he said I'd look better with red hair, I'd dye it red. I tried everything to try to make it not go there. And then I realised I'm not even me anymore...

Currently Annette is not in a relationship and does not intend to move in with any men in the future:

I'll never live with a man, and I gotta keep that, because I can't put my guard down, because my children come first. I know a lot of single moms, they can't live without a man. I don't want my guys seeing four or five guys in a month, because I've seen what it does to children.

Annette’s life centres around her two boys. She also puts a great deal of effort into making their home beautiful and in spending time with them. She works at being everything to her children: “the mother, father, everybody”. Her eldest son Brock has ADHD and he functions well when on medication, but he is “all over the place” when not on medication. Annette describes Brock as, “a little Einstein who has ideas that thirty year olds have not come up with”. Annette wants very much for her children to have good lives and think they have “the best mommy in the world”. Annette keeps in close contact with Brock’s school to help them cope with his behaviours:

...It started way back in day care, I knew that my son not having a father was

doing something to him. So I asked for him to be checked out...and it progressed. In kindergarten, he wasn't sitting still, he wanted to be the life of the party...And that's when I called the school and said is there anyway you can set me up to talk to someone? Behavioural specialists, some kind of support...Brock's very bright, they think he's very very, like too smart for himself sometimes...Last year, his teacher, I asked her, can we have a journal? Brock's going off to school today, he's very rough feeling, he doesn't want to go, blah, blah, blah, so she's ready for him when he gets there. And she would tell me all the things that happened during the day.

Brock misses Jerry and has difficulty understanding why he cannot see him:

He cries for Jerry a lot, he doesn't think it's right how they did that. It's a seven year old, telling me it's not right that he can't see Jerry, because Jerry never did anything to him. And he doesn't agree with what Jerry did to mommy, but that's hearsay, because he wasn't here the night [the major assault on her] happened.

Annette focuses on teaching Brock that “everything is beautiful”. She puts a great deal of time into decorating their apartment and her boys bring home things they think she might be able to use:

The whole scenario to my apartment is love. You gotta be able to walk in here and feel comfortable. My children should be proud of where they're going to live, not like how dirty it is and what not, because that will never be in my home. And I get my seven year old, I've gotten him involved since he was I think four and a half, five, I gave him a paint brush and feather duster, and I asked him what he thought was beautiful. Gave him a piece of paper and cardboard, and he actually gave me more ideas...

Annette says she wants to teach her sons to “treat women the way they're supposed to”.

Annette became involved with Children's Aid after the police were called when Jerry assaulted her and a neighbour. Her children were taken into care from the police station when her story was not believed by the child protection worker and her safety plan to stay at her girlfriend's home was rejected. Her kids were returned to her at a shelter a few days later.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth left her childhood home at sixteen and became absorbed into a life of drugs, alcohol, and many men. Elizabeth met Steven traveling with the carnival and she moved away with him and married him. Steven and Elizabeth had a baby, Carrie. Steven was not working but Elizabeth worked until she had to quit due to bi-lateral tendinitis. Elizabeth got tired of her life; she started drinking, and stopped taking care of herself. When Elizabeth returned from a visit with her step-father, Steven had taken Carrie and he wanted full custody. Elizabeth started drinking even more, and started using cocaine again. She moved to a different town where she moved in with her next partner, Ben.

Elizabeth and Ben were together on and off for seven years. Ben became very controlling and abusive. Elizabeth and Ben had one child together, Kimberly. It is still threatening to Elizabeth and her children when Ben shows up unannounced. It was hard to find a way out of the relationship with Ben:

You know when you have so much anger, you just hate the person, and then you get so much hatred that you have to get rid of your hatred and then you forgive him. And then when you forgive him you lose all your hatred and then he sweet talks you and then he sweet talks himself back into my life and then the cycle just started again.

Elizabeth was in the hospital for a week after the attempted suicide bringing the Children's Aid Society into her life. She leaned on them to extricate herself from the relationship. Elizabeth had prior involvements with the agency, once leading to the children staying with her mother for a week rather than going into foster care.

Elizabeth feels that she becomes bored in relationships and cannot keep commitments.

She is not looking for a relationship right now. Elizabeth says she struggled with motherhood in the past because when things get tough, she turned to drugs and alcohol, but she recognizes that she wants to be more focused on the kids now. After the last suicide attempt, Elizabeth realized that she had to “start thinking of the children” before herself:

...the last incident I tried to commit suicide because I couldn't cope. I couldn't deal with it so I had taken an overdose on pills and um, it's just, and while I was there and talking and talking to different counsellors and whatnot, cause I was hospitalized. They kept me there for 7 days. And uh, you know I had someone to come in and talk me everyday and I realised there was more to this life then just me and I gotta start thinking of the children before me.

Elizabeth says her daughters are “good kids”. Elizabeth gets along well with Carrie who she has taken with her to volunteer at the food bank. She wants to teach her children the value of volunteering in the community:

I like giving back to the community instead of taking...instead of being selfish and then if you know, I show my girls about volunteering and you know and that, both of them have come in and volunteered Carrie the older one, she's been in volunteering and she's probably put in about 50 hours and coming and just volunteering and actually she got a badge for guides for it, but she didn't do it for guides. She just, I said you know, why don't you see if there's one for community service and she got a letter from the food bank that she put in these hours and she started doing them even before she started doing guides so it's and on going thing. She likes going there and helping out and even some of the regular volunteers say where's your daughter? She's such a hard worker...

Elizabeth says that Kimberly has a more sensitive nature than Carrie. Elizabeth says that Kimberly cries easily if she is yelled at. Kimberly is often upset when she returns from a visit with her dad:

Carrie can pretty much say whatever. You know, she'll tell you lately she's been hiding her feelings but now she's getting better since you know, she learned that she can tell ne and things like that and um, we get along pretty well together you know. The worst time that I don't get along with Kimberly is when she comes

*back from her dad's. 'Daddy says I don't have to do what you tell me to do'.
And things like that, and she acts up and I get frustrated.*

Elizabeth says Kimberly, who is seven, has a hard time making friends, while Carrie who is 11 has many friends. Carrie is energetic, 'tomboyish', outgoing, and she loves participating in activities at school and in the community. Last year, Elizabeth taught Carrie how to fish. Elizabeth thinks Carrie is "smart", but says she has a hard time concentrating at school and gets poor grades. Elizabeth says that Carrie has a "tough exterior"; she keeps her feelings inside. Carrie has revealed to a teacher that she worries her mom will die because her father (Steven) died.

Elizabeth describes why Carrie is seeing a counsellor:

...because of a lot of things that I think she needs to talk out about and it would be nice to not have mom or someone from school someone on the side who's objective to...I don't think that she needs to go on anything but you know, but because she's you know, um, starts shoplifting and hanging and smoking at 11 and I'm just freaking...

Elizabeth says that Carrie has developed a good relationship with her counsellor because she is a younger student on placement.

Elizabeth finds motherhood demanding, but feels that she needs her kids "as much as they need her". Elizabeth wants her daughters to succeed in school, because she never did. Elizabeth and her kids continue to move frequently. Elizabeth said that the longest her children have been at one school is two years. As a child, Elizabeth moved often, sometimes several times in a school year. She is planning to move to the trailer soon and then to a place near to her mother. She is under her second six-month supervision order with the child welfare agency and looks forward to when they will be out of her life.

Discussion

These women's stories confirm the established story about the plight of many of these families; however, they also uncover a happier and stronger story of family. They show contrasting sides of family life and raise questions about philosophy and methods of child welfare with these families.

While a few of these women talk about long term marriages, most of these discussions of partnerships tell of a series of relationships with different men over time. Most of these women have been involved in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship with a live-in male partner, some with several. Most of the children in these stories are not living with their biological fathers and many have minimal, if any contact with them. Siblings have different biological fathers in quite a few stories. The images of many fathers in these women's stories are irresponsible men who are not able, or willing to play an active role in parenting. Many of these men struggled with substance misuse, particularly alcohol. Several of these mothers talked about their own past addiction problems [Julie, Sandy, Amber, and Elizabeth]. While none of these women mentioned active drinking now, several stories suggest that the temptation to turn to alcohol to cope has not entirely vanished.

Yet, there is another side to the image of partnerships. Several women expressed a desire to stay out of a partnership, at least for the foreseeable future [Kaitlyn, Annette, Elizabeth] and others remain committed to their well-established marriages [Rebecca, Sandy, Marie]. These stories tell of a strong motivation to partner, to try again, among these women coupled with a strong desire for a "normal" family and home [Pamela, Susan, Julie, Janet, Donna, Jennifer, Amy,

Amber, Karen]. In addition, in most of these current partnerships, the women feel that they are doing better than with past partners and, in many if not all tales, there are descriptions suggesting that their perceptions of improvements may be accurate.

The portraits of some families hint at continuing “chaotic and unstable” living arrangements [Julie, Amy, Amber, Elizabeth]. Many mothers talk of their very difficult trials in parenting an “explosive child” [Pamela, Marie, Janet, Donna, Kaitlyn, Amy, Sandy, Amber]. Many children in these stories have endured the loss of a father, a number of “step fathers” coming and going, violence and conflict in the home, parents with alcohol or drug abuse problems and unstable living arrangements. Some children have moved back and forth between parents and other extended family members. The stories suggest that some of these mothers struggle with managing the stress of their work/school, parenting and home management “burdens” [Chen, Susan, Julie, Donna, Rebecca, Kaitlyn, Amy, Sandy, Amber, Karen]. The childhood stories of at least half of these women suggest that they might not have much to draw upon in terms of a “map” to guide their own parenting. Some are clearly repeating patterns from their own difficult childhoods.

Nonetheless, these families remain central to mothers and children “being well” and “feeling that they belong and that someone cares”. Mothers, including many with quite “horrendous” childhood experiences, established contact with their own mothers and other extended family members when they were adults. Family was the most common source of emotional and practical support for many mothers and many of these women and their families do much of their socializing within their extended families. In almost all these stories, mothers

provide the only continuity of parenting and family for these children over time. In many of these stories, becoming and being a “mom” is central in these women’s lives. Many talk fondly about “who their children are” and strive to maintain a family and a home for themselves and their children, under sometimes very difficult circumstances.

Anyone who grew up experiencing the turmoil and disruptions of many of these families understands the fear, anger, and confusion experienced by children in such homes. They know about the price children pay over a lifetime. A price many of the mothers in these stories continue to pay in their own lives. Nonetheless, these are the families for these mothers and children and, for most, represent connections that will be desired for all of their lives. What this strongly suggests is that child welfare focusing mainly on changing mothers, enforcing parental behaviours, and removing children from these homes is insufficient. Greatly increased focuses on women’s well-being, supporting families and parenting, and helping children directly are required. This implies an acceptance and elaboration of the principle of sharing the responsibilities for caring for children among parents, extended family, friends and neighbours, and human services. In time, this perspective requires moving away from our longstanding reliance upon a “stand alone” child protection system.

(4) Experiences with Children's Aid Societies

The dominant emphases in “Anglo-American” child protection systems are on responding to allegations of maltreatment of children through investigations of parents, requiring changes in parenting practices, monitoring families through “voluntary” or court mandated supervision agreements/orders, and removing children temporally or permanently from “dangerous” homes into state care. While some argue that these child protection systems do what the public expects of them reasonably well (Parton, Thorpe, & Wattam, 1997), there have been increasingly insistent concerns raised about these child protection systems in the English-speaking countries in which they predominate. Among the most persistent critiques is the low level of assistance provided to most families involved with these services and their rapidly escalating costs with little tangible

evidence of enduring benefits to parents or children. Many have noted that many parents fear and resist involvement with child protection agencies and the lack of congruence between the help offered and the realities of the lives of many families. In each of these countries, there is an active search for solutions to the increasing pressures on their child protection system. (Cameron, Freymond, et al., 2001).

In these considerations of alternative possibilities, the voices that are missing are those of parents and children involved with child protection services. While these life stories did not focus on services involvements, it is not surprising that each of these mothers talked extensively about their experiences with child welfare. These stories provide insights into what it is like to be a parent “under investigation” and suggest how our helping might fit better with what is acceptable and useful to families.

Pamela

When Pamela’s daughter, Megan was ten years old, Pamela called the Children’s Aid Society for help:

She was ten...I called them up and I asked them for the information....my daughter wants to be alone, she’s in the house...I come home at 5, she comes home at 3:30...I called up and said what’s the rule on this?...and they said it depends on the kid...

Pamela decided to leave Megan alone while she went to work but that did not work:

...she started playing with knives...She was scared to be here alone...and I said Megan, you can go over to Mary’s...You don’t have to be here alone. I have to work that is a fact of life...and she did take Megan after school a couple times and then she said I’m right next door...and I come home and she’s right where she’s supposed to be. She’s watching TV with the jug of milk beside her and there’s a knife under the chair...it got to the point like I say, I need a knife, and it was nothing for me to go looking for one and it just became common...and...I’m

telling [Children's Mental Health Centre]...she hid knives...and they're going there's something wrong with that...

Pamela began working with the Children's Mental Health Centre to try to find some help for Megan. When Megan turned fourteen, she became a challenge for Pamela. Megan would lie to Pamela, "trash" their house, and she was caught shoplifting. Megan went to live with Pamela's parents and then ended up in a number of placements:

...She was put in jail. My dad got her out...she called Children's Aid, Megan got them involved...She was living with her grandparents...She ended up at [group home 1], my parents', [group home 2], [youth shelter], my parents'. (What is [group home 3]) Children's Aid group home...she's in care of Children's Aid...her probation officer called me and said...instead of throwing her in jail, I would like to see her get therapy...My position has been that before she even ended up at [group home 3]...He said okay...because in [group home 3], she's made friends...And what did she do?...the staff [at group home 3] said she was acting funny...and they smelled marijuana...and she says no, there's nothing...she yelled and screamed at them and they called the cops on her. The cops found a trace amount of marijuana in her cigarette package. They searched her room and found a razor blade...

Currently, Megan is at a residential children's mental health facility for a five day a week program. Pamela sees Megan on the weekend. Initially there was some difficulty in setting up the program:

...[Children's Aid] was thinking of her going to my parents every Friday night and my house every Saturday night...and they said if we make this happen you're going to have to talk to your parents...I said no, I'm not talking to them and you can't make me. And on top of that they have a trailer...You're telling them if they go to their trailer on a Friday night they gotta be back on Saturday at 8...I said this is not feasible for anybody. And my worker was really good...she said...there's no sense in implementing the plan if we know it's not going to work...but she says I'll need to think of an alternative plan...

Pamela is really happy with what Megan is learning in the children's mental health facility:
...you should see the list I got of what they're going to teach her...anger triggers...they're going to teach her that, more positive self thoughts...a whole

list. ...they got real in depth goals... they talked about communication in between Megan and me...there were a whole bunch of those goal setting things.

Pamela is hoping to have Megan come back to live with her, but Megan is trying to take the independent living course through the Children's Aid Society to live on her own. Pamela also feels Megan cannot come home until they take family counselling together.

Pamela has not had much contact with workers from the Children's Aid Society:

I was put in with a worker, a family case worker [CAS worker 1] last November or so and I met with her once...and we had a smoke out the back and I didn't hear from her again until January...she says, I'm not being able to give you the time you need, so I got this student working with me...[CAS worker 2]'s been coming every two weeks...She gave me time, or I could call up her answering machine...I went to counselling up until March.

Pamela is struggling with money now that Megan is not living with her:

I was being supplemented by mother's allowance up until January and because my daughter doesn't live here I don't get that anymore...I'm poor now. Not only that [Children's Aid] was charging me 221 dollars a month to take care of her. Meanwhile I'm not receiving welfare and my hours got lowered...Now they're only charging me 30 a month. Which I haven't paid because I'm used to getting 800 to 1000 a month, now I'm getting six...

Chen

Chen's children were seven and four when the Children's Aid Society took them to a foster home for the first time:

Children's Aid took them away to a foster care, so my mom was living here to make sure I was taking medication [and it would be] okay for them to come home. They were in foster care two months...Almost a year ago now because last Christmas they were taken away....the cops came and brought me to the hospital and Children's Aid came and took the kids. I was scared and thinking 'why are they taking the kids? [I had] brought the kids to the doctor and I was not talking, I was just staring and the doctor knew that and I was having symptoms again, so she called Children's Aid and the police to take me to the hospital. I thought when I got out of the hospital they would give them back, but they didn't.

Chen was very sad when her children were taken:

...I said why is this happening? I had them all myself all those years, how can they take the kids away? I didn't tell them that. I was just thinking in my mind. I feel sad. I know that I can take care of them even though I have schizophrenia...because they don't know when I have schizophrenia, like it could just happen like that, so they don't want to take chances with the children's safety.

The second time Chen's children were taken from her home they were gone for approximately two months, she was not as afraid because she knew "they would come home".

Chen just needed to make sure that she had a plan to regularly take her medication. Chen did not agree with the Children's Aid society taking the kids:

No, I don't think I agreed because I got depressed before, but I [was] still taking care of them really good. I don't harm hem and I feed them and stuff but I her voices also, I start doing things. Like the [CAS thought] I wold probably harm them...and you don't want to take chances...Because before I still took good care of the kids...I wish CAS asked me how I feel. I don't like it that they don't do that. They just take the kids...

The second time Chen's kids were taken by the Children's Aid Society, Chen was warned if they had to take the kids again they would be put up for adoption. Chen is doing everything to make sure that does not happen; she is taking her medication regularly and her mother now lives with her:

She moved in since the kids were given back in September. Yeah. That's the plan because they want me take the medication. If we didn't make a good plan like that. Maybe I won't have the kids back...It's tough for them to trust me because I've been off the medicine so many times.

Chen felt that foster care was able to giver her son more things to do than she could:

Charlie didn't really want to come back that much because he's going to miss his friends and he has games like Gameboy to play. They have a lot of stuff for kids

to do. Because usually in here if they sit with me, they usually don't go out that much.

Chen has to go back to court in a few weeks and she is unsure why:

I probably go back and I wonder what it's about. Maybe it's about Children's Aid don't have to be involved anymore. I hope so...I want them to be off my back. I don't like them asking questions. I don't like them being involved. They have to get all the information and that's what I don't like. Private stuff...

Chen continues to be involved with Canadian Mental Health so that she can get the help that will help her make sure the Children's Aid Society does not take her children again. Chen hopes her file with the Children's Aid Society will be closed soon:

She's nice, but I wish they wouldn't be in my case anymore...they have to get all that information and that's what I don't like. Private stuff. [The CAS worker] hasn't called since after Christmas...Canadian Mental Health is involved...she set that up...because her role is not to take the kids away...it is to help me...[Children's Mental Health worker] doesn't talk about my pills...Children's Aid does...community mental health nurse...we go out for lunch...the Children's Aid lady do it like business, professional.

Susan

As a child, Susan remembers some involvement with the Children's Aid Society, but there was "nothing concrete". Susan has recurring problems with people calling the Children's Aid Society for "nothing concrete", people who she feels are just angry with her. The most recent call was made because Susan's house was "in appalling state due to dogs and dirt". The Children's Aid society came to the house to investigate:

So, they came and looked at the house and everything was fine and then we had to get going, so they left and then the next thing you know they were taking us to court for a supervision order. Well, part of the reason was because our bedroom used to be downstairs and the door has a lock on it which the children don't go down there so Nick wouldn't let [the CAS worker] down there. It was about a month later after they came [that CAS removed the children].

The Children's Aid Society implemented a supervision order for Susan and one of the terms was that any babysitters had to be approved by the Children's Aid Society:

One of the standards was that all of our babysitters had to be approved. So, the last time they were at court when they got the supervision order, my fiancé gave a name to the first worker and said how do we get her approved and she said well, I just run her name. And he says okay, you've got her name, can you approve her? Then nobody called us back and at the time he wasn't working and then he got his old job back so I had to get the same babysitter. Then this was the end of April when they took the kids, they came to the house, they switched workers after we went to court [for the supervision order] so I had a new worker. Then [CAS] came back and the babysitter that [Nick] had asked to get approved was here and they came and she was here. And then when I got home they showed up shortly after that and said that the babysitter wasn't approved and that I had to find someone else. So, I had to take the next day off of work because if I couldn't have her, you know, short notice, I couldn't find anybody. And the next day [CAS] came and took [the kids]. They said it was breach of probation or breach of a court order. The understanding was that they were taking them because I had a babysitter here that wasn't approved. And then another reason was because my two boys had a bunk bed, a metal bunk bed that was kind of doing the wobbly thing. And so Nick took the mattress off the bed and dismantled the bed and put the mattress on the floor for a bed until we could get new beds. And [CAS] said that there was a bare, dirty mattress on the floor, which it wasn't but that was what they say in their papers, right.

Susan had difficulty meeting all the requirements of her supervision order:

I saw my worker I think it was two or three times over the four months. She didn't really come around or anything... We [Nick and I] did parenting [courses]. Well, actually no we didn't even do parenting right away. Their main issue was parenting courses and I kept asking them, you know, let's go, get this parenting over with so that the faster I get it done the faster the children can come home. I think they were just, I don't know, they're really slow over there, right? The whole time the kids were gone I never saw my worker. My feeling of the agency is that they're supposed to help families and I didn't feel they were helping me...

A child welfare employee visits Susan in her home every two weeks to teach parenting and, although she does not feel the course itself is helping, she does like the worker:

She's from the [CAS] agency. She just comes and talks to me about different things or if I have a problem then she'll help me with it. She's a nice lady. I have no problems with her, just everybody else...Towards parenting it hasn't really done anything. She's just very easy to talk to. See, I'm not allowed to do anything to the children other than stick them into a corner or give them a time out or take something away. There's no form of physical discipline, which doesn't really bother me but...I wasn't using physical discipline....just my open hand if they needed it on the butt. So, if I had a problem or if the kids have done something wrong, I'll talk to the worker about it that comes here and she'll help me, give me suggestions on what to do. They're doing good.

Susan went to a women's group at Family Services and felt that was helpful:

No, I went on my own...I just let them [Children's Aid] know that I was going to it...I enjoyed it. It was only an hour every week but it helped get some stuff off my chest and talk to someone else, right.

When the kids were first removed from Susan's home, she was able to see them:

Yeah. I saw well, my [oldest] son Adam...I was able to go out to their house and visit him as often as I wanted to. And then my worker stopped that for some reason. Yeah, she said that I needed to have visits at the agency so that they could see how I am as a parent.

Having her children taken away from her was very painful for Susan:

It was hard, but they're back now...it was very stressful because I was pregnant...I didn't eat very much, kind of like a depression stage...that's when I went and got the counselling and it was more like a booster.

Susan spent time in court with her case getting remanded again and again. The kids were in care for four months and Susan feels they were returned to her home because the Children's Aid Society "didn't have any evidence". Susan's believes that her kids' experiences of foster care were confusing:

They thought it was a holiday. I had a hard time with Adam because when they were taking him, Adam asked how long we're going to go, how long do we have to go and the worker...pretty much said just the weekend. So, for about a week and a half after that every night when I talked to them on the phone...he says "I think

I'm coming home today". My son Owen didn't really say too much because he had everything he's ever wanted. Nintendo and you know...He cried a few times on the phone to me, that was it. Sarah, well, she's only three so she didn't really understand too much. Every night she'd ask me to come and pick her up, right. Adam, a few times after spending time with me on the weekend, wouldn't want to go back...

When the kids returned home, there were some adjustments for everyone:

Well, my daughter (daughter #1), she was very well behaved before and had perfect speech and now she feels like she has to talk like a baby because, well, there was another little girl in her foster home that couldn't talk very well so she picked up on a lot of just baby talk. And now she [daughter #1] doesn't listen with anything. She tells me she doesn't have to listen to me and the same with both boys. They push a lot more because they know I can't really do anything to them so they they're pretty much they push me to see what they can get away with.

There is an ongoing supervision order because Susan feels the Children's Aid Society thinks they are "really bad parents". Susan has been told by the in-home worker and by the kids foster parents that they did not understand why the kids had been taken from the home in the first place. In Susan's supervision order, she now has to keep the house clean, use no physical discipline, get the kids to school on time, and make sure their dental and medical needs are met.

Susan is not very happy with Children's Aid Society:

Well, some families do need it. I just don't feel that I did. I've been a mother for seven years and never once have they even threatened to take my children from me. So, I can't be doing [everything] wrong...[The CAS] were pressing for trial and see the whole thing is going to court all summer they were trying to get it to stick. They wanted six months society wardship on top of however long they were gone for...Both me and my fiance had our own lawyers...two lawyers and my understanding is that [CAS] didn't really have anything because everything they wanted done got done...Like I went to counselling for a couple and then I went to a women's group. And then my fiance signed up for a men's group and then right after he told them that he was signing up, it went into the papers that they told him to go do it, but he went on his own free will. Like they just kind of took the credit for it. He's still going to the group...I don't know if it's helped but he sits and listens...I think he's going because he wants to. He doesn't like Children's Aid at

all. He's got a very strong feeling.

Susan wonders why Children's Aid Society workers were not visiting her home when the kids were in care after they came home:

I thought once the kids were back, my worker would be more involved in checking up on us because we were supposed to be so neglectful...During the time [the kids] were gone, the four months, we hardly ever saw her...She only called me if she needed information...

Susan is unsure of what is happening in the future with the supervision order, but she would like it to be over:

Well, we asked [the worker] how long it would be and she said well, if everything goes well, four months. Like they asked for six, they got six months, but if everything goes well and she feels one day that she doesn't really need to be involved with us, she can just take us back to court like that and get it erased...yeah, she said it could be four months, it could be six months, right. It's just all depends on how we're doing and whatnot...They just requested that Nick finish his men's group and he's got three more weeks left and then it's done. So I don't know when they'll be out of our lives, right...Like I have no privacy because they can just show up here anytime and say I want to look at their house and you have to let them. You can't stop them. There wasn't anything good that came out of their involvement....

Marie

Marie and Dave were having difficulties with Laura listening to their rules:

...We've had numerous conversations...at this dinner table, you know, Laura, you know, these are the things that we, you know, expect from you...And of course, you know, she turns everything around so basically and that was it so Dave gave her the strap...the next day obviously when she went to school, she mentioned it to one of her friends...one of her friends had mentioned it to the school and that's how Children Services called. Basically she first contacted Laura...after she finished talking to Laura, she called me and...made an appointment...and we warned her, like all the psychologists say, if you're going to tell a child you're going to do something, you have to go - follow through...And basically that's what we did...okay, so that backfired and now - the one thing that I find very odd,

you know, with Children Services, you know, what you hear on T.V., you know, sometimes they step in, sometimes they don't...obviously they don't step in when there should be stepping in and they step in this situation that I don't feel should have been stepped in...

The Children's Aid Society worker came to the house to talk to Marie and Dave. Marie felt she was not qualified for the job:

...Yeah, she came for the - I don't know, a two or three hour conversation...what I don't understand is why did they give this file to this woman that has no children. She doesn't have a clue as to the issues that I'm dealing with at all...as to raising a 14 years old...I'm sorry but what it says in the textbook is not anything that goes on...And of course she's saying that we definitely have to go for some counselling, you know we have to deal with these issues and I have to stop spending so much time and energy on Laura. Well, I'm sorry but when she's right here in your face, you have to deal with these issues...C.A.S. involved very little...she came for that - that initial meeting...and of course because I told her I had made another appointment to see another psychologist - not psychologist, another counsellor...And I asked Laura, do you want to go and see a different one. We'll check this one out and see if you're going to talk to this one or not...and she said yes and so she's gone to him a few times...my case was closed quite quickly...

After the case was closed, Marie and Dave continued to struggle with Laura. Marie decided to call the same worker for help with their situation:

She's still up to her lovely little schemes..I'm always looking for someone to give me an idea as what am I doing wrong, what can I do to fix this problem. She said ...You know, you have to spend more time on yourself...That I spend too much time on Laura's problems and I'm going I don't know...that the last time I phoned her...I didn't feel that they needed to -to come into the home and - and find out what was going on...had they been able to do a little more for me then I would have said well, yeah it was a good experience...but I found she really didn't do anything...

Julie

When Julie was a child, she was regularly threatened with being dropped off at the Children's Aid Society if she caused trouble:

...if we did anything bad we were really threatened that we were going to be dropped off at Children's Aid. I know my mom dropped me off a couple of times...and came back a couple of hours later. She said that she couldn't handle me.

As an adult, Children's Aid became involved after Julie left her abusive partnership and moved in with her mother. She says that Children's Aid was "called on her because my family didn't want to see me become like my mom." The Children's Aid Society apprehended her two sons when 'she went downhill' during this difficult time and her aunt has legal custody of them. However, Julie has her boys with her regularly on weekends also visits during the week.

Julie lives with her three year old and newborn daughters in a cramped basement apartment. She believes that her neighbour across the hall called the Children's Aid Society on her recently:

They were here in January to visit. (And did you have an open case all the time or did it close?) I'm not quite sure. They never told me. They just came to visit again. There is actually a girl that lives across the hall from me that knows people that I used to hang around with and she calls Children's Aid when she feels like it. My old worker was here, yeah. And she was here last night too. And she told me that they'll be coming to see me once a week, once every two weeks until November.

When she was pregnant with her oldest daughter, Julie was required by the Children's Aid Society to live at a home for young mothers where she could be monitored while she participated in counselling and drug and alcohol assessment programs. She did not enjoy the experience:

Curfew is...at eleven...I ended up being the only one in the house most of the time because my curfew was eight o'clock. I had four hours out each day...Children's Aid. My lovely worker set it up...

Janet

When Janet's mom and dad divorced when she was a child, Janet went to counselling at

the Children's Aid Society and that was her only involvement as a child. Janet was last involved with the Children's Aid Society a few years ago, when she and her boyfriend, Sam, asked for help from the Children's Aid Society for Sam's son:

His youngest son was living with us at the time and we went to [Children's Aid] asking for their help for some relief. His son had grown up with his mother on a Native reservation. The child had fetal alcohol syndrome, has learning disabilities, problems etc., etc. and we got him when he was like 14 so all these problems came with him and we were having a lot of problems dealing with his problems. So we went to [Children's Aid] and asked for their help and didn't get it. So it got to the point where my boyfriend got very angry and upset one day and hit him and in turn we had [Children's Aid] at our door interviewing us thinking that Bobby was being abused. I understand they have to investigate the allegations etc., etc., but just the runaround and the lack of consideration for anybody involved was just unreal.

Sam's son, Bobby, ended up in a foster home for two and a half months. When Bobby returned, Janet and Sam's involvement with the Children's Aid Society ended. Janet felt that the Children's Aid Society handled their situation poorly:

The intake worker for that particular incident in my opinion was a moron. Like trying to get answers out of some of the people at the [Children's Aid] office is like pulling teeth because you can just get the run around, get the run around, get the run around. You know and when you ask for help as a parent and you're denied that help you know what can you do? Like your patience can only go so far you know and when you're not accustomed to dealing with children with those types of problems. [Bobby] ended up being placed in a foster home for a couple of months and then he came back and that was the end of that involvement with them. But it was just a very bad experience...I would never go back to ask them for help again and I certainly would never work for them again knowing the way they treated me and my ex-boyfriend and the kids. [The CAS] just didn't even attempt to want to hear our pleas for help...why not help the people that are reaching out for help and admitting that they have a problem before it gets to the point where you know you're lashing out at your kids in anger.

Janet would like to see the Children's Aid Society operate differently:

...I feel they need to revamp their system and try to help families. Hit it before it

gets to that. Where they end up having to take these kids out of the home. Like that's the worst thing you can do is take a child from it's parents. Like if these parents are so abusive, get them some help...they obviously don't care about the family or the kids for that matter. It's apparent this recent events that have happened. It's supposed to be you're innocent you know until proven guilty. Well you're guilty until you prove yourself innocent. And yeah OK, I did hit my kid or whatever. I'm not beating him you know. We live in a society today where you can't even discipline your kids without being accused of abusing them, which is ridiculous.

Janet's oldest sister adopted a foster child and also had problems with the Children's Aid

Society:

Let's see, 4 or 5 years ago they adopted one of their foster kids and it kind of has been a nightmare. Another thing that I think [Children's Aid] needs to do is in the case of kids that are crown wards...the adopting parents should have full access to all information regarding that child. Every last piece of it, which my sister and her husband didn't and that caused a lot of problems. My niece has been in and out of jail. She is probably of one of the reasons that my sister and her husband are going to be getting separated shortly and [Children's Aid] has not been too kind to them in the last I'd say 2 years. Since they started having problems with my niece they have cut them off to having any more foster kids, saying that they more or less have enough on their plate with my niece.

Janet is still very angry at Children's Aid:

But it was just a very bad experience...I would never go back to ask them for help again...[they] just didn't even attempt to want to hear our pleas for help...Why not help people...before it gets to a point where...you're lashing out in anger...[they] don't want to get at it before it gets to that point.

Donna

Donna's son Luke has been diagnosed with ADHD and was having increasing problems at school, having been suspended a couple of times and falling behind academically. Donna changed his school hoping for an improvement but the same difficulties emerged quickly. Donna engaged in a frustrating struggle seeking help for her son over many years. After learning that he had been

thinking of suicide, Donna took him to the Crisis Clinic at the hospital. The Children's Aid Society was contacted by the hospital and Donna panicked:

...I was contacted by Child and Family Services...The hospital...it's required by law that any child that ends up in the crisis clinic with suicide attempt or whatever...I panicked at first when I found out...and they said...not to worry, we're just here to help...[intake worker] came to visit us...two days before Christmas...and he was a real nice guy and I told him a bit what was going on...and I told [intake worker] that and he was such a compassionate man. He was very concerned about my health and the well-being of Luke and he said that, you know, they were going to help all that we needed to do was to wait to be assigned a worker...I thought great. Finally somebody is on our side...I talked to him several times over the next several weeks and I waited and...I thought maybe Luke would be out of school two weeks, two to three weeks at the most. I waited and I waited and waited...

Donna was very excited about Children's Aid Society working with her to get some help for Luke, but she quickly learned differently:

Nothing...finally when I was assigned a worker I met her, [intake worker] brought her over, introduced her to me and...I even signed a proposed plan and that they were going to put in force. I was supposed to get a copy of it, never did...The only thing they put in place for me was...family counselling...[for] eight weeks to come into your home and try to work with you and the family...after the eight weeks I never saw her again...I talked to [worker] a couple of times on the phone...the last time I talked to her was she called here the middle of July just to...see how things were going and I told her they're not going good and I was in a really bad way and I needed some help...But I was...in a rush and I told her...I'm on my way out the door to a doctor's appointment and she said okay, maybe I'll give you a call back on Monday then we can discuss this further and I said okay and I haven't heard from her since.

Donna was very angry that the worker did not return her calls or her emails despite the worker telling her that, "Their main priority is to help out the child that's in need". Donna was angry because she had signed a contract, but she felt that helping her family and was not a priority for the CAS:

And I said [intake worker] specifically said that there'd be , you know, help for the family...she said as long as Luke seems to be doing well then there's nothing more she can do and I said oh, boy, you know, it's funny how that's not what I was told in the beginning...

Donna is still trying to get help for Luke, while their relationship remains a constant struggle for her. His problems at school and in the community continue, as does her search for useful assistance.

Rebecca

Rebecca's first involvement with the Children's Aid Society was over the holidays:

I had been in the boys' bedroom, three or four times. Telling them to clean up. And I was basically fed up, so I asked Matt to deal with it, cause he's downstairs anyways by their bedroom. And then, he went in a couple of times, and the next time he went in, he had been wrapping up some wire. He was cleaning up the shop. And he went to smack it down on the chair, for kind of emphasis, and put a little bit of fear in them, so they'd get moving, and it ended up, ah...the end of it unraveled or something, and it ended up hitting Jacob. A nice big scar. The kids went back to school, and that day, after Christmas holidays, um...two cops and the intake worker came knocking on the door. And, we sat at the table, and they basically said about, you know, Jacob's big mark on his face. And they were wondering what happened. And, Matt said it was an accident. [CAS worker] said they had been at all the schools to talk to the kids.

Everything happened during a time when Rebecca was feeling frustrated with Matt for his drinking and she was considering whether he should move out:

...But all during the Christmas holidays, I had been considering asking Matt to move out. So this, and the intake worker, said...do you want your husband in the house at this point? And I said no, I want him to move out. And actually, the cops had asked me too. Do I think, did I think it was an accident. And I hesitated in my answer, and at that point, I said I wasn't sure. But I think it was. Just because of the emotional turmoil. And I couldn't think straight. Um...which upset Matt. Um...so then, e left him here. Me promising them, that I would never let it happen again. And then I did. But, you know, the drinking's back again. And he's like...you know what? I promised them at the same time, you know...does the loyalty got o the kids, or the husband?

Rebecca felt that the CAS was not helpful the first time they became involved with her family:

...[the CAS involvement] was more of a policing. It wasn't really a helping. We really felt like that. And we felt like the kids were just...you know, every time we wanted to discipline them, we felt like we had to be on our toes, and be very careful, because...if we did anything wrong, you know...the children's society would be there again, you know, knocking on our door. I have a temper. And I know that. And I have to be very careful with the kids. I've had to walk away. [So was that ever an issue with the C.A.S.] No, because at that point, I wasn't ready to even hint at that. Because I didn't want them taken out of the home, thinking that there's two parents there...No. No, I mean...you hear the horror stories where they just walk in and take the kids.

Rebecca signed an agreement not to yell or call the children names. Matt was to attend Alcoholics Anonymous. Rebecca recognizes that the involvement with the Children's Aid Society has brought them to "a turning point", because they knew "something needed to be change", although they did not like having an "outside agency" involved in their lives. Rebecca and Matt attended counselling, and Matt returned to the home in November. Rebecca still feels resentment towards Matt:

Um, the first few months, it was hard to get adjusted. Ah, for him, it was very hard, because he wasn't sure he could discipline, and not discipline. He thought that he was still, you know, tip-toeing around the kids...I was angry at Matt, that this had to happen. Yeah. And I'm upset at Matt but...to some point, I'm bitter that because of his drinking, and me not standing up to him, you know, Anne felt like she had to leave home.

The Children's Aid Society ended their first involvement with Rebecca and Matt but soon returned when Lori (their CAS worker) dropped by for a family meeting and Matt was staggering and smelling of alcohol:

I guess what happened was...Lori contacted Family and Children Services, saying that Matt's still drinking...Um..well the funny thing is, he went to [counselling

agency]. And they recommend ten beers, the most. That's the maximum for a week...So seeing what it did to Matt, I didn't want any booze in the house anymore. I didn't want him drinking at all. But...you know, also realizing that's not reality...And Lori was okay with that, as long as he didn't get too abusive. And I told Matt too, like, please don't do it, when you're responsible for the kids. Or when you have to drive them somewhere. But...Lori, never told the kids that was okay. So they just saw it as, their dad was drinking again, it's not allowed, which really upset us...Lori said it was okay for, you know, Matt to be drinking. But in moderation. And they had no ideas about that.

Although the worker stated to Rebecca that their second involvement was voluntary arrangement, it did not feel as if they had a choice:

And she said, it's a volunteer thing. And...but if you don't volunteer, I have to take it back to the supervisor and he might get a court order. So in other words, is it really volunteer? It's the attitude thing. And this intake worker also comes from...living with an alcoholic husband. So, we knew...you know, she said right there, the first time we met her, she said, I do have a different point of view... because I lived with an alcoholic. But she couldn't see either that, Matt should be drinking at all. So as we got discussing about it, just...discussing it.

Rebecca feels the Children's Aid Society has been helpful in some ways such as bringing Christmas presents for the kids. However, she does not believe that they have helped much other than to keep her "on her toes". Rebecca says that the Children's Aid Society does not understand certain things:

...[They don't understand] the conflict of loyalty, between the husband and the kids. And I mean, I don't think I've ever brought that up in that conversation though either. Where, they're looking at it from the safety of the kids, and I can see their point of view.

Rebecca has noticed Matt falling back into old patterns, but feels torn between her responsibilities as a mother and a wife. She is ambivalent about telling Children's Aid Society about these changes:

Looking back on the last couple of Fridays, when he's drinking, and he's

supposed to be responsible for the kids, it's like...he's over the set limit..but I want to say it to Matt first, before I say anything to Lori...because I can't bury my head in the sand anymore. And I need to deal with it, before it becomes a really bad problem again...Matt first...And then...I'll probably bring it up with the Children's services...I don't know if I want to keep it hidden, I just...I guess, that's really where I am coming from, yeah. I don't know, I haven't thought it through it fully yet. [Are you scared?] Yeah.

Jennifer

Right from the time Rachael was born, Jennifer has been involved with the Children's Aid Society:

...Children Services, as soon as I had Rachael were pretty much involved then. I think because I was so young...16 [years old]. But I was turning 17 and that so ever since then they pretty much bothered me. As soon as I had Rachael they were at the hospital. And Rachael, she was only three pounds, five ounces. And I had a C-section and that. So, I had to stay at the, we had to, she had to stay at the hospital for like two months in special care. So, like when I first brought her home, they said that someone called in and said that I wasn't feeding Rachael, that she was losing weight. So, then Children's Services came and made me take her to the doctor to get her weighed and she was gaining.

At one point, the Children's Aid Society took Rachael into foster care for about three months:

They took her and all I got to see her was for...two hours but an hour each time, twice a week at the agency and that and most of the things they said weren't true. That day I was upstairs cleaning my room. I had a whole bunch, all my laundry...so, I was going downstairs and then I was just about to leave and Children's Services came to the door. And the one lady I had already known because she was coming over before. And she comes in with this other girl, like this other social worker I've never met before. There was toys in front of the door mat well, obviously because she was playing like with her toys. They said that they were just here because someone had called in and said that they were at our house and that every time I go to bingo, my grandmother, like she can't because she doesn't have no legs. But they said that she was being left with her. And that's impossible. And then they said that day that my room upstairs smelled like urine, which wasn't true. I had been cleaning and I had just sprayed, you know, the flower scent stuff. So, I just had sprayed that in the hall and two rooms

upstairs and they said that. They said that she had on dirty clothes and I just had put clean clothes on her. And her diaper was turned around, it was backwards. But I put it backwards because she takes them off. So, if I put them backwards and the sticky stuff is back here then she can't take them off. So, they said that I didn't know anything about children because I didn't know how to put a diaper right. But once I explained that then they're like actually a good idea. So, then they removed her from my house....

Jennifer also was told that there had been many calls made about her fighting with her boyfriend, Tony and she acknowledge that they were yelling and arguing far too much at this time.

Jennifer did not like the foster parents Rachael was living with:

I didn't like her. (Foster mom) took her to the doctor's and her eyes were almost crossed. So, when I got her back, (foster mom) said I had take her to this eye doctor, she set up the appointment and everything. So, I took her there, nothing was wrong with her eyes. I knew that from the beginning. I said to (worker #2) there's nothing wrong with her eyes. That's just the way she like she looks. And so I took her down, I was right. There was nothing wrong with her eyes. I went to a meeting there with the foster mom and the worker and a whole bunch of other people and she was there. She said that I asked her that and she goes well, like right snobby she goes oh, yeah, sure, we all pick our noses. Like she said it like really rude like that, the foster mom.

Rachael is now living with Jennifer, but the Children's Aid Society has a supervision order to monitor the situation:

[A CAS worker] had to come visit once every two weeks and I have "Healthy Babies" coming to my house every two weeks and that and most of the workers I don't like at Children's Services. I went to counselling. Individual counselling at two different places. I went to [women's self help] group. I went to couples counselling, me and my boyfriend. I went to a parenting group, a parenting course and I already completed that. I'm going back to school at [an] Adult Learning Centre. And so everything that I did has been completed and I've been doing a lot of things...That was my choice, like the Children's Services never told me to...

Jennifer both liked and disliked the workers she had to deal with:

They don't listen or nothing. I had this Sandra woman [first CAS worker], every time she came to my house she'd be like, she wouldn't talk you, she'd like tell you...She doesn't ask you or anything like that...I didn't like it and then things that she would say aren't true. I would get upset about it and that and then she'd say 'oh, well, you're yelling' and all that. Well, my voice is being raised because it's not true and you're not listening. I said well, maybe I have to raise my voice for her to listen. The worker I have now I like, I like her...Betty...and she's been on my case since like November. I think she's nice. She's more like me. She has her eyebrow pierced but she's older. And I don't know, she's friendly and she's like way nicer. She listens to what I have to say. She like looks at my crafts and things like that...She's really, really nice. She's like the only one I do like. It's nice to have her coming over and talking to me...

Jennifer's involvement with Children's Aid has been hard on everyone in her home.

Jennifer's grandparents were very upset and she feels it led to Tony losing his job:

Then he lost his job because the only time he could go see Rachael would be whenever they [CAS] decided our visits were. So, he'd have to take off work. And then he...then they fired him because of that.

Rachael also had a tough time adjusting when she came back home:

Rachael wouldn't freak when I left...I never seen that before in my life and Rachael's never ever threw a temper tantrum. She started doing that and throwing temper tantrums and the woman had two, a five and a three year old boys and she started doing that and now I can't take Rachael anywhere...she's out of control. She's throwing herself on the ground, kicking. I finally got her sleeping in a bed another things is that when I first brought her like got her home she was very like I couldn't do anything. Like I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't it was hard for me to cook or do the dishes or anything because she'd be holding my leg. She'd be like really clingy like I could like walk with her sticking to my leg. She was like clinging to that for like a long time.

Jennifer is hopeful that her file will be close soon:

...I'm going to go back to court [in July], they're going to close my case. ...Betty, when we go to court, she's going to close my case with the courts. But she said she's going to keep my case open just on her half really. She's not like going to come visit or anything, but she's going to keep it open for a couple months because this person keeps calling Children's Services on me. If they close my case, and she wants to close it on her side, then if someone called on me I would

have a different worker and the worker wouldn't know me like she knows me. And then they'd have to start a full investigation and so on. As where if she's still my worker, then she can just let me know she called and check it out and then, you know.

Overall, Jennifer feels that her experiences with the Children's Aid Society have been very frightening and she continues to worry they will come back and take Rachael:

...[CAS] takes something small and they make it like huge. They don't sit and find out what's really happening, because they don't even come over long enough to hear your story. They come over and then they're gone...They went and they had opened my young Offender's Act...they're not allowed. Like I've definitely changed since then...I agree that they [CAS] should be, you know, helping people that really, really, really need it. I don't think they can just walk in your house and like, 'see you later'. Like they should like help and that, like come over and visit. It's just don't come over and like take her again. Like that I'm really nervous about...I got to try and do everything like prefect as possible so that doesn't happen again. [The night the CAS removed daughter], a woman cop, she whispered to me that I better agree and do what the Children's Services said or I'll never see my kid again. I think that when you go to visit...like visit your child and that, I don't think [the visits] should be supervised. It's uncomfortable, because I didn't know if I did one thing, like I didn't know if I said anything wrong or like I didn't know how to act because I'd be all nervous and that so I'd be like hoping like 'oh, I hope I don't hug her wrong' or something because then they're going to write this down and say oh, she does this and you know?

Jennifer continues to have problems with people phoning the Children's Aid Society on her; however, she hopes her involvement with the Children's Aid Society will soon be over.

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn became involved with the Children's Aid Society one year ago:

My son was babysitting my daughter and we lived in an apartment building at that time and he had left the apartment that we had lived with and went down to a different apartment where his friend was and left her by herself. And she would have been ten at the time. Just before her tenth birthday and someone phoned the Children's Aid saying that John had abandoned her. So, that's when they came out to check us out and due to my being the way I was, the house was a mess...Somebody had reported that (son) was doing sexual things to (daughter)...

which he wasn't and they had talked to (daughter) about it and they talked to (son) and he wasn't doing anything but somewhere along the line somebody did that. Now, I don't know who is the kid that (son) because he stopped hanging around with him and stuff.

Kaitlyn first experience with the Children's Aid Society was confusing because of the lack of information:

I think they phoned first and said they were coming and then I talked to them and then they talked to Erin by herself and they talked to John by himself. I had to wonder what they were coming for, because they don't give you much information over the phone and what was going on...

Kaitlyn has found the worker at the Children's Aid Society helpful:

The lady that comes is helpful. She has some good ideas on how to get things back to being organized in my life and I was just that turnaround point where I was starting to come out of my own grief and starting to see things and started to get everything organized again and so she was very nice. She had lots of like suggestions on how to do this and how to do that and like to help out. She even offered to clean one day. She said well, I'll help you clean no problem...what had happened with (son) and (daughter) they found it was unwarranted, like it wasn't really true.

Kaitlyn continues to be involved with the Children's Aid Society on a voluntary basis and feels the Children's Aid Society has helped get her life on track:

And just to make sure everything is staying on track and helping out that way, giving me some suggestions. Like for skating, there's a thing in [town]...that if you're short on money but you want your child involved you can apply for that, or she's arranging like some counselling through the school board again for Erin for this year just to you know, help out a little bit more. I think it is a good thing. In the beginning it was mandatory...Well, just for the safety issues. I signed on and then...It's agreed to, it's voluntary. I probably won't do it the next time around because by that time I'll be working and with John at the school, things are changing that way and with Erin she's starting to do her work now, her homework and her chore work, you know, things like that. Every day I do a little bit more...I'm sure there's a lot of other families out there worse off where there's actual child abuse and other cases and you always hear about them so again, short of money and not having the time or the resources, so I felt I was taking

away from more the major, important cases. But, yeah, they've been helpful that way.

Kaitlyn's son John has been her "problem child":

He had croup three times, diagnosed with ADHD...He's punched windows, broken glasses. You'll see a broken banister, a few holes in the wall, that's from him and his temper...He's getting better as time goes by but still...He's very smart child but he doesn't have the motivation...attention span...

John has not been able to stay in regular school but fortunately Kaitlyn and her extended family have the resources to send John to an expensive, highly structured military academy where he's done well so far. His first visit home is next weekend.

Amy

As a child, Amy spent time in foster care but has no memory of the experience. As an adult, Amy's experience with the Children's Aid Society began when she moved in with her partner Phil:

...Phil was involved with Children's Aid in [Maritime Province]...Keri used to go to school and the school said that she wasn't fed and...it was Keri's way of screaming out for help...Her mom held a pillow over her head. Her mom has beat her in the head. So, pretty well from day one when Phil and I decided to reside together we started getting inquiries from Children's Aid. They would show up at the door saying that we weren't feeding our kids; we weren't keeping the house clean...The first few times Children's Aid sort of fell for it and they came out to our house and you know, made sure there was food...

Amy made several attempts to get help from the Children's Aid Society. When her efforts were unsuccessful, the situation in her home got worse:

I contacted Children's Aid on several occasions for help with the blended family. There was no help for blended families...In-home counselling or out-of-home counselling...I made call after call...They were putting us on lists...we played that

game for about three years believing each time that I talked to these people that they were really putting us on a list...things got progressively worse...we ended up contacting Children's Aid...and asking them to put [Keri] into foster care...Phil was afraid at that time that he was going to get physical with her...she was very, very verbally abusive to everybody in the house...

Amy felt everywhere they turned there was no help for their family:

...before I had put Keri in foster care, I really believed in our children's social system. I no longer do...like when Phil and I were trying to get help, we were told flat out if you have a drug problem or an alcohol problem, then we could probably get counselling for you or your family or if we were abusive to our children...There was no help or assistance for us...there needs to be help. There needs to be crisis intervention...Every source we contacted we had to pay...we just didn't have the money...the kids are getting older so some of it's getting easier. But now because they didn't get the help they needed then, they're going to carry baggage into their grownup lives and...it's really sad that children have to grow up and not be able to reach out and get the help that they need to become productive young people...

After Amy contacted the Children's Aid Society to put Keri into foster care, they responded:

They did respond that time...They put her in foster care but...It was like a holiday for Keri...So, she came home...It went okay for a few weeks...but then at high school all sorts of things started to happen and...we've had contact with Children's Aid to deal with Keri. She's taken off several times. She's been brought home by the police drunk...and then Keri took off and she went to stay with a friend and Children's Aid couldn't do anything because she's going to be 16...the place where she was not a safe environment...I gave her an ultimatum and the Children's Aid told me not to do that, that we should leave that door open at all times and have it open for help to come and go as she pleased...I don't believe...that...At fifteen know right from wrong and she needed to make up her mind. We have four other children besides her...I said you know you have two weeks to make this decision...I am sorry, I love you...CAS isn't involved anymore, they don't want no more involvement with her...she's going to be 16...

Amy did not receive any more help for Keri from the Children's Aid Society when she turned sixteen years old, however, her involvement with the agency was not over:

...my ex-husband...said to Phil and I that he had a very big favour to ask us...he was with a woman and had a child after me and that girl already had a child that was just an infant...so he had sort of raised this infant plus he had his own child. But he left this woman and about a year after he left, Children's Aid took the children away from her...They totally manipulated him because he could not read English...He asked us if we can help him...with Children's Aid...Kyla comes...with bruises, marks, scratches, black eyes...Then she came with lice. She starves for attention by the time she gets here...she said the big...man is mean to me, Amy-mama...I said what are you talking about?...The...man at (foster mother)'s house...[and] Kyla showed up with a black eye again...this is the fifth black eye she's shown up with. Nothing has been done about this...every time you bring up something against the foster family or against C.A.S. they punish you...They think that they've made the decision about what makes a good foster home and we shouldn't question that...I said to [C.A.S. worker], Kyla needs nurturing and she needs physical affection and she told me well, what do you expect, she's in a foster home.

Amy felt the Children's Aid Society had "manipulated" her ex-husband because he could not speak English. After questioning the worker about the foster home, Amy felt Kyla's voice should be heard and was told "they cannot take the word of a two and a half year old". Amy's experiences with the Children's Aid Society have not been very good and she has a negative opinion of the agency:

...Children's Aid reneged on all the promises that they made...they keep saying that it's in the best interest of the children of the children when...the children they should be with people that loves them, know them and where they want to be...They think that the children would be better off in the daycare...it's a confusing thing because they only have good things to say about us in their reports. ...Children's Aid needs to be honest and they are very, very deceptive people...everything that they told Ed and I to do for care, they used it against us...I told the worker that I was very disgusted...and that she's not be trusted...and I think they're making it hard for parents to be parents...Kids are getting spanked for...thousands of years and now they're going to take kids away from their parents because they spank them. ...Children's Aid felt that if Kyla was in this home she'd be treated as second-class citizen because she's not biologically connected...I really trusted [C.A.S. worker]...She had her own game plan all along...

Sandy

After Sandy heard from her daughter Marcy that her step niece had been touching her inappropriately, she reported the incident to the Children's Aid Society. Sandy was sexually abused by her older brother as a child and found coping with this incident with her child very frightening::

...I had to report it from [mental health agency] to the Children's Aid because they felt that it was a Children's Aid case...I was really kind of scared because I didn't want to make a big issue out of it...Children's Aid had asked us if we had sought any counselling...And I said well, I don't really want to because I really don't want to humiliate my daughter at seven years old. I said I know how I felt when I was around thirty, that this humiliated me terribly and I said I wouldn't want to put my daughter through it. I said thank goodness she didn't actually sexually whatever...but they still consider that a form of sexual abuse...But I had said I won't subject her to that because I know what I went through and it would be her word against the girl's word...My niece would have been just around sixteen the time that it happened...[after] I reported it to the Children's Aid and I got a phone call and they asked me a bunch of questions and then...the woman came to our home here to talk to Marcy and myself. And every story to me, to the counsellor to the Children's Aid and to the police officer was all the same...then they called in my niece to have her interviewed...and she denied it...So, then I got a phone call from Children's Aid...that said we have finally wrapped up the case or whatever...but she's admitted that she hasn't done it so therefore we've closed the investigation...

Amber

Amber is of Native descent. She spent time in several foster homes as a child. Although she enjoyed her last foster home, Amber was raped when she was living there. The Children's Aid Society was involved in Amber's life for several years when she was a child.

More recently, Amber was going through a difficult time with her two children. A major fight in their family brought involvement from the Children's Aid Society:

...I was somewhat stressed out because my son had come back home from out west

and stuff like that...I don't do drugs, I've been clean for 12 years now of any substance and I come home that night and there's my son smoking pot in front of Erin because he was watching her for me. And I just hit the roof and I was already stressed out as it was from her getting in from the wrong crowd and then trying to get things organized in the home with an extra person there so yeah, there was a lot of stress. I drank more than what I normally drink because I don't drink. My son started getting angry and throwing things in my face and that and I flipped out on him about smoking and that and he just started, you know, yammering at me something to the effect that I don't care, he doesn't care, this and that anymore. And I said fine, if it doesn't matter anymore, I said I can do myself in, you know, like I've gone through periods in my life where I was suicidal because I couldn't handle what I've gone through in my life. And he ran out the door, I didn't have a phone so he ran down to the pay phone to dial 911, my mom's trying to kill herself...I paid dearly for it from my actions. In a way I deserve it but not to this extent. You know?

Amber went with the police that night to the hospital and saw a psychiatrist.

Approximately three weeks later, while she was continuing regular visits with the psychiatrist,

Amber was becoming frustrated that the Children's Aid Society would not let her see Erin:

I said now I am starting to get angry. You know, Children's Aid won't tell me a darn thing about my daughter, not a thing. I was not impressed. You know, three weeks I got no phone call, wasn't allowed to talk to her on the phone, not allowed to see her, they won't give me information where she is. You know? Like what am I going to do? Go and harm her? Yeah, I did not like the worker I was dealing with and then seeing because they went with the joint custody order, she lives with her father. Oh, I was hurting big time. I did not like this guy that I dealt with at all. He would not give me any information, nothing. I would phone and I want to talk to him. Oh, no, you've got to leave a voice mail and he wasn't returning my calls. So, I wasn't impressed and I was like I've got to know what's going on. What are my rights here as a parent? You know? So what, I screwed up, I'm paying dearly for it. I will follow the rules, you know, go to the counselling and stuff but...

Amber likes her new worker but continues to have difficulties making contact with her:

Well, like you phone her. You want to talk some information out or get things arranged, you know, to have your daughter for the weekend or whatever and you

hear from her in a week, not the next day or the same day or the next day or within a couple of days span, you know, that you would expect. A week or two later and then I get the excuse, oh, well, I've been busy. It's like come on. You're not that busy where you cannot check your phone messages and then get back to the client. You know? Like even my ex-husband has had that problem with the social worker and he even went to the point of screaming, asking to speak to her supervisor and he was even refused to talk to the supervisor.

Amber can now have her daughter return home, as long as she “follows their guidelines”.

Erin is finishing her school year living at her dad's, and Amber is continuing with counselling.

Despite the fact that Amber thinks her new worker is “nice”, she does not have a positive opinion of the Children's Aid Society:

Now, it's just very frustrating when you have to prove to the government the kind of person you are. To me it's almost like invading my privacy. I've got to tell them absolutely everything I do, you know where I'm going to go, how I'm going to live, what changes I make just so I can prove to them that I'm a good person. It makes me so angry. We're dealing with a social worker that doesn't even know what it's like to have children...they have to have social workers who know what it's like to be living with children, problems with children, being around them. They're learning from schoolbooks as far as I concerned....You know, like sometimes I feel like phoning her, screaming at her and saying why don't you take my daughter and live with her for a month or two and then come back and tell me how you deal with the problem because all I'm getting from them is 'go to counselling. Go to counselling, you've got to learn how to cope with your stress'. And it's like oh, yeah, come and sit here for a night and listen to a 13 year old mouthing you off, with a behaviour problem and you can't raise your voice or hand because you've got it in your head that if you do anything like that, you are going to be charged with child abuse. So, you can't even be a normal parent or human being to reprimand your child. Not that I've ever hit my kids. I think only once I've laid my hand on my daughter but if you heard what she called me [the night the CAS became involved] you would have slapped her too.

Amber is also resentful of the lack of attention paid to her son who also was struggling.

Amber and Alex did not feel they could lead a “normal” life, so they started doing things “behind their [CAS] backs”:

...We're on edge all the time. You know, like when we have Erin it's like what are we allowed to do? What are your limits? Even Alex said that to the worker one time, what are our limits? We can't even live a normal life. You know, if we go out and there's a function, because we do get invited out to company barbecues, family barbecues...And it's very embarrassing when you have to sit there and go no, we're not allowed to drink...I've been following the rules by the book. I've been following them like beyond what they ask for...if we turn the wrong way I won't get her. Well, to be honest with you, we've been doing certain things behind their backs. We just said to heck with them. why follow the rules? We don't even see the social worker half of the time. You phone the social worker and you leave a message and you hear from them two weeks later? Well, sorry, the event was a week ago. Because what happened with the Children's Aid taking her away from me, it kind of ruined our relationship. Me, I have one incident, one huge big fight with my children. the police, the ambulance, fire truck, Children's Aid, everybody there...Children's Aid invaded Alex's privacy too.

Amber believes that the Children's Aid Society will be in her family's life for another year.

Amber's son Chris has been diagnosed with ADHD and started acting out around the age of ten when he took a knife to their furniture. When Amber moved in with Adam, Chris's problems got worse. He was put on medication but Amber took him off it to "work on it our own way". She said: "I figured it out on my own. Doctors weren't doing anything." She says that Chris is doing "excellent. He bounces around all over the place. He's a gypsy. ...He's young and needs to explore." Her daughter Erin also presented problems:

Her father let me have her...Our child would not leave the house...It's like I finally have my mom and I'm staying by her side...Eight, nine years old...fighting, rebelling. Erin has her own problems...She was bounced around between her father, her grandmother, her aunt and then he remarried about three years after the divorce...She was coming home late and she started stealing from me...

Erin is now living with Amber again. It's been a year "since the incident" which brought the Children's Aid into their lives. She is hopeful that Erin will be all right because "the other two

are fine”.

Karen

Karen is of Native descent. When Karen was young she was adopted and her brother (also an adopted First Nation child) sexually molested her. Karen ran away from home and she refused to return. Children’s Aid became involved and Karen spent time in several foster homes. She went through a rebellious time where she ran away from all three foster homes.

As an adult, Karen’s involvement with the Children’s Aid Society started at the end of her relationship with Bill:

...He was arrested that day, and I guess that same day, [the CAS] had come to the door, and...they wanted to know if I needed some help, or...they said that somebody told them that I might need some help. I was pretty...really defensive with them. Cause I said well...there’s no reason for you to come here, if you’re worried about any neglect or abuse with the kids, cause there isn’t. And this is what I told them. They said well, we’re just worried because of your ex, and we just don’t ‘want any confrontation. I can understand their point of view...And ah...they reassured me, more or less, they’re not here to get involved with the kids. ‘Cause I’ve heard so many horrors stories about Children’s Aid. Like...how they come in, and in some way...like ah...twist your story, or whatever is happening in your life, and find some reason to have something against you, and how you are with the children, and...then all of the sudden, just poof, there goes you kids...But um...I don’t know. I still feel a little bit uncomfortable, because I really feel like there’s no need for it.

Despite Karen’s initial hesitation, she found the Children’s Aid Society to be helpful:

And um...it was a good experience for me too. Cause they helped me out with ah...a lot of...how to go about getting a lawyer, and stuff like that. And um...they set me up with the mutual program for women. It’s like a community health program. But it’s good to talk to people, and...talk about things. How your kids are like, and...stuff like that. It’s just um...like ah...like mother stuff. Parents stuff. Debbie, my worker, she’s been really nice. She’s been super nice. And she’s been great. Um, really supportive. And um...any questions, like, she always is...she’s always helped ah...answer what she can, help me with what I need to be answered... But I don’t feel like there was such a need...priority for them, to come

into my life. Because everything was fine. It just...maybe I needed that step to actually get my...ex out of my life.

Karen's Children's Aid Society worker helped her fill out her application to get her Native status card. Karen has been involved with the Children's aid Society for over a year now. She has contact with a worker twice a month. She is unsure as to why her file is still open, however, she is afraid to ask:

Yeah. Because...then I'd feel like I'm pushing my luck. That's why I'm afraid to...more or less confront them, and ask them...why is this, why is that. Cause I don't want them feel like I'm being pushy, or being negative towards them, or...or feel like um...you know, like I don't want them...I guess, I don't want them to have a bad outlook on me. Cause what they see now, is how I am.

Karen feel that the last conversation she had with her worker suggested to her file may be closed soon.

Annette

Annette has been involved with the Children's Aid Society for approximately a year and she feels her involvement has been beneficial in some ways, but she objected to some of the actions taken by the CAS :

Well for the most part I think they're a good organization...It was good because they protected my children when this person did something to me, which they thought maybe my children were in danger...But they shouldn't have been taken from me. I should have been with the children, that's the only thing that I'm upset about. I know they're just here for the children, but without the mother, where are the children going to be?

Annette became involved with the Children's Aid Society after an abusive episode with her boyfriend, Jerry:

The day in question, my boyfriend at the time [Jerry] came to my apartment...he saw me sitting at my kitchen table with my neighbour, and approached me and

started being violent. And I got the phone and called the police. Before I knew it, the police were at the door...the next thing you know my children are at the police station, they're questioning me...the next thing you know they call Children's Aid, and the guy never let me explain what happened, because I smelled like beer. My ex had thrown a whole bottled of beer on me. So I looked like a drunk, traumatized and distressed and everything else, and that's the first day that I was involved with Children's Aid. They took my children away...and from that day on...I fought for everything to get my children back.

She says that when the police showed up, that they determined that she was

“automatically guilty.” Annette did not feel supported by the Children's Aid Society at first:

'Why didn't you live him earlier, how long has this been going on, do you put up with this every day?' Just comments like that, which made me feel totally alone, like I didn't feel like anything I said would justify...telling the truth, because it seemed like everything I was going to say, they were going to blame me. I just more or less answered her questions and left it at that. Yes Mam, no Mam...I was a hurting person. I was traumatized, I didn't like the fact that this had happened, I am so happy my children weren't here, but what if they were here in my house? What kind of treatment would I have gotten then?...It's like once someone gets in trauma, like going to the hospital, oh I'm here because of domestic violence, they kind of put you in you own little pile, they don't have no sympathy, they don't have compassion...Made me feel very cheap...it was just having to take my clothes off in front of these people and let them take pictures of me and I'm thinking about my children the whole time, so I did it...

Annette had a negative experience with the first worker she had contact with:

I'm outside [the police station] sitting down and [CAS worker] came outside and approached me...He started asking me questions, and I know I wasn't answering what he wanted me to say, and then he goes, 'you smell like alcohol'. And I said 'excuse me sir', and he goes 'no I'm talking to you, you have to listen.' He wanted total control. I wasn't allowed to talk. He kept telling me to listen, and I kept trying to ask him to understand why I was trembling. I was crying, I wasn't making any sense, because my baby's in there behind the desk of the police officer. I can't see him at any time since I got there, my other little guy, they're feeding him chips and everything else, sitting there all by himself and I'm outside and I can't...believe my whole world was just gone.

Annette responded emotionally when the worker went to leave with the kids:

...I was asked to go back in [because] the police had something else to ask me and then the Children's Aid Society guy goes, 'we're leaving right now'. That was all that was said. I turned around, and there he was walking out with both my children and I lost it. I went down on my knees, I screamed, I yelled, I done everything...this happened on a Wednesday...And I called the next day, I had to meet up with somebody to talk to me [at] Children's Aid...different person, very much nicer person...He asked me to come in for a visit, sign papers, I get to see my children for one hour and uh, that was more or less, what was I willing to do to get my children back. This guy treated me with respect, he didn't raise his voice...He was very low-key, he didn't question any of my answers, let me speak, helped me find solutions to the problem that just arose. And it wasn't rushed on me, I did break down quite a few times, he handed me a tissue, which I thought was very nice, and just more or less told me not to give up hope, that things were going to work out if I did things that they wanted me to do...I actually was put in a shelter. In order for me to get my children back, I had to live in a shelter so that my children would be safe from Jerry...

Once Annette was in a shelter, the kids were returned to her five days later. The Children's Aid Society did not feel it was safe for Annette's kids to be at their home nor would they agree that her and her kids could stay at a friend's house. Staying in the shelter was a challenge for Annette and her kids:

And it was a big transition for my seven year old, but at least I could talk to him...The so-called intake worker gave me an actual worker and we got to sit down and chat and they talked to my seven year old. I didn't enjoy it at all. It wasn't my house, it wasn't my kids' stuff...It was more uncomfortable for my children than it was me. I can adapt, because I'm an adult. But my seven year old felt everything, he couldn't touch it, it wasn't ours, it wasn't his toys, we actually slept in the same bed for most of the time we were in there and he just blamed Jerry so much during all this because we've lived there for so long in our apartment with no outsiders...and the next thing you know, we're living in a place where you can't sleep, you don't feel comfortable eating there. He started to act out because there was a lot of children there at the time and then the baby was sleeping and he wasn't comfortable in that tiny roll away playpen, which I didn't put him in there because it stunk. But anyways, they did their best, but all along I knew I belonged home. And so did my children.

Annette met with her new child welfare worker once she was at the shelter and, although

she was nervous and felt “judged” at first, Annette thought the worker believed that she would do anything to get her kids back. Annette needed to follow the requirements of the supervision order:

...counselling, go to deal with my brother’s committing suicide, trying to deal with living in the shelter and going to these meetings and I’m handling all that...they wanted me to go to two meetings a week in the shelter, they wanted me to look up a number to try to go deal with my brother committing suicide. They figures that was going to help me...I had to go for alcohol testing...I had to start seeing a counsellor one on one, and I had to continue doing all these things while I was in the shelter...so that was their way of saying you do all this and then we’ll let you take your kids out of here. I had to keep talking about the incident...and I’m trying to tell these people the more you make me talk about it, the more that I’m frightened it’s going to happen again to whoever...I found one of the mom to mom groups at the shelter. I liked that I wasn’t alone, that a lot of women were judged by the police and the hospitals. The same kind os story. Almost exact. I was going twice a week while I was out at home, but it was too much with the other counselling and trying to deal with grief and trying to get the seven year old back in a routine...It was probably one to two times a week with the other counselling too, because I was seeing counselling outside...that was excellent.

Annette has been following her supervision order and she currently sees a child protection worker once a month and she anticipates in the near future that her supervision order will be finished. Although Annette feels that the Children’s Aid Society was helpful in some ways, she wishes things would have been handled differently:

And I just wish that they had more patience with me to let me go to my friend’s house that night with my children...There was no need for me to stay at the shelter...what happened to me was a misunderstanding...Um, but I wouldn’t change anything you know? I got my children back, we’re safe, it was all a big nightmare...But then I found that they tried to teach me how to be a parent and the ones I was talking to never even had children, so I took it with a grain of salt...so me and my worker get along...I can’t believe we get along so well. Because he knows I’m not rejecting anything, I’ll do what is the best of my ability to raise my children properly...I think he’s so cool because he listens to me.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has been involved with Children's Aid society since 1996, her first involvement,

Elizabeth suspects, was due to a neighbour's phone call:

One of the ones was open because a neighbour had called and said that I had no food for my kids, I'm pretty sure that's why. And when she [the CAS worker] did come, I'm like, okay, fridge number one, I had two fridges. Fridge number one and I had meats and like whatever in the first freezer and then stuff in my fridge and my cupboards were pretty much full. Like this was a surprise visit kind of thing and in the second fridge I had it all full of breads and stuff and pop and juice in the other part of the fridge... One of the times they came up to my house, it's cause I was drinking as well. I left them with a caregiver, with a babysitter and never came back. They were gonna take the kids away but they went to my mom's instead. They went to my mom's for a week.

The most recent involvement with the Children's Aid Society was because of her relationship with Ben, who was being abusive:

[CAS] helped me out at first because I was so afraid of leaving Ben, I put it in their hands that they're ordering this to happen. They [CAS] were called because of the suicide, when I stayed in the hospital for a week... they were called by the police. Like middle of last June is when I went to the hospital... October or November they had taken us to court, my ex and I, to put a society order on because my ex would pull a lot of things like fighting in front of the children and threatening me and things like that.

Elizabeth was required to become involved in a number of programs:

At the time, I was already going to counselling and I was already seeing a psychiatrist, those were two things that were on the order. Also the other one was to refrain from alcohol and illegal drugs. Um, and to go to the woman's shelter for counselling for abused women. Go see an alcohol drug counsellor and get the children into um, children who witnessed abuse. Not only physical abuse, but mental and emotional and all that stuff. I had went for a seminar for the alcohol one. There was like a 3 hour seminar and they said that I didn't need any counselling but CAS is singing a different tune that I have to go... So I'm going to go to three of them before I leave at the end of the month [she's moving to live in her trailer at the lake for the summer] and say 'well there you go'... I haven't got the kids in for their counselling because the waiting list is like huge so you know I'm still waiting on that...

Elizabeth does not appreciate many of the programs and services she has been involved in:

Well the psychiatrist, she put me on antidepressants and I've taken myself off and [the psychiatrist] told me that I have to be back on them even though I don't feel that I should be on them, so I have to pretty much take them, but now that I've stopped drinking since October you know, they didn't see a problem. I think it's a crock of shit. I think that if a person's gonna drink no matter if the order's there or not, they're gonna do it and it doesn't...My problem is that not that I'm allowed to drink, it's that I don't have a choice whether I can or not. The shelter thing. I can't get into the group um, I've been to previous groups before but I can't get into this particular group. I've stayed at the woman's shelter before and that was tough. I've done some venting and I don't even feel like talking in there, but they said that if I don't participate then they're gonna have to tell the CAS that I'm not participating...Like if I say everything's fine you know, they just leave me alone. So I can't really say what I feel kind of thing...

Despite having negative experiences with the programs, Elizabeth does like her psychiatrist. She enjoys having a third party who can advocate for her. Elizabeth resents her new Children's Aid society worker:

I just hate Children's Aid right now. I didn't mind them before but now that I got this stupid advisor. She's a nasty little woman...My [previous] worker is no longer my worker. He has left the society, so now I get his supervisor and she's a really nasty woman and you know, I have no use for her...Just her total attitude. I was used to my worker and he was pretty easy going. You could talk to him like a normal person. And she doesn't, it's just like boom boom boom...

Elizabeth will "continue doing what they want", but she is unhappy with her involvement with the Children's Aid Society:

I just want them out of my face. I'm sick and tired of them. They make me ill. They can't even cooperate, they want me to go to all these appointments, they can't even give me bus tickets anymore or anything like that and it's just like come on now, my ex isn't paying me child support, I only get like \$900 a month, what more do you want me to do? And [previous worker] had given me bus tickets before. He like paid for all my bus tickets.

Elizabeth struggles with the "lack of privacy" in her life since the Children's Aid has been

involved:

They come into your house, they expect to, you know, they come in, they want to see what's in your fridge or cupboards and everything else. It's an invasion of privacy. They come and inspect your children. You know, my daughter Kimberly didn't even want to...someone said I beat her or whatever...she had bruises all over. Well I had to literally prove to her as my kid is struggling and screaming in my arms. I had to take her bottoms off and show her that there were no black and blue marks on her butt, I had to pull up her shirt. ...They give you more stress than anything. 'Cause you gotta comply with what they want...it gets stressful, that part.

She is hoping to move to another city in the fall to be nearer her mom and step dad. She expects that Children's Aid will come make sure the housing is appropriate.

Discussion

The background for this discussion is the assumption that almost all of the children in families involved with child protection services, including most of those who enter care, will continue to live in their homes and communities of origin. Children and their parents in these stories derive their sense of belonging and identity through their families. Families are where many women and children look for social involvement, emotional support and practical assistance long after child protective services have gone away. As tumultuous as the lives of mothers, families, and communities are in many of these stories, efforts to improve our helping efforts must focus on finding acceptable ways to be useful within these living environments.

There are clearly important positive elements in many of these women's stories about their experiences with child protection services. Quite a few of these women talked about a positive connection they were able to make with a child protection worker. What was most often appreciated was having someone who would listen to them and who believed that they were doing

their best. Services providers were also appreciated for offering useful advice and finding helpful resources. For example, Rebecca appreciated finding a child protection worker with some life experience who knew what it was like to live with an alcoholic husband. Jennifer liked her second worker who, despite being older, had her eyebrow pierced and listened to her. She liked “having her come over and talking with me.” Kaitlyn found her worker friendly and full of good advice. She says her worker “even offered to help clean the house”. She credits Children’s Aid with “helping me get my life on track.” Karen found her worker very nice and helpful finding supports for her and in getting her Native status Card. While both Annette and Elizabeth had trouble with some of their child protection workers, they both appreciated finding a worker they could talk to “just like a regular *person*.”

Karen, Annette, and Elizabeth gave credit to the Children’s Aid Society for helping them get out of an abusive relationship, though they did not necessarily appreciate how this was done. Involvement helped Jennifer argue less frequently with her boyfriend. Rebecca says that child welfare forced her to face issues in her life that she’d rather ignore. Women talked about helpful programs and services that they voluntarily used or were ordered to use by child welfare. Susan liked talking to her in-home visitor and found a women’s group a good place to “get things off the chest.” Rebecca thought that family counselling helped her relationship with her husband. Jennifer, as a very young mother, liked the in-home services as well as some individual counselling and group involvements. She talked about trying out some new recipes she had learned from her home visitor. Karen valued her involvement with the “mutual support” group and her “summer placement” through the Native community centre. Annette also liked her mom’s group and

counselling. While Elizabeth described “going through the motions” with many programs to satisfy Children’s Aid, she did value the support of her psychiatrist who sometimes advocated with child welfare on her behalf.

However, these positive experiences were not the dominant themes in these women’s child welfare stories. Having more than one child protection worker while their case was open was the norm. Many commented about infrequent contact with child welfare workers and how hard it was to get a response to their calls. Some child welfare workers were clearly experienced as insensitive and judgmental. Some mothers talked about workers assuming that they were guilty until they prove themselves innocent. Other felt information about their circumstances was misrepresented or exaggerated. Others wished child welfare workers had listened to them before making up their minds. Chen wondered why her children needed to go into care and complained, “they didn’t ask me or listen.” Susan commented on infrequent contacts and was particularly upset about neither being visited when her kids were in care nor when they came home. Janet was very angry with the Children’s Aid Society not responding to their requests for help until her partner “lost his cool” and slapped his son. Amy, Pamela, Marie, and Donna told similar stories of getting no response to their requests for help coping with “difficult children.” Amber talked of child protection workers who didn’t return her calls and not feeling she had “to follow their rules if they took two weeks to get back to you.” Marie, Amber, and Annette commented on the lack of credibility of parenting advice for child protection workers who had no children of their own.

Fear was a prevalent theme in most of these stories. Fear when child welfare first showed up and fear that they might come back in the future. Even “voluntary clients” talked about not

feeling that they had any choice but to agree with what the agency wanted. Most mothers were very clear that they believed that needed to do what they were told to do, especially if their child was in care. Some complained about feeling constrained as parents and unclear about what they could do with their children. Many expressed confusion about what child welfare expected of them and even the status of their case at the agency. Others talked about going through the motions with some elements on their supervision orders or simply not telling the child protection worker what was going on. Even when a supervision order was in effect or when a child had just returned home from care, child protection worker visits often were infrequent. Most mothers were anxious for child welfare to be out of their lives.

Chen was very unclear about what her next court appearance was about. She liked her new child welfare worker but preferred the mental health worker because she couldn't take her kids away. Susan and her partner fought the child welfare agency's version of events in court. She was unsure what was happening in her case and wanted the involvement to be over. Julie also didn't know the status of her case at the agency. Janet was not happy with the Children's Aid Society or her child protection worker and "would never ask for help again." Rebecca is afraid to tell her child welfare worker, who she likes, about her husband's renewed drinking. She feels that they do not understand how it feels to be caught between your commitment as a wife and as a mother. Jennifer is hoping her case will be closed soon but overall she found the involvement to be very frightening and worries they will take her daughter again. If someone calls on her again, she is afraid a different child protection worker will show up who won't understand what her present worker knows and won't believe her. Amber is resentful about "having to prove

what kind of person you are to the government” and she feels “on edge all the time” about Children’s Aid. Karen wonders why her life is still open but is afraid to ask. Elizabeth is “doing what they want” and waiting for them to leave. Annette is the exception hoping child welfare involvement can continue because her “current worker is cool because he listens to me and knows I’m not rejecting anything.”

Of note is that most of these families’ lives seem to be going on after child welfare involvement much as they did before. Crises have abated and a few new behaviours may have been learned, but there is little evidence in these stories of substantial and enduring benefits for children, parents or families. Readers might wonder what was the point of all this activity and disruption.

In these stories, child welfare prescribe a fairly standard and limited range of interventions for families: individual and group counselling of various types, anger management and parenting courses and alcohol and drug testing and treatment are most common. Parents are monitored to make sure they follow through with “treatment” and behave appropriately with their children. The most cursory reading of these stories indicates that these helping strategies are neither congruent with the lives of these parents and their children nor sufficient to respond to the obstacles they confront. In our concluding section, the argument is made that these family profiles demand a more balanced approach to child and family welfare, which not only makes more helpful resources available to families, but incorporates a shared responsibility for protecting children and fostering the well being of children and parents.

There is a substantial absence of interventions designed to help children directly in these

stories. Providing supports to children directly is an accessible avenue to protect children from harm and to enhance their development under these circumstances. For example, daycare, school tutoring and mentoring programs, after-school programming, access to recreational and social involvements, connections with pro-social adults, developing contact families or persons for children and families, family resource centres, and mentoring and apprenticeship programs for children and youth all have promise. To take advantage of such possibilities requires moving beyond our narrow conception of a stand-alone child protection system (Cameron, O' Reilly, et al., 2001; Cameron, Freymond, et al., 2001).

Of particular concern is the use of short-term placements in these stories [from 5 days to 4 months] as a precaution [e.g. Annette] and as leverage to secure changes in family functioning [e.g Susan and Chen]. These placements were horrible ordeals for these mothers. Consider Annette being left on her knees at the police station only to have her children returned to her at a shelter five days later. Or Susan falling into a depression, or the tears of Jennifer's grandparents, and her own terror. Most of the mothers with young children apprehended and returned home talked of the insecurities and confusion of their child. It does not take much imagination to see how even a relatively brief placement of a child can be marking point in that child's memory of childhood. Mothers in these stories who had been in care as children did not have fond memories of these experiences.

Our contention is that, rather than taking a child out of his or her home for a short period of time for these purposes, it is both practical and humane to create alternative choices. Other countries have created "family-friendly" placement options such as contact families or placement

homes for mothers and children together (Cameron, & Freymond, 2003). It is possible to have access to short-term accommodations or even to have a trusted person stay in a home 24 hours a day for a while. In many instances, the assistance of extended family members or other community residents can be solicited.

Over half of these stories describe the trials of parents trying to cope with a child exhibiting very difficult behaviours [Pamela, Marie, Janet, Donna, Kaitlyn, Amy, Sandy, Amber, Annette]. None of these stories talked about receiving useful assistance from the Children's Aid Society. Many of these mothers were angry about a lack of response to their requests for help. Others found the help offered of minimal value. This observation is important for two reasons. Clearly, many families facing these challenges become involved with child welfare and the absence of appropriate responses is troubling. In the Partnership for Children and Families residential care research over half of the children entering residential care had prior involvement with child welfare agencies. The parents of these children also reported dissatisfaction with their reception at Children's Aid Societies (Cameron, de Boer, Frensch, & Adams, 2003). This residential care research also illustrates the tremendous pressure such children can place upon their families and the often disastrous consequences of their efforts to adjust to life in the community. It is essential to explore better ways of recognizing and responding to families in such circumstances.

The stories of Karen, Amber and Janet's partner's First Nation's son remind us of the unique relationship of Aboriginal communities to child welfare. In each of these families, there is a similar tale of community dissolution and of generational involvement with child welfare. Child welfare has continued the relationship of mainstream culture to First Nations began by residential

schools and some argue that its negative impacts have been even more pervasive (Mandell, et al., 2003). This underscores the inappropriateness of an exclusive emphasis on individual mothers with this population and the need to accommodate the First Nations emphasis upon a community healing approach to child welfare (Cameron, Freymond et al., 2001).

5) Personal Challenges and Heroine's Stories

Heroine: “a woman admired for her courage” (Pearlsall, 2002). This descriptor is deliberately chosen to illustrate a characteristic of these women too often obscured from our vision. The women themselves were not comfortable with the term heroine: “We’re not used to thinking about ourselves that way.” They were more comfortable with “survivors”. But does a heroine always succeed? Does a heroine emerge undamaged from her trials? Does a heroine never fail? Does she always succeed at everyday life? Not necessarily. Heroines endure under exceptional difficulty. They continue to hope and to strive. Life has given most of these women many reasons to give up. Less resourceful women may have ended up in mental hospitals, prison, on the streets, or dead. Many have. Yet most of these women continue to talk about their joys and aspirations, despite the challenges in their lives. Is it possible for us to acknowledge the hope, persistence and courage in these lives?

Amber

Amber has faced a great deal of obstacles in her life. Growing up, she lived on the streets living hungry, and moved from place to place. When Amber moved to a new province, she started seeing a counsellor, and she began having flashbacks as a result of her experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Amber recalls that she became suicidal:

I started getting counselling because I didn't know what was wrong with me and I started getting flashbacks because I had blocked out so much of my childhood. And I started having flashbacks and just acting irrational and I started drinking again and started to get into the drugs and because I didn't know what was happening with me and finally I had a big breakdown and ended up in the hospital. Yeah. And I went through the therapy and one thing, it started like a hypnotherapy or whatever and they video taped it and that and then it all came out of all the abuse I've gone through and it's not just what from what I can remember back until about four or five, it went beyond that.

Amber describes how her history of abuse has left her with low-self-esteem:

It is because I still have to gain a lot of my confidence...My self-esteem and my confidence because I've been put down all my life and a great part of my life where I was put down a lot. And I'm just...I'm still rebuilding all that back because it was taken away from me...Yeah, yeah. And I'm scared at the same time too, you know, when people do compliment me it's it's hard for me to believe it you know, because I don't quite see it.

For many years, Amber used drugs and alcohol to deal with the pain caused by her childhood experiences. Amber still drinks occasionally, but she says that she has been “clean” for 12 years. But it was difficult to stay away from drugs working in a bar:

Oh, I don't do it [drugs and alcohol] because why, you know, I went through that scene plus I went through my counseling and I don't use it as a crutch to solve my problems anymore or hide from it like I used to, block things out like my childhood and a lot of times the odd I won't lie about it. It's offered a lot, you know, like the girls will be partying oh, come to the bathroom, there's something in the bathroom and you know, it's like no, I can't be bothered plus I don't want to upset (boyfriend). I don't want to upset me, my family. I get caught doing that on the job, I might as well kiss my butt goodbye and then you get a reputation that you can't you know, and it goes around to other bar owners, then you don't

get hired on anywhere else because they think, okay, she's going to be doing this and that.

Amber says that she avoids social activities because she fears if she is around people consuming alcohol, she will drink. She avoids these situations because CAS has instructed her not to drink around her children. To reduce stress, Amber enjoys cleaning, gardening, baking, and canning. While she finds it difficult to give herself praise, she explains that one of her proudest moments was when she received her grade 12 diploma.

Amber spends most of her time around the house with her partner. They enjoy watching movies, going on motorcycle rides, walking the dog, and going on picnics. They are planning a weekend getaway up north for their anniversary. Amber says that she is trying to look at things more positively; thinking negatively is a challenge that she is trying to overcome:

I have to have a better attitude. I know I do. I've got yeah, I'm still working on it, I'm still changing but I get a lot of support from (boyfriend), you know, he sits there and he shakes his head and he wants to walk away from me because of just all the stuff that I've gone through in life and the way I look at things and that sometimes it's so negative you know and I'm trying to snap out of it but I I'm going to get more counseling for it...

Amber recalls that a psychic once said of her, "this person is a helper, this person helps people and looks at people different than other people...". Amber exemplified this helpful nature by bringing a homeless senior into her home. The man's home was destroyed in a fire and he was left destitute. Amber felt compelled to help him. She describes:

I don't know, I don't know how to describe it. It's he needs love, something like that. He's never had it in his life. You know, when he got burnt out, he's got nephews and a brother in town here and they didn't even bother to check up on him. You know? And then like three weeks later his nephew died and then they come looking for him to let him know that there was death in the family and I felt like blurting out to them, where were you went he got burnt out? This this guy

had nothing. Nobody came by to see how he was doing and see if he even died in the fire. I was hurt, eh, like it makes me I don't know. I'm in tears here. He needs to be looked after. He needs to know that he's needed and loved and you know, that somebody actually out there does care, you know or it makes me feel good to know that I'm doing something for him.

Despite her helpful nature, Amber says that when people first meet her they think she is cold because she, “sits back and listens” to people. She does this because she was told to “keep her mouth shut” as a child. However, Amber can also be assertive:

Yeah, I can let it loose. I don't let anybody stand in my way. When I get upset and you put me down I let you know. Yeah, that's just shakes his head and goes that's a side of you I don't like Amber. And I says well, hey I went through my whole life with keeping my mouth shut. I went through my whole life in fear that if I opened my mouth I'd get I'd get beaten up or put down or something. I says it's about time I stood up for myself. I know sometimes it's wrong. And I tell you these people don't do it again.

In regards to her physical health, Amber received treatment for cervical cancer several years ago. She was told she would have to have a hysterectomy, but she sought a second opinion. The second doctor said she could avoid the hysterectomy. She was happy because she was able to go on and have another child.

Amber has dreams of one day opening her own restaurant business. She would like to be married some day and “ride off into the sunset” on a motorcycle.

Janet

Janet has returned to school. She is enrolled in a Personal Support Worker program, and looks forward to seeking employment in a hospital. She spends several hours a day on the internet, chatting and playing games. She met an American man on the internet that she would like to meet in person. Since they cannot meet in person, they spend several hours talking on the

phone. Janet says that the phone bills are “outrageous”.

Rebecca

Working night shifts for ten years left Rebecca feeling “*exhausted all the time*”. She gained weight because of her lifestyle and felt “*frazzled, stressed, and grumpy*”. She now works a better shift at work, but she finds herself feeling very stressed out because she is caught in the middle between the best interests of her children, the CAS’s expectations, and her loyalty to her husband. Her husband is drinking again, and the CAS has left it up to her to report this behaviour. Rebecca describes what living with alcoholism feels like to her:

....when it first started, when I first realized, you know, we’re having a problem here... I’d pick up some books from the library, and...you know, one of the big things was...it’s for the rest of your life. And I thought, I don’t want to deal with this for the rest of my life. You know, cause...right then, you’re in it so heavy, that...I thought, to never be out of this...it’s a cloud. It’s always there. Dark cloud, hanging over you.

Rebecca feels torn between having to choose sides with her children or with her husband. It seems like neither choice will end up in a positive result at this point. She notes, “*I grew up in a family, and you know, all the way through, I never believed in divorce, but then...when does the protection of your kids come before your marriage?*” She feels that she needs to deal with the situation soon before it becomes “*a really bad problem.*”

Rebecca describes how she deals with the stress and challenges in her life:

...sometimes when I’m really stressed out, just, well, taking a night off, it can be the smallest thing. Someone giving you a compliment...say there’s a song coming on the radio. Sometimes it doesn’t take much. Other times, it...takes a lot of chocolate. I guess realizing just how strong I am. That I can deal with it. And, you know, get through it. Maybe...like, I do bury my head in the sand some days, but, you know, I try and deal with it a little bit at a time.

She also turns to her faith and her personal philosophy for strength:

...like, growing up in Mennonite church, I felt it was just do's and don'ts, from my perspective. Where, here, I finally felt like I got taught why the do's and don'ts are in place. Like, you know, why God wants you to behave, the way, you know, like...You know. Why the rules are there. And just realizing, that...you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to lay the guilt trip on yourself, because...he doesn't expect you to be perfect. So yeah, and just that...you know, he's there to care for you, and love you, no matter what you do. So I mean, how could life be more perfect?

Rebecca describes herself as a “people pleaser”. First and foremost she sees herself as a “mother and a wife”. She says that what makes her life good, “*are the same things that make it bad...the husband and kids.*” She also enjoys her job, which involves providing supports to people with developmental disabilities. She also tries to do volunteer work, when she can fit it into her schedule. Overall, Rebecca feels her life is quite good because she has a husband and children that love her. She would, however, love to have a break from her busy life, and go on a vacation. She hopes the pace of her life will slow down within the next few months.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth has had a life long struggle with alcohol and drugs. She recalls that when she was heavily using she did not value or care about herself or others. She would engage in risky behaviours such as riding in a car with a drunk driver. Two years ago, Elizabeth stopped using cocaine – cold turkey. She says that she quit because she doesn't want her children “growing up like that”.

Elizabeth has been on and off medication to help her deal with depression over the past seven years. A year ago, she separated from her partner and attempted suicide. She describes the incident:

I had a lot of anti depressants plus sleeping pills and Tylenol 3 in June of last year I had taken them all and um, you know thought well maybe this world would be better off without me kind of scenario kind of thing and it was just pure stupidity on my own part but um, I felt like I had no other way out, no other way to go and that would be the only way so I thought, I was drinking the night before and continue drinking and took all these like a big handful of pills, took them all and my ex common law came home from work cause he worked midnights and um, found me and then he phoned 911 and then the ambulance came and took me to the hospital and made me drink that awful charcoal gross disgusting stuff.

Elizabeth was hospitalized for seven days. A counsellor talked with her every day. She said that she realised, “*there was more to this life than just me, and I gotta start thinking of the children before me*”. Elizabeth is currently taking medication for the depression. She says that she smokes cigarettes to reduce stress as well. She knows that smoking is unhealthy, and it may have caused her asthma, but she cannot quit.

Elizabeth thinks she will remain single for awhile because she has issues she needs to work out within herself. She describes:

I think probably in the past I couldn't get with anyone because I didn't like myself so if I didn't like myself then why would anybody else like me? Like really for the real me I'm thinking that like no...I didn't think that back then. This is my pain now. And you know, I still have a lot of issues to deal with on my own before I even think about dealing with another human being. Like another adult human being.

Elizabeth says she really wants to be able to be herself in a relationship with a man. She describes herself as a friendly, “people person”. She enjoys meeting new people and talking to people. Elizabeth also enjoys doing crafts such as ceramics, as well as reading, and chatting on the internet. She says what makes her life good are her kids, and being away from her abusive ex-partner. Elizabeth takes her children to the beach in the summer, and enjoys going on class field

trips with her children. She has recently purchased a trailer, and she has enjoyed bringing the kids to play in the trailer park while she paints and redecorates the trailer.

Elizabeth also describes how she is really good at finding and accessing community resources. Through her volunteer work at the food bank, she has become aware of many social services available to her in the community. She says that sometimes its difficult to get by, but she keeps “trying”:

I just keep trying. Sometimes it gets really frustrating and whatnot and you just let it slide for a couple days and then you gotta go back at it and you know, keep on finding ways of, because you know... oh well we can't help you but here's a number that can' and you call that and... oh well we can't help you but here's a number that can' and sometimes you get back to the first number that you first started with kind of thing so that gets frustrating. When that happens it's just like...I'm tired of this, I'm giving it up for a while and then you know after you've had a couple days of relaxation and not having to worry about that right at the moment then you go back at it or even a day kind of thing.

Elizabeth is hopeful for the future for herself and her children. She says that she doesn't know why she tends to move so often, but eventually she would like to settle down in one place and own a house and a car. She looks forward to moving into the trailer for the summer. She thinks her children will enjoy the experience. She also hopes that they will soon be at the top of the list for subsidized housing.

Jennifer

Something that frustrates Jennifer is that people tend to treat her like a child because she looks very young. She is nineteen years old, however, she is responsible for her daughter and running a household. Jennifer cooks and cleans for her grandparents and has helped to fix up the house. She has help lay flooring, and sanded, painted, and wallpapered in their house.

Jennifer describes herself as “shy”. She says that she doesn’t know what caused her shyness:

I don’t know. I don’t well, I like people but well, I used to say that I don’t like people at all but it’s not that I don’t like people. Like, I don’t know, I don’t feel comfortable around people I don’t know because I think like what what are they thinking about me.

In the past, Jennifer has participated in individual and couples counselling. She says that before the counselling she was a “mad person”, but now she is much happier.

Jennifer loves spending time with her daughter. They go to the park, swimming, and to community events and festivals. Jennifer likes to work with her hands. In her spare time she cross-stitches, crochets blankets, pillows, and toys, builds doll houses, and works with clay. She has taught herself most of these skills. She recently bought a knitting kit, and looks forward to learning how to knit.

Jennifer would like to get her driver’s license because she doesn’t want to have to rely on others for transportation anymore. In the future she would like to complete her home schooling, become an accountant and move out on her own and be independent. Ideally, she would like to own her own home.

Kaitlyn

The biggest challenge in Kaitlyn’s life has been overcoming the grief and depression she has experienced after her husband died. She says that after his death she, “bottomed out”; she slept a lot, gained weight, and neglected the house work. She shopped and ate to make herself feel better, and she took the anti-depressants prescribed by her doctor. Kaitlyn also enrolled

herself in a nursing program, and worked on “autopilot” to get her through her courses and the rest of her life. She describes what life was like:

I think I was working on autopilot and because it's a great loss and then the disciplining of the children and I kind of let them get away with lots of things because I felt guilty that they had lost their dad and so they kind of took advantage of that too as children tend to do. And so now I'm putting the foot back down and saying okay, now, you have to clean up the house, you have to clean up your bedroom, you have to help out with chores, get them back to where we used to be with routines...

Kaitlyn says that it took her about 2 ½ years after her husband's death to get herself “back into life”. She thinks that by keeping herself busy she has been able to work through the worst parts of her grieving. She began going out with friends, meeting new people, and she enrolled in skating to get exercise and reduce stress. Writing letters expressing her thoughts and feelings to her husband has also helped. It's still a challenge to keep her house as organized as she would like it.

Kaitlyn recognizes that it has been “a major accomplishment” to go through the grieving experience, attend school full-time, and raise two children. She's very proud of herself. Kaitlyn says that she's “still surviving” and she's going to “keep going”, and further pursue her goals.

She describes her feelings about the future:

I wouldn't say I'm completely back but I'm most of the way there. I would say I'm most of the way there. I can look at things that usually remind me of my husband without any of the heart lurch type of deal and I look forward to carrying on and things like that. Now, again plans for the future I don't have any for a long, long term because I mean the ones we did have went away when my husband went away but I had plans on which also involve money which I don't have but I mean getting done school, graduating, buying a house, living somewhere, decorating my house to how I want it to be type of deal not this is a rental place so you don't do too much to it, spending more time with my friends and family and things like that so...

Karen

Karen has survived on living on her own from the age of fourteen. She has experienced depression, a suicide attempt, and she recently left an abusive relationship. She says that she tries not to focus on what has happened to her in the past. She tends to “brush it off” and “go on” with life. Karen says that she has trouble remembering a lot of her past. She tries to heed the advice a friend once gave her:

...my friend, she mentioned something to me before that...kinda stuck in my head. Like it was the she ah...whatever happens in your life is a learning experience. And you learn from it. You can't dwell on it, but you just ah...use it as a learning experience, and try to deal with it that way. And um...that's one strength I used.

In the past, Karen was seeing a counsellor with whom she had built a trusting relationship. She looks forward to seeing this counsellor again. Currently, Karen says that she is a lot happier than she was before, because she is working and she has people in her life to support her. Karen feels that she is “accomplishing what she needs to do” in her life, day by day. This means getting away from her ex-partner and getting on with her life. She says that “things are going good” in her life, but “there is always a bunch of problems.” What Karen wants in life, is to have a “stable home” for herself and her children, and she feels that things are working out that way right now.

Amy

One of the biggest challenges for Amy has been her health. Problems with her reproductive system began as a teen. She had various surgical procedures, and went through chemotherapy to treat cancer on her ovaries. Doctor's thought it wouldn't be possible, but Amy was able to have children. She eventually had to have a hysterectomy. Since the hysterectomy, Amy has gained 120 pounds, and was diagnosed with a thyroid problem, for which she takes

medication. The medication stops the increase in further weight gain but she says that she is still struggling to lose the weight gained.

Amy has also struggled with her mental health. She recalls that she used to “hide” in her room and cry. She describes how she reached out for help:

Finally about three years into it I thought that I was going to have a breakdown because of all of the scenarios going on. And by this time I've got a small infant also and I called how I got help for me, I called the Mental Health Unit and said if they didn't help me I was going to commit suicide. I wasn't going to commit suicide but I knew that I needed to speak to somebody. You know? I knew that I needed help. If I couldn't get help for the rest, at least the person that was getting run down needed to be sane and that sort of worked out okay.

Amy was set up with a psychiatrist, who diagnosed her with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Amy says that the medication is helping, and her psychiatrist has been quite helpful as well. Her psychiatrist helps her deal with negative feelings around not being able to work, after injuring her back. She describes how she reacted to her back injury:

I was devastated. Absolutely devastated. I wasn't even allowed to lift my three-year-old daughter up at the time, she was two and a half actually. I wasn't even allowed to lift her and nobody in the house wanted to understand that mom could no longer do all this stuff and when I first injured myself, they thought that it was only going to be a six to eight week recovery and I'm a pretty, pretty recoverable person. Example, I went in for a hysterectomy just before I went back to work originally and I was out of the hospital within 12 hours and home. You know? I so I'm a pretty but it wasn't the same you know and the more I tried the worse I got, the worse I was causing myself to be. I tried two more attempts to go back to work just to get to work. You know, give me anything. Let me stamp envelopes, I don't care, just let me get to work and work of course ran out of things for me to do.

Amy was referred to a chronic pain program, which she says has helped her. She has

learned that she needs to be realistic about what she is physically capable of. She has to delegate household responsibilities more. Also, she is working on becoming a medical transcriptionist. This is a job that she can do from home and work around her pain.

In her spare time, Amy enjoys being creative. She is currently working on decorating hats for a friend's wedding. Amy says that she "can take anything and make something out of it". Self-taught, she paints murals and makes variety of arts and crafts. Amy says that it makes her feel "great" that she has people requesting the art work she does. Amy calls herself "creative and strong-willed". She feels like she can speak her mind, but she also has an intense fear of failure. She always thinks that her cooking and her art could be better. Another passion of Amy's is reading. She learns a lot about crafts and painting through her reading.

Amy describes herself as a "total nurturer" and a "doer". Both she, and her husband are "caretakers". Amy loves to do things for people, but she says this means she is often taking on too much, and offering too much of herself. For example, her father is living with her family right now after the death of her mom, as well as her brother-in-law and his partner because of their financial situation.

Pamela

Pamela was prescribed anti-depressants after feeling suicidal a year ago. At that time, Pamela's daughter had just moved in with Pamela's parents. She recalls feeling, "like my parents were right, that I was a bad parent". Pamela recalls thinking, "I was going to kill myself. I was contemplating it. What the hell does she need me for?" She thought about overdosing on pills and she was also intentionally driving recklessly. It was a supportive aunt who encouraged

Pamela to seek help with her doctor. Pamela reports that the medication allows her to “take a step back and look instead of being so caught up in my life.”

Pamela’s daughter is now back living at home. Pamela says that despite the hardships she and her daughter have faced, they still have a sense of humour. She describes how someone recently referred to her as a humourous person, which made her feel good about herself. Being a sociable person, Pamela says that she loves to laugh and joke around with people.

In the past, Pamela has found participating in a self-esteem work shop and counselling to be of some assistance. Volunteering at a woman’s shelter also helped her. She said that her volunteer position allowed her to help others as well as allow her to become aware of the various social services in the community. Pamela has also pursued self-discovery through a self-help workbook and counselling. By working through exercises in the self-help book, Pamela thinks that she is gaining a better understanding of her strengths and accepting herself for who she is.

She describes:

...one of the things I learned with that self help thing, was that you’re not as bad of a person as you think you are when you actually look at yourself. It’s not as scary as you think it’s going to be and that if you will look at other people and give them a break in a non-judgmental way, then why can’t you look at yourself?

Pamela feels that her self confidence is improving. She thinks that she had confidence as a child, because she had a lot of responsibility. For example, as a child, Pamela would make phone calls for her mother because she had a disability. However, when her father came home, her confidence would diminish because he had all of the control:

I got confidence in making phone calls from my mom. But yet, well my dad would come home and everything was switched. It’s like this is the way it is and this is

the only way, and he was so confident that...that was the way it is. Meanwhile, we know there's a better way or a different way, yet when he was home, this is just the way it is and that's confidence...or control. To me that was confidence I guess.

Pamela describes how she thinks she lost this childhood confidence:

...somewhere along the line I lost confidence. I guess I had confidence as a teen or whatever, and I hooked up with my ex, lost it, gained it back, and then dealing with my teen I lost it again.

And now she feels that she is re-gaining her confidence again, as evidenced by her volunteer work and her activism:

I think I'm just learning confidence now, and that must be it. I could be rebellious, I could be angry, I protested and I take up causes, and I can get in your face, or I can go volunteer.

In reflecting upon her life, Pamela says that life isn't simple, there are "ruts" and "soap operas" to live through. She recalls that when she was being abused by her ex-husband she dreamed of a happier marriage and life. However, she came to the realization that she had to alter that dream and develop a new dream for her future. Pamela describes:

I had to quit loving him and so in essence I took that dream I had and I smashed it. That dream's gone, but then in this place, like I said, there is no other dream. And not only lose one dream, but not have another one except for raising that child, being the best mother that I could be. That's the only replacement.

Donna

Donna describes the past two years of her life as the worst years of her life, because health problems have taken over her life. She says, "my life deals with 95 percent medical every day from the time I get up to the time I go to sleep." Donna has experienced ongoing health problems since she was a teen. She has had difficulties with her reproductive system that required

several treatments, and eventually a hysterectomy after she had her son. As well, Donna was in a bad car accident when she was 17 that left her with chronic neck and back pain. She has also been diagnosed with clinical depression and Attention Deficit Disorder. In the past two years she has experienced chronic, debilitating pain that often leaves her house bound and bed-ridden. She thinks the escalation of the pain is associated with the increased stress levels in her life.

Donna describes how she deals with the pain:

Being in chronic pain 24 hours a day takes a toll on a person and I don't complain about it. I don't say anything about it but it doesn't mean I don't feel it. Like right now I'm in a lot of pain but there's no sense complaining about it. It gets every one else down and gets me down just listening to myself but it I can't do normal things like everybody else. My energy level is extremely low.

One of the biggest causes of stress and frustration for Donna has been trying to find a diagnosis for her problems. She has been told many different things by various professionals. She has been diagnosed with fibro myalgia by a doctor and she has self-diagnosed herself with mio-facial pain syndrome. Donna feels that she isn't getting the help she needs from any health or social services. Recently, Donna started smoking cigarettes again to deal with the stress of her mother's hospitalization. Donna describes her current state of mind:

I've become a very negative person and I think negative and there's only negative things in my life on a daily basis and I never used to be so negative and down but up until the last couple years no matter how hard it got I always felt that one of these days things would change and get better. I have always had hope, always positive but trying to get any help in this country is impossible and it just has changed my life so drastically that I've given up hope of ever having a normal life. I've given up hope.

Annette

Annette says that she feels lucky to have survived many of the experiences in her

life. She lived through an abusive childhood, abusive relationships, an injury from a bad car accident, and she also survived cancer and a difficult pregnancy. When Annette was diagnosed with cervical cancer, she recalls thinking, “I just had this determination that this is not going to get me, I’m going to keep on with my life and I’m going to look after myself, and hope to God I don’t have any more.”

Annette says that she tries to bring this sense of determination to all she does. She describes:

...in life, they say you should never call yourself a determined person, because that means either you’re angry or something, but my definition of determined means someone who’s not going to quit, somebody who does not give up and wants the best and will do their best. And hopefully the best comes out of it and if not, if it’s wrong, you try again until you get it right. And I’m also a perfectionist, which I cannot handle saying that, but my dad always said, if you’re going to do a job, you gotta do it right. So I’m a person who likes to take my time sometimes and sometimes I know how to do things I’ll do it quick, but to the best of my ability.

One of the happiest days of Annette’s life was when she received her high school diploma. She took this “ticket to freedom”, and travelled to a different province to begin a “new life”. Annette recalls how she felt after she reached Ontario:

...when I hit Ontario and I was only sixteen, my life was so beautiful at the time. I was open to hear anything, I was willing to talk to anybody if they were willing to talk to me, and then people couldn’t understand me because I talked too fast and my language or slang, and I would take the time to slow down and next thing you know, I had friends all over. And that’s the beautiful part, because I started to believe in myself. And that was a big step for me.

Reflecting upon her life, Annette states, “I’ve done well on my own, except for getting messed up with the wrong men.” She recalls that when her husband was abusive, she would cope with her situation by distracting herself by painting with her son or going for walks, because she

believes that if you dwell on the past and negative things in life, you won't get very far. She describes:

Me, I'm into wallpapering that wall today and not thinking about it, or me and the kids will go in and draw something with crayons. We will do something in memory, but not a bad memory. Like make something good out of a bad situation and that's the way I've dealt with everything in my life.

Annette has done a great deal of soul searching to help her better understand her life.

This has mainly involved writing her thoughts and feelings in a journal. She has drawn some conclusions from this process:

...that it's all worth what happened. Everything in my life happened for a reason. It toughened me up I guess. I don't know how to explain it in English. Sometimes you gotta go through rough times in order to see what it's actually like to have what you've worked for. And sometimes you might be misunderstood, you might speak like slang, like I do and words come out that get misrepresented or whatever, but when someone actually takes the time to listen to what's going on, it's worth it. Instead of assuming this and that, and I'm just always a happy person, but there's a few times where things will come in my way, that I know that there's gotta be a way to make people understand that that's not the way I was or the way I am. And that's the listening part, listening's a big thing for me, and not a lot of people can do that. They just assume things.

Annette says that the best part of her life is having her children in her life and knowing that both she and her children are safe. She describes how she remains hopeful for the future, "I'm a never-giver-upper. I'm determined that everybody around me is going to be happy, including myself...happiness awaits me."

Sandy

Throughout her life, Sandy has struggled with a number of physical and mental health

problems. At the age of nineteen, she was told by a doctor she was going to die if she didn't quit drinking. She was diagnosed with jaundice because she was drinking heavily, taking diet pills, and not eating. She recalls this time:

I never ate. It was wonderful. It really was like at the time. I thought that was great because I was losing weight like you wouldn't believe. Everybody told me how fabulous I looked. I loved it. It was great. And now people just tell me how fat I am and they won't put me on diet pills or anything but it's like I don't know. I just I always feel a part of me was so popular back then. That everybody was so attracted to me that I loved to have that feeling but then when I became ill that wasn't so great. It was a very tough, tough time in my life and I couldn't bring it to tell my parents. I couldn't tell anybody what the doctor had said.

Sandy stopped taking diet pills and drinking. She developed a thyroid problem that caused her to gain weight and have very low energy levels. She now takes medication to regulate her thyroid condition. Sandy also does physiotherapy exercises to reduce back pain. She was in a series of car accidents that resulted in a back injury. As well, she recently had a severe fall in her home that left her with a concussion and a further injury to her back. Sandy has taken medication for depression for several years. She has also sought individual and group counselling to feel better. Sandy states, "I took different things to to better myself, to make me feel that I was going forward with my life rather than backwards and when I felt I was on the right track I felt I didn't need them anymore."

Sandy describes herself as an independent and strong-willed person. She feels comfortable saying what is on her mind. In the past, she says that this trait sometimes turned into angry outbursts:

I'm a very abrupt person. I'm not afraid to admit to any one I'm very abrupt. If I don't like a situation, if I don't like it, then I'll tell you. And he thinks I'm too abrupt, too assertive. And if I'm deprived of my sleep I get really angry. I just go

berserk, you know, but my temper when I first met him was so bad. I used to smash windows. I used to throw things at my husband. I used to do you wouldn't believe what I used to do. I realized I had a rage in me...

Sandy feels her forthright nature is also reflected in her persistence and determination, that have allowed her to survive many of her life experiences. She says, "It is definitely very challenging but in my life I've always enjoyed to have challenges in my life. I need to have something challenging in my life." Sandy describes how she has developed her determination:

I don't want to ever back out of anything. I'm a very determined person. It's like I won't back down. I won't back down from anything. I'm not afraid of anything. I'm not afraid of any one and I have felt I have regained my whole life back by just being here and going through the counselling I went through, all the people that helped me and the classes I took and everybody I had there to help me through it.

She describes how she has dealt with her anger towards her brother and how she has forgiven him for what he did to her:

I've learnt how to basically...I wouldn't say totally control myself but I do try to gain more control than what I had in previous years. I look at people now. I can look at my brother and laugh at him because of what he has done to me. I think you are such a jerk, if you only knew. Okay, that's my version of I'm not exactly angry with him anymore. I understand from his intelligence that he is not a very intelligent person but I mean it doesn't mean that it takes brains to know right from wrong. It's basically the frustration probably of his growing up. I can basically say that in my heart I have not probably totally forgiven him but I am trying to forgive what has happened. I haven't told him to his face which I have been told I probably should.

Sandy also describes herself as a caring and intelligent person. She notes that one of the customers at the store she works at told Sandy that she was, 'the most caring person they had ever met', and this made her feel really good. The most important things in Sandy's life are her children and her husband. What Sandy values most are the people that are close to her, and she

says that she needs to have “a sense of closeness” to people her family. Sandy explains how she wants what she didn’t have in her childhood and she also wants to prove her father wrong:

I need to have to feel closeness with people. I have basically lacked that all my life. So, when when I say relationships are important, they are very important because if I don’t feel close to a person, I feel like I’m worthless. If I can’t help somebody out, I feel I’m very worthless. If I can’t succeed at what I’m doing, I feel worthless. I’m always striving to better myself. I remember like my dad used to say you’ll never amount to anything. You’ll never be anything. When I went to my computer class I couldn’t believe it because when I came out of it I got a 98 percent after all the hard work I had done and I thought bonus. I’m going to prove him wrong. I do know something in life and my husband and I have stuck together all these years.

Related to her interest in caring for others, Sandy reveals that one of her coping strategies is to listen other people’s stories. She says that through her counseling experiences and through listening to people’s stories through her volunteer work, she is trying to develop effective coping strategies. Sandy states, “I feel I can face a lot of things in life where as before I couldn’t face a lot of things. I would just sort of break down but now I feel I can handle a lot.” She feels that everything she has been through has allowed her to be a stronger person.

Sandy has a sense that things in her life are “coming together” now and she is hopeful for the future. She describes:

I’m glad I’m here. I’m glad I went through the whole situation but I feel I’m better for that whole situation. I feel I have more to move forward in my life. I feel that I have a very stable marriage. I feel that everything in my life right now is excellent except for problems with my daughter but I mean if I can survive that and survive all that my husband and I have been through together, I feel I will survive anything.

Marie

Marie says that one of her personal challenges is that she has low self-esteem. She

doesn't know why, but she tends to feel "very low" about herself. Marie describes often feeling inferior and "stupid". She thinks that her daughter is much smarter than her, and she thinks that her daughter must have gotten her intelligence from her father.

Marie says that she doesn't know what she is going to do when the kids are gone because she is content when she is doing something for others. To get her mind off her problems, she has started a part-time job. This provides Marie with a relief from thinking about her problems and offers her an opportunity to socialize.

Chen

Chen has been diagnosed with schizophrenia. She also had severe post-partum depression after the birth of her first child. Chen describes her symptoms:

I was hearing voices, I thought, like my mom gave the medicine to my baby and I thought it was going to kill her. I was so scared. I heard voices, I thought people were talking to me on the TV, I don't want to go out, I don't want anything to do, I just want to be in the house because I'm afraid. And I look around and I feel strange.

Chen was instructed to take medication to help to control these symptoms and her depression. In the past, she has stopped taking the medication because it caused her to gain weight. With the help her mother, Chen now takes the medication regularly, and she reports that the medication does help her symptoms.

Susan

Susan recalls that a stressful time for her was when her children were taken into care. She became quite depressed. At that time Susan was pregnant, and she explains that the depression affected her appetite, and so she didn't gain as much weight as she should have. Susan

participated in individual counselling at that time. The experience of counselling was enjoyable for her, and it helped her to, “get stuff off her chest and talk to someone...”.

Susan says that her children are what makes her life worthwhile. She is happy that they are back living with her now. For relaxation, Susan likes to spend time by herself, taking a bath or watching T.V. when the children are sleeping.

Discussion

John McKnight (1977) makes the controversial observation that professional helpers need people’s dysfunctions, while communities want their abilities. Parent Mutual Aid Organizations (Cameron, Hayward, & Mamatis, 1992), with members who were involved with child protective services, need the strength and initiative of mothers. One of these mutual aid organizations was characterized by its own children’s bill of rights and a philosophy which stated: “You can think. You can solve problems.” Onward Willow Better Beginnings, Better Futures includes a focus on neighbourhood empowerment and also relies on the talents of its members, many of whom have been social service “clients”. Both of these projects reflect the work of their members and demonstrate their pride in what they’ve accomplished.

In the Partnerships for Children and Families project research, mothers coping with “very difficult” children, who’ve been involved with both child protection and children’s mental health services, contrast the recognition and encouragement received from children’s mental health services with the judgement felt from child protection services (Frensch, & Cameron, 2003). There is strength and hope in these women’s stories that needs to be acknowledged in more balanced models of child and family welfare.

Parent and Child Protection Service Provider Reactions to the Stories

To gain multiple perspectives on the life stories, service providers and service participants were asked to read and discuss the sixteen life story summaries. Two groups involving thirteen child protection service providers and two groups involving thirteen service participants [mothers] read all of the life stories and participated in a four hour focus group discussions. Service providers and service participants came from two different regions served by two different child protection agencies, with groups from each region meeting separately. The service provider and service participant focus groups were held at separate times and locations. A trained facilitator from outside the research team assisted with the focus group discussions.

Child Protection Service Providers' Reaction to the Stories

Thirteen service providers employed by two different Children's Aid Societies participated in focus groups. Both groups represented child protection agencies with which the women in this research had been involved. Child protection workers as well as a small number of supervisors and managers shared their reactions to the life stories. The following themes emerged from the service provider focus groups.

A Focus on the Children's Aid Society

An unexpected development was that participants in the service provider focus groups spent much of their time discussing issues related to their own work at the Children's Aid Society. The following themes emerged from the service providers' discussions of their work.

Misunderstanding services: Several participants were surprised and disappointed that many women in the stories misunderstood the role of Children's Aid Society. They were surprised

how many of these women were unclear about why the Children's Aid Society was involved as well as unclear as to why children were being apprehended. One service provider notes, "It's as if, in all the work, I hadn't been speaking their language. That really surprised me." Participants also noted that the life stories suggested that there is a misconception of what Children's Aid Society does and what it doesn't do. One frustrated service provider remarks, "...it always seems that no one knows what the hell we do." A few service providers suggested that it would be helpful if the role of Children's Aid Society was made clearer to families, and that service providers should make an effort to be clearer about procedures with families.

Gap between the needs of families and the services offered: Several participants believed that the stories revealed that Children's Aid Society does not always effectively meet the needs of families. The service providers shared many concerns related to inadequacies that they perceive within the service delivery system. Service providers said things like: "I think there is a huge gap. I don't think what we do is effective for what they need", "we're not doing the right thing", and, "I don't think the services we offer are effective". A few service providers remarked that they feel the services offered to families are too rigid and formulaic, and that they are "setting these people up to fail". They felt they were making demands on families without offering the proper resources and support to follow through with the demands. One service provider describes how she thinks parents respond to Children's Aid Society services:

I think that they placate and they do what we ask them to do because it's getting from point A to point B as quickly as you can to get your child back. So if that means you want me to go a domestic violence group and you want me to send my kid to group then that's what I'll do. We often check back and say, how is she doing in that group – well she sits and really doesn't participate for whatever reason – so if you start to get that pattern its about I need to get from A to B as

quickly as possible to get my child back. I think they do that because I'm not sure they see a benefit with the things we ask them to do which is fair.

Service providers also expressed being frustrated that Children's Aid Society does not provide assistance to families when they ask for help:

...it was really frustrating for me to read the ones where the women were saying they called Children's Aid Society and asked for help – they wanted some help and some support- you know, help me. My kid is driving me nuts and things like this – and then they say well we couldn't be helped and things sort of escalated and got worse and I think to me that was one of the biggest frustrations because I find that is a frustration of my own and a – I think its kind of sad. In some ways we're not really doing that when people really need us, you know, and I know sometimes it takes a crisis situation to start the change but in some ways it would be nice to be able to do some support when people actually ask for it.

Challenges of child protection work: Service providers talked at length about the challenges and difficulties associated with their work. A common concern was the challenge posed by the “dual roles” that their jobs entail. Service providers felt great tension between the role of “social worker” and “investigator”. Many service providers recognized the importance of developing positive relationships with parents, but they find this difficult to balance with their child protection functions. One service provider noted, “The system, the way it is set up, forces you to police more than social work.” Another service provider felt that one of the mothers in the oral stories summed it up, “She said we are business-like professionals”.

Several service providers observed that the mothers in the story expressed great fear of the power of Children's Aid Society. They agreed that the moms' fears are “pretty realistic”, and many service providers discussed the power differential that exists between service provider and parent.

Another common challenge for service providers was the fear and stress they experience.

Participants discussed how the fear of being liable for child death or injury is always on their minds. One service provider revealed:

I read the paper with fear that I'll see a client's name. If I hear of a fire, I read the paper with fear. If I watch the news at night and I hear of a domestic, I watch hoping that I don't recognize the names.

Many service providers feel stressed and burned out. A few service providers talked about recurring nightmares related to their work. They said that they mostly seek support with fellow service providers because they don't always feel supported by supervisors and they do not feel comfortable talking with family and friends about their work. Service providers said they feel as though they are being given an impossible job to do, with not enough time and resources. One service provider describes child protection work as, "like you have to take this broken piece of glass and find all the shards and all the little pieces and glue it all back together again. It can't be done."

Time constraints: Several service providers noted that the time constraints placed upon their work often requires them to make quick judgements about the people they work with. One service provider says that this may lead to relying on "stereotypes" of the people they work with.

Another service provider comments:

I think we make too many assumptions with the information we do have and I think we make assumptions to fill out the paperwork because we need some answers for the paperwork. We're trying to make an assessment so a lot of it is based on assumptions rather than information that we do have which isn't fair to them.

Positives Aspects of their work: Service providers also discussed the positive aspects of their work. Participants noted that they use their position to advocate for services for families and they find this to be a satisfying aspect of their work. One service provider described feeling pleased that she felt she had “helped more than one person free themselves from an abusive partner”. Another service provider stated that she thinks the Children’s Aid Society involvement is a good thing because, “If that’s how bad it is with us in there, how bad would it have been had we not been there?”

One service provider highlighted the importance of listening to the people s/he works with:

My perception of what is easy is not hers, like her and I have different understandings of that word or at least that concept. So you have to listen you have to pay attention to what they are saying. If you just listen to the words, you’ll interpret them through your own experience or what you know those to mean in your life or your experience. So that’s a difficult piece to the work – to try and make sure you’re not working under assumptions

Suspiciousness: Underlying some service provider comments was suspiciousness about the truth of some of the women’s stories. One service provider reacted to one story:

But yet, I’m not trusting her assessment of the situation. And that’s the investigator in me going ‘lady, you’re a liar and you’re messed up’. And sometimes I feel that way about a client. Like ‘You’re a liar, and you’re messed up and it’s really hard for me to work with you’ .

Another service provider explains how the nature of her work necessitates having some level of doubt about people’s stories:

Well I think deceptive can be conscious or unconscious. Their whole lives are about self-preservation and so are ours. And so, in telling a story, we tell a story in a way that is self-preserving. And they are very candid in lots of ways. Susan talked about the basis of Children’s Aid Society and then she minimizes her own

role in that and my little alarm bells go up just because of my experience with people who minimize things. And so if we are basing our judgments on our experience, My experience has been that I've trusted people's stories in the past and later on learn that, that doesn't mesh with reality and so we become suspicious by the nature of our job so when I read this I could read it two ways And so that's where, I think, we have to second-guess people. That's one thing that we have to do in our position. And when we went to listen about Jordan Hicamp inquiry, we had people come in and one of the strongest recommendations was follow up and question and question and check and always double check things so I wish I could take clients for what they give me but my experience and my fear is that with the liability thing everything someone says I have to question. And that doesn't feel good on a basic, basic level.

Understanding of Mothers and Families

Individual and Family “Issues”: Many of the service providers understood the stories mostly from the perspective of individual and family “issues”. Service providers described the women as having poor coping skills and as having many different “issues” related to: attachment, addictions, self-esteem, and mental health. One service provider observed that “the genesis of their dysfunction comes from a lot of different places.”

Several service providers commented on what they called the mother’s “lack of insight” into their problems. One participant felt that the mothers showed, “a lack of insight .. parents saying that they were abused by their parents and then abusing their own children and they couldn’t see it, they couldn’t see the connection ...”. Another service provider concurred:

They don't talk about those things. They don't talk about what they need. They don't talk about how it feels if you've been beaten up. You don't talk about that again. There's no processing within the family of the things that occur within the family. There's nothing. They don't have skills to do that. And so its like its like they are all just leading these narrow, blinded personal lives, side by side with each other and sometimes clashing with each other... But no reflection and no ability to I guess its relationship. They haven't got the skills to build relationships particularly with the opposite sex, particularly with men.

Several service providers understood the mothers' difficulties and successes in terms of their personality traits:

I think people have a basic personality trait, it's either positive or negative, and that was what a difference made...So maybe the differences are we all should do attitude adjustments with our clients because if you have a positive outlook about where you're going you can't help but be affected by your attitude.

Some participants felt that some of the mothers in the stories did have insight into their problems and that they were "determined to change".

Different from Me: Service providers noticed that the mothers in the stories had very different life experiences than themselves. Several service providers referred to the "extreme trauma, crisis, and chaos" experienced by the women in the stories. They talked about finding it difficult to understand and/or relate to many of the decisions made by the mothers in the stories:

I think in our families you know we have normalized the way we grew up, the way we would approach Sunday dinner, brunch, or just whatever, drinking, its all normalized according to how we grew up and maybe expands a bit to our friends. And the way they grew up, if that means, um drunken people at the breakfast table on Saturday morning, that's ok, push all the beer bottles and ashtrays aside to put the turkey down, well that's just all normalized and what they've grown up with.

She adds:

And so the question for me then becomes, or the question that I have to keep asking myself as a social service provider is what's normal. For me, pushing away beer bottles on a Saturday morning to put the turkey down is not normal, for me but is that normal for somebody else and how does that impact on the child

Several service providers noted that they had different value systems than the women in the stories. Issues around cleanliness and lifestyle were mentioned at several points:

I think its hard to understand something that is different from what we know. Like I think that its hard to understand why a mom would want to live in something

that we would look at and go oh my gawd this is filthy or its hard to understand why that's ok for them. Like they're totally comfortable in their surroundings but we would come in and say that needs to be picked up that needs to be cleaned up. So we're just not able to get that sometimes.

A number of service providers found it difficult to understand why women in the stories maintained relationships with their family of origin, given the abuse they had suffered. Others expressed surprise that the women in the stories seemed to give little thought to the needs of their children, rather they felt moms seemed to place their concerns for their partners before their children. One service provider posits, "Maybe they don't look at it [motherhood] as a job."

Reflecting on the difficulty in communicating the role of the Children's Aid Society, one service explains the differences she perceives between service providers and clients:

Its not unlike, you know, you know university level talking to grade school kids. And they are really emotionally immature and socially immature and when you think about it...Imagine if you haven't any clue even that you have issues, let alone giving them a name. We're asking a lot. We're asking kindergarten people to use university coping skills.

Another service provider remarks that not having an understanding of their clients' lives may be barrier to their work:

Can you really ever understand someone's existence unless you've been there yourself? So that's number one. So there is going to be a barrier there automatically and that becomes a bias that we have to work with.

Poverty and Class: There was limited discussion among service provider about poverty or lack of opportunities in these women's lives. One participant explained that they tend to expect poverty to present in families they meet though their work: "... the majority of people that we work with are females who are marginalized and who struggle with poverty...You don't even question it anymore because that's what it is." One service provider said that she had worked with

higher income families and she thought that the Children's Aid Society system deals with higher income families differently than lower income families. She thinks there is a "huge prejudice" against lower income families in what she describes as "two-tiered protection work", where lower income families are treated harsher than higher income families. The other service providers in the group agreed with her.

A few service providers did talk about how they may have had more opportunities in their lives than the mothers in the stories:

... for me, growing up in a middle class family, going to the same school, not moving, life for me, I don't know how it would affect my life to move every four months and go to different schools and be picked on by kids at school. And walking to school and having things thrown at you and tormented. I don't understand what kind of a person that kind of existence makes you into so when they talk about things like that I think I don't get it. I mean I can't understand...

A new service provider who is a recent graduate reflected on her privilege:

I think all the time we do work from a certain assumption. Even working in this agency we work from the assumption of white, middle class sort of, you know that sort of thing and when I look at each of these women, I look from my own lens of my privileged life and in that sense when she says I've had an easy life like maybe to her it has been a relatively easy life where we would say you've had a horrible life. But her way of surviving it isn't like that and I don't know. I think assumptions are important to be aware of when we see them.

Gender Issues: When prompted by the facilitator, service providers discussed gender concerns in these stories. They were not surprised that all of the stories were women's stories, because they say that 95% of their cases focus on mothers: "reading these is like reading your Children's Aid Society load". Another service provider thought that the stories reflected how women are treated within society. Another service provider remarked:

...the women made the decisions when to move, they took the kids. Well they were the ones who were in control of what they had to be in control of. Like they moved when they moved, they got a job when they got a job, they lived with their family when they had to. Like they made the major decisions.

Another service provider commented on the reliance women had on the men in their lives for financial support:

...they had to talk about how hard they had to work just to get upgraded education just to get a job and it still wasn't enough to pay their bills. Just the realistic component that they are always hooking up with guys, a lot of it was financially. The guys always seem to have the better jobs in the stories ...

Several service providers noticed the lack of men's voices in the stories and in child welfare in general. They were not surprised by the lack of male stories. One participant described how Children's Aid Society works with men:

...a lot of the time the women that we work with have multiple partners and they can change fairly quick so that we automatically don't spend a whole lot of time holding them accountable unless there was an incident of domestic violence or physical abuse by this male partner to one of the children, then I think there is a higher level of accountability. For the everyday kind of stuff we really don't focus on the men.

Several service providers talked about the relationships between men and women in the stories. Specifically, they focussed on the deficits women seemed to have in this area:

They haven't got the skills to build relationships particularly with the opposite sex, particularly with men. And then I ask what are we doing with our men? Men have such a terrible role in the family anymore. I mean they just are negligible. They are a walking sperm bank.

Strengths of the Women: While this was a less frequent focus of conversation, some service providers also talked about strengths of the women in the stories. One participant noted that many of the women were working hard to go back to school. Another felt that there were

examples of “positive parenting” in many of the stories. Quite a few service providers commented on the resilience and “survival” ability of the women:

I thought what was amazing about the stories is that most of them, if not all of them, always at the end, like everyone, not matter how horrible their life seems to me or no matter how ugly things have been. There is always a glimmer of hope. And I just thought that is an amazing testimony to people’s resilience and to people’s strengths...no matter what there is always a better way. There is always a way out of this. And I thought, I wish we could look at that more because it’s so powerful when you pull it out...

Another service provider said that, after reading the stories, she now asks her clients what their “hopes” are. One woman remarked that service providers sometimes forget that parents love their children, and the stories reminded her of this.

Empathy and Lessons Learned from the Stories

Several service providers expressed empathy for the women in the stories. One argued that the women did have “insight” into their lives, but external pressures make it difficult to get out of abusive situations: “They’re staying with that gentleman, although he hits them, they can’t get out of there. They don’t have the finances. He’s the breadwinner.” Another felt “saddened” by the obstacles the women had to overcome:

By just the whole thing in general, I was saddened, I think, you know, by reading a lot of it. And all of them women in these stories, what they had to overcome - and what they had to do in their day to day lives - and the conditions they had to live in - and the poverty - and it seemed that they didn’t have a chance from the beginning – and the environments that they grew up in. A lot of stories were wrought with domestic violence and substance use and just some of the patterns that kept continuing – but just the challenge that these people have to face on a day to day basis, even before Children’s Aid Society is involved.

In contrast to the many differences highlighted between themselves and the women, one service provider concluded: “... they’re women, they are people, they are mothers and sisters just

like us.” A service provider who is also a mom related to a mother’s story about being frustrated by the lack of Children’s Aid Society’s support for her problems with a teenage daughter:

I really felt for that mother because I have kids and there are moments as a parent where your kids take you to the last nerve and you’re just ready to lose it and its not as simple as going to manage your emotions and I can imagine how that would feel to her. If someone just told her its your problem and not really be realistic about what would you need to make that doable for you, not really listening to her. So, I felt very bad for her. So I think sometimes mothers do experience our agency in a way that we don’t meet their needs. We don’t even ask them what they would like to have done. That must be pretty tough. They’re made to feel inadequate. That’s how that mother read to me. Like she was inadequate and once you fix yourself, you won’t have any problems with your screaming 13 year old.

Several participants thought that they had learned something from reading the women’s stories. Some service providers felt the stories highlight how they don’t know the stories of many of their clients. The stories supplied more of an appreciation for the things people deal with daily. Another service provider felt that the stories highlighted the damage Children’s Aid Society can do to a family, and she felt that things like a dirty house shouldn’t be given as much concern as it is. For others, the stories reminded them of the importance of seeing people as individuals and listening to and valuing their stories:

I found that a lot of them felt like they weren’t really heard by their worker and for me that was an important piece to look at sort of, am I listening to people? Am I hearing people? A big piece for me was the importance of hearing people’s stories in a way that makes me understand where they come from and developing compassion and empathy for them based on where they came from. And for me, in order to understand people and be able to help them I feel like I want to be able to know where they are coming from because for me that makes me understand why you do the things you do because of the way you were brought up, because of all the things. And for me, that’s what I feel is going to make me a good service provider and a positive service provider that will effect change, understanding sort of where you are coming from. So, that was interesting for me to read the stories.

Mothers' Reactions to the Stories

Thirteen parents with past involvement with the Children's Aid Society participated in focus groups. About half of these parents had contributed their own stories to other studies in the larger Partnerships Project research, while the others were not involved in any aspect the larger study at all. One of the groups of parents were involved with a child welfare agency not participating in the life story research. This group came from support groups within this agency's family resource centre and generally expressed less fear of child welfare involvement than participants in the other focus group.

A focus on the Children's Aid Society

Miscommunication and confusion: Participants were upset that the women in the stories were confused and misinformed about what the Children's Aid Society was doing:

I think I saw a real discrepancy to what Children's Aid Society can do and what people expected of them. And sometimes there was a huge lack of communication about what was expected of the parents or what the parents could expect from the Children's Aid Society.

Gaps between services and needs: Several parents said that the stories reinforced their unhappiness with the way Children's Aid Society works. One parent commented, "Children's Aid Society has to take a look at their procedures. Hard look." Another parent said that the stories painted a bleak picture of the success of the Children's Aid Society:

...the problems with the Children's Aid Society is that, they're suppose to be an institution to help and most of the time, and it bothered me, not one story did they have a positive influence on the families lives. So you have see, you have to ask yourself, this organization has so much power, you know but how come, they're not helping these people?

Several participants said that the stories made them think that the Children's Aid Society is not effectively meeting the needs of parents:

The ones that really hit me was where she was really trying to do what Children's Aid Society said but then she was missing work. She didn't have money for bus tickets to get to the appointments and it put her behind a lot, financially.

Another parent was surprised that so many other parents have had similar experiences to her own:

I just always thought that maybe just I had a bad experience with Children's Aid Society. I didn't think that everybody, would have bad experiences with them. I really did. So that was a bit of the, you know what? It made me feel better, to know that I wasn't going crazy. I wasn't imagining that they didn't want to help you know, everybody else had these same problems with them.

Participants were particularly disappointed that in many of the stories the Children's Aid Society did not provide help when parents ask for it. There was also discussion about how the Children's Aid Society treats blended families. Some participants revealed that they are a part of a blended family and this issue was personally relevant. One parent commented:

I think that the Children's Aid Society is still looking at the family unit as it was in the 1940's instead of the family unit as they exist today. And everybody pretty well as a part of an extended family. You know, I don't know too many kids, that my kids go to school with who don't have step sisters, and step brothers. And I don't think that there are help for that situation.

Resentment for challenging parental authority: Many participants resented the Children's Aid Society and other institutions such as the education system for putting the rights of children over the rights of parents and reducing parental authority. A parent describes how she sees the school discussing child abuse with children:

Cause this is the first thing they are taught in school, the school is teaching it to help them, but the kids are taking it to mean that parents have no authority you

know. I don't think that they're being taught that parents have no authority, you know, but that's just the way a child interprets those lessons. You know, how can I use this to my own advantage?

Another parents adds:

...even if you do figure out what you can do you don't really have much of a backup like a support system like teachers or Children's Aid Society workers say to your children your parents have these rights. They only seem to inform the children of what rights they have. You know, instead of saying this is the real world and kids get smacked and parents get angry and kids do bad things, you know, like I found with my fourteen year old step daughter, they sort of ferried her off to fantasy land, and you know and she had all these unreal expectations of what families should be. You know, it's supposed to be this big happy bubble. Well I have five children, they're no big happy bubble.

Several parents felt that after Children's Aid Society involvement, it was harder for parents to discipline their children:

The parents then had a hard with disciplining the children. That was another similarity, was after the Children's Aid Society involvement the parents had a hard time disciplining the children because they felt, they all said they felt like big brother was watching what they were doing.

Another participant adds:

It was almost like they were afraid of the kids, because they knew their kids knew their rights and if they so much looked at them wrong, Children's Aid Society would be right back there. So there was always that underlined fear. So they're not relaxed to parent. They're stressed and that just makes it worst for them.

There were also parents that expressed being happy with children knowing their rights.

One parent said that her daughter would never take advantage of the situation. Another parent commented that she was glad that her Children's Aid Society service provider informed her children that they still had to listen to their parents.

Fear of the power of the Children’s Aid Society: Many parents talked about their fear of the Children’s Aid Society, especially when they first became involved. One parent reveals, “I was scared of their power. Cause we was told that it was a volunteer based and we’re looking at it and going yeah right.” Another parent said that she was “terrified” of the Children’s Aid Society at first because she thought they would take her kids away. Another parent shared an example of the power dynamics involved in the relationship with her Children’s Aid Society service provider:

I just had the Children’s Aid Society worker and it was someone that I just sat out here and had smokes with and everybody else before she came in as my worker. So it was kind of odd, cause she still had that even though, at one point I felt very much in equal with her, soon as she was coming in as a Children’s Aid Society worker you know into my home, I was you know, scared, even though I knew my son was fine and everything. It was an incident in which I was abused, and they were just coming in, he was gone, and it was to make sure my son was okay and hadn’t, you know, been abused himself an everything else, and like I said, she was like a co-worker, acquaintance, friend almost, and I was still scared. What if, she looks around and sees something wrong...she has the power to take him away.

Service providers’ treatment of parents: Many participants were upset or angry at how the women in the stories were treated by the Children’s Aid Society service providers. Specifically, people felt that service providers didn’t show enough respect towards the women, and often judged the women as ‘guilty’ until they proved themselves innocent. Participants felt upset that the service providers did not believe some of the women’s stories. One person commented, “I thought a lot of them were being prejudged. The workers were not...had not walked in their shoes, did not know what they had been through. They needed to do more communication ...”

Another common issue talked about was the difficulty parents have taking advice from service providers that do not have children:

...in my story, this child care worker came to my home, to help me deal with my fourteen year old step daughter and she didn't even have children so she you know, everything that she helped me out with was right out of the book and it didn't make any sense at all, as far as I'm concerned.

Children's Aid Society as a weapon: A few mothers related to the stories about neighbours using Children's Aid Society as a weapon against one another. One parent shares her experience of public housing, "...even though it didn't happen to me I thought on a daily basis, when everyone would get mad at each other, and this was a weapon. They would call children's aid on each other."

Positives of Children's Aid Society: Participants also had positive things to say about the Children's Aid Society:

My reaction was in most of them was there definitely a need for the Children's Aid to be involved. They needed the help and the guidance and the interactions. Maybe the way it was gone about may have not have been right or handled properly. It could had been done a lot more gently. I could see negative sides of the intervention and positive sides to the intervention but definitely positive outcomes helped support guidance counselling, was given to the mother, to the women, or the partner or the children. There was definitely positive outcomes from the interaction and all the Children's Aid Societies. With workers you have positive results. With not good workers in their open, they did not have good results.

Another parent felt that Children's Aid Society involvement was beneficial to mothers in the stories because it allowed access to more resources. There was some discussion about the fact that child protection is a needed service in the community. Also, many parents in one group revealed that they personally had positive experiences with a Children's Aid Society that was

using a “community-based model”. They found the support groups at agency resource centres very helpful.

Parents’ Suggestions for Improving Children’s Aid Society Help

Some participants wanted the Children’s Aid Society to employ a “partnership” model with parents rather than an adversarial model. They suggested the Children’s Aid Society involve the school system, and work more in partnership with other community programs. Participants were in favour of a more community-based, prevention model of child protection [These comments came mainly from parents involved with the agency using this model].

Participants wanted the Children’s Aid Society to offer help when parents ask for it - but to not “turn the tables” on parents when they ask for help. Participants suggested informing the public about what the Children’s Aid Society does through awareness campaigns. Participants strongly felt that service providers should really listen and talk to parents, respect parents, and treat them like humans, and not judge them.

Parents Related to the Stories

Participants spoke a lot about the empathy they felt for the women and how they felt they understood the women’s stories. They spoke at great length about how the stories “hit close to home” for them.

Emotional Reactions: Almost all of the participants said that they strongly related to the women’s stories. Several people talked about having similar experiences. A woman commenting on a specific story said: “...that was my story.” A few participants shared their own experiences were similar to those in the stories. A mother recalled: “It’s part of the ones that hit really close

to home. Both of kids have threatened suicide. My son actually had the rope around his neck at school”. Many participants had strong emotional reactions to the stories. One woman commented: “It made me feel sad, if you wanted to know. And that I could relate to most of them”. Another remarked:

One I can't even remember what it is now, I kept reading over, over, over and over cause I was getting more, I was feeling more like I was right there when I was reading the stories. And I could picture the stuff that was happening and it was really sad like that a lot of this stuff really happens. It made it seem a lot worse than what I went through, so it was difficult with some of them to read them. I had to put them down, and go do something and then come back to it.

A few participants cried as they read some of the stories and some revealed they talked aloud to the women in the stories when the women made choices they thought were ill-advised.

Lacking care and love: Several participants felt that many of the women in the stories lacked caring and love as they grew up, and that this explains a lot of the things that happens to them:

Lack of being shown that they were respected for when they were little too like when they were probably teenagers and mom went out it wasn't what, can you please watch the kids or what your siblings I'm gone. Like it was the lack of being told I love you, and you're responsible and you're doing good and stuff. Just the lack of praise in general.

Often when someone in the focus group criticized a choice a woman made, someone else would offer an explanation. For example, when the group talked about whether the women in the stories think enough about their life choices, a woman commented:

And you keep saying, well if this happens, you know in my own life, I kind of draw limits for myself. But the limits always get pushed out and all of a sudden you look back and you realize, it went over the limit. Why didn't I do something?

And she adds:

...you're right in the situation. How do you take a step back and look at what's actually happening. And it's not even a very, you know very slowly it groups in you don't even realize it what's going on.

There was also discussion about the fact that many of the women in the stories chose to have relationships with their abusive family members in their adulthood. A few of the participants could not understand why anyone would do this, but several other participants offered another point of view:

Our mothers are the most wonderful gift on earth. You know, and I saw that because I lost my mom a year and a half ago and everything she went through, we went through you know, one thing never failed and that was my love for her. And so I think families can be angry about what happened, and a lot of families, they think if they fight, they have to stop loving each other. You know, you can't stop loving each other. You know people don't abuse, my mom didn't abuse me because she was normal. She abused me because she had issues. I didn't understand that when I was a kid, I resented that. But as you grow as a women you start to understand the dynamics, and you know I think as we grow as women, our relationship with our mom's changes, so we're able to empathize with them that and identify in them, that we weren't able to when we were younger.

Another parent believed:

I think it's good that they're back with their parents because people change. People make mistakes and I'm sure their parents made mistakes and maybe they realized they made the mistakes way back when and it's I commend them on being able to forgive them.

There was also discussion about women putting children before partners. Specifically, one parent was very disturbed that a woman in a story said that she had to stay committed to her partner because her children would eventually be gone. Another woman responds:

I don't know, I sort of understand that too because before John came into my life, my whole life was my daughter and then we got together of course and we have five children all together and now I realize it's not healthy for my whole life to be my daughter. You know, John is just as important, if not a little bit more important than the kids, the kids need you as a parent that's what makes that

important. But your partner need you for life. And I had a very hard time learning that it was okay, to put John first but I always thought it had to be the kids, the kids, the kids, the kids. You know, there's sort of a saying that you don't crawl into bed at night with your kids so in some ways I understand that. Not to the extent that carried through in some of the stories, I don't think to the point that you let your children go because of that, but I do understand that in a way.

When the group discussed what it takes to make better choices and “change”, a woman offers her insight into why this can be so difficult:

Sometimes being a survivor is not an easy thing to do. And it leads to a lot of feelings of guilt and stuff like that because, when your constantly at home in a downward spiral, people that are in it, don't want to see you get out of it. You know, and I think it's easier sometimes to, for them to see us stay where we are, so that when you try to get out of it, you don't have to deal with all these feelings of guilt that you're leaving behind, people that you love, that you're trying to get ahead, you're trying to change, some very very difficult things to do, because you have siblings sometimes that have to be, you know you have to say, okay that was our life then, that this is my life now. And I'm trying to change, sometimes it can be a lonely place being a survivor.

The group also discussed coping with problems. Several parents related to the way women in the stories managed daily challenges. One woman said: “Nobody knows how you cope with things, you just go on I guess. I don't think there's an actual word with how we cope with our problems.”

Participants also related to the stories of physical punishment. Many revealed that they had experienced physical punishment growing up, experiences which several participants considered abusive.

Downward comparisons: Several participants, after reading the life stories, felt that their own problems did not seem so bad. One participant said:

I know for myself when I read these it made me realize the, my life is a lot better than what these women were going through and I'm glad that there was the help there. To get me through the situations that I was in.

Personal issues: Several participants talked about the personal issues that they feel explains many of women's difficulties. Participants thought that these women had low self-esteem and that they had learned dysfunctional parenting styles from their parents. Participants commented that these women need to "help themselves", improve their coping skills, and change their lifestyles. A number of participants felt that they personally, had been helped by individual or group counselling, and so this may also help the women in the stories. One woman from the family resource centre groups revealed: "I believe the groups and everything I've attended has changed my life." Some others were more hesitant to recommend counselling; especially forced counselling:

With all the problems in the families, it's not clear, when you think counselling, well what should the father go for alcohol counselling, should the mother go for anger management, should the children go for something for ADHD? You know, like where is this magic counsellor that is suppose to solve these issues?

Strengths of the women: Many participants thought that the women in the stories were "incredibly strong", managing to survive despite having had many negative experiences. Several participants felt that the women clearly loved their children. Participants were impressed by the strength it took for the women to tell their stories. Participants believed the women were trying hard and doing the best they can in life. A few were impressed that many women were going back to school. They commented favourably that the women expressed hope for the future.

Gender Issues: Participants did not see the stories as having anything to do with "women's issues". Rather, they were disappointed that there was a lack of a man's voice in the

stories. A few participants talked about the pressures that they experience as women, to “do it all” at home and at work. As they discussed the absence of men in the stories, one woman commented there were, “no men mentioned at all...like he was a sperm donor and that was it.”

Poverty and lack of opportunity: A few participants highlighted the financial hardships faced by many of the women in the stories. However, for the most part, issues related to poverty and lack of opportunity were not discussed. A few people thought there was a “range” of financial situations in the stories. Several parents felt that families financial and educational status did not affect the likelihood of their becoming involved with a Children’s Aid Society. Another commented that they did not like to think about their own lives in terms of having less opportunities than others.

Discussion

Perhaps the most important recognition from reading the separate reactions of parents and child protection workers to the life stories of these sixteen women is the great gap which divides them. From our perspective, this illustrates the substantial barriers separating the worlds of child protection service providers and the families with whom they engage and highlights how difficult it can be, even with the best of intentions, to form collaborative partnerships for children and families.

Child protection service providers talked a good deal about how they and their lives differed from those of the women in these stories and other families with whom they were involved through their work, often in terms which “denigrated” the lives of these others. A few talked about how difficult this makes understanding the lives and aspirations of these women for

them. While both groups had similar concerns about the propriety and adequacy of child welfare responses to the sixteen families in these stories, and both talked about the levels of stress on these women and their capacity to endure and maintain hope over time, and both raised questions about the choices and behaviours of various women in the stories, what was most striking was the different tone and content of the parent and service provider discussions.

Parents generally identified very strongly with the women in the stories and drew parallels with their own lives. They identified the women in the stories by their names in their comments. They offered “explanations” of why the women sometimes made “erroneous” choices in their lives and suggestions about what might be helpful to them. For some, it was a comfort to know that they were not the only mothers who were struggling. They debated the appropriateness of some of the parenting behaviours in the stories and were quite unhappy with the help that the women received from the Children’s Aid Societies. More encouraging was the belief of the focus group of parents from support groups in a child welfare agency espousing a community child protection philosophy that a positive partnership between parents and child protection workers was possible and child welfare agencies can provide helpful assistance to families. Parents in both groups argued that it is important that children be “protected”.

While there was variance among the perceptions of child protection workers in the two focus groups, two overall patterns predominated for the research team. First, an unanticipated reaction from the service providers was their “reluctance” to focus their discussions upon the women in the sixteen stories. Much of the service provider discussion concentrated on the challenges in their own work and their comments about mothers were often generalized to the

women that they work with rather than specific to the women in the stories. The facilitator had to make deliberate interventions to bring the conversations back to the sixteen stories. Second, these service providers, with some exceptions, made frequent surprisingly disparaging comments about the behaviours and abilities about the mothers with whom they work. Comments reflecting lack of confidence in these mothers potentials outnumbered positive observations in these discussions by about three to one. Equally important statements about mothers “having the capacity of kindergarten children” or “lacking insight and the skills to build relationships” or “finding living in filth acceptable” went unchallenged. No one objected to these characterizations. In each group, the initial observations focussed upon the “unresolved personal issues” of these mothers.

In the introduction to this volume, the argument was made that the voices of service professionals and researchers are privileged voices in child welfare discussions of the lives of mothers and families and “what should be done.” The voices of parents and children are silent in these deliberations. Consequently, we easily slip into assuming that our perceptions are more “accurate and substantiated” than those of “clients”. This study allows no comment on the “superiority” of service providers’ or mothers’ perspectives on these women’s life stories. However, there is no indication from these group discussions that parents were any less observant or insightful about these lives than service providers. But the difference in world views is evident and of concern. While it is not hard to imagine how the requirements of child protection would require an “emotional distancing” of these two groups, and there are definitely individual, program and organizational instances when such distances are substantially bridged, these barriers

to active collaboration close out many positive possibilities for children, parents and families, as well as for service providers, and must be a priority concern in our search for an improved child and family welfare system.

Concluding Discussion

This research provides an opportunity to hear the voices of mothers involved with child protection services and to learn how they understand their own lives and their involvement with Children's Aid Societies. It provides an alternative to professional and academic statements about who these women are. The research encourages thinking about these mothers strengths and struggles. It invites service professionals to step into worlds which may be quite different from their own and to leave the presumptions and procedures their work places between them and these women aside. When there is no need to defend what is known, it is easier to open to other ways of understanding.

How these women talk about their lives has implications for child protection in Ontario. Most salient is the limited level of assistance forthcoming to most families involved with child protection services and the modest benefits for children, parents and families from these efforts. Some argue that the "Anglo-American child protection system" (Cameron, Freymond, et al., 2001) does a reasonable job of what many consider its core function, the detection and intervention into the dangerous living circumstances of the most vulnerable children (Parton et al., 1997) . Nonetheless, the price of this single minded focus is that most families with open child protection cases resent and fear an unwanted and unhelpful intrusion into their lives.

This research portrays a child protection system which is both expensive and remarkably inefficient in bringing useful assistance to children and families. It is limited in its vision and the help made available. A preoccupation with a small percentage of extreme family situations dominates child protection to the detriment of most of the families. Building a more balanced and

flexible child and family welfare system requires greater congruency with the lives of the women and families in these stories:

Our child protection system continues to involve poorer and less privileged segments of our population. Lack of access to adequate resources and opportunities for enhancing child, parent and family well being, high vulnerability to disruption in existing supports, and high levels of daily living stress are commonplace in these stories. These women confront tremendous personal challenges in their childhood and adult lives. For many, relationships with partners and family functioning experience painful disruptions.

Yet these mothers remain very important in their children's lives often providing the only source of continuity and belonging . These women's stories illustrate persistence and the overcoming of obstacles, as well as continued commitment to their children and desire for a stable home and a family. Despite sometimes "horrendous" beginnings, there is a continuity and strength of family in these women's stories. New partnerships form and families of origin provide assistance and social connections for many women. Most relevant, these are the families and communities in which almost all of the children in these stories continue to live.

Front line child protection personnel talk about these women having lives very different from their own and the many barriers to their forming collaborative helping relationships with these families. The core challenge for child and family welfare remains connecting with the shared daily living realities of these children and parents in ways that they find acceptable and congruent with their lives.

While an extended discussion of promising possibilities for child and family welfare system design is beyond the scope of this report,³ there are some general strategies which emanate directly from these stories. A “sine qua non” is increasing the level and diversity of helping options available to families and service providers, allowing for greater collaboration. This implies moving away from a stand alone model of child protection towards sharing child protection mandate across service and community organizations. It benefits from greater partnerships among formal services and informal family and neighbourhood networks in promoting child and family welfare.

A corollary requirement is an acceptance of the principle of shared parenting. Holding stressed and distressed mothers responsible for remedying troublesome family circumstances is an insufficient response. This paradigm includes broader groupings of service providers as well as family and community members as partners in caring for children. In addition, an easily accessible but substantially unexploited avenue in protecting children from harm and promoting their well being is programs and supports for them directly.⁴

This paradigm accommodates the substantial strength and resilience evident in these women’s and families’ stories. It includes the development of “empowerment spaces”, creating opportunities for mutual aid, social connections and friendships, and communal cooperation. This paradigm complements professional helping by mutual reliance among families, neighbours, and

³ For a discussion of some of these possibilities readers are referred to in Cameron, Freymond, et al., 2001 .

⁴ See the discussions in Nelson et al., 2001 and Cameron, Karabanow, et al. 2001 for examples.

others confronting similar life challenges. In addition, it values compassion and creativity in facilitating healing and personal growth for the mothers in these stories.

Echoing concerns in the recent child welfare literature (Cameron, Freymond, et. al, 2001), this research paints a troubling picture of child protection experiences for children and parents. And the suggested changes represent basic shifts in principle and practice from existing arrangements, arrangements which have proved resistant to modifications to core procedures for many years (Freymond, 2003b). Nonetheless, niches for innovation in Ontario's child protection system exist and changes can happen over time.

The imperative to reform a child protection system so manifestly inefficient and so unwelcome in the lives of children and parents coming remains. There is no contradiction between protecting children and promoting their welfare within families and communities. It is within our grasp to envision a more balanced and inclusive child and family welfare system.

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SOCIAL WORK



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