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BOOK REVIEW

From Pariahs to Partners

David Tobis (2014).

Reviewed by Charles Pragnell,

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Most Western countries in the past two decades have seen increasing numbers of children removed into State Care. These children often incur emotional harm and even further abuse because of the imperfections and inadequacies in State Care systems. Moreover, these systems are also considered very costly to the taxpayers. Child removal policies have largely been a first resort in child protection cases, with little or no investment of finance and resources into family preservation programmes that are designed to help and support families experiencing difficulties or which have become dysfunctional.

Similarly, little or no resources and finance have been invested into re-unification programmes whereby children are returned to their families from State Care. Some countries have instead chosen to pursue fast-track adoption systems for children in State Care, primarily as a means of reducing costs. Such adoption programmes, however, have also incurred additional costs, with little perceivable benefit as the numbers of children in State Care continue to increase.

The system of parent advocates in New York City (NYC), described in considerable detail by David Tobis, is both creative and innovative, and clearly demonstrates that the vast majority of children in State Care can be re-unified with their natural families if there is a will to do so by those who administer the system and are prepared to place such goals as a priority.

Many reforms had been attempted in the past in NYC and a pattern was established of 'Crisis, Reform, Crisis. The system designed to protect abused, abandoned children repeatedly failed those children'.

The Parent Advocacy Programme is briefly described as 'Since the mid-1990s, parents have been embroiled in the child welfare system and their allies have worked with leaders in the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) to reform New York City's child welfare system. Their efforts have brought about unprecedented improvements that are more profound, provide more benefits for children and families, and appear to be longer lasting than any reforms in the recent past.'

The figures given by David Tobis of the numbers of children in State Care in New York being reduced from 50,000 to 14,000 over 20 years, largely as a consequence of parent advocacy, is truly remarkable and, although every instance has not been a success story, it will have brought a vast improvement in the lives of many thousands of children and young people.

There are also great benefits for the parents involved in providing the advocacy, which is summarised as, 'They get back their own value and worth . . . to fight back and not just be a victim'.

The overall improvements achieved by the parent advocacy system are described as, 'The three most important changes in New York City's child welfare system between 1996 and 2011 were a reduction in the number of children in foster care, improved legal representation for parents, and the participation of child-welfare affected parents in child welfare programmes, in shaping policies, and in their own cases.'

The system of parent advocacy described by David Tobis in this book will give immense encouragement and support to both child welfare professionals and non-professionals around the world who believe that too many children and young people are unnecessarily removed into State Care and too often are unnecessarily detained in State Care.

The system brings realisable benefits to the children and young people, their parents, child welfare professionals who work tirelessly to support families, often with little success, and to the taxpayers and politicians who fund the child welfare systems.

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