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LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

WHEN SAFETY IS A SMOKESCREEN FOR SEPARATION

By Miesha Parker

They didn't just take my son. They stripped him of his culture, his family, and his identity.

I was 23 when it happened. A young Black mother caught in the cycle of domestic violence, trying to survive. What I needed was safety and support. What I got was judgment and a system that didn't see me as worthy of mothering my child.

My son was seven when they placed him with his white elementary school teacher and her same-sex partner. They were legal guardians, not adoptive parents, but that distinction meant nothing. They raised him as their own, erasing me piece by piece.

Instead of helping me, they used the abuse I survived to justify removing my son. No one asked, "What does this mother need?" They asked, "Who else can we give her child to?"

They gave him to his teacher, a white woman who used her professional status and image of "help" to position herself as the rescuer. What she really did was exploit my family's vulnerability. Behind my back, she built a case. The school filed over 15 confidential abuse reports (51As) without ever telling me, strategically creating a paper trail that painted her as the safe option and me as unfit. All while smiling in my face. She gained trust through manipulation, not honesty. That's how she got custody.

When it came time to decide where my son would live, there were no community voices at the table. No one who looked like him or understood what it means to grow up as a young Black boy in America, especially one with a mother surviving intimate partner violence and a father in the prison system. No one who understood our context, our community, or our culture.

My son is 20 now. He doesn't really know me. And honestly, he doesn't really know himself either. He's grappling with identity issues that no resources from strangers could fix. They raised a young Black boy in a white household with no real understanding of what it means to be a Black man in America. And when his grief and confusion turned to rage, they put him on psychiatric medications instead of addressing the root cause: his profound loss of identity, culture, and family.

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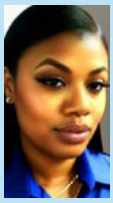

MIESHA PARKER brings over a decade of lived experience in child welfare advocacy. She is a passionate champion for family integrity, using survivor-centered, trauma-informed practices to address systemic bias, domestic violence, and generational trauma. Miesha also trains and mentors professionals across the legal and child welfare systems, working to build equitable, family-empowering practices that inspire lasting systemic change.

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Recent research on attachment trauma validates what I witnessed. As Kevin Campbell, FRSA and trauma expert, notes, forced separation "shatters a child's core bond for security and emotional regulation," triggering survival responses including "emotional shutdown or dissociation" and "identity loss and grief." These aren't character flaws. They're predictable responses to losing primary caregivers that persist without addressing the separation itself.[1] This approach treats symptoms rather than causes. Trauma research shows that behavioral issues following separation often reflect attachment disruption, not mental illness requiring pharmaceutical intervention.

This didn't have to happen.

SAFETY AS A SMOKESCREEN

What happened to me is not an outlier. It's the inevitable result of a system designed to police, not protect, families like mine. This is the reality for countless families, especially Black and brown ones, whose children are taken, not because they're unloved, but because their parents are struggling in systems designed to punish poverty and trauma.

The data confirms this: 53% of Black children in the U.S. will be investigated by child protective services by age 18, nearly double the rate of white children (28%).[2] Most removals aren't for abuse, but for conditions tied to poverty: unstable housing, lack of childcare, or domestic violence where the mother is the victim.[3]

> *The trauma that brings families to the system's attention (violence, deprivation, untreated mental health crises) is weaponized against them. Poverty is treated as neglect. Survival is pathologized. In my case, mandatory reporting was weaponized. The system took what should've been a support (a teacher, a school) and turned it into a tool for family displacement.*

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY PRESERVATION

This pattern isn't unique to America. In the UK, research from the Family Rights Group[4] shows racial disparities in child removal rates mirror those in the U.S. However, some countries are charting different paths. New Zealand's Family Group Conferencing model prioritizes extended family placements and involves cultural advisors in decision-making. This approach has reduced out-of-home placements while maintaining child safety.[5]

Finland's family support services demonstrate how investing in parents prevents family separation. Their child welfare approach presumes family preservation as the default,

1 Campbell, K. (2024). "Attachment Theory and Trauma in Child Separation." LinkedIn post. Pale Blue.

2 Wildeman, C., Edwards, F. R., & Wakefield, S. (2023). "Family Surveillance: Police and the Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect." American Journal of Public Health, 113(S1).

3 Roberts, D. (2022). "Torn Apart: The Destructive Legacy of Family Separation." Basic Books.

4 Family Rights Group. https://frg.org.uk/

5 Connolly, M. (2020). "Family Group Conferences in Child Welfare: A Decade of Development." Children and Youth Services Review, 97, 228-239.

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with removal as the last resort, resulting in lower placement rates while maintaining child wellbeing.[6]

Early results from similar reforms in the U.S. show promise. Nassau County, NY, implemented a Blind Removal Process (where race and demographics are hidden in decision meetings), reducing foster placements of Black children by 42%.[7] Illinois' Families Together Initiative[8] provides wraparound services to parents before termination of rights is considered.

A CALL FOR PLACEMENT REVIEW PANELS

That's why I'm calling for a radical shift in foster placements, especially in cross-racial and complex cases. We need mandatory placement review panels with depth, diversity, and lived experience. These panels aren't just about ticking boxes. They're about restoring truth, trust, and long-term care for the whole child. Expert research confirms that even well-resourced placements can cause "identity loss and grief" when they sever cultural and biological connections, making culturally informed placement decisions critical for long-term wellbeing.

These panels must include:

- **Lived Experience Experts:** Parents who've lost children to the system and youth who've aged out. They can spot red flags others miss (like emotional manipulation, narrative control, and alienation masked as "best interest").
- **Culturally Competent Professionals:** People who understand trauma in Black and brown families without criminalizing survival.
- **Community Leaders:** Mentors, faith leaders, and elders who know the child's world beyond paperwork.
- **Specialized Experts:** People with deep knowledge of:
  - Intimate Partner Violence: How witnessing abuse shapes a child's view of safety and trust
  - Incarceration's Impact: The wounds of losing a parent to prison
  - Poverty: The difference between neglect and unmet need

Critical question for panels: Is mandatory reporting always protection, or has it become policing?

This is how we expand progress: When a child witnesses domestic violence, a survivor and trauma expert should assess how it shapes the child's sense of safety. When a parent is incarcerated, someone who's lived that loss should speak to the child's need for pride, protection, or grief support. When mandated reporting is abused (like my son's teacher did), a reform advocate should distinguish protection from policing. These panelists won't just review files. They'll see the humanity behind them.

6 Nordic Council of Ministers. (2019). "Family policies and child welfare in the Nordic countries." Nordic Welfare Centre.
7 Casey Family Programs. (2021). "Blind Removal Process Shows Promise in Reducing Disparities." Strategy Brief.
8 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois. https://www.lssi.org/services/children-youth-and-families/families-together/

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BEYOND GOOD INTENTIONS

It's not enough to ask if foster applicants can provide resources. We must ask: Why do they want this child?

My son's guardians used their social capital as public servants to position themselves as rescuers. On paper, they were "allies." Behind closed doors, they used their positions to replace me, not reunify us.

Titles don't mean safety. Panels must scrutinize: Are foster applicants aligned with reunification? Do they have biases that could erase the child's cultural identity? Are they serving the child, or their own savior complex?

> *We cannot pretend children are blank slates. They carry bloodlines, memories, and histories, even when those are messy. Removing a child from one trauma to place them in cultural isolation isn't healing. It's another harm, one that looks clean on paper but leaves invisible wounds..*

My son didn't just lose me. He lost his father to violence. He lost his cultural anchors. He lost the ability to know who he was. Now he's navigating adulthood, angry and dissociated, and I'm still here, holding space for him.

THE PATH FORWARD

Love isn't enough. Willingness without cultural awareness, lived understanding, and a commitment to biological ties is not enough. We need panels with veto power over traditional systems. We need to preserve the cord.

If we care about child welfare, we must care about identity, connection, and roots. Family isn't disposable. Culture isn't optional. And love (real love) doesn't erase a child's past to write a more convenient future.

These reforms would mean children like my son maintain their identity while finding safety. It would mean parents like me get support rather than punishment. It would mean breaking cycles of trauma rather than creating new ones.

If we implemented culturally responsive placement panels tomorrow, thousands of families could remain whole. Thousands of children could grow up knowing both safety and belonging.

Your voice can help make this change. Contact your representatives. Question assumptions about "unfit" parents. And remember: When safety becomes a smokescreen for separation, we all lose, especially the children we claim to protect. ■

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