

Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness is a psychological condition in which a human being or an animal has learned to act or behave helpless in a particular situation, even when it has the power to change its unpleasant or even harmful circumstance. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

The American psychologist Martin Seligman and colleagues built the foundation for understanding this phenomenon through experimenting with three groups of dogs¹.

EXPERIMENT PART 1

GROUP 1 DOGS No Shocks

GROUP 2 DOGS Given shocks which the dogs could end by pressing a lever.

GROUP 3 DOGS Given shocks which the dogs could not control. Shocks would start and end randomly.

EXPERIMENT PART 2: All dogs put in a shuttle-box apparatus, in which dogs could escape electric shocks by jumping over a low partition.

RESPONSE TO SECOND EXPERIMENT:

Group 1 and 2 Dogs jumped out of the box, escaping the shocks.

Most Group 3 Dogs laid down passively and whined.

QUESTIONS:

How might learned helplessness make a parent more likely to abuse or neglect a child?

How could being abused or neglected contribute to learned helplessness?

How does foster care create or increase learned helplessness?

¹ Seligman, M.E.P. and Maier, S.F. (1967). Failure to escape traumatic shock. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 74, 1–9.

Learned helplessness: Personal, Pervasive, Permanent

Learned helplessness is dangerous—it is correlated to depression (feeling “helpless and hopeless”), mental illness and physical illness. For victims of child abuse, it is a key factor in two outcomes:

Chronic Victimization

Repeating the Cycle of Abuse and Neglect

RISKS for developing learned helplessness and depression are MUCH higher when a child routinely responds to negative life events with a pessimistic explanatory style²:

PERSONAL (“It's my fault!”)

PERVASIVE (“I can't do anything right!”)

PERMANENT (“I'll never amount to anything!” “Nobody will ever like me!”)

² Peterson, C., Maier, S.F., Seligman, M.E.P. (1995). *Learned Helplessness: A Theory for the Age of Personal Control*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-504467-3

REVERSING Learned Helplessness

Mentoring Clubs have the same emphasis on 'PMA' you and your Mentoring Club Kid remember from Camp! Creating a supportive environment, where a Mentoring Club Kid can experience people with positive attitudes, sows the seeds of change in reacting to tough times. Mentoring Club materials focus on providing new explanations for bad life events using the Word of God:

➤ **PERSONAL ("It's my fault!")**

"God loves me no matter what happens."

➤ **PERVASIVE ("I can't do anything right!" "It is no use trying.")**

"God gave me strengths and talents."

➤ **PERMANENT ("Nobody will ever like me! I'll never amount to anything")**

"My Mentor and Mentoring Club Staff understand and accept me."

"God has a plan for my life."

Reversing Learned Helplessness: Vicarious Learning

Learned Helplessness can also be taught through “vicarious learning (or modeling)”:

Research indicates that people can learn to be helpless through observing another person encountering uncontrollable events.

Question: How might children in an abusive family imitate learned helplessness that they picked up through vicarious modeling?

The good news = vicarious learning (or modeling) can also teach positive messages and behaviors that empower children. **That is why mentoring is so effective!**

RFK'S RELATIONSHIP WITH CAREGIVERS

Some general information has been gleaned from Royal Family's experiences with foster parents since 1985. These would be random observations. In any case, Royal Family's position is that of supporting the year round job taken on by these care givers of desperate children in our society--children who we all care very much about.

There can be significant differences between foster parents in an inner city environment, very rural environment, and in suburban areas. Inner city foster parents are much more apt to be single, have no other source of income, and see foster care as their vocation. On the other hand, suburban and rural foster parents are more apt to be couples, have another source of income, and see foster care primarily as an avocation. Depending on the demographic population served, each child may have experienced foster parents very differently.

Regardless of demographics, there are things that can be done to enhance relationships with all of the foster parents who we serve. Some of them would be:

1. Start with a belief that every child comes from a loving and caring foster home. This may not always be true, but if we start with this belief, we may not be as quick to judge how a foster parent may have dealt with a child. Give them the benefit of the doubt, rather than seeing their 'parenting' as a reason to question the foster parents' parenting.
2. Recognize foster parents for who they are--people willing to take on very challenging children while dealing with a cumbersome legal system, social workers, attorneys, schools, birth parents, and other interested parties. Foster parenting is a difficult and challenging job under the best of circumstances and even the best foster parents sometimes make poor decisions. They are human.
3. See RFK as not just an opportunity to reach kids but foster parents as well. Most counselors and staff do not meet the foster parents, only the Child Placement Coordinator and Registration workers. But those who do interact with the foster parents have a unique opportunity to let them know how much they are appreciated. Make it a goal each year to have at least five people through the camp week (Registration to Departure of campers) that we appreciate the opportunity to have shared in the life of their child. This says nothing about what we think of them or their parenting, only that we appreciate the fact that they shared this child with us for a week---and we DO!

4. Expect that children in foster care may not give us an unbiased opinion of what is going on in the foster home. This does not mean that all foster children lie. These are extremely needy children who perceive the world from the perspective of getting their needs met. Therefore, a child may say that they are not getting enough to eat in the foster home. While this may be true, they may mean they are not getting as much as they want. This would certainly be a legitimate matter to refer back to the agency, but avoid making a judgment of the foster parenting, solely on this statement. Protective services and the courts are the people charged with evaluating the appropriateness of someone's parenting and we need to support them in their job to do so.

5. See yourselves as part of a 'team' with foster parents for the betterment of foster children, rather than 'rescuing' children from the system for a week. When we do, we will all WI

Caregiver Communication

Working with caregivers (foster parents, reunited birth parents, grandparents, group home staff, etc.) is vital to the success of the Royal Family KIDS mentoring program. Keeping expectations and approval processes open and clear is a focus of the partnership and support RFK can provide to caregivers.

As part of the application process, the Mentoring Director will receive back the following completed and signed forms:

1. **The Emergency Medical/Activities/Transportation Release Form** is required for finalizing a child's admission into Mentoring Club. The Mentoring Director retains one copy and you will need another copy in your possession whenever you are driving or spending time with your Mentoring Club Kid. RFK recommends that you keep the completed form in your binder behind Section XI (Release Forms) and keep the binder with you during all mentoring activities and at Mentoring Club.
2. **The Caregiver Covenant** reviews what both caregivers and mentors need to commit to in order to have a great Mentoring Club and mentoring year. It should be received back (signed by the caregiver) with the application packet. The Mentoring Director and the Mentoring Club Kid's Mentor should sign the covenant and make two copies. The Director keeps the original and the Mentor gets one copy. The caregiver should also get a copy of the document once everyone has signed it. While this can be mailed, it is better to have the mentor present the signed copy in person to the caregiver.
3. **Mentoring Club Kid Pick Up and Drop Off Authorization - Caregiver Covenant Part 2 (page VI-5)** allows the Mentor to obtain Emergency Contact name and numbers and enables the Mentor to review the following Mentoring Club Rules:
 - RFK Mentors and Mentoring Club volunteers are NOT allowed to leave a child at his/her home or other designated place unless the caregiver or other authorized adult is present.
 - Only authorized adults may pick the child/ren up from RFK activities.
 - The Mentor will keep this form and a copy will be filed with the Mentoring Club Director.

NOTE: Several Mentoring Club Kids in Same Family

If a parent or caregiver (relative caregiver; group home; foster parent, etc.) has more than one child joining Mentoring Club, they only have to fill out and sign ONE covenant (unlike the Emergency Release, which must be filled out for each child).

The Mentoring Club Director can make several copies of the covenant the caregiver has signed to give 2 copies to each Mentor working with the family or group home (one to keep and one to return to the caregiver). Each mentor simply circles the name of their Mentoring Club Kid at the top of their copies of the Covenant (Child/ren applying line). The Mentoring Club Director and the Mentor each sign the copies of the covenant.

MENTOR/CAREGIVER FIRST MEETING

Option 1

All paperwork has been received prior to first meeting

If all child paperwork (application, medical release, transportation release, caregiver covenant and drop-off/pick-up form) have been received by the Mentoring Director prior to the first Mentoring Club meeting then the mentor first visit will be on the first day of the Mentoring Club meeting. The caregiver will have been given the mentors name by the Mentoring Director. The mentor should make an introduction by phone and let the caregiver know what day/time they will be coming to pick up the mentee for the Mentoring Club meeting.

Option 2

Paperwork is completed at a visit prior to the first Mentoring Club meeting of the year

This meeting can take place with or without the Mentoring Club Director. Mentor should contact caregiver by phone and set up a day/time to come and get the necessary paperwork completed and meet the family. Mentor should provide caregiver with a Mentoring Club meeting date calendar and set up time for first Mentoring Club meeting pick up.

Note: It is recommended that the Mentoring Club Director accompany the mentor on the first visit if the child is new to RFK Mentoring Club. This gives the director the opportunity to meet the caregiver, have an understanding of where their mentor is picking up a child each month and serves to support the mentor on the first visit. This is not always possible but it is helpful.

ONE FINAL NOTE

In 1984 I became aware of the plight of abused and neglected children. The statistics of 10,500 abused children in Orange County, California took on a significantly different perspective. Since the inception of RFK, the statistics have names like Shorty, Mike, Albert, and the list goes on.

That first year, I came back from Camp emotionally drained and spiritually wondering if I had really heard from God, or if I was a “do-gooder” or “bleeding heart.” I walked into the Senior Pastor’s office and he shared with me the story that he heard Bill Wilson use in describing Bill’s mission into kids Sunday schools in Brooklyn. It was such a positive, heart-thumping story. I want to share it with you because your involvement does make a difference.

On the southeastern shore of Australia, along the miles of coastline, starfish are washed up on the beach and then the tide usually takes them back out to sea. But this particular occasion, thousands of starfish were left on the beach. Because of the heat of the sun, it wouldn’t take long for the starfish to dry up and die. Early, at about 6:00 a.m., a man that was staying in a motel located on the beach went out for a jog down the shore. Also out that morning was a young boy frantically trying to save the starfish. As the man was jogging, he saw the young boy hurriedly picking up the starfish and throwing them back into the water. The jogger, curious, stopped and asked the boy, “I know what you’re doing, but do you really think it will make a difference?”

The boy paused for a brief moment and replied, “I don’t know mister, but I think it will make a difference to this one.”

Yes, emphatically yes, and on behalf of the first 38 children that year, the hundreds since then, and with God’s help, the children who you will reach in your community this summer . . . We are making a difference.

—Wayne Tesch
Co-Founder