

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