

## Brief History of Child Welfare in America

In the United States, an early means of caring for orphans was by indenture. The first American child was indentured in 1636, in Massachusetts. Indenture was often free labor rather than protection. Later, children were placed in almshouses with their parents, and the feeling was that they would set children on a road to life, "free from permanent ignorance, pauperism, and vice." By the mid 1800's they were recognized as just the opposite. Yet, in 1927, there were still children placed in almshouses throughout the country.

In 1806, the New York Orphan Asylum Society, a group of wealthy women interested in the less fortunate, established an orphanage which set the example for many that followed. Children were to get clean linen and clothes regularly, and no physical punishment could be used on the children except by the orphanage's director. There was a great deal of concern for the morals of the children.

In 1853, the New York Children's Aid Society hired Charles Loring Brace. He saw many orphaned, immigrant children on the streets of New York, and became concerned that they were a detriment to New York. He was opposed to almshouses, and saw that many children in indenture were treated harshly. Believing that a more humane treatment would be to appeal to good hearted people to take the waifs, for free, and make them a part of the family, he set out on several trips west, with train loads of children ("Orphan Trains"). He would make a preliminary visit to the towns and elicit churches to help him find suitable parents. Thus began the early efforts to screen potential foster or adoptive parents. The major drawback, however, was that there was no system of follow-up to determine how the children were treated. Many of the children were still treated like indentured servants, despite his efforts, which reached their peak in 1873.

The Civil War resulted in the Country's being left with a tremendous number of destitute children and orphans. In 1866, Ohio established the first law that provided for a county children's home. It would be private, but would receive public funds for assistance. Other states followed, establishing Soldiers' Orphan homes and state institutions.

Most of the above efforts were aimed primarily at care for orphaned children. A child was the property of his parents. While there were attempts at times, there weren't consistent legal limits placed upon the way a child could be treated, until 1875. At that time, Mary Ellen, a very abused child who had been beaten and chained in a room by the couple who took her from a charitable institution, was discovered by a church visitor. To her dismay, the worker found that the police were helpless to intervene. As a last resort, the worker made a plea to the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, stating that Mary Ellen was an animal in need of protection. The SPCA investigated, and took the case to court. The guardian was sentenced to jail and the child was removed. With this, the New York SPCA incorporated child protective services. Other SPCAs followed suit, and yet other communities formed separate Societies for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Laws were written to protect children from abuse and neglect.

Some of the SPCCs became an arm of the law, took a rescuing stance, and aimed their services at punishing offenders. Others, such as Cleveland, and Boston, became more concerned with prevention than punishment, and, in 1876, Cleveland's SPCC combined placement with protection services.

The SPCCs, the first protective service agencies, were instrumental in the introduction and passage of many laws dealing with the conditions to which children were subjected. Laws to prevent wrongs to children were introduced in 1876; to prevent baby farming, in 1883; and some aimed at preventing abuse to children employed in the theater were introduced in 1892. Due to concerns about children brought to court mingling with adult prisoners, the first juvenile court emerged in Cook County, Illinois, in 1899.

The first quarter of the 20th century brought about a Children's Bill of Rights, as a result of the first White House Conference on Children, and a number of child labor laws. Yet, during that time, some children were still placed in indenture.

By the late 1960's, it seemed that children's rights, and their best interests were paramount. Foster homes had to go through a study and licensing procedure, and children had to be visited regularly in their placements.

In the 1970's, the reporting laws and expectations for investigating the abuse or neglect of children became more clear. At the same time, however, the legal pendulum seemed to be turning toward the rights of parents. Obtaining custody and assuring due process of law became more complicated, as the rights of families became more paramount. In tandem with that was the thinking that children should remain with their families whenever possible, and the realization that rescuing from a bad situation sometimes only led to children being placed into another bad situation.

In the 1980's, keeping children in their own homes was emphasized. Intensive home-based services became popular as a means of preserving the family. The Public began to recognize the problem of sex abuse, and some communities began to take a tougher stand in prosecuting the perpetrators and/or removing them from the home instead of removing the children.

In the '90's, family and children's rights to remain together remained an important objective, but the child's safety was re-emphasized as the primary objective. Ohio's Soldiers' Orphans Home closed. The policing/investigating aspect evolved to one of assessing the risk to children and assessing the family strengths upon which to build. Supportive services offered at the point of crisis, up front, are means to help prevent placements. A new focus was placed upon permanency for children, rather than allowing them to grow up in foster care. At the end of the decade, Federal and state laws were passed to demand permanency in one year. Additional training was emphasized for child welfare staff and prospective foster and adoptive parents. Limited funding became available to assist relatives in obtaining services necessary to assume the care of a child.