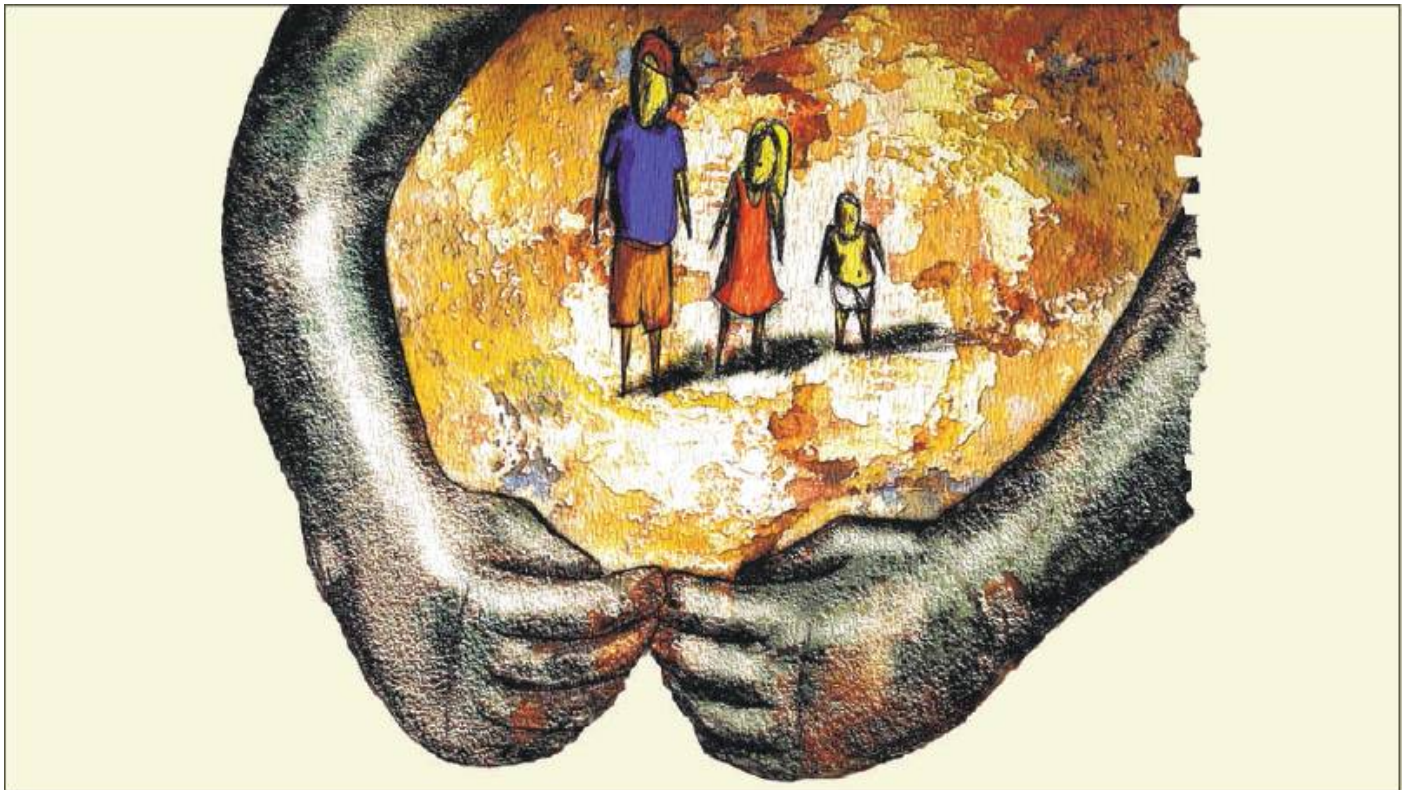


CHILD PROTECTION

A more complicated kind of Mother's Day

For those involved in the system, there are burdens to overcome, and there are frustrations that sometimes border on disbelief.

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BY HELEN KIM



ROB SMOAK • Myrtle Beach Sun-News/TNS

Mother's Day can be painful and complicated for the 400,000 kids in foster care in the U.S. and for their moms. As a psychiatrist for 17 years in a women's mental-health program in the Twin Cities, I have

met many moms involved with Child Protection Services and have found them to be good people with deep emotional wounds. Without exception, they have been survivors of childhood abuse and neglect themselves, often survivors of the foster care system that now has their children. Most have also struggled with basic needs like safe housing and support.

Child Protection-involved moms often carry a checklist of things they must do to get their kids back. Too often, complying with these lists can feel dangerous.

One young mom had to allow her 3-month-old daughter to be placed alone in a cab that shuttled the baby back and forth for weekly visits from a foster home an hour away. From foster home to birth mom, the baby was delivered like a package without regard for how vulnerable the baby and mom felt, since neither knew the different cab drivers involved. As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, the birth mom was terrified with this arrangement. She obsessed over what might happen to her little girl while alone with the driver.

She was also furious at a Child Protection system that said she needed “supervised visits” to be with her baby, yet would leave the baby alone with a stranger. Her visits with her baby were painful because the baby often cried inconsolably after the long cab ride alone. The mother’s distress made the baby even more upset and reinforced the mother’s fear and guilt. She wept as she described her anguish in putting the baby alone in the cab at the end of the visits. She was reminded of her own abuse as a child and the collusion of adults who allowed it to happen.

How could a system charged with child protection do this? Who in

that system would send their own child off with a stranger?

Moms with kids in foster care have many stories of engaging with systems that make them feel like criminals on probation, rather than parents trying to do better for their children.

Tragically, many Child Protection-involved moms have also suffered a lifetime of abuse and exploitation that affects their response to stress. Research has shown that repeated exposure to toxic stress changes how our bodies and minds respond to threat and colors memories and perceptions. Any perceived threat or reminder of one's trauma may trigger the brain and body's survival mode called the fight-flight-freeze reaction.

One Child Protection-involved mom said that since her abuse as a child, her body has felt like there's a "lion at the door." When she's triggered, the "lion" has burst through the door and is lunging toward her. In such moments, survivors of chronic trauma might lash out (fight) or shut down (flee or freeze). These instinctive reactions might save your life if a lion is coming after you, but when they happen in front of a judge or in a therapy office or when you are being "supervised" in your visit with your child, these reactions can make you look angry, checked out or out-of-control.

Fortunately, there's a growing movement in child welfare, juvenile justice and schools to infuse trauma-informed practices into child-serving programs. Adopting a "trauma lens" to see children's behavior can hopefully lead to more compassionate and effective responses to children.

However, without applying this same trauma lens to parents, well-

intentioned systems can retraumatize parents and undermine the parent-child relationship that is so central to children's well-being.

To moms with kids in foster care, please know that many of us in "the system" are thinking of you this Mother's Day. We wish, for you and your children, safety, love and support. To hear the voices of other Child Protection-involved moms, check out www.risemagazine.org.

And to those of us charged with serving children and families: Let's use that trauma lens to see the pain, shame and fear parents feel when they have children in foster care. They were likely once as alone as that baby in the cab. Since the majority of kids in foster care are eventually reunited with their birth parents, respectfully engaging parents and investing in the parent-child relationship can be that child's best hope.

Helen Kim, of Minneapolis, is a psychiatrist.