

Trauma in the Courtroom and Their Longterm Effects, Two Case Examples

Timothy R. Woods, Magistrate Judge for Finney County, Kansas, 25th Judicial District

Disclaimer: The names and some details have been changed to protect the people involved.

Key Point: Past trauma can impact a child far into their lives and it is our duty to mitigate its harm, if possible.

Case One: Emily

Emily, now age 12, is a child who is now living with an adopted family after termination of parental rights. She was exposed to meth during her mother's pregnancy and was non-verbal when she entered care soon after turning two years old. Homelife was chaotic with a lot of moving around and she has two older siblings. Not long into the case, Emily's brother was moved to another placement far away and her half-sister was placed with her father. Few services were offered to Emily and mental health services were not started while Emily was in DCF custody. After about two years, parental rights were terminated and after another year, she was adopted by her foster parents, the only placement she had throughout the case.

While Emily began talking after about four months in her foster home, she showed signs of significant, though not serious, mental health challenges. She is on medication for ADHD and has some physical health issues that started to manifest. Generally, Emily is a happy, intelligent child, though she struggles finding success in school.

Suggestions for how Emily could have been better prepared to face her challenges:

1. Improved access to services, beginning with the moment the child enters care.
2. Better support for the foster family, especially for accessing services earlier and identifying potential long-term issues the child may face.
3. Recognize that the signs of struggle may manifest differently from child-to-child depending on the specific demographics related to the child's upbringing before coming into care.
4. Less adversarial relationship with the agency.

Things that went well for Emily while in care:

1. Patience and willingness by foster parents to work with Emily and seek help when needed.

Case 2: Rita

Rita, now age 20, was first removed from her mother's care around age 7 but was quickly placed with her grandparents through guardianship. After her grandparents passed when she was 12, she returned to her mother and was back in DCF custody one year later, where her mom relinquished her rights at adjudication. There was no known father. From 13 to 15, Rita had eight foster homes, including one family that planned to adopt her before the mom got pregnant and immediately disrupted on Rita. She resided with one family from 15 until she aged out when she was 18.5 years old.

Rita had some support from independent living, but she struggled and, after about a year and a half, facing homelessness, she reached out to her last foster family who took her in to give her safety and security while she worked to get back on her feet, take care of her legal problems, and pay off some debts she accumulated while on her own.

Today, Rita struggles with severe depression and personality disorder. She was able to access mental health services and get a job to take care of her legal and debt issues.

Suggestions for helping Rita transition from foster care:

1. As always, continuous access to mental health services with no lapses during care and during the transition to aging out.
2. A way to have an aged-out child get emergency help when they're on the brink of homelessness.
3. Identify long-term concerns for the child and begin preparing ASAP to help the child develop coping skills to handle future challenges expected from past trauma.
4. Identify community services beyond DCF and the contractors to help support the child.
5. The court handling her case was very hands-off, and the case was handled as a "routine child on her way to aging out."
6. Avoid judgment for wrong choices, instead look for solutions how to help Rita move forward and void repeating the same choices.

What went well for Rita while in care:

1. Her support worker was very helpful, though there was a significant amount of distance for the worker to travel for in-person meetings since Rita was from another county.
2. She had a close family bond with her last foster family, and while aging out involved Rita "burning bridges," the family remained a part of her life and was available to get her back in.
3. Rita is very resilient and knows how to advocate for herself, though she struggles when overwhelmed and can shut down.