Child Welfare:



***WICKED PROBLEMS, GRAND CHALLENGES, & EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS***

***A WICKED PROBLEM***

Child welfare is a wicked problem. By “wicked,” we mean defying ordinary solutions.1 Child Welfare is a wicked problem because the source of the problem is alternately attributed to inadequate and irresponsible parenting on the one hand and to the stresses of the larger social environment on the other. Whatever the source, child welfare problems are interconnected with drug abuse, domestic violence, and unmarried parenthood at the individual level and concentrated poverty, institutional racism, and ineffective social policies at the societal level. In setting policy, government continues to struggle with how to measure success and whether it is best to focus narrowly on child safety or more broadly on social and emotional well-being.

Addressing the wicked problems of child welfare not only has potential to prevent harm to children but also to save money. Data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) illustrate the widespread prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) among children who come to the attention of the child welfare system.2 Studies show that “… cumulative exposure to ACEs may accelerate an individual’s disease experience, putting them at increased risk for premature mortality.”3 If untreated, childhood trauma not only leads to poor health outcomes for individuals, but also expensive burdens for society.

**Adverse Childhood Experiences 4 :** Physical abuse by a parent Emotional abuse by a parent Sexual abuse by anyone

Growing up with alcohol and/or drug abuse in household

Domestic violence



Experiencing incarceration of a household member Living with family member experiencing mental illness Loss of a parent

Emotional neglect

Physical neglect

***THE BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS TOWARD RESOLVING THE WICKED PROBLEMS OF CHILD WELFARE CAN BE SURMOUNTED BY:***

• Promoting the use of social impact (pay-for-success) partnerships, IV-E waiver demosntrations, low-cost RCTs, and other evidence-building activities that enlarge the supply of evidence-supported interventions in child welfare.

• Supporting the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being which is the only source of national data on child well-being outcomes;

• Prioritizing interconnected responses to child maltreatment and post-permanency instability by encouraging local collaborations via public-private and university-agency partnerships.

***WICKED PROBLEMS INSTITUTES***

To help shed light on the wicked problems of child welfare and to help drive a productive conversation towards practice-

informed, evidence-based research to address these wicked problems, the University of North Carolina School of Social Work is partnering with the Children’s Home Society of America to convene a series of institutes in Chapel Hill, Chicago, and Washington, DC. The Institutes started in 2012 and the eigth institute is being held October 23-24, 2018 in Chicago. These Wicked Problems Institutes bring together child welfare administrators, service providers, researchers, philanthropists, and policymakers. The ideas and insights of this diverse, interdisciplinary group led to the identification of eight (8) grand challenges for child welfare that if addressed, could set a new direction for building innovative, evidence-based, and sustainable solutions to the wicked problems of child welfare.

***EIGHT GRAND CHALLENGES***

The nature of a wicked problem is such that it cannot readily be resolved by a single discipline or one sector of society. It requires overcoming grand challenges that, if removed, could help resolve a wicked problem with substantial probability of success. Over the last six years, the Wicked Problems Institutes have assembled experts, service providers, and government officials to debate the wicked problems of child welfare and identify eight (8) grand challenges that must be overcome to set a new direction for building innovative, evidence-based, and sustainable solutions:

Reversing the adverse effects of child maltreatment on brain development

Harnessing the natural motivations of parents and kinship caregivers



Synthesizing research evidence on the effects of out-of-home care

Sustaining family continuity after legal permanence

Strengthening the voice of youth and families in the child welfare system

Linking well-being measures to administrative data on child safety and family permanence



Attracting private investments and using pay-for-success contracts to improve child and family services

Preparing the workforce for child welfare’s future wicked problems and grand challenges



***INNOVATIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS***

Strengthening the evidence-base is essential if we are to address the wicked problems and grand challenges of child welfare. First, although we may intuitively have a feel for how to best address complex issues, we can’t truly understand a wicked problem until we have evidence of a solution that works. The innovative use of IV-E waivers and pay-for-success projects coupled with rigorous evaluation can advance our understanding and improve child welfare. Second, the interconnected nature of wicked problems necessitates an interconnected response that includes public, private and university partnerships. Lastly, child well-being is the appropriate way to evaluate the effectiveness of child welfare interventions to support safe and permanent homes for children.

Through the Wicked Problems Institutes, we can learn critically important lessons that will help inform child welfare policy, practice, and financing decisions at the local, state, and federal levels and move us forward toward achieving the interconnected goals of safety, permanence, and well-being.

1Thorp, H. & Goldstein, B. (2010). *Engines of innovation: The entrepreneurial university in the twenty-first century.* Chapel Hill: The University of North

Carolina Press.

2Stambaugh, L., Ringeisen, H. Casanueva, C., Tueller, S., Smith, K., & Dolan, M. (2013). Adverse childhood experiences in NSCAW. *Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Report #2013-26.*

3Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults—The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), 245-258.

4Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study.* Retrieved September 21, 2016 from https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/

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