

Appropriate Technology to Support Timely Child Placement Decisions

**Recommendations for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
(UNCRC)**

September Workshop on Children Without Parental Care

Presented by

Professor Thomas Whalen, Georgia State University

Proposed Recommendations:

That the planned "UN Guidelines for the Protection of Children without Parental Care" should mandate the use of appropriate, readily accepted, and low cost decision support tools and methods to expedite moving children from institutional and temporary foster care into good family placements.

That the Guidelines or a supporting document associated with it call for research in identifying and developing appropriate, readily accepted, and low cost decision support tools and methods to expedite moving children from institutional and temporary foster care into good family placements.

There is ample scientific and medical evidence that children who are deprived of a stable and loving home environment quickly begin to show symptoms of psychological trauma, and their development proceeds at a fraction of normal rates. The norm should always be to keep a child with his or her biological parents whenever possible, and if they are separated, to strive to reunite them. Unfortunately, this all too often proves impossible due to death, abandonment, or severe problems such as intractable drug addiction which prevent the biological parents' from nurturing and protecting the child. Children who become permanently separated from their biological parents need a substitute placement, typically through adoption, and they need it promptly. The best interests of the developing child need to take precedence over the interests of the various adults involved in the process.

If the goal is to serve the true best interest of a child and time is critical, then all existing placement options must be considered simultaneously. Precious time for a child is lost when options are considered in sequence independently of each other, and more time is lost when waiting periods are substituted for simultaneous consideration of the relative importance of domestic adoption versus prompt adoption regardless of locale.

The placement of orphaned or abandoned children with adoptive families is dominated by paper-based systems in which every detail of the process is handled by unaided human judgment. Such a system has the potential to work very well when the number of needy children and the number of eligible potential families are small and in balance. However, given the very large number of children in the world who are orphaned, abandoned, or otherwise in need of homes, the result of current methods is that far too many children spend long periods of time, sometimes their entire childhood, in institutions or unstable foster care situations. The time element is especially critical in the case of infants, whose neurological development is retarded by one month for each three months they spend institutionalized.

Another very serious drawback is the lack of transparency in traditional systems; the reasons for placement decisions are not stated in a clear and consistent manner. This can lead to both the appearance and the reality of decisions unduly influenced by political, financial, or other improper considerations detrimental to the best interests of the child.

What is needed is the application of appropriate tools and techniques that will quickly identify good assignments of children to adoptive families. However, it is absolutely essential that these tools and techniques be acceptable and accessible to the people who staff and hold authority over the system. In order to be accepted and used, a system may have to include some compromises with traditional practices and opinions that a theoretically "better" system would avoid. A central goal is to facilitate and speed up the process of adoption across jurisdictional lines when domestic or in-state placement is not immediately available. Currently, many jurisdictions have no provision for placing children outside their own territory, while others impose a mandatory waiting period on infants and children which requires them to remain in-country, generally in an institution, for as much as two years before foreign adoption can be even considered. These nationalistic concerns could be better harmonized with the best interests of the vulnerable child if they are treated as "bonus points" for domestic adoptions in an expedited placement considering domestic and foreign adoption simultaneously, without unnecessary waiting periods.

The UNCRC has the responsibility to protect the human rights of our planet's most vulnerable citizens, children. A giant leap forward was made with the creation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 but many developments have occurred since that time. Technology and advanced communications tools have changed our world over the last sixty years and provided tools which have helped decision makers in business, engineering, and many other fields to make decisions with greater effectiveness, transparency, and speed. It is time for the lessons learned in these fields to benefit the most vulnerable children of the world.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is sometimes ambiguous in key statements such as in article 18, "where parents cannot perform their parental responsibility, state bodies are under obligation to provide them with appropriate assistance." Throughout the convention is the use of words such as "suitable" and "adequate". One essential step in reducing this ambiguity would be to mandate the prompt placement of children in stable loving homes, with biological parents if possible but with adoptive parents otherwise. And the use of appropriate, readily accepted, and low cost decision support tools and methods to expedite moving children from institutional and temporary foster care into good family placements is an essential part of making this possible.

Keeping a child in an institution when a better option exists for the child is a human rights violation. All studies clearly indicate that the development of a child within an institutional setting is greatly impaired and, in most cases, the damage haunts the child for life. If these studies all agree, then as the global entity responsible for protecting the human rights of children the UNCRC should state this fact clearly and encourage other global organizations concerned with children (such as UNICEF) to do the same. Millions of children are separated from their biological families throughout the globe.

Recommendation one is that the planned "UN Guidelines for the Protection of Children without Parental Care" should mandate the use of appropriate decision support tools and methods to expedite moving children from institutional and temporary foster care into good family placements.

Decision science is the synergy of logic, mathematics, cognitive psychology, group dynamics, information technology, and economics in the broad sense of "the science of scarcity." Appropriate concepts and methods from these fields are being used to improve decision making in business, government, medicine, and even personal decisions such as choosing a residence. Extremely modest investments in information technology, or creative use of what is already available, routinely lead to decisions that result in more benefit, less cost, and much greater transparency and fair accountability. A key characteristic of such a formulation is transparency; the reasons for a decision are presented clearly, in direct reference to the best interests of the child. Exceptions to standardized procedures are possible, but these two become a matter of record along with their justifications. This will act as an effective deterrent against improper financial, political, or other influences that act against the best interests of the child.

One big reason decision science is necessary for meeting the human rights of children currently without parents is due to the limitations of the unaided human brain in consistently balancing multiple considerations at once. People faced with complex problems without adequate tools and procedures necessarily rely on mental shortcuts called "heuristics." One such heuristic is elimination by aspects (e.g. dropping a family totally from consideration on account of age even if other positive factors might rationally outweigh a few extra years). Another is to favor domestic adoption over international by imposing a fixed time period that a child must wait (typically in an institution) for a hypothetical domestic placement to appear, and only begin to consider international adoption after this waiting period has run its course. Many other heuristics are documented in the decision science literature. Decision science offers inexpensive and easily mastered tools to deal with many considerations and their relative importances simultaneously, and to do so for a whole cohort of children in need of parents together with a pool of qualified domestic and international families, with no need for sequential consideration.

Many criteria should be considered in order to make the best decisions possible for a child without parents. It is quite easy to make a list of forty or fifty criteria that should receive some consideration in the decision making process. However, due to the limited capacity of the human mind, most lifelong decisions made for these vulnerable children are based on no more than three or four criteria. In addition, non-transparent processes provide opportunity for the conscious or unconscious prejudices and biases that exist in all human beings, and well as the risk of temptations to undue financial influences.

Some of the many considerations that might need to be included follow:

Mental Health history of the child, history of the parent
Language of parent and child and distance between the dialects
Health status of parent and child and ability and or willingness to deal with any
difference of ability
Religion
Economic ability to provide for child(ren)
Children in Adoptive home
Ethnicity of parent and child
Cultural competency score (a measure of the ability of the parent and/or older child
are able to understand the cultural considerations of adoption)
A measurement that rates the cultural perceptions of the adoptive parent and older
child about characteristics of a stable loving safe home

A simple and effective decision support system would use a list of criteria and a measure of the relative importance of each one. The importance scores would be based on expert studies, scientific and medical data, and statistical outcomes, but also on the cultural preferences of the people and institutions currently holding custody of the child, and other interested parties, to make the system acceptable to those in a position to use it or not. Each prospective adoptive family would be assessed on the criteria that pertain to a family per se, and each pairing of a needy child and an available family placement would be assessed on the criteria that pertain to pairings, using the characteristics of both family and child. The benefits of decision science can be applied throughout the decision making process from the time that a child is separated from biological parents and enters the child welfare system. These same values can also be applied to immediate decisions for the child such as temporary “foster” care versus institutional care.

Recommendation two is that the Guidelines or a supporting document associated with it call for research in identifying and developing appropriate, readily accepted, and low cost decision support tools and methods to apply available resources (especially qualified potential adoptive parents) to the needs of children without parental care.

Enough powerful and inexpensive tools and processes have been developed over the past 60 years to make the first recommendation feasible in the short run. The purpose of this recommendation is twofold.

The first goal is to spur the creation of a model child welfare system that can be emulated by governments, especially those struggling economically, but also those governments with “overgrown” systems that need to be overhauled such as the United States. This model would be based on the most appropriate new tools of technology and decision science developed over the past sixty years, but beyond that would be based on relevant current science from the fields of psychology, social work, medicine, law, and political science. Such a system of tools and methods would make the process of moving children from institutional and temporary foster care into good family placements more reliable and more transparent, enabling clear and fair accountability for all participants. It would also move vulnerable children out of institutions and into stable homes more quickly, which is a major consideration given the developmental harm suffered by institutionalized children.

The second goal is to encourage modifying these existing tools and procedures and developing new ones so that they are as acceptable, transparent, and inexpensive as possible. New developments in using ubiquitous cell phones, PDAs, and inexpensive small computers to handle information at the most appropriate quantitative, non-quantitative, or semi-quantitative level need to be moved from the laboratory and the business and military fields into the field of protecting the rights of vulnerable children.

When the existing expertise from countries around the world was pooled to create a scientific panel focused on serving the best interest of the child, then the scientific analysis and outcomes that currently exist can be applied to a system of appropriate, readily accepted, and inexpensive tools and procedures created to focus solely on the best interest of children. By bringing together such diverse expertise, a model system would be truly comprehensive. A model system would also give transparency that would allow for intense analysis and a collection of outcomes that would benefit children in the decades to come.

Governments are struggling to build child welfare systems that are efficient, transparent, and accountable from all respects. Many have limited or no resources to continually invest in these systems and unfortunately, no manuals or true guidelines exist to follow. The result is inconsistency, inefficiency, and ultimately a failure to serve these vulnerable children in finding them a family. The current lack of accurate data and outcomes prevents oversight of failures within existing systems. By utilizing inexpensive, easily mastered appropriate technology combined with expert decision science, complete analysis of failures, successes, trends can be provided to UNCRC or any appointed global authority over children without parents. It is imperative that global standards be established to ensure that all children are being served.