

ABC'S EXERCISE IN CHILD EXPLOITATION – AND RACISM
For the second time in five years, network exploits children, stereotypes families
By Richard Wexler
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In its relentless effort to promote a fantasy in which all birth parents are sick or evil, and any child in foster care must have been horrendously abused and in need of rescue by saintly, white, middle class, saintly foster and adoptive parents, ABC News engaged in a shameful trade – it's second in five years.

The network's special report on 20/20 last night featured what amounted to a commercial for a residential treatment center.

Residential treatment is by far the worst option for children. Two comprehensive reviews of the literature say it's a failure and there are far better alternatives. (Details on our website here: <http://bit.ly/6neiVw>) Indeed, though this is the second time in five years ABC has done such a commercial for the same residential treatment center, Maryhurst, in Kentucky, in neither case was there any independent evaluation of the program – only children put forward by the institution itself and the institution's own director.

What makes this almost Orwellian is the fact that the topic of the whole program was the misuse and overuse of psychiatric medication on foster children. And across the country **residential treatment centers are the places most likely to misuse and overuse psychiatric medication on children. To suggest such places as a solution is to endanger children.**

ABC News claimed that children left Maryhurst on no meds or fewer meds 75 percent of the time. But that can mean simply that they went from five drugs to four. As with everything else about Maryhurst there was no independent verification, and you can bet ABC News didn't check. But most important, **the notion that you have to institutionalize children to get them off psychiatric medication was contradicted by the rest of the program, which featured children who got off the meds without being institutionalized.**

While the institution got its commercial ABC got a chance to exploit a couple of kids.

I have no problem with showing children's faces on camera and even having them discuss the pain in their lives – *if* there is someone with the legal *and* the moral authority to provide informed consent. That means someone who *loves* that child, not a person or an institution who will gain personally.

In almost every case on this program there was someone with that moral authority – an adoptive parent. That was even true with the youngest children at Maryhurst. But not the teenagers. Who, then, gave consent? Presumably the institution itself. And the bromides from the director notwithstanding, institutions do not love children. The institution also had a

vested interest in giving this permission. **It was child exploitation by the institution and child exploitation by ABC News.**

Granted, in 2006, it was worse. As we discussed in detail on our child welfare blog at the time, available here: <http://bit.ly/uLqEq4>, then they put on camera an 11-year-old with an unusual first name who was seen not only talking about being abused, but becoming an abuser herself. She was seen during some of the most painful imaginable moments of her young life.

After my organization and a grassroots family advocacy group, the Child Welfare Organizing Project (www.cwop.org) met with ABC News producers to complain, that child's photo and information were removed from the ABC News website. But I also hoped ABC would raise its standards beyond the improvement seen tonight – fewer children exploited and they were older.

THE DISNEY VERSION

But all this was necessary to maintain the larger fiction that all parents who lose children to foster care supposedly are sick or evil, while white middle-class foster and adoptive parents are saints. **Indeed, every single heroic figure on the program – the foster parents, the adoptive parents, the RTC staff and the RTC director – was white. Apparently African Americans have nothing to contribute to the child welfare system – except their children.**

As ABC's parent company might say, that's the Disney version.

The reality is a lot more complicated. Many children never needed to be taken from their own homes in the first place. Contrary to the common stereotype, most parents who lose their children to foster care are neither brutally abusive nor hopelessly addicted. Far more common are cases in which family poverty is confused with "neglect." (Details at www.nccpr.org). Racial bias permeates the system. As it happens, there is another video just out that tells the stories ABC News systematically omitted. It's not quite as slick, but it's a whole lot more real: <http://vimeo.com/32337815>

When children really must be taken, study after study has shown they are better off – and safer – placed with relatives. They're also a lot less likely to be overmedicated. Florida found that when a child is placed with a grandmother or other relative he is dramatically less likely to wind up on meds than when that child is placed in an institution, a group home, or even a foster home with a stranger.

It's not hard to figure out why. Unlike the strangers, grandparents typically love the children they're caring for – so they'll put up with a lot more instead of rushing to seek a prescription to make a child docile and easier to manage.

You can't fix this with another regulation because you can't legislate love. The only way to significantly reduce the use of psychiatric medication in foster care is to significantly reduce foster care.

THE FEDERAL ROLE

Nevertheless, the federal government is doing more than ABC News let on – again, because it would spoil the network's "master narrative."

The network left the impression that no one at the federal Department of Health and Human Services would talk to them except one bureaucrat from the FDA seemingly sent up by central casting to play the role of "heartless bureaucrat." (And, in fact, it's good that ABC exposed the fact that the FDA is clueless about the special issues involving foster children, and chose to put forward to discuss the issue someone who displayed all the empathy and compassion of former BP CEO Tony "I want my life back" Hayward.) But the program also left the impression that no one at HHS wants to take ownership of this issue.

That's not true, and ABC News knows it.

Ever since he took the job of Acting Assistant Commissioner for the part of HHS specifically responsible for foster children, the Administration for Children and Families, only six months ago, George Sheldon has made trying to control overmedication of foster children a top priority. And it was only in these past six months that HHS finally began moving on this issue.

ABC News didn't say if it tried to interview Sheldon in his present job. But ABC already had interviewed Sheldon for this program when he held his previous job, Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families. He was running the agency when Gabriel Myers, whose case was discussed on the program, died – and he led the effort to reform the misuse of overuse of psychiatric medication in Florida as a result.

But of course, showing any of that interview, noting his accomplishments in Florida and then noting Sheldon's new job would have ruined the whole "heartless, clueless bureaucrats" theme that was another part of the network's "master narrative."

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