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“The Jigsaw Puzzle Child”

By Eileen Mayers Pasztor, DSW

Every adult who interacts with children in foster care must understand average, expectable, or “normal” child development principles, and the often devastating impact of neglect and physical and sexual abuse on child well-being. As a foster care caseworker who grew up to become a foster and adoptive parent, here are two stories about child development that demonstrate what happens when case-workers don’t have grounding in child development, and offers a tool that helps look at child development from a more realistic perspective.

My decision to be a child welfare worker was not a career calling. I sought any job where a college diploma was required, and the county welfare department (as social services was called a long time ago) was seeking college graduates. With the qualifications of only a bachelor’s degree in history and a driver’s license, I was hired as a foster care caseworker. I didn’t even know what foster care was because I was fortunate to grow up in a family with nurturing parents.

On my second day at work, I was sent to see a foster mother who had been fostering for more years than I was old. We had a disagreement about the age of a child in her care. According to the case record, the child was about one year of age. The foster mother said the child was three years old. I did see the child, but I didn’t stay long. When I returned to the agency, I told my supervisor, who recently earned a masters in social work, about what happened. My supervisor asked me what the child was doing, as a way to determine who was correct: the case record or the foster mother. I told my supervisor that the child was riding her tricycle most of the time. Everyone but myself was astonished that I didn’t know a one-year-old couldn’t ride a tricycle... I didn’t learn that as a history major. Years later, after I gained some experience in child development and of course much more, I returned to the agency and ran into that foster mother. She told me that I was the dumbest case worker she had ever met. Think of the mistakes that are made when basic information such as child development is not known.

Many years later, after having the privilege of working with literally thousands of wonderful foster parents and child welfare professionals around the country, and becoming a foster parent, my husband and I decided to add to our family by adopting a child with special needs. He was chronologically ten years old, and had been in two residential facilities since the age of six. My parents were thrilled at the addition of who would be their only grandson. But it didn’t take long for them to be frustrated with his behaviors, least of which was his “excess energy” and inability to focus on any activity for more than a few minutes. Try as I might to prepare them that he was going to be “different” from other ten year olds, we were all struggling. So I invented the “jigsaw puzzle” activity to show them how he wasn’t really ten years old.

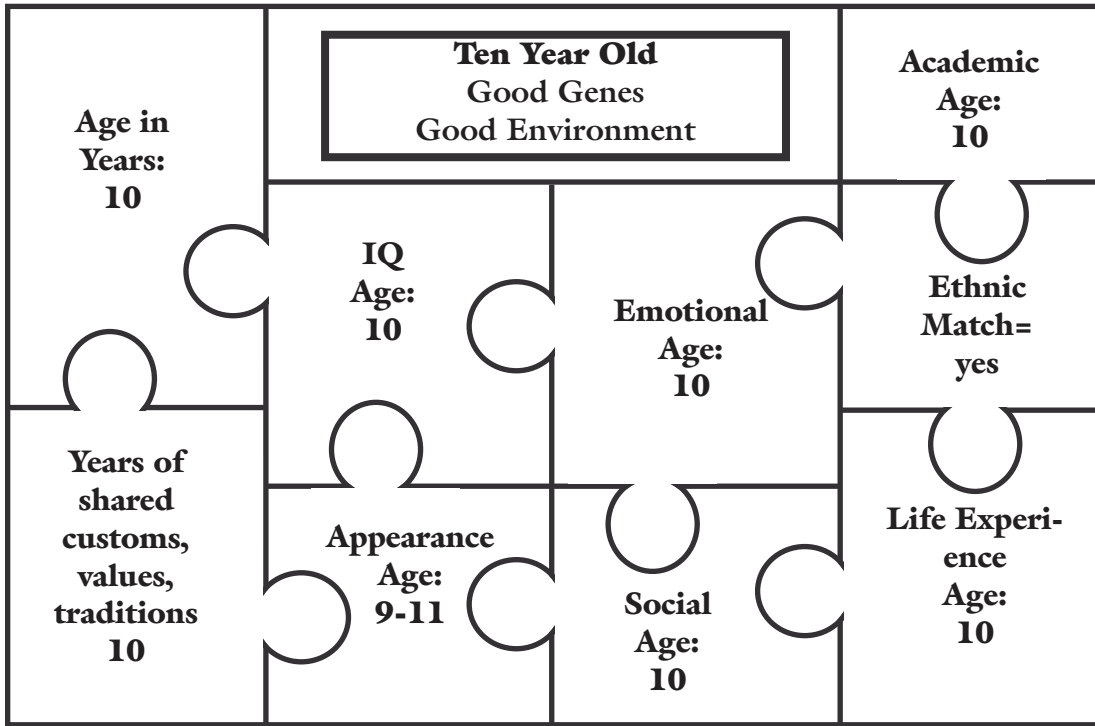
The Jigsaw Puzzle Tool

Children have eight parts to their development: their age in years; appearance age; IQ age; academic age (grade in school); emotional age; social age; whether they are an ethnic match with the family they are living with, and how many years of customs, values, and traditions they share; and their life experience age. Most people – like my parents – were expecting that a ten-year-old would look between 9 and 11 years of age, would be in the fifth grade, would be of average or above intelligence; would be white like us, and would share our family values and traditions.

Children who have experienced the tragedy of abuse and neglect and sexual

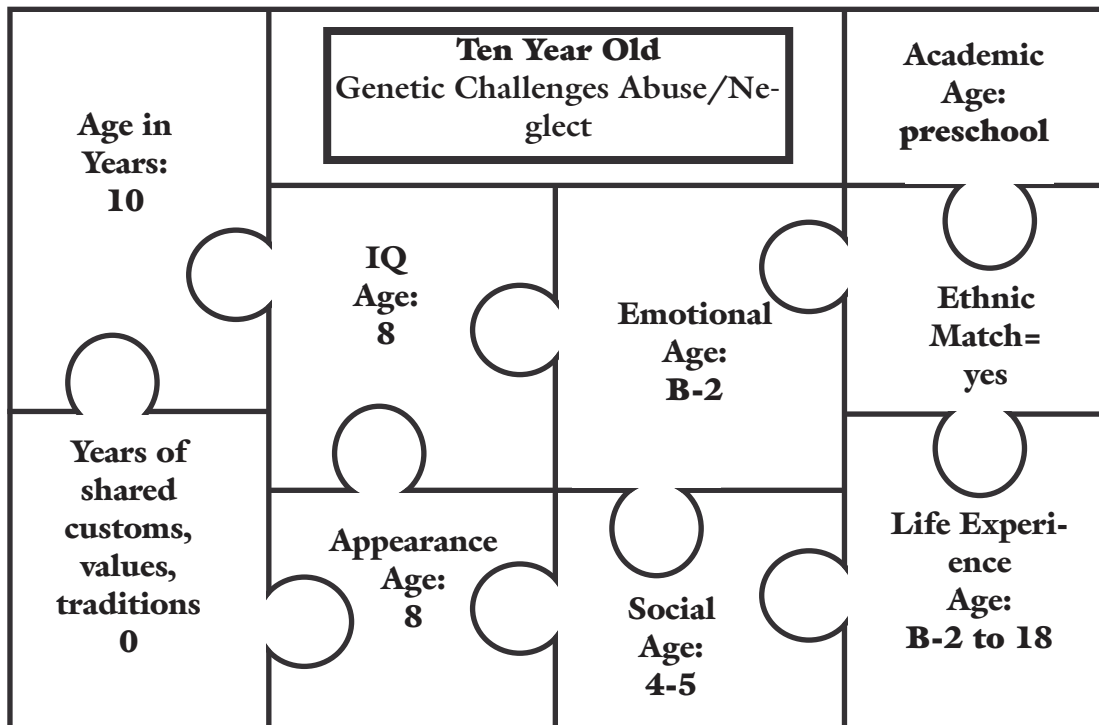


abuse have fragmented pieces. See the puzzle below – that’s the puzzle for a child born with the blessings of good genes and good environment.



The Typical Ten Year Old

The next puzzle – that’s my son. He was 10 years old in years, but he looked eight (small for his age). He processed information like an eight-year-old according to his IQ test and, academically, he didn’t read or write when he came to us: not one word. So he was academically preschool age.



My “Ten” Year Old Son

Regarding trust, why should any child who has been abused or neglected by adults trust any of us? We think of families as safe havens. Children coming into the foster care system typically see families as places where children get hurt. Mom neglects you when she is high; her boyfriend abuses you because you're just a reminder that she had sex with someone else. Families can be scary places. This can be especially true if you've lived with many previous foster or even adoptive parents who started off by saying, "I love you," and then called for your "removal" (like you were garbage or snow) when your behaviors acted out your normal feelings of fear and anger.

Socially, after living in a residential setting with other challenged children, our son could do parallel play but not interactive play, which made him socially at the preschool age. We were an ethnic match, but we had zero years of shared customs, values, and traditions. He wanted to sleep with us because that was what he had been taught before he was sent away to residential; and he wanted to be sure we wouldn't abandon him in the middle of the night. As another example, when our foster daughter came to live with us, she had the custom of sleeping with her shoes on her pillow. That's because, where she used to live, she never knew who would try to molest her in the middle of the night; she used her shoes as a weapon or to run.

To assess the "life experience" age, you look at the range from the youngest age to the oldest age of functioning. In my son's situation, this would place his youngest age of functioning at his emotional age, which was "birth through two" – when basic trust is established. For most children who have been abused or neglected, typical attachments and trusting relationships are suspect. His oldest age of functioning I list as 18 plus years of age. This is because children who have been sexually abused have experienced activities that many people don't know about until they at least go to R-rated movies or have had some of their own more "grown up" or intimate relationships.

How Does This Work?

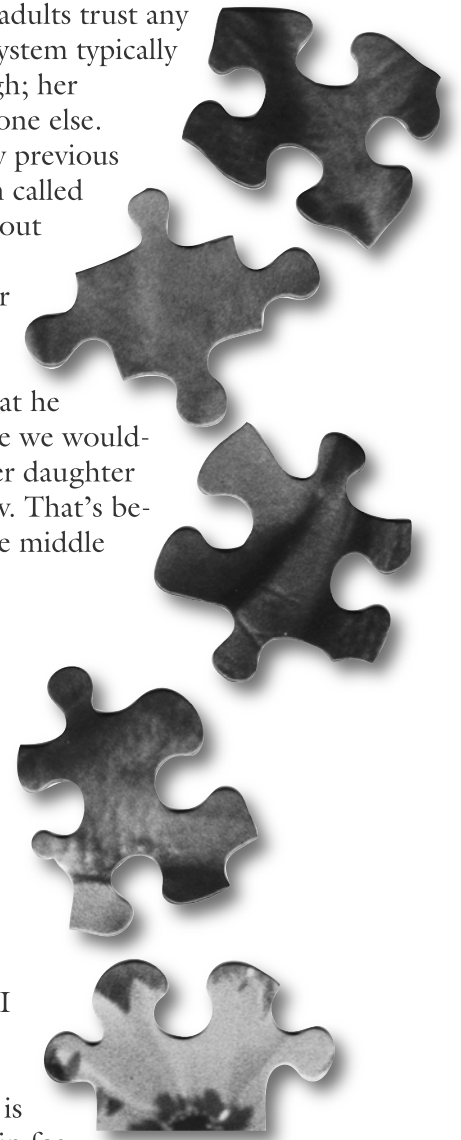
In every child welfare class I teach, in every workshop I do, in every keynote I give, I demonstrate the "jigsaw puzzle child" activity. I usually do it with two pieces of flip chart paper. First I diagram the "typical" ten-year old. Then I diagram my son. And then I rip the pieces apart and throw them on the floor. This is because the child welfare and other "systems" don't typically deal with children in foster care from a developmental perspective and in a unified way. The case record documents the date of birth or chronological age. Anyone who meets the child sees the appearance age. Schools interact with a different piece of the child, and so on. And if a foster parent has three children in their care, that's actually 24 different ages and stages to protect and nurture.

Consider the risk factors for children whose pieces of their jigsaw puzzle do not fit together. What are the risks for a girl who is emotionally, socially, and cognitively 12 but looks like she's 16? What are the risks for boys who look older than their abilities? And for young people of color, the risks are greater. Latino and African American males tend to get referred to juvenile corrections while Anglos are more likely to go to mental health facilities.

What happens when these "jigsaw puzzle children" turn 18 years of age and the alarm on their independent living clock rings? Now, at the chronological age of 18 years, they are supposed to be "emancipated." They "age out." Listen to how awful those words sound, how unnatural they are. What do they sound like to a child? How can we expect safe and responsible behavior from someone who is 18 in years only, but socially, emotionally, academically, and cognitively much younger? And here's another critical question:

Who is responsible for putting all the "pieces" back together again?

From now on, every time you think about a child in your care, your caseload, your classroom or even the courtroom, think of all the pieces of the puzzle. Put a jigsaw puzzle diagram in their records. Discuss the "jigsaw puzzle" pieces when getting ready to place children. It may be that the placing caseworker does not know what all the pieces are. It may be that some children have to live with foster parents for a while before their foster parents can





determine what the “ages” are. Tell the judge. Remember, when you are considering sending children back to their parents, the parents have jigsaw puzzle pieces, too. It’s just their chronological ages are higher. Otherwise, their pieces look a lot like those of their children. How do we ensure child safety, well-being, and permanency when we send “jigsaw puzzle” children to live with “jigsaw puzzle” parents?

Fast forward the clock: Our son is now in his thirties. He is a client of county mental health services. He cannot work; my husband and I help him with most of his tasks of daily living. He has a wonderful relationship with my 90-year-old parents, who accepted him many years ago, once they put the pieces of the puzzle together. I didn’t expect to be a mom to someone who is thirty-something in years, but emotionally and socially much more like a 14-year-old. However, I am humbled that, through his challenges, and those of my foster daughter, I was taught the lessons that enabled me to create and share these activities. I would have preferred, of course, that they had not had the experiences. But our adult “children” are safe, and we’re still a family. I hope this “jigsaw puzzle” tool will help facilitate safety, well-being, and permanency for the children in your care and in your caseloads, too.

Adapted from:

Child Welfare League of America. (2009). *Foster PRIDE/Adopt Pride – Preservice Training for Foster and Adoptive Parents, Trainer’s Guide*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, p. 243.

Pasztor, E.M. & McCurdy, M. (2009). *When work comes home and home goes to work – child welfare social workers as foster and adoptive parents*. In E. Grise-Owens & K. Lay, (eds.), *Reflections – narratives of professional helping*. Special Issue: *Inside Out – Reflections on Personal and Professional Intersections*, Spring, Volume 15, #2, 95-105, p. 95; and p. 98.

Pasztor, E.M., Polowy, M., Leighton, M., & Conte, R. (1991). *The ultimate challenge: Foster parenting in the 1990s*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

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