



## Mini Steamrollers and Giant Bugs

Bringing "Families Together" through the Rhode Island Children's Museum

. . . by Adam Voiland/image courtesy of Sarah Palmer

William Franklin (all names in this article have been changed) only has an IQ of 69, but had no trouble understanding why the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) requested that he receive a psychological evaluation two years ago.

"It's about my son, Nathan," he told the psychologist. "His mother and I were separated for a while, and he was sick, and he never could go to school. DCYF decided to take him. I would like to get my son back. If you told me I had to give up an arm or a leg, I would sign up to do it now. That's how much I love him. Every two weeks I go to DCYF for a visit. It hurts me so much to see my son there, that I miss him so much that I have to leave."

DCYF first opened a case on the Franklin family on October 30, 2000. Nathan, then eight years old, was attending his first year of school and had already missed 30 of the first 45 days. When a social worker visited the Franklin's home to discuss Nathan's truancy, his mother, Cora, flew into a rage. She threatened the social worker with a knife saying she had no knowledge of either of them. The outburst placed her in a local hospital, where her doctor described her as tangential and delusional. A later psychological evaluation revealed that Cora was severely schizophrenic.

What makes this case strange, however, is that Mr. Franklin fails to accept or understand this fact. He contends that his wife is perfectly normal and sees her behavior as unremarkable. "Part of it is his low IQ," said Mark Dittloff, a family clinician familiar with the case. "But part of it is cultural too." Mr. Franklin was born in Jamaica in 1951 and lived there for 19 years. According to Dittloff, Jamaican culture regards inner voices and hallucinations as an appropriate part of spirituality. "The doctors would tell him your wife is hearing voices and he would say: 'So what? Doesn't everybody?'" Dittloff said.

Mr. Franklin, then, had no qualms about leaving Nathan, who himself has learning disabilities, with his schizophrenic wife for some sixteen hours a day, while he commuted to New York City to work as a security guard. He simply didn't understand that what went on at home when he left for work qualified as child neglect.

According to Becky Celeste, a clinician who now works with the Franklin family, "It was an unbelievable situation. When DCYF first got involved, Nathan was eight and had never been toilet trained. He was still wearing diapers and was so severely constipated he had to go to the hospital for immediate treatment. He hardly spoke and had a terrible vocabulary. He really didn't seem to know what was going on."

When Nathan's mother refused to take medication for her schizophrenia in the spring of 2001, doctors recommended that he be removed from the home. That April, DCYF placed Nathan in non-kin foster care, making him one of some 1,200 foster children in Rhode Island.

### Fostering Relationships

When DCYF removes a child from the home and places him or her in foster care, the intent is not to destroy the family, but rather to allow parents to amend whatever behavior caused the separation, while ensuring the safety and well-being of the child. Most child abuse and neglect occurs when parents are overwhelmed by multiple problems such as substance abuse, unemployment, emotional distress, or illness. Theoretically, if parents can resolve immediate problems like unemployment or substance abuse, the family can and should be reunited as quickly as possible.

The reality, of course, is not nearly so tidy. Though efforts have recently been made to reduce the duration of stays, many children still spend long periods in foster care—the national average is between three-and-a-half and five years—and some reach adulthood without ever getting a permanent placement. Even in cases where families are reunited, the solution is often temporary. About twenty percent of Rhode Island children who are reunited with their parents end up being removed again because of repeated abuse or neglect, or because parents fail to stick to drug treatment or to live up to other conditions of the child's return. Recent national research on the death rates of children returned to their biological families shows these children dying due to violence at three times the rate of the general population.

Before allowing reunification Family Court judges, DCYF caseworkers, foster parents, and parents must create a formal contract that includes specific information about tasks, timeframes, and goals—called a case plan—that details what a family must do to regain custody of a child. In the case of the Franklin family, the case plan recommended that Mr. Franklin find a job closer to home, that he and his wife receive therapy, that Mrs. Franklin begin to take medication to control her schizophrenia, and that the family participate in a visitation plan. The Franklin's visitation plan stipulated that the family could see each other for a few hours each week under the supervision of a DCYF caseworker, and soon after Nathan's removal, the family began visits at the DCYF offices in Providence.

These visits, however, did not go well. Neither the parents nor Nathan seemed to understand why he had been removed, why they were there, or what they should do. Before the first visit Nathan's social worker asked Mr. Franklin if he would bring something for the family to do or play with during the visit. Mr. Franklin brought a Gameboy and Nathan's parents spent most of the visit in silence watching him play with it. The social service worker reported "almost no interaction among family members during the entire visit." After another visit in July of 2001 she reported: "Visitation with the parents is not going well... Nathan becomes tearful during the visits and rocks back and forth."

### **From Sterility to Serenity**

Undoubtedly the Franklin family was going through a stressful period, making positive interaction difficult. However, according to Heidi Brinig, the founder of an innovative visitation program at Providence Children's Museum called Families Together, part of what made these visits so difficult was the environment in which they took place. She said that many parents whose children have been removed view DCYF—and anything associated with DCYF—as the 'enemy.' They often come into visits at the DCYF municipal headquarters with extremely hostile and guarded attitudes that make meaningful interaction difficult.

On top of this ever-present tension, the sterile environment of the DCYF visitation rooms is hardly a place that encourages interaction. The rooms are typically twelve by fourteen feet, have bare white walls, a couch, a stool or two, and a few toys. "It's not like they don't try," said Mark Dittloff, a family therapist that supervises visits at DCYF and the Children's Museum. "But, they just can't keep them clean. They have such a huge caseload and not enough money or staff to keep up."

Fourteen years ago Brinig, who at the time was working with children separated from their parents at a hospital in Pennsylvania, came up with a simple but revolutionary idea: why not hold the visits in a more friendly, welcoming environment, such as one finds in a children's museum—an institution created to strengthen bonds between children and parents.

Brinig soon found an ally in Janice O'Donnell, Executive Director of the Providence Children's Museum, and together the two women brought Brinig's idea to Rhode Island DCYF. Their original proposal included holding visitation for court separated families in the interactive, colorful exhibit halls of the Children's Museum rather than in the sterile visiting rooms of municipal buildings or in crowded fast food restaurants. Participants in the program would make a series of visits to the museum where, under the guidance of the professionally trained family therapists, they would learn and play together.

While the program's primary goal would be to help families rebuild damaged relationships, the informal atmosphere of the children's museum would allow family therapists to step back and unobtrusively observe how families interact in a more neutral setting than they could at the DCYF visiting rooms. This would encourage spontaneous rather than guarded reactions, and would give a more complete and accurate picture of family dynamics—information that is critical for judges charged with deciding whether to reunite court-separated families.

In 1992, DCYF referred five families to a twelve-week pilot program; the partnership between the Children's

Museum and DCYF has grown and flourished ever since. Today DCYF fully supports Families Together, channeling \$348,000 in federal funds toward the program, which now serves some seventy-five families each year and provides guidance and training to DCYF social workers.

No two Families Together visits are the same. As the situation of the Franklin family suggests, the program has seen more than its share of mangled families and extraordinarily complex situations. Past participants have included a 17-year-old who sexually assaulted her two-year-old-son, a mother who had ten children with nine different men, and scores of alcoholics, crack addicts, and other drug abusers.

“This can be a very difficult job at times,” Brinig said. “Sometimes I feel like I’m talking to kids when I talk to some of these parents. When I’m feeling overwhelmed I try to understand the root of the problem. Maybe, at one point, the parents were lied to or abused. I just don’t know and it is impossible for me to walk in their shoes. I ask myself: how can I teach through the filter that they [the parents] see the world through? You have to understand how they problem solve, what their own parental situation was like, what is in their heart before you can change anything.”

### **All about the Kennedys**

Brinig’s program seems to be working. After being nominated by DCYF, the Department of Health and Human Services Children’s Bureau in Washington recently named Families Together a “Promising Practice” for child welfare nationally. Within the child welfare community Brinig is considered a visionary and is credited with changing child welfare practices in Rhode Island. Last spring Families Together attracted national attention and won \$10,000 by making a shortlist for the highly competitive Innovations in American Government Award from the Kennedy School of Government.

Meanwhile, Nathan and his father have had eight visits at the museum. Nathan’s mother cannot participate in the visits until she begins to take medication for her schizophrenia—something she simply refuses to do. Observing the two, it is obvious that Nathan’s father loves his son, and that Nathan, despite everything, reciprocates.

They usually meet in a large brightly colored room, with bright, checkered tiles, and huge cut-out shapes plastered on the walls. During one visit the pair practiced the order of the months, played with blocks, sat on the museum’s miniature steamroller, and explored an exhibit about immigrants in Rhode Island. Once, when he saw a huge model of a bug hanging in the Museum’s stairwell, Nathan’s father pretended to be a mosquito and playfully chased Nathan down the stairs, buzzing all the while. Towards the end of a visit, Nathan fidgeted from his seat, crept towards his father, and leaned his head against his shoulder. The notes from other visits revealed this type of attention and affection was part of a larger pattern. An entry from an earlier visit read: “Mr. Franklin walked Nathan outside and gave him a hug, kiss, and a handshake. Nathan told him, ‘I love you.’”

It is unclear what will happen to Nathan in the future, despite the encouraging visits at the Museum. According to Families Together therapist Becky Celeste, he has wonderful foster parents and is flourishing under their care. Nathan is toilet-trained now, eats independently, and is speaking much more frequently. He enjoys school and has formed a number of friendships with peers. The visits have improved as well. “It’s amazing how far they’ve come,” Dittloff said, referring to Nathan and his father. “When they first started visits at the Museum, they hardly knew each other. They didn’t have a thing to say to each other. Now, look at them.”

Despite apparent successes like this one, Museum and DCYF officials acknowledge that they need more formal and objective ways to evaluate the program. Museum Director Janice O’Donnell said there is, in fact, little applicable research examining whether this kind of visitation strengthens relationships.

Complicating the issue, a gradual shift in priorities has occurred among child welfare professionals since Brinig first launched the program, changing the role of Families Together. Originally, Families Together set out to facilitate reunification in all cases. It soon became clear, however, that measuring the impact of participation in Families Together as contributing to a family’s reunification, ultimately involving numerous personal and legal factors, was impractical.

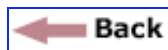
Furthermore, Brinig explained that in the world of child welfare, permanence is emerging as a priority over reunification. While DCYF continues to make reuniting biological families their top priority, child welfare professionals across the nation are growing increasingly alarmed that some children in the system are spending too long bouncing from temporary placement to temporary placement as they wait for their parent’s situation to stabilize. As a result, many are calling for quicker decisions on either returning children to their homes or terminating parental rights. Making such decisions about permanence is a daunting responsibility and Families Together, with its unique ability to observe families interacting in an environment designed for learning and play,

has become increasingly relied upon to make recommendations to Family Court judges who ultimately determine a child's fate.

What will Families Together recommend for the Franklin family? "It's hard to say," said Dittloff. "Mr. Franklin wants Nathan back and has done everything the courts have asked except quit his job (Mr. Franklin is on track to receive a lucrative pension at work). He obviously loves his son, but it isn't completely clear that he and his wife are capable of caring for him. We'll just have to wait and see."

*Adam Voiland B'05 reps Geology. Holla!*

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