

# What Will It Take to Build a Child Welfare System That Heals?



A compilation of social posts by Dr. Amelia Franck Meyer

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## What Does Healing Look Like?

We've talked about what's broken—or rather, how what was designed to “help” has caused immeasurable harm. Now, let's talk about how we build something better.

Over the past few months, we explored the flawed foundation of America's child welfare system—a system that isn't broken but was designed in ways that harm the very children and families it was meant to protect. Today, I'm excited to shift the conversation from critique to creation. How do we reimagine child welfare as a system rooted in healing, connection, safety, belonging, and the prevention of family separation? What does healing and belonging look like—for children, families, and communities?

Belonging starts with shifting our understanding of what children need to thrive. We know that family separation causes life-long predictive harm for children and unbearable trauma for parents and extended family, too. So, when families are in crisis, instead of creating another Adverse Childhood Experience (e.g., family separation), we should identify what families need to stay safely together. For example, we could ask the 4 questions used by Midwestern judges that help keep 50% more families safely together.\*

Over the next few weeks, I'll be exploring what it takes to co-design systems that build on a child's need for an uninterrupted sense of belonging. From redefining safety to reimagining leadership, we'll examine the building blocks of a future where every child can grow up surrounded by love and support, and every family has what they need to stay safely together.

At Alia, we call these UnSystems—systems co-designed with impacted parents—that move beyond punishment and surveillance and instead center healing, support, and connection. Together, we'll dive into ideas and practices that can help us move from what's wrong to what's possible. How do you imagine a new way forward? I'd love to hear your thoughts as we begin this journey together.

\*Check out: Four Questions, Seven Judges: <https://findbrightspots.org/bright-spots-library/four-questions-seven-judges/>





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### Redefining Safety

What if we redefined “safety” in child welfare?

For decades, the child welfare system has equated safety with physical protection alone, but true safety is so much more than that. Of course, children need physical safety, but they also need emotional, psychological, and relational safety to thrive. The system’s narrow definition of safety has caused countless children to be separated from their families, often unnecessarily, without addressing the deeper needs that foster true well-being.

When families face challenges like poverty, mental health struggles, or substance use, the solution isn’t removal—it’s support. Research, sociobiology, history, and the voices of lived experts tell us that separating children from their families causes trauma that ripples across a lifetime. We must move beyond short-term “rescue” approaches and focus on long-term solutions that allow children to grow up connected to their families, communities, and cultures. But how do we create safety in families? There are countless ways. Here are a few to get us started:

- **Re-examine your own ethnocentric, socio-economic lens of what “safety” means**—If family separation creates known, life-long predictive harm, very little is more harmful than separation. Of course, in extreme cases or with very young children, we may need to make temporary hard choices.
- **Provide services and supports instead of punishment when families struggle**—Design interventions to remove the danger, not the child.
- **Keep children connected to their parents, and their extended families, whenever safely possible**—Work with family members or provide supervision to make it safely possible. Children are rarely less safe than when they are disconnected from their families. Belonging creates safety.
- **Build on the strengths present in every family and family system to help keep children safe.**
- **Work with parents and extended family to design safety plans.**

At Alia, we’re working to co-design UnSystems that expand the meaning of safety. We believe in supporting families where they are, providing resources like housing stability, mental health care, and building parental capacities to keep children safe—so children are never removed in the first place. Safety isn’t just the absence of harm; it’s the presence of connection, belonging, and love. How do you define safety for children and families? Let’s rethink this together.





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### Leadership as Foundational to Systemic Change

True transformation in child welfare begins with brave leadership.

As we continue our series on how to UnSystem the system—building new ways of work that keep families safely together—we must start with a foundational pillar of systems change: leadership. Leaders in child welfare systems often have an average tenure of only 18 months. That’s barely enough time to complete probation, navigate the internal processes, or build relationships, let alone implement meaningful reforms. Yet consistent, effective leadership is one of the greatest predictors of successful, lasting transformation. So, what does this type of leadership look like?

- **It is proximate to communities**—Leaders must be close enough to understand what families need to stay safely together. Without this proximity, they cannot create solutions rooted in the real experiences of families.
- **It is committed to co-creating solutions**—Effective leaders partner with parents and communities to achieve lasting outcomes. They must push past surface-level changes and tackle the deeply rooted policies, mindsets, and beliefs that cause harm.
- **It is brave**—Transformative leadership requires undoing decades of intergenerational harm. This includes dismantling practices and contracts that perpetuate trauma and building systems centered on healing and belonging. This type of work isn’t easy and often faces significant resistance.

In times of rapid change, when all systems are in flux, we need leaders with the fortitude to sustain and guide humane redesign. When we identify such leaders, we must support their bravery by clearing obstacles in their path and ensuring they have the longevity to make real progress.

Changemakers often face barriers and pushback. Rarely do they hear, “How can I help?” or “I appreciate your bravery.” Yet that’s exactly what’s needed. The pushback often becomes personal, with people targeting those who make them uncomfortable. In moments like this, we must remember that being uncomfortable is part of transformation.

If you are someone working to create a vision of a better future—one where all children live safely with their families—you are a changemaker. The world needs your courage now more than ever. What role do you see leadership playing in transforming child welfare? Let’s rethink this together.





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### Put the Movement in a National Context with a Research Base

How do we frame child welfare transformation in the context of a national movement?

The efforts to UnSystem child welfare aren't just a local initiative—they're part of a larger, evidence-based movement rooted in federal law, research, data, and lived expertise. However, if we focus solely on local transformation, those uncomfortable with this change may attempt to halt progress, believing it can be stopped at the local level. True transformation happens when we help others understand the broader context for this change—it's backed by decades of research on trauma, family separation, and the long-term, predictive harm of systemic interventions on children and families.

So, how do we ground this work in a national context? Here are a few critical steps:

- **Use research to drive change**—We have decades of studies showing the lifelong harm caused by family separation, the importance of belonging, and the effectiveness of prevention-based interventions. Leaders must use this knowledge to inform policies and practices. (See Alia's Evidence Base: [The Case Against Family Separation](#), available as a free downloadable tool.)
- **Recognize this as a national and global issue**—Child welfare systems across the U.S. (and beyond) are reckoning with the same challenges—racial disparities, over-surveillance of marginalized communities, and outdated models of intervention. We must connect local work to broader reform efforts to build momentum.
- **Look to existing models of success**—Some systems and states have already begun shifting toward prevention, community-based supports, and co-designed solutions. By amplifying and learning from these efforts, we can accelerate change.
- **The pandemic was an unplanned experiment that debunked myths about family separation**—The fear has long been that reducing family separation would put children at greater risk. But during COVID, when far fewer children were removed, child abuse did not drastically increase as many feared—and may have actually decreased.
- **Align with interdisciplinary movements**—The movement to rethink child welfare intersects with criminal justice reform, mental health, racial equity, and economic justice. Collaboration across these fields strengthens our impact.

At Alia, we believe in using research and lived experience to fuel systemic transformation. We're not just imagining a better way—we're building it, alongside families, leaders, and communities across the country. Where do you see the biggest opportunities to connect child welfare reform to broader movements for change? Let's rethink this together.

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### Shift the mindset across the workforce and leadership about what kids need to thrive, about families as the solution, and the importance of belonging in feeling safe

What if we redefined what kids need to thrive?

For too long, child welfare has been built on outdated assumptions about safety and well-being—assuming that separating children from their families leads to better outcomes. But we now know that true safety isn't just about physical protection; it's about connection, belonging, and the stability of growing up in one's own family and community.

To build an UnSystem, we must shift the mindset of all involved from seeing families as problems to be solved—and toward recognizing families as the solution.

This means:

- **Reframing beliefs about safety and thriving**—Safety isn't just the absence of harm—it's the presence of love, belonging, and stability. We need training that helps child welfare professionals understand what truly supports child well-being.
- **Centering lived expertise**—Parents who have navigated the system should be at the forefront of shaping policy and practice. Hearing directly from those impacted, about what they would have needed to avoid contact with the system, helps reframe harmful mindsets and shift decision-making toward family preservation.
- **Embracing multiple sources of "evidence"**—Storytelling, understanding context and historical experiences, and using reflective practices help professionals move toward solutions that truly support families.

At Alia, we're working alongside impacted families and partnering with child welfare leaders and professionals to reimagine what it means for kids to be safe and to thrive. By shifting mindsets and centering belonging in our definitions of safety, we can provide environments where fewer children are removed and more families have the support they need to stay together.

What mindset shifts do you think are most needed in child welfare? Let's rethink this together.





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### Build safety, trust, and stability with leadership and the workforce to create the conditions for individuals and teams to do the introspective work necessary to be good community partners

What does it take to create a workforce that can truly partner with families?

Building an UnSystem isn't just about changing policies—it's about changing people. Shifting child welfare from a system of separation to one of support requires a workforce that feels safe enough to do the hard, introspective work of transformation with families and partners.

We cannot ask professionals to rethink deeply ingrained beliefs, examine their biases, and show up differently for families if they don't feel safe themselves. Psychological safety within teams is essential—without it, fear and self-protection will override growth and change.

So, how do we build trust and stability across leadership and the workforce?

- **Prioritize psychological safety**—Teams must feel safe enough to be vulnerable, challenge old ways of thinking, and make mistakes in service of learning. Without this, change efforts stall before they even begin.
- **Embrace trauma-informed supervision**—Child welfare work is emotionally demanding. Leaders must be self-aware and also support staff in recognizing their own trauma triggers and biases so they can engage with families from a place of understanding, not judgment.
- **Encourage bold, family-centered decision-making**—Staff need to know that they are supported in decisions that lead to better outcomes for all involved—like keeping a family together instead of defaulting to removal. This shared accountability is an essential component of transformation. The workforce needs to know they are not alone in holding risk.

At Alia, we work alongside systems to create cultures where leaders and teams can engage in meaningful self-reflection and growth. When the workforce feels supported, they're better equipped to become the kind of partners families need.





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### Data as a Tool for Change

What if we saw data as a tool for learning, not a weapon for blame?

For too long, child welfare data has been used punitively—to justify removals, highlight failures, or assign blame. But data should be a tool for understanding and improving, not for shaming or penalizing workers, families, or communities. If we want to build an UnSystem, we must create a culture where data sparks curiosity about better questions, not fear of punishment.

So, how do we shift how data is used in child welfare?

- **Ask better questions**—Instead of just tracking how many children enter foster care, let's ask why they're coming to the system in the first place. Who is making reports? What services were missing? Where could intervention have happened earlier?
- **Create safety around data discussions**—When staff fear data will be used against them, they avoid honest conversations about the drivers of data. What is leading to these results? That's what we need to understand to create meaningful change; lead measures, not just lag measures. Leaders must create conditions where data is used to understand, not to punish.
- **Look beyond numbers to the bigger picture**—Data should never be viewed in isolation. Pairing numbers with stories, context, and the qualitative data and stories that can be provided by those with lived experience gives us a fuller understanding of what families actually need.

At Alia, we believe that a data-informed system cannot authentically occur in a punitive system. When we shift our mindset from blame to learning, data becomes a powerful tool for change—helping us understand what's working, what's not, and where we need to focus our efforts.

How have you seen data used as a tool for learning rather than blame and develop a culture of inquiry and curiosity?

Let's rethink this together.







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### Understanding the Story Behind the Numbers

What if we asked better questions about why families are in crisis?

Too often, child welfare data focuses on tracking removals, placements, and case closures—but these numbers don't tell us why families are coming to the system in the first place. If we want to build UnSystems, we need to dig deeper into the patterns, disparities, and barriers that bring families to CPS.

Here are some of the most critical questions we should be asking:

- **Why are families coming to the attention of CPS?** Are we responding to true safety concerns, or are families being flagged for poverty-related struggles like lack of food, housing, or childcare?
- **Who is calling them in?** Are certain professionals or community members over-reporting families of color or those living in poverty? How can we train reporters to distinguish between neglect and the need for resources?
- **What services are missing?** What would prevent a CPS call in the first place? Are mental health care, parenting support, substance use treatment, or housing assistance available before families hit a crisis point? If not, how do we build them?
- **What are the barriers to access?** Even when services exist, families often can't access them due to waitlists, eligibility rules, language barriers, or fear of CPS involvement. What policies and funding shifts could remove these roadblocks? Families can give us these answers.
- **Which children and families are disproportionately impacted?** Are Black, Indigenous, and low-income families being investigated and separated at higher rates? Are certain zip codes or demographics overrepresented in child removals? If so why? Are there service deserts? Is there bias at play? Work to use data to understand disproportionalities.

At Alia, we believe that data must be used to guide solutions, not just document problems. By regularly analyzing these key questions—and validating and contextualizing findings through community feedback and lived experience—we can shift from reactive interventions to preventative, equity-centered solutions.

What other questions should we be asking to ensure child welfare data is used for learning, not just tracking? Let's rethink this together.







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### Voices of Impacted Parents

What if the best solutions for child welfare already exist—in the voices of impacted parents?

Too often, child welfare systems are redesigned in boardrooms and government buildings, far from the families who've experienced them firsthand. But if we want to build UnSystems that truly work, we must center the people who know exactly what would have made the difference in their lives: impacted parents.

Parents who've experienced the child welfare system firsthand carry hard-won wisdom. They know what support would have kept their family safely together. They know where systems fail—and where they can change. The key is not just to listen, but to co-create alongside them.

So... what does co-design really mean? At Alia, we don't believe that one-time focus groups, advisory boards, or non-shared power engagements are true co-design. We believe in 2E-Codesign that is both Equitable and Ethical.

- **Build trust before solutions**—Co-design begins with relationships. Trust must be earned, not assumed. Create safe, respectful spaces where parents feel seen, heard, and valued—not judged or extracted for input.
- **Shift from “what do you need” to “what would have helped”**—The best ideas often come not in the heat of crisis, but from reflection. Invite parents to name the supports that could have prevented their system involvement—and design from there.
- **Design with, not for**—Co-design is not a one-time feedback session. It's an ongoing collaboration where parents are embedded as leaders, thinkers, and co-builders of new ways of work.

At Alia, we're walking alongside systems to ensure that transformation is not just informed by lived experience—it's led by it. When we build with those closest to the problem, we unlock solutions that are more effective, more humane, and more lasting.

Who are the parents in your community whose wisdom could transform your work?

Let's move from consultation to co-creation.





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### Build Trust with Impacted Parents

What if trust was the starting point—not an afterthought?

Too often, systems rush to ask for parent input without doing the hard work of building genuine trust. But trust is the foundation of transformation. Without it, co-design is just a performance.

Families impacted by child welfare have experienced deep harm—from being surveilled, blamed, and separated. If we want to work together to UnSystem the System and allow for healing instead, we must start by building relationships that are safe, consistent, and rooted in respect.

Here's what that looks like:

- **Show up with consistency**—Trust isn't built in a single listening session. It takes time, follow-through, and a willingness to return even when the conversations are hard.
- **Listen without fixing**—Many parents have never had the chance to speak their truth without judgment or interruption. Let them lead. Hear their stories.
- **Center humility**—It's not about proving your commitment. It's about honoring their experience. Be open to learning, being wrong, and trying again.

At Alia, we've seen how the deepest innovation starts with the simplest act: showing up with openness and care. When parents feel safe, seen, and valued, the door to true collaboration opens.

What have you learned about building trust across power differences?

Let's rethink this together.





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### Co-Design New Approaches with Impacted Parents

What if parents helped design the very systems that impacted them?

Once trust is built, the next step is shared power. True transformation doesn't happen when we design solutions for families. It happens when we co-design with them.

Impacted parents carry the clearest vision of what would have helped them stay safely together. Their wisdom, when paired with data and system knowledge, can obsolete the need for child removal.

To do this ethically and effectively:

- **Co-design must be ongoing, not a one-off**—It's not a focus group or a survey. It's a long-term, power-sharing relationship where parents help shape strategy, policy, and practice.
- **Create healing-centered spaces**—Co-design must reduce harm, not replicate it. Host sessions that prioritize safety, inclusion, and care. Avoid retraumatizing dynamics.
- **Start with questions focused on lessons learned from lived experiences**—Instead of "What do you need now?" ask, "What would have helped if you never come to the attention of CPS?"

At Alia, we call this kind of design experience: Equitable and Ethical Co-Design (2E Co-Design)—not extraction, not tokenism, but authentic collaboration that builds solutions no single party could build alone.

How have you seen co-design done well? What makes it real and not performative? Let's rethink this together.

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