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# OPINION

## Overmedicating Children in Foster Care

Other treatments can build on better outcomes

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

On any given day nearly one in four children in foster care is taking at least one psychotropic medication — more than four times the rate for all children. Nearly half of children living in residential treatment centers or group homes take psychotropic medications. Children in foster care are more likely to be prescribed multiple psychotropic medications at very high doses, although research shows higher doses can result in serious side effects.

Viewers of the ABC News program 20/20 may remember Ke'onte Cook from a few years ago, a 10-year-old who had already spent four years in foster care being treated with a dozen different medications for conditions including seizures, bipolar



disorder, and ADHD. Ke'onte had never been diagnosed with the conditions some of the medications were meant to treat. Under his adoptive parents' care he stopped taking all the medications and started relying on therapy, and with that new treatment plan he was transformed. Why are some children in foster care being overmedicated, and what steps do we need to take to do something about it?

Psychotropic medications act on the brain and central nervous system to cause changes in mood, behavior, or perception. They can be effective treatments for certain serious mental health conditions but there is a growing concern that too many children in foster care are overmedicated — in some cases as a form of behavior control.

Children who come into foster care often have been exposed to multiple traumatic events including the removal from their families, and may be at higher risk for mental health problems and emotional disorders. Too often

multiple medications may be used without other kinds of effective treatments that might better address the underlying trauma children are experiencing. There's evidence some children in foster care are subjected to powerful medications at very young ages and/or in combinations and amounts that are unsafe for children of any age.

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Many psychotropic medications are not approved for use in children at all.

Often children in foster care are prescribed drugs without any psychotherapy because resources aren't available. They may not receive a proper initial diagnosis or any of the ongoing monitoring or extra services that should accom-

pany the use of such powerful drugs — all essential considering the serious side effects from some that can include nightmares, hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, and even death.

The 20/20 special included the heartbreaking story of Gabriel Myers, a Florida seven-year-old who hung himself in his foster

little boy before sending him out the door with another prescription.

We must do better. Too many child welfare agencies lack the proper non-pharmacological treatments to address the mental health needs of children in foster care.

The Administration seeks to reduce the over-reliance on drugs and increase the use of appropriate screening, assessment, and interventions. It wants incentives to states that demonstrate improvements to reduce inappropriate drug prescribing practices and overutilization of psychotropic medications, increase access to evidence-based and trauma-informed therapeutic interventions, promote child and adolescent wellbeing, and improve outcomes for children in the child welfare system.

These common sense and necessary steps build on best practices already in place in some states. Now is the right time to ensure children in foster care get the treatment and care they truly need.

*Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund.*

## Opening a New Door and a New Set of Challenges

To the Class of 2016

BY MARC H. MORIAL

If you are disposed to using the Internet as your guide, a diploma will generally be described as the proof of your successful completion of a course of study, or the bestowal of an academic degree.

Speaking from personal experience, I can tell you that diploma in your grasp, occupying a prominent space on a wall or waiting to be pressed into your eager hand is so much more than the sum of your years-long efforts to be where you are today. Your degree is a key that opens a new door, a new phase of life and a new set of challenges.

Your life's journey—and its achievements—does not end here. Celebrate, because you've earned it; bask in your well-earned feeling of accomplishment today, because tomorrow you will find that there is much work to be done.

On the other side of that new door is a staircase, and that staircase may not be the kind fashioned from crystal with smooth, reliable, clear-cut steps. Obstacles



may slow or impede your climb. There may be tacks, broken floorboards and torn up carpet that would trip, or at worst, defeat someone without the training you have been so fortunate to attain.

There is no shortcut here, no elevator, or bypassing of these difficult steps and turns. There is, however, the choice to apply the perseverance and commitment to excellence you have already shown in your higher education journey.

On the one hand, there is much to celebrate in our country when it comes to academic achievement in African-American communities. Today, we enjoy the highest high school graduation rates in history. More students of color are in college and dropout rates are at historic lows. But the wealth and unemployment gap between blacks and whites remains wide.

While the black unemployment rate has finally dipped into the single digits, it stubbornly remains more than twice as high as the jobless rate for whites. As our country's economy continues to make steady gains after the debilitating 2008 recession, millions in black and brown communities are being left behind. In this country—

founded largely on the principle of economic progress through hard work—the American dream of upward mobility remains only a dream for too many of its citizens.

Your education, drive and diploma, may likely shield you from the harsh economic realities experienced throughout communities of color across our nation, but it does not strip you of an obligation to be an actor, rather than a spectator, in our country's struggle to create one nation with liberty, justice and economic opportunity for all.

No one gets to where they are on his or her own. You have parents, grandparents, friends and family members who invested in your future success, put you on this path and made sure you stayed the course. How will you repay their commitment to you? Whether your ancestors came here by plane, by train, by ship or shackled underneath the hull of a ship; whether the continent they called home was Asia, Europe or Africa, what they did when they reached the shores of our nation, what they sacrificed—all of it is debt incurred. How will you choose to compensate them for their struggles?

Among you are the teachers who will lift the standard of education in poor communities and begin to close the achievement gap; among you are the preachers who will heal the wounds of communities torn apart by violence; among you are the elected officials who will institute laws and policies that promote social and economic fairness for all of America's citizens. Herein lies the answer. The answer our nation has been searching for is you and your talent, put to a higher purpose.

I cannot promise you that your

climb to success in this life will be a crystal stair. You may very well encounter dark corners and obstacles. What I can promise you is that you have been prepared to meet these challenges head on. And more than meet these challenges, you have also been prepared to be an actor in solving so many of the longstanding issues and inequities facing our nation, so "don't you turn back."

*Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.*

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