Family Policing:
Reframing Common Stories

Media coverage of child maltreatment and the family policing system tends to feature a few common story archetypes, most of which involve a tragic or alarming event. The traditional approach to this topic has relied on sensationalism over context, which can fuel "foster care panics" and policies that increase family separations. This resource offers a list of questions to consider when reporting on child safety issues, along with ideas for reframing some of the most common types of stories about the family policing system.

Questions to Consider

- Does this story imply that family separation is the only answer, or does it highlight supports that could help families stay together? Are material supports highlighted, rather than exclusively punitive responses?
- Does this story rely on a rare or tragic event as its hook? If so, is there a risk of fearmongering or misrepresenting the typical experiences of families impacted by the system?
- Can the story be reframed to expose the impact of structural issues (poverty, housing instability, service gaps) instead of only amplifying sensationalized individual experiences?

Story Archetype: The Foster System "Crisis"

Standard frame: Agencies are portrayed as passive victims of an uncontrollable "surge" in children needing placement in the foster system. This framing presents the crisis as inevitable and external. The implied solution is to provide more funding to the system or to recruit more temporary custodians (often called "foster parents"). Temporary custodians are portrayed as "heroes" or "rescuers" of "unwanted" or "unloved" children.

Reframe: Agencies are not passive bystanders to a foster system "crisis." They are actively removing children from their homes, likely driven by state policies that favor separation over support of families. This is not inevitable. Journalists should avoid defaulting solely to agency-proposed solutions that merely call for more temporary custodians or agency staff. Instead, include evidence of proven approaches that can reduce the number of children entering the system or increase the number and expediency of reunifications, including affordable housing, childcare, and medical care.

Take care not to frame children impacted by the foster system as "unwanted" or "unloved" or without other familial bonds. Many children in the system have a strong desire to return home and a family who is fighting to make that happen. Journalists should consider covering the efforts families make to maintain or regain custody.

Story Archetype: Adoption "Success" Stories

Standard frame: Adoption is often portrayed as a celebratory ending: a child finding a "forever home." Adoptive parents (like foster or temporary custodians) are framed as "heroes" or "rescuers," while children are implicitly cast as previously "unwanted" or "unloved." This framing, often described as prioritizing "permanence" for children in the foster system, frequently concludes with calls for more people to foster or adopt, or for policies that make children more quickly and easily "adoptable."

Reframe: Adoption is not a neutral action. Adoption through the family policing system requires the termination of parental rights (the permanent legal severing of a child's relationship with their parent) often referred to as the "civil death penalty." For many children, this loss is abrupt and poorly explained, and may mean never seeing their parents again. Termination of parental rights is often the result of cumulative barriers that prevent parents from reuniting with their children within the system's arbitrary timelines.

The system frames adoption as "permanence" that is needed for a child's stability, but research shows that relational permanence after adoption—meaning the maintenance of safe, ongoing connections with parents and extended family—better supports children's well-being. Yet the system routinely prioritizes legal permanence over relational permanence.

Termination of parental rights also does not guarantee adoption. Some children become legal orphans, left without legal ties to parents and without the promised "forever family." Even when adoptions occur, they are not always permanent; some adoptions later dissolve.

Journalists should consider covering these harms.

Story Archetype: Child Fatalities at Home

Standard frame: Tragic, rare cases like child fatalities are treated as representative of a widespread crisis. It is implied that had the family policing agency been more vigilant, the child's death would've been prevented. The solutions discussed are

broader scrutiny of parents, more funding for agencies, or taking a "just in case" approach to family separation.

Reframe: Ground the story in data to illustrate that deaths are rare and devastating outliers, not representative of the vast majority of family policing cases. Avoid sensationalized coverage that can fuel "foster care panics," and consider highlighting [evidence](#) demonstrating that expanding the foster system is not associated with reductions in child fatality rates.

When politicians propose responses, scrutinize whether they simply expand family separation or scrutiny of parents rather than investing in supports that are proven to increase safety, like cash or housing assistance, childcare, and voluntary mental health or substance use programs. Be sure to include evidence about the impact of family separation and the foster system on children and their parents.

Story Archetype: Child Fatalities in the Foster System

Standard frame: Child fatalities happen when children are in the state's custody, within the foster system. After a child fatality in the foster system, foster agencies will frequently decline to comment. When they do comment, statements from agency officials often seek to exonerate themselves. They may shift blame onto the children themselves (for example, citing "challenging behaviors") or blame the lowest-level employees or contract providers, suggesting a single procedural lapse rather than systemic failure. Agencies may also refuse to provide information to oversight bodies, limiting accountability.

Reframe: The state is fully responsible for the safety and well-being of children in its custody and should be subject to the same type of scrutiny that parents are. Similar to stories about child fatalities at home, stories about child fatalities in the foster system should focus on structural failures, not just individual choices. Include the perspectives of the parents and family of any child who died, and investigate whether the agency provided material support or shared timely information with the family.

Sourcing should include people with direct experience and outside experts who can speak to the harm children face in the foster system. Investigate the program's history: prior complaints, restraint and seclusion practices, hospitalizations, and litigation. Compare outcomes and costs with those of keeping families together or family-based placements.