

# First and Second-Order Changes in a Community's Response to a Child Abuse Fatality

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For more than a decade, I have explored how communication scholars can participate in interdisciplinary efforts to understand and address child abuse and neglect (Wilson & Whipple, 1995). Encouraged by colleagues from other fields and service providers, I have coauthored theoretical and empirical analyses of child maltreatment (e.g., Morgan & Wilson, 2005, Wilson, Morgan, Hayes, Bylund, & Herman, 2004; Wilson, Shi, Tirmenstein, Norris, & Rack, 2006). Recent tragic events have emphasized the complexity of such work and highlighted important interconnections between institutions and families.

This essay analyzes the case of Aiyana Gauvin, a 4-year-old girl in my own community who died in March, 2005 from injuries inflicted by her stepmother. I explore the Greater Lafayette community's responses to Aiyana's death, arguing they evolved over time from primarily first-order to second-order changes (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). These levels differ in terms of which institutions are responsible for responding to child abuse as well as how communities see families. I discuss research questions our discipline could pursue to help assess whether community responses to child abuse and neglect are making a difference.

## Aiyana's Story

I can offer only a brief description of the events surrounding Aiyana Gauvin's death. (Interested readers can find a more detailed chronology at <http://tholian.sla.purdue.edu/communication/html/people/pages/stevewilson.htm>)

Aiyana Gauvin was born in December 2000 to Cassandra Robinson and Christian Gauvin. When her parents divorced 2 years later, Aiyana initially lived with her biological mother. Following multiple episodes of substantiated neglect, Aiyana and her siblings were removed from their mother by Tippecanoe Country Child

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Protective Services (CPS) and placed temporarily with their maternal grandparents. Over the next few months, Aiyana's mother failed drug tests and missed scheduled visits with her children, whereas her father found employment. Based on recommendations from therapists and Aiyana's court-appointed special advocate (CASA), the court approved a plan transitioning Aiyana to her father's home in December, 2003. Because her siblings had different biological fathers, they were placed elsewhere.

In February 2004, Christian Gauvin and his daughter Aiyana moved in with his girlfriend, Michelle Urbanus. Nearly all contact between Aiyana and her siblings/maternal grandparents stopped at Michelle's insistence. Christian and Michelle married in January 2005. Two months later, police responded to a 911 call from Michelle and found 4-year-old Aiyana dead. Police discovered bruises all over Aiyana's body; an autopsy revealed she had died from a head injury. Interviews revealed that Michelle had severely abused Aiyana, physically and psychologically, for months prior to Aiyana's death (Gerrety, 2005a). Michelle Urbanus Gauvin eventually pleaded guilty to murder and received a sentence of life without parole; Christian Gauvin awaits trial for felony neglect in connection with a child's death.

Aiyana's story is, in some respects, not unique. Approximately 1500 child fatalities resulting from abuse or neglect occur in the US each year; the vast majority of children killed are 4 years or younger (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Yet Aiyana's story generated tremendous local media coverage; an online search of the *Lafayette Journal and Courier* using the term "child abuse" revealed 199 matches for articles and editorials published in 2005, up from only 45 stories in 2004. The coverage, in part, reflects the severity of abuse that occurred, but the case shares another feature with stories that receive widespread media cover—miscues by CPS and law enforcement (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

In June 2004, a Tippecanoe county sheriff's deputy visited the Urbanus home in response to an allegation that Aiyana was being physically abused. He talked with Christian Gauvin and Michelle Urbanus but did not insist on seeing Aiyana. He filed a report claiming to have seen Aiyana, which he later admitted was fabricated. The allegation was not passed on to Tippecanoe CPS (Voravong, 2005). In February 2005, Cassandra Robinson called Tippecanoe CPS alleging that Aiyana was being physically abused by her stepmother (Michelle Urbanus Gauvin). A CPS case manager decided that the allegation did not meet the legal grounds for CPS to investigate; hence, no inquiries were made. A fatality review team later determined that the allegation should have been investigated ("Child Fatality Review," 2005).

### **Community Responses to Aiyana's Story**

The Greater Lafayette community's initial responses to Aiyana's story included shock, disgust, sadness, blame, and a belief that something must change. Jim Klusman, CEO and President of the Greater Lafayette Community Foundation, summarized these feelings in a column published in the *Lafayette Journal and Courier* 3 weeks after Aiyana's death:

What can be done to prevent child abuse and neglect? No question has been asked more frequently in the aftermath of the tragic death of Aiyana Gauvin. . . . Though some individuals may rush to place blame, others are in despair that such a thing could happen in our community. . . . We need to prevent this from ever happening again. We need to start somehow. And we need to start now. (Klusman, 2005, p. 5A)

In response to calls for action, the community enacted both first- and second-order changes.

### *First-Order Changes*

Watzlawick et al. (1974) define first order change as “change that occurs within a given system, which itself remains unchanged” (p. 10). First-order responses have a common-sense quality; for example, if the “problem” is that CPS and law enforcement failed to protect Aiyana, then the “solution” is to devote more resources to and improve coordination among them. Along these lines, Tippecanoe county CPS received state funds to hire 50% more staff and also made extensive changes in how allegations of child abuse are reviewed; police began forwarding all allegations of child maltreatment to CPS; police, CPS, courts, and schools increased their use of a confidential database that allows them to share information about at-risk children; and dozens of citizens underwent training to become new CASA volunteers (Gerrety, 2005b).

On the face of it, these first-level changes make sense. Although the maximum recommended load is 17 families per caseworker (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005), many Tippecanoe CPS case managers were handling two or three times this number at the time of Aiyana’s death (Sonya Janssen, personal communication, May 29, 2006). Yet these changes focus only on systems that respond after maltreatment has occurred. Several assumptions seem to be implicit in these first-order changes, including that (a) legal and mental health systems are the institutions with primary responsibility for addressing child abuse, because (b) child abuse occurs only in families that are highly deviant, and hence (c) future cases can be prevented with better policing and counseling (i.e., by doing “more of the same”).

There are three reasons why these assumptions are too simplistic to be truly effective in addressing child abuse within a community. First, many cases of child abuse and neglect never come to the attention of CPS (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). Although media tend to cover severe cases like Aiyana’s story, such cases are not representative of what the vast majority of abused or neglected children experience. As Crittenden (1998) notes,

although . . . child abuse is often identified with heinous incidents of injury to children, in fact most abuse is not spectacular, not life threatening, [and] not an isolated occurrence. . . . To the contrary, most often it is minor, recurrent, [and] accompanied by other forms of danger such as neglect and psychological maltreatment. (p. 16)

To acknowledge that child abuse is not restricted to highly deviant families is not to downplay the importance of preventing it; harsh physical discipline, chronic neglect,

and psychological maltreatment can all have serious long-term effects on children (see Barnett et al., 2005). Rather, such a view reminds us that in many situations legal and mental health institutions are not directly involved and therefore cannot be solely responsible for addressing abuse.

Second, it may be too late to prevent damage to the child when child abuse does come to the attention of legal institutions. CPS, judges, and CASA volunteers play a vital role in protecting children from immediate danger and coordinating services from other agencies to prevent the reoccurrence of abuse (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 180), but they do not address risk factors that lead to abuse in the first place. Third, the complex etiology of child abuse makes it unlikely that any single type of intervention (e.g., policing) can reduce child maltreatment. Ecological models (e.g., Belsky, 1993) emphasize that child abuse and neglect are multiply determined by a complex interplay of forces at the parental (e.g., drug addiction), child (e.g., premature birth), family (e.g., poverty, partner violence), neighborhood/community (e.g., social isolation, crime), societal (e.g., belief in the necessity of corporal punishment), and evolutionary levels. From this view, “there are many pathways to child abuse and neglect . . . there is no single solution to the problem of child maltreatment. A variety of targets of intervention exist” (Belsky, 1993, p. 61). Fortunately, these first-order changes were followed by second-order changes that occurred in the Greater Lafayette community.

### *Second-Order Changes*

Second-order changes alter the nature of the system itself. They typically arise from questioning assumptions and reframing the problem. Second-order changes often have a paradoxical quality; for example, reducing child maltreatment may require moving attention away from what brings it to the public’s attention (e.g., child fatalities) towards a much larger number of less proximal and seemingly tangential risk factors. Second-order changes are changes in kind rather than only in degree (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

Second-order change processes were initiated via three public forums sponsored by the Greater Lafayette Community Foundation in the aftermath of Aiyana’s death. Forum participants, as well as others who followed extensive local media coverage, gained a more complex understanding of child abuse and neglect. Wide-ranging topics were discussed, including some that might seem far removed from Aiyana’s case (e.g., infant health care; “Collaboration Vital to Stopping Child Abuse,” 2006).

In November 2005, more than 250 community leaders and citizens attended a “Stopping Child Abuse Summit.” The summit’s focus was to adopt the Search Institute’s model of 40 Developmental Assets that children need to “grow up healthy, caring, and responsible” (Search Institute, 2005). The model includes external assets (e.g., positive family communication, neighbors taking responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior; school/community youth programs) and internal assets (e.g., achievement motivation, interpersonal and cultural competence). Based on this model, the community enacted a number of second-order changes, including: (a) ongoing working groups to discuss children’s health, preschool/parenting/child care,

children and the courts, and neighborhoods and communities; (b) 40 Developmental Assets training for CPS, CASA, police, social service agencies, and family practice physicians (among others); and (c) a new Center for Infant Health, located downtown Lafayette, via collaboration by Trinity United Methodist Church, the Purdue University School of Nursing, and others.

These examples of second-order change differ in kind from first-order changes: they operate continuously rather than intervening only when maltreatment has occurred, address a range of risk factors, and allow families to choose type and duration of program involvement. Underlying these second-order changes is a reframing of the “problem” of child abuse, away from the vision of legal and counseling professionals policing highly deviant families and towards the vision of a network of community groups with a shared understanding of how to support families and develop children’s assets. As the Greater Lafayette Community Foundation stressed in its 2006 report, the 40 Developmental Assets model:

shifts the focus from seeing children as the problem to be fixed to a view that considers children as assets that need of nurturing. The community lacks a common language when discussing child-abuse-neglect. The model changes that, teaching how to assess and intervene to best help. (p. 4)

Accompanying this reframing is a shift in perceived responsibility for the problem, as an editorial written by the *Lafayette Journal and Courier*’s staff makes clear:

Through forums and workshops, it became clear that stopping child abuse is not the sole responsibility of the government. . . . As a community, we need to invest in ways to prevent abuse and neglect, before a child is harmed physically or emotionally. ( “Collaboration Vital to Stopping Child Abuse,” 2006)

### *Discussion*

This essay analyzes first- and second-order changes in my local community’s response to a child abuse fatality. Besides doing more of the same, innovative programs are being developed that reflect a more complex understanding of child abuse and neglect. Still, one wonders: will these changes continue after memories of Aiyana’s story fade? Will they make a difference?

Communication scholars are well situated to address such issues, by posing questions such as:

- How should communities assess second-order responses to child abuse and neglect? As one example, many communities have home visitation programs that target at-risk (e.g., poor, history of maltreatment in their own childhood) women from pregnancy through their child’s first 3 years of life (Barnett et al., 2005, pp. 146–149). Given that such programs attempt to improve parent–child communication, what patterns of everyday interaction should be influenced by program involvement (Wilson et al., 2004, 2006)?

- How do media facilitate versus impede second-order changes? Do their stories reflect that risk factors for child abuse exist not only within families but also in larger communities in which families are embedded? How might nonprofit organizations negotiate with media regarding how child abuse stories get framed (Kirkpatrick, 2004)?
- What occurs when community leaders adopt a common discourse for talking about child abuse and neglect (e.g., the 40 Developmental Assets model) and build training programs around it? Under what conditions do employees (e.g., police officers, nurses) embrace versus resist the new discourse (including shifts in underlying assumptions about families and community responsibility)?

Organizational, political, health, family, interpersonal, and mass communication scholars could help address these research questions. We could integrate such topics into our classes and participate in community dialogue. We need to start somehow. And we need to start now.

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