

Becoming sober—A 'voice' for mothers navigating the child welfare system

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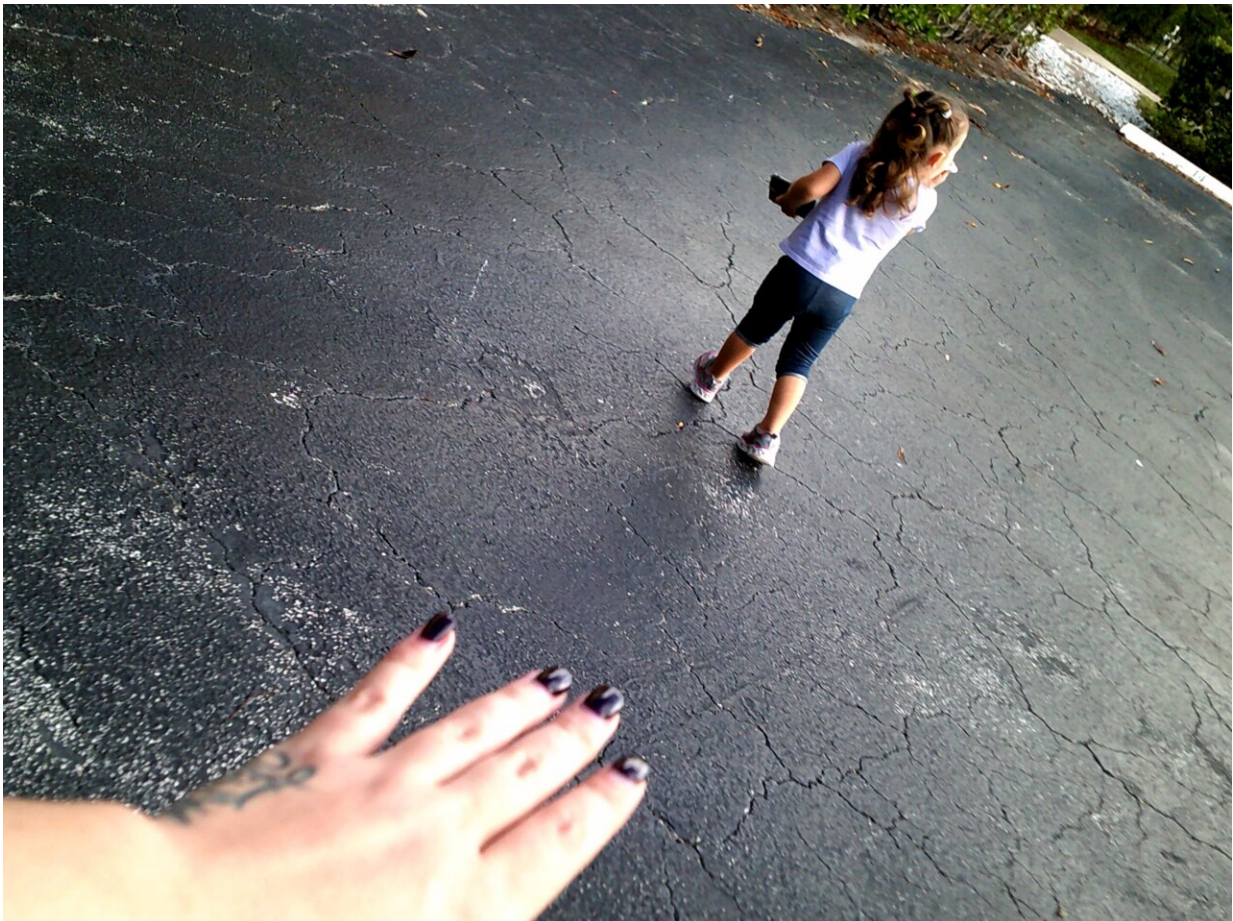


Photo taken by one of the mothers in the study titled, “Out of Reach.” Always reaching for her child yet didn't feel like she was the mom. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

With current federal mandates and state laws, addressing substance use during pregnancy is punitive rather than compassionate. In fact, 23 states and the District of Columbia consider substance use during pregnancy to be child maltreatment under civil welfare statutes, and three states consider it grounds for civil commitment. Evidence, however, suggests that building maternal capacity should be a priority.

Stigmatized and ignored, [pregnant women](#) and mothers with [substance use](#) disorders often are voiceless. Researchers from Florida Atlantic University's College of Social Work and Criminal Justice, used documentary photography as a platform to enable mothers in recovery to be heard.

The study was designed to better understand their perspective and lived experience navigating the [child welfare system](#) and recovery support services as well as their recommendations for societal and systemic change. By focusing on the mothers' experiences, this study helps to understand and inform child welfare practices and long-term recovery perspectives from a critical feminist framework. Through photovoice documentary, narrative descriptions, and critical dialogue among 13 mothers, their experiences are portrayed in vivid detail.

Results, published in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*, reveal a shared perception. For mothers with a substance use disorder involved with the child welfare system it is easy to fail and hard to succeed. Findings identify disempowerment, an incongruent system and the need for relational support with emphasis on empathetic and equipped caseworkers. The emotional jeopardy of child welfare system interactions was described by the mothers to result in feelings of defeat and an increased vulnerability to reoccurrence of substance use.

Nicole "Niki" Tartal, 33, who will celebrate six years of sobriety in December, participated in the study. A mother of two, Tartal is now

completing a master's degree in [social work](#) at FAU's Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work, and plans to pursue a Ph.D. degree to focus on reform within the child welfare system.

Nine months pregnant and living on the streets in Florida more than six years ago, Tartal's road to recovery began after "Dr. Phil" paid for her treatment and travel expenses following her appearance on the show in 2016.

"My daughter who is now 6, was placed in [foster care](#) when she was just 3 months old. She lived with my sister in New Jersey, which required traveling to Florida for supervised visits," said Tartal.

In the study, Tartal details how she was constantly being scrutinized and punished even though she was sober the entire time.

"When my daughter was removed from me I got sober and stayed sober," said Tartal. "As I navigated the labyrinth of the child welfare system and recovery services, no one ever asked me about how I felt. I never felt that I had been given a voice as parent. I was always looked down upon. They just didn't believe me."

The mothers in the study had one or more children ages 5 or younger and were currently active in recovery support services. After capturing and documenting their experiences using digital cameras, they came back together to share their pictures and discuss their experiences.

In their collective stories, they identified numerous barriers that impeded their substance use recovery and reuniting with family. Examples include missed opportunities for early intervention, child welfare system and community practices that appear incongruent with family-centered, trauma-informed, and strengths-based approaches, and experiences of feeling unheard, uninformed, and devalued in system interactions.

Mothers also described encountering caseworkers who lacked empathy and competence and who were working in an environment of high turnover and heavy caseloads. Current child welfare system practices and communication norms often conveyed to them the perception that they did not matter; and from their perspective, in the midst of "getting clean," child welfare system interactions introduced fear, confusion and degradation.

"Given the time intensive commitment of this type of research and challenging life demands, the continued participation of the women in our study is not only noteworthy, it is truly commendable," said Marianna L. Colvin, Ph.D., senior author, associate professor and associate dean of research and academic effectiveness, FAU Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work.

"They had to balance recovery meetings, numerous child welfare services appointments, court dates, work, family, and sometimes disruptive life events such as losing a job and still made their participation a priority in order to share their stories."

Positive relationships with others in the recovery community, relationships with foster parents, and relationships with professionals who demonstrated empathy were all noted sources of support that mothers reflected on with gratitude.

"Our study illustrates many ways in which coordinated, compassionate and comprehensive care in child welfare settings remains a work in progress and suggests multiple implications for practice and policy," said Heather Howard, Ph.D., co-author and an associate professor, FAU Phyllis and Harvey Sandler School of Social Work.

"By listening to mothers' perspectives, child welfare system and community stakeholders including law enforcement, teachers and those

in the justice system can work to improve policies and practices when interacting with mothers in recovery."

Mothers communicated how pivotal it is to be heard and humanized when in a stigmatized population. As it related to involvement from child welfare services, they uniformly expressed the need to have someone believe in them; someone to say yes to them; someone to stay with them.

"My advice to [mothers](#) in recovery ... doing the right thing sometimes hurts and seems counterintuitive. But, getting treatment and taking the steps to grow and to heal to get your kids back is the right thing to do," said Tartal.

More information: Marianna L. Colvin et al, Hard to succeed: A call for social change from mothers with substance use in the child welfare system, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2022.106574](#)

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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