

## Residential care for children: a review of the research

by Roger Bullock, Michael Little & Spencer Millham

1993, HMSO, London

*If residential care is to succeed in improving the quality of young people's lives, providers and clients need to be aware of what good research indicates are its strengths and weaknesses. (p.19)*

This review, prepared by the Dartington Social Research Unit, does more than provide an overview of the literature, it presents a number of research themes examined in the field to date and outlines the major findings. Further it identifies areas in our knowledge that would benefit from further research. The literature is divided into pre-and-post-1975.

The stated aim of this paper is to contribute towards a coherent theory capable of informing decisions about residential care while recognising the context of residence as one facet of a wider range of interventions available to social workers.

More than 100 studies were scrutinised from the UK, North America and Israel. Each study was analysed with reference to six factors: i) history of care services; ii) characteristics of entrants; iii) reasons for admission; iv) client routes of entry; v) goals and regimes of institutions; and, vi) other influential factors.

In looking at the earlier literature, much information may be gleaned, however many of the prominent issues identified in the pre 1975 studies are no longer relevant particularly given that because of juvenile justice reforms most reformatory school clients would not even qualify for residential care. Also gone is the Aquarian optimism seeking the causes of delinquency or universally effective regimes. The basic pre 1975 findings were summarised as follows:

- that the more child centred and caring the regime, the better the outcome for children.
- that different regimes produce different responses among staff and children thereby affecting their behaviour while in care.
- that the good functioning of institutions is more important than its administrative structure.

- that informal structures are significant in influencing performance.

Further effects and outcomes are summed up in the following quote,

'Good residential care can provide children with a stable home and a stimulating educational environment. It can widen their cultural horizons and create a framework for emotionally secure relationships with adults. It can also provide a basis for more intensive therapeutic work. The weaknesses of residential settings lie in their inability to give unconditional love, the constraints they place on a child's emotional development, their inability to ensure staff continuity and the peripheral role they allocate to children's families' (p. 8).

The more useful studies looked at not only the aims and functions of programs, but also at their style and ethos. The complexity of both formal and informal aspects of residential institutions had become apparent but there had been little investigation or appreciation of the relationship between residential and other child care services and outcomes.

After 1975 there was a change in focus in the research which reflected a decline in the belief in the value of treatment and a move toward providing alternatives within the community, with the imperative being to keep children home wherever possible. The point is made that gaps in recent research cannot be filled by the pre-1975 studies because residential establishments have changed so much since the 1960's. There has also been a significant change in the clientele. Their average age has increased, and the problems of young adults are different to their younger counterparts. Further, young people placed in care currently are more likely to have serious problems — otherwise they would be eligible for home support or foster care.

Therefore an increasing proportion of those placed in residential care show disturbances of behaviour and functioning and exposure to damaging events in their lives.

Following the review of the themes raised in post-1975 literature, the study highlights gaps in research to date and makes many suggestions for further inquiry. Recent research has improved our understanding of residential care in the wider child-care system while lacking an analysis of the clients background and needs. Also lacking are comparative studies of different interventions, or the relationship between institutions and the outside world. Mention is also made of a number of areas that, although having merit, remain unstudied. While the authors outline their perceptions of where current literature has been found wanting, they also outline the main findings as follows:

- that many adolescents in care are likely to present special difficulties.
- that there are concerns about risks inherent in social work procedure around placement, especially with decision-making which may aggravate a child's problems.
- that admission to care can create secondary problems eg. stigma and separation which can so preoccupy a child that the original concerns are neglected, potentially overwhelming any benefit that may be gained by being in care.
- that children leaving care face very different problems from those that led to their admittance.

The section looking at theories of residential care points out that no single comprehensive theory is possible and that many different perspectives are relevant and complementary. Four perspectives are highlighted:

- i) organisational theory informing the achievement of environments which minimise conflicting staff roles and hostile resident cultures
- ii) child development theories
- iii) legislation based on theoretical principles of what constitutes effective care
- iv) theories relating to specific residential interventions which aim to meet children's needs

The theoretical gaps are identified as including procedural implications arising from recent legislation. Also more research is required to evaluate particular types of residence and explore the needs of specific groups of children. A range of questions from previous decades are identified which the authors believe require a fresh approach. These include comparison of regimes and styles of care across childcare, education and health settings, and a much wider analysis of outcomes of the residential experience. Attention is also sought for a wider view of children's interests. The extent to which spiritual and expressive needs and connection to art, music and popular culture is recognised and developed. Always a central concern is what represents good practice and how people

and agencies involved in the child and young person's life relate to each other and act collaboratively in the child's interests. A strong argument is made for the need for the better use of theoretical dimensions and more research in residential care.

The latter part of the book is devoted to three charts and bibliographies. The first two cover studies pre- and post-1975, the third covers influential texts cited by the authors. The charts are divided into short and long stays in care and look at the overall structure of the placement, the influential factors during the placement and the effects and outcomes of the placement. Under each category, there is a number corresponding to a text in the following bibliography so that the reader

can quickly ascertain which texts dealt with which factors. The bibliography then has a description of the text and the main methods used and findings made for each text.

This publication will prove useful to students, workers and policy makers interested in the issues of residential care. The issues are outlined clearly and direction for further research is provided. The charts and detailed bibliography are especially useful for those wishing to further delve into this subject. ✪

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## Prosecuting child abuse: an evaluation of the government's speedy progress policy

Plotnikoff, J. and Woolfson, R.

Blackstone Press Ltd. London

This is a slim volume with a very specific focus. It began as a research report, and it reads like one. As a book it has substantial limitations because it does not adequately consider or analyse many of the substantive issues with which it deals. As a research-based report though, it is likely to hold considerable interest for anyone concerned with the plethora of problems surrounding children's participation in court proceedings.

*Prosecuting Child Abuse* is concerned not so much with substantive issues in the prosecution of child abuse, but rather with the dilemmas of implementing safeguards for children who are caught up in the criminal justice system as witnesses to, or most often victims of, criminal acts.

The book provides an overview of how 'child abuse prosecutions' were dealt with in the United Kingdom prior to the implementation of the Criminal Justice Act. The researchers sought to evaluate the impact of this policy through the examination of disposition times and a description of how police, prosecutors and court staff handled a sample of cases. Two hundred prosecution case files were examined and interviews conducted with 85 criminal justice personnel during 1992-3.

The Government's policy responded to a widespread perception that children were particularly badly served by the criminal

justice system; there was a perceived delay in getting cases to court; the justice system was perceived as fragmented, characterised by a 'conveyor-belt' process where each professional participant was familiar only with their own bit; and a 'Duty Gap' was said to exist across and between agencies. Most importantly, the cases could take an inordinate amount of time to come to closure, and the courtroom experience of the children was likely to be harmful to them.

The problem of relating the time demands of various types of administrative action to the actual lives of children is well known to any practitioner in the child welfare system. The adult Weberian world of administration and law is not a place for children, and the problem is compounded in the court system where the requirements of legal process and probity are even more likely to ignore the critical points in the child's life. Children experience the passage of time differently to adults; there is a very real tension between time in terms of children's growth and development and as an issue in administrative action. Timelines developed around management imperatives are not likely to be related to a theoretically informed approach to practice in child welfare.

The 1991 Act aimed to improve the position of child witnesses mostly through

provisions aimed at reducing delay, and by facilitating the more extensive use of video evidence.

Evaluation of the policy was made difficult by the fact that, in the United Kingdom as in Australia, there is no criminal offence of child abuse as such, so it was not clear to whom the policy applied. Moreover, there was no good data on the victims of crime, on how long cases take to get to court, or on child witnesses in the legal system. The major achievement of this report is in its provision of a credible overview of what is actually happening.

Of the 200 or so cases studied, the ages of the children ranged from 1-16, with an average age of 10. Two-thirds of the victims were female, and 90% of the perpetrators male. These figures flow from the nature of the offences (indecent assault, rape, buggery, gross indecency, actual bodily harm, incest, attempted murder, robbery etc.). The gendered nature of the offences is only noted in passing and the opportunity to comment on the male culture of the courts, prosecution system and police, is not taken up.

The alarming finding of the study was that the number of days between summons and court appearance was over 170, both before and after the implementation of the Act. Moreover, the average time