Family induction into foster care

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This paper presents the findings of a study into current induction practices in foster care agencies throughout Victoria. Eighty per cent of registered agencies responded to a mailed questionnaire exploring: the means of initial contact for prospective foster families, information and pre-service education sessions, assessment of families and the ongoing relationship between new foster families and the foster care agency.

Educational strategies are explored and the issue of worker continuity is discussed in relation to foster family retention and maintaining commitment through early placement difficulties.

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Fostering a child is a challenging and complex task which involves an entire family. The foster commitment may be occasional, regular, short-term or for long periods. The children may have special needs such as disabilities or emotional problems, be part of a large sibling group, a baby or a teenager. The transition from interested and inquiring family to foster care provider traverses several major tasks including: recruitment and initial contact; education about roles and services; a consideration of motivation; assessment; induction into the fostering role; and maintenance and expansion of the various tasks of fostering.

Families seeking to offer foster care for the first time are frequently unaware of the extent and nature of services they may be expected to provide. Many perceive fostering in the light of their experience as children when their own families may have provided some similar form of home based care for needy children (Evans & Tierney 1995); others see foster care as an emergency provision for children whose mothers are temporarily incapacitated; some have notions of foster care that are inaccurate. Whatever that understanding, it is one of the first tasks of the foster care agency to provide a correct and comprehensive introduction to current services before families become seriously committed.

The inductive socialisation experience of potential foster families takes shape

with their first formal encounter with the foster care organisation. It is within this context that the exchange of ideas and information occurs which will modify attitudes, impart values and develop skills. Tierney (1973) describes this exchange of information between family and foster care organisation as an essential part of the 'selection' of a foster family, arguing that in the course of these exchanges the real potential of a foster home emerges. He dispels the image of the 'ideal foster parent', claiming that a wide range of differing qualities are needed to meet the varying situations of foster children and their families. It is these differing qualities of prospective foster families that are reflected in the motives that bring them to the point of inquiry (Evans & Tierney 1995).

Re (1988) found that in many cases the reasons families foster change over time. She argued that agencies should maintain a sensitivity to these changing motivations of caregivers and suggested that preferred foster parent motivations be reflected in the design of recruitment campaigns. In another discussion of the motives of commencing foster families, Ryan, McFadden and Warren (1981, p. 195) comment that:

> ... most [families] enter fostering with a primary focus on helping children. As foster families develop a greater understanding of the biological family's situation, they often come to recognise

the extent to which the plight of the family is a result of a series of unfortunate circumstances and events.

Pasztor (1985) warns against agency publicity or recruitment strategies which play upon the idea of the vulnerable child waif, appealing to those wishing to 'rescue' the child from further harm but not targetting those families with an 'inclusive' orientation. Laurance (1986) discusses the selection of foster parents in the context of an environment of increasing demand and limited availability. He advocates broadening the range of people considered suitable to include single parent families, childless couples, older-aged individuals and couples and those who have themselves experienced disturbed or troubled backgrounds. He cautions that the demand for foster parents must be balanced against the need for careful selection and argues in favour of foster care assessment through group work and training.

The task of establishing commonalities of expectations, attitudes and beginning skills across the differing prospective foster carers is addressed by the inductive socialisation processes of the recruiting agencies. The importance of pre-service education for foster parents is emphasised by such writers as Hampson and Tavormina (1980), Jacobs (1980), Norgard and Mayhall (1982) and Berry (1988). They argue that prior training enhances foster parent role performance by aiding in the development of a common ethos and value set and by identifying the support needs of foster families. In a study of prospective foster parents' attitudes towards multiple preparatory training sessions, Hampson and Tavormina (1980) found that most respondents felt such an experience would be desirable. In a subsequent study following such a training program, the authors reported that both foster mothers and fathers found the sessions to be helpful in terms of learning specific child-rearing skills and techniques and developing supportive links with other foster families.

Thus the processes used to engage and induct new families into foster care not only attract and inform prospective caregivers, but also form the beginning stages of assessment, training and linkages to the agency, its experienced foster families and its workers.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This paper presents the findings of a study into current induction practices in foster care agencies throughout Victoria, Australia. A questionnaire was sent to each foster care program in the state requesting descriptive responses in the following areas: the initial contact between foster family and organisation, the preparation and assessment of foster families and finally the ongoing organisational relationship with foster families. In addition to the completed questionnaire many programs returned additional information about their agency and its inductive processes. Of the thirty five foster care programs throughout Victoria contacted, responses were received from twenty eight, a rate of 80%.

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FINDINGS

Initial contact between prospective family and foster care agency

The initial contact between agency and prospective foster families generally begins with a response to one of the many recruitment strategies set by agencies. Many foster care programs found word of mouth and networking approaches to be the most successful strategies. This included, for example, the involvement of experienced foster families in spreading information about foster parenting amongst friends and acquaintances and the regular use of established community networks such as schools, churches and neighbourhood groups. However, the planning and implementation of recruitment campaigns across such widespread community networks was found to be extremely labour intensive, especially when interspersed with specific recruitment strategies for more difficult-to-place groups such as disabled, teenage or statutory cases. Several programs reported that it had taken a number of years of planning, combined with additional resources such as specialist publicity and recruitment personnel, to achieve a slow but steady stream of inquiries about fostering.

Almost all foster care programs surveyed gave the impression that considerable time and energy was devoted by workers to strategies for recruiting new families. Although some 50% indicated difficulties in recruiting families for specialist groups, it is interesting to note that around two-thirds of programs stated that they did not have serious problems recruiting for the general fostering pool.

However there were exceptions. Eight of the twenty eight programs reported serious long-standing difficulties in recruitment. Most of these agencies were in areas of high family mobility, lower than average income, with high numbers of pension recipients and public housing tenants. Responses from these programs included proposals for more realistic payments to foster families to ensure they were not 'out of pocket' and suggestions that families be able to foster children as an alternative to other forms of paid employment. Payment of foster families is an issue which attracts considerable comment in the field and, although its exploration was beyond the scope of this research, the topic deserves detailed consideration elsewhere.

The first contact between a family and a foster care organisation tends to follow a fairly lengthy period during which the family has considered becoming involved in fostering or some similar activity. The initial exchanges of information, described by Tierney

(1973), often take place during the first telephone conversation. The agency is interested in determining whether the inquirer has targeted the appropriate organisation and how this family might be able to contribute to its programs. The person who inquires is likely to be clarifying their knowledge and expectations about foster care and determining whether this is an organisation with which they and their family would like to become involved.

All foster care programs had their own agency-specific procedures for processing such inquiries, although there were many similarities. At this stage about half of the agencies surveyed held an information night; responses were divided between 57% that did and 43% that did not. Several programs which did not hold group information sessions expressed the view that with low numbers they were reluctant to keep interested families waiting for lengthy periods before proceeding. It was thought that keeping families 'in limbo' might discourage them from remaining interested in fostering and their motivation might shift to another activity. It was suggested by these particular programs that their approach might have been different had they received more inquiries.

Group information sessions were conducted in an informal fashion by sixteen programs, affording participants the opportunity of hearing more about foster care through a mixed format of lectures and group discussion, encouraging the sharing of ideas and enabling question and answer exchanges. Programs which ran such groups generally viewed them as separate and distinct from any pre-service education sessions they ran for more committed prospective families, which tended to depend more upon group participation and the use of experiential activities.

The information groups, or in the case of a number of programs, information giving interviews with the family at home, were an important early step in the overall induction process. They provided inquirers with the opportunity to find out more about foster care before formally applying to foster and

committing themselves to a lengthy and demanding training and assessment process.

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Induction and assessment of families

Following the provision of information to prospective families, the majority of organisations engaged those who remained interested in an educational and training program, usually conducted in small groups. Much of the literature commends the use of group education in foster care as a means of enhancing role performance, claiming that it aids in the development of a shared set of values and a common philosophy with the foster care program. Groups can expose prospective caregivers to various situations they are likely to confront through such devices as anecdotes and simulation, and clarify and validate their future support needs (Hampson & Tavormina 1980; Jacobs 1980; Simon & Simon 1982; Pasztor 1985).

Most programs (79%) ran such pre-service education groups for prospective foster families and viewed these as an intrinsic part of the inductive experience. The four programs which only conducted post-accreditation groups expected all families to attend as a condition for accreditation. Post-accreditation rather than pre-accreditation groups were used where there were low numbers and a concern about keeping families waiting for long periods before fostering. Of the two programs which did not run groups at all, one had a policy of preferring to proceed with all fostering applications

on an individual basis, while the other was influenced by the lack of sufficient numbers and did not consider groups worth running.

The structure of the induction programs was similar, although there were some variations in the content and in the educational techniques used. The way in which workers were allocated to the task of interviewing families for assessment purposes also varied amongst agencies. In some programs this was a worker known to the family through their participation in the pre-service education sessions, in others it was not.

Of those twenty-six foster care programs which reported running group education sessions, most devoted considerable resources to them, in terms of number and length of sessions and number of foster care workers and others involved. In addition, without exception, sessions were conducted out of usual working hours, either at night or on weekends, thus increasing the demands placed on program staff. For example, one program ran either five evening sessions or held them over a full weekend, while another had four sessions for families pre-accreditation and a further two post-accreditation.

In spite of the considerable number of hours spent in pre-service education many programs acknowledged that these sessions were still only able to give families an introduction to the range and complexity of foster care issues. Subject areas most commonly dealt with included the feelings and needs of the child in placement, behaviour management and discipline, the child's own, or biological, family and its role within the foster care arrangement, foster family values, the impact of fostering on the prospective family and engagement with the agency and foster care system.

A variety of teaching techniques were used in these sessions including group discussion, work in small groups, role plays, videos, experiential exercises, written handouts and homework tasks. Programs tended to have a general structure for each session but varied this to accommodate the needs of a

particular group or according to the style of the presenting workers. Most programs involved experienced foster parents in their education sessions to share first hand with the group some of the typical experiences encountered in fostering. A few programs also included service-user parents and young people who them-selves had been fostered. These group education techniques were based upon the desire to involve prospective families as closely as possible with the day-to-day realities of fostering before they commenced.

It is difficult to gauge the relative weight foster care programs gave to experiential exercises compared with other educational content in their pre-service education sessions. The literature generally commends a mix of techniques in preparing foster families to cope with the more difficult and stressful aspects of fostering (Boyd & Remy 1978; Duclos 1987; Berry 1988). Most agencies were hesitant in expecting too much participation from families in role plays or other simulated exercises. As a consequence some of the role plays were acted out by staff, a technique which may be less threatening and may serve to highlight certain problematic features of a case unknowable to novice families. How-ever, this cautiousness militates against providing the prospective family with the opportunity for a full '...immersion in and identification with the secondary socialisation role' (Berger & Luckman 1966, p. 163).

Experiential activities were not confined to role play. The 'guided imagery' techniques described in the Nova Model of foster parent selection (Simon & Simon 1982; Pasztor 1985; Van Pagee, Miltenburg & Pasztor 1991) were also employed in some form or other in most foster care program pre-service education to facilitate appropriate reflections in participating families. Examples included story-telling, drawing, and family sculpting as a means of

remembering childhood experiences and recalling pertinent feelings or events, especially those associated with loss and grief.
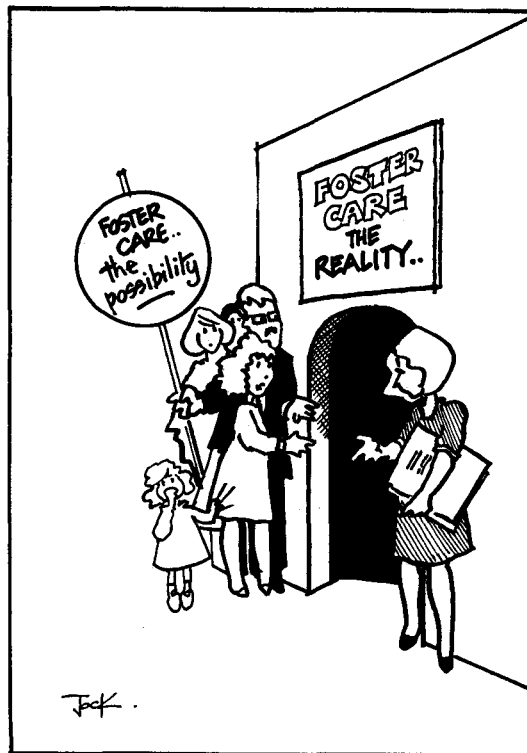
Participants were also taught the value of team work and partnership through sharing ideas and opinions in a group setting, and were required to develop problem solving skills through the completion of homework tasks. Berry (1988) argues that the development of a sense of partnership and the breaking down of barriers which contribute to feelings of isolation and powerlessness are likely to be most important factors in retaining foster families as a valuable resource and in maximising placement outcomes.

All foster care programs conducted family interviews with prospective caregivers as a part of the assessment process. Some did so upon completion of the group sessions and others inter-viewed concurrently with the sessions, as well as afterwards. Interviews almost invariably occurred in the family's home, involved all members of

the household for at least some part of the process, and usually involved two foster care workers. In seven agencies this labour intensive practice of two assessing workers was policy.

Families were generally interviewed at least three times. The content focussed upon family back-ground, life-style, values, interest in and motivation to foster, care of a foster child and specific matters relevant to the family's fostering application. Not surprisingly, a number of programs which had fewer, or less extensive, group education sessions relied more upon the home-based interview process. All programs found the family interviews provided an oppor-tunity for sharing personal information which could not appropriately be dealt with in the group sessions, thus laying foundations for the future close relationship between worker and family, and agency and family. In about 50% of agencies, family assessment interviews were conducted by a worker who had already met the family, either through the education sessions or at the initial home visit.

Ongoing relationship between foster families and agency

At some point in this induction process, through the information sessions, pre-service education groups, or during the assessment interviews, agencies carefully explained the various roles and relationships of the different parties to the foster care arrangement. Relationships between families and workers, family reviews, ongoing educational opportunities and formal and informal supports were discussd as part of the ongoing relationship between agencies and foster families.

In general, the literature suggests that retention of the foster family/worker relationship improves the quality of support. In a Canadian review of

services for children in care, Ens and Usher (1987) advised improvements in the quality of contacts between workers and foster parents and endorsed the need for fewer worker changes. Eastman (1982) suggests that, just as children are affected by frequent changes of social worker, so too might foster parents be similarly affected. In addition, Hampson and Tavormina (1980) found that a major concern of foster mothers was either the unavailability of their caseworkers or the rapid turnover in agency personnel. Whether this stability of the worker/family relationship needs to be reflected in the continuity of the worker through-out the induction and assessment process and on through placements is a moot point. It may be that families would feel more comfortable with a worker who had not been a part of the necessitous probing of assessment. Family preference in the allocation of worker, especially in particular kinds of placements, might also be a reason for variations. However, frequent changes of worker would seem to be counter-productive in maintaining strong support for foster families.

Many foster care programs maintain the continuity of worker for families throughout the induction process of pre-service education sessions and assessment interviews. Few programs however consistently allocate the same worker to supervise placements. In most cases allocation is determined by workload. However, two programs had adopted a policy of matching a foster family with the worker who had done the assessment, a further two rural programs matched according to geography (thereby ensuring the same worker for the same 'group' of foster families) and one program had a sole worker. Many other programs recognised that in some circumstances it is desirable for a foster family to work with the same worker with whom they develop a relationship during the assessment, and they ensure that, where appropriate, this happens. Responses from programs suggest that for a number of agencies matching is a relatively new undertaking which is being tried with the specific purpose of improving the support offered to foster

families and maintaining their relationship with the organisation when not taking placements.

Foster family reviews are also an important means of maintaining a family's commitment to foster care. Reviews involve agency and family in a reassessment of their relationships in light of previous placement experiences and the family's current circumstances. It is an opportunity for 'taking stock' and for both parties to exchange information and ideas which will form the basis of their future working relationship. All foster care programs which responded had some system of review of their foster families, mostly on a regular basis or if circumstances (such as difficult or disrupted placements) dictated.

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The foster care literature lends considerable support to the notion of all foster families receiving some regular and ongoing education (Boyd & Remy 1978; Noble & Euster 1981; Norgard & Mayhall 1982). Ongoing training for foster families receives a high priority within Victorian foster care programs in that some continuing training was provided by all agencies in the survey with the majority offering regular quarterly training sessions. At the time of responding, several programs were seriously contemplating such sessions becoming (at least in part) mandatory for their foster families. Other programs commented that, whilst attendance at training was not compulsory, it was strongly and actively encouraged.

Those programs which reported problems retaining caregivers found that this was due to several factors including: lack of, or inadequate, caregiver support; communication difficulties with foster families; stress; burnout; uncertainty regarding placements; or difficulties (unspecified) with the State Government child welfare services. A few programs cited family resource problems such as financial or accommodation inadequacy as reasons for foster families withdrawing their services. These factors deserve further examination.

Most programs, however, reported good retention levels for their foster families. Repeatedly in their responses, programs emphasised the importance of foster family support and good communication between agency and family, suggesting that these factors are important in retaining family involvement.

Perhaps the most effective potential support for foster families is self-help (Olson 1989), either in the form of participation in their local foster family association, or by the more informal means of casual contact with other foster families. It is noteworthy however that approximately one third of programs which responded did not have a foster family association or support group, although in several of these cases this was not for want of trying to establish one. These unsuccessful attempts appear to have come not from the 'grass roots', that is the families themselves, but from program staff attempting (unsuccessfully) to stimulate enthusiasm and interest.

Of the majority of programs which did have foster family associations, these tended to fulfil various roles with activities ranging from informal support of foster families, coffee mornings or fund-raising activities, to more formalised links with the program director and other statewide associations and representation on committees and working parties, etc. Whilst warning against the inherent dangers of cliques developing in such organisations to the exclusion of others, researchers such as Reeves (1980),

Pasztor (1985) and Titterington (1990) commend this networking approach to community education and foster family recruitment which so often arises out of a strong foster family association. Such an association may provide a formalised example of the role foster families can take within the foster care system and the organisational relationships which are possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Induction programs for intending foster families in Victoria have been discussed in terms of three chronological stages — initial contact, induction and ongoing agency/family relationships. The initial contact between families and agencies is the result of intensive recruitment strategies with some 30% of agencies experiencing ongoing difficulties maintaining numbers. Although the majority of programs offered information sessions for inquiring families, just under half did not. Some agencies provided initial information to families through interviews, while others used the pre-service training sessions to both inform and induct. It may be that individual agencies could economise on worker time by combining information sessions on an area basis, thus encouraging self-selection of inquiring families prior to pre-service induction. Area-based information sessions may overcome problems of low numbers and provide the critical mass necessary for broad attitude sharing.

It is encouraging that all but two programs offered pre-service training sessions for families, using a variety of participatory educational modes and incorporating experienced foster families, service users and workers.

It is hoped that, by providing inform-ation about current practice, this paper may serve to expand the range of modalities for agencies offering pre-service training and encourage the few that do not to either develop such

sessions or to make consortial arrangements with those that do.

Worker continuity is a problem for many agencies. Most maintain continuity throughout the induction process but only half retain this connection through the assessment process and fewer still follow through to the worker allocation stage. There is little doubt that initial contacts between prospective families and workers are potent bonds upon which to capitalise. The relationships which foster families establish with workers whilst they are undergoing their induction serve to support them through the stresses of difficult early placements. It could well be that explicitly promoting the development of such relationships could impact positively upon major problems in retention such as lack of carer support, stress, uncertainty and burnout, thus improving overall retention rates. □

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