

**Making residential care work
Structure and culture in children's homes**

E. Brown, R. Bullock, C. Hobson & M. Little

Ashgate, Aldershot, UK, 1998, 176 pp.

This book by Elizabeth Brown, Roger Bullock, Caroline Hobson and Michael Little is an elaboration of one of the studies included in *Caring for children away from home: Messages from Research* (reviewed above). The study, conducted by the Dartington Social Research Unit, involved a detailed study of nine residential units. It involved data captured over one calendar year, recognising the variety and fluctuation likely in these settings. A preparatory visit was followed by fieldwork extending over three days and nights, repeated a year later, and interspersed with day visits at six weekly intervals, plus contact with staff and children by phone and mail.

They report on the importance of both structure and culture in the homes. Structure is defined as the orderly arrangement of social relationships within the home, governed by its societal, formal and belief goals. A key finding was the way in which convergence these expectations from broader society about how children are raised, how the homes formally stated their purpose and what the manager and staff believed they were doing affected the climate for everyday life and change. These expectations and beliefs govern what is provided and what is done. This impacts on the culture of the home, which is defined as the shared understandings of staff and residents, particularly as evidenced in group responses to specified situations. It is proposed in this research that 'structure determines staff culture which determines child culture, which in turn determines outcomes for home and residents' (p. 134).

Outcomes for the 65 children were measured in a number of ways. Included were the extent to which their needs were identified and addressed, whether they understood the reason

for their placement and its duration, whether education and employment were maintained, and the quality of care plans. With a sample of 18 (2 children from each home), use was made of more detailed instruments for assessment of progress, which have been the product of other research efforts in the UK such as the 'matching needs and services methodology' and the 'looking after children materials'. The study concludes that 'on nearly all these measures, while some children did better than others, they all did best in the better homes' (p. 138).

The research team start to outline the stages involved in establishing a good home, drawing on these tools to aid evidence-based practice. The process is depicted in Table 1 below.

Following this work, the Dartington Social Research Unit is working on the additional publication of a developmental tool for residential units which combines their work on case management with the Looking After Children Materials, with a 'matching needs and services methodology', as well as the insights about structure, culture and outcomes elaborated in this research. Publication is anticipated later this year.

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Table 1

Stages in process	Possible methods
Establish a residential service that, in combination with other services, meets the needs of children being looked after in a locality.	Matching needs and services.
Set out the formal and belief goals of the home which meet the needs identified in stage one, and concord with societal goals for children in need.	The principles of the Children Act in conjunction with roles and responsibilities as to: what, who, where and how? what support is needed? what review procedures are in place?
Establish a staff and child culture which complements the structure of the home.	Use a culture proforma.
Set in place procedures to create targets for the home, residents and staff as well as methods to review whether these targets are met.	Looking after Children for long-stay cases. Simpler methods for short-stay homes.