

Section Two

Today's tough issues and beyond – Coping and thriving: not just in care

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Reversing unnatural childhoods

Dr Frank Kunstal

Coping and thriving: not just in care

Sarah Wise

Therapeutic transitions in out-of-home care

Jennifer McIntosh

There are other tough issues, such as abuse in care and allegations of abuse in care, which have not received specific attention in this issue, although there was some reference to them at the conference. Undoubtedly more will be published about these concerns in other places and later issues of *Children Australia*.

The tough issues of maintaining adequate numbers of carers through recruitment, selection, support and appropriate payment, appear frequently in the conference presentations. Again these issues warrant more specific attention and hopefully presenters will take steps to have material on these themes appropriately published.

Fostering the future

**11th biennial
IFCO conference**

Melbourne, July 1999

Reversing unnatural childhoods

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Dr Frank Kunstal, Ed.D., is a highly acclaimed psychologist, author and trainer, from Colorado, USA, who has worked extensively with emotionally troubled children over the past twenty years. A particular focus of this work has been in the area of attachment disorders and separation difficulties, with special emphasis on children in out of home care.

It is always a bit of a relief to have some guidance and a direction when you are asked to give a keynote or a plenary address. I was asked once to give a commencement address at a university ... to be but one of a few such speeches that day. After accepting the honor, I asked the dean, who had nominated me, 'What should I talk about?' He replied, 'Talk about five minutes ... and be seated.' I did. Today, will talk but a bit longer, and hope that afterwards few of you will say, 'I thought that man would never sit down.'

I also want to tell you what a pleasure it is to talk with an audience that is here because they want to be here ... here by choice. The direction that I want to take us in this brief time is a look at how we can involve ourselves with children in care, with the overarching goal of reversing some of the negative impacts on their lives that have come along with them and into our foster homes.

For our children in care, how invaluable it is to have a family, when the experience of family has been absent, or disrupted, or lost. How important it is to have someone there to interpret the world for you, to correct your thinking, to talk with you about your feelings, and simply to be there ... in both senses of the word, physically and emotionally. What would happen to these children who cannot for varied reasons live at home, if we did not have foster carers? All reasonable alternatives are ultimately unreasonable. Like our orphaned children, it also happens that foster parents themselves can be orphaned by the lack of assistance they receive to address the seemingly intractable issues of the children in their care. We all must face the reality that our foster parents are sometimes caring for children who have suffered extraordinary wrongs for which there

are no ordinary remedies. And then, such dilemmas can awaken in us support, challenge, creativity, and hope.

During a conference on children I was asked about my preferences for patients. I responded, 'seriously emotionally troubled children and their families.' The questioner's reaction was a simple, 'Hmm, interesting.' And it has been. I never imagined that after more than twenty years of working in this field that I would find so much agony and so much joy in work with children. I have to admit that when first in school, I did not like psychology and was not that fond of children either. When I received my graduate degree those years ago, I had two firm job offers: a psychologist in the intensive care unit of a men's maximum security prison, and a job in a residential treatment facility for young children. Not being experienced, I took the job which I felt would afford me the greatest degree of safety, security, and effectiveness. I worked nearly four years in the prison before turning my attentions to working with children. I found that the experiences with convicted felons gave me good preparation for understanding troubled children in care.

Although I had many fine professors, parenting has been my greatest teacher. There seems no shortage of things to learn when parenting. Our daughter Kirsten, almost a teen, made an interesting past observation. She said to me, 'Why is it that when you talk to me I don't hear you, but when you and mom are talking I hear everything you say, even when I'm in my room?' I think it should be known, unresearched as yet, that many of our children can hear through walls, many walls. I can be across the house and saying to my wife Miriam, 'Should we go out for dinner?' Before she can answer, voices

in the distance echo, 'Yes', accompanied by distant arguing and sibling battling about where to go. Can any of you identify with this sort of thing? It should also be acknowledged, for birth, foster, and adoptive parents alike, that we often have less impact on the children than the children have on us. Then, perhaps it is not so shocking to realize that we are much more interested in what we have to say than they are.

I really do not have to tell you that when you parent a special or extraordinary needs child, parenting doesn't just happen normally and naturally, or uneventfully. A foster mother presented to me with a prayer and asked if I would share it with others. Some of you may have heard this, but it sums up a lot of common emotional experiences, so here it goes ...

A prayer for adoptive and foster parents

Lord,
I'm better today, and I want to thank you for that.
I haven't been grumpy, sour, or harsh.
I haven't raised my voice, yelled, or been critical toward anyone,
especially me.
And I feel good.
I'm thankful today.
But Lord,
In a few minutes I'll be getting out of bed,
the children will be getting up,
and then I'll probably be needing a whole lot more help.

We are here for and about children. Children who have lost the innocence of natural childhood. It seems just simply wrong that so many bad things have happened to them. The single thread that is woven throughout their lives is sadly one of pain, hurt, and loss. It seems odd to me that although these children have been hurt in family, the remedy and the key to their healthier lives lie in the healing power of a family. It seems also so unnatural that these children are dealing with complex, abstract, confusing adult emotions at a time in their lives when many of them can't even color between the lines. What must it be like to go to bed feeling that nobody cares about

you? You learn quickly and you become set in the belief that you don't matter, emotionally jaundiced and trying to prove that you are unlovable and thus unloved. What an experience it must be for any hurt foster children to grope through the dark emotional mazes that can only be found and experienced in unnatural childhood. So we have to weave a different thread, one that connects them to a person, a place, or even a thing. It is a process of reversing unnatural childhoods.

I am occasionally asked, by people who don't foster, why people who do, do. And that is an enigma at times for me. What causes a man to say to his spouse, 'Darling, life has been so good to us, we've been so blessed, let's become foster parents and take in some severely emotionally disturbed children who will twist and turn our lives in all sorts of strange ways'? Now, some of you must have said similar things. Foster care at times comes down to the task of dealing with problems that placement parents have done nothing to create. These children come into our homes many times with experiences of family that are hardly familial, and the negativity and pain of their earlier lives come along like uninvited guests. These imported problems are not escapable for the foster family, and they have to have a way to talk about them. We professionals cannot profess that the family should not have problems, or that they are the problem when things go wrong. We need to admit that we know they have problems, they know they have problems, and the biggest problem is that we do not admit to each other that we both know that. It is not good if our caring families learn that they cannot share and be understood, supported, and respected.

The experiences and frustrations of foster parents may make them feel ineffective, angry, deflated, and pessimistic. Perhaps it is just the chronicity of dealing with problems day-in and day-out that wears them down. Perhaps it is that change is often not dramatic, but comes in subtle but profound ways as a test of time. I had at one time done a series of presentations that were entitled, 'If you can't hate the one you left, hate the one you're with'. Perhaps it is just that distortion and shortage of outright appreciation that is

wearing. I would like just once before I end my career, to hear that a foster child has come up to a foster mother and said, 'Mother, I have come to the realization that my acting-out behavior is but a way to distance you and the care that I really need and about which you have so lovingly and unconditionally provided.' Do you imagine that you or I will hear that? But fleeting moments of gain, of redirecting a life, or of therapeutic learning by the child are often the simplest tonics to our emotional fatigue.

I received a recent note from an 11-year-old girl. She had been in therapeutic foster care for some time. She knew that I would be testifying earlier this month about her placement and about her mother's protest for her return home. Here's what she said:

With my foster mom I learned that you don't have to go to school and worry about what's happening at home ... I learned that I can trust people ... I was always let down and it's like, 'Hey, look what I've missed out on ... It's different for me to be a child ... I write poetry, I like to sing, I like to play with my friends and talk to my friends ... I quit being by myself and learned that kids do things like doing stuff with their mom ... Doctor Frank, you can tell my foster mom, 'Hey, the kid's great.' I just want to be with someone who cares about me and takes care of me ... No matter where I go, I now know that there will be someone there who will care.

This is a learning for life, and it is something that cannot happen in a psychologist's office, but in a family. The only way these children can truly recover, and the only way they can learn to live in a family, is through living in a family.

We professionals and professional parents alike are dealing with an archeology of childhood. We see, if we look back, how often in that child is the procession of his family, the child's behavior the epitome of all that family history. In the child's behavior is reflected a mental blueprint about his or her life, an indelible and at times a mean one. In that behavior, as troubling as it can be, is revealed a past, one that is expressed in the present. Unchanged or unchecked, this past becomes the content of developing character.

We had an experience with one of our daughters that originally catalyzed my thinking about this. Let me describe this to you. One day our house was quiet ... eerie, if you can identify with this. Immediately, we thought of our daughter, Rachel. You would have to know Rachel ... with her silence isn't golden, silence simply isn't. We hunted for her, and found her mostly naked standing in the middle of the family room, panties down, wiping up some egg and shells dripping off her legs and onto the carpet. I said to Miriam, 'You know, Rachel has always been a bit eccentric, but you really don't think she could have laid those eggs, do you?' We searched in the kitchen, and there was an open carton of eggs with a few missing. This mysterious occurrence was making sense. Back to the family room, the television commercial had ended and the Discovery Channel was back on – with a show on these birds that were hatching eggs on a tropical island. Apparently, Rachel had thought to herself that this looked interesting, and possible. She had gotten undressed, nicely inserted some eggs into her panties creating a rather unique nest, and squatted. Fortunately, the eggs broke. This was what psychologists refer to as 'corrective feedback'. Rachel quickly learned she was not a sea chicken, with the eggs – not her spirit – broken.

With our troubled foster children, it can feel like we are walking on eggs. Many had pasts in which teaching and correction were not a part of everyday living, and these children have great difficulty accepting that they can and will think and behave differently. In certain troubling situations, they are unused to the concept that adults are there for you, that they can help, and that they can be trusted. Many do not get the corrective experiences which teach and convince them that life is good, that they are not disposable, and that life is not nomadic.

Fixing a child is much easier than repairing an adult. In foster care, this 'fixing' sometimes has as much to do with undoing as it has with doing, with necessary unlearning before relearning. For some children, foster care provides a respite from the stresses and strains and harm of their lives. It can give the parent a needed respite from the child.

This opportunity to take a loving breath is just enough for some parents. But, those experiences I find to be increasingly rare, and foster care is often pre-permanent care, or at least the path to something different forever for the child. Too often the needs of children are suspended while a birth parent is hanging on by a thread, but you cannot raise a child on parenting potential. If we say that we are there to facilitate a reunion, let's do so. If we say that our task is to help a birth parent, let's do this. But let's be clear, and move forward. I have seen few children hurt by removal from a bad environment too early, but many that were too long suffering and thus forever damaged.

For our children in care, how invaluable it is to have a family, when the experience of family has been absent, or disrupted, or lost. How important it is to have someone there to interpret the world for you, to correct your thinking, to talk with you about your feelings, and simply to be there ... in both senses of the word, physically and emotionally.

Because foster parents are faced with such serious and often confusing challenges, I hope you can appreciate my belief that we do foster families a great injustice when we imply, proclaim, or entice that simply this approach or that, this special intervention or some other, is just or only what is needed to get the child past the past. There is nothing so simple about making a difference, and it will not or cannot be that easy. Nor should it be easy for the family, nor without pain, nor without passion. The real healing, the reversing of the course of their lives will happen in a family. You have all

heard that the child will get worse before he or she gets better. This is true, and very often it is the more successful, more proficient family who will have the most acting-out youngsters ... as they have been most successful in striking a nerve, in truly reaching the child at the level of that denied and distorted pain. The family must be the crucible for change. And, that crucible must stay hot and we have to help to keep it hot. Incidentally, the families here must really like this: here I am, encouraging them to be miserable ... and be grateful for it.

I was about to be on my way to a national foster care conference, sitting comfortably on a plane, spring water in hand, reading the daily paper. On came a family. Leading the pack was dad, gravitationally challenged, with a baby carrier in one hand, a diaper bag in the other, and an irritated four-year-old holding up the rear, literally. Behind him foundered mom, a toddler in one arm, a carry-on bag in the other, and behind her a just school-aged child doing his best to pull her sweat pants over her bottom, and being quite successful. It was fascinating watching her pull up her pants without the use of her hands and arms. She barked at dad about their seat locations, and he dished it back that she had the tickets. And all eyes, mostly rolling, were upon them. I ultimately saw them at the conference, and remembered the incident. These are not the family experiences that foster arrogance, conceit, pompousness, or that provide fond memories and stories ... except maybe for others. But in their struggle to be a family are the ingredients for healing and a healthier future for that child, and that is what matters.

It would help the family crucible to stay hot if we realize that the placement only starts at the point the child enters the family. The work happens with all of the moment-by-moment, day-by-day experience of the child in a family. Post placement services must be mandatory, if we accept that we have a different model – a therapeutic, healing model – for our foster families. Many of our children entering transitional or permanent care have been harmed participants in a conspiracy of silence, learning that you are safe and better off if you tolerate and endure, than

communicate your needs. Doesn't this also apply to our foster families? It is not so different for many of them who do not communicate their needs or share their troubles, and so their suffering is unrecognized and unrelieved. Sometimes, I feel that in this planned flight to health for the youngster, it is the foster family that is in the coach seats. The child is the pilot. The caseworkers have deposited the child's baggage onto the family plane. And if there is a destination, nobody has told this family how long this flight will last, or where they will end up. Hopefully, they were told that the price would be steep.

Keeping things hot, but not too hot in the family, would be helped if we all could look past the children's surface behavior and into the needs and hurts underneath. If we could keep in mind that it is the inner feelings, perceptions, and needs of the child that often are reflected so irritatingly, obnoxiously, and frustratingly, we would enhance our success. I have a hard time doing this, and I suppose I always will. In ways, it goes against our own 'natural parenthood'.

It would help and be wise if we generally erased terms from our vocabulary like manipulator, liar, attention-seeker, and whiner, and replaced them with more accurate truths ... like insecure, frightened, rejected, needy, and hurt. It is a great challenge to get past those reactive responses. I wonder how many of you have had instances with your children where it almost seemed that they were intentionally doing everything they could to push your buttons? When it comes to having an appetite for trouble, we find that theirs is an acquired taste. If these children are successful in getting us to become the mean people they expect, demand, and fear we will be, they lose and we lose as well. And it cools off that crucible for change.

We help to reverse their unnatural childhoods if we exercise our belief in the process of change. We should be optimistic, and realistic. You must keep in mind that with the child with a lost childhood, success is a process and not an outcome. Measure growth in increments and you will be amply rewarded. Gloomy, pessimistic

predictions and talk of the 'primal injuries' of children conspire against reversal.

By being a parent, I've learned some things about parenting I never imagined. You see, in graduate school and when I was single, the parenting scheme just seemed automatic. This ended when I became a parent. One foster mother remarked to me at a conference that with my knowledge as a child psychologist she would bet that managing and raising children came very easily. After I finished choking on her words, I assured her that simply wasn't the case. But, I had been doing so many lectures on child management that I convinced myself to get tougher with our two daughters. So, I leveled with them just before dinner one night ... on new expectations, rules, rights, roles, and responsibilities and on how they were to help out and shape up. That said, Kirsten responded, 'Yeah, right', which set off some extended giggling between the two of them. It didn't help that my wife was laughing so hard that tears were coming down her cheeks. They are seated here, and I want to tell them in public that I haven't forgotten that and that was not very nice ... and that they are going to shape up, starting now.

I found a little story, author unknown, that I liked:

As dawn broke over the beach, the old man asked the youth why he was flinging starfish into the sea.

The answer was they'd die if left in the sun.

'But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of them,' he muttered.

'What difference is it going to make?'

The young man looked at the starfish and said, as he threw it to safety,

'It makes a difference to this one.'

It is awfully tempting to assess the foster care problems in terms of the macro issues. Simply the numbers of children needing care are so vast, the degree of their needs so great, and the resources we have so finite that it becomes all too easy to forget that the real focus, and the core of doing what we do, is at that micro-point of connection between parent and child. We must never forget the child.

I want to be with those foster families who passionately struggle, hope, and work to finally do what needs to be done for the child – and then turn around and do it all over again. This is the legacy of the healing, therapeutic foster family. And it is how they change the legacy of those children whose futures had at one point been determined by their pasts. It is how you reverse unnatural childhoods.

I hope that your family crucibles will stay hot. Ladies and gentlemen, that is all I have to say, and now I will sit down. Thank you very much. □