

The wider caring network

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This paper was commissioned for this issue of Children Australia to integrate perspectives of the caring team and its broader social context.

Despite a long history, foster care retains its intrinsic ambiguities. Time and again foster parents, young people who have experienced foster care, workers and scholars come back to foster care's core puzzles – it is ordinary, yet special; intuitive, yet skilled; it is family, but not family; it is private, it is public. While occurring within private homes, foster care performs many official functions, and this core puzzle of foster care is played out in formal policies about foster parents and their work. They are (usually) volunteers, yet paid (at some level); they are assessed in relation to their proficiency in everyday life and child-rearing, yet must undergo training for care-giving; they are asked to commit to short-term, task focussed care, but must expect that the planned exit of the child may not eventuate. Is the foster caring unit a family, or a service?

We can approach the foster care phenomenon in different ways. Foster care may be seen as a set of intimate relationships between adults (usually foster mothers) and children in care. Many of the papers at IFCO 1999 *Fostering the Future* reflected this surrogate family perception, one that is often at the forefront for the care-givers themselves¹. This perspective raises thorny perennial questions about attachment, emotional commitment, and family membership, questions that may arise anew even for very experienced foster parents, when they find themselves in a new or troubled caring relationship. How can we live with this child, manage the attachment difficulties, weather the storms of grief and pain, form a meaningful bond, share the joys of development and achievement, and relinquish a child we have come to care for, perhaps back to an environment and a parent we distrust? How can there be equal

treatment of children about whom we feel differently (Butler & Charles, 1999)? From this surrogate family perspective, the criteria for success are highly personalised, emotional and interactional criteria about relationships:

- Does the child 'fit' with the family?
- Can they abide by rules of give and take in family life?
- Can the family meet the pressing needs of the child?

These challenges may be resolved by drawing the child further into the interior life of the foster family, reducing the possibility of eventual return to the birth parent. Often this is in a planned way for good developmental and protective reasons, and sometimes it is in an unplanned way, for more opportunistic practical and emotional reasons. When the challenges are intolerable, or threaten the children of the foster family, they may be resolved by retracting the commitment to the foster child, or allowing the child's disturbed behaviour to disrupt the placement or become a reason for placement change. Yet, at its best, foster care, understood and enacted in this way provides secure and nurturing permanent alternative family life, and is a cornerstone of care systems in many jurisdictions, echoing the informal kinship arrangements that have existed since time immemorial.

From another, more official, perspective, foster care may also be seen as a social service, a placement of choice, routinely available to almost any child who has been placed out of parental care either voluntarily or by child protection authorities. In contrast with residential care, foster care in some jurisdictions is seen as offering stability, continuity of care, and a normalised experience, but it is nonetheless a part

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of the official repertoire of care options. From this perspective foster families are a resource, to be managed and rationed. Foster parents are seen as accountable 'workers' within the service system. This is the perspective adopted by a number of agency administrators and workers in their presentations to IFCO 1999, and it is often found in child welfare texts produced in academia. This perspective gives rise to more bureaucratic, regulatory questions: the status of the carers; the duration of placements; the appropriate level of funding; the kinds of rules, regulations and safeguards that ought to apply; and the responsibilities of the sponsoring agencies toward the care-givers, the child, the birth parents, and other parties. A major pre-occupation is the capacity of the care-giver population to meet the demands for care². The criteria for success are essentially organisational. Does the carer work well with the agency? Are placements available when needed? Are the difficult behaviours of young people in care managed appropriately? These challenges may be resolved by increasing professionalisation of the care-giver group, manipulation of rewards and incentives, and defining the needs of the children or young people in terms of categories of available placements. Failure may be interpreted as the child being placed in the wrong sort of care, or the care-giver being the wrong person for the 'job', and the child is moved on. At its best, foster care understood and enacted in this way provides an accountable and professional form of care when needed, for as long as needed.

When poorly articulated (in both senses of the word), these starkly different perspectives are the source of much distress in foster care. The key players who together construct this form of care – the foster parents and the foster care workers – essentially march to the beat of different drums. The foster parent's responsive solution to a child's problem may be the worker's administrative nightmare ('I've found this really great learning environment that was just made for him ... you'll take care of the school fees, won't you?'). The worker's professionally responsible case plan may be the carer's daily horror ('I've arranged weekly access visits with mother, father, and grandparents, and

she's booked in for speech therapy at 4.30 on Wednesdays and for the psychologist every Friday'). When well coupled, these perspectives on the nature of foster care have the potential to create a service that is sensitive and responsive while being well organised and accountable.

These two views of fostering are not enough, however, to help us fully understand this puzzling social phenomenon. In 1991 Tierney and Were pointed to fostering as 'an aspect of public life' (p7) although carried out in the private domain, and they warned:

... foster families are bearers of cultural values which do not have their origins in formal political systems. To see foster families in instrumental terms only, or merely as performing 'functions' for the macro society can wash away the significance of intimacy, culture and family organisation (Tierney & Were, 1991:10).

This suggests we need another perspective – a set of concepts to bridge these private and public domains, making room for the intimate relationships and social service perspectives, but recognising that foster care is greater than the sum of these two parts. (Clearly there may be many other perspectives, including international perspectives on the fundamentals of race, culture and power differentials, discussed elsewhere in this edition of *Children Australia*, but they are not the focus of the present article.)

This bridging conceptual set throws light on the child's experience of care, by attending to what Garbarino (1992) termed 'the territory of childhood' – the places and people which construct the developing child's experience of the world. It places the foster child at the centre of an interlocking set of social networks, with all their resources and challenges (Gilligan, 1999). In taking a social perspective, in addition to the relational and organisational perspectives, it allows us to have a wider view of who is in the caring team, and to accommodate the variety of legal arrangements and plans for the future experienced by foster children.

At IFCO 1999 there were relatively few papers that on the face of it attested to this third domain, the social world of

fostering. It seems surprising that this social world of fostering remains relatively hidden when it is lived so openly. Perhaps this is because the social world is so much part of our 'taken for granted' world, that those who write and present papers to conferences think it less important than the psychological/intra-foster family and organisational worlds. There were, however, some papers that directly or indirectly drew attention to this dimension of foster care. This paper considers those aspects of IFCO 1999, and related literature, that help us understand the social world of fostering and implications for the wider caring network, drawing from the themes of the keynote address by Jill Wain, an Australian carer and worker, entitled 'Partnership – the caring team' (reproduced in this edition of *Children Australia*).

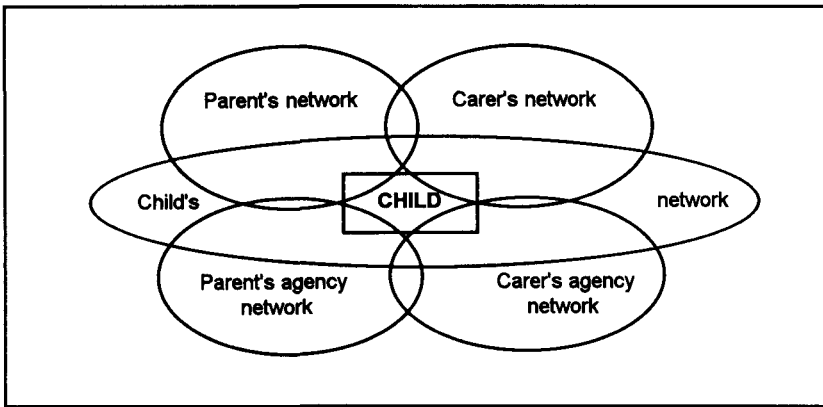
'PARTNERSHIP – THE CARING TEAM'

In 'Partnership – the caring team', Jill Wain addresses this social world of fostering. Through her own stories and those of her children and the families who have used foster care, Wain brings alive the notion of a wider caring team, doing its work through the everyday social fabric of foster family life. That Jill Wain has been not only a foster parent but also a worker and agency manager adds to the importance of the paper as illuminating the bridge between the official and unofficial domains of fostering. One of the striking aspects of her paper is that despite, or because of, these multiple roles, she also speaks to the significance of the birth family as part of the child's social world and as part of the life of the foster family. This birth family presence remained spectral in many presentations, or was regarded as essentially problematic in others.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE CARING TEAM

Wain's caring team features not only foster mother, but also foster father, the children of the family, the former foster children who become family, the friends and neighbours, the foster family's own extended family (for good or ill) and the parents and various members of the birth families of the children in care.

Figure 1 The interlaced informal and formal networks of the child in foster care



Workers are there, but less prominent. In the background, we can hear the rumble of teachers, playmates, sports coaches, friends of friends. Gilligan (1998) reminded us of the critical importance of schools to children in care, including their function as '... an integrator into community and culture, a gateway to adult opportunities...' (Gilligan, 1998:13). At IFCO 1999 this interest in the caring potential and needs of teachers was shared by an Australian presenter, Cas O'Neill (included in this edition.). Again, in 1999, Gilligan stressed the school's position within the child's social network, but he also drew attention to other key non-parental members of the child's social network – siblings, grandparents and extended family, non-related adults, friends and pets (Gilligan, 1999). As Wain's paper makes clear, and as foster carers well know, when a child is placed in foster care he or she is introduced to a new world of social connections, which add to his or her existing network (see Figure 1)

When we pay attention to this set of interlaced informal and formal networks of the child in care, regardless of whether the people within these structures are aware of the existence of the others, it becomes apparent that there are many actual and potential members of the wider caring network. In addition to foster mothers and teachers, some of these potential members of the caring network – who may, of course, also have the potential to impede or disrupt good care experiences – discussed at the *Fostering the Future* conference were:

- foster fathers, or men in the caring team³;
- the biological children of foster carers⁴;
- peer mentors for the carer⁵;
- the siblings of children in care⁶;
- members of the extended birth family⁷;
- the birth parents themselves⁸.

We can imagine many more potential members of the wider caring network. When we consider that not only these informal players but also the allocated workers open up myriad pathways to other contacts, the wider caring network could be large indeed. It becomes apparent that once families begin to foster, they not only bring the riches of their social world to the child, but that social world is in turn broadened immeasurably. Similarly, the birth family whose child enters foster care is thereby relocated into a much more extensive and complex social matrix. Both families may or may not relish what they find embedded in this new social repertoire.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIP

The concept of a 'network' is virtual reality. It does not provide 'support' or 'care' but merely contains individuals and groups that may do so. To convert a network around the caring unit into a wider caring team requires recognition, receptivity, attention, imagination and work. Butler and Charles (1999) present an analysis of foster care disruption that suggests that sustainable partnerships will require us to dispel the either/or dichotomies rife in foster care – good family, bad family – and to try to

dismantle idealisation and denigration of the different families' lives.

Wain's recipe for partnership, assembled over the years of experience, is woven throughout her keynote paper – respect, listening, talking without jargon, and action. She speaks of her efforts to '... build an environment where all members of the team, caregivers, children, birth family, workers, can all feel comfortable to call into our office and make a cup of tea or coffee and talk about how things are going'. But she does not stop at talk, acknowledging that change does not occur if the members of the team generate '... a list of tasks then all sit back waiting for it to happen'... Some of the actions needed may be simple. O'Neill (see paper this edition), for example, in researching the experiences of teachers, therapists, and relatives, as well as birth parents, permanent foster parents and workers, saw a need for tools in opening up communication, and prepared information pamphlets for teachers and relatives/friends, which were then published and distributed by the relevant State department.

CHILD REARING AS A COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY AND A FORM OF FAMILY SUPPORT

Of all the parties to the wider caring team, birth parents raise the most challenges, practically, conceptually, sometimes legally. The first hand voices of birth families were conspicuously absent at this foster care conference. In a field in which tension between carers and birth families is common, it is both ironic and yet unsurprising that it was a carer's keynote speech that gave voice to birth parents. For all the tensions that occur, it is often care-givers who have the most potent link with birth parents. They do, after all, share the child. They also often bear witness to the distress of parents when workers are absent or preoccupied with official tasks. Wain's understanding of foster care is inclusive of birth parents, and oriented to the support of families in difficulty. Her paper conveys a profound understanding of the loneliness and yearning of many parents whose children enter care. While acknowledging the increasing difficulty of many of the situations that now

trigger the care response, and while having herself adopted children who could not return to birth parents, Wain's underlying value of respect and assistance for the birth parents is evident. This perspective on fostering does not assume ownership of children, but asks how people can join together to rear the child – 'have our say and work together in the best interests of the children and families we care for'.

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This position was not widely promoted at this conference, and it is not clear why this was so. It is possible that the growth of kinship care has enabled this to be the care form of choice in those circumstances where a form of shared parenting is regarded as feasible. A scan of any recent child welfare related journal will suggest that many birth families are severely troubled by recurrent mental illness and, more frequently, problems associated with substance misuse. Despite efforts since the 1970s to ensure that foster care is temporary or that it gives way to an unequivocal alternative and permanent arrangement for the child's upbringing, the difficulty of achieving such resolution appears widespread. Many non-relative foster parents argue that for whatever reasons they have been increasingly called upon to deal with those birth parents whose behaviour is more disruptive, or whose cognitive and emotional functioning is more impaired, than the family support approach to

foster care acknowledges. Certainly many of the papers and much of the discussion at the conference suggested that many foster parents do experience fraught relationships with birth parents, or aim for minimal involvement of birth parents in the placement. Wilson and Petrie argue that the promotion of an inclusive model of foster care over the more exclusive model of foster parenting serves poorly those children for whom 'the foster home may well turn out to be the principal, or only, source of close, nurturing relationships' (Wilson & Petrie, 1998: 186).

These factors might lead us to question the thrust of Wain's paper. Perhaps the inclusive, family supportive model is outmoded? Perhaps it cannot apply to the many care-givers caring for children long-term or indefinitely? Fortunately, the paper is not written from the ivory tower of academia but is an expression of what not only a family, but also an agency, has found to work, both in situations of short-term care and long-term care. This is not to say that anecdotal truth is the 'be all and end all' foundation for policy making, but lived experience of this type enables us to explore possibilities. What Wain's paper says to the present writer (admittedly in the ivory tower) is that when one family joins its collective life with that of another family, through the act of foster care, both families are changed, and in turn the notion of family is changed. Form alters, boundaries become permeable, new exchanges are made, new norms and rules must be established. A form of conjoint caring is created simply because the child will, at some level, always inhabit both families. It then becomes a matter of choice – for the families concerned, for the workers and agencies who set up the placement, for the government and non-government agencies who set the parameters of care – whether this will be a dignified, mutually rewarding and socially enriching cultural institution, or whether it will be hurtful, depriving and divisive. A major contribution of Wain and her co-presenters is that they have chosen the first path, and have leavened sheer altruism with reciprocity.

IMPLICATIONS OF WIDENING OUR VIEW OF THE CARING TEAM

There are many practical and policy implications flowing from an inclusive model of foster care that recognises interlaced social networks and pursues a wider goal of social enrichment through cross-connections between families. Several areas emerge from Wain's paper alone: the need to retain a use for foster care as family support; maintaining the focus on the child's well-being and development; and attending the needs of carers. When we look at these implications, it becomes apparent why the bridging concepts of network and social purposes are necessary to expand the intra-foster family and organisational perspectives.

FOSTER CARE AS FAMILY SUPPORT

An orientation to the social world of fostering revives the notion (sorely challenged in an economically rationalist era in the western world) that fostering makes a significant contribution to families by offering emergency care and regular respite care to families who cannot arrange such resources for themselves. This need is felt across many societies, as delegates to IFCO 1999 from the Philippines, the Asia-Pacific regions and Africa made clear. When used for emergency and respite purposes, foster care requires care-givers who are flexible and have a high tolerance of family boundary ambiguity, and who can see the birth parents as fellow citizens who are worthy of support in their own right. The birth mother contributor to Wain's paper noted how she valued 'a chance to miss (my son), making me grateful for his existence and ready to devote my time and energy when he returns' and being 'part of a group of people who really care about me and my son'. This foster care also requires workers who have no clear agenda on anyone's 'side', and birth parents who can non-defensively make use of the care and learning opportunities provided.

MAINTAINING THE FOCUS ON THE CHILD'S WELL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT

Attention to the social world of fostering does not mean inattention to

the developing child, or a focus on birth family to the exclusion of the child. If child rearing is seen as a community responsibility shared between foster and birth families and agencies, this does not render the child invisible. Rather, the inclusive practices involved may facilitate quality child rearing. For example they may:

- Show the child through words and actions that shame and blame do not attach to the parent, and hence do not attach to that part of the self that is the parent. Baker, in a presentation to IFCO on the experience of 'war babes' – children of British women and black American GIs in WW2 – highlighted the developmental costs of denying children respect for the real and internalised parent and associated cultural heritage.
- Model and elicit competence and coping from the child – verbalisation, decision making, judgement formation, flexibility, assertiveness.
- Provide a variety of relationships within which to develop an emotional life, an understanding of society and mutual obligation, interpersonal skills.
- Demonstrate that above all else the child is loved and valued, by a variety of significant people: 'surrounded by people that cared about me and who I grew to care for and feel loved and wanted by' (the child's voice in Wain's paper).

ATTENDING TO THE NEEDS OF CARERS

Given the entrenched family difficulties that lead to admission to care, as acknowledged above, it is a tall order to ask foster families to see their lives as entwined with the lives of parents who are deeply disturbed, socially excluded and failing to care according to normative standards. Most of us do not do this. Wain's paper gives some suggestions by example beyond the usual recipe for training, supervision, financial assistance, peer support, and selection standards. They include creating an environment in which needs can be expressed and outer limits set, allowing a degree of freedom for the parties to negotiate directly the nature

and extent of their working relationships. Some of the qualities that make good, socially aware foster parents – their capacity to get on with a range of people, their practicality, their problem solving and negotiation skills – are assets that can be used in making workable plans for collaborative child rearing. Workers can also strengthen their information giving and support to the foster family's own key supporters, so that they can be more helpful and less obstructive to the foster family struggling with the challenges. Maluccio and Pine (1999) add to this a set of organisational arrangements about visiting purposes and processes, so that contact between the families is affordable, safe, informal, fun and productive. They combine flexibility with caution and a planned approach that progresses at a pace and in a manner in keeping with the parties' comforts and discomforts. Beyond these strategies, though, foster parents are likely to continue to have grave difficulties with a more inclusive approach to fostering if there are insufficient resources devoted to assisting birth parents both with their life issues and with the process of working with a foster family in a positive way.

CONCLUSION

An understanding of the social world of fostering, a world that brings foster carers and members of birth families together with many others to form a wider caring network for the child who cannot live at home, helps us see why foster care has retained its central ambiguities. It is indeed both public and private, and is an intensely personal expression of a larger civic process. By blending the strengths of the interlacing social networks brought to the act of care, foster care has the potential to expand our understanding of the essence and variety of modes of child rearing, and it has the capacity for community enrichment. A wide and blended caring network also contains potential for the interaction of hurts, needs and conflicts, and it is often easier to manage these by excluding the more visible troublesome parties, be they birth parents, difficult to care for children, or recalcitrant care-givers (Butler & Charles, 1999). This seems to

be a recipe for perpetuating a language and ethos of guilt and blame⁹. To manage these inevitable tensions, we may try to reduce the complexity of the phenomenon by restricting our vision of foster care to a set of intimate relationships, the interior of the foster family (mother)/child dyad; or define foster care organisationally as a social service, and try to deal with its complexities by procedures and regulations. Both approaches offer useful insights and strategies, but neither alone nor together are they sufficient to help us manage this complex social institution. A better approach, touched upon but not fully explored by many participants at IFCO 1999, and given its best expression through the keynote address by Jill Wain and other members of her caring network, may be to re-examine the value base of foster care and reaffirm that the purpose of foster care is to enhance, not diminish, the life of each of the key protagonists. This requires us to make more systematic provision for the voices of the different constituencies to be heard, in order to generate a richer repertoire of caring practices that are paced to the participants' readiness, talents and levels of tolerance. □

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¹ Examples of papers at IFCO 1999 relevant to the internal world of the foster family included:

- The keynote address and workshops of Frank Kunstal (United States).
- Paper 38 McNitt, M. 'Processing Loss' (United States)
- Paper 30 Watts, M. & Longmuir, D. 'Hold the torch higher so I can see the light: Realities and challenges of parenting a child with attachment disorder'. (Australia)
- Paper 61 McIntosh, J. 'Understanding attachment through the eyes of the fostered child'. (Australia)
- Paper 82 van der Meijden, R. 'Feelings of guilt'. (The Netherlands)

² Examples of papers at IFCO 1999 relevant to this social service view of foster care included:

- Paper 110 Orr, B. & Bray, J. 'Comparative analysis of foster payments in Australia and New Zealand'. (Australia)
- Paper 62 Nixon, S. & Carbino, S. 'Foster carers and abuse allegations: Findings from a cooperative international survey'. (United Kingdom and United States)
- Paper 44 van Patee, R. & Wadenbo, A. 'The PRIDE Program: A comprehensive, competency based program for the preservice training and assessment of prospective foster parents and adoptive parents, and for foster parent in-service training'. (The Netherlands and Sweden)
- Paper 115 McAuley, C. 'Planning, placement choices and outcomes for looked after children : a comparative analysis of the position in England and Northern Ireland.' (Northern Ireland)

³ Wayne Harris and Anita Pell: The things that make it hard for men to shine as carers – men's business. (Australia)

⁴ Badal Md Moslehuddin : The impact of fostering on the biological children of foster carers: A review of the Literature (Australia)

⁵ Sheila Patel, Jodie Mollison & Karin Henderson L: A day in the life of a supervisory carer (United Kingdom)

⁶ Constance Cass: Foster care research (United States)

Fiona Fischer: Placing sibling groups together in foster care: the sibling group placement program. (Australia)

⁷ Cas O'Neill: Partners in Care: Birth families and foster families (Australia)

⁸ Jenni Rice, Susan Powell, Terri George and Trish Rankin: Access with families of origin: Experiences of families with children in permanent care.

Heather Thompson & Marilyn Webster: Creative models: A Team approach to meeting clients' needs within a home based care placement. (Australia)

Paul Thomas & Helen Jones: Partnership issues in foster care: a comparative examination of contact. (United Kingdom)

⁹ One workshop at the conference specifically addressed this issue – Rolf van der Meijden: Feelings of Guilt. (Netherlands)