

# book reviews

## Grandparenthood

Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan

Harper Collins, Sydney, 1999

Dr Ruth Westheimer, aka 'Dr Ruth', 'loves being a grandparent' and, with her co-author Dr Steven Kaplan, wants others to embrace the role with similar enthusiasm. Their book, *Grandparenthood*, is a highly readable introduction to many of the issues pertinent to grandparents today. Westheimer and Kaplan discuss a range of issues and concerns – from the personal (feelings of 'not being ready' or being 'too young' to be a grandparent) to the very practical (gift giving, financial and health care questions and social and cultural issues of family tradition, religion and education). All these topics and many more are tackled in the frank, down-to-earth manner for which Westheimer is well known in her 'Dr Ruth' persona.

Westheimer and Kaplan see an opportunity for grandparents in an age of globalization and enormous social change to be a source of stability. They acknowledge that the shifts in the shape and nature of families in Western society will mean that many grandparents will find themselves in unfamiliar and sometimes challenging territory. Issues of adoption, guardianship, divorce and death are all dealt with in a way which encourages grandparents to think broadly about the way that their role might develop in their particular family situation.

The authors are keen to reinforce the point that their book is not about parenting. Understanding and accepting the parenting style of a child may be a difficult but important step in grandparenthood. The question of child care and issues about working mothers are acknowledged by the authors as potential areas of conflict or concern. Westheimer and Kaplan are clear about the role of grandparents on these and other

parenting and life issues: 'As a grandparent, your goal is to respect and support your children's choices so there will be no needless guilt' (p30). The authors stress the importance of the special role that grandparents can play as keepers of knowledge of a family's history and traditions. They argue that far more important than material gifts are the time and love grandparents can give their grandchildren. These are the things which reinforce the unique nature of the relationship and provide the kind of stability or consistency that Westheimer and Kaplan are concerned is missing in many families.

The book will appeal to Australian readers although it is frustrating that the authors so frequently resort to using references to American television programmes as shorthand to describe some complex issues of family dynamics or conflict. What is however impressive is the way in which the authors have managed to cover such a wide range of issues without seeming to gloss over any. Lists of suggested further reading are provided at the end of each chapter. Westheimer and Kaplan succeed in showing the potential of grandparenthood to be a rich and rewarding role and relationship.

Reviewed by:

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## On the move again?

### What works in creating stability for looked after children

Sonia Jackson and Nigel Thomas

Barnados, Ilford, Essex, 1999

Professor Sonia Jackson (University of Wales at Swansea) and Nigel Thomas are well known British researchers who have contributed to the literature on child care practice. They were invited by Barnados to contribute to their *What Works?* series of publications, a series founded on the belief that children are entitled to services which are based on the best available evidence of effectiveness. The authors differentiate stability from continuity, pointing out that a placement can provide continuity without necessarily providing stability. Interestingly, they found that the greatest

efforts are made by services not constrained by conventional bureaucratic boundaries.

The authors point to compelling research evidence of the damaging effects of instability on children but there is little on how instability can be avoided. Reports and enquiries have highlighted inconsistencies in planning, policy and practice which are frequently reflected in poor outcomes for children. Among these concerns is the recurring one about the number of placements that children experience and the consequences of change for their educational and emotional

development. It is estimated that around 51,000 children and young people are currently in the care of social welfare departments in England alone with an additional 12,000 in Scotland and 2000 in Wales.

In 1996, Barnados initiated a monitoring exercise of the moves experienced by 145 children and young people. One child had more than 40 moves. The information provided the impetus for Jackson and Thomas' publication which explores the factors contributing to stability/instability and suggests improvements for policy and planning.

Jackson and Thomas state that, while sexual abuse harms children, the instability that can follow is 'just as harmful' for children removed from home:

...the system often inflicts further damage on their development by its failure to provide a place of safety and care where they can stay for any length of time.

Reviewing the evidence available, Jackson and Thomas found a universal impression that 'the whole care system has become chronically unstable'. Furthermore, few studies have examined the child's experience. The literature tends to focus on family preservation, family reunification and the first foster placement.

The authors discuss the influence of attachment theories on modern social work. On the one hand, they can imply that

separating children from their families is to be avoided at all costs and, if it is unavoidable, children must be returned home as soon as possible. This can result in frequent breakdowns of placement and chronic instability. The theories can also imply that children separated from parents need to form new and lasting relationships with good substitute carers. The tensions between these versions of attachment theory appear in discussions and policy and the decisions that social workers make relating to individual children. The authors summarise the factors needed for the provision of stability as well as the factors that contribute to instability.

Consisting of only 124 pages with an 11 page bibliography, the publication is both readable and useful in its capacity to highlight key messages for case managers and those responsible for decisions that profoundly affect children's lives.

Reviewed by:

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## Foster care Theory and practice

John Triseliotis, Clive Sellick and Robin Short

B.T.Batsford Ltd, London (in assoc. with BAAF), 1995

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This book is one in a series on Child Care Policy and Practice edited by Professor John Triseliotis from the University of Edinburgh. Professor Triseliotis has had longstanding international recognition as an authority on foster care and adoption. In producing this book he has been joined by two other authors Clive Sellick from the University of East Anglia and Robin Short from the Derbyshire Social Services Department. They bring to the task a powerful array of experience in practice, management, research and teaching.

Their collaboration has provided a very useful text for students and a reference work for practitioners by bringing together the elements of foster care policy and practice and presenting them in a very readable and accessible way. It relates to British legislation and practice, and draws substantially on the research and literature from the United Kingdom and North America generated since the seventies. It does however provide a clear view of the policy issues and dilemmas of the nineties and makes a real effort to link research with practice.

The book begins with a brief examination of the institution of foster care, touching on its connections with ancient practices, the Poor Law and the French system of wet nurses in the 15th century. It describes the main types of statutory foster care in terms of relief, emergency, short stay, medium and longer term/permanent care. It acknowledges the various routes out

of short term foster care – return to family, residential care, independent living, long term foster care (with the same or new family, with or without family contact), custody (with or without payment), adoption in its various forms. A brief review of outcome studies results in a summary of the percentage of children experiencing the various forms of foster care and what is known of breakdown rates and benefits over time. This also results in a very useful table of factors which may influence the probability of better or worse outcomes. The factors are related to the child, the foster home, social work inputs and natural parent(s).

The remaining eight chapters emerge as a very practical guide to foster care practice. In the chapter which overviews practice, the needs, roles and relationships of workers, carers, the child and birth parents are considered. The complexities inherent demand attention to clarifying of roles and expectations. The use of contracts is suggested with regular feedback and reviews. Misperceptions and ambiguities will threaten the stability of placements. A chapter follows on recruitment and training touching on motivational issues and concerns about professionalisation and payment. Arguments around professionalisation have gained weight since foster care has been called on to take in more adolescents and children with special needs. There is interesting discussion (pp39-42) on the rethinking of policy around pay and,