

book reviews

Away from home

Helen Craig & Lisa Crosbie

Upper Murray Family Care Inc., 1999

It is wonderful to see a book such as this emerge directly from practice. Helen Craig has drawn upon her extensive experience in child protection and foster care to write a delightful picture book designed to help children be better prepared for placement. Lisa Crosbie has brought the story to life with appealing illustrations which capture children's emotions and evoke the everyday rhythms of family life so beautifully. With the support of Upper Murray Family Care and The Ian Potter Foundation, Helen and Lisa have created a book which will be a great asset for the field and it can be easily obtained by completing the order form enclosed with this journal or by contacting the agency directly on the number below.

It is now over 40 years since John Bowlby conducted his classic research on separation anxiety in young children experiencing hospitalisation. The growing body of knowledge on attachment and loss was one of the driving forces which led to the closure of large institutions in child welfare, particularly for infants and toddlers, and which strengthened the case for foster care as an alternative form of substitute care. While less harmful than an institutional placement for young children, any placement which causes disruption to primary attachments poses a significant emotional risk to a child. It has taken a long time for the child welfare field to develop child sensitive practice in situations in which children are faced with such disruptions and to this day there are too many examples of very poor practice. This is why we should welcome this book and no doubt why the author was committed to writing it.

I envisage that *Away from home* will be used in many different ways. It has been written primarily so that it can be read directly to pre-school and primary school aged children and smooth their transition to a short term placement. A sensitive adult could use such a story telling time to gently explore a child's feelings and concerns, and this could be enhanced by encouraging the child to do their own drawings and tell their own story. The book also has the capacity to speak directly to the hearts of adults, including parents whose literacy may be limited and whose own past experience and present situation may make it harder for them to assist in preparing their child for placement. Foster parents and their children could also make good use of this book to share their understanding of what it might be like for a child who comes into their home for a short period. And it

wouldn't do those of us who work in the child and family field any harm to reconnect with this fictionalised construction of a child's experience of being placed in out of home care.

The way the book is written and illustrated will delight young and old alike with its simple, heart warming story about Sam, a pre-school aged boy who is about to stay with a foster family while his mother goes to hospital. His apprehension is clearly conveyed in words and in pictures while Sam's parents are good role models in handling their son's feelings and giving him the reassurance he requires.

Sam's parents accompany him to the home of the foster family and while this no doubt is a situation which cannot always be achieved, it is good to see such a scenario shown as a possibility. The foster mother is initially unsuccessful in her attempt to make Sam feel comfortable and that adds a nice touch of reality. The other children in the family create a chaos which somewhat intimidates Sam but which ultimately envelops him as he gradually becomes drawn into their play. My favourite character is George, the father in the foster family. A big roly poly man with tattoos and a huge truck, George is enthusiastically greeted by the children when he comes home from work, ending up with a child hanging off every limb. It is refreshing to see George help Sam tick off each day on the calendar in the countdown to when it is time to go home. This helps remind us of the value which men can bring to the lives of children, something we are often at risk of forgetting in our field.

Of course, this story ends happily as indeed it should, with the reunification of Sam and his parents. We don't know if they live happily ever after but I would like to think they do. This of course will not be the ending for some children entering foster care. For them there will be a different story which we also need to allow ourselves to hear.

Reviewed by:

Dr Dorothy Scott
School of Social Work
University of Melbourne

[This publication is available from UMFC, PO Box 389, Wangaratta, Vic 3676, Tel. 03 5721 9655, at \$15 per copy.]