

stands up as a means of developing and enhancing exceptional practice, but success comes from a commitment to 'something more than a job', something akin to what most parents do.

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### Getting near to 'Baby'

Audrey Gouloumbis

G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1999. 211 pp.

This novel for children is a gem of a book that, despite some intensely sad moments, has a hopeful view of the potential for growth of adults and children as they pass through the grief process.

It tells the story of two children's experiences when their 'Baby' sister dies and they are temporarily looked after by their maternal aunt Patty and Uncle Hob.

The book opens with Willa Jo and her 'Little Sister', who has not spoken since 'Baby' died, sitting on the roof of their aunt's house.

Willa Jo, who tells the story, explains that, followed by Little Sister as always, she 'came up on the roof to watch the sun rise and ... just stayed'.

She tells us about the accidental death of 'Baby' by poisoning and how her mother had become obsessed with painting 'Baby' 'with the angels' to try to make sense of what had happened to her baby. As a consequence she and the children had lost all sense of time and daily routine and had to be 'rescued' by Aunt Patty.

We hear how Aunt Patty had insisted on taking their clothes and storing them in a box on a shelf in the hall closet, quickly to be replaced with new outfits. Willa Jo observes that her aunt behaves like this not because she has not been able to have the children she desires (as her mother might have explained it) but because she just wants to dress them like dolls and make them look like miniatures of herself.

Willa Jo describes how, despite her best efforts, her frustration with Aunt Patty's apparently rigid and fearful lifestyle gradually leads to more open antagonism between them. Especially difficult for her to tolerate is Aunt Patty's attempts to choose her friends. However, this does not stop her from making friends with Liz, who according to Aunt Patty 'is no better than she should be', but who is the first person to allow her and Little Sister to cry about the loss of 'Baby'.

Life is also made more tolerable by Uncle Hob whom you can talk to because, although he doesn't always have the answers to a problem (unless it is a mathematical one), he agrees 'that is some serious problem you have there' and 'you feel better, that's all'.

The book is full of these insightful and sometimes witty observations by Willa Jo on the behaviour of her family and friends. They become more poignant as the story proceeds, such as when aunt Patty admits to her that she doesn't know, 'the right thing to say to someone who is in such pain, even if she is my sister', and Willa Jo tells her that she should have said to her mother that no matter what she had done, 'it wouldn't have made a bit of difference' (to whether the baby died), and then realises at the same time that 'it wouldn't have made a bit of difference' (what her aunt said because) 'there are no right words. Words are not enough'.

The story illustrates how family members are affected by the loss of 'Baby', but their differing personalities and past experiences mediate the way they cope and change. Aunt Patty acknowledges this succinctly when she responds to Little Sister's explanation of why she would not talk - 'I tried but my voice was lost in sadness', with 'We've all been lost in sadness Little Sister'.

As well as being a powerful description of the grief process the story also points to some of the do's and don'ts for alternative caregivers of children who have experienced a separation or loss, be they kin or foster carers. As such it could be a useful adjunct to the reading list of foster and adoptive carers, and their children - considering that the book is a children's book! (for pre-teens upwards).

Reviewed by: Dr Tony Lunken

### Issues in foster care: Policy, practice and research

Edited by Greg Kelly and Robbie Gilligan

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2000.

These editors from Belfast and Dublin respectively have drawn together an impressive array of authors, including themselves, for the chapters of this very up to date text on foster care. Altogether the book canvasses all the current debates around foster care practice in its various forms. The types of carers considered are the child's relatives, largely untrained

volunteers who are paid expenses, trained and supported volunteers and salaried foster carers. The varieties of foster care includes respite for parents, short term care in emergencies, short term care for assessment and preparation for long term care, medium or long term care and specialist placements for adolescents. Throughout the book attention is given to the theory

and research which has and which might inform practice, acknowledging where necessary a lack of definitive knowledge concerning some questions. Early on there is exploration of the contested value positions which underlie some of the swings in policy and practice in recent decades such as reunification, permanency and adoption. In his chapter on the survival of long term foster care and its convergence with modern adoption practice, Greg Kelly also gives a useful account of attachment theory as it is now understood.

Robbie Gilligan in the next chapter explores the importance of listening to the child in foster care. Starting from the reference point of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child, pragmatic, therapeutic, ethical, philosophical and management reasons are given in support of actively seeking the child's point of view. Key themes are then presented which emerged from studies which have listened to children. There is preoccupation with some biological parents and siblings; understanding why they are in care looms large; there is concern with the stigma of care; there are negative and positive aspects of participation in review meetings; problems at school often connected with change are a concern; there is concern about the future and leaving care is an issue sometimes tinged with ambivalence about the transition; powerlessness and bullying in care or at school affect some; there are clear concerns arising from instability of the care experience; and finally there are a range of issues related to the nature and the effects of relationships with carers and workers. A majority do have something positive to say about their care and carers.

Greg Kelly in the next chapter discusses outcome studies of foster care. It is a useful discussion of the complexities of deciding what outcomes to measure and the difficulties of carrying out the research either prospectively or retrospectively. Nonetheless eight interesting outcomes from research are presented as well as some challenges to common assumptions (p.82). Short term placements are predominantly successful, lasting as long as needed and achieving most of the aims set for them; risk of breakdown in long-term placements increases as age when placed increases and also with behaviour problems; placements of adolescents is fraught with difficulty even in specialist schemes; factors associated with breakdown have remained fairly stable through 30 years of research but insufficient account is taken of them in making placements; there are indications that social workers may be good judges of placements most at risk of breakdown; a more holistic approach to the choice of and support for placements may be more productive than exclusive concentration on the relationships between foster children and carer; 'When it works - it works' those who experience long-term stable placements predominantly emerge as adequately functioning adults though they often have painful memories of being different; researchers and commentators who compared foster care unfavourably with adoption often fail to account for the higher price paid for adoption in terms of professional expertise, the legal threshold and by birth parents who do not want to lose their parental rights. A warning is offered that the perspective of both researchers and the readers of research will be influenced by values and prejudices.

Chapters 4-8 contain some very useful 'how to' advice, again backed by considerable evidence and experience. John Pinkerton, a prominent researcher on issues related to leaving care, provides a chapter on leaving care and fostering. He traces

the campaigning on the issue in the United Kingdom and elsewhere as the realisation has grown since the 1970s, that care leavers are often at a relative disadvantage as they enter adulthood. More supportive legislation has begun to appear in some countries and more active planning and programs both in care and post care have followed the qualitative research of the eighties and surveys of care leavers in the nineties. Some models are discussed for planning and coping. A chapter by Robbie Gillian on promoting resilience in foster care follows.

Discussion of the concept leads to measures which foster resilience in everyday life. These include encouraging talent and skill development and giving attention to problem solving and coping skills. In Chapter 6, Stan Houston discusses the application of solution focused brief therapy in the foster care context. It is recognised that many young people bring problems to the placement which impede their developmental pathway. It is seen as an optimistic and feasible approach to enabling young people to make changes and monitor the effects for themselves. Ken Kerr introduces the applied behaviour analysis approach in Chapter 7, to grasp the nettle of problem behaviour in foster care. ABA entails a behaviour management program in which target behaviour is identified and clearly defined, the contingencies maintaining it are also identified, the current level of behaviour is measured, followed by intervention based on arranging new contingencies to promote desired behaviour. The approach is drawn from the well established work of Martin Herbert and the techniques are illustrated with case examples.

The remaining two chapters address current issues of major concern. The first by Stephen Nixon tackles the issue of abuse and allegations of abuse in foster care. The little available research in this area is complicated by widely varying definitions. There is no doubt though that the impacts of both abuse and allegations of abuse can be grave indeed for all concerned. Practical suggestions are made for avoiding abuse and for investigating allegations. It seems likely that this issue will require increased attention from agencies, enhanced training for carers and practical safeguards for children and young people. The second by Valerie O'Brien takes up the issue of relative care. More commonly known as kinship care in the United States and Australia, it has been an increasing placement practice in many Western countries. The author explores relative care as a form of foster care and points to the contradictory and complex social discourses that surround it. At one end it risks being used as a cheap panacea and at the other, a positive and active strategy, flowing from new decision-making approaches such as family group conferences. The author argues the need for a number of improvements to practice and against the idea of it being seen as the cheap care option. It comes from an age-old tradition as a new departure, but work is needed to ensure that it is an advantageous option and not a destructive one.

The intended audiences of this book include students of childcare, practitioners, managers and policy-makers. Carers and anyone working in the field of out-of-home care will find it a rich resource. It makes a useful contribution to evidence-based practice.

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