

Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care Report from a consultation with children and young people in foster care in New South Wales

Community Services Commission NSW

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The Community Services Commission is described in this report as an independent State Government watch dog for consumers of community services. This report is of the Commissioner's consultation with children and young people in foster care. In the forward to the report the Commissioner, Robert Fitzgerald, says,

While foster care continues to be one of the most frequently used care arrangements, we know very little about it from the point of view of the child or young person. It is also a more hidden arrangement than say, residential care. It occurs in a private home; is provided by committed but voluntary carers; and is not subject to routine external scrutiny - such as that provided by our community visitors scheme. Not surprisingly children and young people in foster care are unlikely to make contact with bodies like the Commission, because of their age and dependence on carers. The very nature of foster care thus leaves them potentially vulnerable.

Over four months from September 1999 to January 2000, 66 children and young people in a foster care through the Department of Community Services and non-government organisations in New South Wales were consulted. The group was selected as a representative sample comprising 4.8 per cent of the foster care population aged eight years and over. For inclusion they needed a foster care placement of at least three months in the last twelve. Forty-five chose to be interviewed individually, 8 were interviewed in pairs, 11 participated in focus groups. A full account is given of the methodology and the interview guides which explored the experience of entry into care and feelings about being in care; the quality of care and case work received and the nature of relationships with workers; contact with family and significant others; changes and their effects; education experiences, leisure activities and peer relationships; and, knowledge and use of complaints mechanisms.

This is a rich report which elaborates on a number of themes identified. The majority of the children and young people spoke positively about the care they received and the carer's treatment of them. Sixty-six per cent of the 53 who were asked whether they were better off in foster care, perceived themselves to be better off in foster care than with their family. The vast majority (86.8 per cent) felt they were always or mostly treated as part of the family. Many expressed gratitude to carers who were generally perceived as being far more important in making things go well than workers, parents or others.

The executive summary of the report provides a representative quote along with the summary of the findings for each of the themes which emerged and which are elaborated in the body of the report. The themes and quotes are given below to convey the flavour of the report. Perceptions of care: "I'm sad I'm not with my own family but happy I've got a good foster family - there are bad ones too". Entry into care: "Confused - I didn't know who I was, whether to be really me or put on an act for everyone. It was just very emotional. All the feelings were intense and jumbled up, but you kept it all inside". Feeling different: "It's

different to being with your parents and if your friends talk about their parents you feel weird". Vulnerability in the system: "I could whinge, whinge, whinge but it might make it worse. We live so far away, who could help?" Worker relationship with children and young people: "You want to feel special, that this person actually knows who you are". Case work: "We had trouble getting the Welfare to pay for school uniforms. They said they'd pay and then didn't". Knowledge of background and history: "I never see my own family. I don't know where I was born or anything". Maintaining relationships: "I want to see my little brothers and sisters. I love them very much. I don't know why I can't!" Participation in decision-making: "Nothing makes a difference. It doesn't matter who you tell or what you tell them". Dealing with changes: "It was sad to leave the first place, I didn't understand why she couldn't keep looking after me and my brother when we all got on well". Education and opportunities: "I miss my other school. I'm shy with new people" Seeking help and making complaints: "It was hard to tell the carer you wanted to leave, even when you didn't like them and even when they asked. I mean, you're living in their house and they did say you could stay there - you can't do them in". A further theme concerned meeting particular support needs. The consultation did not draw out a great deal concerning specific issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, nor issues relating to disability. There was some evidence of placement with families of a different cultural group. There was little evidence of support being given in the leaving care process; where it was present, it was primarily offered by carers.

The report makes 26 recommendations grouped according to: practice improvement; building networks and links for children and young people; improving children and young people's knowledge of and access to complaints mechanisms; and, implementation of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998. It is heartening to see work of this nature being undertaken. It adds to the growing picture and the imperative to celebrate the positives and address the negatives in Australian care systems.

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