

book reviews

Promoting resilience

A resource guide on working with children in the care system

Robbie Gilligan

British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering, 2001. 69pp. ISBN 1 873868 92 8

Robbie Gilligan's new book gives an important voice to an approach to working with vulnerable children and their families that concentrates on what is positive and sustaining in their context, rather than on its defects. The resilience approach emphasises that children can recover from adversity. However, professionals must ensure that any out-of-home care arrangements, be they short or long-term, are mindful of the child's social context and promote their development as well as their protection. The 'resilience-led' perspective is set out in the book's seven chapters, and is exemplified in the excellent case studies that describe the experiences of children in foster care. Direct service professionals are well served by the checklists, questionnaires, tables, points to consider and cautionary notes, that are provided throughout the book; the scenarios, definitions, challenge micro-systems practice and macro-systems thinking about policy and services for children placed away from their families.

Gilligan is critical of the 'one size fits all' solutions to foster care. He calls for greater attention to individualised child care plans that are congruent with the child's development, acknowledge the multiple social roles a child has, give prominence to stability of care and continuous relationships for the child so they can put down roots that give connection, identity and self-esteem. Child care plans too often concentrate on providing a child with a place to live and physical care – especially when foster care is short-term. Yet the child's education, health care, cultural identity, personality and network of relationships – especially sibling relationships – are equally significant factors to consider. These factors form the 'Five R's' that Gilligan describes as the key concepts of resilience: relationship, reciprocity, routine, ritual and responsiveness. Keeping links with family alive is significant, Gilligan reminds, given that the majority of children and adolescents return to their parents or wider family once they leave care (p.26).

The value of school opportunities and experiences is highlighted by Gilligan. It is of particular importance to the Australian context, where foster care might require a child not only to live at some distance from family and key people they are connected to, but also to change schools to accommodate these changes. It is of concern that Gilligan found that a child's educational attainment was not viewed as significant by social workers or carers canvassed for the book. Yet it is the school which, via peer relationships, sport, and other interests, can offer the child 'turning point experiences' (p.30) that give self-esteem and self-efficacy. The list of social and survival competencies for children is an excellent aide-mémoire for all welfare professionals working with vulnerable children and families, and foster carers. So too, is the checklist on creating opportunities for children (p.61).

'Working in partnership' is the new key phrase and aim in child welfare. Gilligan takes the phrase from rhetoric to reality by describing a way of helping that connects helpers and people in need – a way of helping that believes children can be active agents in plans made for them, an approach that believes 'children can do well in difficult circumstances and given favourable circumstances, children in the care system may do better than expected' (p.69). The book is the first of its kind to offer Australian welfare professionals the tools to implement a resilience-led approach to child welfare decision-making.

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The many-sided triangle: Adoption in Australia

Audrey Marshall and Margaret McDonald

Melbourne University Press, 2001. 291pp.

Books on adoption in Australia are rare, so I was eagerly awaiting the release of this one. Adoption is a controversial topic in Australia so any person who attempts to write about it is to be commended and deserves to be read. I read the book as soon as it came out and found it to live up to its title. The authors have managed to present in the main a balanced overview of the major aspects of pre- and post-adoption for all key players: the birth parents and their

families, the adoptees, both local and intercountry, the adoptive parents and their families, and the bureaucracy. The over 100-year-old history of adoption in Australia is told from the perspective of the two authors who, as social workers of long standing, have experienced significant evolutionary periods in the adoption culture in Australia. Information from New South Wales is used as a central point of reference, but work from around the globe is referred to.