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 check-list 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.

Reviewed by:

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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.

The book is divided into twelve chapters with each chapter covering a particular aspect. Starting with an honest examination of Australia's love-hate relationship with adoption, the text flows easily into a chapter on adoption legislation in the context of the 'child's best interest' philosophy. The stories of birth mothers and birth fathers follow in separate chapters. The chapter on birth fathers is aptly titled 'the Shadowy Fathers', as thus far little has been written about or heard from them. Separate chapters are also assigned to the stories of adoptive parents and adoptive families, each giving some insight into how the change in emphasis in portrayal of adoption, from child saving to child stealing, can have a negative effect on the sense of worth and wellbeing of adoptive parents and families. The story of adopted persons, their experience of being adopted and reconnecting with the birth family are covered in the last chapters. Although the authors present the book as being mainly about the adoption of Caucasian infants by approved Caucasian couples with the consent of the birth parents, a quarter of the chapters deals with other children, namely those of Australian indigenous descent, those with special needs and those born outside Australia. The adoption of children with special needs and intercountry adoption are developments of the last few decades. Both these chapters show in a positive way how the growing acceptance of the view that all children have the right to grow up in a safe and secure family environment has led to significant increases in these types of adoptions.

My only disappointment with the book is the chapter on Indigenous Adoptions, where in my opinion the lines between adoption and fostering become blurred. The authors correctly state that it is unknown how many children of indigenous descent in Australia were adopted, but fail to point out that the overwhelming majority of the thousands of children of indigenous descent in the substitute care system were placed in segregated camps, institutions, bonded labour and foster care, not in adoptive families. The authors' apparent failure to closely examine original indigenous adoption research material also make them repeat a misleading 95% adoption breakdown rate, thus perpetuating the myth that adoption of children of indigenous descent by non-indigenous parents was (and is) doomed to fail.*

Not only does this myth affect children of indigenous descent, it also continues to feed the anti-transethnic and intercountry adoption lobby and to provide cultural apologists with an excuse for the drift in care of children for whom an ethnic consistent placement cannot readily be found. How can the authors reconcile this position with their seemingly positive

attitudes towards transethnic placements expressed in the chapter on intercountry adoption? I can only conclude that on the extremely sensitive topic of indigenous adoptions, the authors decided to bow to political correctness, in what is otherwise a fine piece of adoption literature.

The authors offer a glimmer of hope in the final part of the chapter where they critically examine the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, quoting Justice Chisholm's statement that:

...the underlying error was to use children as an instrument of policy, ... we risk making the same error if we use children as instruments of a different policy. On this view, it would be a mistake to move from a policy of removing children (regardless of the impact on children) to a policy of keeping them with their families (regardless of the impact on children) (p. 170).

My hope, that the book would offer enough weight to encourage the adoption pendulum back to the middle, was largely met with the authors' call for adoption to be seen as a viable permanent care option for those children who could not grow up with their birth parents. They encapsulated it well with their final words:

If ... we want to make the lot of children brighter and better, then in the struggle to obtain those optimum placements for children in need of families, we cannot just discard from the choices such a tried and proven alternative as adoption (p.256).

* The statistic is based on a clinical sample of 55 subjects, which include children and birthparents who, over a period of 8 years, had contacted the South Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in regard to placement in non-indigenous families. '... 52 (of the subjects) were experiencing or had experienced severe emotional stress and disturbance' (Ashkam, 1985, 'Aboriginal health issues, our children and the bureaucracy', Second National Women's Health Conference, Adelaide, pp. 30-35). Reportedly, only 3 cases of this sample involved actual adoption (Pers. Com. de Souza, 1991). Unpublished adoption research in Western Australia by S. Peterson (1998) did not find supporting evidence for the purported nationwide 95% failure rate.

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RESPONSE TO REVIEW FROM AUDREY MARSHALL AND MARGARET MCDONALD

Trudy Rosenwald sent a copy of her review to Audrey Marshall and Margaret McDonald and received the following response which, after obtaining permission from the authors, she has submitted for publication with a view to encouraging open and honest dialogue on adoption in Australia.

We are pleased that you consider the book to be 'a fine piece of adoption literature' and of course we are sorry that you were disappointed in the chapter relating to the adoption of indigenous children. Maggie and I have carefully

considered your comments and re-read the chapter with those comments in mind. We would be sorry if your belief that the chapter's recording of unhappy adoption outcomes for indigenous children into non-indigenous families will add to