

# book reviews

## Safe Contact? Children in permanent placement and contact with birth relatives

Catherine Macaskill

Russell House Publishing Ltd, Lyme Regis, UK, 2002

Catherine Macaskill is a freelance social work researcher, writer and trainer from the UK. Her groundbreaking publications, *Against the Odds: Adopting Children with Disabilities* (1985) and *Adopting or Fostering a Sexually Abused Child* (1991), have had enormous influence on best practice in placing children with complex care and behavioural needs with adoptive or permanent foster families.

In this book she begins to unravel the complexities and risks associated with the recent (at least in the UK) trend in permanent family placement, including adoption, to maintain direct contact (more commonly known in Australia as access) between children and members of their birth family.

Using data from interviews with permanent care parents, social workers and the children and young people themselves, she provides detailed insights into the positive outcomes and risks of direct contact, and proposes 'a guide to good practice on face-to-face contact in permanent placements'.

The data sources for Macaskill's research are impressive, if not complete because of the lack of the views of birth family members involved in the contact<sup>1</sup>. The study took three years to complete and included interviews with 52 families caring for 77 children; with social workers of 24 families caring for, or who had previously cared for, 29 children; and with 37 children, including 2 from disrupted placements. All the children concerned had been aged 4 years or more when placed (unless one older child had a sibling under 4); had been in placement between 6 months and 9 years; and had had at least one face-to-face contact with a birth relative.

Eighty-six adoption and 20 long term or permanent fostering placements were included, with 11 adoption and 2 fostering placements having disrupted. Sixty-three children had contact with one or both birth parents, the rest with siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, sibling contact being the most frequent at 79 children. Some children were in contact with as many as 6 birth relatives. Efforts were made with varying success to include black children, resulting in the inclusion of 13 children from a minority ethnic background in the sample.

All interviews with carers and children were face-to-face; some with social workers were by telephone. The social workers were interviewed as proxies for caregivers who declined to be involved in the study.

After describing the background to her research and its methodology, Macaskill presents her findings under the

themes of preparation for contact; making, supporting and reviewing contact plans; the impact of contact and its aftermath on children, carers and the viability of the placement; and issues specific to contact between siblings. These are interwoven with the views of children as well as there being a chapter devoted to the views of the children only.

The inclusion of the views of children, including children with disabilities, is becoming more common in service evaluation and research, and this book makes a worthy additional contribution to such work (see also *Adoptive Children Speaking*<sup>2</sup> and *Two Way Street*<sup>3</sup>). Recent work in Victoria with the inclusion of children in the Child Protection Client and Family Survey, and the increasingly influential consultations with young people through the 'Face to Face' process demonstrate the importance of listening to children. Certainly Macaskill reports that:

Many children made an overwhelming plea for their voice to be heard in all decision making about contact and for professional decisions to be fully explained to them.

This plea is challenging for social workers, especially if children express a wish for increased contact in situations that clearly will exacerbate previous damage to the child. Nevertheless, good practice in working with children requires this sort of openness and we are reminded early on in the book that life story work is an excellent way of discussing sensitive issues with children and the importance of allowing social workers the time and resources to carry out this essential work.

The chapter on contact between siblings highlights the complexity of this area. It has been recognised in the UK, Australia and elsewhere that entry to care often means that siblings are separated and may lose touch, and that this is an area that until recently has not been sufficiently addressed by out-of-home care systems. It is generally accepted that in most situations siblings should live together, and if this is not feasible, contact between them is a potential protective factor in their development. The organisation and management of such contact in permanent family placement is always going to be a challenge and Macaskill identifies many areas where difficulties may arise, such as maintenance of confidentiality, especially when siblings in and out of care are meeting differing attitudes to the contact between caregiving families,

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, C., Beckford, V., Lowe, N. and Murch, M (1999), *Adopted Children Speaking*, British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, London.

<sup>3</sup> *Two Way Street*, Video, Handbook and Video Guide on communicating with disabled children., written by Ruth Marchant and Ro Gordon, produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation – Triangle, March 2001.

<sup>1</sup> A recent paper includes the views of birth parents: Neil, E (2002) 'Contact after adoption: the role of agencies in making and supporting plans', *Adoption and Fostering*, Vol. 26, No 1, pp. 25-37.

and dysfunctional or abusing behaviour patterns being repeated during access.

Another key chapter on 'preparation and planning for contact' discusses the importance of written agreements. Macaskill concludes that these should not only be explicit about the practicalities of arranging contact, but also include a review system to facilitate changes if the children's safety is compromised and to allow for their changing needs and views about access as they mature and develop.

The final chapter raises perhaps the most important message of this work – that finding an alternative family to care for a child permanently is not the end of the work but the beginning of a new phase in a process that needs to be sustained into adulthood. Post placement and post adoption support for carers to manage behavioural and attachment issues has been recognised as vital in many cases. This work demonstrates that if new parents are also going to be able to sustain, supervise, review and support children's contact with their birth family for many years, at times they are going to require additional significant post placement and post legalisation resources.

Overall Macaskill has single-handedly collected and clearly presented an enormous amount of rich data. It is sometimes difficult to discern whether the data originates from interviews with caregivers and children, or from social workers making 'after the event' assessments of what may have contributed to placement difficulties or breakdowns. Despite this she has managed to convey key findings in an organised and eminently readable way, enhanced by the inclusion at the end of each chapter of a comprehensive summary of the key conclusions.

The applicability of these findings and the proposed good practice guide to the Australian context will vary between states with their different legal mandates and policy stances on permanent family placement.

In Victoria children who have been subject to child protection intervention and need permanent placement are placed with a view to a Permanent Care Order under the Children and Young Persons Act 1989, rather than adoption. However, workers and Courts in Victoria continue to struggle with many of the issues identified in this book. The insight and guidance provided is already beginning to inform some aspects of practice in Victoria and certainly complements the knowledge and practice wisdom that has been gained over a longer period than in the UK during which it has been the practice in permanent family placement to encourage direct contact between children and their birth family.

It is interesting to note that the theoretical basis for the promotion of contact in adoption and permanent fostering in the UK, detailed by Macaskill on page 4, differs in one significant aspect from those articulated in Australia, or at least Victoria. In the UK the rationale for contact is entirely child centred (even if the practice does not always follow the logic of this stance). It is seen as the child's right to have knowledge of their family of origin in order to form a solid personal and social identity, not to feel guilty about their situation and to know of the continued interest in their welfare by members of their birth family. In Victoria consideration is also given to the rights and needs of the birth family, particularly the birth parents. This can lead to advocacy in favour of levels of direct contact in permanent care that would not be countenanced in adoption placements in the UK or elsewhere.

It is a sobering thought, highlighted in the *Foreword* to the book, that this recent social work practice (that some might call a fad or fashion), as with many others, is based on very limited evaluation of its long-term benefits. This is unfortunate as much experience and practice wisdom about access has been gained in Australia over many years, with apparently little attempt to evaluate outcomes or disseminate knowledge. Instead we rely on overseas research such as Macaskill's to provide the evidence base to practice. Let us hope that the burgeoning alliance between academics and practitioners to develop a coordinated child welfare research agenda in Australia, promoted at the recent Association of Children's Welfare Agencies Conference in Sydney, and to be featured in a future edition of *Children Australia*, includes the area of good practice in permanent placement as one of its priorities. There is no template for best practice in all circumstances. What is needed is evidence, based on sound research, about what works, for which children and in what circumstances.

Macaskill's insight and clarity has once again succeeded in capturing the essence, and succinctly describing the dilemmas involved in making decisions and planning access in permanent placements. Decisions need to be based on an understanding of the purpose of contact in relation to the long term development of the child, and what is feasible for the various players to manage, given their range of motivations, emotional maturity, level of 'generosity of spirit' and the availability of support at times of crisis. These decisions will always be about 'the least detrimental alternative', but require the well constructed and evidence-based guidance for case planners and practitioners that this book provides.

Reviewed by:

Dr Tony Lunken

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### **Domestic violence in Australia: The legal response**

Renate Alexander

The Federation Press, 3rd edition, 2002

**R**enate Alexander's 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Domestic Violence in Australia: The Legal Response* continues the tradition set by the earlier editions which provided straightforward, concise and easy to follow legal advice for those dealing with

domestic violence. The new edition updates the Federal and State remedies, and provides an array of useful contacts and other sources of support for those for whom a legal remedy is inappropriate or insufficient.