The importance of parents in the lives of children in the care system

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Research to date has found that natural parents may be an important source of identity and support for children in and young people leaving out-of-home care. There has, however, been limited research on natural parents themselves, both internationally and in Australia.

This paper provides a justification for a research focus on parents, documents what is known from research to date, highlights current issues for parents and their children in out-of-home care, and concludes by identifying future research priorities in the area. The paper calls for recognition of the need to maintain positive links between natural family members in order to ensure best practice outcomes for children and young people in care.

In contemporary Australian child protection practice, an emphasis on prevention and family support means that removal of children into care is a last resort option with the objective, in the short term at least, of restoration to the care of natural families wherever possible. Clearly, in such circumstances, parental involvement in planning and decision making, and continuing contact between parents and children in care, are considered desirable in order to facilitate the achievement of restoration (Community Services Commission, 1999).

Moreover, where restoration is not possible (or not yet possible), and longer term or permanent placement is indicated, continuing contact and natural family involvement is recommended, not only in order to maintain significant relationships and important cultural connections, but also to help sustain placements and contribute to stability (Barnardos Australia, 2003). Indeed, studies of children and young people leaving out-of-home care indicate that, for many, natural families are important in the positive formation of identity and lifelong family connections and supports (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996).

In light of these perspectives, it is perhaps surprising that little attention has been given to research or to the exposition of practice theory on skilled work with parents of children in care. While the needs of children are the prime and central focus of concern in the out-of-home care field, nonetheless there is a need to recognise the significance of parents for children's development and long term outcomes. As a recent UK report into the death of a child from the effects of harm notes,

> it is not possible to separate the protection for a child from wider support for families. The needs of the child and his or her family are often inseparable (Laming, 2003, p. 7).

Clearly, then, there is a *prima facie* case for a focus on working with parents of children in out-of-home care to be included in the evolving research agenda in child welfare.

WHAT WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH

Research with a focus on parents with children in care is in rather short supply both internationally and, in particular, in Australia. Of the research with parents that has been undertaken, much has centred on the pre-care or early in-

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care stages, such as family support and preservation (Scott & O'Neil, 1996; Maluccio, Ainsworth & Thoburn, 2000), child protection investigation and family separation (Fernandez, 1996; MacKinnon, 1998), and – with less of a focus on parents *per se* – family reunification (Maluccio, Ainsworth & Thoburn, 2000).

Overall, very little research has focused on parents with children in long term care apart from a spate of studies in the 1970s and early 1980s (Jenkins & Norman, 1972, 1975; Thorpe, 1974; Aldgate, 1976; Rowe, Cain, Hundleby & Keane, 1984). In recent years, however, the 1989 UK Children Act has prompted research attention to working in partnership with families (Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997; Thoburn, 1999) and on maintaining connections between children in permanent foster care (or adoption) and their birth and pre-care families (Argent, 2002). Similar recent research in the USA has explored the experience of maintaining family connections in open adoption (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998).

Australian research on parents with children in long term care is particularly sparse, the most notable contribution being the investigation by Fernandez (1996) which combines a quantitative outcome study of children entering care with attention to giving voice to biological parents. Cas O'Neill's study of the support needs of stakeholders in permanent placements also explores the perceptions and experiences of birth parents as well as permanent carers (O'Neill, 1999).

With regard to Indigenous Australian parents of children in care, the *Bringing Them Home* Report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 1997) provides extensive qualitative evidence of the impact of historical family separation on biological parents, extended families and their communities. This is reinforced in the SNAICC (2002) Report, *Through Young Black Eyes*.

By contrast, the long term outcomes for non-Indigenous Australian parents of children in care remain un-researched and largely invisible within the child welfare field. Current research in allied areas, for example, with women who lost children to adoption, may indicate important research questions to be pursued in future studies of parents who have lost children into the care system.

In summarising what we know from research about parents with children in care, plainly much of what we don't know will become readily apparent.

WHO ARE THE PARENTS OF CHILDREN IN CARE?

Overwhelmingly, research studies to date have identified social and economic deprivation as a major characteristic of parents with children in care (Millham, Bullock, Hosie & Haak, 1986; Fernandez, 1996; Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997, MacKinnon, 1998; Tregeagle, 1985). While in other respects there may be important differences among parents, the centrality of limited resources and limited support

inevitably has implications for work with parents, although to date this has not been a major focus of research study in Australia.

In the Australian context a second notable characteristic is the over-representation of children in care from Indigenous Australian families (Dodson, 1999). In consequence it is likely that present day racism may be a significant factor affecting the lives of many Indigenous parents of children currently in care, as Masson, Harrison and Pavlovic (1997) found for parents of black children in their UK study. Furthermore, the legacy of the 'Stolen Generations' inevitably shapes Indigenous parents' interactions with the child welfare system (Pearson, 2001), notwithstanding the endorsement (at least in principle) of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and the existence of Aboriginal Child Care Agencies (SNAICC, 2002).

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Other characteristics which have been found in some studies to have a high prevalence among parents with children in care are a background of domestic violence (Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997), problematic alcohol and drug use (Tomison, 1996; Ainsworth & Summers, 2001), mental illness and developmental disabilities (Fernandez, 1996), and young motherhood, particularly among young women in care or recent care alumni (Rutman, Strega, Callahan & Dominelli, 2002).

Other characteristics identified by practitioners, but yet to be documented systematically, are parents' own childhood experiences of abuse and/or being in care, and the realities of mothering and working class family life (Thorpe, 1996; Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997; Mackinnon, 1998; Featherstone, 1999).

While over 50% of children enter care from female-headed single-parent families (Fernandez, 1996; Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997), not infrequently this results from a mother's difficulty in protecting children from a male partner's abusive behaviour – a male who often is not engaged with by the child protection system (Milner, 1993; Thorpe, 1996; MacKinnon, 1998; Featherstone, 2001). Plainly, gender issues should be central to any research agenda for parents with children in care, especially since

gender-blindness and mother-blaming may be discerned in much of the child abuse literature (Thorpe, 1996).

One further point must be made about characteristics identified in research of parents with children in care. Rarely are such parents found to have been essentially abusive or neglectful. Thus, while behaviour causing significant harm must be challenged, at the same time parents' strengths can be recognised and harnessed as a foundation for change (Fernandez, 1996; MacKinnon, 1998; Callahan, 2000).

HOW PARENTS EXPERIENCE FAMILY SEPARATION

Without exception the major studies of parents with children in care identify loss as a dominant experience with far reaching implications (Jenkins & Norman, 1972; Thorpe, 1974; Aldgate, 1976; Fernandez, 1996). Indeed, Jenkins and Norman coined the term 'filial deprivation' to describe the effect of loss of a child into care. As Burgheim (2002) suggests, working with loss and grief is a central part of practice with parents of children in care although, as yet, this approach to practice has not been the focus of systematic research. What Thorpe (1993) has suggested from practice experience is that grief reactions, particularly of depression, may be misinterpreted by workers as disengagement and lack of interest. Moreover, the perspective of loss is likely to be of relevance not only in the early months following removal of children into care. Studies with women who lost children to adoption (Rickarby, 2002), or to the 'Stolen Generations' (HREOC, 1997), document how un-resolvable grief following loss of a child (who is still alive somewhere) can develop over the years into post-traumatic stress disorders with major long-term distressing and dysfunctional sequelae. Perhaps with this in mind, Maluccio, Ainsworth and Thoburn identify 'outcome patterns for parents of children who come to the attention of the child welfare system' as an area warranting research attention (2000, p.108).

Certainly, research indicates that attention to the needs of parents themselves is a necessary part of work to promote the well being of children in care (Fernandez, 1996), particularly in terms of identity and maintaining family connections, both of which are key aspects of the *Looking After Children* (LAC) protocols that are now quite widely used in Australia (Cheers, 2002).

HOW PARENTS EXPERIENCE THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Research with parents to date has documented widespread experiences of powerlessness and exclusion in relation to child welfare systems, leading to anger or withdrawal (fight or flight) reactions (Thorpe, 1974; Jenkins & Norman, 1975; Fernandez, 1996; MacKinnon, 1998). Even in the UK, where partnership with parents is mandated under the 1989 Children Act, facilitation of participation has been less than

optimal and at times tokenistic (Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997; Thoburn, 1999).

In Australia, Fernandez (1996) found evidence of overt exclusion of parents from the very start of their children's stay in care, while in the UK Thorpe (1974) identified how exclusion can also occur by default, when parents are not *actively* included. Studies also highlight how many parents feel judged as totally bad and, as a result, are treated with disrespect, and denied even basic courtesies of civil human interaction (Thorpe, 1993; MacKinnon, 1998; Thoburn, 1999).

MacKinnon (1998) found parents who were involuntary clients experienced child protection workers as controlling or avoiding, whereas parents who initiated or consented to referral tended to be less negative, and a few actually perceived workers as 'friends' who conveyed respect and advocated on their behalf. Such different experiences of parents according to different routes of referral have also been identified in UK research (Thoburn, 1999).

To date in Australia there have been no studies of parental participation comparable to those documented by Thoburn in the UK (1999). However, given the use of LAC materials, which assume the involvement of parents (even of children in long-term or permanent care), the time is now ripe for some Australian research on what works well in facilitating parental involvement and active participation. In this regard, studies of the effectiveness of Family Group Conferences in Australia are also an urgent priority (Maluccio, Ainsworth & Thoburn, 2000).

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CONTACT BETWEEN CHILDREN IN CARE AND THEIR FAMILIES

In 1999 the New South Wales Community Services Commission identified insufficient contact between children in care and their families as a major recurring problem, despite the findings of empirical research that contact 'has a positive impact on the well being of children, whether or not restoration is a goal' (Community Services Commission, 1999, p. 7).

Research with parents of children in care has focused in some detail on parents' experience of contact and Fernandez provides a thorough review of the major findings with regard

to the pattern and difficulties of forging links between separated children and their parents (1996, pp.198-202). Of additional interest, but as yet barely researched, is the concern of grand-parents who also experience considerable grief following the loss of their grand-children and lack of contact with them (Family Rights Group, 1986; Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997). Arguably, similar loss may be experienced by other extended family members, though this has not been canvassed in research to date except in relation to siblings (Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997; Ainsworth & Maluccio, 2002).

Problems with contact arrangements identified by the NSW Community Services Commission (1999) include poor case planning, arbitrary and distressing changes to agreed contact arrangements, failure to facilitate contact, conditions imposed on visits and other forms of contact, inadequate information, and lack of flexibility in contact arrangements. There is a need, however, for further research to examine the factors influencing problems with contact and to identify what works well in managing contact arrangements and in keeping children and families connected.

Apart from benefits in terms of identity and continuity in family relationships, ongoing contact is seen as having potential to facilitate shared care, regardless of the likelihood of eventual restoration. Research on formal shared care is virtually non-existent in Australia (Maluccio, Ainsworth & Thoburn, 2000), apart from a small study by Brenda Smith (1993) of natural parents' experiences of using shared care. Clearly, further research into the challenges and potential of shared family care would be a high priority on an Australian child welfare research agenda.

Having identified what we know from research, a number of areas for further research have already been foreshadowed. In moving to identify priorities for future research, however, it is first necessary to overview the current pressing issues concerning parents with children in care.

SALIENT CURRENT ISSUES FOR PARENTS

While professionals respond empathically as active helpers to people who are vulnerable and distressed when working in adult settings, there seems to be less awareness of and response to the needs of adults when they are the parents of children and young people in out-of-home care. Although, rightly, the child's needs are the prime focus in child welfare services, nonetheless there is an important challenge to incorporate supportive attention to parents' needs, particularly in respect of the following salient issues.

Loss

It is not impossible to be a 'hopeless' parent who desperately loves the child and has no other ambition in life than to be a good mother, or a parent who hates the child but is desperately sad that they did not love them. It is a great deal to ask of

anyone to sort these feelings out alone without professional support and understanding, even if the person is highly functioning and within a supportive environment. Few birth parents have either of these resources to call upon but are rarely offered any kind of professional support (Burgheim, 2002, p.3).

Dealing with the loss and grief of parents who have had their children removed remains an urgent priority. Parents can be far more effective in meeting the needs of their children and achieving positive relationships with carers if their own pain is sensitively acknowledged and worked with.

Inter-generational experience of the child protection system is not uncommon so that people can simultaneously be survivors of the statutory care system and parents of children currently in statutory care.

POVERTY AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Most child protection workers acknowledge that financial disadvantage imposes stress that can lead to children experiencing harm (Thomson, 2003). If a structural analysis of the causes of poverty is accepted (Mullaly, 1997), it would also be accepted that such parents frequently experience the material struggle to care for their children as overwhelming. This is the situation in which neglect frequently occurs (Pelton, 1989), and thus an ongoing focus in this area should be central to both research and practice with parents with children in care.

ADDICTIONS

As Ainsworth and Summers (2001) assert, the exponential growth in the incidence of drug and alcohol problems among parents of children in the care system is placing unmanageable pressures on systems world wide. Active co-operation between health and child protection services will be greatly assisted by a practice research focus on ways to work with drug and alcohol affected parents regarding protection and care of their children.

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Contemporary child protection jurisdictions acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of family violence, yet children continue to be removed on account of a carer's 'failure to protect'. The development of skills to work in families where adult carers (most frequently women) are victims of violence from partners which immobilises them from effective protection of their children, is urgently needed. Equally important is research to identify the types of support

which enable carers to protect and thereby avert the removal of children into care, or promote reunification from care.

MENTAL ILLNESS AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

In recent years growing attention has focussed on the needs of parents with psychiatric and/or developmental disabilities (Byrne, Hearle, Plant, Barkla, Jenner & McGrath, 2000). Very little research, however, has explored the issues which pre-occupy workers when children of such parents are in out-of-home care, even though these situations pose considerable challenges for agencies.

CARE ALUMNI

Inter-generational experience of the child protection system is not uncommon so that people can simultaneously be survivors of the statutory care system and parents of children currently in statutory care. Experience of long term statutory care, which is frequently characterised by placement disruption and emotional upheaval for children and young people, can leave care leavers ill equipped when they themselves become parents (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996). There is an urgent need for an active research focus on how to assist statutory care alumni to achieve more successful life outcomes for themselves and their children (Mason, Payne & Pecora, 2002).

PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In summarising research to date and identifying salient current issues relating to parents in child welfare, a number of research questions in need of further attention become apparent. We now draw these together into broad areas for future research, indicating priorities and making recommendations for underpinning theoretical frameworks.

UNDERPINNING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Given the legacy of gender-blind research in child protection (Thorpe, 1996), in our view it is essential that any future research related to parents with children in care employs an explicitly gendered frame of analysis so that distinctive issues for mothers are identified clearly, and fathers are no longer 'written out' of child welfare knowledge and practice (Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997, p. 23; Featherstone, 2001).

A second theoretical framework that we believe should be central in research with parents of children in care is that of loss and, in particular, the life course impact of child loss (Rubin, 1993), non-finite loss and disenfranchised grief (Bruce & Schultz, 2001), un-resolvable grief (Hindmarch, 2000), and post-traumatic stress (Rickarby, 2002). A deeper understanding from a loss perspective would help clarify appropriate ways of working with parents, facilitate their involvement, participation and partnership, maintain family connections and thereby enhance the possibilities of restoration for some children in care and of continuing life-

long family ties for most others (Millham, Bullock, Hosie & Haak, 1986).

A third theoretical perspective that is important is that of attachment. Already this concept is used extensively in child welfare decision making, particularly concerning relationships between children and foster carers. Attachment is, however, highly pertinent also to consideration of a child's relationship with a natural parent, despite previous negative experiences (Osmond & Darlington, 2001), and regardless of whether the case plan is for restoration or for long term/permanent placement (Macaskill, 2002).

A fourth theoretical framework that would seem indispensable for research in this area is that of power (Rees, 1991; Ife, 2001). Not only would this facilitate greater understanding of both structural disadvantage and family relationships, it would also lead to more rigorous analyses of parent/worker interactions in child welfare systems and the complexities of achieving participation and partnerships (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995).

While some readers may question the appropriateness of allocating even a small portion of scarce research dollars into parents rather than children, it is important to re-state that enhancing parental involvement and on-going contact is of immense value to children in care.

FOCI FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Because of the dearth of Australian research on parents with children in care, and significant gaps in information recorded by child welfare agencies, there is a need to document and understand in some detail the characteristics and life experiences of parents in terms of their childhood past, their present, and in the long term following entry of children to care. Of particular interest are issues of poverty, domestic violence, childhood experience of abuse (especially sexual abuse), mental health, disability, and drug use. In addition, we seem to have no idea how many parents are themselves care alumni and, although awareness of new young mothers in or from care is now emerging, we have yet to recognise the extent of the problem and identify appropriate preventive and supportive service responses.

The issue of drug using parents must certainly be a high research priority given its increasing current significance and the difficulties of achieving reunification (Ainsworth & Summers, 2001) or of working in partnership with drug or

alcohol using parents, including those with substance related brain injury (Contole & PACS, 1996; ARBIAS, 1997).

It is no coincidence that the increasing use of kinship care, often with grandparents, has occurred concurrently with the increase in children entering care on account of drug use by parents. Although there is some research on grandparents (and other relatives) providing kinship care (Richards, 2001; Mason, Falloon, Gibbons, Spence & Scott, 2002) there is a dearth of knowledge in Australia about attachments between grandparents and other extended family members and children in care. This is an important gap to fill since there may be a pool of untapped resources for children in need of continuity in family and cultural identity, and especially when contact with a natural parent may not be possible or desirable.

Clearly, in all future research with parents of children in care, particular attention should be given to distinctive issues of concern for Indigenous families, communities and their children. This has implications for the composition of research teams, advisory committees and ethics approval protocols.

In terms of parental involvement there is an obvious need for Australian studies, perhaps through action research, of inclusion and participation in planning, decision making, LAC reviews, ongoing contact arrangements, shared family care, and family reunification. Of particular importance is the identification of barriers to involvement, including organisational and resource constraints as well as values and attitudes in workplace culture which actively or passively contribute to parents becoming 'lost' from working partnerships with child welfare systems (Masson, Harrison & Pavlovic, 1997).

Despite changes over the years in child welfare philosophies and policies, in research studies over several decades the consistency of parents' experience of powerlessness and lack of respect suggests that simplistic notions of abusive or neglectful parents are resistant to change. There is thus a need for research which unravels the reasons for this and which identifies what might enable policy to move from rhetoric and actually influence practice.

Of related concern is the need for research into necessary skills development for workers and for foster carers in forming partnerships with parents, particularly parents who are angry or hostile, who have drug, alcohol, mental health or disability issues, or who are hard to like and hard to reach and engage.

CONCLUSION

While some readers may question the appropriateness of allocating even a small portion of scarce research dollars into parents rather than children, it is important to re-state that enhancing parental involvement and on-going contact is

of immense value to children in care. If we neglect to learn more in order to do things better, we will continue to have children 'lost in care', care leavers with severed connections to family and cultural heritage, and care alumni deprived of potential supports in their journey to independent adult life. In short, we will be abrogating our duty of care to children and young people in care. []

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