

BOOK REVIEWS

Testing the limits of foster care: Fostering as an alternative to secure accommodation

M. Walker, M. Hill and J. Triseliotis

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Pioneering foster care practice in the United Kingdom has had a considerable influence on the development of programs and practices in Australia with much of the knowledge being gained through the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) journal and series of publications. Another quality publication from BAAF, *Testing the limits of foster care*, provides further food for thought at a time when our service system is struggling to respond effectively to 'high needs young people'.

The book provides a detailed evaluation and discussion of a ground breaking professional foster care service in Scotland, which set out to provide an alternative to secure care for young people. In 1996 the Scottish Social Work Services Inspectorate had recommended that community alternatives should be developed for some of the 200-250 young people who are admitted to secure accommodation each year in Scotland. The experienced UK children's charity, National Children's Home (NCH), took up the challenge and established the Community Alternative Placement Scheme (CAPS). In so doing, the service drew on the strong practice legacy of UK 'specialist' foster care schemes such as the Kent Families Project for young offenders and the 'treatment' foster care programs in North America.

This book provides a detailed report on the establishment, operation and results of the service over a three year period. Central to the study is the tracking of the first 20 young people in the scheme and comparing their experience with a sample of young people in secure accommodation over a similar period. While it may seem a long report on a relatively small study, the book is enhanced by exploration of many key issues (such as assessing and managing risk in child welfare) informed by the literature and the considerable expertise of the authors.

The achievements of the service as reported in the study are impressive, although ultimately the outcomes for the young people were found to be mixed.

CAPS, with apparent ease, was able to exceed initial targets and recruit 28 carer households through the Scottish foster care association and local newspapers. Three-quarters of the carers joined CAPS seeing it as a positive alternative to paid employment – quite realistic given that the weekly payment to carers is £440 per week which is described as equivalent

to the wage of a senior residential care worker. Success in recruitment was followed by an enviable 100% retention rate for the carers during the three years of the evaluation. This was attributed to the high rate of remuneration combined with 24 hour support, eight weeks planned respite care per year, intensive training and social work support where practitioners carried caseloads of 6 or 7.

The young people in the study will appear familiar to many readers, both for the nature and extent of their needs and in their comments quoted in the text. While the service began with the intention of catering for young people 'at imminent risk of admission to secure care or already in secure care', this criteria broadened early in the program to include a wider range of high risk groups. This could have implications for the validity of the comparison which is made between young people in CAPS and the secure accommodation group. Nevertheless it is clear that all young people in the program had highly intensive needs, including aggressive behaviour, self-harm, substance abuse, offending, involvement in prostitution and absconding. The project's initial placement targets were doubled, with 36 placements achieved at the end of three years and many placements continuing well beyond the expected six month period.

Chapter 5 unpacks the aims and expectations of the service. Here it is clarified that it is the positive influence of highly supported everyday family life experience that is expected to be the vehicle for change, as well as providing a stable base for life outside the family, notably school. Personal care, firm boundaries, good role models, learning of new skills, acceptance and trust are some of the program elements identified. Establishing rules was an important part of the carers' role but both carers and young people identified that it was the quality of relationship between carer and young person which made boundary setting acceptable or not.

The study's findings are comprehensively reported and cover not only what the service provided and the qualitative experience of participants, but also the developmental progress of young people over the three year period of the evaluation. This includes progress against measures of emotional well-being, behavioural change, education, family relationships, health, leisure activities and preparation for independent living.

In summary, the study finds that the service was highly effective in establishing a community alternative to secure accommodation; however, the overall outcomes for the young people in the study group were found to be no better and no worse than for the comparison group in secure care. Transition to unsupported high-risk independence, difficulties in obtaining work or further education, rates of offending and other difficulties occurred at similar levels for the study group as for the comparison group. More encouragingly though, young people in CAPS reported more positively on their care experience. Three-quarters of the young people in CAPS said they 'enjoyed the placement' and their responses indicated that they experienced a high level of acceptance by carers which for some young people was 'profoundly empowering'. The authors also note that the results were achieved by CAPS in a community setting without the loss of liberty which comes with secure accommodation. However the authors caution against promoting one model over the other with both secure care and specialist foster care being described as necessary and effective parts of the same service system.

Chapter 8 considers costs and 'value for money'. The cost of a CAPS placement at £850-£1,400 per week was found to be considerably cheaper than a secure care placement, but not necessarily cheaper than traditional residential care.

The final chapter provides an excellent summary of the principal findings and a discussion of the core issues and challenges. The study confirms that with appropriate planning and supports, foster carers can be found and retained to care for extremely challenging young people. However the researchers also conclude that foster care models cannot be expected to replace residential care. Rather, they provide a community-based alternative to residential care and secure care for some young people.

Can it be done here in Australia? Many would say that our foster care programs are already stretched beyond their limits. At the same time there are examples of expert practice which are claiming success with professional foster care models for high needs young people. The Scottish example presented in this book provides a 'state of the art' example of a relationship-based model of care for this very challenging group of young people. It is an example highly relevant to the current Australian debate. But as the authors conclude, it should be regarded as one model, not the only model of service for our young people.

Reviewed by:

Nigel Spence
Chief Executive Officer
Association of Children's Welfare Agencies

Children, Family and the State: Decision-making and child participation

Nigel Thomas

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Nigel Thomas has produced a scholarly work based on some impressive research which in turn grew out of practice with children 'looked after' in the English care system. Both the Children Act 1989, which applies to England and Wales, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12), make explicit the expectation that the wishes and feelings of children must be taken into account in decisions affecting their interests. The author embarked on his research to explore 'how much the child's wishes and feelings would really be heard and how much notice would really be taken of them'. In the context of Local Authority processes, particularly around care plans and reviews and the interpretation and administration of the legislation, there are many potentially competing voices and stakeholders with interests in relation to planning processes and outcomes.

Thomas' enquiry has taken him into much broader territory around conceptions of childhood through history and across cultures, and various conceptions of family and State care, before returning to think about research with children in general and the execution and outcomes of his own research.

The research itself includes a quantitative element with a sample survey of decision-making in 225 cases and a very substantial qualitative element involving a detailed study entailing interviews and group discussion with 47 'looked after' children from two local authorities.

There was a substantial lead up to the latter stages of the research which was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Thomas had explored the issues in relation to children's participation in his earlier roles as case worker and manager, and he had conducted a prior survey of 166 cases drawn from seven local authorities. In his account of these efforts, he shares a great deal of his discovery of the complications and pitfalls of research in this territory. The knowledge gained was put to good use in the funded study.

The book consists of 12 chapters. The first six review from various perspectives the place of children in society. The reader is taken through a range of conceptual and theoretical positions with a fair measure of critical analysis to reveal many of the contested issues and dominant assumptions