

# Caring for children who care

## Acknowledging the importance of the natural children of foster parents

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*In the arena of social welfare it is not unusual for practitioners to endeavour to give a voice to the disadvantaged by working to empower clients; placing value on each individual member in a family; helping communities care for each other; advocating for the rights of children and women. No doubt this is all familiar rhetoric to most welfare and social workers. However, in the area of foster care a voice that has seldom been heard is the voice of the 'children who care'. The natural children of foster carers are valuable members of the caring team and whilst many foster parents are aware of their own children's contribution in caring for foster children, foster care agencies and social workers/caseworkers have not formally acknowledged them or accorded to them the support they deserve. Better outcomes for children in foster care and for families who care will be achieved if practitioners consult with, support, and acknowledge the 'children who care'.*

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Fostering makes major demands on all members of the foster family. However the biological children of families that foster are often the unacknowledged caregivers. These children, who are commonly referred to as either natural children, home grown children or 'kids' (children) who care, are important members of a successful caring team and their contribution and experiences as part of the team needs to be both formally and informally acknowledged. The significant contribution by children who care to the success and/or failure of foster care placements is an area of research that has long been neglected. Children who care have to share their parents, and often they have to share their room, their clothes and their toys. As well as all this, they sometimes have to cope with challenging behaviours from the foster children who come into their home. However this does not lead to the conclusion that children who care do not like fostering.

Qualitative research within Wesley Mission, Dalmar Child and Family Care at Castle Hill, NSW (Wesley Dalmar) concurs with research reviewed by Professor Berridge (1993) which concluded that 80% of children in families that foster liked fostering. However he also noted that, in most cases, the feelings of the children who care had not been taken seriously by either social workers or parents when placements were being negotiated. Without consideration of the crucial role played by these children, placements are more vulnerable to breakdown and there is a greater possibility of the loss of valuable foster carers (Barber & Gilbertson, 2002; Moslehuddin, 1999; Pugh, 1996; Berridge, 1993). Preparation of children who care for the experiences of fostering, as well as on going support during foster care placements, will not only produce better outcomes for existing foster families, it will also provide the foundations for a future generation of carers.

This paper will demonstrate how, as part of best practice goals, Wesley Dalmar acknowledges and supports the children who care through:

- assessment and special age-appropriate training, including an age-appropriate training manual;
- careful matching with every member of the family when making foster placements, with an awareness of child protection issues;

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- agency support of both foster children and children who care through group work, camps, beach days, film nights and fun days, with additional fun days arranged specifically for the children who care;
- careful planning of the transition process from short term placement to restoration or long term foster care placement;
- awareness of grief and loss issues for all members of the foster family, including the children who care; and,
- the implications for social work practitioners working in the area of foster care.

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#### FOSTER CARE TRAINING FOR CHILDREN WHO CARE

Like most foster care agencies, Wesley Dalmar includes children of foster carers in the initial assessment process where their opinions are sought and documented. However, unlike many other agencies, Wesley Dalmar offers children who care 'special' foster care training aimed at primary aged children, and older children are invited to attend the adult foster care training. The training for children who care has had a variety of formats, depending on the number of children attending training and the availability of workers and guest speakers. Whilst training is always presented as informative, it also includes some component of fun for the children such as games and getting to know each other over pizza or McDonalds during lunch and morning tea. If there is a large group of children for training, they are divided into two groups consisting of six to eight children with one caseworker and a guest speaker present in each group. The guest speakers include two teenagers, one who has been a child in foster care and the other being a biological teenager of a foster family that has been fostering for some time. These groups are alternated so that both groups have an opportunity to hear and speak with the guest speakers.

At other training sessions when groups have been smaller and/or guest speakers have not been available, the 'Children Who Foster' video (produced by Vera Productions for the Natural Children's Support Group) is used as a tool to provide insight into issues for children who foster and to promote group discussion. During the training day, the children are given their own 'Kids' Who Care training manual. This manual, designed for primary aged children,

explains what to expect when a foster child comes to live in their home and tells them to whom they can talk if they are concerned about any issues that may arise. Caseworkers who are able to spend time with the children who care during the training process find that the acquired first hand knowledge of the children helps them when they are matching a foster child that would best suit a particular foster family.

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#### PLACEMENT

As a general rule, when matching a foster child with a potential foster family, the age of the child placed in their care is always younger than the youngest child in the foster family. Apart from not wishing to displace any existing family member, there is an awareness of child protection issues and placing a younger foster child helps to ensure that there is less likelihood of any emotional, physical or sexual abuse of the children who care by the foster child placed in the care of their family. This is particularly important in the temporary care program when details of a foster child coming into care as an emergency placement are often not immediately available. Where possible foster families in the temporary care program are encouraged to share with their children any relevant information available about a child who is coming to stay in their home and to talk with them about ways that they can be supportive of one another and the child/ren coming into their family. On rare occasions, in the temporary care program, some children who care have objected to having a foster child placed in their home when specific events were coming up for them. For example, on two occasions older teenage children who care have requested that their parents in the temporary care program take a break from fostering while they are sitting for their High School Certificate. On another occasion, the children who care in a large family wanted to go outback camping as a family and they requested that they have this time together as a family unit. On one particular occasion the foster parents suggested that their children were being selfish, but caseworkers in this particular agency encourage the foster parents to listen to and respond positively to their children's requests. At other times when foster families need a break, particularly in the long-term program, a Shared Family Care (one weekend per month) respite program is set up or camps

for the foster children and/or the children who care are organised.

## CAMPS AND ACTIVITIES

On average Wesley Dalmar holds a camp at least once a year (other non Dalmar camps are also utilised for foster children) and they are organised and run by staff and two particular foster carers who are employed on a regular basis to work with children at various camp sites. These camps have been held in a number of locations in NSW, such as the Jindabyne and Blue Cow snow fields, with skiing lessons for the children; camping out in the bush at a place called 'Little Wobbie' in Brooklyn, and at Wesley Mission's camping grounds at Vision Valley. At Vision Valley there are on site youth workers running numerous activities for children such as canoeing, archery, bush walking and rope climbing. Camps provide a unique opportunity for workers to spend 'special' time with both children in care as well as the children of foster carers. As well as camps, there are a number of full day events organised by an enthusiastic team of young social workers within Wesley Dalmar's office at Castle Hill.

Beach days are held once a year at Narrabeen and the children are taught water safety by the local lifesavers. Children in care and children who care together with the workers are able to interact, build relationships and share experiences over a barbecue lunch. Film nights have recently commenced and have proven to be very popular with the teenagers. Whilst these evenings are not aimed specifically at the children who care, they do provide an opportunity for children to mix with workers and other children who foster, as well as children who are in foster care.

Fun Days are held every school holidays. The children are transported by bus to the chosen location where they enjoy activities such as treasure hunts, face painting, football, cricket, and bead making, as well as a barbecue lunch provided by Wesley Dalmar staff and volunteers. There are a number of different venues used with excellent facilities and they are all within a reasonable travelling distance of the office.

### 'Children who care' special fun days

One fun day a year is held exclusively for the children who care, and this requires particular preparation. Prior to the event foster parents are asked to encourage their children to attend and they are informed that their children will be given an opportunity to talk about what it is like for them living in a family that fosters children. Interestingly, on the most recent fun day, two boys who attend the same school met up with each other for the first time outside of the school grounds, and they were surprised to discover that they both came from families that foster children. The boys formed an almost instant bond as they chatted about what it was like for them being the elder boy in a family that fosters. Thirteen

children attended the most recent children who care fun day and, during an informal after lunch discussion, the children were invited to talk about their experiences as children who care under the following headings:

- What do they 'think' of living in a family that fosters?
- What do they 'feel' about having a foster child/ren in their home?
- What do they 'do' differently because they have foster child/ren in their home?

Butchers paper and pens were used and the following responses were given under the suggested headings. When asked what they thought of living in a family that fosters, they said:

we are helping;  
babies are better;  
good but sometimes not good;  
I think it can be annoying;  
it's great;  
I like it;  
it can be hard  
it is sometimes aggravating;  
I think fostering is a kind thing to do.

When asked how they 'feel' about having a foster child/ren in their home, they said:

I sometimes feel angry especially when they break my toys;  
sometimes I feel happy sometimes angry and sometimes sad;  
I feel responsible;  
I feel proud that we help other children;  
sometimes I feel like I'm being driven around the twist;  
I felt annoyed when I got nits because one of the children used my brush;  
I hate lending my underwear.

When asked what they 'do' differently because they have foster child/ren in their home, they said:

I have to share my room;  
sleepless nights;  
change my schedule;  
change our holidays;  
play with the foster children;  
share my toys;  
sometimes they get me into trouble;  
we have to share our parent's attention.

What came across to the workers during the most recent fun day were the deep feelings and attachment the children who care had for the children that came into care. Some of the

children talked about how sad they felt when a child living in their family was moved back to their parents or into long-term care, and this highlighted the importance of the transition process (Moslehuddin, 1999).

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### THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Careful planning of the transition process of foster care placements from short term to long term care or restoration is just as important for the children who care as it is for the foster parents and the foster child/ren. Many foster children in temporary care remain in the same home anywhere between three and twelve months; then they leave and another child/ren comes into their family. Families in the temporary care program are thus in a continuous state of flux. When a child leaves a family or a new child joins, it not only produces changes in relationships and positions of power, it also causes some individuals within the family to experience varying degrees of grief and loss, thus requiring support and care (Watson, 2002). The level of bonding and attachment to a particular foster child differs according to the personality and age of the child/ren who care. However all family members benefit by being adequately prepared for the foster child's departure and by being given the opportunity to say goodbye or to participate in a farewell ritual. If rituals are deemed to be useful, the nature of the ritual used will be determined by the age of the foster child and the ages of the children who care. For example, a senior worker in this office has used a candle ceremony (each candle representing a significant person in the foster child's life), one worker used dinosaur feet to represent stages in change, while others have helped organise transition parties. Where possible, ongoing contact with the foster child is planned, particularly after an extended temporary care placement. For example, when a child is unable to stay with the temporary care foster carers, every effort is made to move the child from the temporary care program to the long term program within the Wesley Dalmar programs. When this is possible the children who care are able to have knowledge of the foster child as well as some ongoing contact with the child.

At the commencement of the transition process, introductions between families are commenced and they are

encouraged to share activities and visit one another so the children get to know the new family. The introductions and outings are followed by planned overnight placements for the foster child/ren before they are moved permanently to the long-term carers. During the process special toys or objects of affection are left in the home of the long-term carer and the foster carers gradually move more items to the permanent foster home. Fortunately in the Wesley Dalmar programs many of the foster mothers and children know each other through our foster carers support group that meets in the Castle Hill office every fortnight. However for children who are restored to their natural families or into the care of other agencies, ongoing contact with foster carers is not always possible, and the management of the transition process is of even greater importance for the children who care.

### Loss and grief

One of the children who care in the Dalmar temporary care program, Sarah, whose family has fostered for over 25 years, is now a young adult social worker herself. She has experienced what she would describe as both good and bad transition processes. In an address at a foster carers' conference, Sarah described her experience as a child who cared. She told the audience that the pain she experienced was as if she had actually lost the children that had been in the care of her family. She said she understood that each child that left their care was restored or moved to long-term care, but for her it was an experience of deep and personal loss. During her presentation she recounted her experience of a painful transition process. She spoke with deep affection of a precious baby that had been in her family's care for more than six months. This particular child, a victim of abuse which left the baby with a severe disability, was being transferred from the care of her family to a Department of Community Services foster carer whom Sarah had not had the opportunity to meet. There was a meeting between Sarah's mother and the Department's foster carer, but there was no opportunity for Sarah to say her appropriate 'goodbyes' and be reassured that this baby she loved would be well cared for (Stedman, 2001). The reasons for this poorly planned transition were complex, and consultations with the Department of Community Services since then have led to changes in practice. However this did not help Sarah deal with her feelings. When Sarah spoke at the conference of her feelings of loss and grief it brought tears to her eyes and many carers in the audience shed a tear as they identified with her feelings (Stedman, 2001). None the less she insists that she and her family do not dislike fostering, and on the contrary she said, '... I would never deny the joy and pleasure fostering brings to myself and to my family' (Stedman, 1998). This highlights the importance of the social work practitioner's duty of care to be available to the children who care, and to provide support and a forum for the expression of these feelings.

The experience of grief and loss for children who care, especially in the temporary care program, are the same for those in the general community, grief being the emotional process through which people adjust to any significant loss in their lives. Understandably the focus of grief and loss issues have been on the foster child and little thought has been given to the children of foster carers and the impact of repeated attachments and then losses on them when a child or children are moved into long term care or restored to their family of origin. Often the grief experienced by children who care is disenfranchised, that is to say the grief is not legitimised by others and thus the expression of the grief can often be suppressed (McKissock & McKissock, 1998). Social work practitioners in this agency are encouraged to arrange post placement home visits by caseworkers. These visits (where on some occasions a small token of appreciation, such as a thank you card, is given to the family) provide an ideal opportunity for ventilation of suppressed emotions. For example, a particular foster family with Wesley Dalmar who have five biological children of their own were surprised during a post placement visit when one of their children broke down and began to cry. Through her sobs she stated that she wanted the little boy, who had recently moved into the Wesley Dalmar long-term care program, to come back to their family. The depth of the grief experienced by this particular child revealed during the post placement meeting alerted the foster parents to be more sensitive to her needs and they spent time with her allowing her to express her feelings and discussing the possibility of future contact with the foster child. The knowledge that children who care are valuable members of the caring team who support foster care placements, and who experience grief and loss when foster children move on, has ramifications for social work practitioners working in the arena of foster care. As Sarah rightly pointed out, 'natural children are key players in the area of fostering and we jeopardise the individual, the family and the foster child's well being by not addressing their needs' (Stedman, 1998).

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Better outcomes for foster children in care and families who care will be achieved if the needs of the children who care are addressed, and their contribution and opinions are given the rightful value that they deserve. Applying best practice principles will mean that:

- children who care are given preparation for fostering, firstly through the assessment process, and then as special training that includes the provision of their own 'special' training manual;
- where possible social workers need to consult with the foster parents and their natural children prior to placing a particular foster child in their family;
- regular caseworker contact is maintained after the foster child has been placed, including home visits when the

children who care are home from school. In this way, the social worker/caseworker will have the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with all members of the foster family, not just the foster child and the foster parent/s.

The practice of post placement meetings (particularly after long temporary care placements) with all members of the foster family, including the children who care, will help to facilitate expressions of grief and loss, as well as allow a time to discuss any issues that may have arisen for individual members of the family. Whilst foster care programs such as Wesley Dalmar which are able to include camps, film nights, beach days and fun days, are ideal and certainly benefit the children who care, they cannot replace the 'special' fun day where children who care are able to say what they think, what they feel and what they do differently because they are part of a foster family. Above all the intention of this paper is to encourage practitioners to care, support, empower and acknowledge the contribution made to the success of foster care placements by the children who care.

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