

Disrupted adolescents in foster care

Their perspectives on placement breakdown

Robyn Gilbertson and Jim Barber

Placement breakdown has long been recognised as a serious problem in foster care, particularly for young people whose behaviour is seen as disruptive. This qualitative study conducted in South Australia examined recent unplanned placement changes (n=14) from the perspective of the young people involved. Participants were eligible for the study if their social worker attributed their most recent placement move to carer request on the grounds of problem behaviour. There was a high level of agreement between participants and social workers on the problem behaviours, but a divergence of views on the reasons for the move. Participants' contextualising of their behaviour highlighted the complexity of the processes underlying placement disruption. The dominant theme to emerge from this study was the unhappiness of participants. Other problem areas noted were apparent lack of placement options, and exclusion of young people from placement decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was made possible by a grant to the second author by the Channel Seven Children's Research Foundation of South Australia.

Despite the prominence of permanency planning in alternative care practice, the movement has largely failed to realise the hope of placement security for children and young people in care (Bandow, 1999; Fein & Maluccio, 1992; Schorr, 2000). Minty (1999) referred to the high rate of placement breakdown as 'one of the most serious deficiencies of long-term foster care' (p.993), and some writers have categorised repeated placement changes as institutional or system abuse (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997; Fernandez, 1999). Such comments reflect concern at the association between placement instability and poor outcomes for young people in care.

A multitude of variables has been associated with unplanned placement moves. These include: behavioural and emotional problems (Fratter, Rowe, Sapsford & Thoburn, 1991; Pardeck, 1983; Pardeck, 1984); history of abuse (Stone & Stone, 1983); diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (Community Services Commission, 1999); and active rejection by birth parents (Rushton, Dance & Quinton, 2000). But, summarising findings from their large study of children in long-term care, Fein, Maluccio and Kluger (1990) stressed that:

It is vital that foster care research move beyond the traditional exploration of discrete factors or search for direct causal relationships and emphasise the interactive processes that affect children and their families. This shift promises to be more productive in the understandable quest of practitioners and educators for useful practice principles and guidelines (p. 76).

Supporting the view of placement breakdown as a process rather than an event, Hayden and colleagues noted that:

Several studies have shown that foster placements often break down over a long period of time, rather than as a result of one particular incident, although a specific incident may mark the end of a placement (Hayden, Goddard, Gorin & Van Der Spek, 1999, p.57).

Berridge and Cleaver (1987), in a detailed study of ten placement breakdowns, found that none had been precipitated by a single major crisis, rather it was the culmination of a long period of stress during which families had made considerable efforts to maintain the placement.

Comparatively little is known about the process of placement breakdown from the child's or young person's perspective. There may be barriers to involving young

Robyn Gilbertson, Postdoctoral Fellow
School of Social Administration and Social Work
Flinders University of South Australia
GPO Box 2100, Adelaide SA 5001
Email: robyn.gilbertson@flinders.edu.au

Jim Barber, Professor and Dean
Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1, Canada
Email: jim.barber@utoronto.ca

people in research (Gilbertson & Barber, 2002; Heptinstall, 2000), but studies which have included their perspective strongly indicate that they want the opportunity to voice their opinions and to make suggestions about foster care (Community Services Commission, 2000; Festinger, 1983). The aim of this study was to examine the process of placement breakdown from the perspective of the young people involved, and to identify any interventions which, in their view, might have made the placement sustainable.

METHOD

DESIGN

This was a qualitative study with data collected via semi-structured interview schedule.

PARTICIPANTS

As the risk of placement breakdown rises with the child's age and the presence of disruptive behaviours (Barber, Delfabbro & Cooper, 2001; Pardeck, 1983; Pardeck, 1984), young people were eligible for the study if they were aged 10 years or over, and their most recent placement breakdown had been at the carer's request and because of problem behaviour. Recruitment and participation were not without complications (for details see Gilbertson & Barber, 2002), and the final sample was probably not representative. There were 8 male and 5 female participants. Their mean age was 12.75 years (range 10 to 15 years), and they had been in the placements in question for between 2 months and 2 years. One young man had recently been removed from two placements and was interviewed about both. The total number of breakdowns examined was therefore 14.

Participants were in care for reasons of neglect, parental incapacity, parental rejection, or parent-child conflict. Reported disruptive behaviours included running away, substance abuse, keeping company with people suspected of selling illicit substances, theft, assault, verbal abuse, property damage, death threats to carer, highly sexualised behaviour, sexual abuse, small animal torture, misuse of prescribed medication, suicide threats, suicide attempts, and school refusal. The goal in one case was reunification with family, in the other cases the goal was long-term family-based care.

PROCEDURE

All new placement referrals made in South Australia between August 2000 and March 2001 were examined for eligibility. Statutory agency social workers for potential participants were telephoned and asked to describe the circumstances of the most recent placement breakdown. If the placement was reported to have been ended at the carer's request because of the young person's behaviour, and if the social worker considered that an interview about the breakdown would not be detrimental to their client, the

social worker sought the young person's consent to participate. If consent was obtained, the first author contacted the young person and carer (or staff member in the case of residential care) and arranged the interview. Interviews were conducted in the young person's home (n = 11) or residential institution (n = 3). Participants were advised that they could have a support person present during the interview, but all elected to be interviewed alone. Interviews were conducted in a separate or private area of the home or institution.

The interview schedule included the following topics:

- the circumstances leading to the breakdown;
- the breakdown itself;
- when placement problems first became apparent;
- the young person's emotional response to the breakdown;
- whether and with whom s/he discussed placement problems;
- the positive and negative aspects of the placement; and
- whether any intervention might have made the placement sustainable.

... studies which have included (young people's) perspective strongly indicate that they want the opportunity to voice their opinions and to make suggestions about foster care.

The interview schedule was not followed in all cases. Four participants were visibly distressed at some time during the interview, and one interview was ended prematurely for this reason. Some others appeared to become highly anxious at certain points in the process, and two young men were very reserved and difficult to engage. The format was therefore adapted as necessary to minimise unease.

DATA ANALYSIS

Brief notes were taken at interview and additional notes were made immediately after each interview, after which a comprehensive interview record was compiled. The printed record was subjected to content analysis (Babbie, 2001, p.310), responses were coded, and nominal categories were created for each topic identified.

FINDINGS

Participants fell into two distinct groups: those who had liked the placement and were sorry to leave (LP, n = 7), and

those who had disliked the placement and sought or welcomed the placement change (*DP*, $n=7$). The *LP* group comprised 4 males and 3 females aged between 10 and 15 years. The *DP* group comprised 5 male and 2 females aged between 10 and 14 years. One young man was in both groups. After the breakdown of a placement which he liked and which was the subject of his first interview, he experienced a series of placements which he disliked – the longest of these was the subject of his second interview.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF TERMINATION

Of the *LP* group, four participants agreed that the placement had been ended by the carer because of disruptive behaviour. Of the remaining three, one young man said that the secondary carer had disliked him and, for that reason, ended the placement against the wishes of the primary carer. Another participant believed that the social worker and carer jointly made the decision, and another said that her social worker alone had made the decision.

In the *DP* group, three young people agreed that their carer had requested the termination for reasons related to their behaviour. A further two said that the move had been at their own request, and two reported that although they had told their social worker on more than one occasion that they disliked the placement and wanted to move, it was not until the carer requested the move that action was taken. Overall, then, in 7 of the 14 cases, there was some discrepancy about who had made the decision on, or submitted the first request for, a placement change.

While there was disagreement in some cases about who had made the decision, the problem behaviour reported by the social worker to have been implicated in the breakdown was confirmed by the participants in 13 of the 14 cases. The exception was a case where the social worker cited physical assault on a foster sibling as the precipitating incident, with absconding from placement as a secondary problem. At interview, the young man did not mention assault, and gave the carer's intolerance of his running away as the sole reason for the breakdown. All of the young people were frank in discussing their behaviour, even behavioural extremes such as improper sexual advances, vandalism and assault.

WHEN PLACEMENT PROBLEMS FIRST BECAME EVIDENT

Four young people in the *LP* group had recognised problems in the placement. One said that problems became apparent in the first week, another said problems had begun after the first six weeks, and two were unable to remember when things had started to go wrong. All *DP* participants were clear that there had been problems in the placement. Two could not recall when things had started to go wrong, but three had identified difficulties at the outset, and one had noticed problems six weeks into the placement. One young man had not wanted to go to the placement at all because he

had had prior respite experience in the home and disliked it intensely.

REACTIONS TO TERMINATION

The principal reaction in three *LP* cases was resigned acceptance. These three young people said that although they had liked the placement and wanted to stay, they realised that their behaviour (sexualised behaviour, property damage, and running away) made termination inevitable. Of the other four, all expressed sadness at having to leave. One young woman added that she had been 'shocked' because she had not been warned that termination was being considered, and first found out she was leaving on the day she was moved. A young man also said that he had found out his placement was ending on the day he was moved.

As noted above, four *DP* participants had asked to be moved. One reported that he was 'miserable' when it eventually happened because, despite disliking the placement, he was sorry to lose contact with a good friend who lived nearby. One said he would have run away had the placement not been in an isolated area, one said he had been 'happy to move', and another said, 'my life began again'. There were similar positive reactions from the others in this group.

These contrasting outcomes suggest that expeditious termination of a placement which is not going well may be the most sound intervention and, conversely, that early intervention to address problems developing in an otherwise promising placement should be a priority.

While *DP* participants had been unhappy in placement and happy to move, the converse was true for *LP* participants. From the *LP* group, a young man explained that the placement had been the only family-based placement he had liked. He got along well with the carers and their adult children, liked the activities and amenities they offered, and liked the fact that there were other foster children in the home. When he was moved as a response to his running away, he elected to return to institutional care because his earlier experiences of family-based care had been poor.

One young woman said that the placement had been the first she had liked after a series of unsuitable foster homes. She reported that she and the carer got along extremely well, and that both had been distressed when the placement was terminated by the social worker on the grounds that she had maintained ties with friends proscribed by her social worker. Some months after the placement ended, the carer continued

to visit the young woman in her new home, and to take her shopping and on outings. Of the three participants in institutional care at the time of the interview, two expressed strong dislike of congregated care and hoped to return to family-based care, and one hoped to find his mother and live with her.

CONTEXT OF THE BEHAVIOUR

Participants expanded upon their social workers' discussion of the behaviour or precipitating incident by describing the context in which it occurred. For example, in one case the social worker cited the young person's fighting and arguing with her foster sibling as the reason for the breakdown, but the participant said that she had requested a new placement because she felt unwanted by the family. She was in tears as she talked about her foster sibling's spiteful comments and 'practical jokes', and the carer's preferential treatment of the sibling. She also said that, as a strategy to prevent pining for her family, the carer temporarily confiscated a birthday present which had been sent by her mother.

In another case, the social worker cited repeated absconding as the reason the carer terminated the placement, whereas the participant (also in tears as she recounted her experience) said she had run away because she did not get along with the carer, felt unwelcome in the home, and felt exploited by the carer who expected her to do the family's washing and ironing and babysitting. In another case involving absconding, the young man explained that he ran away to look for an uncle whom he had not seen for many years, but who he believed would be shocked to find that he had a family member in foster care and would immediately offer him a home. Another young man who repeatedly absconded explained that he ran away in order to visit members of his large extended family in the hope that someone would be able to tell him where he could find his mother. The mother was usually transient, but she maintained irregular phone contact with her son and occasionally stayed with other family members.

SOURCE FROM WHICH YOUNG PERSON SOUGHT HELP

As *LP* participants had liked their placement, most had not discussed placement problems with anyone. The exception was the young man who was looking for his mother. Young people in the *DP* group had sought help from at least one source. Five approached their social worker, and four reported that s/he had been helpful in trying to resolve the problem. The fifth, the young man who objected to the placement because of his earlier respite experience there, was told that it was the only placement available. He therefore ensured he was moved by destroying a number of household items (the young man was close to tears as he talked about his time in this placement). Two young people had sought help from their parents (to no avail), and two had

spoken to a friend. Two asked respite carers to become their permanent carers, the carers agreed, and the move was arranged.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE PLACEMENT

Six of the *LP* participants were asked about the positive and negative aspects of the placement. Positive aspects reported were: the carer (n=3), outings and shopping with the carer (n=1), cable television (n=1), and 'everything' (n=1). Only one *LP* participant nominated a negative aspect of his placement, namely the primary carer's partner who was 'grumpy all the time' and eventually insisted that the placement end.

From the *DP* group, two participants said that there had been nothing good about the placement, and another observed, 'it was all crap there'. Others disliked being treated less well than other children in the home. Three *DP* participants found something positive to say about the placement – going swimming, the family pets, and a friend who lived nearby.

INTERVENTION WHICH MIGHT HAVE SAVED PLACEMENT

As noted above, four *LP* participants had recognised placement problems. Two suggested that counselling to address a specific problem (sexualised behaviour and violence) might have saved the placement, and one thought that, had it been made clear to her that staying out late would lead to her being removed, she would not have broken the curfew. Six young people in the *DP* group were adamant that no intervention would have enabled them to remain in the placement. The seventh, the young woman who felt that her carers favoured her foster sibling, said that she might have been able to stay if the carers had been nice to her.

POST-TERMINATION OUTCOMES

Two young people from the *LP* group went to institutional care. One young man declined a family-based placement and elected to go to institutional care. Three experienced further placement instability in family-based care, and one ran away from her new placement to live with friends deemed unsuitable by her social worker. Of the *DP* group, five moved to placements about which, at the time of interview, they felt positively, and two went to new placements from which they ran away. Ten of the 14 placement changes also involved a change of school.

INEQUITABLE TREATMENT

Inequitable treatment, or feeling disliked or unwanted by the carer, was a theme which emerged unsolicited from these reports. It was an important negative aspect of placement for five of the *DP* group. When asked why they had felt that way, participants gave examples of carers buying sweets, takeaway food, or expensive clothes for their biological or

other foster children but not for them, inequitable allocation of household chores, and the carer siding with the foster sibling whenever there was an argument. One LP participant noted that he had been treated less well than biological children, but dismissed it as normal and said he was not concerned about it. In all, inequity was reported in six of fourteen placements.

PLACEMENT SUITABILITY

While placement suitability was not directly examined in this study, it was a theme which arose in a number of interviews. For example, the apparent dislike of the secondary carer for the foster child, confiscation of a gift as a strategy to obviate pining, and inequitable treatment, suggest that some young people were in less than suitable environments.

PLACEMENT AVAILABILITY

Carer shortage was an underlying theme in six cases. Two young people were moved to institutional care for lack of a suitable placement. As noted above, one young man had respite experience in his foster home and he had been most distressed to learn, en route, that he was being taken back there. The response to his objection and subsequent repeated requests to move was that it was the only placement available. Three participants who asked to be moved referred to the long wait before another placement was found. One recalled that his social worker kept saying, 'next week, next week'; another said that it took 'about a month'; and the third commented that the wait 'seemed like years'.

DISCUSSION

As noted above, the participation rate for this study was low and the sample was probably not representative. In one respect, findings are limited because social workers provided only brief reports on the circumstances of the breakdown, and the carer's perspective was not included. On the other hand, participants' reports of their behaviour accord with those of their social workers, and this stands as partial confirmation of their accounts of the breakdown. Moreover, the distress exhibited by some participants at interview tended to substantiate their reported distress at being in what they saw as unsuitable placements or being subjected to unwanted placement changes.

While social workers and young people agreed about the nature of the problematic behaviour, the context of the behaviour suggests that it was unlikely to have been the sole or the most salient factor associated with the placement change. For example, frequent absconding was classified by two social workers as the reason for the move but, from the perspective of two participants, it was their way of working towards the goal of leaving foster care and returning to family. Similarly, a social worker saw failure to get along with foster siblings as problematic behaviour, but from the

young person's perspective it was a response to foster sibling spitefulness and the carer's favouritism of the sibling. Similarly, property damage was cited as the reason for placement breakdown, but for the young man it was a desperate means of ensuring he was moved from a placement he hated and from which he had repeatedly asked to be transferred. These examples exemplify the point made by the researchers cited above (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Fein et al., 1990; Hayden et al., 1999) that placement breakdown is a process rather than an event.

... the fact that 13 young people under State protection can collectively experience such sadness, powerlessness, isolation, and even desperation, stands alone as an indictment of the system.

In the DP group, neither the young person nor the carer wanted the placement to continue, and only one young person could think of anything which might have made the placement sustainable – the carers treating her differently. This suggests that these placements had little potential to provide a positive long-term environment for these young people, and intervention to strengthen the placement was therefore both unlikely to succeed and possibly contraindicated. In contrast, most of the young people who had been moved from a placement they liked mentioned the carer as a positive aspect of the placement, and those who recognised problems were able to nominate interventions which might have saved the placement. This suggests that, if the problems had indeed been amenable to intervention, these placements had potential as a long-term care option.

At the recruitment stage of the study, when social workers were asked about the reasons for the breakdown, none intimated that factors other than behaviour were involved, that the young person might have had a different view, or that the placement might have been unsuitable. While these young people were by their own admission disruptive, designating their behaviour as the primary reason for placement breakdown may be incomplete or incorrect. In such cases, the young person's perspective, if obtained, was not represented in the social worker's discussion of the case. It would be a disservice to these young people if the placement history provided to subsequent carers perpetuated this unilateral view. With respect to placement, not only is participatory decision-making a common practice requirement across jurisdictions, its importance is highlighted here by the fact that most young people were aware of placement problems from the outset or within weeks of moving into the foster home. Their involvement in placement decisions

might have obviated some of the distress and dislocation they experienced.

With respect to longer term outcomes, young people who had been moved from a placement they liked fared considerably worse than those who were moved from a placement they disliked. The seven who had liked their placement were moved from family-based placements in which they wanted to stay, to institutional, unstable or unsafe living arrangements. On the other hand, of the seven who had disliked their placement, two ran away but five went on to placements which held some promise of long-term stability. These contrasting outcomes suggest that expeditious termination of a placement which is not going well may be the most sound intervention and, conversely, that early intervention to address problems developing in an otherwise promising placement should be a priority.

There are indications that placements were based on expediency rather than suitability. Some of the participants apparently remained in homes where they were manifestly unhappy for what was, to them, an unacceptably long time until a new placement was found. Some questionable carer practices were also reported. The most commonly reported problem was inequitable treatment which featured in six of the fourteen placements. Equitable treatment is highly valued by young people in care, and can be important to placement success (Allen, Barenblat, Le Prohn & Pecora, 1996; Schofield, 2002). An underlying problem may have been that, given participants' histories of placement instability and problem behaviours, placement in standard family-based care was not appropriate. In South Australia, more than 96% of children and young people in foster care are placed with families (including kinship placements) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2002), and there is an urgent need for a broader range of placement options (Barber, 2001; Scott, 2001).

A dominant theme throughout this study was the participants' unhappiness. Given the small and probably unrepresentative sample, it is impossible to suggest the extent to which any of these findings might be applicable to the population of disrupted children. Methodological problems aside, however, the fact that 13 young people under State protection can collectively experience such sadness, powerlessness, isolation, and even desperation, stands alone as an indictment of the system. □

REFERENCES

- Allen, R., Barenblat, M., Le Prohn, N. S. & Pecora, P. (1996) Quality Service Redesign Project Child Interview Report, Retrieved from the World Wide Web: <http://www.casey.org/research/reports/reportdocs.htm>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2002) *Child Protection Australia 2000-01*, Child Welfare Series no. 29, Canberra: AIHW.
- Babbie, E. (2001) *The Practice of Social Research*, (9th ed.), Belmont CA: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.
- Bandow, D. (1999) *Children in Crisis*, Pacific Research Institute. Retrieved 10 August, 2001, from the World Wide Web: www.pacificresearch.org/
- Barber, J. G. (2001) 'The slow demise of alternative care in South Australia', *Journal of Social Policy*, 30, 1-15.
- Barber, J.G., Delfabbro, P.H. & Cooper, L.L. (2001) 'The predictors of unsuccessful transition to foster care', *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 42, 785-790.
- Berridge, D. & Cleaver, H. (1987) *Foster Home Breakdown*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Briggs, F. & Hawkins, R. (1997) *Child Protection*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Community Services Commission (1999) *Just Solutions - state wards and juvenile justice*, Sydney: Author.
- Community Services Commission (2000) *Voices of children and young people in foster care*, Sydney: Author.
- Fein, E. & Maluccio, A. N. (1992) 'Permanency planning: another remedy in jeopardy?', *Social Service Review*, Sept, 335-348.
- Fein, E., Maluccio, A.N. & Kluger, M. (1990) *No more partings: An examination of long-term foster family care*, Washington DC: Child Welfare League of America.
- Fernandez, E. (1999) 'Pathways in substitute care: Representation of placement careers of children using event history analysis', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21, 177-216.
- Festinger, T. (1983) *No one ever asked us: A postscript to foster care*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fratter, J., Rowe, J., Sapsford, D. & Thoburn, J. (1991) *Permanent family placement: A decade of experience*, London: BAAF.
- Gilbertson, R. & Barber, J.G. (2002) 'Obstacles to research involving children and young people in foster care', *Child and Family Social Work*, 7, 253-258.
- Hayden, C., Goddard, J., Gorin, S. & Van Der Spek, N. (1999) *State Child Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Heptinstall, E. (2000) 'Gaining access to looked after children for research purposes: lessons learned', *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 867-872.
- Minty, B. (1999) 'Annotation: outcomes in long-term foster family care', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40, 991-999.
- Pardeck, J.T. (1983) 'An empirical analysis of behavioral and emotional problems of foster children as related to re-placement in care', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 75-78.
- Pardeck, J.T. (1984) 'Multiple placement of children in foster family care: an empirical analysis', *Social Work*, Nov-Dec, 506-509.
- Rushton, A., Dance, C. & Quinton, D. (2000) 'Findings from a UK based study of late permanent placements', *Adoption Quarterly*, 3, 51-72.
- Schofield, G. (2002) 'The significance of a secure base: a psychosocial model of long-term foster care', *Child and Family Social Work*, 7, 259-272.
- Schorr, A.L. (2000) 'The bleak prospect for public welfare', *Social Service Review*, 74, 124-136.
- Scott, D. (2001) *Improving services for children and young people requiring placement and support services*, Retrieved on 17 August, 2003, from <http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/4A2567300078E04/BCView/B2EF93384F0BF84F4A256ADB001BE206?OpenDocument>
- Stone, M.N. & Stone, S.F. (1983) 'The prediction of successful foster placement', *Social Casework*, 64, 11-17.