

BOOK REVIEWS

Fostering attachments: Long-term outcomes in family group care

Brian Cairns

British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, 2004

It's not often that you can say 'this is a truly inspirational book'. However, this is one of those books.

Fostering attachments: Long-term outcomes in family group care is the account of how Brian and Kate Cairns became long term parents to fifteen children, three of whom were born to them and twelve who joined them between the ages of four and fourteen years. All fifteen are now adults and some are also parents themselves.

Brian and Kate Cairns were in their 20s when they decided that they were committed to combining 'the adventure of helping children to recover from earlier damaging experience with the warmth and spontaneity of family life' (p. 15). They chose to become parents to a large group of children, so that therapeutic networks of relationships and interactions could naturally develop.

The process of finding an organisation which would provide them with a suitable house and then becoming 'wardens' of a registered children's home is the prelude to the fascinating account of the children's background and arrival with the family (singly and in sibling pairs) over fifteen years between 1975 and 1990. Amazingly, both parents studied (social work) and/or worked during these years!

The care and thought which went into the planning for, and nurture of, this family is wonderful. For example, the author covers family celebrations (birthdays, Christmas, etc) in detail – what these can mean for children who have been abused, neglected and are separated from their birth families and how and why the family created their own traditions over time. The need for a soothing, yet robust, physical environment is also covered – 'the environment must be able to soak up hard physical treatment yet still look and feel welcoming, unthreatening, embracing ... colours should be uplifting but never harsh, lighting warm, textures soft and comforting' (p. 211).

The relationships amongst family members (between parents and children, siblings, extended family members and other important people in the children's lives) are discussed in loving detail throughout the book in chapters with themes such as health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development and self care skills. While Brian and Kate's birth children are intrinsic to every other part of the book, their experiences are also covered in a separate chapter, *The birth children*.

The author also writes about his and his wife's growing understanding that children try to 'recreate the old familiar chaos, to engender mistrust, to rediscover the pain of known horrors, more bearable than the bewildering nightmare of disorientation' (p. 33). There were some very hard periods for this family when 'the children's unhappiness could seem infectious, the strain of resisting it in oneself ... at times almost intolerable' (p. 29). At least one of the children 'was a grave risk to himself and to other members of the family ... he made serious attacks on each of them' (p. 29). And yet, this family persisted and thrived, often with little professional support.

Towards the conclusion of the book, a chapter entitled 'What's transferable?' discusses how this model of family care could become part of the choices available in child placement. The author covers recruitment of foster carers, professional support, group size and the physical environment.

Whether or not you believe that the model of care described in this book is practical and achievable, or alternatively impossibly utopian (I moved between both extremes), it is filled with insights about the needs of children in alternative care and the families who care for them. It is highly recommended for both carers and professionals in this field – and indeed anyone else who wants to be inspired!

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