

Providing a secure base in long-term foster care

Mary Beek and Gillian Schofield

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This book is very different from the book reviewed above, but no less interesting. *Providing a secure base in long-term foster care* is the report of the second phase of a longitudinal study of 53 children in long term foster care in the UK. Attachment theory is used as the theoretical basis for the study and the key concept used by the authors is that of foster care providing a 'secure base'.

The sample for the first phase of the study, undertaken in the years 1997 to 2000, consisted of 58 children under the age of 12, from eight local authorities. In this earlier phase, the children were grouped according to their behavioural and emotional responses at home and at school. These four groups were:

- 'Open book' – children whose feelings (both positive and negative) were open and easily displayed;
- 'Closed book' – children who did not display their feelings openly;
- 'On the edge' – children whose behaviour was distrustful, fearful and controlling;
- 'Rewarding' – children who appeared happy and successful (despite the same troubled backgrounds as the other groups).

The Phase 2 sample, on which this book is based, consisted of 53 children followed up in 2001 when they were between 7 and 15 years of age. At this time, placement stability was greatest for the 'closed book' group and least for the 'on the edge' group.

The authors held discussions with both children and carers. Discussions with children involved the use of 'story stem' narratives in which children are presented with dolls and the beginning of a story and invited to complete it. This process is 'designed to provoke an attachment-related anxiety that will lead the child to communicate something of their sense of the availability and responsiveness of parent figures' (pp. 40-41).

There is a chapter based on the findings for the follow up of children in each of the four original groups. These chapters have extensive illustrative quotes from the children and from their carers. The authors point out that overall, the four groups had become more like each other by this stage and that individual children had often moved away from their earlier grouping. In addition, some of the children followed up were no longer in a foster placement.

The chapters on the discussions with carers follow the four parenting dimensions described by Ainsworth et al (1971) – providing availability, promoting reflective capacity, building self-esteem and promoting autonomy. A fifth dimension was added by the authors – promoting family membership. These chapters also have extensive illustrative quotes.

The final chapters draw together the findings, not only on what a secure base can provide for children, but also on the importance of consistent and sensitive professional support.

This clearly written book has two major strengths. Firstly, the in-depth exploration of foster care from children's and carers' perspectives is of considerable relevance to the child welfare field in Australia. Secondly, the research itself has been comprehensively reported and is therefore a good example of how such a study can be presented. *Providing a secure base in long-term foster care* is recommended for both these reasons.

Reviewed by:

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REFERENCE

Ainsworth, M. et al (1971), 'Individual differences in strange-situation behaviour of one-year-olds', in Schaffer, H. (ed), *The Origins of Human Social Relations*, New York: Academic Press, pp. 17-52.

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