

RECRUITING, ASSESSING AND SUPPORTING LESBIAN AND GAY CARERS AND ADOPTERS

Gerald Mallon and Bridget Betts

British Association of Adoption and Fostering, 2005

In Australia, State governments tend to be silent on the issue of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive families. There are inconsistencies in the way individual states and community service organisations respond to gay and lesbian applications, and there is also a dearth of literature and policy in this area.

In Victoria, gays and lesbians are precluded by law from adoption. However, they are permitted to foster, if the agency is accepting of gay and lesbian applicants. Gays and lesbians are eligible to become permanent carers (within the provisions of the Victorian Children and Young Persons Act 1989), but only if the relinquishing birth parents agree. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of home based care programs are auspiced by religious organisations and current Victorian anti-discrimination legislation exempts religious community service organisations engaged in the care and education of children.

Very few Australian agencies publicly advertise for gay and lesbian carers for fear of a homophobic backlash from the general community. It is also of concern that some social workers may have personal biases or prejudices which could impede their ability to make non-judgmental assessments of gay and lesbian applicants.

Share Care (based in inner-city Melbourne) has had considerable success in specific recruitment within the Victorian gay and lesbian community. The majority of respondents are professional couples aged 35–40 years (equal males and females), who have been in stable relationships for 5–10 years. They may be interested in having their own family; considering long term and/or permanent foster care; or wanting to provide regular planned respite care one weekend a month.

Between 3% and 5% of the UK community identify as gay, representing a significant minority of the population. *Recruiting, assessing and supporting lesbian and gay carers and adopters* reviews the research and UK legislation and policy, as well as providing guidelines for conducting assessments of gay and lesbian people, and practical advice regarding working with gay and lesbian foster and adoptive families.

The authors express concern about the lack of policy to guide social workers in their recruitment, assessment and supervision of gay and lesbian foster carers and adoptive parents. They emphasise that, for most heterosexual people, fostering is their 'second choice' (after having their own children or accessing IVF treatment). However, for many

gay and lesbian people, fostering may be their 'first choice'. Social workers need to be sensitive to this fact.

This very useful resource also alerts social workers to beware of inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes and to avoid identifying sexual orientation as the sole aspect of identity. It also provides practical advice about appropriate use of language when working with and/or referring to members of the gay and lesbian community.

The UK appears to be much more progressive than Australia in recognising the rights of gays and lesbians to foster, adopt or create their own families. This publication is timely, given the fact that the UK government recently passed ground breaking legislation allowing gay marriage, adoption and access to fertility treatment.

In summary, this is a clearly written and very practical summary of the issues facing gay and lesbian foster and adoptive families and the agencies which recruit and support them. It is recommended reading.

Reviewed by:

Janet Elefsiniotis,

Share Care Team Leader

Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service

A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FAMILY PLACEMENT LITERATURE

Edited by John Sudbery, Stephen Hicks, Sheila Thompson, Hugh McLaughlin and Carole Bramley with Katrina Wilson

BAAF, 2005

This is an excellent resource for material published in the UK on out-of-home care between 1989 and 2004. The authors state clearly that 'literature from outside the UK has only been included where there are specific reasons to do so' (p. 2) – for example, where the international literature would provide a broader context for the UK or when there is a dearth of research on the topic in the UK. I only found one reference to Australian research (there are significantly more references to research undertaken in the USA).

The authors have compiled this bibliography in a variety of ways – through their own professional knowledge and networks; through other bibliographies; and through well known databases. However, they caution that any bibliography can never be exhaustive and that web addresses for on-line resources may well have changed.

The book is divided into broad subject chapters:

- Family placement – the current UK context
- Family placement in general
- Adoption and permanent foster care
- Different kinds of care arrangements

- Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability in family placements
- Attachment, therapeutic help and life story work.

Each chapter is divided into further useful sections – for example, the chapter on adoption and permanent foster care is divided into permanence; infant adoption; contact; birth family; search and reunion; support services; and books for children and parents/carers.

The book also contains author and title indexes for all entries.

Reviewed by:
Dr Cas O'Neill

RELATIVE BENEFITS ... PLACING CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE

Bob Broad and Alison Skinner

BAAF, 2005

Kinship care placements are steadily increasing in the UK as they are in Australia (see www.aihw.gov.au, Child Protection 2004-05, for the latest Australian statistics). I am currently undertaking research in Victoria with kin and kin carers and young people – and this book confirms many of my local findings, particularly those around finances; loss of independence for carers; the complexity of contact between children, birth parents and carers; and the need for different kinds of support.

Relative Benefits is aimed at professionals. It reviews the literature, summarises the messages from research and looks at the legal framework for kinship care in the UK. It then goes on to cover policy and practice issues; family support (including financial support); family relationships and contact; health support; education; and therapeutic work with kinship care families. It is firmly based in Bob Broad's research and is clearly concerned for the wellbeing of kinship carers and children. For example, the authors state:

All the kinship care research undertaken in the UK and USA indicates that kinship carers are materially disadvantaged and are in need of, and do not receive enough, support services (p.46).

One of the things I really like about this book is the way in which research findings, professional practice and consumer views are an intrinsic part of each chapter, with sections in each broad area entitled:

- 'Good practice principles'
- 'Kinship carers: what they think', with examples from the authors' research in the area.
- 'Local authority examples' – how different Local Authorities handle the complexity of their work in this area.

For example, in the chapter on contact between child and birth parents, one of the 'good practice recommendations' states:

Be aware that when kinship care grandparents ask for help from social services, they are likely to be in priority need, given the many deterrents which may prevent them making this request earlier, and should be responded to quickly (p. 75).

Similarly, in the chapter on 'support structures', the authors share a local authority's approach to devising a 'support plan', at the same time stressing the need for at least six monthly reviews of the plan (p. 47).

Australian professionals are likely to find particularly useful the sections on assessment:

- The discussion of why kinship care assessment is intrinsically different to foster care assessment (p. 23)
- Issues in assessing grandparents (pp. 29-32)
- Assessment of risk and protective factors (p. 40)

There are also good discussions on the issues around family group conferences (p. 25 and Appendix A) and working with kinship care families in therapy.

There is very little published research on kinship care in Australia, which makes this book both timely and useful.

Reviewed by:
Dr Cas O'Neill

ONE OF THE FAMILY ... A HANDBOOK FOR KINSHIP CARERS

Hedi Argent

BAAF, 2005

Reviewed in conjunction with:

WHEN THE CHILDREN ARRIVE

Mirabel Foundation, 2003
(www.mirabelfoundation.com)

One of the family is a comprehensive small book aimed at kinship carers and those who are considering becoming carers. I read it in conjunction with the excellent local resource book for carers *When the children arrive*, published in 2003 by the Mirabel Foundation in Victoria. While the two books cover some of the same ground, they also have some different emphases (as well as legal information which is specific to each country) and kinship carers would be well served by having access to both.

One of the family covers the reasons why children may need kinship care, the pros and cons of kinship care, the emotional roller coaster of becoming a carer in this way, children's needs and behaviours, and the kinds of support which carers are eligible for and may need.