

Children's voices

'Home is where their heart is'

Jenny Higgins and Lynette Buoy

This paper discusses the negative effects on children who are placed in out-of-home care and the need for early intervention and support for families to enable children to remain at home.

On Monday 16 November, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology to the half a million 'Forgotten Australians' raised in institutions across Australia. As we know, many of the children suffered ongoing abuse at the hands of those charged with providing for their care. Many were separated from their siblings and many never saw their families again.

Prime Minister Rudd's apology was not just to the 'Forgotten Australians', but to their mothers and fathers who were forced to surrender their children often because they were poor, or because they did not have the support they needed to continue to care for their children.

Prime Minister Rudd's apology for the plight of the children who suffered in institutional care, and of course the ongoing pain and suffering of the 'Stolen Generation' of Aboriginal children separated from their families, is a sobering reminder of how important the connection with home and family is to a child's wellbeing and identity. Some sixty years after being removed from their families and placed in out-of-home care, many 'Forgotten Australians' and members of the 'Stolen Generations' are still searching archival records for lost relatives and longing to be reunited with family members.

WHAT DO CHILDREN SAY?

The suffering and poor outcomes of children placed in out-of-home care is not restricted to past generations of care leavers. In a study that included the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care, when asked, 'If there was one thing in your lives that you could change, what would that be?', the children and young people did not respond with comments such as 'stop the abuse' or 'to feel safe'. Instead, the most common responses related to returning to family and community (Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield & Richardson 2007).

For many young people, being removed from an abusive parent meant separating from other loved ones such as siblings as well, and this caused great pain and loss for the young person, as the following quote illustrates.

I want to go back home to [name of township] to mum and dad. I miss my little brother and my mum and dad I love them so much ... I want to go back to [name of township] so my little

brother can be happy, he's lonely so I want to go back there (Girl in care, aged 13, cited in Higgins et al. 2007).

The above quote highlights how important a loving connection with family can be to a child, even when that situation can be abusive for the child at times. Current Australian research tells us that children in care have consistently poorer outcomes than children who have never been in care and experience significantly poorer mental health outcomes than children who have never been in care (Bromfield & Osborn 2007). It seems obvious that a child's mental health outcomes would be linked to their sense of belonging and feeling loved.

As the 'government parent', workers focus on minimising risk and keeping children safe, believing these are the most important priorities for children. But what children are telling us is that feeling they belong and living with people they care for and who care for them is more important than safety, stability, and an absence of risk. Even after years in care, children seek out and return to their families – they do not return to the Department of Human Services!

Australian and international research tells us that the most frequently cited messages from children in care are that:

- they want their views listened to and heard;
- they want to participate in decisions about their lives;
- they want their needs met as they defined them, including contact with their birth families and a continuing connection with others who are important to them (Higgins et al. 2007).

In a study by CREATE Foundation (2004), an organisation run by and for children and young people formerly or currently in care, four of the seven items that children and young people most wanted to change related to reunification or contact with their biological family members. These were:

- returning to live with parent/s;
- more contact with mum/dad/parents;
- to not be in care;
- more contact with siblings or to live with them. (CREATE Foundation 2004)

LACK OF SKILLS DOES NOT EQUATE TO LACK OF LOVE

Research shows that many parents whose children enter the child protection system lack parenting skills and support and resources, but they do not necessarily lack love for their child or the desire to be better parents.

In Victoria, there were 5,056 children aged 0-17 years in out-of-home care as at 30 June 2008 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009). Of course we know that many children placed in out-of-home care are there because their parents are not able to provide even for their most basic needs. But we also know that for many families whose children end up in care, had their families been provided with sufficient support early enough to prevent their situation from deteriorating, they may have avoided having their children removed and placed in care.

Well-known expert on attachment and bonding, Bruce Perry, believes that the majority of attachment problems are due to ignorance about child development rather than abuse (Perry, Runyan & Sturges 1998). An Australian review of out-of-home care research also found that the main reason for children entering care is a 'breakdown in parental performance' and that the families of children placed in out-of-home care are characterised by 'enormous stress' and inadequate parenting (Bromfield & Osborn 2007, p.4).

These findings offer hope and opportunity because they suggest that providing parents with appropriate information about child development and sufficient support to cope with their difficulties and improve their parenting skills could enhance bonding and attachment between parent and child, provide parents with the skills and resources necessary to become better parents, and enable children to remain at home.

PROVIDE EARLY INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES TO ENABLE CHILDREN TO REMAIN AT HOME

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is the peak body for over 96 community service organisations across Victoria. The organisations that form the Centre's membership have a long history of providing support services to families in need. It is the collective view of many of our member organisations, based on their experiences of working with vulnerable families, that providing early intervention services to families who are struggling is the best way to assist families to overcome their difficulties and to avoid children and young people having to be placed in out-of-home care.

Providing early intervention services from a strengths-based perspective that support and resource parents when they first present with issues will prevent family functioning from deteriorating to the point where tertiary service intervention is required.

This position reinforces the current legislative requirements outlined in the Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, which states:

- when determining whether a decision or action is in the best interests of the child ... he need to ... protect his or her rights and to promote his or her development ... must always be considered;
- the need to give the widest possible protection and assistance to the parent and child as the fundamental group unit of society ...;
- the need to strengthen, preserve and promote positive relationships between the child and the child's parent, family members and persons significant to the child;
- the child's views and wishes should be given such weight as is appropriate in the circumstances;
- the desirability, when a child is removed from the care of his or her parent, to plan the reunification of the child with his or her parent.

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FAMILY CONTACT AND REUNIFICATION

According to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, children in care are entitled to have regular access with their biological families with the aim of reunification. As the current access regime is structured, children and their parents have access according to what is decreed in their court order, but the quality of this access, and the degree to which it contributes to the capacity for reunification, is dubious. In many respects, access as it is currently structured is a missed opportunity to build parenting skills and support the relationship between parents and children.

A pilot program implemented by Gordon Care called 'Bridging the Gap – the Children's Access Program' found that access could be an opportunity for parents to seek and receive parenting advice and support from skilled agency staff in a friendly, safe environment. This was of great benefit to both children and their parents. Often parenting advice was sought out by the parent, and access staff observed a significant change in the way parents played and interacted with their children over time.

The program has been independently evaluated by Professors Thea Brown (Monash University) and Margarita

Frederico (La Trobe University) (Brown & Frederico 2009). Two of their key recommendations were that:

- a stronger partnership should be built between DHS and the agency around information sharing; and
- a mandated parenting support program should be built into access programs.

The findings are supported by a study conducted by Cathy Humphreys and Meredith Kiraly of the Alfred Felton Research Program on contact between infants in care and their parents (Humphreys & Kiraly 2009). The authors concluded that it was the quality of the access rather than the quantity which was most beneficial to infants, and that access should be supervised by specialised, skilled staff in an environment that supports the infant-parent relationship, strengthens the family and aims for reunification.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, children in out-of-home care resoundingly tell us that they want to be home with their loved ones. We as a sector need to provide early intervention services to support parents before issues become serious enough to warrant removing children from their homes.

Where children must be removed from their families, regular contact with skilled staff available in a supportive, non-threatening environment can enable parents to develop skills and build positive relationships with their children.

I leave you with the wise words of Krystal, a care leaver with CREATE:

Your mum is your mum – it's forever. If you can do something better than removing a child from their mum, why wouldn't you?

We need to look at the importance of trying to reconcile children with their families earlier, we need to stop and work out if we can rebuild families at the beginning, then they wouldn't need all these services at the end.

(Krystal, Care Leaver, CREATE Foundation.)

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