Out of Home Care: Perspectives on Support

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Cas has been interested in home-based care, both professionally and personally, for 35 years. Her most recent research (on kinship care and also on carers' time commitment to children) is reported in this edition.

All articles in *Children Australia* have strong implications for support of children. This is an area that most of us — writers, readers, workers and researchers in the broad area of child welfare — tend to be passionate about.

My own early journey in this regard was not uneventful, but it certainly changed radically when I became the parent through adoption of a child with special needs who joined our family at the age of almost 6 years. I had already parented biological children and had many years of experience as a social worker in this area. However, nothing prepared me for the rollercoaster of caring for a very troubled child who, for many years, did not want what we had to offer. I realised that whatever I knew through experience and reading was almost useless. Worse still, no-one else seemed to understand how to care for, and cope with, a traumatised child who looked very normal to the outside world. I became trapped in a spiral of not asking for support because my early attempts resulted in blank looks and comments such as 'but you knew what you were getting into!'

I emerged from this trough many years later, with not only a better understanding of my own frailties, but more importantly with a strong determination to provide better support to others on the same path. This has been an ongoing theme in my research and was also the impetus for joining with a group of like-minded people to set up the Post Placement Support Service (Vic.), which has recently been funded by a philanthropic consortium.

Support is an interesting concept — individually, we know what it is like when we receive good support and we assume, sometimes wrongly, that we know how to offer it. Albrecht and Adelman (1987, p. 20) describe givers and receivers of support as 'caught up in a web that is ongoing and dynamic in character', and which influences the attitudes, beliefs, emotions and behaviours of both parties.

Clearly, support that is offered may not be perceived as supportive by the recipient. Indeed, research shows that providers of support tend to assume that they are giving more than receivers think they are being given (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Receivers of support are therefore really the only ones who can say whether what has been given is supportive. Just as importantly, support is not static and givers' and receivers' understanding of support needs change over time (Hupcey, 1998).

Some of the themes which appear to be important to the process of support for recipients are:

- A sense of others simply 'being there' — interestingly, support that is *perceived* to be available is more consistently related to outcomes than support actually received.

- A sense of acceptance — the belief that others accept us as we are is strengthened when we see the support willingly given to us.

- Feeling heard without being judged (O'Neill, 2003).

In exploring how people experience support, the intrinsic connections between emotional and practical support, in particular, are inescapable. Receiving practical support is usually experienced as emotionally supportive, while receiving emotional support is likely to have practical benefits. Thus, while it may be useful to make distinctions between different kinds of support, it needs to be recognised that these can be misleading (O'Neill, 2003).

The challenge for all of us in the areas of child welfare, education and health is to provide a cooperative network of consistent practical and emotional assistance that supports children, their parents and carers.

The articles in this edition of the journal are all very topical and have many implications for the support of children. Interestingly, there are two articles that relate to residential care. This, of course, is a care option that has not been favoured in Australia for some time, but which is once again being considered as a result of decreasing numbers of foster carers, and children who present far more challenging behaviour than previous generations.

We begin this edition with a Commentary by Meredith Kiraly, reporting on some of the early data arising from research on family contact in kinship care undertaken by the University of Melbourne Alfred Felton Research Group. The research has involved a large survey of statutory carers that attracted 430 responses; together with focus groups and individual interviews with young people, parents, kinship carers and kinship support workers. Many of us are looking forward to the detailed findings of this important research.

The first article by Georgiana Cameron presents a detailed review of policy, practice and research relating to the experiences of young refugees arriving in Australia. The author notes that refugee minors are at heightened risk of social exclusion and mental illness and highlights risk and protective factors in relation to possible avenues of intervention. Potential supportive strategies, as well as directions for future research, are implicit within the discussion of how young people cope with integration of past and future.

Home-based care is generally understood to require considerably more time and energy from caregivers than is the case for children who are not in care and the second article provides evidence for this. The authors, Catherine Forbes, Cas O'Neill, Cathy Humphreys, Sue Tregeagle and Elizabeth Cox report on a project that quantified the amount of time, over and above 'ordinary parenting', spent by twenty-six foster carers and prospective adoptive parents of children during a 9-month period. It is hoped that these findings will be useful, not only in the debate about the decline in carer numbers, but also for agencies when they are recruiting, training and assessing prospective carers.

The third article, by Ian Milligan and Judith Furnivall, provides an interesting discussion on recent developments in residential care in Scotland. As discussed above, this is particularly pertinent to the current Australian context. The authors report that residential care has received strong government support over the past 20 years and that there is a significant focus on staff training and interprofessional collaboration. In particular, new specialist education and health services have been set up for this population of children. These are developments that we could well heed in Australia.

Our fourth article is by Sue Tregeagle, who presents the findings of research at Barnardos (NSW) on planned and unplanned placement changes in foster care programs. The frequency of unplanned changes in five programs over a 6-year period was found to be 2% of all placements, while the frequency of planned changes was 4.5% of all placements. The implications for support in this research are significant, both in terms of avoiding unplanned placement changes for children wherever possible, as well providing support to both children and carers when changes occur.

Residential care is the context for the fifth article, by Annaley Clark, who reports on therapeutic residential care for children and young people in Queensland. She examines three therapeutic models, the sanctuary model, the positive peer culture model and the dyadic developmental psychotherapy residential model, in relation to Anglin's theory of congruence, which is seen as a critical element of success for residential care services. Whether or not you favour residential care, this article provides a strong argument for having a clear theoretical basis to services.

Kith and kin placements are steadily increasing in Australia as they are elsewhere. Many of these carers are elderly and support is therefore a huge issue. The final article in this edition is by me. I report on qualitative research undertaken in Victoria with sixty-five kin and kith carers. The article reports on caregivers' views of family relationships, finances, relationships with government agencies, respite and peer support and distinguishes similarities and differences between the experience of formal and informal grandparent carers, nongrandparent relative carers and nonrelative carers.

This issue concludes with two book reviews, the first by Kathy Mendis who reports on a U.K. novel, *Control Freak*, in the form of a diary, about the move from foster care to independent living for a young girl. The second review, by Frank Ainsworth, is on *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, an account by a Chinese American mother of how she has raised her children in America in a way which clashes with the dominant culture.

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