The Value of External Support Services when Children Transition into Foster Care: An Example of a Volunteering Project

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When children are removed from their homes in an emergency situation they leave behind some or all of those familiar items they consider their own. The loss of this sense of ownership, combined with the shock of moving to an unfamiliar foster environment, can leave them afraid, traumatised and emotionally scarred. A group of volunteers addressed this by forming the Love and Care project in Brisbane, Australia. The aim of this project is to provide kits to children from birth to 17 years of age upon them being placed in foster care. These care kits, containing clothing, school supplies, toys and other items, fill a need for the children to have something they can hold on to and call their own. This paper demonstrates the value of an external support service that can play a substantial part in maximising better outcomes for children transitioning into foster care. It aims to describe the structure and practices of Love and Care and, from the lessons learnt through observation of the project practices that created and sustained it, to make recommendations. It also briefly addresses the importance of including external services in the evaluation and research of foster children's outcomes.

■ **Keywords:** Child fostering, external support services, volunteering, evaluation

Introduction

Frequently, when children are urgently removed from their homes they take few or no possessions with them. Many of these children are placed in foster care, which is a formal, out-of-home placement in which children receive care from families who are willing to provide an environment as close as possible to a regular type of home (Lewit, 1993). Children come into foster care for many reasons. Neglect – defined as any passive or active omission by a parent that is considered a failure to meet the fundamental needs of a child in his/her care to an adequate and appropriate level that causes harm (Australian Capital Territory Government Community Services, 2010) – is recognised as the leading reason for urgently placing children into foster care (Straus & Kantor, 2005). A long-term consequence of neglect is the development of insecure attachment relationships, affecting children's future relationships and cognitive development (Cole, 2005).

These, together with other factors, justify high levels of support during foster-care placements. Although the roles of social workers, the police and child protection workers are vital, external and anonymous support services play an important role in easing this transition. A successful transition is viewed by Cowan (1991) and Mitchell and Kuczynski (2009) as being highly dependent on the personal and social resources available. The loss of a child's needed and personal possessions is often unavoidable; therefore, any resources or services to remedy this are valuable in mitigating the many traumas children face when transitioning.

The Love and Care project was formed in Brisbane in 2005 to respond to this issue by providing children from birth to 17 years of age with Care Kits. These kits provide age-appropriate items for personal hygiene, clean clothes and other items. The purpose of these kits is to provide the children with something they can hold on to and call their own (Love and Care, 2014). As O'Neill (2006) states, foster-care families need extra practical and emotional support from many services, given our understanding that children

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in foster care experience profound consequences as a result of constant upheavals. Love and Care's kits are one way to provide this support, which addresses a need, often overlooked, that children who have lost possessions require things they can call their own.

The Role and Importance of External Support

To ensure that projects such as Love and Care succeed, it is vital to obtain and maintain volunteer support. The key quality a volunteer should have is the capacity to give practical support, time and labour, with an underlying sense of empathy and care. It is unsurprising that intergenerational volunteering is a major part of projects such as Love and Care. Older adults have altruistic motives for volunteering in these types of project, often based on what Gallagher (1994) describes as a decision to help based on love and affection, care and concern, which is not always regarded as something that can be measured. These motives can have a positive impact on the child's transition into foster care, and the support during, and post, placement contributes to minimising the child's negative experiences as effectively as possible.

Two examples demonstrating positive outcomes arising from intergenerational support to foster children are: The Foster Grandparents Program (FGP) in Arizona (Teh & Terry, 2005) and Generation of Hope in Chicago (Eheart, Power, & Hopping, 2008), both in the United States of America. These programs operate with a similar ethos to Love and Care, using an approach that encourages foster children to experience what it feel like to have a happy home with a sense of belonging and, importantly, feel that someone cares about them (Allen & Vacca, 2011).

In the first example, Teh and Terry (2005) described how older adults gave their time to tutor foster children in literacy skills. The neighbourhood where they did this was a lower socio-economic part of Arizona, where racism, alcoholism, abuse and other factors impacted on children's learning due to the disruption these caused. The volunteers paid special attention to understanding the needs of the diverse cultural populations, and developed a sensitivity and empathy towards the children. The researchers concluded that the easing of trauma experienced by the foster children was associated with the older person's presence, empathy and respect for the children's native language and cultural beliefs (Teh & Terry, 2005).

In the second example, from Eheart et al. (2008), the innovative practices of Hope Meadows had a significant impact on the lives of the older adult and the foster child. Older adults would move into subsided low-rent housing with the requirement they gave six or more hours a week of volunteering in child-related activities. This program eased the transition of children into fostering and adoption situations by providing supportive formal learning and social activities. The researchers argued that this support contributed to reversing assumptions of foster children as being victims and older people as being dependent and infirm, because the project created a therapeutic culture that eased the bad memories of the past and present of all involved (Eheart et al., 2008).

What these examples illustrate is that the lives of the older person and child are enhanced in a positive way by sharing time and skills. The child may develop feelings of comfort and security after the trauma of displacement, while the older person develops a sense of purpose. The compelling factors motivating those wanting to be foster parents or to support children during foster-care transitions, are the plight of children in society (extrinsic) and the foster parent's own need for personal fulfilment (intrinsic) (Daniel, 2011; Tyebjee, 2003). Relationship- and trust-building are crucial elements to cultivate. Mitchell and Kuczynski (2010) state that the stressful nature of disruption during transitioning means that the children may be unsure about how to relate to others and to interact with new people in their lives. External care and support, regardless of whether this involves direct contact with the child or not, makes a positive contribution to managing foster-care issues, because it demonstrates to the child that someone, even if they never meet, does care for his/her welfare.

While these examples of the enhancement of outcomes for foster children are from the USA, there are many organisations in Australia offering ancillary and external support services for foster children and families. Some examples in Australia include: OzChild, offering mentoring support; Marymead, offering respite care for families in a safe environment; Softacare, which offers arts workshops for children in care; and the Foster Parenting Organisation offering compulsory skills training for those wanting to be foster parents. The project, Love and Care, differs because it provides material and resource support rather than direct person-to-person support. However, it has been suggested that the project Love and Care could link with other foster-care organisations to provide much-needed material resources, as well as to share ideas, from an external perspective, about how to ease the transition process.

The value of creating, maintaining and funding external projects lies in providing the extra support that may maximise the child's chances of experiencing the foster transition as less traumatic. In protecting and supporting foster children in the community, Daro and Dodge (2009) state that a target audience must embrace and own any ideas and see tangible benefits for them, particularly in creating external pathways to support everyone in the foster-care process. The Love and Care project has been able to achieve this, although measuring and evaluating it, and other external non-direct support services' effects on easing child fostering transitions, has not been an area of in-depth exploration.

The Love and Care Project

The description of Love and Care and its practices are discussed in this section. These were gathered from

observations of work practices, informal interviews with volunteers and staff who administer the project, and by participation in the packing and sorting activities. Protocols were followed to protect informants' details and no children were interviewed. However, Love and Care is a publically visible project, so some details of location and its activities appear in this paper.

The project evolved from an incident in which its current director, who was working with Queensland child protection authorities, had children brought to her in the early hours of the morning with just the clothes they had on and no other possessions. She had the idea of creating kits with clean clothes and essential age-appropriate items, and discussed the idea with her local office of the Department of Child Safety. Despite initial limited financial support, in 2005 she began the project from her home with a growing number of volunteers. The contents of these kits are sorted into age and gender categories on one day, then packed into hand-made containers on another day. The majority of items, as well as transport support to deliver the kits to distributors to give to the children and their foster carers, are donated by the community, local charitable organisations and corporations.

The key purpose of the kits is to provide something the children can hold on to and call their own as they move into an unfamiliar environment with little or nothing from their previous home or birth family. Within each kit there are toiletries, activities, clothing and toys. A quote from the Love and Care website illustrates the rationale behind providing these kits (Love and Care, 2014):

> It is sad to see little children standing before you often with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. They feel lost, lonely and afraid and are often traumatised and emotionally scarred. These precious souls need love and attention immediately to lessen their pain. The people who care cannot be everywhere, but our love can be felt if we all work together.

Providing a kit suggests to the child someone is caring about him/her during the transitional process. As one of program managers stated, some garments and blankets are knitted and are soft to touch, the rationale for this being to encourage a sense of comfort and security, especially for younger children.

The project has links to individuals who provide practical help and are able to promote the program to donors. Having this is important for the long-term sustainability, credibility and visibility of the project. The patron is a local political representative for the area in which the project is located, while the project is under the auspice of, and guided by, the Inala Youth Service organisation and its Chief Executive Officer. Love and Care also has a director and a manager to guide any financial or other affairs that arise. The project's operations take place at the director's private home.

Some issues had to be addressed before the program became fully operational. Volunteers were not screened through a formal process; therefore, a high degree of trust

was given to them as they were coming into a private home to work. In addition, those who did not have security checks by Queensland Police could not attend any functions where foster children were present. To solve this issue, a local youth organisation offered to pay for these checks and over the years this has been taken up by many of the volunteers. Secondly, donations were sought from reputable organisations, excluding those that promoted or endorsed practices, or sold goods, considered inappropriate; for example, businesses selling alcohol.

The volunteers are predominantly older people living in the local community. Some have been packing kits and sorting donations since 2005, and are naturally enthusiastic about their contribution. Although no formal induction or training is given to volunteers, those who join are aware of what Schofield (2002) and Fernandez (2008) describe as common types of issues leading to the child having to be fostered – circumstances of deprivation and disadvantage with issues of neglect, violence, lack of stable care or maltreatment. Having an awareness of the complexity of issues that brings children into foster care is important so the volunteer can focus on the goal of maximising a positive transitional experience for the child.

The volunteers were not concerned about not meeting the children who received the kits. The sense of purpose and satisfaction was clearly expressed and it was no sacrifice to take half a day once or twice a month to do the packing and sorting. A comment one volunteer made reflected much of the group's attitudes towards Love and Care:

> "I get a sense of satisfaction. I like helping the foster children. It makes me feel I have a purpose. I'm helping to provide for people in need."

It is worth considering the therapeutic environment created by this project (Eheart et al., 2008), which begins with the creation of a culture of care in which participants know they are contributing to another's welfare. This gives the volunteer a sense of purpose in life, as well as feeling appreciated and acknowledged for any contribution they make to society.

The feedback the volunteers receive from managers and directors is important, and there has been consistent, positive feedback from the children and their carers about the kits. A question asked of the group was if they had an awareness of the impacts the craft items had on foster children in transition. This reply was typical of the feedback given:

> "We have heard stories of the good impact it has on the children. One such story was about a young boy who was given a blanket in his kit. He was told that he couldn't take it to school. He begged the teachers to let him take it because 'someone who loves me made it for me'."

Love and Care has received local media coverage as well as ministerial attention in the Queensland State Parliament. As a result, other organisations in Brisbane that involve older people, including aged care facilities, have also contributed

to Love and Care, for instance through monetary donations or by making craft items for the kits. The exposure has been successful, with one story in May 2012, published in the Inala area newspaper, resulting in large volumes of much-needed wool being donated to the project.

Implications for Practice and Research

The lessons learnt from Love and Care raise two key issues for effective child foster-care transitioning practices. The first relates to the practical aspects associated with organising and maintaining a project with little to no funding. The second issue concerns evaluating and measuring the outcomes of external services and their impacts on outcomes for foster children.

Creating a similar project requires willingness to network with government, the community and corporations to sponsor and donate to such a program. This is often difficult when little to no funding is available to start it. Continuously seeking new avenues for financial assistance, resources and new sources of donations is a constant challenge. To maximise the long-term success of the program, it is important to consider the following:

- involving local child agencies who manage child foster-care placements and being clear about the level of involvement of volunteers in the project, making sure that, if any face-to-face contact arises with a child, the volunteers and all involved have criminal history checks and have been issued with a positive notification, such as the Blue Card working with children system that exists in Queensland;

- obtaining a figurehead or patron, such as a local Member of Parliament or credible business person, to raise the visibility of the project and support its goals;

- succession planning of the management and directorship must occur to ensure that the project continues to assist foster children in transition;

- having someone who is willing to manage the necessary legal, project scheduling and co-ordination and administrative tasks, as well as building relationships and networks to further the project's aims;

- involving the local and other media appropriately, together with consideration of a carefully constructed website and other social media, noting these will need to be maintained as details change, which can be labour intensive;

- having up-to-date and adequate insurance to reduce risks, especially those associated with operating from a private home if there is no other available venue, including cover for occupational health and safety issues;

- willingness to critically review and evaluate the project and its work practices, in order to respond to changes in society and increased levels of child fostering placements, and making changes to practices if needed.

The authors also advocate that external services that provide a novel, but necessary, level of care be included in evaluating the outcomes of foster children's welfare. Assessing such external programs can be challenging. The descriptions of the programs mentioned in this paper were anecdotal, but did provide a description for the types of issues that may need to be managed. However, there is a lack of critical assessment of such projects, which are usually described in positive terms and not investigated for their limitations. The Berkeley School of Social Welfare (2005) argues that children come into foster care with numerous complex problems and it is difficult to determine whether such issues are improved or worsened by external and indirect care. Doyle (2007) states the difficulty of obtaining long-term data on foster-care transitions and placements means that outcomes are not always capable of being measured in a systematic way. Further, Barnardos (2011) argues that many factors should be included when measuring the wellbeing of separated children going into foster care, including all types of care responses. Finally, Vicary, Clare, Tennant and Hoult (2009) argue that to improve outcomes for children, the children themselves need to be included in focus groups and interviews, which itself raises a number of safety and ethical issues that need to be addressed.

By highlighting the practices of the Love and Care project, it is argued that, despite obstacles and challenges, particularly in funding projects that must operate on minimal budgets, it is a worthy endeavour to contribute to the transition process of foster children. The distribution of the Love and Care kits makes a symbolic gesture to children that they do have something of their own, at a time when much may be taken away from them. The authors urge more research into the value of external services and their impacts on child wellbeing, as we all seek to protect, nurture and reduce the negative impacts of experiences faced by children transitioning to foster care. However, such evaluative research remains a challenge.

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