

THE LONE FATHER AND HIS CHILDREN

An aspect of Family policy

BY ARNOLD J. KATZ



INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years the Australian family has again become a focal point for inquiry and intervention. Scholars and researchers, as well as the government, have suggested there has been a breakdown in Australian family life. This has brought in its wake a concomitant increase in divorce and separation, a surge of single parent families, and a decrease in the marriage rate. A broad range of activities has been initiated to both understand the parameters and substance of the subject, as well as to develop means of supporting and strengthening the family.

It has been stated "that the family is the basic organizing device of modern society and that all social policy decisions impinge on family well-being" (Axinn & Levin, 1975, p.2). It might be added that social policy decisions also aid in defining what the family is now and what it will be in the future. This point is conceptually both cogent and relevant since Australia has no deliberately stated family policy.

Part of the reason for lack of a family policy may be, as suggested by Kamerman and Kahn, that "plurastic societies may prefer to focus on specifics, not on overall policy perspectives" (Kamerman & Kahn, 1978, p.501). Therefore, in order to consider one perspective on family policy, this paper will focus on a specific population, the one-parent, male-headed family. In keeping with the dictates of Richard Titmuss that social policy is both action-oriented and problem-oriented, this paper will attempt to define and examine those aspects of lone fathers that are problematic, as well as further suggest necessary actions that might be structured to assist those families to become fully functional (Titmuss, 1974).

A GENERAL OVERVIEW

While the phenomenon of the single-parent, male-headed family is new, the idea of single parenthood is not. Long before marital dissolution and family breakup were the major

causes of single male parenthood, the vagaries of childbirth often resulted in the death of the mother. As the Book of Common Prayer stresses on various occasions, one must be aware of "the great pain and peril of childbirth."

The plight of the orphan is one of the great themes of Victorian literature, yet little appears about the high rate of maternal mortality or the resultant high rates of motherlessness. It is conjectured that part of the reason for this is that in the past the extended family absorbed motherless children. Historically there were reserves of unmarried women ready to step into the breach and become substitute mothers for nephews or nieces, cousins and younger siblings. The children might also have been parcelled out to relatives or neighbors. If there were no relatives available to help, the middle class father could cope with the help of maids and governesses. If all else failed children could be taken into care by the parish or the state.

Certainly in modern times much of the above has changed. For the most part, the mother's death at childbirth is a relatively insignificant factor, while the advent of the one-parent, male-headed family continues to grow. This growth has been as a result of separation, divorce, and desertion. The causes of motherlessness have changed while the problem of providing adequate care of the motherless remains. As a result of social and economic changes the former solutions stated above are no longer readily available or acceptable (George & Wilding, 1972.)

This means increasing numbers of children are being raised by a father alone. New roles will result which will have different meanings and outcomes to different families. The factors which affect its meaning and implications are varied. Much depends on the age of the children and the size of the family, or the cause of motherlessness and the events which preceded the mother's death or departure. Equally important are the proximity of kin and their ability to help, the quality of relations with neighbors, the availability of social

services, and the degree of understanding of employers. The father's income, the nature of his job, and the length and ability of the former marriage are also relevant. Motherlessness will unite some families; it will divide others. It may bring blessed relief to the father and a sense of a fuller life for the children or it may bring unrelieved tragedy. To some it will mean a combination of these — relief to the father and tragedy to the children, for example — and the results will be ambivalence and uncertainty of feeling. Some fathers are able to continue their employment and the pattern of the family's life remains outwardly unaltered. Some find it a struggle to combine work and the care of children but manage to do so. Others find themselves compelled to give up work, thus suffering a drop in income, and often weakening their own self-respect and risking the good opinion of their friends and neighbors who fail to understand their problems.

"The causes of motherlessness have changed ..."

To the children it may mean a rougher, harsher life without a mother. It may mean a father so busy with combining work and domestic duties that he is always tired and impatient and without time to relax with his children. For girls it means the absence of a model in the family. The loss of one parent, say Glasser and Navarre, "produces a structural distortion in the communications between the child and the adult world and, since such communication is a factor in the development of the self-image, of social skills, and of an image of the total society, the totality of the child's possible development is also distorted" (Glasser & Navarre, 1976, pp. 98-109).

THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

The phenomenon of the lone father has its beginnings in two general areas. The first (and foremost) is as a result of separation and divorce, with (physical and/or legal) custody going to the father. Demographic statistics suggest divorce is growing at an ever-increasing rate. In the early 1900's it was less than 0.1 per 1000 population, climbing to 0.3 per 1000 in the 1920's and following the English rate fairly closely. By the early 1940's the Australian rate was two to three times higher than the English rate (.57 per 1000) but by the end of World War II returned to their mirroring activities. This rate is far below either Western Europe or the United States (Borrie, 1957).

The reasons suggested for the comparatively low rates are both cultural and legal. Furthermore, McGregor (1970) suggests that the low official divorce rate cancelled a much larger de facto rate.

The legal difficulties in obtaining a divorce in Australia had held constant until liberalizing legislation was passed in 1959, followed by a total revamping of the law in this area incorporated in the Family Law Act of 1975.

Meanwhile the rate continued to grow. In 1945 the rate was .97 per 1000 (the postwar surge) followed by .90 per 1000 in 1950, .73 per 1000 in 1955, .65 per 1000 in 1960. It then began to reverse itself again with a rate of .75 per 1000 in 1965, .98 per 1000 in 1970, and 1.76 per 1000 in 1975.

Another way of looking at these figures is to determine the number of families headed by a single parent. In 1966 there were 111,000 single-parent families (a single parent with children). In 1971 this had increased to 123,000 families with 244,000 children. In 1976 there were over 25,000 divorces involving 24,700 children with 7608 children (30.7%) being awarded to fathers. A point must be kept in mind. Not all separations end in divorce, so at any given time there are far more single-parent families than the above statistics indicate.

Coupled with the increase in divorce is what appears to be further evidence of changes in social values and norms. The courts have changed their previous practice of automatically awarding children to mothers in all or almost all cases of divorce; since the early 1970's they have increasingly considered the father as a likely candidate for custody of the children. This has further accelerated with the 1975 Act and the development of the Family Court system.

The second major cause of lone fatherhood has been the death of the mother. Over the same 75 years cited above in reference to divorce, the rate of death of the mother appears to have remained constant, or even to have decreased slightly. Overall it appears that about 20% of the cases of single-parent male-headed families are the result of the death of the mother.

In 1960 it has been estimated that 7% of all single parent families in Australia were male headed. This grew to about 10% by 1970 and 17% by 1976 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1979). Estimates by some researchers suggest this figure could rise to about 30% by 1985.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON LONE-FATHER FAMILIES

While there is an extensive literature on the single-parent, female-headed family, there is a paucity of reported research on the male counterpart. Studies by Gasser and Taylor (1976), Orthner, Brown and Ferguson (1976), and Mendes (1976) in the U.S.; Ferri (1973), George and Wilding (1972) in England; and Todres (1975) in Canada, represent a majority of the material currently available. All (except the English studies) share some common short-comings, particularly if one wishes to use the findings as a basis for policy development.

The shortcomings are small samples (ranging from 20 to 72 families) and the use of non-probability samples. That is, because of the difficulty of finding these families, samples were generally

drawn from populations known to educators, social workers, physicians or other helpers. Other samples were developed from subjects who volunteered as a result of media appeals. In each case there is a strong selection bias introduced, but given the nature of the population being dealt with, it is difficult to suggest moderate cost alternatives.

Overall the studies do suggest that the fathers are doing a relatively good job in raising their children by themselves. Most authors mention the special types of physical, psychological and sociological (role) adjustments the fathers must make to carry out this new or dual role (both mother and father combined). The juggling of work and child-care arrangements tend to be a problem but not an insurmountable one. The development of new or continued person arrangements also seem to be an area of some tension, as is the area of dealing with daughters as they near puberty.

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Mendes in her study underlines the fact that "the role of single fathers is not yet institutionalized in culture. Consequently, a man who attempts to perform that role must do so without role clarity" (Mendes, 1976, p.436). This forces the fathers into making major readjustments and often results in the development of new areas of need, which are not always adequately met. Those areas examined in Mendes' research were the supervision and protection of children, homemaking, the emotional needs of children, and particularly the rearing of daughters in motherless homes. In each of these the author pointed out multiple levels of difficulty, especially in those families where there is a lack of help from

extended families or friends. These findings were verified independently in a similar study (Glasser & Taylor, 1976), while the work of Orthner, et al. stressed the more positive outcomes underlining both the satisfaction the fathers derived from the new role, as well as the success of their undertaking (Orthner, Brown, & Ferguson, 1976).

Todres and Schlesinger (1976), in reporting the Canadian studies, also point out role conflicts in areas of housekeeping and child rearing but add that "the breakup was upsetting for the children and that there were noticeable changes in their behavior, in some cases enough to necessitate a need for outside assistance" (Todres, 1975). This was also a finding in an English study (George & Wilding, 1972), where the areas of control and discipline were most often mentioned. The related research by Wallerstein and Kelly strongly supports this finding (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974, 1975, 1976a, 1976b; Wallerstein, 1977).

The Canadian and English studies also indicated significant numbers of respondents needing financial and other community assistance, particularly daycare or child-minding help so the fathers could continue normal patterns of employment. That these issues did not surface sufficiently in the United States studies further underline the skewness of these samples.

The Australian literature is equally limited. This author has been able to find reference to five studies. Three are quite limited in scope, with relatively small samples (Victorian Council of Social Services, 1963; Dorothy Goodrich, AASW, 1973; Andrew Darbyshire, Brisbane, 1975). C. Bain (1973) looked at the phenomenon in Victoria, while English et al. (1978) has published an extensive survey of all families including male and female single parents. This latter group has a more major publication tentatively scheduled for the end of 1979 which should be extremely helpful in looking at the single-parent experience from a comparative point of view (vis-a-vis intact families).

The first three studies (Darbyshire in particular) seem to have findings

similar to those cited above for other countries. Its limited sample (20) does raise validity questions, however.

Mary Jo Bane (1976) sums up the focus of needs in one-parent families in pointing out that "The loss of economies of scale [are] inherent in single parent families and the expense of daycare, home help, and difficult circumstances must be faced. It would appear, in short, that single-parent families need more income than they are capable of earning or collecting, at least during the difficult periods when children are young" (Bane, 1976, p.114).

THE CURRENT AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH

STUDY DESIGN. The material presented here was obtained from a volunteer sample of one-parent, male-headed families in Australia (i.e., families made up of children and a father gathered by the author). The population was drawn nationally from the membership of Parents Without Partners, and reflected weightings of both urban and rural populations. As will be seen, they reflect a diverse socioeconomic group, yet were close in distribution to the normal male married population of Australia. Nevertheless, for technical reasons the study population must be classified as non-probability sampling.

METHODOLOGY. A printed questionnaire was given to all fathers who volunteered in each chapter of Parents Without Partners in Australia. The distribution of questionnaires and instructions were given by an officer of the organization in each chapter. Upon completing the material the respondent placed the questionnaire in a previously addressed, stamped envelope; the envelope was sealed and returned directly to the researcher. The researcher had no direct contact with the respondents (except for a small group who later volunteered to present further in-depth material in a one-to-one contact with the researcher) nor was there any identifying material on the survey instrument.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POPULATION — FATHERS.

The total sample consisted of 409 single-parent males (7.9% of all lone fathers in Australia) drawn from all regions of Australia consisting of the following:

1. **Age** — The sample had ages extending from below 25 (2.7%) to 50+ (11.0%). The majority of the sample, however, were between 30 and 49 (62.3%).
2. **Employed** — 88.8% of those represented in the sample were employed at the time they filled out the questionnaire. 11.2% were unemployed (a total of 46, of which 40 were collecting unemployment benefits). At the time of the study the unemployment rate in Australia was 10.1%.
3. **Type of Employment** — Using standard Australian Bureau of Statistics Classification, it was determined that all groupings were represented in the sample. The largest single grouping was tradesmen (23.5%) followed by product process workers and laborers (14.4%) and professional and technical workers (13.2%). The two smallest categories were miners (1.0%) and Armed Services (0.5%).
4. **Income Range** — The income range extended from under \$2000 (3.4%) to over \$18,000 (4.2%). Mean income at the time of the study of \$6,356.

5. **Education** — 10.5% of the sample population had less than seven years of education, while 10% had 13+ years (2.6% with advanced degrees). The median educational level was 10 years.

6. **Marital Status** — At the time of the study 35% of the respondents were separated, 45.5% were divorced, 19.3% were widowed and 0.2% were never married.

Description of the Population-Children. Within the 409 families studied, there were 1,173 children. The following is a demographic breakdown on this group.

1. **Age** — 16% of the children were between 0 — six years old. 38.8% were between seven and 12, 33.6% were between 13 — 18, and 11.6% were 18 or older.
2. **Sex** — Male children made up 53.7% of the sample group while female children were 46.3% of the total.
3. **Current Education Status** — Of the 1,173 children, 73.6% were in school at the time of the study, while 26.4% were not.
4. **Those Not in School** — There were 290 children out of school at the time of the study. Of this group 35.7% were too young for school, 12.2% had dropped out but were not working, 41.6% were working and 10.5% were other (institutionalized, jail, traveling). These children, however, were still counted as being part of the family by the fathers.

EMPIRICAL DATA RELATED TO THE FATHER

LIVING SITUATION. By far the largest group were living in private homes, either buying them or owning them outright (60.0%). While the next largest group were renters (24.9% — 7.9% in public housing), only a small group lived with parents (6.6%). The rest had varying arrangements, from employer-supplied (in rural areas) to living with friends, or other. Comparing this group with the English study (the group they most readily compare with ethnically), we find only 34.5% living in private homes, while 40.6% lived in public housing, and 14.6% rented in the private market (George & Wilding, 1972).

CAUSE OF SEPARATION OR DIVORCE. As reported by the fathers in this study, 199 out of 329 (61.4%) who were divorced or separated stated that their wife's interest in another man was the cause of their divorce or separation. This was followed by the stated cause of "growing apart" (39.6%), lack of similar interests (33.2%), and sexual problems (20.4%). (It should be noted that multiple reasons could be indicated by the respondents.)

CHANGE IN WORK ACTIVITIES. Since becoming a lone father, 51.6% of the sample have changed the number of hours worked (to less hours). Of this group 70.6% stated the reason for this action was either the requirement or desire to spend more

time with their children. This is also supported by the statistic which shows that 77.1% have had to change their outside activities to spend more time at home, while 79.4% reported spending more time than before divorce or separation in activities with their children.

CHANGES ON INTERPERSONAL LEVEL. A large number of the fathers have reported changes in their interpersonal relations since separation or divorce. 67.7% report having new female friends, while 56.3% report new male friends. Couple this with a reported decrease in such activities as seeing friends (61.6% report less than before), viewing or participating in sporting events (79.4% report less than before), participating in political activities (95.5% report less than before), studying or going to school (94.8% report less than before). These changes appear to represent a significant change of activity since becoming a lone father.

NEED FOR HELP. When asked what kind of help they believed they needed at the time of inquiry, the sample responded as follows: 194 out of 409 fathers stated they needed financial help to maintain their household as it was before, 189 reported a need for household help, 90 for day-care or child-minding assistance, 81 for help with personal problems, 62 for employment-related help, 26 for assistance related to transportation or housing, while only 20 stated they needed no help at all. (Responses could be in more than one category.)

EMPIRICAL DATA RELATED TO THE CHILDREN

PROBLEMS WITH CHILDREN. When asked if they were having difficulty with the children, 152 fathers (37.2%) answered in the affirmative. When examining what type of problems were being experienced, 34.9% stated the problem related to household difficulties or lack of help at home on the part of the children. 24.1% of the group said the problems were related to behavior that was not acceptable or appropriate or related to issues of discipline (not obeying). 31.5% of the fathers reported the children were displaying school or health problems, while 9.5% of the problems seemed to relate to role model issues. Going further, a large number of lone fathers

felt they contributed to these problems, with 41.2% stating "there is too much pressure on me with both job and home to care for which leads to problems," while 36.4% of the fathers admitting that raising children was too much for one person alone.

THE SEARCH FOR HELP. The majority of fathers who had stated they were having problems also stated they have tried to get help (69.4%) generally from multiple sources. The largest number (95 fathers out of 102 who tried to get help) went to either the child's grandparents or other relatives. Of this group 36.8% rated the assistance received as helpful. The next largest group that the fathers turned to for help was friends and neighbors (61). This contact was rated helpful in 49.2% of the cases. The next largest help source was social workers (49 cases) with a helpful rating in 26.5% of the cases. Physicians were next with 41 cases and a helpful rating of 41.5%. Religious leaders followed with 35 contacts and a helpful rating in 14.3% of cases.

“There is too much pressure on me with both job & home to care for which leads to problems. . .”

THE TIMING OF HELP. Since the issue of the timing of help came up spontaneously in the in-depth interviews with a small sub-sample, no statistics are presented related to this issue. Yet since each of the fathers mentioned the need for early assistance, beginning in some cases immediately upon the filing of a petition for the dissolution of marriage, it was felt this was an important and often overlooked need. All of the fathers in the sub-sample five mentioned (without being asked or probed) that upon being awarded custody they had felt a need for either someone to talk to, some practical counseling related to managing the household, someone with whom to discuss the children, or a combination of all of these. The point

was that this service was not readily available and the fathers did not know who to turn to, even for information; in one case a father was told an agency would be glad to assist him if he would come to see them, fill out an application and then wait his turn on the waiting list — only about three/four months.

DISCUSSION

From the data presented there appears to be strong support for the contention that lone fathers are confronted with multiple difficulties in their attempts to raise their children by themselves. It is clear to this author that a series of interventions are needed to support these fathers. As suggested above, some type of counselling service offering supportive and practical assistance is needed very early in the divorce process or soon after the court has acted. Probably the best venue for this service would be an adjunct to the court, which would be readily available and part of the continuum of the legal process. The focus of the service should be concrete assistance, over a short time span, with referral to community-based service agencies for those families who would need more intensive long-term contact.

A number of fathers had pointed out in their general comments that since becoming a lone father the single most intensely-felt emotion had been one of loneliness. The data seem to support a view of a radical change in life-style with changes in friends, working patterns, and leisure activities. Activities such as Parents Without Partners fill some of this void but again some effort, perhaps as a follow-up service from the court or community-based service group (or initiated by the schools), could service as a bridging device. It has been pointed out that on the average lone fathers remarry in about 2 years and hence the service needs may well be short or medium term (Lewis, 1978).

It was initially surprising that such large numbers of fathers suggested that their greatest need was for financial help. However, when one begins to realize that many of those activities which were provided by the wife now must be purchased in the "market," the reasons are evident. One such area is daycare. While a majority of fathers in the study reported no cost for daycare (since it

was provided free of charge by friends or relatives), those who did have to pay for this service reported costs ranging from an average of \$20 per week for after-school care, to an average of \$40 per week for all-daycare. The range was from \$5 to \$70 per week. In those cases where the service included household assistance such as cleaning or washing, the costs were far greater still.

If the children become ill, forcing the father to take time off from work, he may find himself in an even more difficult financial bind. In some cases this might endanger his employment.

So while the costly issues of daycare and home help may be similar for both female and male single-parent families, the options currently available for males are severely restricted. This is an area that could use some new policy initiatives.

The popular press, as well as material presented in professional journals, have suggested that fathers can raise their children successfully by themselves. If one was to take the incidence of reported difficulties as an index, then clearly this study supports this contention. However, I would prefer to take a more guarded view. While there is nothing in this study to support a view that fathers cannot be successful lone fathers, a number of issues do suggest the need for further research in this particular area. I base this on a number of findings which, while not clearly related to one another at first glance, may require further in-depth inquiry. Mendes points out the lack of role clarity for lone fathers (Mendes, 1976). One would expect that any father who fought to have custody of his children would be reluctant to admit to not being able to cope. Yet in this study 37.2% did just that. While this is not a large percent, one must be careful not to label it as a sign of success. Couple this with the fact that almost 70% of those who admit to having problems also have attempted to obtain help. Perhaps a part of admitting one is having problems is the decision to get help. In other words, some fathers may not be willing to accept even to themselves that there are problems until they have also come to the point of being willing to search for help.

Another element is important here and must be underlined. In Australia

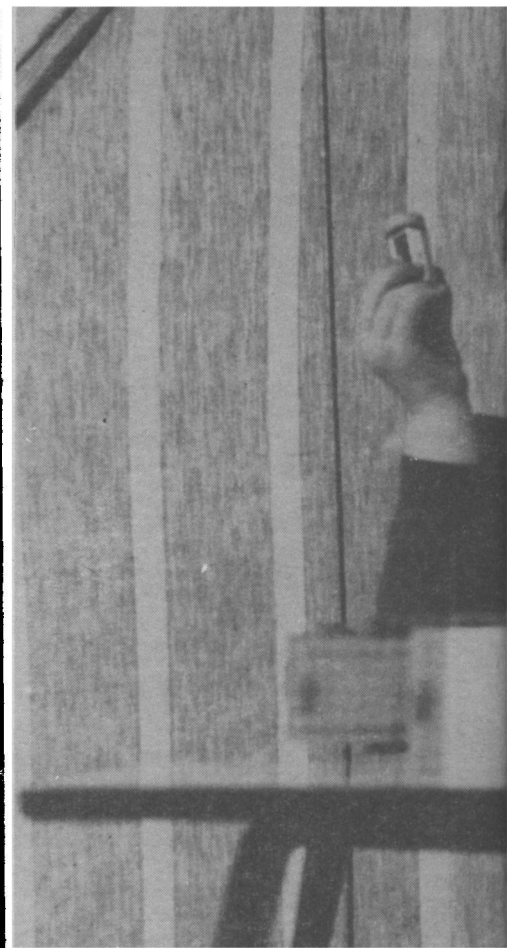
the cultural norm is for males not to complain or seek help, particularly for personal problems. This is communicated to boys in school as part of the socialization process and is personified in the male theme in Australia of "I'm all right, Jack." Given these expectations, it is somewhat surprising to find anyone admitting to problems. The point here is that we really may be seeing only the tip of the iceberg. Other researchers have reported the need for intervention with children during and after the divorce process and I would suggest that we do not have enough information yet to determine whether the outcomes are fully positive or not (see Wallerstein above).

As a related sub-theme to the question of problems, one must examine the efficacy of the intervention efforts focused on these problems. It is interesting to note that of those fathers who did seek help, professional help was not rated very highly. In fact, as often as not, the help was rated as not very useful or as a waste of time (46% for social workers, 43% for medical personnel, 60% for religious leaders). Some clues to the reason why the help offered was perceived as less than helpful may be found in the statement made by 48% of the fathers that school authorities had no understanding of what it meant to be a lone father. Clearly this suggests to me that some training is necessary for all professionals to help them understand the unique needs of lone fathers and their children.

CONCLUSION

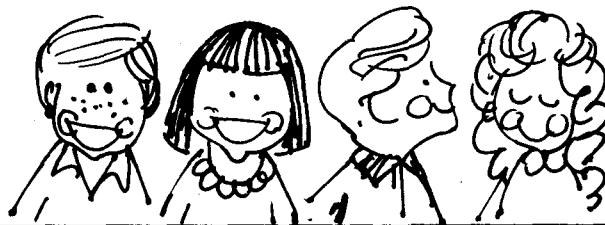
This paper has suggested that the lone father phenomenon is one that is growing and will continue to grow in the future. It also contends that the lone father is a unique individual, who may share some commonalities with female lone parents, but who also has a series of unique and poorly understood needs (poorly understood, that is, by the community and professionals). The research supports the idea both of raising further inquiry into the question of single-parent, male-headed families, as well as of structuring new policy initiatives and interventions in support of the lone father and his children.

REFERENCES:
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The U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare has just released for comment a Model State Adoption Act. Graeme Gregory, recently returned from a visit to the U.S., discusses the document against the background of adoption legislation and practice in Australia.

The number of children placed for adoption in Australia (and in virtually all other countries) in the 1970's was infinitesimal compared with the number placed in the 1960's. Nevertheless, we enter the 1980's with adoption remaining a major subject for public scrutiny and discussion. Several factors contribute to this interest. Adoption in the one "welfare" activity that touches the lives of the "non-welfare" public, in that it is still seen (unrealistically) as the first alternative for childless couples wanting a family.¹ The decrease in babies needing adoption reduces the number of couples who can look to adoption as a means of having a family and increases the public interest in this "rare



Pot

CARDINAL RULES IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN

- 1) Avoid cliches in conversations with children. Most adults are uneasy in talking with children and sprinkle their conversations with innocuous questions ("... how do you like school?") or gratuitous comments ("... you must like living here!"). Children are adept in sensing the uneasiness of adults who do not know how to talk with them. Take your time. Use simple and direct language.
- 2) Assume that any child experiencing placement has deep concerns which have never been adequately explored. Such children have lost a succession of caretakers, parents, family members, foster parents, institutional workers. With few exceptions, the children have had no opportunity to understand what has happened. It is always safer to assume that no one has adequately assessed the deep and often confused concerns of the child assigned to you.
- 3) understand that all children in care have been damaged. There is often the temptation to believe that a particular child is "unscathed" by chaotic life experiences. While it is true that individual children react differently to stress, it is unwise to conclude that the child displaying no apparent difficulty has been untouched by events. Anxiety, strain, and confusion often emerge much later in behaviours never before demonstrated.
- 4) Learn how the child explains himself and his situation to himself and others. Unless you have good basic understanding of his self image, you

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