



**FAMILIES HELPING FAMILIES**

**Australian Foster Care Conference —  
I.Y.C. Proceedings  
Sydney, New South Wales,  
September, 1979  
Published by The Children's Bureau  
of Australia  
1980**

This work is the proceedings of the Australian Foster Care Conference held in Sydney during September, 1979.

The conference covered all aspects of foster care including, academic, worker, foster parent, natural parent, through to the experiences of foster children and children with specialised needs. Throughout the conference issues relating to policies, procedures and practice were raised.

Speakers, from overseas and from each Australian state (except South Australia) included a range of those involved in the fostering process: workers, foster parents and a foster child.

As was the conference, the book is divided into five sections. The first, Families Helping Families, contains the general aims of the conference and the Opening Address by the N.S.W. Minister of Youth and Community Services, R.F. Jackson. In it, Mr Jackson states "This is a conference that will not only highlight, but will also be the highlight of this country's programme for the International Year of the Child". High aims indeed for a year where so much was promised, yet so little fulfilled.

Part II brought the opening address by Mary Reistroffer from the University of Wisconsin and was followed by four speakers each of whom touched on their particular involvement in the information flow so necessary between all parties involved in the fostering process. These speakers gave the conference its essential strength; namely practical, common-sense observations of fostering. Vicki

Rymer's "On being a foster child" while offering nothing new (or nothing most readers would not already know) did serve as a timely and sensitive reminder of the ultimate recipient of the foster workers' efforts.

Part III relates to issues of the child's identity in foster care and includes an interesting, and entertaining, play written and performed by a group of children in care. The book is worthwhile if for this section only — though when first performed it must have caused embarrassment in some quarters!

Part III also reports on the long discussion that followed the play and highlights the two themes that were developed: the child's need to find his/her own parent and know who he is in his network of relationships; and the child's need to be listened to.

Part IV covers fostering to meet particular needs. Possible difficulties between workers and families with specialised needs are discussed. Five common themes emerged during this part of the conference and though canvassed thoroughly in the book, they are worth repeating here:

- self-selection — foster parents' education into the job is replacing the notion of agency selection.
- collegueship — the need to emphasise the relationship between agency and foster parent.
- the foster child's future. necessary financial assistance. agency support and services — including foster parents access to the network of community services.

The last section of the conference covered the general area "The Foster Care Work" and includes specific sections on working together and quality of care. Mary Reistroffer took the major role in this section, speaking before and after the workshops

which covered topics of policy, procedure and practice as well as issues including evaluation, information sharing, foster parents' feelings about their work, training and availability of backup services and resources.

A foster care practitioner reading these papers will be frustrated at the lack of detailed practice issues. One thinks Mary Reistroffer must have had difficulty pitching her remarks given the broadness of the audience. (This, for instance, expressed itself in the need continuously to restate basic needs such as need for teamship, sharing of information between all parties, flexibility of programmes, etc).

The major drawback of the book, and something which the publisher could have covered, is the lack of any indepth analysis of evaluation of the conference as a whole. While the papers do illustrate the vast difference in programme standards and developments between States nothing confronts the major need to discuss ways of standardising practice — and this surely is something most practitioners desire.

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