

Horizons

child protection research

This edition of *Horizons* focuses on a range of issues associated with out-of-home care and reunification. Both these issues are central to our work and critical to the fulfilment of our collective responsibility as guardian to children in care throughout the state.

Some of the most profound insights offered to practitioners in this edition address these issues, including how important it is that we place children and young people with carers who are able to warmly welcome them into their families and provide a stable, supportive placement experience.

We must also remember that an out-of-home care placement does not bring to an end our efforts to act in the best interests of children and young people. We must remember that we can continue to support the growth and maturity of children and young people by actively encouraging positive relationships with members of their extended family, where appropriate.

Additionally, we find that for some parents who are misusing substances, intensive case management can assist attempts for family reunification. Reunification

Introduction by Robin Sullivan



itself comes under the spotlight with one of our authors clearly challenging reunification as a dominant ideology and urging child protection practitioners to consider the risks inherent in reunification.

Finally, we tackle one of the most scrutinised, challenging and disheartening areas of our role – mistakes in child protection. While acknowledging that some errors in judgement are inevitable, we can improve our responses to vulnerable children and young people by daring to change our assessments when new information emerges.

One of our practitioners suggests that ‘we begin the debate’ and I hope that this edition of *Horizons* will encourage you to discuss, modify and enrich your own practice.

Do you know these people?



All of these people are key presenters at the Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (ACCAN), to be held from 30 October to 2 November 2007 on the Gold Coast. See the back page for more information and website details.

Placement disruption and negative placement outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care: the role of behaviour problems

Sonya J. Leathers

Child Abuse and Neglect, Vol. 30, No. 3, March 2006

This study from the United States examined placement disruption and outcomes among adolescents placed in traditional family foster care.

The researchers analysed the theory that changes in placement could increase emotional and behavioural problems, particularly for children who did not initially exhibit serious emotional and behavioural problems when they entered care.

The young people recruited to the study were 12–13 years of age and were followed for a five-year period.

The researchers began the study with two theories:

1. Behaviour problems in early adolescence will be associated with placement disruptions and negative placement outcomes, and a foster parent's report of behaviour problems will be more likely to predict placement disruptions than a caseworker's report.
2. The extent that young people are integrated into a foster home will impact on the association between behaviour problems and placement disruptions.

Contrary to the expectations of the researchers, it was behavioural problems reported by caseworkers

that were most likely to predict placement disruption – not those reported by foster carers. Foster carers instead were more likely to predict negative placement outcomes for young people, including imprisonment, runaway status and institutionalisation.

The study found that young people who were less integrated into foster homes were more likely to experience placement disruptions but were not more likely to experience negative placement outcomes.

'... a youth's ability to form relationships with an unrelated foster family is a key factor in determining placement outcome ... placement with foster parents who do not facilitate a foster youth's integration into the family might increase behaviour problems ... these foster parents might display less warmth, involvement, and commitment to consistent parenting, factors that are clearly predictive of child behaviour problems.'

In conclusion, the researchers suggest that assessing a young person's relationship within a long-term foster home may be even more important than assessing behaviour problems when planning for services to stabilise placements.



Comment by

Dr Anne M. Butcher

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This article provides us with a timely reminder of the importance of matching children and adolescents with the foster carers with whom they are placed if longer term positive outcomes are to be had for them.

The findings of the study reinforces what those of us working at the frontline in child protection are keenly aware of – and that is that placement disruption for children and young people in care can have life long negative consequences for them. Interestingly, it was the child's caseworker, rather than their foster carer,

who was best able to predict the likelihood of foster placement breakdown based on the behavioural problems exhibited by the adolescent. Although, it was foster carers, rather than caseworkers, who were more likely to predict negative placement outcomes for adolescents in their care.

This article reinforces the criticality of matching children and adolescents to foster carers to give them the best possible chance of forming attachments and integrating well into the fostering family household if good placement outcomes are to be had. Also, the importance of both caseworkers and foster carers communicating with and listening to each other regarding the children in foster care is a key message from this research if good placement outcomes are to be had for children and adolescents in foster care.

The challenge for child practitioners in Queensland remains having a sufficient pool of foster carers from all cultures and socio-economic strata from which to draw to enable optimal compatibility matching to occur.

Integrating substance abuse treatment and child welfare services: findings from the Illinois Alcohol and other Drug Demonstration

Joseph P. Ryan, Jeanne March, Mark Testa and Richard Louderman
Social Work Research, Vol. 30, No.2, June 2006

The Illinois Alcohol and other Drug Abuse Waiver Demonstration Project tested a model of intensive case management for substance-using families in the Illinois child welfare system.

'Children of substance-abusing parents remain in substitute care for significantly longer periods of time and experience significantly lower rates of family reunification relative to almost every other subgroup of families in the child welfare system.'

Parents were randomly assigned to a control group or the demonstration group. Those in the control group received 'treatment as usual' while those in the demonstration group received regular services as well as intensive case management, which included comprehensive clinical assessments, advocacy, service planning, outreach and case management by independent 'recovery coaches'. Recovery coaches provided ongoing support to parents throughout

the duration of the child welfare case and worked on issues of housing, domestic violence, parenting, mental health and family support needs.

The project found that 12 per cent of the families in the demonstration group achieved family reunification, compared to 7 per cent of the families in the control group. The authors suggest that as the likelihood of achieving family reunification for substance-abusing parents is extremely low, interventions that can increase rates of reunification should be considered, even if such increases are modest.

The study also found that:

- Family reunification is even less likely to occur when parents are also involved with the adult correctional system.
- For many families, facilitating recovery from alcohol and drug abuse is necessary but perhaps not sufficient to achieving reunification.



Comment by

April Jeffries
Child Safety Officer
Child Safety After Hours
Service Centre



The authors of this article describe the increase from a 7 per cent rate of reunification (control group) to the 12 per cent rate of reunification for the families receiving 'recovery coach' services as 'modest'. I was quite disappointed at this result — hoping as I read for a much higher rate of successful reunification for the families receiving intensive case management services. This article was a reminder to me of what a powerful thing addiction is — so powerful that when parents are in the middle of something like a tug-of-war between drugs and their kids, drugs win over and over again.

I know that's a simplistic view and that the issue of recovery from addiction is far more complex than just

loving your kids enough to stop using drugs. That view in itself probably highlights one of the intended aims of the 'recovery coach'/intensive case management model — it integrates the goals of two separate services. Rather than the drug and alcohol agencies providing a service to the parents only and the child protection system looking after the best interests of the children, it offers a focus on the issues of the family in the context of treatment for substance abuse.

If we had a service in Queensland that offered something similar, for example a holistic clinical assessment, assistance to parents to ensure they get the services that match their need, support in their own home, support on-call 24-hours-a-day, specialist staff to engage 'hard-to-reach' parents and someone who shares information to inform child protection decision making — I would feel confident that the family had been given a great opportunity to address the issues that led to the children being removed from their parents' care.

The authors do comment that 'no single intervention will resolve all the issues associated with reunification for substance abusing families'. I think this is important for us to remember in our case planning with families, so that we set realistic and achievable goals that genuinely support the overall goal of reunification.

Contact with family members and its impact on adolescents and their foster placements

Sue Moyers, Elaine Farmer and Jo Lipscombe
British Journal of Social Work, Vol. 36, No. 4, June 2006

This British study describes the contact young people in care had with their families, its impact on them and their foster families and how it changed over time.

‘... a number of studies are now beginning to suggest that contact ... is a complex phenomenon that needs to be re-appraised if it is to be better managed ...’

The findings of the study demonstrated that the majority of young people in care experienced considerable problems in their contact with their families.

For example, the foster carer for a 17-year-old said: ‘[Darren gets] upset when arranged meetings fail. He does not control himself. He will punch walls, jump up and down like a two-year-old displaying tantrums and become very withdrawn.’

Another carer commented: ‘occasionally he is ostracised by parents when he does something they disapprove of ... on occasion, even whilst home for the weekend, parents have not spoken to him.’

The study found that contact difficulties and difficulties in relationships between the young people and their

parents contributed to placement disruption. Over half the placements in the study broke down when there were contact problems, compared with less than a quarter when there were no contact difficulties.

The study found that young people who had beneficial contact with someone in their family network were more likely to show improvements in their wellbeing than those who had no beneficial contact.

The researchers suggested that relatives, particularly maternal grandmothers, may be a key source of stability and continuity and may counteract the troubled relationships young people experienced with their parents. It appeared that when young people were able to talk about their past experiences and troubled family relationships with their carers or others, their placements had better outcomes.

Importantly, where child protection workers were aware of problems in contact arrangements and took action, changes in contact usually resulted in definite improvements for the young people and their placements. The article clearly recommends that contact arrangements for young people need both careful planning and vigorous review.



Comment by

Elicia Doty

Senior Practitioner
Logan Central
Child Safety Service Centre



The study is directly relevant to our current case management practices, specifically when organising contact between adolescents and their family.

The key points that I took away from this study were that the quality and quantity of contact both with their immediate and external family members impacts on young people’s perception of themselves, their placement stability and their ability to develop and maintain positive family links.

As a result, it is vital that we have a clear understanding of the purpose of contact, maintain clear boundaries in relation to contact, regularly review the contact within our case planning processes and carefully consider the feedback from carers, young people and family members when making decisions regarding contact.

Careful and proactive planning to encourage positive contact will enhance young people’s ability to confide in their foster carers, to learn how to develop meaningful relationships and increase their sense of belonging both within their placement and within their family structure.

I am proud to be a departmental officer, knowing that current departmental policies reflect the current research findings particularly in relation to case planning and contact practices.

Literature search – Placement breakdown for kinship carers and relationship between kinship care and its impact on rates of reunification

The summary below is based on a review of 15 articles published between 2001 – 2006.

Most articles reviewed suggested that there was limited research examining kinship care in detail, with some suggesting that there was a lack of research examining the effectiveness and impact of kinship care on children.

The literature review found that kinship care tended to be more stable than non-kinship care, and that children in kinship care experienced fewer placement changes. Researchers also reported that kinship carers seemed to view foster children in their care more positively than non-kinship carers.

Researchers suggested that kinship care was an important option for permanency planning, with some suggesting that while kin carers may be content to have children with them on a permanent basis, they were not interested in adoption or the ‘termination of parental rights’.

Studies examined indicated that children in kinship care were likely to remain in care for longer periods of time and return home more slowly. They found that once home, children in kinship care placements were less likely to re-enter the child welfare system.

However, one study suggested that a sizable percentage of children placed with relatives did not stay with them or return to their biological parents, but returned to the child protection system.

The literature reviewed suggested that the primary reason for disruption in kinship placements concerned relationships with, and influence of, the biological parents.

The articles included in this newsletter are available for departmental staff from the Information Resource Unit (IRU) library.
You can request copies of any of the articles by calling the IRU on (07) 322 46046 or by emailing infodesk@cscentre.qld.gov.au



Comment by

Leanne Black
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There appears to be little research on the specific issue of reunification rates. However, some studies, like this one, are finding that the rate is lower for children placed in kinship care.

It appears clear that kinship care is more stable, but there is little exploration as to why. The suggestion is made that there are lower numbers of children in kinship care placements and this in itself may lead to increased stability.

Interestingly, there appears to be changes in the stability of kinship placements at different time intervals in the placement (that is, greater stability at the initial phase of the placement).

One of the implications for practice which can be drawn from this literature search is the importance of case planning around parent contact in kinship placements. Studies cite the relationship between parents and kin caregivers as the major cause for disruptions in kinship care. This further supports the need for robust case plans which detail exactly how contact between parents and the child and the caregivers occurs.

Avoidable & unavoidable mistakes in child protection work

Eileen Munro

British Journal of Social Work, Vol. 26, pp. 793–808, 1996

Common errors of reasoning in child protection work

Eileen Munro

Child Abuse and Neglect, Vol. 23, no. 8, pp. 745–758, 1999

Both of these articles were based on Munro's examination of 45 publicly available reports on inquiries into child abuse deaths in the United Kingdom from 1973–94. Munro argues that some mistakes in child protection are unavoidable because of the complexity of the work and the limited knowledge base available about some families.

'In the difficult area of child protection work, [child protection] workers are fallible. They cannot make the "right" decision in any absolute sense. Judgements and decisions can only be the 'best' on the available evidence. As the case progresses and new information and ideas are received, judgements have to be reviewed and sometimes changed. [Child protection] workers therefore often have to recognise that their former views were wrong — although reasonable at the time they were made. In this sense, "mistakes" are an inevitable part of practice and recognising them is an essential element of good practice.'

Munro suggests that the most striking and persistent criticism in the reports she examined was that professionals were slow to revise their judgements. Where the initial assessment was accurate, child protection workers demonstrated adequate to good practice. However, when the assessment was not accurate, professionals were criticised for not considering opposing evidence.

Munro suggests that time restrictions came not from the nature of the cases but from work conditions. Heavy workloads and little supervision made it hard for child protection workers to reflect on their work and

carry out further investigations and checks.

Written information was less likely to be considered than verbal information. For example, at case conferences, significant written evidence was repeatedly overlooked in preference for direct reports from those present.

The primary analysis suggested by Munro is that humans as a whole tend to pay attention to evidence that support beliefs rather than the evidence that challenges them.

'Research in psychology has shown that people are not, on the whole, rational thinkers who have occasional lapses. Instead, they tend to prefer imperfect but easier ways of reasoning.'

Munro suggests that maintaining good records enables access to the necessary data about the past history of families and addresses issues associated with the fallibility of human memory.

Strategies that enable practitioners to change their mind should also be implemented. For example, in case conferences and discussions, workers should be encouraged to articulate the opposing point of view of cases. Munro suggests, however, that evidence indicates that case conferences or case reviews are problematic settings in which to expect constructive criticism to occur because groups tend to lean to conformity. One-to-one professional supervision is seen as a better context in which to expect a systematic and critical review of a case.



Comment by

Vicki Quadrio

Zonal SDM Coordinator
Northern Zone



Although these articles relate to an examination of British inquiries into child abuse deaths, it highlights extremely relevant issues pertaining to child protection in a Queensland context.

As a practitioner, it is impossible to reconcile the death of a child. Working in child protection, we are faced on a daily basis with the possibility of missing some crucial information when working with a child and their family which may contribute to them being harmed, or worse, die.

These articles discuss the complex nature of child protection work. Inherent issues such as time

constraints, lack of resources, high caseloads and a lack of opportunity to critically reflect on practice in an often crisis-driven environment were noted. What I found most enlightening was the acknowledgement that inquiries did not expect workers to be infallible, but were focused on professionals learning lessons from the tragedies.

A number of themes which attributed to the death of a child were identified in the articles, including the criticality of revising assessments and altering judgements when necessary, collecting all relevant pieces of information from a number of sources when undertaking investigations and assessments, reading files and previous histories, critically reflecting on practice, and ensuring that views are checked against a broader range of evidence.

The second article was of special interest as it discussed the difference between analytical and intuitive reasoning in child protection work. It placed importance on utilising risk assessment instruments, though not as a replacement for professional judgement. Both articles were extremely valuable to read and related to child protection practice in a Queensland context.

Family reunification: Rhetoric and risks

Brenda Clare

Children Australia, Vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 19–25, 2002

The article acknowledges that a dominant idea in child protection is reunification — that the return of a child to parental care should be the ultimate goal for all children placed in out-of-home care. However, the author suggests that there are risks in adhering to this ideology, and that once children are returned home, many workers are unwilling to remove them again, even under circumstances similar to those that prompted placement in the first instance.

Two key reasons for the difficulties inherent in reunification are offered, including:

1. Reunification work is at the highest-risk end of child protection and there are inherent difficulties in mobilising and motivating parents.
2. We cannot know for certain how parents and children will respond to reunification and whether parents will continue to cooperate.

Clare quotes Gelles (1993) who argues ‘child protection and child advocacy need to replace family reunification as the guiding policy of child welfare agencies. Child welfare workers need to “listen” to the action of maltreating parents ... With some kinds of child maltreatment, one strike is sufficient to warrant terminating parental rights’.

Four strategies are suggested as central to the success of reunification including:

1. Placements made for protective reasons need to be explicitly and repeatedly explained to parents.
2. Plans for reunification should be initiated as soon as possible after placement.
3. The focus needs to be on where in the family the child would be safest, rather than assume that reintegration into the family of birth parents is the ‘best’ solution.
4. Workers involved in reunification should receive training and supervision.

Clare concludes the article with implications for practice. She suggests that policymakers and practitioners must clearly articulate their purpose in reunifying children with their families. Similarly, decisions about reunification need to be explicitly justified for each child rather than become routine goals that are governed by procedure. Decisions in child protection are necessarily complex and fraught and as there can be no objective, value-free criteria, the theories, principles and ethical frameworks required clear articulation.



Comment by

Peta Densmore

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Chermside

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‘Reunification’. What is it? What does it really mean? What impact does it have on all parties involved? This article invites us to challenge the concept of reunification as we commonly know it within the field of child protection and encourages us to enter into an informed debate about reunification in the hope to address these questions.

As a practitioner for seven years, I possess very established views and opinions about reunification based on my practice within two very different child protection systems — Queensland and the United Kingdom. This article challenged me to

broaden my perspective of reunification, highlighting that while the concept of reunification can have many ‘shades of grey’, it can be equally ‘black and white’. This article served to reaffirm the beliefs that I previously held.

It is very clear that there is not enough dialogue about reunification, the pros and cons, the lack of research — and it is a matter the author wants rectified. Reunification is a process/event that we assume as child protection workers we should all be working towards. At other times we don’t want to have to make the hard definitive decision about a child not returning home to prevent looking like we have failed.

This article argues that there are some incidents of abuse or scenarios that don’t warrant parents getting a second or third chance and that reunification poses its own risks and can have implications for all involved. These need to be examined before we automatically pursue reunification as an option.

So, let’s begin the debate ...



ACCAN 2007 is coming to the Gold Coast!

11th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect
Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre

Tuesday 30 October to Friday 2 November 2007

www.accan2007.com

The *Voices Calling for Action* conference will bring together around 1,000 professionals, researchers, practitioners, service providers, and government and community agency representatives from across the Australasian and Pacific regions. The focus is on current information relating to research findings, service developments, contemporary practice and associated professional issues for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. The involvement of young people will be a feature of this conference.

Chaired by **Julie McCrossin**, media identity and ambassador for the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN), the conference will feature leading international and Australasian presenters, including:

- **Dr Michael Little**, Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago, and Dartington Social Research Unit (UK)
- **Muriel Bamblett**, Chairperson Secretariat of National Aboriginal & Islander Child Care Inc (SNAICC)
- **Dr Marie Connolly**, Chief Social Worker, New Zealand
- **Professor Dorothy Scott**, OAM, Director, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia.

To register interest, present a paper or exhibit, go to www.accan2007.com

Child Safety Research Conference

Session presentation slides from keynote addresses, examples of good practice and working sessions and the report on the inaugural Child Safety Research Conference held in November 2006 and are now available at www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/department/events/research-conference/

Child Safety Research Register

The Research Register lists the active research projects that are currently approved and supported by the department. It is made available for the information of child protection workers, researchers, academics and members of the public. The register is an avenue for those interested in research on issues of child protection to liaise directly with researchers to seek information and exchange ideas. It is maintained by the Strategic Policy and Research Branch and is available at www.childsafety.qld.gov.au

Smart State PhD Scholarships

The *Growing the Smart State PhD Funding Program* is designed to support doctoral research at Queensland universities on issues of relevance to Queensland and to inform public policy development. The Department of Child Safety has submitted priority research topics to the program. Details will be available on the program's website www.premiers.qld.gov.au/policy/research/phdfund/ from June 2007.

The program provides competitive grant funding of up to \$5,000 per year for up to three years to selected PhD students enrolled in Queensland universities. Funding is available to support specified research costs including equipment purchase or leasing, travel and other costs which are incurred as part of the PhD research being undertaken. As well as receiving funding, successful applicants are individually linked with a Queensland Government officer for mentoring and support.

Horizons is developed by the Strategic Policy and Research Branch.
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