WHAT MAKES A GOOD FOSTER CARER?

RESEARCH FOCUSING ON THIS TOPIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF

"INVESTIGATING THE EDUCATION, TRAINING AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF FOSTER CARERS"

This paper has been prepared by Anne Butcher based on her doctoral research for a short personal presentation at the CROCCS Conference "Protecting Children - What Works" at Shingley Beach, Cannonvale, Mackay on Saturday 9th August, 2003.

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

For the past two years I have been undertaking doctoral research on the topic of "Investigating the Education, Training and Support Needs of Foster Carers". Education from the point of view of understanding what the current levels of educational attainment held by foster carers are, training from the perspective of learning about what training has and hasn’t been offered to, or taken up by, foster carers and what training should be offered, in what format and structure and at what level/s. I also sought to find out whether training should be accredited and if so whether that training should provide for the transportability of any qualification/s gained.

My research it is due for completion by the end of April 2004.

The ultimate goal of my research is to improve the quality of foster care provided to all children in the out of home care system in Queensland through exploring what foster carers and a majority of other ‘key players’ in this field believe makes for ‘good foster care’. A broad range of views relating to the education, training, and support needs and requirements of foster carers has therefore been undertaken as a key focus of this inquiry. This research began with foster carers own views then broadened to seek expert opinion from leading social science educationalists and practitioners from within the fields of social work and psychology to identify what they believe makes for good quality foster care for children who have experienced varying degrees of abuse and/or neglect. Equally important was the need to gather a broad range of perspectives from a number of other ‘key informants’ including State and National peak organisations representing the interests of Indigenous and non-Indigenous foster carers, alternative care agencies, foster children, training organisations and a number of other significant bodies in this field.

Then, in light of the findings from all of these sources, recommendations will be put forth in a final report to the Department of Families regarding how Departmental policies and practices in the areas of training and support for foster carers can be improved.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research has been conducted using a multi-method approach. Primarily the use of
collect, collate and analyse the data. Although, data analysis is still ongoing and therefore not yet complete. Alternatively, it has also been important to incorporate some quantitative methodologies for the purpose of collating data relating to the demographics of the foster carer population and in drawing statistically significant inferences from the data.

THE SAMPLE

The sample for this study comprised 40 foster carers from the Mackay, Whitsunday and Bowen areas of North Queensland. This figure included 27 Non-Indigenous foster carers and 13 Indigenous foster carers across all three centres. At the time that this stratified random sample was selected these figures equated to the statistically equivalent percentage of the total foster carer population of Indigenous and Non-indigenous foster carers in each of these locations.

In addition to the interviews with foster carers. I also sought the views of 20 other ‘key informants’ and social science ‘experts’ as identified below.

- Foster Care Queensland
- Pathways Alternative Care Service, Mackay
- Australian Foster Care Association
- Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
- Mackay Aboriginal & Islander Foster and Alternative Care Service
- Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Association (Qld)
- Mackay And District Australian South Sea Islander Association
- CREATE Foundation
- An interview with a former foster child
- PEAKCARE (Qld)
- QDoF staff - a Manager, a Team Leader and an FSO
- Qld Commission for Children and Young People
- Qld Children’s Services Tribunal
- Life Without Barriers
- Volunteering Australia
- Volunteering Queensland
- Qld Community Services and Health Industry Training Council
- Central Qld Institute of TAFE
- Social Work and Psychology experts

I have also consulted with all State and Territory Governments in Australia regarding their current status relating to foster carer training, also with the Fostering Network in the UK, with other internationally renowned researchers in this field in the UK as well as with the Child Welfare League of America. It has been very important to gain an international perspective of issues relating to the training and support of foster carers.

3. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

As I have already stated this research is currently at the stage of undertaking data analysis and as this is not yet finalised I am not in a position to comprehensively report on the findings from the study. However, what I am able to do is to highlight for you some of the ‘stand out’ statistics, themes and trends which I have noted from my interviews thus far from two of the sampling populations. Firstly, I will present information which relates to the foster carer’s data and the other is information gathered from the social science experts in this field about what, in their opinion, makes for ‘good’ foster care.
FOSTER CARER DATA

- The average age of all foster carers interviewed was 46.2 years and the average age of the relative foster carers was 55 years.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

- Primary and secondary school educational attainment levels of all foster carers ranged from year 5 to year 12 with the overall average being 9.6 years of schooling.
- 6 or 15% have never attended any post-school training at all on any topic (4 have done some foster carer training while 2 have never had any post-school training or foster carer training at all).
- 8 or 20% of foster carers have completed some form of tertiary training, e.g. associate diplomas, diplomas or Bachelors degrees (in areas such as teaching, child care, residential care, business, and nursing).

FOSTER CARER TRAINING

- 20 foster carers or 50% of foster carers had no initial training to prepare them for their fostering role prior to taking their first child. Of these 8 or 20% did their pre-service training after about 12 months of becoming a foster carer while the remaining 12 or 30% have never done any pre-service training at all although some have attended other one-off training sessions on specific topics.
- 6 or 100% of relative foster carers (3 Indigenous and 3 non-Indigenous) have never had any preservice training at all and only one has ever had any training (two sessions in behaviour management).
- Relative foster carers stand out as the most disadvantaged in terms of access to information, training and support.
- Indigenous foster carers felt there needed to be a stronger emphasis on cultural considerations within any training offered. Otherwise the training needs of Indigenous foster carers were very similar to those of non-Indigenous foster carers.
- Almost all foster carers said they would like some or more training and that they would like any training they do to be accredited and recognised in other States.
- Most foster carers said more specific and specialised training would be helpful to them in their role.
- Barriers to attending training mainly involved time of day when training was offered, child care, transport, and the financial costs which foster carers have to meet to attend training.
- Incentives to attend training included: flexibility of times when training is offered, mode of delivery of training, the topics need to be of interest to them, whether child care was
training and/or an attendance payment being made to them in recognition of the time they contribute to attend training.

**SUPPORT**

- Foster Carers with Pathways felt they were already adequately supported by their support agency, while Government and Indigenous foster carers generally felt they were not adequately supported by their respective agency.

- Indigenous foster carers, Government foster carers and relative foster carers wanted more contact, support and training with either their respective alternative care agency and/or their Departmental case manage.

- Most foster carers were not clear about their rights and entitlements and wanted more information about these things.

- Many foster carers said a 24 hour helpline to call for practical advice when it was needed would be very helpful.

- Many foster carers said they would like more respite so they could spend time with their own children and families.

- Many said they would like more social contact with other foster carers.

**AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

- Most foster carers interviewed were reasonably satisfied with the current fostering allowances being paid although many said they would like it to be increased to meet the 'actual' costs of caring for the child so they are not out of pocket with expenses.

- Many foster carers want more information from the Department about a child or children at the time of them coming into their care.

- Most foster carers felt they had enough opportunity to be involved in case planning discussions and meetings but felt their opinions were not valued or taken seriously by the attending Departmental officers.

- A recurring theme was that most foster carers felt undervalued by most Departmental officers but they believed that the community valued the work that they did as foster carers.

As stated above these are simply some of the stand out themes from the research to date and they should be read with this in mind. More thorough data analysis is presently underway with the findings due for release early in 2004.

However, the findings presented below form the collated data from my interviews with two respected social science experts from the areas of social work and psychology who have a long history in practice and academia relating to field of child protection. They are not named in this paper and will not be, which is in keeping with the confidentiality agreement of this research with all research participants. Presented below are their opinions of what makes for a 'good' foster carer in the areas of knowledge, skills and personal qualities.
What foster children need in a foster carer?

The social science experts were asked to identify the 'essential' and the 'ideal' in each of the following categories. They each concluded that they could not separate the essential from the ideal as this would be to accept a lesser standard than what they consider to be absolutely necessary for any child in foster care. These are presented in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• About the Department and the child protection system</td>
<td>• to listen and communicate effectively</td>
<td>• to be saints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• legislative and case responsibilities</td>
<td>• take the time to learn about the child they are caring for</td>
<td>• have to like children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• case information about the child’s history</td>
<td>• to not make assumptions about what the child needs but listen to the child</td>
<td>• more than just a job but need to have a personal commitment to children and/or families</td>
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<td>• knowledge of child/human development</td>
<td>• to be good behaviour managers</td>
<td>• to be serene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the importance of the child’s previous emotional contacts and experiences</td>
<td>• to be flexibly consistent in their approach</td>
<td>• tolerate ambiguity and difference</td>
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<tr>
<td>• how a child’s experiences are going to impact upon their development, e.g. their ability to form relationships with foster carers</td>
<td>• help to integrate the child into the foster families sub-systems</td>
<td>• humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• formal training in and a working knowledge of attachment theory</td>
<td>• to foster a sense of belonging</td>
<td>• to be inspirational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• understanding how abuse and/or neglect impacts on children</td>
<td>• help the child fit within other systems, e.g. school, community</td>
<td>• flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• understanding about a systems view of the world</td>
<td>• recognise what’s special in each individual child</td>
<td>• a sense of constancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• understanding of disability</td>
<td>• help children to reach their fullest potential</td>
<td>• capacity to reach out even if not getting anything back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the importance of education and health care in the longer term</td>
<td>• know appropriate ways of interacting with children across the ages</td>
<td>• long term commitment to the child even after leaving care</td>
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<tr>
<td>• issues relating to leaving care</td>
<td>• to foster a therapeutic environment within the foster home</td>
<td>• need to be secure in themselves to not become overly attached and 'grabbing' the child for themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• need to understand that they may always be a significant person for that child or young person.</td>
<td>• act as child’s advocate</td>
<td>• people who communicate strength, support and stability by just the way they are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• capacity to relate to the child’s birth family to work towards reunification</td>
<td>• acceptance of short term placements becoming a long term placement</td>
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</table>
When asked what could be the consequences for children in foster care if foster carers didn’t have these attributes, they commented:

"well I think they probably range from children’s lives (and) children’s capacity to develop into their full potential is either not improved or made worse" (personal interview, 26/02/03).

And another: "The worst would be a child for whom that first experience is compounded by a whole lot of other series of rejections and not being good enough and being ripped out of other foster homes so I think that is why it is such a big big decision to take a child into care because we have a system that can’t necessarily guarantee something better"

One concluded by stating:

"IT’S A TALL ORDER. IT’S A TALL ORDER FOR ANYBODY"

These experts thought that formal training was necessary for foster carers and that such training at a minimum should be pitched at a university or TAFE level Associate Diploma or Diploma with opportunities to undertake more advanced and specialist level training affording them greater knowledge and higher qualifications. It was suggested that such foster carer training should be offered as a modulised system where foster carers can choose to enter and complete relevant modules then exit when completed with the option of re-entering training at various points along a training continuum each time upgrading the knowledge, skills and qualifications gained.

As this aspect of the research is still subject to rigorous data analysis these findings must be read as preliminary. Formal research findings in these and many other areas of this study will be put forth with recommendations to the Queensland Department of Families by mid 2004 based on valid findings when full and complete scrutinisation of the data has been completed.