

The Needs of Children in Care

Developing a model of out-of-home care to meet the needs of individual children, through participatory research including children and young people.



because
children
matter

Background

- A collaborative research project between *UnitingCare* Burnside and Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.
- The project was funded for 3 years, commencing in 1999, by the Australian Research Council's Strategic Partnership with Industry - Research and Training (SPIRT) Fund.
- A qualitative, action research project involving children and young people and other Burnside out-of-home care stakeholders.

Aims

- To contribute to improving out-of-home care service provision to better address the needs of individual children and young people.
- To identify ways of involving children and young people in decision-making about out-of-home care.

Who was involved?

Some of the children and young people in Burnside's out-of-home care and other adult stakeholders:

- 47 children and young people (8 -18+)
- 10 birth parents
- 34 carers
- 20 workers
- 4 Senior Managers

Overall findings

The needs of children and young people in out-of-home care as defined by them are:

- Emotional needs
- A need for some control in their own lives

Findings - emotional needs

- Maintaining connections where there is familiarity and/or something in common is fundamental for meeting emotional needs. Children and young people define such connections more broadly than do many adults.
- The particular connections valued by children and young people are those where:
 - there is something in common, a knowing or familiarity
 - there is continuity
 - there is reciprocity.
- Siblings and friends are generally very important although adults do not always identify their significance.

Findings - emotional needs

- Relationships with birth mothers are intense, complex and change over time.
- Relationships with fathers are generally non-existent or hostile.
- Pets and places can be more important to children and young people than adults recognise.
- Feeling loved and having someone 'there for them' are important to children and young people.

Findings - agency/power

Children and young people told us that:

- exercising power in their everyday lives is fundamental for meeting their everyday needs.
- *... Because then we get a kid's point of view, from where they are standing, which might be different to where someone else is standing.*
- choice in, and some control of relationships is particularly important.

Findings - emotional needs and agency/power

Children and young people are very aware of lacking agency/power within their own lives.

Their experiences of powerlessness relate to a lack of influence over what happens in their lives.

Findings - emotional needs and agency/power

- **Feelings of powerlessness were expressed as ‘a lack of voice’**
- ***When you go to school when you are little and they say ‘oh where did you get all those bruises from?’ you say, ‘Oh I fell down the stairs’ because you’ve been trained to. You’ve said it so many times that you just come to think I have to say it.***
- ***When we told our mother about it (abuse) she goes ‘don’t be so stupid’, that sort of stuff.***
- ***..because you are scared of them. You don’t know what they might get angry about. Interviewer: Who might get angry? The carer or the other person. They might be really caring people but you might think oh, if I ask this they might take it wrongly or something or you think they might get aggro....***

Findings - emotional needs and agency/power

- **Feelings of powerlessness were compounded by not being heard by adults**
- ***No one takes you seriously. Like the police, when you talk to the police they did not take us seriously. They ask us about 10 times the same question like we were going to change our story or something. They kept asking thinking it was funny.***
- ***.....they shouldn't have just put us in there and left us to talk to these people. Especially when they didn't take us seriously.***

Findings - emotional needs and agency/power

Feelings of powerlessness were also compounded by being excluded from decision-making about their care

- ***I wish people (in the agency) would listen to me***
- ***The other relatives that I did stay with I didn't like and they knew that when I got there. But they (DoCS) still sent me there...I told them I didn't want to go. They should take notice of you or take it into consideration.***
- ***Well I hadn't seen them for 3 years. I kept asking DoCS and they didn't want me to see them.***

Findings - agency/power: adult focus

In this research, adult stakeholders generally focus on children and young people's future in contrast to the focus of children and young people on their presents.

Generally the adults:

- assume that children and young people are vulnerable dependents who require that decisions concerning them be made by adults acting in their best interests.
- emphasise that children and young people need to be disciplined and socialised to become appropriate citizens in the future.

Findings - agency/power:adult focus

However some carers and workers:

- do acknowledge children and young people as competent actors in their own lives
- are concerned that children and young people are often not included in the decision-making affecting their lives and
- they are uncertain about how to provide such opportunities as they feel powerless to influence the system of out-of-home care for this to happen

Supporting children and young peoples' voices in out-of-home care decision-making

**Children and young people are asking for some control in their lives.
They want:**

- **to have a say in decisions relating to their everyday lives not just about major events**
- **to engage in decision- making with those who are familiar to them**
- **to have opportunities for negotiating with those making decisions that affect them**
- **to be provided with specific information when requested**

For more information

Download the full report from www.burnside.org.au
and www.uws.edu.au/schools/ashs/sjsc

To obtain a printed full report or summary contact
Naifee Younan, *UnitingCare* Burnside
nyounan@burnside.org.au

Professor Jan Mason jan.mason@uws.edu.au

Christine Gibson cgibson@burnside.org.au