

SEPARATION AND RETURN

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LOST IN CARE - 1986

- 1986
- First follow-up evidence of children in care
- Evidence of drift: no contact with birth family relatives and no permanency in placement

CHILDREN IN CARE - 1

- Studies showed enormous variety of backgrounds and needs
- Stereotypes re offending, abuse questioned – no dominant characteristic
- Common experience was SEPARATION

CHILDREN IN CARE -2

- Interest in separation – War time evacuation, nurseries, hospitalised children
- Several studies of separation published – Rutter, Hall, Fanshel
- Effects of separation debated but generally agreed that context is important

CHILDREN IN CARE -3

- Children in care faced additional separation problems because:
- Family structures likely to change while they are absent
- Children move around which make it difficult for relatives to keep in touch
- The secondary problems of adjusting to separation displaced concerns with those that necessitated separation

CHILDREN IN CARE -4

- Family structures were complicated and fluid.
- Children related to a series of households
- Wider kin (including siblings) ignored
- Relationships with and risks posed by different relatives varied
- Danger that children were double victims – of abuse/neglect/disadvantage and loss of their birth family

CHILDREN IN CARE -5

- Research studies found that access (who sees whom, where, how often etc.) is different from contact which has dimensions of belonging, identity, claims by virtue of role and possessions
- There were many informal barriers to contact (e.g. distance, procedures, attitudes)
- The problems of maintaining emotional relationships at a distance seemed underestimated
- A solution to difficulties raised by contact was to reduce it, exacerbating the child's risk of DRIFT.

By 1990

- Contact with birth family a right which may need to be controlled rather than a reward or privilege
- Issues of access included in court decisions

- BUT, child abuse concerns made professionals cautious about family contact

CHILDREN IN CARE -6

- Longitudinal studies revealed disadvantages faced by children in care and high levels of return to birth families
- Return often by default or in absence of other alternatives

CHANGES SINCE 1990

- More aware of risks of returning children to abusive families
- New problems such as substance abuse that affect parenting capacity
- Children from poor homes and facing temporary family breakdown no longer come into care, so the care population as a whole presents more complex needs; there are fewer short-stay admissions

RECENT RESEARCH - 1

- Is return home always in the child's best interests?
- – it depends on how they are treated, how young people see themselves and ways that others perceive them and interact with them, e.g. are they perceived and treated as ordinary children, do they perceive themselves as going to school, behaving well etc
- Yet, only about 10% of long-stay children over 5 want to be adopted, yet half wanted to stay in foster care but also see their birth families

RECENT RESEARCH -2

- So children's preferences vary:
- Return home and cease contact with foster carers
- Return home but maintain contact with foster carers
- Stay with foster carers but have frequent birth family contact
- Remain in foster care with little/no contact with birth family

RECENT RESEARCH - 3

- Varied approaches – yes, but
- Those who returned tended to do worse than those who did not, at school, in terms of re-abuse, behaviour problems and some (23%) come back into care.

RECENT RESEARCH -4

- Most children want more contact with birth families, but they distinguish with whom, why and by what method.
- But if there is evidence of previous abuse, reabuse and return breakdown is more common

RECENT RESEARCH - 5

- Outcomes for children depend very much on setting – whether it provides supportive key relationships and a social environment that offers a meaningful and enjoyable role.
- Plus the child's ability to use and encourage such support – their attachment status and temperament
- Experience of one setting will only influence another if work is done to make the setting adapted to the needs of the child, the experience helps the child adapt better to the new setting,
- or both

RECENT RESEARCH -6

- So, yes, family contact is associated with return home; distance is associated with low contact; prohibition of contact limits it

RECENT RESEARCH -7

Supports previous work:

- Continuing importance of birth family relationships
- Family work might bear fruit re outcomes
- Compatible roles (e.g. success at school) are important in successful return
- Crucial step is for children to free themselves of families but not be rid of them, self perception as a separate positive identity
- FINALLY, WHAT ELSE IS THERE IS THE LONG-TERM? The birth family is often the only continuity

RECENT RESEARCH -8

- Recognise that some children do better in care than at home
- More mid-way positions, shared care
- Recognise that any return is difficult and obviate difficulties by specialist practice
- Greater success will only be achieved from experiment, there is no 'off the shelf' model

RECENT RESEARCH -9

Adoption Studies:

- Adopted children have changed in the last 30 years (older, already in care etc.)
- In 80% of cases, there is some contact between adoptive and birth families but details are vague
- No evidence that contact is a risk factor in terms of attachment, adoption breakdown but is obviously so if the child does not wish it or demonstrates feeling by their behaviour

RECENT RESEARCH - 10

- For some children, only adoption is appropriate
- For others, only foster care is appropriate
- For others (majority) a family that can meet their needs and which offers stability
- Child's sibling and birth family contacts are often sacrificed to meet adoption targets

RECENT RESEARCH -11

- We also have to bear in mind the difficulties of restricting contact in this age of
- emails
- mobile phones
- digital cameras

RETURN – A NEGLECTED ISSUE

- High numbers of looked after children return to live with relatives or to live in their home area
- Return is the most likely thing to happen to a child in care
- While separations are well managed, return is often ignored and left to take its course
- This can have serious consequences for services and child outcomes, as in therapeutic community example

RETURN -2

Return cannot be understood in isolation; it is a process not an event

The are seven episodes in the return process:

- The initial separation
- Subsequent changes in family structures
- The point at which return becomes an issue
- The point at which return happens and early days at home

RETURN -3

- The honeymoon period
- Acrimonious negotiations between family members
- The point at which a new modus vivendi is established

RETURN -4

- Three issues important in the process:
- Continuity
- Territory
- Role

RETURN -5

The success of return depended on:

- The child's right to territory in the home
- A place in a family that has some identity as a family
- Commitment to return among professionals
- Integration into school and peer group

RETURN -6

- The remedy for return difficulties is further separation
- Some groups of children have more chance of return than others, and of going home successfully
- Attempts to predict who goes home and the success of return are incorporated in the Dartington Practice Tool – *Going Home*

PRACTICE TOOLS

Details on www.whg.org.uk

Practice Tools

- Clinical Tools for Individual Child
 - PaperWork
 - Threshold
 - Prediction
 - Going Home
- Management and Planning Tools
 - Matching Needs and Services
 - Aggregating Data
 - Structure Culture and Outcome
