

**BOOK REVIEWS**

Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in Long-Term Foster Care and Adoption

Nina Biehal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker and Ian Sinclair (2010). London: British Association for Adoption & Fostering, ISBN 9781907585012

Reviewed by Kathy Mendis, MSW and currently a PhD scholar at La Trobe Rural Health School, Bendigo.

Belonging and Permanence reports the findings of an English study that compared three types of permanent placement for children in public care, or 'Looked after Children' as they are referred to in the UK. The book adds to the series that brought together the research studies in the Adoption Research Initiative (ARI), a program that has been set up to examine the impact of the United Kingdom's *Adoption and Children Act 2002* and various related policy issues. The authors are well-known in international child welfare circles, particularly Ian Sinclair, Nina Biehal and Claire Baker, whose works have been widely cited in the child welfare literature.

The book targets researchers, managers and practitioners in the child welfare field. The authors are currently working, or have previously worked, at the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York. The study discussed in this volume was a follow-up investigation extending earlier research known as the York Study; the latter being conducted by Ian Sinclair in collaboration with Claire Baker and other colleagues (2005a, 2005b, 2005c). Clearly a comprehensive study that was longitudinal in nature, the investigation described in this publication used both quantitative and qualitative approaches and a significant sample size. The sample included children in different types of placements from seven diverse English authorities, using data gathered by the children's adopters/foster carers and social workers, as well as managers of related children's services and fostering and adoption agencies, and children themselves. The book provides a comparison of the pathways and outcomes of three types of permanence for children who entered care — adoption by strangers, adoption by carers and long-term foster care — and uses data from the York Study as a baseline measure. A group of children in unstable foster care was also included in the study in order to make comparisons more meaningful.

The book commences with an executive summary of the key findings of the investigation and is followed by sev-

enteen chapters that each takes a specific topic or theme. At the end of each chapter there is a concise conclusion highlighting the important points pertaining to that chapter. This is helpful as it allows readers to have a quick scan or revision of the important points in a particular chapter. The first two chapters set the background to the study and the third chapter explains the designs and methods applied in the collection and analysis of data. The remaining chapters are dedicated to discussing the key themes that the authors wanted to explore, these having emerged from the process of data analysis. The themes explored are: children's pathways through care, what influenced the decisions about adoption, the behavioural and relationship difficulties of children in each type of placement, the children's participation and progress in education, the nature of children's contact with birth families and the stability of long-term foster care and adoption.

A stand-out feature of the book is its particular attention to the methodological issues informing the study. The measures, techniques and procedures used to collect data and how the data have been analysed are carefully described, if not in the text then in footnotes and appendices. Limitations of the study are also carefully addressed. This ensures a high level of transparency and increases the validity and reliability of findings. The book is written in straightforward, clear language though it would be an advantage for readers to have some quantitative research knowledge to assist in comprehension of the analytical aspects of study. Nevertheless, as a whole, the book is easy to read and understand and clarity is provided by the use of tables that add to the understanding of readers, even if they are less adept in quantitative methodologies. The layout of the book is also impressive.

The central aim of the book is to discuss how best to meet the needs of children who cannot safely be reunited with their parents. This discussion includes addressing the issues of how to provide emotional and legal security, a sense of permanence and belonging and achieve positive

outcomes. The book provides important new evidence on the outcomes of different types of placements and argues that long-term, stable foster care has a higher likelihood of a positive outcome. To support this claim, the authors provide quotes from the children's own accounts of belonging and permanence. This makes the chapter titled 'A sense of belonging' especially interesting to read. One exciting and encouraging finding is that, despite being placed at an older age, the children in long-term foster placements have done as well as the adopted children on measures of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Nevertheless, the authors argue that adoption should be encouraged as it gives legal security in addition to emotional security for children in care.

Though conducted in the UK, the issues discussed in this book are relevant to the Australian context. Given the dearth of Australian empirical research with regard to children in public care, it is a welcome addition that boosts our Australian child welfare resource base. Moreover, given

the much publicised current political debates in Australia over the wellbeing of children in care, this publication is timely, providing guidance as to the ways in which the wellbeing of children in care can be improved. In conclusion, the authors offer exciting new insights into the lives of children in care and their journeys through permanent placement which, I believe, should be read by the policy-makers and practitioners alike who wish to contribute to the wellbeing of children needing out-of-home care.

References

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Understanding and Working With Parents of Children in Long-Term Foster Care

G. Schofield & E. Ward (2010). London: Jessica Kingsley, ISBN 9781849050265, £22.99, pp. 224.

Reviewed by Dr Frank Ainsworth, Senior Principal Research Fellow (Adjunct), School of Social Work and Community Welfare James Cook University, Australia

This book reports on a qualitative English study of 32 parents who between them had 130 children, of whom 90 had been 'looked after' at some point. Separately funded parallel studies were also conducted at the University of Bergen, Norway and the University of Gothenburg, Sweden (Schofield et al., 2010).

In 10 chapters the book covers the following topics — 'Parenting before the children went into care', 'Parents' experience of their children going into care', 'Parents' experience of their children growing up in foster care', 'Contact between parents and their children', 'Parents' relationship with foster carers', 'Parents' relationship with social workers', 'Am I still a parent? Managing a threatened identity', 'Social workers' perspective on their work with parents', and a final chapter on 'Developing social work practice'.

Apart from some recent studies — Clary, Klease, Thompson, Thorpe, & Walsh (2007), Harries (2008), Holmes (2009) and Ivec, Braithwaite, & Harris (2009) — there is very limited Australian material that looks at the experience of parents who are involved with child protection services. In different ways, these studies all report on parents' negative experiences of these services from the point of first involvement through the Children's Court process to the time a child becomes permanently placed in

foster care. As the studies are from Queensland, Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, it looks as if these negative experiences, regrettably, are typical rather than uncommon happenings.

It is therefore a joy to read a book that while focusing on parents' experience of child protection services is able to quote parents who have had positive rather than negative experiences of the child protection process and also with social workers from these services. It is also a joy to hear about child protection practices that are relationship-based and that follow the 'ERGO' acronym formulated by Scott, Arney and Vimpani (2010) that highlights empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism as the essential ingredients for good practice.

Particularly heartening are the chapters on 'Parents' relationship with foster carers' and 'Parents' relationship with social workers'. To hear about how accessible some foster carers are to parents and how alliances between parents and foster carers can produce real benefits for all concerned is of immediate value. This chapter also makes it clear that the child benefits from constructive and positive relationships of this kind. It also shows how keeping parents and foster carers isolated from each other is most often unnecessary.

Very differently, the chapter 'Am I still a parent? Managing a threatened identity' is heart-wrenching in terms of how it portrays the child's parents' trauma, loss and grief when a child is removed from their care, even when they acknowledge that this was necessary, and some do. This trauma, loss and grief are well replicated in all the Australian studies cited in this review, but this is yet not as easily acknowledged by child protection practitioners.

I regard this book as a very important contribution to social work and child protection literature. It offers a model of practice with parents of children in care that is to be applauded. The book should be widely read by all those involved in child protection practice. Certainly, if child protection practice evolves in the way this book proposes the critics of child protection services in Australia will be much less vocal.

References

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Physical Punishment in Childhood: The Rights of the Child

Bernadette Saunders and Chris Goddard (2010)/ Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, ISBN 9780470685262, pp. 274, AUD59.95

Reviewed by Dr Phillip A. Swain, Geelong, Australia

I think I was about nine and in Grade 5 when I got the 'cuts', as they were euphemistically called at my primary school. My heinous crime? ... talking in class. Well, to be honest, probably talking too much and (though I don't recall) no doubt after repeated warnings to stop. I certainly didn't talk much in class after that, for quite a long while. I do recall being ashamed (supposedly those caned were the ones who were really badly behaved) and I never told my parents ... but even as a 9-year-old I remember thinking that this wasn't right, and there had to be a better approach to disciplining children than a larger and much more powerful adult physically hitting someone smaller, who was supposedly in their care.

Bernadette Saunders and Chris Goddard have drawn together an insightful, but worrying, reappraisal of the place of punishment in childhood and adolescence, its historic underpinnings and contested meanings, and the impact of physical punishment on those who administer punishments (usually parents), those who witness incidents and those on the receiving end — almost always children. They draw upon a raft of research and published knowledge from across the globe, principally focusing

upon trends in the US, Britain, Canada and Australia, interweaving this wealth of information with the results of their own research funded by the Australian Research Council in partnership with the Australian Childhood Foundation. That research involved semistructured interviews and focus groups with some 40 adults (parents, grandparents and professionals working with children) and 31 children, some five of whom had received counselling for abuse. The comments made by parents, and especially by children involved in the research, as to their experiences of giving and receiving punishment, its effects on them at the time and its effects over time present perhaps the most powerful and, at times, distressing messages in this important book.

The authors begin with a challenge to common perceptions and the use of language to disguise what is, in essence, an assault upon the child. The multiplicity of terms and definitions, use of euphemistic language and the contested arguments around what is seen as normative (and so, acceptable?) punishment for children are discussed within the challenge to perceive childhood punishment for what it is — 'child rearing violence'. The

emergence of childhood as an acknowledged and differentiated stage of development; the social construction of childhood as affected by cultural, social, economic and political conditions; and the emergence of the very idea of children's rights, sit uncomfortably alongside the persisting notions that children are 'owned' by parents, that children (like wives) are chattels, able to be treated as any other. While the Australian Family Court has, as the authors note, formally done away with the notion of the child as a possession, owned by her or his parents, that perception remains entrenched in the attitudes of many parents and others in the wider community whose views, research suggests, often do not reflect the formal changes brought about through legislative amendments and the adoption of International Conventions. The research knowledge, summarised across several chapters here, highlights experiences of powerlessness, fear and guilt for those being physically punished, and a surprising (for me) acknowledgement by children of the uncertainties faced by their parents trying to distinguish between reasonable 'punishment' and 'abuse', between the competing challenges to teach and yet to protect their children.

One of the great strengths of this book is the explicit inclusion of children's voices — as to their experiences of punishment and its impact upon them, and their understandings of the rationales employed by parents (and others in positions of authority) as to its use, and its perceived effectiveness. Saunders and Goddard conclude that '... physical punishment has played a significant role in silencing children's voices' (p. 61), and those voices are highlighted in this volume — often with a distressing reality for the reader.

The difficulty with a book like this is that it needs to be read, but perhaps is unlikely to be, by those most in need of its insights. It certainly is directly relevant to those teaching the next generations of the caring professions — perhaps particularly the next generation of teachers — but so too for practitioners working with parents and children, by policymakers and legislators across the breadth of human and social services, and by parents as well. As Saunders and Goddard cogently argue, physical punish-

ment of children is not only damaging to developing young minds and bodies and can often contribute to repetition of punishing (abusive?) behaviour in adulthood, but the final irony is that the research evidence demonstrates that the majority of parents and children doubt that it works. It rarely achieves the outcome for which the punishment was supposedly administered, other than at best in the short term (not that I'm suggesting that end would justify the means). Rather, use of physical punishment gives inappropriate messages to the child about the use of violence to manage behaviour, condones the misuse of power, fails to offer alternative ways of responding to behaviour that is unacceptable and contributes to mirroring of behaviour in the subsequent generation. The dissociation involved in the old argument 'it [being physically punished] didn't do me any harm. ...' is clearly laid to rest by the arguments and the voices presented here.

As Saunders and Goddard strongly argue here '... [q]uestions about what is and what is not acceptable behaviour towards children, and when physical punishment ends and child abuse begins, elicit considerable public and professional controversy' (p. 8), and so they should. In the end, however, as the authors conclude, euphemisms and endless debates about childhood punishment need to be put aside. They conclude that 'child rearing violence' is neither morally justifiable nor particularly effective and carries significant long-term implications for both parent and child. The difficulty is that it is easier to ignore, minimise or even condone what, for many, remains essentially a private matter, and so avoid the challenge to the still widely held view that hurting a child is a normal and reasonable thing for a parent to do. But, as one 10-year-old contributor to this research stated

If adults [have] physical contact with someone, like punching then, it's against the law ... they could go to jail, they could be charged with assault. ... But ... if you're a kid, and it's in the house, it's okay because they're your kids. If you are a kid, it doesn't really matter. (p. 138)

This timely and well-written book adds great weight to the argument that it is not okay and that it should matter.

Baby Strengths

Jan Player (2010). Bendigo, Australia: St Luke's Innovative Resources.

Reviewed by Jennifer Lehmann, La Trobe University, Australia

The card set titled *Baby Strengths* was published in 2010 and contributes to the extensive range of card tools now published by Innovative Resources. This is the creation of Jan Player from South Australia who is clearly a talented and creative woman, well grounded in family support prac-

tice. She has developed this set of cards over a long period of time and has presented her ideas already well worked through with a range of clients and across a variety of situations. It is always particularly rewarding to see one's efforts recognised through publication and Jan and her colleagues

at Innovative Resources can feel proud of this addition to their repertoire.

The 25 cards are colourful and uncluttered in design and are presented in a neat package that is easy to handle. The cards carry cute, cartoon images and illustrate a number of normal baby and early childhood behaviours with which most parents will be confronted at some stage in their parenting. These reflect the needs of small children to be safe and yet able to explore; to receive the attention of parents for both the positive and the more negatively perceived behaviours they exhibit; and to be encouraged to learn, play and be creative.

Accompanying the card set is a small booklet that provides the user with an overview of the development of this tool, together with some ideas about potential uses. As always, there are a variety of additional ways that they could be applied, one being for encouraging professional support staff to reflect on their experiences as parents before taking up specific roles in parent education. The set might also be useful for developing the reflective capacity of TAFE and university students who plan to embark on welfare, early childhood development, social work or other parent/child-related disciplines.

In terms of the design and use of these cards there are two aspects I noted that are worthy of comment. The first is that the cartoon characters, while attractive, feature only babies and women; and the second is that any reference to people of diverse backgrounds is achieved by colouring in

the characters in a darker tone, without any attempt to change the physical features. My concerns that stem from these design issues relate to the potentially limited use of the cards with fathers, grandparents and people of migrant backgrounds who might not engage as strongly with this set of cards. Having said this, I appreciate that I have not had the opportunity to use them in diverse family and parenting contexts; I also acknowledge the difficulties of design and the complex negotiations that precede publications of this nature.

All parents have moments of frustration with the behaviours of their small offspring and parents whose daily lives are compromised by mental illness or other forms of disability are often those whose capacity to respond positively to babies and small children is diminished. This is a tool that re-stories the demands of small children as behaviours required for healthy growth and development rather than as negative and overwhelming. And the humour in the situations depicted on the cards clearly works to shift the storying of difficulties to a positive point of view, allowing the set to be applicable to many parenting contexts.

Baby Strengths is a welcome addition to tools for parents and will no doubt be widely used in contexts from direct care and support to group work and training; and the fact that this tool has emerged in such a direct sense from long practice bodes well for its success.