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16 Research to Practice Series Recruiting and Retaining Foster Carers

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

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Recruiting and Retaining Foster Carers

Issue 16 of the ICPS Research to Practice series explores what works to help people make the choice to become a foster carer, and the strategies that can assist in supporting and retaining carers for children in out-of-home care. It is based on a literature review conducted by ICPS in 2016, which is part of a three-year project commissioned by the Australian Foster Care Association and funded by the Sidney Myer Fund and The Myer Foundation, to identify the most effective strategies to attract, support and retain successful foster care families. More information about the project is available at the end of the issue.



Overview

At 30 June 2015, there were almost 43,400 children in out-of-home care in Australia, with 93% of those in home-based care: 40% with foster carers, 47% living with kinship carers, and 6% in other forms of home-based care (AIHW, 2016). There are several models of home-based care, including traditional volunteer foster care, kinship or relative care, permanent care (including adoption), professional foster care, and therapeutic foster care. Within these models, there are different timeframes leading to different phases of foster care, ranging from emergency care to permanent care.

Australian authorities have reported difficulties recruiting and retaining skilled foster carers, and consequently, there is a growing disparity between the numbers of children needing care, and the number of qualified carers in all Australian states (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; McHugh & Pell, 2013; Riggs, Delfrabbro, & Augoustinos, 2010).

'Becoming a foster carer is a complicated choice' (Hendrix & Ford, 2003, p. 26). Although providing family-based care has job-like aspects, foster carers generally receive lower remuneration, have extended and unpredictable working hours, experience a lack of boundaries between work and home (Kirton, 2011), as well as high levels of emotional labour and role ambiguity (Blythe, Halcomb, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012; Thomson & McArthur, 2009). Additionally, recruitment and retention are linked and create a cycle: satisfied carers may interest others in caring through word of mouth.

Foster care providers and governments are seeking to attract a wider range of demographic, cultural and family groups and carers than have been previously involved in foster care. The literature supports the view that the quality of the relationship between carer and child is important, rather than particular family structures.

43,400 children in out-of-home care in Australia



What works to help people to make the choice to become a foster carer?

Several factors contribute to the decision to become a foster carer:

- 1 'Word of mouth' is the most effective strategy: such as knowing or meeting other foster carers, or having a relative who was a foster carer (Sebba, 2012; Luke & Sebba, 2013a; McGuinness & Arney, 2012).
- 2 The main motivators to seek more information about foster caring and adoption were largely altruistic: such as a desire to help, the love of children, and wanting to put something back into society (McGuinness & Arney, 2012; Sebba, 2012).
- 3 There were also family-related motivations, including extending the size of the family, seeing fostering as a step towards adoption, and providing a sibling for a lone child. Although money was not found to be a motivating factor, it was well-established as a factor in retention (Sebba, 2012).
- 4 Motivations of kinship carers and traditional foster carers will often be different: kinship carers may be motivated by the specific needs of a particular child who they already know (McGuinness & Arney 2012).

Initial enquiry

As foster carers may spend years considering fostering before enquiring, publicity and media campaigns may help to continue reminding those who are considering it (McGuinness & Arney, 2012). Targeted, rather than generalised, marketing may offer more productive recruitment.

Given the effectiveness of 'word of mouth' in recruiting new foster carers, it is important to include current foster carers in recruitment campaigns and information sessions. Research has also highlighted the importance of foster carers being employed and properly remunerated as 'ambassadors' for foster care (Sebba, 2012). Satisfied and well supported foster carers are more likely to be effective recruiters.

One of the barriers to recruitment may be that agency responses to initial enquiries may not be prompt or effective. An Australian study found that while half of enquirers did not proceed for personal reasons, a quarter did not proceed because the agency did not follow up their enquiry (Sebba, 2012). One service had recruitment success by following up enquirers and offering individual one-on-one sessions to those who did not attend planned information sessions (Sebba, 2012).

Screening and Assessment

Luke and Sebba (2013a) suggest that any foster carer selection instruments need to be used to promote foster carers' development and their relationship with the agency, rather than alienating potential foster carers through processes seen as overly bureaucratic. They also emphasise the need for different types of assessments for different carers. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services in Australia have recognised the importance of culturally sensitive and safe assessment tools and processes to the recruitment and retention of carers.

Kinship carers are not a homogenous group. Unlike traditional foster care, the decision to become a kinship carer often has to be made quickly and in relation to a particular child who they already know. They may agree to kinship care in the context of emergency need and family obligation. There is emerging literature on the need for relative carer-specific assessment and approval processes.

In Australia, recruitment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship and foster carers is acutely needed, and the most promising way forward may be through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Controlled Organisations. The Winangay Carer Assessment Tool is an example of a culturally-sensitive assessment tool developed through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led process with ongoing evaluation (www.winangay.com.au).



Support and retention

Carer stability (retention) is key to placement stability (Colton et al., 2008). The support needs of carers vary (Blythe et al., 2014); and kinship carers are often much less well supported than non-relative foster carers (Coleman & Wu 2016, McGuinness & Arney, 2012).

While carers do report satisfaction and joy in caring for children, the stresses and strains of fostering are well documented. They include:

- Coping with the special needs of children
- Lack of specialist support for children's complex needs
- Lack of support and respect from professional foster care staff
- Role ambiguity – e.g. volunteer or professional, parent or worker, part of the care team or not
- Trauma associated with planned or unplanned loss of a child
- Allegations of abuse and lack of support or information to deal with these
- Vicarious trauma due to the frontline provision of care for a traumatised child
- Lack of opportunity to participate in decisions about children's futures
- Effects on the carers' own children and the caring family
- Relationship with parents of the children in care
- Being required to undertake care types which the carer did not anticipate – e.g. when short term care becomes long-term care
- Lack of adequate financial support

Carers require multifaceted and individualised support to respond to the interaction of these stresses and strains. Carers' levels of satisfaction with fostering reflect these factors, and the information and formal supports that are available (Sinclair et al., 2004). Whether a carer thinks of leaving their role as a foster carer is influenced by these levels of satisfaction, family circumstances, and the extent to which they received a 'professional package', involving training, support from other carers and enhanced finance (Sinclair et al., 2004).

Retention success is not easily defined and may be different for different types of caring models. However, there are important principles in ensuring that foster carers feel supported (Sinclair et al., 2004):

- The type of fostering that carers are asked to undertake needs to fit with carers' situations and preference
- Carers need a combination of support, including financial, and to be treated as part of the team
- Carers need a supportive response to critical events (for example, allegations of abuse or placement breakdown), and early intervention, which might help to prevent these critical events.

Elements of support

Training

Hek and Aiers (2010) concluded that carers welcome training, even if the long-term 'hard' evidence of effectiveness is not available. Cairns (2002) suggests that theories and knowledge (e.g. trauma, neuroscience, child development and attachment) help carers to understand the children they are caring for; and Rork and McNeil (2011) suggest that obtaining views from foster parents themselves about what they need, may increase retention in training programs. It is important to use adult learning principles in foster carer training, such as ensuring it is interactive (Dorsey et al., 2008). Dorsey et al. (2008) also observed that the programs which showed the greatest promise were those which gave the opportunity for foster carers to practise new learning in their own homes with their child in care.

Support from foster care workers/social workers

Individualised attention and respect from foster care workers, social workers or case workers make a difference to the support 'package' received by foster carers.

'...characterised as having effective communication which enables information sharing, conveys mutual respect and encourages foster carer input into decision making.... When good relationships are experienced, foster carers feel valued, involved and encouraged to continue providing foster care.' (Blythe et al., 2014, p. 28)

Including all members of the fostering family in support arrangements is also considered important, with Kirton (2011) referring to fostering as a 'family enterprise'. Responsive and skilled social casework at critical times may make a difference to the wellbeing of caring families and to retention (Sinclair et al., 2004).

Support from other foster carers

Research strongly supports the value of support from other carers. Luke and Sebba (2013b) identified that carers valued the following elements of peer support:

- Learning from each other
- Mentoring schemes
- Shared understandings, particularly when support groups were led by foster carers
- Concrete support, such as respite
- Countering the isolation that can be experienced as a foster carer



Financial Support

Adequate financial support is important in retaining foster carers across the board of the different models of foster care (Colton et al., 2008; McDermond, et al. 2012; Sinclair et al., 2004). Research into the complexity of payment arrangements is ongoing. Thomson et al. (2007) note that financial strain, including late reimbursement for expenses, in the context of the needs of the dual income family or single earner can be part of the strain that causes carers to leave.

Respite

The supportive role of respite for carers is well recognised. A recent study (Madden et al., 2016) indicated that regardless of the type of respite service, 92.5% of responding carers reported that respite had made a positive difference to their lives. A mix of formal and informal respite services was rated the most positively as increasing family stability.

Matching

Matching carers' needs and intentions, and the needs of children, has been found to be important in carer satisfaction (Munro & Hardy, 2006). Insufficient placement options can lead to carers accepting children who they do not feel fit with their families' capacities and individual situations (Munro & Hardy, 2006; Sinclair et al., 2004).

Matching can involve many dimensions of both the caring family and the child, and these can include: the ages of children in the caring family; the health and educational needs of the child; geographic location; linguistic and cultural belonging; and the type of placement it is anticipated to be (Munro & Hardy, 2006).



About the Study

The literature review that informed this issue is the first component of a three-year study commissioned by the Australian Foster Care Association, and funded by the Sidney Myer Fund and The Myer Foundation. This study seeks to help address the difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled foster carers by identifying the most effective strategies to attract, support and retain successful foster caring families.

More information about the project, along with links to associated publications, is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References

For a complete reference list, please refer to the literature review report.

Thomson, L., Watt, E., & McArthur, M. (2016). Literature Review: Foster carer attraction, recruitment, support and retention. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.

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