

Inquiry Report

The impact and experience of moving while in care

'You should really try to think the way that they would feel...'

July 2013



Government of South Australia

Office of the Guardian
for Children and Young People

Preface

Moving house is stressful. Most of us, as adults, have considerable control over what and where and how a move is made. Even as children, most of us moved with the reassuring presence of parents and siblings. Imagine then how it must feel, as a child, to move alone to a new family or household who are strangers to you.

'Well I didn't know where I was going, what it would be like, what the people would be like there,' said one 14 year old in boy in interview. 'It was scary' said a 17 year old reflecting on her experience.

For children in care, moving house is a common experience because of changes in placement. Based on information from this Office's monitoring of their circumstances we knew that many felt a great sense of powerlessness about the moves and sometimes lingering loss and grief.

This Inquiry sought children's views about the impact of moving and what would make it a better experience. The Inquiry also sought the views of people who most influence placement moves and looked at case records for what happens when those decisions are made. The Inquiry commenced in September 2012 and concluded in June 2013, followed by discussion with the South Australian child protection authority.

The findings are strongest in the resonance of children's voices as they describe their discomfort and fear. Their views of what worked well are instructive. 'Being listened to is the main thing,' says Ella, 17. Gypsie, 14, said, 'She could tell that I was sad but she couldn't understand it. And she could admit that she couldn't understand it.'

The impact of this record of their experience will be realised through changes in adult behaviour and the depth of understanding and empathy. The Inquiry recommendations intend to support and encourage improved decision-making.

The Inquiry was conducted in the regrettable context of a constricted out-of-home care system which gives too little choice for the best alternative arrangement for each child. The pressure to find *any* placement for children who have to move creates a sense of urgency and reaction among decision-makers that hampers good placement matching and well-paced moves. While this is so, there were examples of moves that were done well, despite the constraints, and these are what we look to for inspiration.

I thank all of those who participated in the Inquiry and who were so eager to learn more about children's experiences and views.

Pam Simmons, Guardian

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Background

The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (GCYP) works with others to improve services to children and young people in out-of-home care, promote and protect children's rights and to strengthen their voice. One of the functions of GCYP is to investigate systemic matters of concern. The Guardian provides advice to the Minister for Education and Child Development on these matters.

Based on information from the Office's monitoring activities the Guardian is concerned about some aspects of children moving while in care. Information about placement changes shows that a significant minority of children experience instability and frequent placement changes, usually for short periods of time. Children from country regions are not always able to be placed with foster carers who live locally, and their move to the city can result in them losing contact with family and friends. This is of particular concern for Aboriginal children whose identity and security is closely linked to their land and their community.

There is also awareness that placements become unstable when children reach adolescence and that children and young people have expressed a sense of powerlessness over decisions about changes in placement.

The purpose of this Inquiry was to provide information on what children and young people say about their experiences of moving while in care and on what the documented decision-making shows about the practice of moving children. In undertaking the inquiry, the Guardian sought:

- the views of children and young people who had to move, on what helps to make the move a positive experience;
- the views of people who most influence the decisions and practice of placement change;

- what the literature says about the impact and experience of changing placements and instability in care; and
- evidence in case records for what happens when decisions to move are made.

The Inquiry asked the following questions:

- In children's views, what makes a positive or negative experience of moving while in care?
- What constitutes good practice in making decisions about placement moves and carrying them out?
- What is needed to achieve good decisions and carrying out a positive placement move?

Methodology

The Inquiry was guided by a reference group with members from key stakeholders including carers, out-of-home care providers, the statutory child protection agency and the organisation representing children in care.¹

The Inquiry was conducted by:

- Engaging key child protection stakeholders through the reference group, focus groups and a survey of 'charter champions';
- Reviewing the literature regarding children moving while in care and the impact that this has on children;
- Considering guidelines, legislation, government policy and standards on placement decisions;
- Viewing case records to understand the decision-making process, the implementation of such decisions, the support that is available to children and young people when they move and the extent to which their voice is heard; and
- Interviewing children and young people in care.

¹ See Appendix 1 for reference group membership.

It did not include an examination of whether existing resources to government and non-government service providers are sufficient and/or used efficiently, except in a general sense.

Literature review

National and international literature was reviewed to explore what constitutes stability in care for children and successful outcomes, good decision-making and planning for stability. Research on the impacts on children was considered and particular attention was paid to research that includes what children and young people had to say. Suggestions emerged from the literature about making moves positive for children. The literature also challenges some of the assumptions that are made about and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Case records review

The SA statutory child protection agency Families SA assisted with the random selection of the records of 100 children in Connected Care teams² from five offices – four metropolitan and one country office. The number of cases selected from each office reflected a percentage of the total number of guardianship cases managed by the office.

The gathering of case record evidence was not for the purpose of evaluating case management practice but to provide GCYP with a better understanding of the practices and processes that surround a child moving in care as well as providing insight into the ways that the child's voice is elicited and recorded.

Interviews with children

With assistance from Families SA and contracted psychologists, GCYP conducted interviews with children and young people in care to hear about their experiences of moving while in care. Connected Care Teams within the Families SA offices where case record evidence had been gathered were asked to nominate children and young people under long-term guardianship orders who may be interested and had the capacity to participate in an interview.

² Connected Care teams is the term used for teams of social workers with case management responsibility for children and young people under long-term court orders of guardianship of the Minister.

Consent was then obtained from the child, the carer and the child's legal guardian.

GCYP contracted private psychology firm *Connected Self* to conduct the interviews. The themes were then validated by discussion with other young people.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were convened, one of social workers, another of carers and the third of Aboriginal³ workers. The social workers were nominated from the offices where the case record evidence had been gathered. The carers were nominated by Connecting Foster Carers SA and the Aboriginal workers were known to the Office of the Guardian. The groups met once for a facilitated discussion.

Wider consultation

An on-line survey was sent to all charter champions⁴. Their responses were collated, summarised and subsequently featured on the website and further comment sought.

Children under guardianship

At 30 June 2012, 2,443 children were under the custody or guardianship of the Minister. They were either under a 12 month care and protection order (15 per cent) or a guardianship to 18 years order (85 per cent). A little over half (53 per cent) were boys. More than a quarter (27 per cent) identified as Aboriginal. Most (83 per cent) lived in family-based care with relatives or foster carers. (GCYP 2012)

Written direction on children moving while in care

The importance of seeking the views of children and young people in care and considering their views in decisions about placement change is articulated at all levels of policies, procedures and guidelines – from the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* through to departmental procedures in South Australia.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

In addition to the obligation to give primary consideration in decisions to a child's best interests (Article 3), the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* says that

³ The term Aboriginal refers to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

⁴ A charter champion is a designated officer of an organisation that has endorsed the *Charter of Rights for children and young people in care*. Their role is to promote the charter and children's rights.

children have the right to form their own views and to express them, and that their views will be given due weight when decisions are being made (Article 12).

UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children

Twenty years after the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was agreed, international *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* were embraced by global organisations such as International Social Services, UNICEF and SOS Children’s Villages International.

The best interests of the child, the child’s right to be consulted (paragraph 6) and the importance of a stable home for the child (paragraph 12) are clearly articulated. The importance of stable placements in the forming of attachments is highlighted (paragraph 60) as is the need for planning and permanence (paragraph 62). Part of planning is the need for goals for placements (paragraph 63) and that children are to be prepared for changes of care settings (paragraph 68). The need for children to be informed and to understand what is happening is referred to in at least four other paragraphs.

National Standards for Out-of-Home Care

The *Australian National Standards for Out-of-Home Care* were agreed to by state and territory Ministers in 2011. The Ministers also agreed to incremental reporting. Among the first outcomes to be reported is that of stability of placement, the measure being: ‘the proportion of children and young people exiting out-of-home care during the year who had one or two placements, by length of time in continuous care preceding exit.’

The first of the national standards is about stability and security while in care. The second is that the voices of children and young people are heard and taken seriously - that they are participants in discussions and processes that affect them. The views of children and young people are also to be sought in the process of continually improving the out-of-home care services that they use.

Children’s Protection Act

The South Australian *Children’s Protection Act 1993* articulates the fundamental principles of:

- the child’s views should be considered when determining a child’s best interests (4 (4) (d));
- a child who is placed in out-of-home care must be provided with a nurturing, safe and stable living environment (4 (6) (a) (i));

- the child must be consulted about, and (if the child is reasonably able to do so) take part in making decisions affecting the child's life, particularly decisions about the child's ongoing care, where the child is to live, contact with the child's family and the child's health and schooling (4 (6)(c)); and
- the child must be given information that is appropriate, having regard to the child's age and ability to understand, about plans and decisions concerning the child's future (4 (6) 9d)).

Policy and Procedures

In implementing the legislation, Families SA is bound by policies and procedures that translate the Children's Protection Act to implementation.

The *Standards for Alternative Care in SA* reinforce the expectations of good planning and preparation for moves, such as:

- Standard 1.4 – Participation: Children, young people, birth families and carers will be supported to actively participate in decision-making and to make choices in case planning. (p13)
- Standard 1.7 – Transition planning will occur for children and young people from the onset of entry into care through to leaving care. (p 17)

Throughout the standards there is constant reference to the inclusion of children (and kin and carers) in decision-making. Children are to be provided with information and their views sought 'appropriate to their age and their cognitive ability.' (pp 19, 22, 23).

The Core Standard of Care Provision says that children and young people have a right 'not to have to move too much'. (p 47)

The *Guidelines for Consents and Decisions* for children and young people under the guardianship of the Minister in family based care say that 'all children and young people have a right to participate in decisions about day to day issues and plan for their future... [and that] dependent on their age and developmental level they should be increasingly involved in day-to-day and long term decisions. (p 8)

The *Care Planning Policy* is based on the principle that children have the right and developmental need to live in a stable and nurturing environment and that intervention should follow the emotional lead of the child.

Good care planning practice will apply knowledge of child development and listen carefully to what the child is saying, not saying, showing and not showing, about what they need. Intervention will follow the child's lead. (p 5)

In addition,

Children, parents, extended family members and carers are to be treated as partners in all phases of assessment, planning and decision making. (p 6)

The *Aboriginal Child Placement Principle Practice Guidelines* provide a hierarchy of preferred placement options:

- With a member of the child's or young person's family;
- With a member of the child's or young person's community or language group;
- With an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who does not have a familial or kinship relationship to the child.
- Other options include placing the child with a carer who is not an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person but is considered by the Director to be capable of 'promoting the child's ongoing affiliation with the culture of the child's Community (and, if possible, ongoing contact with the child's family.' (p2)

The *SA Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* comprises 37 rights which are reinforced in the policies and procedures referred to above.

Of particular relevance to this inquiry are the following:

- Your thoughts and opinions are asked for and considered
- You don't have to move too much
- Regular support and contact from your worker
- A plan which shows how and where you will be cared for
- Express your opinion about things that affect you
- Be involved in what is decided about your life and your care

Summary

There is consistency in direction about the rights of children and young people in care that flows from the international level through to the state's written direction. In addition to children's best interests being paramount in decisions that affect them, they also have the right to stability and security, the right to be heard when decisions are made about them and to be given information about plans that are made about their future.

The Guardian's Inquiry attempted to assess how well these rights are respected when decisions are made to move a child. This was primarily done by checking case records, interviewing children and seeking the views of others centrally involved in the decisions.

Literature Review

Common sense and research evidence tell us that stability of home and family is good for children and young people. For children in care their story will include at least one move from birth family to carer family, and usually subsequent moves. At 30 June 2012, of the 2,546 children in out-of-home care in South Australia⁵, almost one in every five children had had between six and ten placement moves and another one in seven had had more than ten placement moves. One in five though had had only one placement change.⁶

Understanding better the impact of these moves and what can be done to ameliorate the negative effects is critical to good child protection practice. With the growth and development of out-of-home care for children in need of protection, researchers and practitioners have wondered how it must feel for children to be displaced from their immediate birth family and ‘adopted’ by another, often preceded by other moves. The literature has much to tell us about the likely impact, and something to say about children’s views.

Successful outcomes for children in care

What constitutes successful outcomes from being in care is what we expect for all children but often complicated by a child’s history of trauma and complex ‘parenting’ by multiple players. Successful outcomes include: children achieving developmental milestones within acceptable age ranges; children being able to form and sustain attachments; educational success; children and young people emerging from the care system as resilient adults; and

⁵ This total is different to that reported in the Background because the first group of 2,443 are under custody or guardianship orders, which is not coterminous with those in out-of-home care.

⁶ Due to this being a point in time count of all children, it includes children new to out of home care. It therefore does not show how many placements children have over their time in care.

children remaining in a placement until they age out of the care system (Berridge 2005; Fernandez 2007; Delfabbro et al 2007a). This literature review highlights the impact placement stability, and its inverse of frequent moves, has on achieving these outcomes.

Delfabbro et al (2007a) suggest that more research is needed into what factors contribute to stability and how the child's background and characteristics interplay with the quality of care and the influence of the systems surrounding out-of-home care. The Delfabbro study *Certainty for children in care: Children with stable placement histories in South Australian Out of Home Care 2000-2005* showed the significance of good quality care to stability for children and that 'those in more stable care were generally better adjusted and had fewer conduct problems than other children in care.' (p45)

US-based psychotherapist, paediatrician and author Vera Fahlberg who worked for many years with children in alternative care, was interviewed in 2012 and reflected on changes that she has noted since she started working with children and since writing her landmark book *A child's journey through placement* (Fahlberg 1994). She noted that over the years there had been societal changes such as the increase in prevalence of 'crack' babies and HIV positive infants, but she also said

How few [changes] reflect an actual change in the needs of children being placed and how many reflect a change in laws and societal values. The basic needs of children have remained constant and the basic importance of families as opposed to institutional settings as the source of child rearing has remained the same. (Fahlberg 2012, p 5)

Basic needs which should be met include: normality, family care, respect of a child's origins, their views able to be expressed and heard, and hope for the future (Berridge, 2005).

What constitutes a move in care?

As children move through the care system, most face separation and loss on a number of occasions. This happens when they move from their immediate birth family into the care system and then subsequent moves. These changes are referred to by a variety of terms: instability, disruption, breakdown, placement change, shifts in placement, placement pathways and a move event (Unrau 2007). Some authors do not include the initial entry into care as a placement move, but they do include re-entry into care after either a return home or adoption (Hyde & Kammer 2009). Others count re-entry as a placement change if there was a gap of more than two months between successive entries to care (Tregeagle & Hamill 2011, AIHW 2011).

The term ‘placement’ can refer to: foster homes, adoptive homes, group homes, residential facilities, institutions and other substitute care facilities (Unrau 2007). A move occurs when a child leaves one living arrangement and enters another with both placements being part of the care system. Unrau examines moves from the standpoint of those affected by the move, thus giving credence to the lived experiences of the child, the caseworker, the caregivers and the birth parents. She highlights the fact that most of the research data is gained from case records and therefore the reader is unable to ‘see’ what the experience is like from the viewpoint or standpoint of the child or the foster carers or the birth family.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare which reports on child protection data, among other things, says that a placement change “...includes a change in the placement type, for example from home based to a facility based placement; or within placement types a change in the venue, for example, a change from one home based placement to a different home based placement.” (AIHW 2011)

Living in out-of-home care often entails ‘moves’ to respite care, that is, a temporary stay in another family’s home or residential unit on either a regular or occasional basis. The place of respite care when considering placement moves is rarely addressed directly in the literature. However the AIHW counting rules include respite or temporary placements as a change if they last more than six days (AIHW 2011).

Stability in care

Similar to legislative directions for child protection in other jurisdictions, the South Australian *Children’s Protection Act 1993* has as one of its objects:

Every child has a right to care in a safe and stable family environment or, if such a family environment cannot for some reason be provided, in some alternative form of care in which the child has every opportunity that can be reasonably provided to develop to his or her full potential. 4 (2)

A ‘safe and stable environment’ implies that children are in stable home circumstances, but many children who enter state care will have several moves. The nature of the child protection process, and the requirement to respond promptly to a child’s lack of safety mean that children who are removed from their family are often initially placed in a short term arrangement and this placement does not become their permanent home.

Stability in care though, is not just about number of placement moves. This is only one possible definition and arguably the less important measure when considering what

contributes to successful outcomes.⁷ Stability in care can be ‘time dependent’, that is, a child has stability now but did not in the past, or ‘proportion dependent’ where a child who has spent a substantial proportion of their time in care in one placement is considered to have had stability in care (Cashmore and Paxman, 2006).⁸ It may be ‘view dependent’, where stability is defined by emotional state or ‘felt’ security, such as the child experiences stability when they feel happy and safe in their placement (Cashmore and Paxman 2006; Schofield 2002). It may be dependent on the consistency of approach among carers, which is often hard to achieve in residential care (Norgate et al 2012).

Australia’s Productivity Commission in its annual *Report on Government Services* defines ‘stability of placement’ as the proportion of children who had one or two placements during a period of continuous out-of-home care (Productivity Commission 2013). However the authors note that while low numbers of placements are desirable, this must be balanced against other placement quality indicators. This measure is adopted in the *National Standards for Out-of-Home Care* (FaHCSIA, 2010). A US study in California defined placement instability as three or more moves after the first year in care (Webster et al 2000).

Pecora (2007) reports that care leavers’ satisfaction with their experience of foster care is influenced by the number of placements that they had. It is important that workers recognise that for children, ‘separation involves fear which needs to be mastered, and that loss involves grief which needs to be expressed’ (Aldgate and Simmonds 1988 cited in Fahlberg 1994 p 133). However, not all placement changes need to be seen as bad. Pecora (2007) acknowledges that there are times when it is in a child’s best interests to move on from a particular placement. For example, Norgate et al (2012) in their interviews with social workers found that one placement in residential care may mean numerous changes of staff, and a move could result in more stability of care. Similarly, a move to get a ‘better fit’

⁷ Tregagle and Hamill (2011) note that some commentators claim that stability is only used as a proxy measure for good outcomes because it is easier to assess than changes in a child’s development (Chistiansen et al, 2010).

⁸ Cashmore and Paxman (2006) found in their longitudinal study of 47 young people leaving care in NSW that those who had had one placement that lasted for at least 75 per cent of their time in care were more positive about their time in care, were less mobile and had better outcomes 12 months after they left care.

for a child will likely mean more stability in the long run (Barber & Delfabbro 2003, Norgate et al 2012, Fahlberg 1994, Argent 2006).

A multivariate analysis of the case records of 5,557 children who had been in care for more than seven years in California, US, found that children who had more than one placement move during their first year in care were more likely to experience placement instability later (Webster et al 2000).

Norgate et al (2012) collected social workers' views on factors influencing placement instability. The social workers said that unplanned moves tended to be driven by crisis, and that they were often precipitated by the acting-out behaviour of the children which was not managed due to a lack of support services, a shortage of foster carers who could respond to the needs of children, and social workers' case loads which were too large to allow them to provide enough support to maintain the placements. This study highlighted the critical need for foster carers who are well trained and supported so that they can respond to the needs and behaviours of the children in their care.

Fewer placement changes have many positive outcomes for children in care such as: minimising pain and trauma; lessening the disorders of child attachment, behaviour and mental health; decreasing school mobility which leads to higher academic achievement; maximising continuity of services; decreasing foster parent stress leading to greater retention of carers and lower program costs; and increasing the likelihood that a child will be able to sustain positive relationships into adulthood (Pecora 2007; Delfabbro et al 2007b; Barber & Delfabbro 2003). Specific to positive mental health impacts of placement stability, Rubin et al (2004) found a significant association between mental health service use and frequency of placement change and episodic foster care.

Delfabbro, Barber and collaborators have identified factors that can assist in understanding what influences placement stability. The factors fall into the categories of: the characteristics of the child (such as age or exposure to abuse during their early years); characteristics of carer(s) and the home environment that they provide; and the operation of the out-of-home care system, including how well the child is prepared for placements and their understanding and acceptance of their situation (Delfabbro et al 2007a).

They concluded that good quality care meant that children were generally better adjusted and had fewer behaviour problems, but they also propose that these children may well have

been better adjusted when they came into care. This was supported by the work of Osborn and Bromfield (2007) who found that:

[C]hildren with a history of placement disruption experience an average of 11 placements during their time in care and five placement breakdowns over the previous two years. There is a strong coincidence of early trauma and abuse and subsequent placement instability.

Children with high levels of placement disruption are reliably identified as those children who in the previous two years have experienced two or more breakdowns due to their behaviour. (p7)

Osborn and Bromfield (2007) reviewed 21 research studies on outcomes for children in care that were undertaken between 1994 and 2006. In summary, they found ‘a worrying trend of increasingly complex behavioural problems and extensive placement instability’ (p12). Collectively the studies found that problems increased the longer the children spent in indefinite periods in care.

When challenging behaviours are high or extreme, Hyde and Kammer (2009) say that residential treatment is better resourced than foster care and therefore better able to respond to some of the more challenging behaviours of young people. They point out that, in general, foster placements are quicker to disrupt when there is acting-out behaviour.

When placement disruption occurs, Fitzgerald (1990) maintains that it is important to learn from disruption and that as a result of a disruption, the child’s needs should be met more effectively, practice improved and that families can be helped to recover from the experience.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

In June 2012 in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were ten times more likely to be placed in care than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The rate of child protection substantiations was 35.7 per 1,000 children as opposed to 3.9 per 1,000 for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Nationwide, 33 per cent of all children in out-of-home care identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Child Family Community Australia 2012). In South Australia, more than one in four (27 per cent) of the children and young people who are the subjects of care and protection orders are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children (GCYP 2012).

There is increasing attention paid to examining assumptions about what constitutes wellbeing and good early childhood experiences for Aboriginal children, because of differences in child-rearing practice and the high value of Indigenous knowledge and identity to wellbeing. The implications of this to placement decisions for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care can be a source of tension and debate in practice.

All Australian states and territories have committed to comply with the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle* to help correct past practice of Aboriginal children being removed from their family and community, and losing the benefits of their own cultural history and place. The preferred order for child placements in the *Aboriginal Child Placement Principle* (ACCP) is that children are placed with:

1. the child's extended family
2. the child's Indigenous community
3. other Indigenous people. (Child Family Community Australia 2012)

Ten years ago, the then SA Department of Human Services reviewed its practice of placement decisions for Aboriginal children because of concerns about the high number of Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal care. Among the conclusions was the importance of finding Aboriginal placements for children *early* in their placement histories and that the ACCP must be interpreted as inclusive of placement support programs and not simply as the need to ensure Aboriginal placement *starts* (Department of Human Services, 2003).

Indicators of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should include cultural and spiritual aspects as well as social status, physical and emotional wellbeing, and these should be considered in relation to the wellbeing of the child's community (McMahon & Reck 2003 in Higgins et al 2006).

From interviews with Indigenous workers, carers and young people, Higgins et al (2005) reported that the traditional practice of shared care of children among several adults called into question the relevance of parent-child attachment theories for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and the need for formal out-of-home care processes, particularly in regard to kinship care.

The same summary of interview findings (Higgins et al 2005) alerted readers to the tension in deciding between a parent (or child) who wishes their child to *not* be placed within the Indigenous community and what is in the child's best interests for strong cultural connections.

The perspectives of 16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in care were sought by Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield and Richardson in their 2006 study about Indigenous young people's experiences of out-of-home care. They found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in care in Australia identified contact with their birth families and returning home as their most important concern, which is consistent with the findings of a similar study in Canada (Jones & Kruk, 2005). They also found that Indigenous children from metropolitan areas and non-Indigenous children from rural areas had longer histories of alternative care and that Indigenous children were less likely than non-Indigenous children to have contact with their families, particularly in their first months in care.

While it is not possible to generalise from these responses, there were clear preferences for being back in their community and reunited with their parents. The themes of reconnection with people and place were very strong. There was also an emphasis on the relationship with siblings.

It would appear that many young people in care are already experiencing a cultural commitment to community and caring, which is reflected in their sense of responsibility to family. (Higgins et al 2006 p 8)

Delfabbro, Barber and Bentham (2002) found that Indigenous children were less likely to be reunified with their birth families than non-Indigenous children. However, the findings about placement disruption and moves for Australian Indigenous children are not consistent. Osborn, Delfabbro and Barber (2008) did not find significant differences between the Indigenous sample and non-Indigenous sample for placement breakdown in the two years prior to the research. However, a recent survey by the Create Foundation of young people's views and experience of care found that Indigenous children and young people encountered more placements and more disruption during their time in care than other young people (McDowell, 2013).

Based on consultation with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal carers, workers and young people, Kiraly and Humphreys (2011) provided, among other things, 'key pointers' to good practice in Aboriginal kinship care. The core message here reinforces the significance of understanding Aboriginal family life, its broader definition and its significance to wellbeing.

Summed up by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (2005):

...for cultural and spiritual reasons, maintaining contact or involvement with family or returning to family will always be in the Aboriginal or Torres Strait

Islander child's best interests if safety issues can be addressed... Family and community are the source of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child's culture – remove them from family and you deny them their culture. (p.2)

Planning for stability

While some placement changes happen as a result of crisis, most can be foreseen and prepared for. Placement breakdown is a process rather than an event (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Hayden et al 1999). Better still, when the placement is largely supportive and positive, there is an obligation to plan to prevent disruption.

When social workers were asked about care planning (Delfabbro et al 2007a) they talked of the need for concurrent planning, such as planning for a long term placement while also working towards reunification, and good transitional care arrangements. They emphasised the importance of timeliness in decision making about placement change, that is, decisions were made efficiently and effectively.

In a US-based study about placement stability, Barber and Delfabbro (2003) concluded that most children found stable placements within their first 12 months in care. They also concluded that child welfare workers need not be afraid of moving children at least up to the eighth month point if more suitable arrangements become available. They do not suggest that decisions should be taken lightly or without proper consultation but rather that placement stability should not be the sole, or even primary, objective.

Research on the impact of institutional care on infants suggests that there are “sensitive periods in several domains of development” in very young children, so that their age at achieving consistency of carer (through adoption) was significant to cognitive, language and secure attachment development (Zeanah 2009; Zeanah et al 2011). Citing Kreppner et al (2001), Zeanah (2009) says that,

[F]or children with multiple impairments, those adopted before six months of age have made almost complete recoveries. In those adopted after six months, long-term impairments have been evident. (p 275)

Institutional care is very different to one or two changes in primary carers in family settings but other evidence on the development of secure attachments suggests that early attachments in infancy are formed to only a few people (Main, 1995, 1999).⁹ On a more

⁹ For information on good practice in arranging family contact and infants' needs for stability, also see Humphreys and Kiraly, 2009.

encouraging note though, Daniel Siegel says that it may never be “too late” to begin to offer children the basic elements of secure attachments (Siegel & Solomon 2003).

Delfabbro et al (2007b) found that families with multiple and complex difficulties can take years to resolve these to a point where it is safe for a child to be reunited with them. They point out the need to consider whether placement stability is more important in these situations than working endlessly towards reunification and increasing the risks of harm that the child is facing. They reiterate the importance of the child’s time frames in decision making, that is, a month’s delay in decisions or a year of uncertainty is a proportionally long time in the life of a child.

Reasons for moving in care

As acknowledged above, there can be very good reasons for making a placement change, and a change can result in more stability over a longer time frame. However, when placement changes are unwanted or unplanned it is also useful to learn from what happened.

John Fitzgerald worked at the Exchange Centre in London in the 1980s. There were about 200 children placed for adoption through the centre each year, and about nine per cent of these placements ended in disruption. Fitzgerald developed a way of addressing these situations and working through them with all concerned so that children could be re-placed and achieve permanence in their new placement. His work is documented in the book *Understanding Disruption* (Fitzgerald 1990). A central tenet of Fitzgerald’s work is that children should be helped to understand the realities of what has happened and that they should be able to contribute to discussions about the disruption even if they are not present.

Fitzgerald and others considered what contributes to the likelihood of placement disruption. The reasons include:

- Issues in the foster family such as unresolved feelings about childlessness, difficulty with authority, families’ own issues, lack of warmth and joylessness (Fitzgerald 1990).
- Conflict between the foster family and the child protection agency (Fitzgerald 1990).
- The child’s emotional needs not being recognised or met, or abuse or neglect of children while in care (Fitzgerald 1990; Fahlberg 1990).

- Lack of support to carers at time of crisis or falling confidence to manage behaviours (Cashmore & Paxman 2006; Norgate 2012).
- Other work pressures which lead to hasty decisions by the child protection agency or poor monitoring of the placement (Fitzgerald 1990; Donley 1978; Fahlberg 1994).
- Moves done too quickly and without good preparation or good matching (Fahlberg 1994; Hyde & Kammer 2009).
- Caregivers' lack of knowledge about how to respond to behaviours, or a child insisting on leaving (Hyde & Kammer 2009; Fahlberg 1994).

The reasons adults give for a placement disruption may not be the full picture or may be incorrect if the young person's views are not represented. Gilbertson and Barber (2003) found this to be the case when they interviewed 13 young people about recent placement breakdowns.

...when social workers were asked about the reasons for the breakdown, none intimated that factors other than behaviour were involved, that the young person might have had a different view, or that the placement might have been unsuitable. While these young people were by their own admission disruptive, designating their behaviour as the primary reason for placement breakdown may be incomplete or incorrect. (p.29)

Impacts on children of moving

Understanding the impact on children will help guide the way a move is made and the interactions that adults have with children.

The effects that a placement change or a history of placement changes has on a child are complex and dynamic, partly because a child or adult's perception and memory may change over time (Unrau 2007, Unrau, Seiter and Putney 2008). Typically though, children are likely to feel powerless, a loss of 'place' in school, family or neighbourhood, and sometimes, shock and grief.

Fitzgerald (1990), Fahlberg (1994) and Unrau et al(2008) found that children often felt *powerless* about the move. Fitzgerald (1990) writes that the child will feel frightened about the future and the many unknowns that are to be faced. The child has no way of knowing whether there will ever be a permanent home or not. The child can feel worthless and bad. The child has to move, whether she or he wants to or not.

Fahlberg (1994) writes that the child may feel that they have no control, that they have been kidnapped or snatched and that the importance of their family ties diminishes when there is a 'power based' move, that is, a move done to them rather than involving them. Without preparation for moves, children can become prone to chronic fears and anxiety and may withdraw or become overly compliant. Others become more assertive and try to control everything. Yet others may develop chronic guilt as they hold themselves responsible. A child can perceive a move as someone coming to take her or him or the child can perceive that she or he is being given to someone else.

The least harmful perception of how a separation comes about is for the young person to see decision-making as a shared responsibility. It is best if the child feels that he or she, along with others, has input but not full responsibility for the plan. (Fahlberg 1994 p 157)

In considering the child's perceptions of moving, Fahlberg points to the importance of egocentric and magical thinking in children's perceptions. Hence, a child may view herself or himself as the cause of a move. Children should understand what is happening, and that they feel that someone is in control and taking responsibility for planning their future (Fitzgerald 1990).

Fitzgerald (1990), Schofield (2002) and McDowell (2013) write about the importance of *hope and belonging* for children. They need to be able to hope that someone will love them, and that there will be someone to whom they can belong. Fitzgerald maintains that children who have experienced disruption will need help. Similarly, Cashmore and Paxman (2006) conclude that young people's sense of security was a 'more significant' predictor of their outcomes after leaving care than stability *per se*. They say then that 'the issue is twofold: how to ensure stability in care and how to translate stability into a sense of security and belonging so that young people leaving care have a safety net of supports around them that they can trust and are willing and able to access.' (p238)

Placement changes for school-age children usually imply a change in school and all the attendant changes such as loss of friends and the adjustments that need to be made to accommodate differences in a school's culture and pedagogy (Hyde & Kammer 2009). Unrau (2008) explains that children who move from one place to another are concerned about how their relationships and connections with people change.

In their study of children in out-of-home care in the Netherlands, Strijker, Knorth and Knot-Dickscheit (2008) found that a move meant the loss of social relations, adapting to a

different social and physical environment, learning new house rules and developing a new social network. They found significant associations between the number of placements and the prevalence of attachment disorders, behavioural problems and breakdown of new placements.

There may also be feelings of *shock and grief*. Fahlberg (1994) writes about separation and loss, including factors influencing the reaction to separation and how unresolved separations may interfere with new attachments. She follows this with ideas for minimising the trauma of moves (see *Positive placement moves* below). When interviewed in 2012, she reflected on the changes that had occurred since her book was published in 1994 and notes that ‘the basic needs of children have remained constant’ and

[T]here have been significant advances in knowledge especially in the areas of brain development and the treatment of post traumatic stress syndrome in children. Such advances....do not obviate the need to make use of the basics of child development; the impact of loss (or separation from family members) on children... (Fahlberg 2012 p 5)

The reactions of children to separation from their caregivers vary from severe depression in children who are strongly attached and then abruptly separated to almost no reaction in children who have little connection to their caregivers or who have been emotionally neglected. The main factors that influence an individual’s reaction to loss are the strength of the relationship being broken and the abruptness of the separation (Fahlberg 1994).

Fahlberg (1994) generalises that the stronger the relationship, the more traumatic the loss. A corollary to that is that if there is no love, there is no pain in loss.¹⁰ The more abrupt the loss, the more difficult it will be to complete the grieving process. Children may withdraw or they may become active and act out; they may be overcome by fear – and for a child the known is preferable to the unknown. It may feel like a better option to stay in, or return to, a ‘bad’ placement rather than move to something unfamiliar.

Children’s voices

A common theme in the literature was the importance of hearing the views of children in care. Authors like Mitchell and colleagues, Hyde and Kammer, Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs

¹⁰ The work of Brodzinsky and Schechter discuss children’s perceptions of adoption in the context of developmental theories (Brodzinsky and Schechter 1990), making the links between developmental stages and impact of change.

have written about what children have had to say and others such as Delfabbro, Barber, Fahlberg, Fitzgerald, and Fernandez say that children's views should be taken into consideration.

In the 2013 Create Foundation's Report Card (McDowell 2013), which records the views of over 1,000 Australian children and young people in care, 33.2 per cent said that they did have a say about the place they live in now (46.6 per cent in SA, N = 103). When asked whether they had ever been moved from a placement they did not want to leave, 25.9 per cent said that they had (35.9 per cent in SA).

Mitchell et al (2010) worked with twenty children aged eight to fifteen years to garner advice to other children in care, foster parents and child welfare workers about the move into foster care. The children wanted those entering care to know that there is no set type of foster family and that the dynamics of the foster family would differ from those of the birth family. They stressed the need for politeness and open communication of feelings. Also, placement change is not always bad. One child said:

Sometimes it takes more than one placement before children will find a placement where they will get along with the foster parents and feel they can adapt comfortably. (Mitchell et al 2010 p 178)

The children in Mitchell's study identified positives in moving, such as meeting new friends and peers and also having opportunities that they would otherwise not have had. They suggested that children try to be calm and respectful and express their emotions in a positive way and give foster parents a chance. Some children spoke of having items of sentimental value during the transition into care. It was also suggested that the child could talk with the new foster parents about what made them feel at home and what they like and what they do not like. Social support was identified as minimising stress.

Advice from the young people to foster parents included to familiarise the child with the home and the people who live there as well as telling the child the benefits of the home.

Other practical suggestions were that children need to know the house rules and what responsibilities they would have and to be familiar with the family pets. Physical activity and comfort food also help in settling in.

Advice from young people to child welfare workers was to consult with children about placements and to ask for their opinions about important matters such as family visitation and preferred school. The children stressed the importance of having information and also

being reassured that their best interests were being considered. The child welfare worker should undertake the transfer to the new home and be compassionate and supportive (Mitchell et al, 2010).

In another study (Hyde & Kammer 2009), children and young people talked about the reasons placements did not work out, from their point of view. They felt that the people who were trying to take care of them did not know what to do or how to respond to their anger, grief or frustration. In their experience, foster placements disrupted more quickly than residential treatment places. Participants also spoke of the poor placement matches that they had experienced. They attributed these to generation gaps, differences in religious beliefs and practices, personality differences, and a limited tolerance of the developmental experiences of adolescents.

Children sought a say in choosing their carers and talked of feelings of insecurity and powerlessness (Sinclair, Wilson & Gibbs 2001). Other things that children asked for were: respect for their wishes about adoption, fostering or returning home; less frequent moves; moves when placements were not working out; ability to stay after 18 if they wanted; efficient planning and review; good information on plans for their future and their own past; and regular contact with social workers on their own.

Whiting and Lee (2003) analysed the stories of 23 pre-adolescent foster children. They found that many children talked about feeling confused, being angry, experiencing loss and uncertainty about how they came to be in care and the status of their current placement.¹¹ Unrau, Seita and Putney (2008) also found that children were confused and felt a loss of personal power over their destiny.

Fernandez (2007 and 2009) has undertaken longitudinal research on children in care in Australia. She found that when coming into care, most children felt sad, worried, lonely and angry. However, she also found that over time, the children showed consistent patterns of improved outcomes in such areas as adjustment, satisfaction, integration, academic progress and behavioural outcomes. This finding is supported by the recent Create Foundation's report on young people's views which indicate that, for most children, basic needs were being met, particularly the need to feel loved, safe and secure (McDowell 2013).

¹¹ This provides an interesting parallel to Howe's findings on success in adoptions and the importance of the questions: 'who were my first parents and what were they like' and 'why did they give me up?' (Hodges 1988 cited in Howe 1992).

Interviews with adults who had been foster children revealed that placement moves are remembered as a series of losses, and are also viewed as causing emotional scars (Unrau 2008). In looking at the way that moves are remembered and also the perceived consequences of moves, many themes emerge including: loss of power over personal identity; loss of friends and connection with school; loss of personal belongings and loss of the memories attached to those; loss of siblings; and loss of self-esteem. On a more positive note the respondents said that moves can mean guarded optimism, leaving a bad placement, a chance to start over, connecting with people and the opportunity to interact with different people and families.

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* is very clear about listening to the voice of the child. Gilligan (2002), in writing about the need to strive for balance between protecting children and encouraging their independent development, says that the voices of children are pragmatic, therapeutic, ethical, and philosophical. He acknowledges the challenges in engaging with children, including the complexities of gaining consent and trust.

Gilligan concludes that

The words of the young people bring to life their lived experience and illuminate for the adults in their lives the tensions, dilemmas and pain that is often their lot. If adult carers and social workers are to have any hope of meeting the needs of children in foster care then they must among other things, listen very closely to the lived experience of children in foster care, through the medium of research and the participation of young people in policy and decision making fora.
(Gilligan 2002 p 56)

The Australian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (2011) traces the historical development of the view that children are competent even at a very young age, to be a commentator on their own life and to contribute to decision-making. They suggest that the child protection and child welfare system must be challenged for the way it reinforces adult power over children by asserting the supremacy of adult knowledge of what is best for them.

Seeking children's views is often justified by reference to children's rights but as Schofield (2002) presents it in her development of a psychosocial model of long-term foster care it has 'beneficial developmental consequences for the child's sense of self-efficacy and the ability to think and reflect.' (p 271)

Of course, children's voice is not to be limited to decisions about what is happening to them. Vicary et al (2009) discuss the need for children to be involved in debates on policy and in research including the example in Western Australia of children in care being involved in the development of a Charter of Rights. They see the involvement of children as a way to check the relevance of policies and programs, as well as equipping children and young people with skills for the future.

One example of children and young people who are in care being involved in policy development comes from the London Borough of Lambeth. Their Corporate Parenting Board, which guides the local council's corporate parenting strategy, has a Children in Care Council (CiCC) with approximately twenty members aged between 13 and 25. The CiCC provides a voice for children and young people who are in care and they speak to the Corporate Parenting Board. During 2011-12 the CiCC achieved a number of significant outcomes for children in care including the development of a new 'staying put' policy for looked after children (Ofsted 2012).

Positive placement moves

Placement moves can be made more positive for children and young people in care by taking into account the likely impact on children and what children have to say, and having an efficient and inclusive decision-making process.

Fahlberg (1994) says that the young person must feel that they have had some say in making the decision. She and others (McIntosh 1999, Argent 2006), stress the importance of planning transitions and using pre-placement visits to diminish fears and worries of the unknown for the child as well as for the potential carers. Such visits can help to transfer attachments, to start the grieving process, empower the new carers and encourage making commitments for the future. Once the transition is completed, post-placement support is important to maintain the flow of information, build relationships and also to review and work through emotions raised by the separation from the previous placement. Contact with birth parents can help to resolve some of the separation issues.

In undertaking transition planning, the attitudes of the people that the child is leaving and those to whom the child is moving need to be considered. Children need to be encouraged to talk about their feelings and they may need some help to identify what those feelings are (Fahlberg 1994). The emotional turbulence provides the opportunity for the new carer to understand and respond to the 'inner experience of the child' (McIntosh 1999).

Children need to understand what is happening, and to understand the differing roles that people play in their lives. The fact that they have virtually three sets of parents: birth parent, legal parent (court/minister/social worker) and parenting parents can become confusing (Fahlberg 1994). McIntosh (1999) writes that child-focused workers allow the child to hold on to relationships that have held them, while new relationships are forming.

Argent's (2006) book *Ten top tips for placing children* encapsulates many of the suggestions from other authors. Argent's tips are: know the child; work with the child; find a family for *this* child; prepare a family for *this* child and the child for *this* family; use introductions to listen, hear and observe; maintain and monitor continuity for this child; agree a support plan for this placement; do not overlook the birth family; promote openness; and do not fear failure.

Of course there are impediments to making a positive child-focused placement move, not the least of which is relief at finding a suitable placement, as McIntosh (1999) writes.

Often professionals are so relieved that a good link has been found, and can lose sight of the fact that a 'good link' means nothing to a child who has not had a part in the decision and who must leave what has been a safe and familiar home.
(p29)

McIntosh criticises the argument that rapid transitions 'will hurt less if you tear the bandaid off quickly', instead arguing for longer time frames except in the few circumstances where the relationship has been brief or unsupportive, the child is unduly distressed by staying, or clearly indicates their readiness to move. She suggests a minimum period of transition of between six to ten weeks for pre-verbal children.

In 2007, the Youth Advisors to the SA Guardian for Children and Young People prepared a *Checklist for Social Workers* to assist in providing the child or young person with information about what is happening to her or him on entering care or changing placement. The 18 questions are the things they had wanted to know or worried about when they were moving. The very first question was 'what is happening to me and why?'. (GCYP 2007).

Summary

Frequency of moves for children in care adds to the trauma and insecurity they have often suffered before coming into care. The review of literature suggests though that stability in care and its impact is perhaps better understood by examining the 'felt security' of children rather than counting the number of placements. However, most reports of stability resort to

a count, including the governments of Australia in reporting on placement stability for the national standards, which counts the proportion of children exiting care who had one or two placements during a period of continuous out-of-home care.

It is clear that minimising the number of moves is desirable, considering the likely adverse impacts of loss and dislocation. However, placement change can be desirable to get a better fit for a child, in the anticipation that the child will have more stability and security where they feel they belong.

Decisions about placements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are guided in the first instance, by reference to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, which emphasises the significance of care and child-rearing by Aboriginal people, retaining the child as close as possible to his or her own clan. The significance of this is underscored by Aboriginal young people in care who, when asked as a group, consistently say that contact with their families of origin is their most important concern.

Placement changes can be counted, but placement breakdown or disruption is invariably a process, not an event. Planning for stabilising a good placement or preparing well for a placement change is usually possible.

Understanding the likely impact of moves on children, and on each child, will help guide the decisions about moves and the way the move is made. Typically, children feel powerless about the moves, experience loss of 'place' and relationships, and sometimes experience shock and grief. Children may also view themselves as the cause of the move. Unresolved separations may work against forming good relationships with new carers.

The adverse impact of moves can be anticipated and ameliorated by talking with children about the reasons for the move, what they wish for, and what would help make the move easier. Planned transitions and post-placement support can make a move a more positive experience. In some cases it may be that the relief for social workers in finding a suitable placement, or any placement, is what is uppermost in their minds, and the focus becomes the many practical tasks of making the move, not the child's anxiety. Nobody disagrees with the principle of child-focused practice; it is sometimes competing for time though.

Case Records

With assistance from Families SA, the Office of the Guardian (GCYP) randomly selected the records of 100 children and young people who were in long term care, that is, under care and protection orders until 18 years of age. The number selected from each office was roughly in proportion to the total number of cases each office had responsibility for. The number selected from each office was:

North East	24
Woodville	23
Mount Barker	20
Marion	19
Whyalla	14

Data collected included demographic information and information about the social worker's contact with the child or young person. The profile of the sample group closely reflected the profile of children and young people in care, with the exception of a skew towards older age and more children in non-relative foster care.

Specific to placement moves, data was collected on the number of moves, reasons for the most recent move and who was involved in the decision.

Records were accessed from the electronic database Connected Client Case Management System (C3MS) and hard copy files where necessary.

C3MS was introduced incrementally from the latter half of 2009, and the variable quality of the records reflects the unfamiliarity that workers had with it in the early months of use. This meant that it was at times difficult to find the information in the case notes. The

database category ‘face-to-face’ which should have noted contacts with the child sometimes included contacts with carers and supervisors. It was also difficult to find when referrals for placements had been made. All records that appeared relevant had been scanned, but some records may have been missed in gathering evidence. It was necessary to consult paper based files when a placement was made prior to the introduction of C3MS.

Profile

The demographic profile of the sample of 100 children and young people whose records were examined has been compared to the profile of all children and young people under care and protection orders as at June 2012.

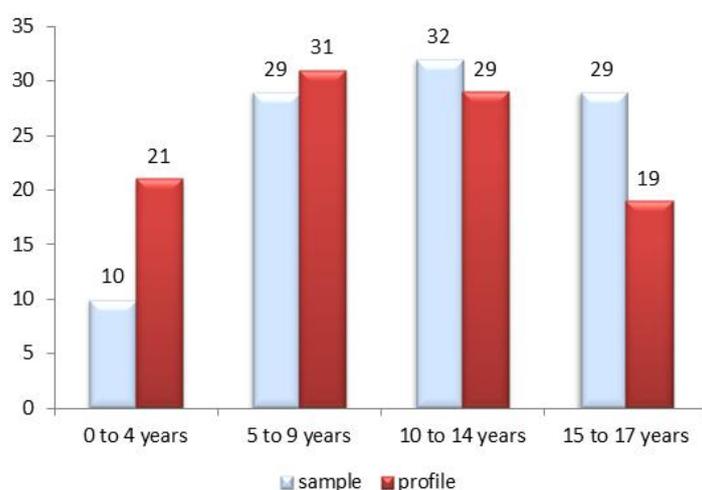
Gender

For gender, the sample closely resembled the profile of all children in care with 56 males and 44 females in the sample of 100 compared to 53 per cent males and 47 per cent females in care in SA (June 2012).

Age

The sample had fewer children in the 0-4 age group than all children in care and more in the 15-17 year age group. (See Chart 1.) This means that the sample would include more young people transitioning to independence.

Chart 1. Age of sample group, compared with age of total, percentage

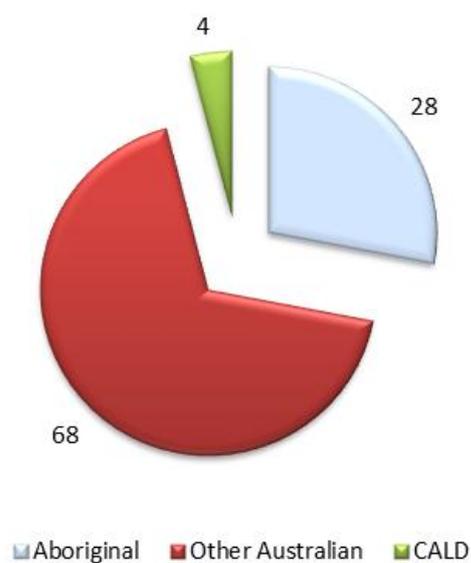


Cultural identity

In the sample, there were 28 children of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background and four from Cultural and Linguistically Diverse cultures. (See Chart 2.) Three of the four

children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were refugees. This closely resembled that of the total care population in June 2012 with 27 per cent of children in the total population who were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children.

Chart 2. Cultural identity of sample group

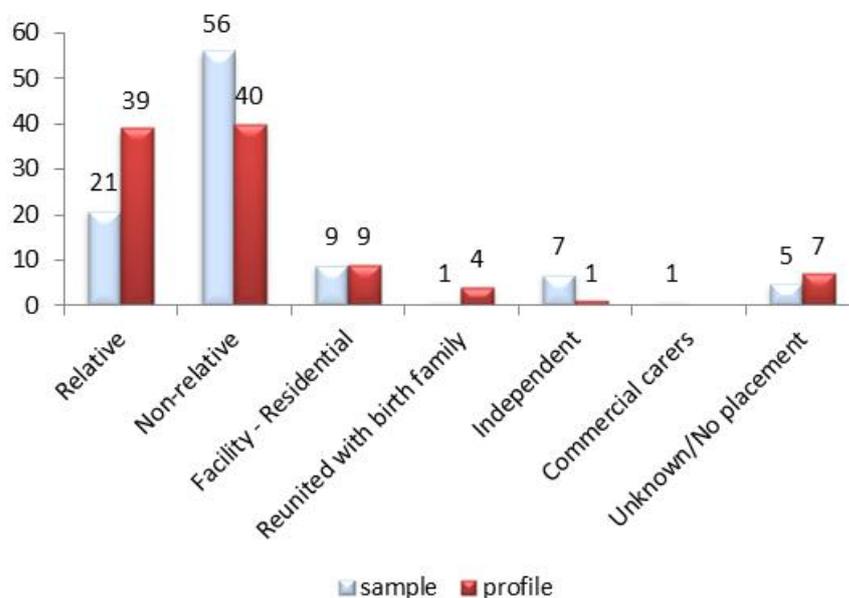


Type of placement

The sample had a higher proportion living in non-relative foster care (56 per cent compared to 40 per cent) and a corresponding lower proportion in relative and kinship care. (See Chart 3.) In the sample, the five who had no placement were 'couch surfing' (moving among friends) and one had returned to family against the recommendation of Families SA.

The data for all children includes a small number who were living with their parents which has been compared with the child in the sample who was reunited with birth parents. There is no category in the general data for specialist foster care and none that shows which children are being cared for by carers engaged through commercial agencies.

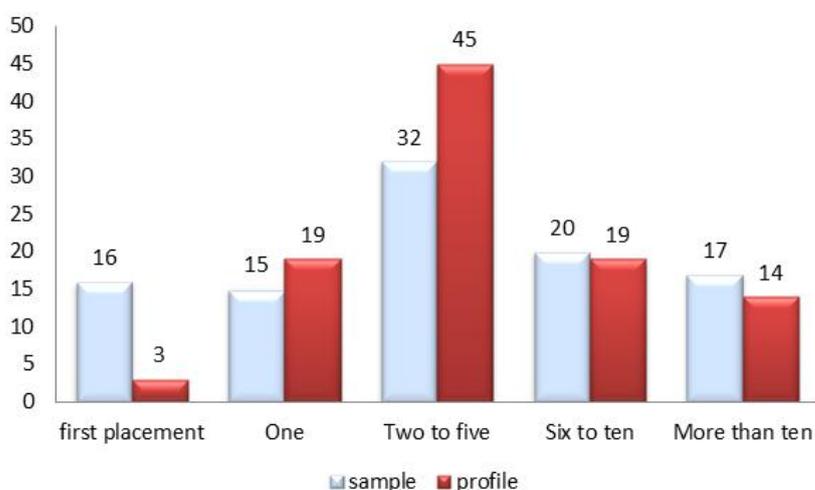
Chart 3. Type of placement, sample compared with total, percentage



Number of placement moves

The sample has a higher number of children (16 per cent) who were in their first placement compared to the group as a whole (3 per cent). Almost a third (31 per cent) of the children in the sample group had experienced no or one placement move compared with 22 per cent of children in the group as a whole. (See Chart 4.)

Chart 4. Number of placements, sample compared with total, percentage



Case Worker

Case worker allocated

Ninety seven of the children in the sample group were allocated to a social worker. Those who were not would be expected to contact the Senior Practitioner or Supervisor in the office should they require assistance.

Case workers in 12 months

Fifty five children in the sample group had had the same social worker for the 12 months prior to the data collection. Six children had had three or four workers in that time.

The most common reason for a change of social worker was that the case management for a child was transferred to another office (10). The next most common reason was that the allocated worker had moved to another team (7). Five children had been allocated a worker, where there had been no worker before. Another five were changed because the social worker had left that office. A small number had changed worker because they had recently moved from an 'intake' team to a long-term guardianship team (Connected Care) within the same office. It was not possible to identify the reason for the change of worker in 12 of the reviewed cases.

Frequency of face-to-face contact

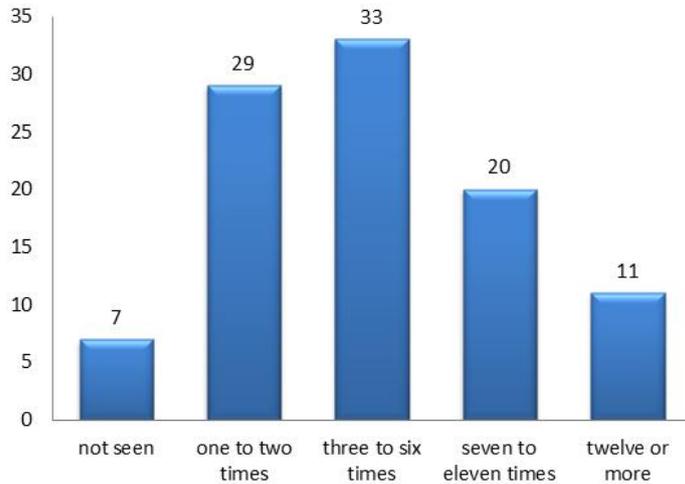
The number of face-to-face contacts between the child and social worker over a 12 month period varied greatly between none and 31. Only 11 children had face-to-face contact with their allocated worker at least once a month as specified in the Standards of Alternative Care in South Australia.¹² (See Chart 5.)

Some children were having regular contact with family which was being supervised by a support worker. When this occurred, a report of the contact was included in the case notes but was not counted as face-to-face contact with their social worker.

It is possible that not all face-to-face contacts were recorded.

¹² Standard 2.2: Caseworker Contact – Every child and young person in care will have face-to-face contact with their allocated worker a minimum of once a month. P 28

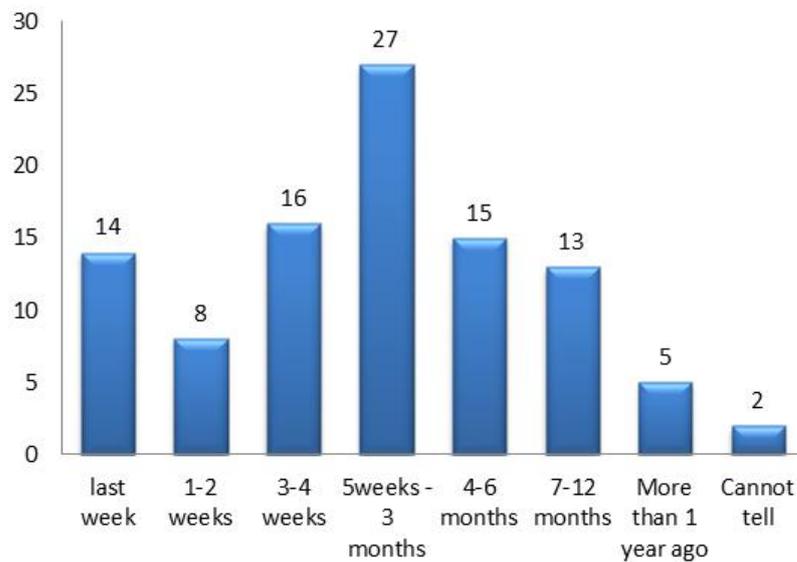
Chart 5. Number of face-to-face contacts with the child in 12 months



Case worker’s most recent face-to-face contact

Thirty eight children had been visited in the month prior to data collection. The results for this question were likely to be affected by the timing of the case record review which was undertaken soon after the Christmas break. It would be expected that more face-to-face contacts are made in December ahead of Christmas and the summer holiday. The records of five children indicated that it was more than a year since they had face-to-face contact with their worker and for another two children it was not possible to know when they had last seen their worker. (See Chart 6.)

Chart 6. Length of time since last face-to-face contact with the child

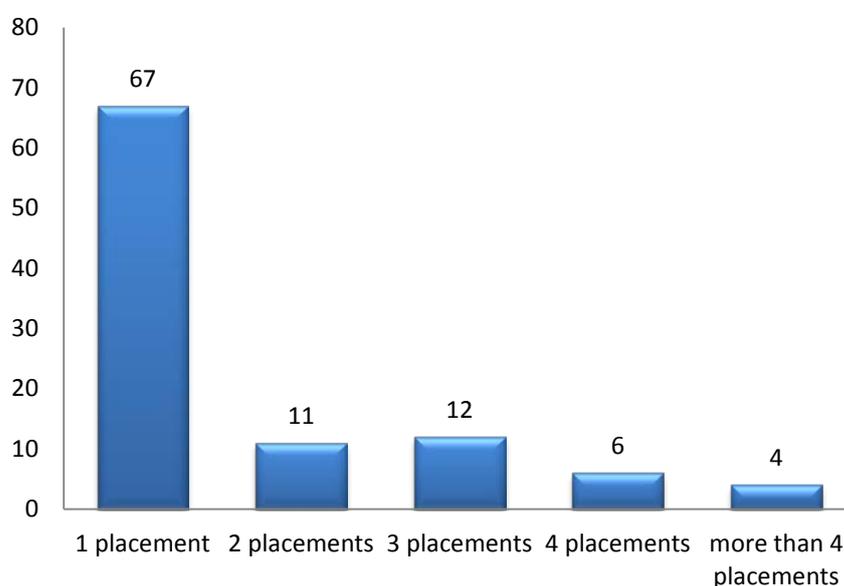


Placement changes

Number of placements in the last two years

Sixty seven children had not changed placements in the two years prior to the data collection. A small number had moved from parents to care, which was not counted as a placement change. Of those who had moved, 11 had had one move, 12 children had moved twice, six had moved three times and four children had moved more than three times in the previous two years. (See Chart 7.)

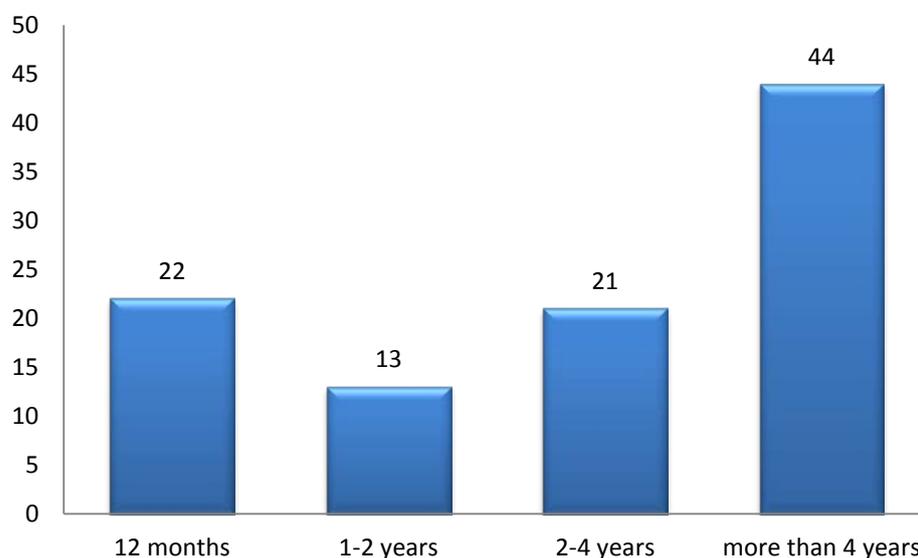
Chart 7. Number of placement in two years



Time of most recent move

The length of time since the most recent move, including entry into care, was more than four years for 44 children and within the prior year for 22 children. (See Chart 8.)

Chart 8. Time since most recent move



Reason for the most recent move

Sixteen children whose case records were viewed had not changed placement. Of those who had moved, 43 per cent (36) were because the child moved from short term or emergency care to a long term placement. The next most common reason for the most recent move was that the young person was moving to independence and had left a family based placement or residential care for their own accommodation, supported by workers and carers (7). Four young people moved out of placements into homelessness, 'couch surfing' with friends, and one had moved back to live with his parents. Five children moved to live with relative carers and four to be with siblings. For the remainder the reasons could not be found.

Where moves were not expected from the beginning of the placement, the documented reasons for the move were broadly carer related or child related reasons.

The carer related issues included such things as illness, personal issues, breakdown of relationship between the child and carers, mistreatment, carer not coping, lack of warmth, short term placement while carer on holiday, not meeting child's needs and asking for the child to move.

The child related issues included conflict between the child and others in the placement, the young person wanting to live elsewhere, sexualised behaviours of the child, the child asking to move, and the child being unsafe because of a sibling's behaviour.

Case work and placement

If a child's new placement is in an area managed by a different Families SA office, the responsibility for case management is expected to be transferred and the child allocated to a new worker in a timely way. Prior to the transfer of case management, the records must be brought up to date and arrangements made with the new office for handover of the child's records and for the worker to meet the child.

Transfer of case management

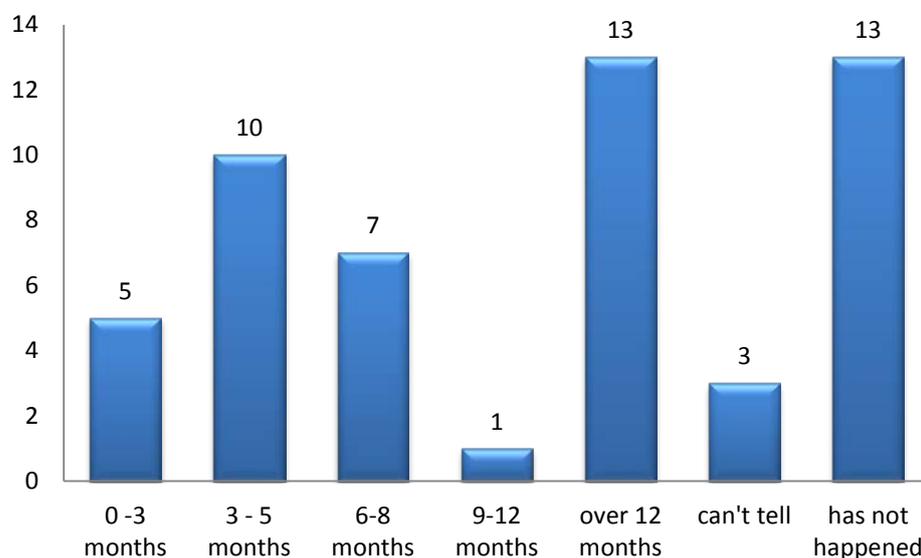
The case records review found that when 41 children had moved they moved within the metropolitan area but to another Families SA office area. Nine children moved from the country to Adelaide, three from Adelaide to the country and two children had moved from one country area to another.

At the time of the data collection, 84 children were with the appropriate office and 16 were not.

The reason for the 16 not being with the appropriate office was not documented routinely. However, three young people were couch surfing and moving frequently; another three young people had moved and were about to turn 18; and one child had moved just prior to the audit. In one situation the carers had asked that the case not be transferred and in another the carers had moved out of the area but were planning to return.

The length of time between placement change and the transfer of the case to the closest office if this was required varied from under three months to over 12. (See Chart 9.)

Chart 9. Time from placement move to transfer of case management



Recommendation for the child to move

For those who had moved (N= 84), evidence of the recommendation to move was sought in case plans or case reviews. Recommendations were found for 26 children.

Before a child moves, a referral is made to a central unit to identify a suitable placement. Where evidence of referrals could be found in the records, 34 were placed within three months of a referral. Eleven waited between three and eight months, six children waited between nine and twelve months and seven had to wait more than a year before they were able to move.

Decision-making

Involvement in decision-making

The assumption was made that the social worker and supervisor were involved in all decisions about moves. Notes about the decision-making were often not found when the child had quickly moved to a permanent arrangement. Supervision notes did not always include references to discussion about proposed moves for children.

Where documented, others who were directly involved in the decision included psychologists (19 cases), Aboriginal cultural consultants (12), principal social workers (12) and managers (10). Records showed that young people had been involved in only seven cases.

It is likely that not all consultations with others were noted in the records. For example, there were 28 children and young people whose culture was identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, yet the Principal Aboriginal Consultant was only mentioned in 12 decisions to move.

Documentation of children's views

The involvement of children in decision-making and consideration of their views is mandated in legislation and policy. In 26 cases the views of the children about moves were documented. A further 29 records noted that the child was preverbal or too young to comment.

Some of the responses clearly indicated where the child would like to live. One young person moved of her own accord despite the recommendations of the workers. Two young people wanted to move out of residential care to foster care, but no suitable foster families were available. One young person had been in a temporary arrangement for three years and wanted to live with his siblings but this was not possible.

The best interests of the child

Despite the focus on the best interests of the child in legislation and policy, these words are seldom found in children's case records in decisions about moves. It was assumed that the move into care is in their best interests, as decided by the Youth Court. Beyond that, there was little evidence of moves being explicitly linked to a child's best interests, though the absence of the term does not mean that their best interests were not considered.

Transitioning to the new placement

For 16 children their first placement had been their only placement. Twenty one children were living with relatives and a gradual transition process was perhaps not required.¹³ Four children returned to live with a previous carer.

Thirteen children had been engaged in 'getting to know each other' activities such as overnight stays and weekend visits. The auditor recorded that one young person was 'just handed over'. One child who had been offered a placement turned it down during the transition process.

¹³ These groups are not exclusive because some living with relatives had not moved since coming into care.

It appears that staff in residential houses facilitated more extensive transitions to new placements such as five overnight stays and a visit, a party with the new carers, and discussion among the social worker, current and new carers.

The child's satisfaction with the current placement

Information on whether the current placement was satisfactory to the child was hard to find. However, from a range of sources (case notes, annual review reports, contact notes), 43 children appeared to be satisfied with their placement. Seven children were not happy with their placement. Only some records of annual reviews had information about the children's views and some indicated that views had been given but the views were not recorded.

Contact with previous carers

Desirability of contact

There were indications in 51 cases that it was desirable for the child to have contact with their previous carers. For 20 children it was not possible to tell whether contact was desirable. For a number of children, the primary contact that was formally arranged was with their birth family and this was given priority over contact with previous carers. When children had been with carers for a short time there seemed to be less consideration of ongoing contact with them.

Recommendations for contact were mostly followed, with 47 children having had some contact with past carers. Contact was recommended against in only two situations.

Form of contact

In 24 cases contact was not with the immediate past carers but with the birth family. Seven children had respite care with previous carers. In some situations children initiated contact when they wished. Where casual and rotating carers had been engaged it was rarely possible for contact to occur after a move. However in one situation a carer engaged through a commercial arrangement was in an ongoing mentoring role with a young person and another had become the full time carer for the child.

Summary

A case record review is a window into what is happening for children but it is only as good as what is recorded and can be retrieved. This review shows some of the complexities in extracting data about the quality of care. More than three years after the introduction of this electronic case management system there are persistent issues with accurate recording.

The profile of the sample group (N= 100) closely reflected the profile of children and young people in care, with the exception of a skew towards older age and more children in non-relative foster care.

Most children (97 per cent) had a social worker allocated to take the guardianship responsibilities and more than half (55 per cent) had had no change in their worker in the 12 months prior to the data collection. The frequency of face-to-face contact between worker and child varied from 31 times to none, with 36 per cent seeing their worker on two or less occasions in the 12 months. Of most concern were the seven who had not seen their worker in this time.

More than two in three of the sample (67 per cent) had not moved in the two years prior to the data collection but ten children (10 per cent) had moved three times or more. Reviewing the most recent move, regardless of when it was (N= 84), 43 per cent moved from temporary arrangements to long term placements.

The picture of decision-making is unclear, with much of it undocumented. It was assumed that social workers and their supervisors made the decisions. It is likely that other workers were consulted but only some had their views recorded. There was evidence of only seven children or young people being directly engaged in the decision but 26 children had their views about the move documented (29 were too young to comment). More often the views of the child about their current placement were recorded. Some records indicated that views about their placement had been given but the views were not recorded.

Likewise the picture of planning for the transition from one place to another is unclear. In only 13 cases was a gradual transition process evident from the records.

Interviews with children

With assistance from Families SA and contracted psychologists, GCYP conducted interviews with children and young people in care to hear about their experiences of moving while in care. The Families SA offices where case file evidence had been gathered were asked to nominate children and young people under long-term guardianship orders who may be interested and had the capacity to participate in an interview.

Consent was then obtained from the child, the carer and the child's legal guardian.

GCYP contracted private psychology firm *Connected Self* to conduct the interviews. Two psychologists, Tracey Jane and Ivan Raymond, prepared the interview schedule and interviewed the children. The themes were then validated by discussion with other young people. A full report was provided to the Guardian, excerpts of which are reproduced in this report.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology, based upon a grounded theory approach, informed the design of the interviews and report. The approach uses a constant comparative method, which is a process of engaging in simultaneous collection and data analysis and conducting further analysis on the basis of the emerging theory.

The challenges included the sensitive nature of the content area, the age and developmental level of participants, and the need to systematically explore historical placement moves. By way of addressing these needs, narrative therapy principles also informed the interview process, including the application of externalising techniques, such as structured drawing, during the interview.

A semi-structured interview template, using open questions, guided the collection of data and included questions designed to elicit both descriptive content and underlying meaning. (See Appendix 3.)

After four interviews, the interview template was reviewed and modified. It was assessed that the content depth of the initial interviews was not as high as anticipated. The interview template was modified to allow young people to spend additional time talking about historical placements such as, what happened in the placement prior to the move, so that they were better attuned and connected to their historical experiences and the subsequent placement move.

It is likely that participant selection was mediated by factors such as placement stability and participant maturity. After obtaining participant consent, face-to-face interviews were conducted on an individual basis. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and confidential location which primarily was the participant's home. In total, 17 interviews were audiotaped and externally transcribed, with one additional interview manually transcribed in detailed notes as the young person declined to be taped. The interviews ranged from 14 to 53 minutes in duration.

Interviews

After a brief rapport-building activity (eg, general conversation, game) and completing the consent process, participants were engaged in the interview.

Recording commenced with permission and the interviewer asked the young person to identify a placement move they wished to talk about and to describe the placement from which they moved in detail. Questions tapping the closeness of the relationship between carers and the young person were posed using a written scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing "not close" and 10 representing "extremely close". A range of open-ended questions were applied to assess the participant's view of why the placement move occurred, as well as the impact of the placement move. A scale of 0 to 10 was also used to capture how "difficult" the placement move was for the young person, with 0 representing "easy" and 10 "extremely difficult".

The above reflective process was replicated for as many placement moves the young person was willing to discuss. Follow-up questions were applied to explore the relative impact and differences between placement moves.

A number of general questions were asked in relation to placement moves and stability, to broaden and validate the discussion of specific placement moves. In most cases, young people were asked to comment on how Families SA (and/or individual case workers) can support young people within placement moves.

At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewer summarised the key themes and sought the young person's feedback in relation to this summary. This provided an initial validity check. Any issues raised during the interview that required a carer, guardian or other response, were followed up with the participant's knowledge and consent.

Participant profile

A total of 18 participants (8 male, 10 female), age range from 11 to 17 years (Mean = 14.3), were interviewed.

Half of the participants resided in a foster care placement, with six young people residing in a residential/congregate care placement. One participant was residing in an approved relative care placement, one in an independent living placement, and one participant was incarcerated at the time of interview without an identified future placement. The majority (73 per cent) of the participants resided in a metropolitan location, within 50km of central Adelaide. One participant identified as Aboriginal.

Data analysis and validation

The interviews were conducted over a six week period. Notes of the emerging themes were maintained, and these themes were regularly discussed by the two interviewers, and integrated within the interview process, as per the grounded theory design.

The transcripts were analysed in respect to four distinct categories: (1) what fosters placement stability, (2) impact of placement moves, (3) factors mediating transition process and (4) consultation around placement moves. A thematic analysis technique was applied to examine the reasons, role, meaning and impact of placement moves.

Preliminary and summary themes were reviewed and refined through discussion between both interviewers. These preliminary themes were then discussed with two young people, aged 17, recruited by the Office of Guardian for Children and Young People to provide critique on the theoretical and applied implications of the thematic content. This small panel provided an important validity check, and also assisted in the naming and consolidation of the final themes.

Results and themes

There were significant variations in the level of content depth across the participant group. Older participants (> 15 years of age) generally provided more detailed and content rich data sets, with higher levels of abstract understanding and reasoning of why placement moves occurred, and the impact of such moves within their lives.

Table 1 below summarises the primary and secondary themes generated from the content and thematic analysis.

Table 1 Summary of Primary and Secondary Themes

Category	Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
Placement Stability	Relationships communicating belonging	<i>Part of the family</i>
		<i>Genuine care and acceptance</i>
Placement Transition	Vulnerability and discomfort	
	Adjustment facilitators	<i>Choice and control</i>
		<i>Preparation</i>
		<i>Understanding why</i>
		<i>Openness</i>
		<i>Support and validation</i>
Impact of Placement Moves	Loss and opportunity	
	Accepting versus complicated understanding	
	Trigger for change	
	Emerging awareness of longer term impact	
Consultation	Inconsistent engagement	

The following section explores the primary and secondary themes in detail. Brief commentary is provided to contextualise the theme and embed it within the wider literature.

As part of the ‘consent to interview’ discussion, the young people could choose their own pseudonym to accompany any quotations used. So the names that appear below are the names chosen by the interviewees.

Placement stability

When I say stable...I feel comfortable. I don't feel like there is me, I am in a different family, then there is you. (Mason,15)

As a later, adjunctive process to the main analysis, the interviewees were requested to provide comment and feedback on participants’ understanding of “placement stability” and any themes emerging from the study relating to how placement stability might be fostered. These findings should be regarded as preliminary and used to highlight directions for future exploration.

Across the participant group, there was evidence of poor literacy relating to the construct of “placement stability” (e.g., “do you know what placement stability is”). Even with follow-up questioning and exploration, the construct was not comprehensible to young people. As such, a working definition of a stable placement was required. This was defined by the interviewees as “a placement which demonstrated resilience (i.e., was unlikely to break down easily) and longevity, as reported by a young person feeling satisfied and content within the placement for an extended period of time”.

Using this definition, one primary theme (relationships communicating belonging) and two secondary themes (being treated as family, genuine acceptance and care) emerged as factors associated with placement stability.¹⁴

Relationships communicating belonging

Participants who reported feeling connected or a sense of belonging within the placement also reported higher levels of placement stability. Connection and belonging was associated with members of the placement, whether they be carers, family members or siblings, communicating to the young person that they were valued and wanted. Belonging was associated with two secondary overlapping themes: being treated as family, and the experience of genuine care and acceptance.

¹⁴ The authors wish to caution that these themes, which are more fully examined below, are not exhaustive and that factors relating to different placement types (e.g., foster care, kinship care, residential care) cannot be fully extrapolated within this analysis.

Part of the family

Interviewer: How do they make you feel here?

Shazzie: Part of the family.

Interviewer: Part of the family do they? Is that important to you?

Shazzie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that's a good thing for kids to feel like they're a part of the family?

Shazzie: Yeah.

Interviewer: You do? Why is that?

Shazzie: Helps you a bit, get a good life and that.

(Shazzie, 12)

Young people who reported feeling (or having felt) content and stable in a family-based placement, said that they were treated as “part of the family” within that placement. Specifically, they reported being treated in an equal and similar manner to other family members, both adults and children. Examples that were given included being involved in family rituals (e.g., birthday celebrations) and being provided with the same supports as other children in the family. A number of young people stressed the importance of discipline being conducted in a fair and equitable manner, even when it involved the young person themselves getting told off. In other words, feelings of belonging are fostered in family environments that foster equality and fairness.

I was treated as part of the family, and not as an outsider. (Mason, 15)

She treated me as her own son. (Ricky, 17)

We are one family, we do things together. (Lavender, 14)

If you don't feel part of their family then why would you want to live there anyway. (Aria, 14)

Conversely, when young people felt as though they were treated differently or unfairly, they reported feeling as though they did not belong in the placement. They reported feeling a division or disconnection between the biological members of the family and themselves.

Christmas times we had to sit there and watch everyone else open up awesome presents or something and we would have to sit there or you would get locked in your room or something. (Mason, 15)

Congruent with this theme, Tiddle, a 12 year old girl residing in foster care, reflected on her experiences whilst living in a previous residential care placement.

Well I wanted a proper family and I wanted a place I could call home and at the old house I couldn't really do that because people would come in and go, come in and go, because they'd all have different shifts, so I'd never really know who was going to be on. (Tiddle, 12)

Genuine care and acceptance

It didn't feel like she was in it for the kids, she was in it for the money. (Mason, 15)

The theme of belonging was also associated with participants experiencing genuine care and acceptance by carers. The term genuine refers to the young person's belief that care and support by the caregiver/s is being provided from an altruistic place, rather than driven or motivated by money. The term acceptance relates to the experience of young people feeling accepted and valued, irrespective of their life circumstances.

She treated me like a human...Like she didn't treat me just like some kid that...doesn't have parents. (Ricky, 17)

Interviewer: So did you feel comfortable when you came here that day, did you?

Ebony: Yes.

Interviewer: Why did you feel comfortable? What reason do you think?

Ebony: Because 'Natalie' and that are accepting.

Interviewer: Yes.

Ebony: They didn't judge me or anything

Unfortunately, there was evidence that young people did not always feel genuine care and acceptance.

I felt I was there to annoy. (Maz, 17)

They just think I am a 'dero' because of my anger. (Ricky, 17)

There was evidence that a number of young people experienced placement stability within residential care facilities. While the theme of belonging was associated with stability within these settings as well, it appeared more strongly related to the experience of genuine care and acceptance, as opposed to being treated as part of a family. For example, few young people identified carers within residential settings as “family” (although some did see other young people as siblings), however many did identify carers within these settings as being significant in their lives. As an example, Ella, 17, talked about moving back into a Transitional Accommodation (TA) placement from foster care, and being welcomed by staff members who had previously supported her.

Interviewer: Was there anybody that you knew at TA when you moved into the TA there?

Ella: A guy called “George” and “Karen”, “Paul”, a whole range of people. They were shocked when I came back but they were an amazing help when I came back and “George” he’s a good person because he knew, he had to be on that night when I came into the house. He’s a senior support person.

Interviewer: Okay.

Ella: He’s like welcome back to TA. He was really happy but then when he said like that I’m like wanting to cry but he was really helpful and went clothes shopping. That made me fit in better.

Interviewer: So they sort of helped you settle more than anything else?

Ella: Yeah, yeah.

In a similar manner, Ricky, 17, talked about a staff member in a residential facility who he reported had a profound impact on his life.

I had depression and no-one else knew and she pinpointed it and she helped me through it step by step. She helped me sort my payments out, she tried to get me back into school. What else – yeah, she just helped me majorly. (Ricky, 17)

Comment

Belonging as defined by being accepted and treated as part of the family and/or by experiencing genuine care and acceptance was associated with placement stability across

the participant group. This finding is consistent with the attachment literature which identifies strong positive caregiver relationships as being central to optimal child development and wellbeing. Moreover, this finding is consistent with the view that having access to stable and secure caregivers in a relationship where the child or young person feels valued and cared for can be pivotal in healing historical trauma.

Placement transition

Placement transition is defined as ‘the process of a young person becoming aware that they are leaving one placement, through the move itself, to a point of adjustment in the new placement’. Across the participant group, this process was varied and dynamic. Not only were there differences between young people in terms of their broad experiences regarding placement moves, but most participants described the role and impact of different placement moves in very distinct ways.

Despite this heterogeneity, common themes did emerge. Universally, across the participant group, young people talked about feelings of vulnerability and discomfort. As well, a number of themes emerged relating to the process of transition and subsequent adjustment that underpin a supportive and child-centric transition process.

Vulnerability and discomfort

I didn't like the idea of moving, but I guess I just had to. (T-Dog,15)

Scared and did not know what was going on. (Maz, 17)

The intensity and type of vulnerability or discomfort differed across the participant group and across different placement moves. Participants talked about feeling lost, in shock, alone, awkward, depressed, confused and scared during the placement transition. Perceptions of unfairness, poor treatment, a lack of understanding, and inadequate support were not uncommon.

Well I didn't know where I was going, what it would be like, what the people would be like there. (Bob, 14)

I think I was just upset back then. I was just pretty upset at the time there and I missed everyone that I knew. Yeah, I was just upset. (Ceazer, 17)

It was scary. (Maz, 17)

I know what it is like to be basically left in the dark with no-one, nothing, you're just there on your own and you look round and everything is alive, but you feel dead. I know what it feels like. (Ricky, 17)

For some young people these feelings of vulnerability and discomfort also had a behavioural expression, that is, young people reported that the transition led to them engaging in absconding, avoidant (hiding), or self-injurious behaviours.

I'd lock myself in my room for five or six days and just not leave it because I just felt shit, didn't want to be there, didn't want to see no-one. (Ricky, 17)

Interviewer: Okay, so what was it like walking into [residential unit]?

Michael Jackson: Stupid, I didn't know what I was doing, I just like stayed in my room the whole time and then after like a week or so I came out.

There was evidence that some transitions or moves were harder or more challenging than others. Participants reported placement moves that involved leaving family members behind (siblings etc.), “being put in a place where you do not want to be”, having information shared about themselves without their consent and having to leave a placement at short notice made a transition harder.

So the next day I pretty much had to move you know, it was unexpected and I had to ask for a day off because you know, I wouldn't handle it being by myself at school. (Ella, 17)

Interviewer: What was that like to leave placements and not have your brother with you?

Gypsie: It was hard because I just put my focus on wondering about my brother because for me... I will run halfway across the world, swim and everything if it means that I could be with my family and I would never let anything happen to them.

Even in cases where the participant had requested the move and there was excellent preparation and support, feelings of vulnerability and discomfort were still reported. These feelings were associated with the multiple changes within the transition and included more obvious changes associated with adults and caregivers in their life, moving schools, peers and social connections, sports, and connections with family, but also included less tangible

changes like getting to know people on a different level, having different rules and expectations, changes to rituals and routines and connections with community.

Interviewer: So what other things do you think that people need to consider when kids have to move placements?

Tiddle: How they feel safe in the house, because if you don't feel safe you don't really want to move in...And I know when I came it was a bit hard for me to get settled because different sounds, different noises and different people...Normally I'm used to a main road and a few cats. Now we hear trucks and buses come around and a dog barks its head off.

Interviewer: What other things do you think help make people feel safe in a placement?

Tiddle: Like once I was here for about a week, that's when I started feeling safe. Sometimes it's a lot harder for people because I know when I went into care with Nannies SA it took me at least, about six months because I had just moved from an environment where my Mum and my Dad would always be up.

Adjustment facilitators

A placement transition inevitably requires young people to adjust to a number of changes. Adjustment involves the young person being able to appraise, understand and adapt to new roles, experiences and people. The interviews sought to understand which qualities and supports young people felt were important. The following five themes emerged. Even in cases where these conditions were met, a number of young people reported that the transition process was difficult.

As you don't know what it is really going to be like. (Maz, 17)

Choice and Control

A universally reported theme was that young people wish to have choice and control over their placements, including when the placement changed, the nature of the transition, and the final placement. This included being listened to about how the placement was going and providing feedback on the location, type and composition of the future placement. Young people wanted to be informed as to the types of placements being considered and consulted as to their views, prior to a decision being made. "Being put in a place where you do not want to be" (Ariel 14), was reported by young people as a concern they had regarding their placement moves.

There were multiple examples where young people were given choice and control over the type and nature of their future placements.

Having it less unexpected and having a choice of where I could go. (Ella, 17)

Having more variety in saying where you're going to go because Families SA normally generally just picks one place and says well this is the only option when really they could be looking for longer. As soon as they find something they don't keep looking. They should at least have two options to say there's this or there's this, what would you prefer and things like that but they don't do that, they just tell you where you're going. (Aria, 14)

There were also frequent examples where placement transitions occurred in a manner where young people were given no choice over the nature or type of move. For some young people these moves were distressing both in terms of the placement experience and the way in which they moved, such as, not being able to say goodbye. Sometimes there was a sense that these moves remained unresolved, either due to negative experiences precipitating the transition or due to difficulties connecting to the new environment.

Preparation

Having some time to take it in before I have to move. (Ariel, 14)

Yeah, not moving them really quickly, make sure they actually want to do it and let them like come here a few times so they feel a bit more safer and so they can get to know the people a bit more. (Tiddle, 12)

The importance of preparation during the placement transition was stressed by participants.

Preparation had the potential to take many forms, and included:

- Talking with their social worker about the possibility of a placement move.
- Talking with their carer about the possibility of a placement move.
- Talking with their social worker about the options being explored or available.
- Meeting the new carers prior to the placement move occurring.
- A graduated or slow transition plan between placements (e.g., visiting the new placement, building up length of stay over time).

- Being given photos of the new placement location and street
- Meeting and developing relationships with the children in the placement
- Having the opportunity to find out about other changes (e.g., schools, clubs, access) that might be associated with the placement move
- Being able to say goodbye (to peers at school, teachers, carers, siblings, other children in the placement)

Preparation was often reported as a need to get to know the new placement in a slow and graduated manner, as summarised by Tiddle.

Don't take the progress so fast. Like maybe for a week or two have just visits and then maybe for another week, sleepovers. And then that person just starts gradually putting their stuff into the house. And then maybe the next week that's when they move in, because that's what I did. I came here about three or four times and then I thought I might like it speeded up a bit so we skipped the sleepovers and then I waited another few weeks and then I moved in. (Tiddle, 12)

Gypsie, a 14 year old girl residing in residential care, reported that when she moved into this congregate care placement the residents aided her transition by making her feel welcome.

The older boy who used to live here sent me a letter saying: Hi Gypsie, I am a kid who is living where you are going to be living at the moment and I am looking forward to meeting you and I am happy to help you with your work or anything you need help with when you come. And I reckon that was really nice because he didn't need to go to the effort in doing that but he did and we had another young person which I have got a photo of him over in a frame. His name was 'Bruce'. He was here when I came and I remember the first thing he did when I walked in through the door, didn't even know me, he came and gave me a nice big hug. Came, he saw me, a car pull up and he – I saw his face out the window and then I opened the door. He came running along the house and did a cannonball in to a hug. (Gypsie, 14)

The importance of preparation was highlighted by more than one young person who commented on preparation as providing the opportunity to say goodbye, but also to provide “some thinking time”.

Well it doesn't give you much of a goodbye, doesn't give you much time to have some thinking time. It's just kind of get in the car, you're going sort of thing.

(Aria, 14)

The preparation stage also related to the process of supporting the young person to understand the rules, routines, living arrangements and expectations of the new placement. Upon arriving at a new residential placement, the desired preparation and welcome reported by one young person included:

Well take the kids there, show them around. You know, this would be your room, this is how it will be, this is the routine. Slowly, you know, like probably maybe one day a week, two days a week, three days a week, slowly get them used to it, you know, because it is a big step going to a unit where, you know, a unit with twelve other kids. (Ceazer, 17)

Some young people reported knowing their new environment well by the time of transition, either through good preparation or by having a pre-existing relationship with the new carer (e.g., a sibling's carer or respite carer). This was viewed positively by participants.

In contrast, there was also evidence of young people transitioning into placements with minimal or no preparation.

Interviewer: Right. How did you know that you were going to go to [residential unit]? Who told you about that?

Ceazer: They didn't. They just took me pretty much. They just packed my shit and took me there. Or actually, yeah, that is what they did. They just packed my shit and took me there. Nobody just explained like, yeah you are going to this. They just took me there.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Ceazer: I didn't like it at all.

Interviewer: Why was that?

Ceazer: I was at this – you go from what you know, to you are just in a place with strangers really.

Interviewer: So one minute you are living somewhere and the next minute you are living somewhere else?

Ceazer: That is right.

Interviewer: How could that have been done differently?

Ceazer: Just explained it, all that kind of shit. Yeah, I guess nobody wants to go in to care, you know, especially no one wants to go from home or, you know, be taken away from the family or whatever and then go in to emergency care and then get used to that and then go to this other place. (Ceazer, 17)

Ricky, 17, indicated that he had to move to a temporary congregate care placement with no preparation or support in the transition.

No, I had no clue. They just – what did they do? They chucked me on a bus, packed all my shit, chucked me on a bus and they didn't even tell me who I was meeting there. They just said there will be someone there waiting for you at the bus stop, they didn't say male or female, nothing. I sat at the bus stop and then yeah, this chick come up, can't remember her name, and then she grabbed me and she was like yeah, rah, rah, rah. She took me to the [residential unit] and it was shit, I hated it there. (Ricky, 17)

Similarly, Aria spoke about a placement move that involved her sister.

They told her on the day and as far as I'm concerned that's just terrible. You shouldn't be putting that on a child to say well you're going today and like – my sister didn't really have a choice, there was no really other places to go. (Aria, 14)

Understanding why

Young people wanted to understand the reasons a placement move was occurring. This aided their ability to transition successfully and adjust to the new environment. Adults were seen as important to this by providing young people with this information in a clear way. Some young people said that even though it was difficult for them to hear that a carer could no longer look after them, they found knowing the reasons behind this decision valuable in helping them move on.

At times the environment in which this information was conveyed was significant in either a positive or negative sense. For example one young person indicated that she had been taken for a special appointment to see her psychologist where she was told the information. She reported feeling concerned when she got to the office and realized that “something was wrong” as everyone was there and behaving strangely.

There were many occasions when young people reported that they did not understand why the move had occurred, or the reasons behind it. For some young people this was

associated with a sense of confusion. Other young people appeared to have only a partial understanding of why a placement move had occurred. Some young people appeared to hold themselves responsible for a placement transition relating to problems in the previous placement.

I haven't really had the opportunity to sit down with the carer that I am leaving with and find out why she wants me to leave. (Mason, 15)

As an extension of this, Ella, 17, was asked what should “never occur within the placement move” or transition.

Ella: Just not being unexpected.

Interviewer: Okay, so it should never be unexpected.

Ella: Should have been told the actual reason.

Interviewer: So you should be told the actual reason?

Ella: But then again they may not want to, if you know what I mean.

Interviewer: ...It sounds to me like you're needing...to get some information about why the move is happening.

Ella: At least some of the reason.

Ceazer was asked what adults could have done differently and he reported the potential positive impact of understanding why placement moves occur.

I guess if they could ask me or whether, you know, ask me, try and find out, why are you here, you know, it would probably make you feel more at home. (Ceazer, 17)

A lack of understanding of why the move occurred has the potential to trigger unresolved feelings.

Interviewer: You don't know why you moved?

Boy George: Yeah.

Interviewer: And is that something that bothers you at all?

Boy George: Yep.

Openness

Participants reported not wanting to have things hidden from them, in terms of social workers looking for a new placement, even when they did not yet have any tangible options.

Young people commented that social workers should: “not hide things from us” and “should be upfront” about their thinking around placement moves. Ariel, 14, noted that when this does not occur, it seems like people are “gossiping behind your back”. Ricky, a 17 year old young man who had experienced many placements, stressed the importance of Families SA case workers providing upfront information and being honest.

Just tell them like you know, give them information of what they're going to have to go through instead of just saying pack your shit, you're moving, and then put you on a bus and send you away. Like you know, just give them information and say look, you're going into a halfway house, rah, rah, rah, you know, it's going to be difficult but if you need help we'll be there for you, and shit like that, because that never happened for me. They just, yeah, as I said, just chucked me in placement and yeah, I didn't hear from my worker ever when I was in [residential unit]. I did not hear from her once. She did not ring me. She did not ring the [residential unit]...I had no support whatsoever except for two workers when I was in [country town]. (Ricky, 17)

Across the participant group, a small number of participants reported that disorder or deceit had been used in communication by adults within the placement transition. Two extreme examples are reported below. In the first example, Michael Jackson, 16, reported his placement transition to a residential unit.

Interviewer: Did you have any choice about where you went?

Michael Jackson: No.

Interviewer: So who talked to you about why the move was happening and where you were going?

Michael Jackson: My old social worker but I don't talk to her anymore, so.

Interviewer: What sorts of information did she give you?

Michael Jackson: She just said pack your bags and then I packed my bags and she said okay, you're moving out. On the day she started talking about what was going to happen when I moved up there and all that type of stuff and how she would organise access but that barely happened, so.

Interviewer: Okay, so you weren't aware before the day that you were going to move?

Michael Jackson: Not really.

Interviewer: Not really? Okay. So on the day that you moved, you were told that morning that you had to pack your stuff?

Michael Jackson: Yep.

Interviewer: Okay, so how was that?

Michael Jackson: Shock really, I didn't know what they meant. I thought I was just going on a holiday for a few days but yeah.

Interviewer: So when did you figure out that you weren't going away for a few days?

Michael Jackson: Well they said I was only going to be in [residential unit] for a bit, like an emergency placement but then I was there for like ever so I kind of gathered and thought to myself like I'm going to be stuck here so it was like I kind of gathered that pretty quick.

Interviewer: So did anybody have that conversation with you to tell you that you were going to stay there long term?

Michael Jackson: No, I kind of gathered that myself because everyone – like when I was there my social worker kept saying oh you're only there for a bit until we find something else and then I had to go to a new social worker and that was about it.

In this second example, T-Dog, 15, reported a move from foster care to a congregate care placement, where deceit was used by the foster carer.

T-Dog: Oh yeah, my foster parents took me there all right. Umm, it was hard saying good-bye to them. They said: oh don't worry about it, we won't let you go. Let's just go get something to eat then we will go and collect the rest of your stuff. As I walk in they jump in the car and drive off.

Interviewer: They drove off did they?

T-Dog: Yeah. So mean. And then they stopped halfway down the road saying: we are sorry for doing that. We knew that you would refuse to go anyway. And I am like this: fair enough, I agree with that. I was laughing too because I actually agreed with them. I would have refused to leave the car. I would have just held on to the car so they had actually done a pretty big favour for me and themselves by driving halfway down the road.

Support and validation

Because like if they don't understand what you're going through they can't help you. (Pink, 11)

Young people consistently indicated that they wanted to be supported by adults in the placement transition process. Predominantly, the desired support took the form of practical support related to packing up their possessions, being transported to their new placement, and being assisted to physically settle into their new environment. However, another aspect of support that emerged was that of emotional support. Specifically, many young people talked about their desire to have an adult talk to them and support them emotionally during the move. This included helping them to feel connected to someone (and not abandoned or alone) during the move, listening and acknowledging their feelings (anxiety, fear, grief, sadness, excitement), helping them negotiate the new experience on an emotional level, and providing them with hope for the future.

Let me know that I can talk to her if I am sad and I can call up if I need to, if like things aren't going well. (Lavender, 14)

Like she just talked to me. She was there. She always listened to my problems and she always, when I told her what was wrong she'd always find the best solution for me and that solution always worked for me. (Ricky, 17)

Ella, 17, reported that her support person had: “been there like a rock for me”.

Try to spend as much time as you can with them while they are in their new placement. (Gypsie, 14)

Support was further characterised as adults attempting to understand the feelings and impact on the young person of the placement move.

Interviewer: What do you mean by 'supportive'? What would you like them to be doing in support of you?

Mason: To let you know what is happening. To be supportive of you and how you feel. Not to disagree with how you feel. Like not to say: it is going to be okay because it is going to be okay, when you and they know it is not.

Similarly Gypsie, 14, talked about desired support.

Interviewer: What sort of things could adults do to make you feel okay in your placement?

Gypsy: Well, it depends how well you know the child. You should really try to think the way that they would feel instead of thinking the way you are going to – the way most people think is they think making a move will be okay because they would be okay with it.

Interviewer: Yes.

Gypsy: But, they need, people need to stop and think about the other person and not themselves because I find that that is what a lot of people do. They think more about how they are going, how they would feel about moving but they don't feel about how the other people would feel about moving. They don't think about how hard it would be for them or how they would feel. They think of the way that they might feel about it, if it was happening to them. But, it is not what you should do.

Interviewer: Did adults around you understand how you felt when you moved?

Gypsy: They attempted but to understand the way I feel, you have to understand the feeling of being confused a lot of the time and feeling like you are in the dark or in a cage.

Gypsy in her discourse went on to say:

Everyone tried to understand but no one could really understand. Unless it is happening to you, you can't understand. I find that kids at school, they say that they wished they weren't living with their family, but they can't understand how that will feel until it happens. If it was to happen to them they would be wishing the exact opposite. I would do anything to take their place and be able to live with my family. They complain that they hate their little sisters or their little brother, that they are annoying. But I am the opposite. I complain that I miss them and I love them and I have a friend who went on a camp that would teach you, that would try to teach you more about, would be like if you were in foster care because she wanted to understand and wanted to support me so much that she was willing to do anything to do that because she knew that I was, she could tell that I was sad but she couldn't understand it. And she could admit that she

couldn't understand it. But no one could admit that they couldn't understand how I was feeling. They all said, 'I understand. I understand'. All I wanted was them to admit what they couldn't. (Gypsie, 14)

From the participants' discourse, the delivery of support, validation and acknowledgement could occur through one of many adult relationships, including carers in the old placement, new carers, case worker or a counsellor/psychologist. In most cases, the Families SA social worker was reported as a key figure in the transition, both in terms of facilitating the practical support (transportation etc), as well as providing emotional support. Young people regularly reported that they had coped better through the placement transition because of a supporting adult who listened to them and was responsive to their needs.

Mason: The only person I have looked up to for support and have gotten support from would be the case worker, probably because they have done it a few times, they know what is happening, they are understanding of how you feel.

Interviewer: Yep. So they have a really important role do you think?

Mason: I would say they have an important role because it is their responsibility who you go to, whether you are going to be safe, whether you are going to be happy there.

Ricky spoke about the importance of providing support through the entire placement transition not just through the move itself.

Like instead of just chucking a kid in a placement, help him through it or help them through it man, until they feel steady and stable and they're back on their feet and then sort of back off. But don't just chuck the kid in there and just leave him there. I mean just because it's not your kid, it's your client; your job is to look after that kid, not just you know dump him in a placement and leave him there... It is man because like I'll tell you right now, getting on a plane from [country town] to Adelaide and not knowing where you're going is pretty scary and you rock up and you don't know no-one, there's a bunch of young girls, there's a bunch of young kids, boys, girls, it's mixed man and like it can be scary, for some kids yeah it can be scary. (Ricky, 17)

Similarly, when Ceazer was asked what support he would like to receive in a move, he described support beyond the initial move, identifying that he valued supportive

communication that included both ‘checking in’, as well as helping him understand why the placement move occurred.

How are you going mate, you know. Why are you here, you know, or mainly find a bit about them. Ask me, well, are you all right, how are you handling it, you know, anything you need. (Ceazer, 17)

A small number of respondents felt that even when good adult support was provided, adults would never truly understand what young people experience during a placement move. They indicated that other young people might be a helpful source of support, suggesting for example that sharing their own personal stories (through the interview process) might be of benefit to other young people.

Make me feel like I am not the only one. (Ceazer, 17)

Comment

Many young people have multiple placement moves during their time in care. Change is associated with the unknown, and hence for most people is unsettling and may create anxiety or fear. Even when the move is viewed positively, placement changes are experienced as unsettling and a time of vulnerability and discomfort.

Whilst there was a lack of consistency in implementation there were factors that facilitated adjustment to these changes. Not surprisingly, many of these factors, such as, having a level of choice and control, preparation, openness from adults and an understanding of why the move was occurring, are associated with making the move more predictable. This is an important consideration in a vulnerable population group where predictability enhances a felt sense of safety. This highlights the role of adults in supporting young people emotionally through placement moves.

Impact of placement moves

Across the participant group, there were reports that young people had experienced between two and more than 30 placement moves. The reasons for the placement moves varied and included the following:

- Behaviour of young person
- Neglect/abuse within the placement
- Changing carer circumstances

- Deteriorating health of carer
- Reunification with a parent (some young people transitioned in and out of care several times)
- More appropriate care option became available (e.g., transition from a residential care facility to family based care, or independent living)
- Changing caregiving environment (e.g., mix of young people within congregate care changing)

For a small number of young people, they reported placement moves in which they could not provide a clear reason or rationale for why the move occurred. Whilst the impact of placement moves varied across the participant group and individually, there were consistent themes.

Loss and opportunity

Some placements can really help kids. (Ricky, 17)

Participants reported that all placement moves involved some sort of loss, whether this was the loss of a person, object, experience, photos, group or situation. These losses held different importance for the young person depending upon the meaning ascribed. Some of these losses were still significant and evoked an emotional reaction when discussing them. For example, a number of young people felt a transition away from siblings to be an important loss, and one which continued to be experienced with sadness.

It was the first time I'd been away from my Nana in 12 years. (Ricky, 17)

I had to leave my brother and sister behind. (Tiddle,12)

I had to change schools; that was also pretty hard on me. (Tiddle,12)

I just couldn't get over it for a while. (Ella, 17)

At the same time, young people were also able to report a positive opportunity or gain coming from the placement move. This may have been an opportunity to form a new relationship, to experience a more positive caregiving environment, to learn a new skill, or to have a new experience. Again the degree to which these were seen as important differed.

Well it was like a lot of freedom which I wanted. It was good to be able to just go out and spend time with my friends and stuff which I wasn't able to do before. The workers were nice and the girl that was in the house was very nice when she eventually came, so I built a friendship with her. (Aria, 14)

Aria further commented how the same residential placement had offered a range of challenges, in relating to other residents and the staff.

Well I had a really crazy girl that was in the group home which just made nothing easy for anyone. She like set the house on fire as well, absolute crazy, but the other girl there was nice. But the workers, they're really young and you don't feel, because they're so young you don't really feel like – do you know what I mean? Because they're so young so you don't really feel like they're your family and stuff like that.

Interestingly, whilst most participants had a tendency to focus on either the loss or opportunity, rather than both, their retrospective analysis of their placement move indicated that both features were present for most young people.

Trigger for change

If you get in the wrong placement it can change the person you are. (Ariel, 14)

Many placement moves represented a trigger for a significant change within their lives. Many young people were able to directly relate the origin of a certain behaviour, experience or situation to a particular move. Some of these changes were positive, and included linking in with a positive peer group at school, feeling a sense of connection for the first time or having the opportunity to settle and experience some peace.

Just to know that I have got the family here that loves me and like accepts me and they will like be there for me and they will like have their home set up for me and take me with them wherever they like go, or whatever. (Lavender, 14)

Other changes were less helpful such as being linked in with peers who were engaging in antisocial behaviours. For example one young person identified that when he moved placement:

They [residents in new placement] got me into sniffing glue and smoking...I have managed to give up the glue but I can't give up smoking. (T-dog, 15)

Ricky had multiple placement moves and summarised the potential of placements as being able to:

Change the way they [young people] act, but it can also make them worse. It made me worse. (Ricky, 17)

Ariel noted in reference to the capacity for placements to initiate significant change that decision makers:

Should never put them in a place they don't want to be. It can give them depression, make them cut themselves and run away. They might get in with the wrong crowd. (Ariel, 14)

There was evidence that reflection on an impending placement move offered some young people significant hope for their future, especially when a current placement was not meeting their needs.

A better life. I could turn my life around and it would be better for me. (Mason, 15)

Stepping stone to a new start in my life. (Ricky, 17)

Somewhere I could live life as I wanted to and not feel like someone was holding me back. (Ariel, 14)

Emerging awareness of longer term impact

When young people were asked to describe the cumulative impact of multiple moves on their lives, many young people were not able to provide responses with high levels of content depth. While young people were able to describe a small number of placement moves that had an impressionable impact, many young people were not able to report the long term impact.

There are a number of reasons that this might be the case. Possibly the repeated experience of placement moves may have desensitised young people to the impact to a degree. As reported by one young man:

I am used to it now because I have had it done to me so often, just being tossed back and forth between carers. (Mason, 15)

There was evidence that older young people (15 and above) were able to provide deeper or more abstract analysis of the impact of multiple placements moves on their life.

Interviewer: What was that like to having all these different adults coming in and out of your life?

Mason: A bit of a worry. I guess I did feel sad because I didn't know who to look to because I wasn't really staying with anyone for a long period of time so it was always just took them as them doing their job because I would be leaving them soon and going back to my other foster carers and I wouldn't stay there for long so I didn't have enough time to actually get to know them or anything like that.

Interviewer: Do you think that had an impact on you at all, that sort of movement?

Mason: I guess it did have an impact on me because I haven't; I didn't get the chance to have that bonding experience with anyone so I have kind of had to be an independent person in the family

Mason provided further information related to the impact of placement moves.

There is always – in the back of my mind it has always been: I could be leaving here soon, I could be going to another foster carer, wondering who that would be. Before I came to “Sarah” and “Bob” I was always worrying what my brothers and sisters were doing because they were in the same sort of set-up as me, going to different people all the time so it did make my life a lot harder because I couldn't focus on my life. (Mason,15)

T-Dog, 15, was asked, “do you think that [referring to a placement move] has had an impact at all, changed who you are?”

T-Dog: Yeah, it has changed me from who I am.

Interviewer: Why is that?

T-Dog: When I was living at [residential unit] for the first time I was so nice, so good. Now look at me. I am a bad arse kid. I break anything which comes in my path. I have a go at anyone who annoys me. I don't like doing it. I do it at school but they can't control it. My blackouts are too powerful. I don't even see out of any of my eyes and I am blind out of one of my eyes.

Accepting versus complicated understanding

As noted above, each and every placement move results in an immediate experience of vulnerability and discomfort, as well as loss and opportunity. There is also evidence that placement moves have the potential to be change factors in the lives of young people.

There was significant variation in how young people reflected on their placements. Many young people had come to a point of acceptance of leaving the placement, while for others, there was ongoing conflict or confusion. This was evidenced through:

- Young people being unable to communicate why the move occurred - *“I don’t know why I moved”*
- Young people reporting ongoing anger, discomfort or hurt attached to people involved with the move
- Young people avoiding talking about specific placements but conveying an emotional response
- Young people displaying inappropriate affect when talking about difficult moves (e.g. laughing) or disconnecting from the emotional response.

Placement change which had more complicated features left unresolved feelings.

I wasn’t sure what to feel. You see I am mixed with different emotions like everybody but the thing is I don’t know which ones are the ones that I should feel at the time. I am still trying to find that. (Gypsie, 14)

I was forced to move from there because of my stupid court trial...I am not allowed to go near that place. (expressed with frustration, T-Dog, 15)

A complicated analysis of a placement move also involved unresolved feelings.

Well it is kind of upsetting because like I don’t want her to not hate – I don’t want her to hate me or anything. But I know she won’t hate me because it wasn’t going away or anything and it wasn’t her fault or anything but I just didn’t want her to feel like she, like I didn’t love or something like as a family. (Lavender, 14)

This complicated analysis was also seen in the accounts of young people who blamed themselves for the placement move:

'Jane' just wanted me to leave because she had enough of me. (Shazzie, 12)

The potential impact of the placement move can remain dependent on the relationship a young person has with the carers, as reported by Gypsie, 14.

Interviewer: So what do you think of moving placements; overall good or sort of not so good?

Gypsie: It depends. If the carers were nice to you and you were attached to the carers then not so good. But, if the carers were horrible and you were quite glad to move, then good.

As an extension of this discussion, Gypsie reported a range of complicated or unresolved feelings that were triggered when she had incidental contact with a previous foster carer:

Well when you are unsure of what to say or do. Like when I saw "Betty" again at [country town] to me it felt like my heart was about to stop and I barely could breathe. I didn't know what to say nor did I know what to do. But, I kept on thinking it was all a horrible dream so I kept on pinching the side of my leg. (Gypsie, 14)

Comment

Understanding the impact of placement moves on children and young people is important in providing responsive placement planning. The fact that placement moves are characterised by both loss and opportunity and provide a trigger for change highlights the need for adults to validate losses, support connections, and explore and promote positive growth associated with the move.

The interviews indicate that some young people have become accustomed to moving. As well, it is likely that many young people have minimised the impact of cumulative placement moves by way of self-protection. Finally, it is also likely that young people's capacity to reflect upon the long term impact of multiple moves in depth (e.g., impact on developing self, views of self and world etc.) is limited by their developmental age and their emerging capacity to apply abstract cognitive processing.

Adults also have a role in helping young people develop a healthy narrative around a move, without which, the research suggests, it is difficult to reach a point of acceptance or to process fully any impact of the move on an emotional level.

Consultation

Being listened to is the main thing. (Ella, 17)

The thematic analysis indicated that there were no consistent themes in the way young people were engaged and involved within the decision-making process around placement cessation, transition or the selection of a new placement. In short, there was evidence of very inconsistent engagement.

Inconsistent engagement

Young people said that is important for them to feel as though they have some choice and control in regards to a placement move, that they understand the reasons for the placement move and that they experience support and validation within the process. These factors appear to contribute significantly to a young person's capacity to adjust to the move in a positive way. Despite this, it was clear that the degree to which young people were consulted varied significantly. There was preliminary evidence that consultation was more likely to occur when:

- The young person had a consistent social worker who had regular contact with the young person.
- The young person had another supportive adult in their life who was able to advocate for them.
- The young person had a placement option available to them where there was a pre-existing relationship (e.g., respite carer who became a full time carer, youth worker who became a carer, a teacher at school who became a carer).
- The young person was older.

Conversely, there was evidence of less consultation during:

- Periods of crisis.
- When the young person was absconding regularly from placement.
- When the young person had few other supports available to them.

Despite young people being inconsistently consulted about placements, there was certainly evidence of young people's views being actively sought and integrated within the planning process for some moves. Where this occurred it was highly valued by participants.

Interviewer: So who spoke to you about moving places?

Mariah: Social worker.

Interviewer: Did your social worker do a good job of doing that?

Mariah: Yep.

Interviewer: How did they do a good job? What things did they do?

Mariah: They told me beforehand.

Interviewer: So, they spoke to you about it?

Mariah: And they asked if I wanted to move houses.

Consultation is a process of understanding the young person's point of view, as evidenced by this quote from Mason, 15, who described a social worker who had consulted with him during a placement transition.

Interviewer: Do you ever have any regrets, do you ever wish something would have been done differently at that time?

Mason: No, not really because at the time I was ready to leave.

Interviewer: Yep. So you were ready to leave and that was the right decision for you at that time?

Mason: Yep.

Interviewer: Your social worker at the time, you know, did they support you get to the new placements? How do they do that?

Mason: Umm, "Hannah" was very good at the time. She was supportive of me in wanting to leave. I guess she, it felt like she knew my point of view from where I was standing.

Interviewer: Yep. So did you feel understood by "Hannah"?

Mason: Yep, yep, definitely. I did feel understood by "Hannah". Umm, we even had a few talks after that like basically the same as we are doing now, just umm where I was and if I was happy where I was in my new placement. And she was supportive, yep. Yep.

Bob, 14, was asked "are there things that you think that people should never do when they are talking about moving young people through care?"

Bob: Force them to move. I didn't get forced to move to [residential unit].

Interviewer: You didn't?

Bob: No, I had a choice.

This theme of how important consultation is to young people is perhaps best demonstrated by the following quote from a young person who was asked: "what kinds of thing do you think adults should do or think about when there is a placement move happening". In response to this question, Mariah, 15, residing in foster care simply responded:

Listen to them more.

Ricky extends this theme.

As far as I'm concerned, all kids should have rights and if they don't want to be somewhere they shouldn't have to be there. Simple, man. Why put a kid somewhere where you could possibly be putting his life in danger. Maybe that kid could end up wanting to kill himself for all they know and it's all because you took him away from his family or you took him out of somewhere where he felt safe and secure and put him somewhere like, I'm not going to say anything, but like this young girl I know apparently she got put into a house and apparently she got touched by another young male that was there. Why do that to some kid? Why do that to some poor little kid? What did that kid do to deserve that? It's a kid. (Ricky, 17)

Comment

A sense of agency and safety is frequently lacking for children and young people who have experienced trauma and it is vital that the adults supporting these young people foster this where possible. This is especially important in times where young people are particularly vulnerable, for example, when a placement change is required. Adults can foster agency and safety in these circumstances through consultation with the young person.

In line with the above, children and young people interviewed almost unanimously desired to have a voice, to be heard and to have their wishes taken into consideration in regards to placement moves. There was an inconsistent pattern of consultation in the accounts told. Where it did occur, it was viewed positively.

Consultation

As the inquiry gained pace, common themes emerged through the literature review, the case record review, reference group discussions and early information from interviews with children and young people. These themes were explored with groups of people involved in decisions about placements.

Three focus groups were convened. The first comprised social workers from Families SA offices, the second of foster carers and the third of Aboriginal practitioners. Record of the discussion was returned to participants to check the accuracy.

At the same time, a survey was sent to Charter Champions¹⁵ to seek their views about children moving in care. Nearly a third (52) responded to all or part of the survey.

Stability in care

It feels sometimes that their lives are like sausage rolls which can be chopped into discrete bits, with little connection between one placement and the next. (focus group, carers)

A stable placement for children in care was seen as being family based, safe, secure, nurturing and loving, with a strong commitment from carers to children and where children are viewed as part of the carer's family. There was an acknowledgement that children may view stability differently to adults and for children, stability will depend on trust. Placements should not be retained if they are not suitable for a child, if a child is not happy or is not being treated well.

A child was being bullied by the other residents. The move was effected quickly without much consultation but this worked well. (survey respondent)

¹⁵A charter champion is a designated officer of an organisation that has endorsed the *Charter of Rights for children and young people in care*. Their role is to promote the charter and children's rights.

A number of common challenges emerged. Primary among these was the lack of choice when children need to be moved which limited the possibility of matching children's needs to carer's capacity. Respondents referred often to the need for more therapeutic placements.

Respondents referred to the increasing number of large sibling groups entering care. It is reportedly now not uncommon for groups of up to ten children to require placements at the same time. Considering the best interests of each child entails complicated decision-making and the need to balance conflicting needs. In some situations siblings require different intensity of care and assistance and separating siblings can help to provide for the needs of each child. Regardless, respondents said that stability is usually aided by strong sibling relationships.

One of the challenges is splitting siblings when one of a group of siblings needs a therapeutic placement but the approval is not extended to the second child. (focus group, social workers)

For Aboriginal children, stability may depend on their relationship to the broader family, community and land which is part of their heritage.

...children need to be connected with and recognised by their community. (focus group, Aboriginal practitioners)

One participant in the focus group said that sadly, some Aboriginal children find stability only within youth justice detention. Their family connections may end up being with others in the youth or adult criminal justice system.

Social workers referred to the value to stability of 'concurrent planning' where they support carers to work towards different outcomes if circumstances change. For example, a plan is developed for the child to return to the birth family when safe, while plans are also made for the child to remain with the carers.

Respondents talked about children moving in to placements before assessment and training is complete and that it is often better for a child to go to a short term placement ahead of this to ensure a better outcome for the child.

Children placed with carers two weeks after the carers applied because they were viewed as 'good people'. The carers had no idea of the difficulties that they would face. (survey respondent)

Some young people choose to move from what workers or carers regard as stable placements to risky and unstable accommodation, particularly as they move to adulthood. The young person's social worker may undertake a risk assessment and decide, in consultation with their supervisors, to manage the risks. In the view of respondents, such arrangements can be successful with constant support and frequent visits from the worker.

Sometimes young people choose options that are challenging, but with support these can work. (focus group, social workers)

Other options can be explored and workers need to monitor and consult, change direction or maintain it and they don't feel that they will be hung out to dry. Supervisors have to be brave. It is important to keep clear records of consultations. (focus group, social workers)

Impact of moves on children

The survey asked respondents to rank the frequency with which they had observed certain factors in placement changes in the past year. One of the most consistent negative responses was to the statement 'the child is given a choice of placement'. More encouraging was the positive response for the statement, 'the child is informed about the reasons for the move to the limit of their understanding'. Views were most divergent on the statements: 'the child's wishes for contact with former carers are supported' and 'the child's views are discussed during planning for the move'.

Many respondents talked of the key to minimising the negative consequences of moving being good planning which involves the child. Unplanned moves when children had no prior knowledge was seen by all as negative for the child and carers.

A child was told that they were being moved on a particular day, but then was moved sooner to a placement without a transition process and without consulting the child. The result was that the child became unsettled and the child's behaviour deteriorated. (survey respondent)

A team approach to managing the changes was viewed by all as being of significant benefit.

It is better if everyone is honest early about the stresses because stresses just compound over time, until a placement breakdown is inevitable. (focus group, carers)

Social workers talked of disruption seeming to more often occur when children reached the age of eight or thirteen years. If a child has experienced multiple moves, the child's

behaviour may well be a reaction to previous grief and loss. Understanding child development and the impact of grief and trauma helps carers to respond appropriately and positively, including in situations where the child is moving from them. Children and young people may need additional support and help as they work through the complex web of relationships that they have with birth and foster families. It was suggested that:

You don't want young people to see themselves as just victims, or to use their past as an excuse for poor behaviour or choices. (focus group, carers)

As children mature, it is easier for them to understand what is happening to them and why but they need the information and to get answers to questions. If a child is not given reasons for moves then the child will create their own explanation which is often self-blaming. It is also highly likely to be inaccurate.

When a child has to change placement, it also affects staff. This may mean that they do not explain things well to children. This in turn means that children are vulnerable and may need to invent their own explanations which are often egocentric and self-blaming in situations which are not their fault at all. (survey respondent)

It appears from responses that it is not uncommon for children to be moved to a new placement with no preparation or without being told that a move is imminent. The abruptness of such moves is very damaging to children.

Siblings were moved from a placement following an access visit without any preparation. The carers and the children were shocked and upset as neither was given any reasons for this action. (survey respondent)

The timing of placement moves also needs to take account of significant events such as Christmas or birthdays so that anticipated celebrations are not missed.

In an ideal world, children should not need to change placements and we should be working to reduce the number of changes that occur (while supporting change where it is needed). We need to ensure all appropriate checks are in place to ensure that the best possible foster carers are selected whilst also encouraging more potential carers to come forward and offer their skills. (survey respondent)

Making moves more positive

Social workers said that they would know that a move had been positive when the child says ‘thank you’ or appears happy, when the child is blooming and catching up to peers in development, when they express hope and everyone gets a good night’s sleep.

Good communication and common approaches are critical to positive moves. Carers said that it is good when carers can talk to each other ahead of a move so that the new carer can learn some of the special things about the child. The worker needs to explain to the child what is happening and why.

Children need a friend... someone to take and hold their hand through the change, to be available at any time in those early months. (focus group, carers)

When the care team is working actively together, there is a greater sensitivity to any problems as they arise.

The care team approach has strengths in that there is support for carers and there is always someone to contact when things get tough. Every aspect of the child’s needs are addressed. There needs to be a coordinator who makes sure that everyone is kept informed. (focus group, social workers)

If there is good preparation in the new placement the child will feel welcome, including personalising the child’s private space.

A transition plan should map out the steps prior to, and following, the move. A gradual increase in contact was recommended, starting with a shared meal or other activity, to overnight then weekend visits. It became clear that transition plans need to be flexible and responsive to the child’s timing and examples were given of children wanting to move before all steps in the plan had been completed.

A planned placement change was expedited when the young person indicated that they were ready to move without further transitional activities. (survey respondent)

There was discussion of facilitating ongoing contact with school friends or teachers and others who had been important to the child.

Following a change of placement, the former carer continues to transport the child to school and positive contact continues. (survey respondent)

Pets may also have special significance for a child and one carer commented that children may talk more openly to pets about their feelings. Saying goodbye can be formalised to acknowledge the ending and celebrate shared experiences.

A transition process may show that a new placement will not work and the decision can be reversed, saving the child another placement move.

If the right placement is not available, a good transition process does not really help. (survey respondent)

Aboriginal children must maintain their cultural and familial links. Aboriginal practitioners talked of the need to understand the structure of Aboriginal families and to explore family genograms thoroughly before deciding on placements.

The Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is perceived as optional by some... (focus group, Aboriginal practitioners)

Some Aboriginal families fear being involved with 'the welfare' by offering to care and others of course fear that their children will be lost to them. The impact of past practices of removing children without good cause and the terrible grief is still felt keenly.

Some Aboriginal families will say that they don't want their children to have contact with their community.... In this situation, workers should talk with the parents about why they are saying this. It could be because they are descendants of the Stolen Generation or they are from a mixed cultural relationship where the other culture is dominant. (focus group, Aboriginal practitioners)

Making decisions about moves

The placement changes best remembered are the ones that social workers were not expecting. If workers are aware that a placement is becoming unstable they can plan for support and change. Some workers reported that they do not find out where the child will be moving to until just prior to the move, partly explained by the lack of choice in

placements and the sense of urgency this generates. The workers said that there is little opportunity to match children and carers.

It is very difficult to plan when there are no placements to be found. Young people with disabilities are very vulnerable. It is also difficult to find respite placements for young people with disabilities. (focus group, social workers)

The *Aboriginal Child Placement Principle* guides practice but is not always easy to implement. When a child cannot be placed with Aboriginal carers, the Aboriginal practitioners have seen it work well for children when the non-Aboriginal family seeks out and is accepted into the Aboriginal community. This includes using, where appropriate, Aboriginal child care, schooling or other cultural programs.

...where relationships develop between the children's family and the carers. This can be like a shared care approach. There is a cluster of non-Aboriginal caregiving families who are proactive in the Aboriginal community. They have sound knowledge of Aboriginal culture... they attend local Aboriginal activities including language, football, Elders group and community meetings. (focus group, Aboriginal practitioners)

Placement decisions are usually not made lightly and best decisions are made inclusively, including taking advice from others who know the needs of the child.

Decision-making is more complicated when a child is in a kinship placement that is not working well or during investigations of notifications of abuse or neglect by the carer family. Investigations can stretch out for a very long time during which the child (and the carers) are in limbo.

Workers are not able to see information about care concern investigations... If social workers knew what the problems were, they would be able to resolve them in some situations. (focus group, social workers)

Placement decisions are sometimes made by default such as when a child is placed for an emergency or short term placement which then extends into long term care. Relative carers often have very little time to make a decision and they need help to talk through the implications that their decision has for them.

Carers expressed concern that they are not always informed and given the choice of caring for a sibling of a child they have in their care when another baby is born into the family.

Carers also spoke of the difficulties that they experience when children are not consulted prior to a move and there is little time to prepare. Consideration needs to be given to the feelings of the child(ren) staying as well as the child(ren) moving.

It would be helpful to have training for those carers providing short term care about how to manage the moves out of the carer family. (focus group, carers)

Voice of children

The survey concluded with a question about what changes could be made to improve the experience of children who are changing placement. A frequent response to this was the need for the voice of the child to be heard.

Social workers should spend more time with young people in the initial stages of a placement. This is a stressful time for all concerned. (survey respondent)

It was also suggested that feedback from children needs to be recorded in case records and that children should be given timely information about a pending move. It was noted that transitions to new placements are smoother when the child has been consulted and involved in planning the transition.

In some circumstances, the child may not be present for the discussions, but their opinions can be noted and contributed by their worker so that they have a voice in the process. In such a situation, it is important that the child receive feedback promptly.

Many times children are not consulted and their wishes are not taken into account. Decisions are made by key stakeholders without listening to the child. This results in the child losing ownership of their own life. (survey respondent)

Discussion

When it is necessary to move a child from their immediate family because they are unsafe, the aim is to find an alternative setting which gives that child every chance of a good life through love, security, nurturing and guidance. The expectation is that the number of moves is minimised and, if and when changes are required, that the move is done in a way that supports the child. Indeed, the two are linked, with some evidence to indicate that good preparation for a move is likely to influence placement stability (Delfabbro et al 2007a).

However, as one respondent to the Inquiry survey wrote:

A good transition doesn't compensate for a wrong placement.

This Inquiry has been conducted in the regrettable context of a constricted out-of-home care system, which gives too little choice in what is the best alternative arrangement for each child. Social workers and carers understand and support the significance of 'placement matching': that is, assessing a care setting for its likelihood of providing what a particular child needs. Instead the pressure to find *any* placement for children who have to move creates a sense of urgency and reaction among decision-makers that hampers good placement matching. The lack of choice in placements works against achieving stability and security for children in out-of-home care.

Regardless, the aim of this Inquiry was to learn more about the impact on children of placement moves and how we can do better in helping children to deal with the moves. The evidence in the Inquiry was gathered from published research and opinion, case records, what children had to say in interviews and what decision-makers had to say in discussion. These multiple sources were used in the hope that a fuller picture emerges of the experience.

Stability in care

This was an Inquiry primarily about children's experiences of moves; it was not an Inquiry about placement stability. However, a positive experience of being in care and successful outcomes for children are heavily influenced by their history of stability. The case record evidence suggests that there is greater stability for children in care than we are often led to believe. Almost a third of the children in the sample of 100 had had no or only one placement change at that point in time. This does not mean that at their time of exit from care in the future they will not have had more moves, but the sample was taken from those who are very likely to have been in care for more than a year, which is often said to be a time of great instability. The concerns about instability overall though are not unfounded with 17 per cent of the sample having had more than ten placement moves.

When just the past two years were viewed, 67 per cent of the sample group had not moved. At the other end though, four children had moved at least three times. This supports the general conclusion from earlier research that some children will experience high levels of placement disruption and instability (Osborn and Bromfield 2007a) influenced by the history and characteristics of the child, the carers' characteristics and home environment, and the operations of the out-of-home care system including the preparation for a move (Delfabbro et al 2007a).

In this Inquiry, the case record evidence counted the number of moves. This is the most common measurement for stability in care. However, some researchers, such as Cashmore and Paxman (2006), are refining their search for answers about what constitutes stability and contributes to it, by examining 'felt' security. The importance of this refinement was reinforced in the focus groups and interviews when many respondents talked about stability as being the feelings of a child at that point in time, and the imperative to find a home where children *feel they belong*.

This turns attention to the quality of the care arrangement. Several respondents to the survey, in addition to the focus group participants, said that assessing and supporting carers' emotional capacity, skills and knowledge to provide security to troubled children was one of the most important improvements to make, and this applied equally to those providing care on a short term or casual basis.

On the basis of other research and on the focus group discussion, for some children stability in care appears to be less dependent on a single strong one-to-one relationship. This was

suggested more often for Aboriginal children and older children. The stability can be provided by extended family, identification of 'place' and acceptance by the child's community or household.

The placement of siblings is a complex decision, with many things to take into account (GCYP, 2011) but the Inquiry evidence suggests that it is also one of the most important decisions, because placement together can enhance stability and, conversely, separation can generate instability. Of course, separation of siblings is sometimes in their best interests and cannot be avoided. When this is so, the quality of the contact between them should be at the front and centre of case planning and carer support.

The case records showed that the reasons for moving were largely positive and most moves were planned. Sixteen per cent had not moved since coming into care. More than a third of the recent moves were because the child moved from short term or emergency care to a long term arrangement. Some moved to live with relatives or to be with siblings. The far less positive moves though were the four who had elected to move to homelessness, and in one case, a return to parents. Other moves which appeared necessary, if unfortunate, were because of carer illness or stress and children's needs not being met.

Social workers talked of those circumstances where young people elect to move to places not approved by Families SA, including to homelessness. While this is actively discouraged, the social workers explained that they could do little to prevent this when the young person reaches an age to act decisively. The management of these cases is usually highly active and interventionist, so that as much support is provided as possible to reduce the risk of harm. This is referred to as "risk managing a placement" and the social workers reported that Families SA supervisors provided strong guidance on what was to be done.

When the most recent move was examined, of those who had moved (N=84), nine (10.7 per cent) moved from a country region to Adelaide and another three (3.6 per cent) from Adelaide to country. It is impossible to say whether these long-distance moves were in the best interests of the children but it suggests some considerable disruption to familiar relationships.

On the basis of the interviews with children and young people, the term 'stability' was not well understood by children. This is arguably a good thing because it is a notion they should not have to understand. On the other hand it was evident that they do understand having

connections, a sense of belonging and acceptance by carers, all of which made them feel secure.

Impact of moves on children

Readers of this report will be able to recall moving house, city or country, and some will have moved away from family. Some moves will be remembered as positive and others less so. A move is invariably charged with emotion and stress. Children in safe and caring families are cushioned from the impact of disruption to routine and comfort by the security of family relationships. Children in out-of-home care are often moving without family companions. The evidence from talking with children about moving while in care overwhelmingly points to strong feelings of loss, vulnerability, uncertainty and powerlessness.

From a child's point of view, they may perceive a move that is *done to them* as someone coming to take them away or that they are being given to someone else, and that they are the cause of the move (Fahlberg 1994). The implications of this to self-perception are obvious and can only add to the difficulties they already face.

From the interviews and from previous research or enquiry, it is clear that some moves are more difficult than others and the strength of the relationships being disrupted or terminated determine the depth of feeling. Perhaps the hardest of all is separation from siblings and this was suggested by some survey respondents, participants in the focus groups, in the interviews with children, and by the findings of our previous inquiry into what children say about contact with their siblings (GCYP 2011).

Several survey respondents recalled children who had struggled with feelings of rejection following a move. The interviews brought to light that, regardless of the desirability of the move and even whether or not the child wanted to make the move, children invariably felt vulnerable during the move. Their vulnerability was escalated when they did not understand the reasons for the move or felt excluded from influencing the decisions.

The feelings of loss are compounded for Aboriginal children when moved away from their clan group. The significance of gaps in knowledge about where they come from and who they are in relation to their Aboriginal families and communities are realised more keenly as they age. Understanding their place in their community and being accepted as belonging to that community is of huge importance to their wellbeing, as evidenced in the value young

Aboriginal people put on returning home and contact with their birth families (Higgins et al, 2006).

Preparation ahead of the move can ameliorate the adverse impact. The interviews and survey brought to light examples of good preparation and bad. The interviews though highlighted the heightened anxiety for children when there is little preparation.

Well I didn't know where I was going, what it would be like, what the people would be like there. (Bob, 14)

The child has no way of knowing whether there will be a permanent home or not (Fitzgerald 1990) so insecurity and anxiety can last a long time. The difficulty for social workers and carers is that too often they cannot promise permanency and, indeed, may be working with impermanency for children in short-term placements. The challenge is to create security when stability of placement is not possible. Equally there is challenge in translating stability into a sense of security and belonging (Cashmore and Paxman 2006).

The best moves

When moving children from one placement to another is either desirable because it is in their best interests or inevitable because it cannot be sustained, then the focus must be on how to make the move more positive for the child.

In interview, the children and young people could recall what things would have made moves easier. As Ella, 17, said, *'having it less unexpected and having a choice of where I could go.'* And Aria, 14 who said *'having some time to take it in before I have to move.'* Tiddle, 12, said,

Yeah, not moving them really quickly, make sure they actually want to do it and let them like come here a few times so they feel a bit more safer and so they can get to know the people a bit more.

These reflections point to slower transitions and planning that includes the child. The starting point is a simple one of more conversations with the child. This was reinforced by survey respondents who said that conversations to explain and listen are critical to helping children through destabilising placement changes. These conversations do not all have to be done by the social worker and, indeed, it is preferable if the opportunities to talk are widespread. This depends though on the strength of the 'care team', the group of adults who support and care for a child. If the care team are 'in the know' about what is planned,

what a move depends on, when it is likely to happen and what changes are anticipated, each one of them can seek and answer questions.

From reflection on what the case records showed, it appeared that the more considered transitions to new placements were occurring when young people were moving out of residential care. There were several examples of carefully paced moves where the young person had up to five visits and finally 'sleep-overs' with the foster family ahead of a permanent move.

Planning also needs to be individualised, considering who and what are most significant to this child. The case records indicated that where contact with previous carers was desirable, this was mostly respected and contact occurred.

It appears though from the interviews and focus groups, the key person in making it work well is the social worker. They 'hold the cards', because decisions will be made by them or include them and they are seen by the children as powerful and responsible for the child's safety (GCYP 2009). The case records showed a mixed picture of regular contact between social workers and children. The vast majority of children (97 per cent) had a social worker allocated and more than half had had the same worker for at least 12 months. However, only 11 per cent had had the required monthly face-to-face contact. Of most concern were the seven children who had not seen their social worker in more than 12 months and another 29 who had only seen their worker once or twice in the 12 months prior to the data collection.

The significance of regular face-to-face contact lies not just with managing moves smoothly but with predicting and preventing disruption. Few placement changes are unanticipated and none should be, except in very rare and unavoidable circumstances. The regular contact means that problems can be talked about and early support or advice provided.

In the focus group, social workers said that some placement decisions are made suddenly and there is little time to prepare a child. It appears that one consequence of a constrained out-of-home care system with little choice is a heightened sense of urgency about accepting placements and moving fast. This is clearly a case of weaknesses in a system determining the terms and conditions.

Social workers may also understandably focus on finding a good placement and the relief at finding a placement can dominate their interactions, but as McIntosh (1999) said, "[they]

can lose sight of the fact that a ‘good link’ means nothing to a child who has not had a part in the decision...” (p29).

The focus group of Aboriginal practitioners considered the question of whether and in what circumstances Aboriginal children can be placed and live successfully in non-Aboriginal placements. Assuming that all effort had been made to secure a placement within the child’s Aboriginal family or community, participants said success depended very much on the foster family seeking out and being accepted into the Aboriginal community. This meant that the child experienced the learning and growing into their Aboriginal identity as part of their family life, not isolated and divided. All participants had seen this work well, with generosity and respect intensifying with every joint activity.

The interviews, focus groups and literature provided information on the practical things to do in preparation for a move, including thinking through what does not have to change such as finishing the year at the same school or taking a pet as companion or seeing out the term’s end with an out-of-school activity. A child’s reception at the new place can make a big difference to how welcome and settled they become. Personalising the child’s room and asking about and respecting what they like and do not like in food, play and sleep can all make a child feel special.

The interviews suggested though that the reception from other children is more important than that of the adults, and this was confirmed in the discussion with other young people following the interviews.

The older boy who used to live here sent me a letter saying: Hi Gypsie, I am a kid who is living where you are going to be living at the moment and I am looking forward to meeting you and I am happy to help you with your work or anything you need help with when you come. And I reckon that was really nice because he didn’t need to go to the effort... [Another young person] the first thing he did when I walked in through the door, didn’t even know me, he came and gave me a nice big hug. (Gypsie, 14)

The stress of moving means that information told may not be received or remembered. The reference group noted this when reviewing the findings, particularly from the interviews with children, and suggested that it is good to write things down that are said to a child (or carer) and to leave this with them. With children, this can be done as part of an active conversation about the move.

In many ways though, the practical things are the easier part of making a move positive. Children need to have their feelings acknowledged and preferably anticipated. Practising enhanced empathy was the conclusion of the reference group, that is, adults putting themselves firmly in the shoes of the child and imagining what it must be like and listening closely to what the child says and does not say.

The challenges in working with the child's feelings about the move are obvious, partly because of their age and limited decision-making power. For example, it is difficult to explain well to a young child a move from a foster family because the carer's own family circumstances have changed or a move from a grandmother's care because she has got too elderly. More difficult still is where children are not safe being accommodated together and have to be separated.

The Inquiry findings suggest that, even in circumstances where there is no choice about the move, the adults can build in to the 'big picture' many details which can be controlled by the child. The job of the adults is to find these and help the child decide. The timing of the move, what they take with them, what farewell occasion is held, who accompanies them, how their first days are spent, and which friends they want to see, can in most circumstances be arranged to suit the child. As one focus group participant said, "Children need a friend, someone to take and hold their hand through the change, to be available at any time in those early months."

Making decisions

Good placement moves are supported by sound decision-making. To re-iterate the complexity of making decisions for children who are in care, there are often up to 20 adults and sometimes more, who have a direct or indirect responsibility for a child who is being 'parented' by the state. All of these people are not involved in every decision, and nor should they be, but even when a handful have a direct interest in the matter it is easy for misunderstandings to occur and feelings to be hurt.

The examples given in the survey and interviews with children showed how important good communication is among everyone, and coordinated by someone. It is not enough to rely on verbal exchanges or even face-to-face meetings. Written record is required of what the decisions were, the reasons why, who were involved and what action was required to implement and when. Of a sample of 80 moves that were documented in case files, only 26 had recorded a recommendation for a move. Who made the decision about moves was

rarely recorded. It has to be assumed that the social worker and their supervisor were involved. Only seven recorded that the child or young person had been part of the decision.

The focus groups and reference group were sympathetic to the time pressures that social workers have but concluded that, of all the recording that should be done, the recording of such significant decisions is of top order. Recording is not just for future reference but for present certainty, about the reasoning and who needs to be included and informed. This becomes even more critical when there is disagreement among people about the best interests of the child.

While adults have the responsibility for making the big decisions for children, they are required by law and policy to take into account the views of the child and give the views due weight. In the case records, of 75 children who were old enough to give their views about the most recent move, only 25 had their views recorded. No doubt others had expressed their views but there was no evidence of these being taken into account. This makes the job of individualising transition or reviewing decisions less likely if people do not know what the child thinks and are not listening closely.

The focus group of Aboriginal practitioners addressed the problem sometimes encountered when Aboriginal parents say that they do not want their children to live with or to have contact with their family or community. The possible reasons for this ranged from alienation or distrust, to one parent who is not Aboriginal deciding for the two parents. The participants said though, that the reasons need to be explored fully and a wider view of the child's best interests taken than the views of parents.

In the focus groups and in the survey, respondents talked of decisions being implemented too quickly, and the opposite, of decisions taking too long to implement. Getting the timing right is difficult even when the practical things fall into place. The case records showed though that the length of time between a decision made on the need for a new placement and one being found ranged from days to over a year. The documentation for referrals following a decision was patchy, with over a third having no evidence of a referral or request having been made. Where there was information about a referral for placement, one third of these were met within three months. Six though had waited over 12 months.

The time gap between decisions to move and realisation of the move is one of the many challenges carers and social workers have in effecting a good move. The Office of the Guardian knows from its visits to residents in residential care, and which was confirmed in

the survey responses, that the uncertainty of ‘if’ and ‘when’ a move is to happen is unbearable for many children. It is not hard to understand then why decisions and discussion about future placements becomes more secretive. This does not stop a child from imagining what may be happening and acting out their fears and anger. The evidence in this Inquiry points to being honest with children to the extent of their capacity to understand and managing the expectations, rather than saying nothing.

Conclusion

The Guardian's Inquiry into children's experiences of moving while in care was conducted to learn more about the impact on children of moving, and their inclusion in decisions about moves. In its monitoring of circumstances of children and young people in care, the Office was aware that the anger often expressed by young people about their history of placements stemmed from a heightened sense of powerlessness. This was confirmed in the interviews with children in this Inquiry.

The Inquiry, which commenced in September 2012 and concluded in June 2013, was conducted by:

- The engagement of key stakeholders including government and non-government service providers in the child protection system, through the reference group, focus groups and a survey of 'charter champions';
- A literature review regarding children moving while in care and the impact that this has on children;
- Considering guidelines, legislation, government policy and standards on children and placement decisions;
- A case record review to understand the decision-making process, the implementation of such decisions, the support that is available to children and young people when they move and the extent to which their voice is heard; and
- Interviews with children and young people in care.

Key findings

The core purpose of the Inquiry was to learn about how we can do better in helping children who must move from one care placement to another. Repeatedly though in discussion about this topic, the prior issue of lack of choice in out-of-home care placements arose,

sometimes as a reason for hurried transitions but more often as a lament. The pressure to find any placement creates a sense of urgency and reaction among decision-makers that hampers good practice in finding the *right* placement for each child.

There is more stability in care, at least as defined by the number of placement moves, than we are often led to believe. However, the impression of instability is fuelled by proper concern for the significant minority who do move too often or who spend long periods of time in temporary arrangements. When stability of placement cannot be assured, it is imperative that we turn temporary or short term placements into a positive secure experience for a child.

Examination of case records showed that the reasons for moves were largely positive and most moves were planned and predicted. This augurs well for making the experience a more positive one for children; that is, moves that they experience as paced around their needs and within their control, as much as is possible. The evidence from children talking about placement moves overwhelmingly points to strong feelings of loss, vulnerability, uncertainty and powerlessness. Planning for positive moves means working with these feelings through greatly enhanced empathy, communication and reflection. The stronger the 'care team' is around the child, the stronger the prospect of acknowledging those feelings.

The key person in making a move work well is the social worker. They are seen by children as the decision-maker and the person responsible for how the change will happen. Therefore the significance of a strong and trusting relationship between child and worker cannot be overstated. This points to the importance of frequent and regular face-to-face contact, not just for managing moves well but for anticipating and preventing disruptions to placements.

Children feel very vulnerable when moving from one place to another. Even when they want to make the move and are excited by the opportunity, there is anxiety about what happens next and loss in saying goodbye to familiar people and places. They need someone to stand beside them, to help them say what they feel and to create power for them where there does not appear to be any.

Making the decision about where a child should live is one of the most important decisions adults will make for children in care. This is not an event, but a series of decisions. There will be many people to involve and as many points of view. The decision for Aboriginal children is made more momentous by the grave implications if they are separated from their

Aboriginal community. All of this, the considerations, the views, the people, and the choices must be diligently recorded. The case record evidence suggests that this is commonly overlooked. Written record is not just about professional conduct and accountability, but also a means of reflecting, analysing and deciding on the best interests for a child.

Adults have clear responsibilities to protect children from harm, including emotional harm. It is unclear though what constitutes emotional harm and many judgements are made about shielding children from situations or information which is likely to be distressing or too complex. However when decisions are made that have a direct impact on a child, depending on their maturity, they are entitled to have their views considered. The evidence in this Inquiry suggests that children's involvement in placement decisions is not customary, at least until they are nearing independence. There are at least two explanations provided: that there is no choice about placements and there are sometimes long periods of uncertainty about what will happen. Adults are acting to protect children from unnecessary anxiety or disappointment. The problem arises often though that when children know that something is being decided about them they will fill in the gaps in their knowledge with what they imagine or fear. Assisting children to understand what is happening and why, looking for the decisions that children can make and helping them to sit with uncertainty is all part of the job of working with children.

Recommendations

In many ways, the findings of the inquiry are unsurprising. Much of what was learnt about the impact and experience of children moving while in care was known or could be predicted. The challenge then is to convert that knowledge into changed practice. This is a perennial test in human services, that is, how to carry out what we know to be effective when the medium is human relationships.¹⁶ Recommendations from an Inquiry such as this inevitably refer to structure and policy, because this is largely the Guardian's sphere of influence. The bigger impact will be realised through changes in adult behaviour and approach. Perhaps the most important finding of the Inquiry, which is the need to practice enhanced empathy for children who are moving, is largely beyond the reach of written direction except to emphasise the *significance of time and skill in reflective practice*.

¹⁶ For information on this topic and from which the groupings for the recommendations are drawn see Fixsen D L, Naoom S F, Blase K A, Friedman R M & Wallace F 2005 *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature* University of South Florida: Tampa FL

Changes in organisational structure and cultures

The *Children's Protection Act 1993* enunciates the principle that when a child is placed or is about to be placed in out-of-home care she or he must be consulted about and (if the child is reasonably able to do so) take part in making decisions affecting the child's life. The Act is more specific still about the requirement for a child's participation in decisions when the care and protection court orders are being considered. A similar specific requirement for consultation and participation of the child in other major decisions, such as placement moves, would be an unequivocal statement of intent.

Recommendation 1

The Children's Protection Act 1993 be amended to make it a requirement that a child be present or the child's views be presented, at any meeting where a placement move is being decided and at annual reviews of the child's circumstances.

Good placement moves and sound placement decisions are hampered by either the reality or the perception that there is no choice in where children can be placed. One reason for this is the long lag between 'demand and supply'. Contingency placements rather than ideal are the norm, many of which become long term and some of which work well. A well-functioning out-of-home care system would predict demand for types of care and create or expand options accordingly. Of course this is complex and risky but it can be done.

Recommendation 2

The Department for Education and Child Development, in collaboration with the non-government organisations providing out-of-home care, develop models for projecting future demands for types of out-of-home care that attempt to ensure demand is met through planned capacity increases.

In 2008 the Department for Families and Communities published the *Standards for Alternative Care in South Australia*, following negotiation with non-government and government service providers of alternative care. The standards are comprehensive and detailed, and consistent with the more recently adopted National Standards for Out of Home Care. There are eight core standards with the first two (entering care and case management) being most relevant to the experience of moving while in care. The principles of inclusive decision-making and the provision of information to children, appropriate to

their age and their cognitive ability are reinforced throughout. It is five years since their introduction and it is timely to ask about adherence to them.¹⁷

Recommendation 3

An independent audit be conducted and reported publicly of compliance by the Department and non-government organisations with core standards 1 (Entering Care) and 2 (Case Management) of the SA alternative care standards.¹⁸

In 2011 the Guardian released her report of the Inquiry into what children say about contact with their siblings. In January 2012, the Minister for Education and Child Development accepted all the recommendations in full. The third recommendation of seven in the report was specific to decisions about placements. It was:

Decisions about placement of siblings include and document:

- assessment of the needs of the collective sibling group, individual needs of each child, including their views, and advice about attachment between siblings;
- sibling relationships, as identified by the child(ren), including the significance of each relationship;
- the child(ren)'s views even if their wishes cannot be met;
- if siblings are separated, a review of the placement decision within one month of the initial decision; and
- if siblings are separated, the preparedness of carers to support contact and proximity of placements.

Recommendation 4

An independent audit be conducted and reported publicly of implementation of the 2011 recommendation from the Guardian for decisions about placement of siblings.

¹⁷ As part of the 2013-2015 Families SA Redesign program it is anticipated that an assessment will be made by Families SA of their compliance with the standards as a baseline for measuring expected change. An independent audit may be best done in 2015.

¹⁸ The audits in recommendations 3 and 4 were not done as part of this Inquiry because of time constraints.

Changes in adult behaviour (knowledge and skills)

It is almost a cliché to refer to child protection work as one of the most difficult and important jobs which must be done. Emotions are almost always high and the decisions are momentous. The professional judgement, reflection and action must be of the highest standard as must the capacity for review and guidance. The findings from this Inquiry show that the professional development and quality assurance requires strengthening, especially in the areas of inclusive and accountable decision-making, documentation of consultations and interactions and reflective practice. This quality assurance has commenced in 2013 with the introduction of accreditation for child protection staff in solution-based casework.

Recommendation 5

A system of accreditation for child protection practitioners be introduced which is required for case workers and alternative care support workers and provides off- and on-site professional development and training over a two year period, with individually tailored study of working with Aboriginal children and families, Aboriginal history and culture.

When children and young people move in and out of placements the skills and knowledge of the people providing the day-to-day care are critical to how the moves are experienced. They can make it a good or a traumatic change. They are also charged with the responsibility to help create security for a child when stability cannot be assured. The findings from the Inquiry show that there is limited training or guidance for carers specific to the circumstances of children moving.

Recommendation 6

The skills of residential, foster and kinship carers in welcoming and parting from children and young people be strengthened by emphasis in assessment, training and care reviews.

Changes in relationships to children and young people

Within any single major decision there will be multiple decisions of how, when, what and who. If children and young people feel powerless about some of the major decisions, such as a change in placement, it is the responsibility of the adults to not just explain the decision but to return some power, as possible and appropriate. While we should be confident that this happens in the nature of a contemporary professional relationship, there was little evidence in this Inquiry of this being routine when placement changes were implemented.

Recommendation 7

At meetings where placement moves are being decided and as part of the documentation of decisions and action, decisions that can be made by the child or young person about the move are identified, recorded and communicated to the child, and, if required, the child assisted to make and implement the decisions.

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Appendix 1

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Appendix 2

Case file evidence collection tool

Families SA office:

C3MS ID:

Date evidence recorded:

Advocate completing evidence record:

This evidence record is to be completed on the following basis:

- 1. That the child has been placed under the guardianship of the Minister until 18 years***
- 2. That the case has been randomly selected by the Office of the Guardian***
- 3. That the questions are to be answered according to whether there is evidence recorded on file***

Source of information

Case plan

Case consultation records (ongoing directions / discussions from supervisor regarding practice)

Differential case management response assessment

Annual review recommendations

Care concerns

BASELINE QUESTIONS

- 1. Age of the child / young person at today's date?**
- 2. Gender of the child / young person?** Male / Female
- 3. Cultural identity of the child / young person?**
 - Aboriginal / Torres Strait Islander
 - Other Australian
 - CALD background
 - Specify
- 4. Is the child / young person of a refugee background?**
 - Yes
 - No
- 5. In what year was the Guardianship to 18 order issued by the Court?**
- 6. From the first court order until now, is it:**
 - Under 2 years

- 2 – 4 years
- 5 – 7 years
- 8 – 10 years
- Over 10 years

7. Type of care arrangement at today's date?

Home based

- Relative / kinship
- Non-relative foster care
- Other
- Specify.....

Facility based

- Residential care
- Secure care
-

Reunited with birth family

Independent living

Interim emergency care

No placement

8. How many placements has the child or young person had?

ALLOCATED WORKER / RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILIES SA

9. Is there an allocated case worker?

- Yes
- No

10. How many workers have there been in the past 12 months?

11. What is the reason(s) for change?

12. Is there evidence of a differential case management response?

- Yes
- No

13. How many times during the past 12 months has the case worker made face to face contact with the child or young person?

14. When did the case worker last visit the child or young person?

- In the last week
- Between 1 - 2 weeks
- > 2 - 4 weeks

- > 4 weeks - 3 months
- > 3 months – 6 months
- > 6 months – 12 months
- More than one year ago
- Cannot tell

MOVING WHILE IN CARE

15. How many placements has the child had in the past two years?

- The same placement (1).....
- Two placements
- Three placements
- Four placements
- More than four placements

16. How long ago was the child or young person’s last change in placement?

- Within the last 12 months.....
- Between 1 – 2 years
- Between 2 – 4 years
- Over 4 years

17. What was the reason for the move? Please note source of information.

.....

18. Was the move:

- From country regions to Adelaide.....
- From Adelaide to country regions
- From one country region to another
- Within Adelaide but different office boundary
- Within the same office boundary

19. Is the case managed by the appropriate office according to the designated boundaries?

- Yes
- No

20. If not, is there a documented reason? What is it?

.....

21. What was the length of time between placement change and the transfer of the case to the closest office, if this was required?

- < 3 months.....
- 3 – 5 months
- 6 – 8 months
- 9 -12 months

- Over 12 months
- Not required

22. Was the move recommended in the case plan or last annual review prior to the move?

- Yes
- No

23. What was the length of time between the referral for placement and the placement move?

- < 3 months
- 3 – 5 months
- 6 – 8 months
- 9 -12 months
- Over 12 months
- If over 12 months, state length of time.....

24. Who was involved in making the decision?

- Social worker
- Supervisor
- Manager
- Regional Director
- Principal Aboriginal Consultant
- Principal Social Worker
- Families SA psychologist

25. Are the child's views regarding the planned move documented?

- Yes
- No

If yes, how were they consulted and where is this noted?

.....

26. If yes, was the child or young person satisfied with the decision?

- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied

27. Is there documentation that the move was in the best interests of the child?

- Yes
- No

28. Was there a transitional process prior to the move?

- Yes
- No

29. If yes, please describe.

.....

30. On the basis of the documented information, was it desirable for the child or young person to have further contact with their previous carers, for a long or short period?

Yes

No

31. If yes, did they have contact?

Yes

No

32. What form of contact was this? Please describe.

.....

33. Do the current placement arrangements reflect?

The child's wishes

Yes

No

Cannot tell

Professional advice / opinion

Yes

No

Cannot tell

34. Is there any case file evidence indicating the child's level of satisfaction with current placement arrangements?

Yes

Satisfied

Dissatisfied

No

Cannot tell

Additional Comments:

Appendix 3

Interview Template

Interview designed to collect responses from children in care in response to the following questions:

- What is the impact on children and young people of placement moves?
- In decisions to move, what consideration is given to children and young people's views?
- When moves are necessary, what helps make a successful move for children and young people?

Preliminaries (not to be audiotaped)

- Warm up discussion/and or activity (to be identified at time of interview)
- Overview of interview process to be provided to young people, in terms of length and very broad aims
- Information sheet to be reviewed with young people
- Consent form to be signed
- Consent to be obtained in relation to audio-taping.

Researcher sits with young person in front of a large piece of butcher's paper.

Young person is supported to draw a timeline of their life from birth to now- just drawing the line without any significant events.

- How old are you now?

Researcher directs young person to put that mark on the time line

- Where are you living at the moment?
- Can you remember how long you have been in this placement (with this family, etc.)
- Researcher directs the young person to put a mark on the time line representing entry into the placement.
- Can you remember where you were living before that?
- Can you remember any other placement moves?
- Researcher directs the young person to mark them on the time line.

(audio recorder to be switched on)

Above timeline narrative is summarised for tape recorder.

- Is there anyone in any of these placements you consider is your family? This is different for everyone, it might be people you live with or have lived with, are related to biologically, or people that are special for another reason.

PAST PLACEMENTS REVIEWED

- The researcher asks the young person to describe a placement in detail (to aid memory recall). What was it like? Where were you living? What school were you going to? What led up to the move? How close were they with the adult?
- Researcher draws another scale of 0-10 at the top of the page, with 0 representing “not close” and 10 representing “extremely close”
- Looking at this placement (researcher points to the last placement) and using this scale where 0 is not close at all and 10 is extremely close, how close were you to people in this family when you were living with them (researcher allows young person to have different figures to different family members if required).

REASON AND NATURE OF THE MOVE

- What were the chain of events that led to you moving? Why did you need to move?
- What do you remember about this move?
- Can you remember why this move happened?
- How did you feel on the day?
- Who told you about the move?
- How much choice did you have about the move?
- What things were you asked about moving?
- Who helped you understand about why the move was happening?
- What things happened to prepare you for the move? (e.g. met new carers, visited the house?)
- What did you imagine the place would be like before you moved?
- Who was there to help you with the move?

Researcher directs young person to draw a stick figure of the person or people that helped

- What was it that they did to help?
- Is there anything anyone else could have done to help?
- Was there anyone special there at that time?
- What made that person special?

IMPACT OF MOVE

- What was it like in the new placement?
- How close were you to the adult (rate on closeness scale).

- How did the placement move make you feel?
- What did you get to take when you moved?
- Did anything important get left behind?
- After you moved did you have any contact with the people that you were living with before?
- Who decided that this contact would happen/not happen?
- How did you feel about having contact/not having contact.
- What other changes happened for you at this time? (e.g change of schools, family access, sporting stuff etc.).

Looking at this move which involved moving from this house (researcher points to the last transition point) to this house, and using this scale from 0 to 10, how challenging was this move for you?

- Researcher reads out the number-(e.g. ‘so this move made you feel about a 3 out of ten’)
- Let’s look at some of these other changes (school, sporting stuff etc), on the scale, how challenging were these changes?
- How did you feel about those changes?
- What things were hardest about this move?
- What things would have made it better?
- Researcher points to the scale and says you said this move was a X/10, If those things had happened how high do you think this number (researcher points to scale) would have been?
- If you had a magical wand, what would have you changed about this move?

REPEATED PROCESS

- Researcher asks young person to repeat the process for all the moves (getting in contact with initial placement, change experience and then impact).
- If there are many placements, researcher points to the timeline and asks the young person to identify the moves that they remember the best and explore as above
- Why are these moves that you remember the best?
- Are there some things that are common to these moves that made the process easier?
- Are there some things common to these moves that made the process harder?
- If there are many placements and the young person doesn’t remember well, researcher asks what types of things they do remember about moving and adjusts the questioning process above.

COMPARING PLACEMENTS

- The researcher paraphrases the different moves and how challenging each move was, and asks a question, why was one move more or less challenging than another? Comparisons are unpacked and explored.

GENERAL

- If you could tell a Families SA social about how they should support young people through placement moves, what would you say?
- What kinds of things do you think adults should think about with placement moves?
- Have you heard people talking about placement stability?
- If so, what does this mean in your eyes?
- If not, what kinds of things do you think would help make young people feel stable (or settled) in their placements?
- What are the three things should never happen in placement moves if possible?
- What are three things that should always happen in placement moves if possible?

THEME VALIDATION

Other young people are telling us that some of the important things about placement moves are the following. I am interested in your thoughts?

- Being listened to and believed about how you are feeling in a placement?
- Being asked about what they want in a new placement?
- Visiting the new placement ahead of time?
- Others.....(added as themes reach threshold)

SUMMARY

Is there anything else you would like to say about placement moves?

Researcher summarises the themes of the interviews one point at a time and pauses to allow the young person to validate the theme or provide.