Editorial 23:6

Themed Issue: Children Looked After

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Statistics across the UK suggest that since 2008 the number of children in public care has risen from 81,315 to 92,728 in 2013 (NSPCC, 2014). In England, there were 68,110 children Looked After at March 2013, an increase of 12per cent since March 2009 and the highest figure since 1985 (DfE, 2013). <u>The majority of children, 62 per cent, are looked after due to abuse or neglect</u> [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] (DfE, 2013). At the same time, numbers of children placed for adoption also seem to be rising, with 3,350 looked after children being placed for adoption in England at March 2013, a 16 per cent rise from 2012 (DfE, 2013). In terms of placements, the majority of children in England (75%) and in the UK more broadly**,** who are 'looked after' by local authorities live with foster families, with others cared for in children's homes, hostels, secure accommodation or at home with their parents. MacMillan et al.'s (2009) review of the research evidence illustrates how a placement in foster care, and in particular in enhanced foster care may lead to improved outcomes for children compared with those who remain at home. Yet, there is also evidence from other research showing poor outcomes for children. This themed issue brings together a number of papers concerned with children and young people who are adopted, looked after and placed in foster care or other out-of-home placements.

The importance of listening to young people is emphasised in our first paper by Julie Taylor and colleagues (2014) who sought to find out the reasons why young people run away from public care. In a qualitative study using a critical incident technique, these researchers took <u>a novel approach</u> by <u>recruiting and involving two young people to collaborate with them as peer researchers</u>. [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] Twenty-eight young people with a history of running away from care took part in six focus groups in Scotland. Reasons for the young people running away are complex, but centred around isolation and not wanting to be separated from their families; authority and power; friction; and environmental issues such as boredom and lack of boundaries. When children do run away the participants stressed the importance of workers' responding supportively and empathically, for example, trying to find out why they ran away instead of being punitive. A key finding of Taylor and colleagues' (2014) study was young people's perceptions that their voices needed to be heard: they wanted to talk to a child care worker who could empathise and listen to them, and they wanted to be treated with respect.

In our next paper Philip Mendes and colleagues (2014) report on a research study conducted in Victoria, Australia as part of a partnership between Monash University and seven non-government child and youth welfare agencies. This study sought to identify policies and practices that could reduce the numbers of young people who were

transitioning from out of home care ending up in the youth justice system. These authors argue that such young people often have significant current and life-long problems [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] and are "arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadavantaged groups in society" (Mendes et al, 2014: add page number at compilation). Yet, they also note that in Victoria, housing, health, employment and education services which are intended to meet care leavers' needs "remain discretionary rather than mandatory" (Mendes et al, 2014: add page number at compilation). As part of this study data were collected from 77 individuals from the out-of-home care, youth justice, legal and drug and alcohol organisations in Victoria, who participated in either one-to-one interviews or focus groups. The study findings highlight many problems which exist in the application of Leaving Care legislation and policy in practice, including the fact that few young people making the transition from care at 18 years of age are developmentally ready to live independently [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] This research also highlighted the absence of a safety net of family or support networks, with some young people becoming immediately homeless, ending up in youth justice, or returning to abusive families. Mendes and colleagues (2014: add page number at compilation) conclude their paper by proposing some reforms to policy and practice, including that governments should extend "guaranteed" housing, material and emotional support for out-of-home care leavers until 21 or "preferably 25 years of age".

Like the UK, Australia has a large and increasing number of children placed in foster care. In a second paper from Australia, Shanti Raman and Sharmishta Sahu (2014) report on a study which described the health and service needs of children exposed to psychosocial risk factors and attending community paediatric clinics in South Western Sydney, to compare the needs of children in parental and foster care. Following ethical approval, data were retrieved over a 12 month period from electronic medical records and reports. The study results revealed that children who are exposed to early life environmental and psychosocial difficulties "have well-established health and developmental needs" [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] (Raman and Sahu, 2014: add page number at compilation). Interestingly, the study findings showed that while there was a trend towards more educational and developmental difficulties in the foster care group, there were no statistical differences in the health or social care needs of the children whether they were placed in foster care or parental care. These authors point out that when children are exposed to such early life adversities, all 'in need' and vulnerable children, not just those placed in foster care, should have access to specialist paediatric and psychosocial assessments and early intervention services.

The issue of interventions is explored in Laura Kerr and Jill Cossar's (2014) paper from the perspective of foster and adoptive parents' use of attachment interventions in the treatment of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Kerr and Cossar (2014) report on a systematic review conducted to identify the impact of attachment theory-based

interventions with children who are fostered and adopted.   Research papers were included if the study population was "foster carers and/or adoptive parents of a child between birth and 18 years" (Kerr and Cossar, 2014: add page number at compilation). Ten studies met the review's inclusion criteria and explored children's outcomes in terms of their behavioural, emotional and relational functioning.   However, while the authors did find some evidence that attachment theory-based interventions targeted at adoptive and foster parents have a positive impact on these outcomes, the authors urge caution in interpretation of the findings because the majority of studies were of relatively poor methodical quality thus making conclusions difficult.   However, when quality criteria were applied, <u>two studies</u> focusing on the use of early attachment interventions to increase parental attunement with children from ages 6 months to 6 years <u>did show promise as early preventative attachment interventions</u>. [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] The authors conclude that more methodologically sound studies are needed in this area to explore the effectiveness of attachment theory-based interventions with children who are adopted and fostered.   Kerr and Cossar (2014: add page number at compilation) state that "interventions focussed on child relational functioning should be undertaken early in placements in order to maximise outcomes" and that this supports a move towards placing children earlier with long term foster carers and adoptive parents.

In the final paper in this issue Julie Steen and Julia Buckey (2014) report on a study which was undertaken to gain a better understanding of social work students' attitudes to foster youth empowerment.   In the foster care field, empowerment practice is regarded as an important method to support the development of young people who are fostered and promote their rights, as well as to improve care systems and policies. Steen and Buckey (2014) undertook a cross-sectional survey of a nonprobability sample of students enrolled on social work courses in an American University; data were analysed using multiple regression. The analysis revealed that two variables - student political affiliation and receipt of training/education in child abuse and neglect - showed stronger support for foster youth empowerment. Steen and Buckey (2014: add page number at compilation) conclude that the general social work curriculum "does not appear to have as much impact on attitudes towards foster youth empowerment as population specific material." They suggest that <u>social work educators should reflect on the ways in which empowerment practice is taught</u>,[PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] with students perhaps better able to appreciate empowerment only when they have understood the meaning of population disempowerment.

There are three training updates in this issue. Judy Furnivall reviews Kim Golding's (2013) *Nurturing Attachments Training Resource: Running Parenting Groups for Adoptive Parents and Foster or Kinship Carers.* She describes this as an excellent yet challenging resource for trainers to use in developing carers' conceptual undertaking and emotional skills that may help to prevent a placement breakdown.

The *Voice of the Child DVD Training Resource* is discussed by Carolyne Willow who commends Greater Manchester Safeguarding Board for funding this DVD resource which is made by young people. The DVD which focuses on the child's world throughout is intended to help professionals develop their skills in working with children and young people. It uses a number of stories, including that of a young care leaver to stress that <u>respect and listening are the key means to successful work children and young people</u>. [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] The *Kim Resource Kit* reviewed by Jo Sharpen was also created in partnership with young people and focusses on violence and domestic abuse in young people's relationship. The film tells the story of Kim, who lives with her young child and her abusive boyfriend and the DVD, toolkit and additional web resources focus on helping practitioners to discuss issues of abuse with young people and to promote an understanding of healthy relationship.

This themed issue concludes with a book review by Helen Cosis Brown of Jeanette Caw and Judy Seba's book *Team Parenting for Children in Foster Care: A Model for Integrated Therapeutic Care* which provides an extremely useful contribution for those responsible for the care of foster children.

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