

Foster families

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The reduction of residential care options in Australia has led to home-based (foster and kinship) care being the primary form of care for children in out-of-home care in Australian jurisdictions (Barber & Delfabbro, 2004). The increasing numbers of children entering and re-entering care and the increasingly complex needs of a greater proportion of children entering care have significantly changed the role of and need for fostering in Australia (Layton, 2003). As a result, the recruitment, retention, assessment, training and support of foster carers are now central issues in the field of out-of-home care. In the best interests of children and carers, and in order to do no harm to foster families, it is important to provide carers with the training and support they need to assist in preventing placement breakdown and retaining foster carers.

Although the primary focus in out-of-home care is the children and young people in care, there are several other sub-groups of people who require some attention with respect to their support needs and/or ability to perform their role. It is important that research not only investigates outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care, but also others on whom there could potentially be an impact, such as carers and their natural families.

Aim

In this paper, we aim to:

- summarise what we know from Australian research about foster families;
- assess the quality of the evidence base; and
- identify future research needs.

For each of the studies identified, a review was conducted describing the study's aim, methodology and key findings, and identifying any particular strengths or limitations that would affect whether the study findings could be generalised to a wider context. In this paper, the findings from this review are summarised to provide an overall picture of the Australian evidence base on foster families. For a detailed description of each individual study review, see the tables in the Appendix.

What research was reviewed?

Fourteen Australian research studies on issues affecting foster families that were completed between 1994 and 2006 and were publicly available, were reviewed. (For more information on

how Australian research was identified, see Bromfield & Osborn, 2007. For papers on other topic areas go to www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/menu.html#research.)

The findings are grouped into five sub-themes:

- carer recruitment;
- carer retention, satisfaction and support;
- impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families;
- training carers; and
- the professionalisation of foster carers.

Carer recruitment

The combination of increasing numbers of children entering care and decreasing numbers of non-related foster care placements being available have resulted in an insufficient number of foster care placements for children in need of out-of-home care. This problem is further complicated by recent trends in out-of-home care that have placed increased pressure on already strained foster care services.

The studies

Seven of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on carer recruitment. They were:

1. Higgins, Bromfield and Richardson (2005), *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People* (see Appendix, page 5).
2. Keogh and Svensson (1999), "Why Don't They Become Foster Carers? A Study of People Who Inquire About Foster Care" (see Appendix, page 6).
3. Lawrence (1994), "Recruiting Carers for Children in Substitute Care: The Challenge of Program Revision" (see Appendix, page 7).
4. McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski, and Saunders (2004), *The Availability of Foster Carers* (see Appendix, page 9).
5. Siminski, Chalmers, and McHugh (2005), "Foster Carers in New South Wales: Profile and Projections Based on ABS Census Data" (see Appendix, page 11).
6. South Australian Department of Family and Community Services (1997), *Fostering: The Future* (see Appendix, page 13).
7. Victorian Department of Human Services (2003), *Public Parenting: A Review of Home-Based Care in Victoria* (see Appendix, page 14).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding carer recruitment?

There were seven Australian studies investigating the recruitment of foster carers. Only one study (Lawrence, 1994) attempted to measure the effectiveness of an Australian recruitment campaign by measuring the number of inquiries. However, this study did not compare the volume of inquiries before, during and after the campaign. Two other studies that concerned the effectiveness of recruitment campaigns were qualitative. Australian research in this area was largely qualitative or reported only descriptive statistics. While the research conducted appeared to be of sound methodology, there were no quantitative studies with representative samples that provided predictive data on foster carer recruitment that could be generalised more widely.

What do we know about carer recruitment?

Social factors impacting on foster carer recruitment

In a study to examine the extent to which there might be a potential pool of foster carers in the community who were not being reached by current recruitment strategies, individuals aged 25–54 years (that is, those eligible to foster) were asked about fostering. The overwhelming

majority of individuals (97.7%) reported having never fostered a child (1.9% were former carers and 0.5% current carers). Of those who had never fostered, the great majority had never considered fostering a child (74%) and over 40% of respondents said that they did not know who to contact about fostering. This suggests that the majority of the population is not reached or engaged by current recruitment campaigns (South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 1997).

The majority of the population is not reached or engaged by current foster carer recruitment campaigns.

Siminski, Chalmers, and McHugh (2005) reported that increases in female labour force participation are expected to contribute to a continuing decline in the number of foster carers over the next decade. However, projected increases in sole-parent families and couples without children are expected to have the opposite effect on the growth of foster carers. The authors cautioned that the impact of the growing number of sole-parent families may not be associated with a corresponding increase in foster carers if the Australian Government's welfare reforms result in the movement of sole parents into the labour market (Siminski et al., 2005).

Increases in female labour force participation are expected to contribute to a continuing decline in the number of foster carers over the next decade.

Foster carer families in NSW were most likely to contain women aged 35–54 years who were not in the labour force. Most foster carers had always planned to foster or had known a specific child in need of care. Couples accounted for two-thirds of all the foster carers, with the majority also caring for birth children. Single parents accounted for less than one-fifth of all foster carers. However, given the small numbers of single parents compared to couple parents in the population, this means that single parents were actually more likely to foster than couple parents. Higher rates of fostering were found in relatively disadvantaged areas (Siminski et al., 2005).

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Attracting foster carers

In a study by the South Australian Department of Family and Community Services (1997), people who had considered fostering gave reasons for why they had not become a foster parent, the most common of which were: their circumstances had changed, work commitments prevented them from fostering, fostering did not suit their lifestyle, and they never got around to it. These people also indicated that they were unlikely to foster unrelated children (68%). Several concerns were recorded, with the most importance given to the disruption of the person's own family circumstances (20.5%) and the financial costs associated with foster care (14.1%) (South Australian Department of Family and Community Services, 1997). McHugh et al. (2004) suggested ways to improve recruitment that included: targeting professional groups who could care more effectively for children with difficult or challenging behaviours, government departments working more closely with other agencies and community groups, and providing greater levels of support to existing carers to encourage word-of-mouth recruitment.

The most common reasons given for not fostering are the disruption to the person's own family circumstances and the financial costs associated with foster care.

In a study that specifically examined the recruitment of carers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care, Higgins, Bromfield, and Richardson (2005) found that there were an insufficient number of Indigenous carers to meet demand. Some groups of children were particularly difficult to recruit carers for (e.g., children with a disability, having juvenile justice involvement, requiring short-term care, or who had no kin). Material disadvantage and the

mismatch between traditional child-rearing practices and the out-of-home care system represented barriers to recruiting Indigenous carers. The commitment to community among Indigenous people assisted recruitment. Past government policies and practices represented both a barrier and strength for recruiting Indigenous carers.

Recruitment of Indigenous carers is both aided and hindered by several culturally specific factors.

Broad-based media recruitment strategies

Lawrence (1994) conducted an evaluation of the effectiveness of a multi-media foster carer recruitment campaign. The campaign comprised newspaper advertising and other outlets such as flyers, radio, agency newsletters, the backs of taxis, public speaking and information stalls for Children's Week. Overall, the campaign was successful in attracting 205 inquiries and 17 new carers. The highest number of inquiries came from radio announcements and newspaper advertisements. Limited inquiries resulted from public speaking and information stalls for Children's Week. In a study of individuals who made an initial inquiry about fostering but did not become carers, Keogh and Svensson (1999) reported that the vast majority (96%) were affected in some way by foster care advertising, with by far the most commonly remembered advertising being television commercials. However, in a study of current carers, McHugh et al. (2004) reported that a minority (20%) said that they had responded to media promotion. Overall, recruitment strategies using broad-based media strategies were considered excellent for awareness-raising and creating an initial interest in fostering, but were less successful in the conversion of inquiries into actual carers (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2003).

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Localised recruitment strategies

In an evaluation of a foster carer media recruitment campaign, Lawrence (1994) reported that 126 of the 331 inquiries received during the study period were not associated with the campaign. For instance, inquiries came from individuals who were connected with the agency, heard about the agency through word-of-mouth, or were referred to the agency by another organisation. A study by the Victorian Government Department of Human Services (2003) showed that localised promotion built awareness and understanding in the community and contributed to converting inquiries into a commitment to care for children. The effect of word-of-mouth, both positive and negative, impacted upon recruitment, and the report's authors cautioned that word-of-mouth should not be underestimated. Similarly, McHugh et al. (2004) reported that one of the "best" recruitment strategies was the use of current and experienced carers to recruit by word-of-mouth. Community-based (especially word-of-mouth) recruitment strategies were also reported as being the most effective way of recruiting Indigenous carers. However, localised recruitment strategies for recruiting Indigenous carers were more effective when carried out by Indigenous people (Higgins et al., 2005).

One of the "best" recruitment strategies is the use of current and experienced carers to recruit by word-of-mouth.

Impact of the application process on recruitment

Lawrence (1994) documented the progress of inquiries through the application procedure. Only 17 individuals of the 331 who inquired became carers. At each stage of the application procedure, individuals withdrew or were rejected. This shows that recruitment is an extremely time-consuming activity. Keogh and Svensson (1999) conducted a valuable study examining the reasons why individuals do not proceed with applications to foster. Only half of the sample received a personal follow-up to their inquiry. An overwhelming majority (96%) of callers had

not become carers 10 months after their inquiry. Approximately half (51.2%) did not continue due to personal circumstances (e.g., house was sold, pregnancy). Most notably, about one-quarter said that they did not proceed because the agency had not followed up their inquiry, and approximately 20% said the agency could not offer them an appropriate placement or advised them not to proceed. Two-thirds of the callers were not satisfied with the outcome of their inquiry. The findings from this study suggest that, despite a successful advertising campaign, many applicants are discouraged from continuing due to the agencies' responses (or lack thereof) to their interest.

Recruitment is an extremely time-consuming activity. At each stage of the application procedure, individuals withdraw or are rejected. An overwhelming majority of individuals who inquire about being a foster carer have not become carers ten months after their inquiry.

What future research is needed regarding carer recruitment?

Community awareness of fostering is considered important for increasing the number of individuals who are willing to foster children; however, only one study examined community perceptions of fostering. Further research is needed on community perceptions toward foster care in Australia. Research also needs to examine the experiences of individuals who respond to recruitment strategies. It must be clear that recruitment is a process in which individuals make initial inquiries, receive information from the agency, undergo approval and finally have a child placed into their care.

Further research is needed to investigate, at each phase of the recruitment process, the experiences of people inquiring about foster care and the demographic characteristics of those who proceed or decide not to proceed to foster. Such research is best conducted using a longitudinal design, which would provide information on the types of families who are not only reached by, but who also respond to recruitment campaigns. It would also give practitioners insight into how the response of agencies affects prospective foster families' decisions to foster, thereby allowing improvements in such organisational procedures and practices. The types of families who respond and do not continue could be compared with the characteristics of families who are most likely to be retained (gained from longitudinal studies of retention), or the types of carers that are needed to care for particular groups of children (e.g., Indigenous or ethnic minority children) so that recruitment campaigns can be designed to target such families.

There has been little evaluation of the effectiveness of recruitment strategies; however, it must be highlighted that such evaluation is difficult due to the broad-based nature of recruitment campaigns (see Freimuth, Cole, & Kirby, 2001). For instance, as everyone in the community receives some form of exposure to campaign messages, it becomes difficult to make a comparison with a "no treatment" control group. Furthermore, there is difficulty in isolating the effects of new community-based approaches, given that, in many communities, the new approach often complements or extends pre-existing campaigns, rather than replacing them entirely. This limits the ability to identify the specific campaign components that have the most effect on increasing the number of carers recruited. Although associated with methodological weaknesses, pre- and post-test surveys (with no control group) are the most common means of evaluation to assess whether a recruitment strategy or campaign achieved its intended effect on target audiences (Freimuth et al., 2001).

Carer retention, satisfaction and support

The support needs and satisfaction of carers are particularly important, because if they go unmet, this may impact on the retention of carers, and cause further difficulty in the recruitment of new carers.

The studies

In total, there were eight studies published between 2001 and 2005 in relation to the support, satisfaction and retention of foster carers. They were:

1. Australian Foster Care Association (2001), *Supporting Strong Parenting in the Australian Foster Care Sector* (see Appendix, page 1).
2. Briggs and Broadhurst (2005), "The Abuse of Foster Carers in Australia" (see Appendix, page 2).
3. Butcher (2005), "Upping the Ante! The Training and Status of Foster Carers in Queensland" (see Appendix, page 3).
4. Gilbertson and Barber (2003), "Disrupted Adolescents in Foster Care: Their Perspective on Placement Breakdown" (see Appendix, page 4).
5. Higgins, Bromfield and Richardson (2005), *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People* (see Appendix, page 5).
6. McHugh (2002), *The Costs of Caring: A Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate Out of Home Care in Australia* (see Appendix, page 8).
7. McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski, and Saunders (2004), *The Availability of Foster Carers* (see Appendix, page 9).
8. Victorian Department of Human Services (2003), *Public Parenting: A Review of Home-Based Care in Victoria* (see Appendix, page 14).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding carer retention, satisfaction and support?

Australian research in this area has primarily been in the form of non-experimental studies that have employed questionnaires or qualitative methods (that is, focus groups, interviews) to examine the views of carers and other key stakeholders of out-of-home care service delivery (such as foster care agency and government departmental workers). One publication carried out quantitative comparisons of past and present foster families' satisfaction with fostering; however, these comparisons were limited (see Victorian Department of Human Services, 2003). The same study was also the only research to canvass the views of past carers to determine the reasons why they had ceased fostering. Siminski et al. (2005) used Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data to undertake projections of foster carer numbers (projections "trace out the future implications of a continuation of past trends", p. 19). However, the projections were impeded by limitations with the ABS data. Siminski et al. recommended that the ABS include a "foster child" category for relationship questions in the census questionnaire to improve the reliability and quality of data on foster carers. It is worth noting that a "foster child" category was not included in the Australian Census 2006.

What do we know about carer retention, satisfaction and support?

Do carers get "enough" support?

In a survey of carers carried out by the Australian Foster Care Association (2001), the majority of carers (79%) reported that they felt they received "just enough" or "not enough" support. In a carer survey conducted by McHugh et al. (2004), over half of the carers who participated in the research regarded the overall level of support they received from their caseworker as good, whereas a fifth of the carers described it as poor.

The majority of carers feel they receive "good" or "just enough" support.

Carers' assessments of their relationship with the government department responsible for foster care services mirrored the findings in relation to overall support, with half of the carers describing the relationship as good and a fifth describing it as poor (McHugh et al., 2004). The Australian Foster Care Association (2001) reported that the perceived level and quality of support received from the state or territory child protection department was significantly lower than that

received from non-government agencies. Nearly half of carers indicated that they received little or no support from the relevant government departments. Areas of concern for carers included: provision of adequate support from caseworkers; support and information concerning legal entitlements and eligibility for benefits and services; and the need to be adequately informed, prepared, supported and consulted by the system to improve placement stability (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001; McHugh et al., 2004). It was also noted by Briggs and Broadhurst (2005) that when “foster carers do seek advice from case workers for handling children’s disabilities or emotionally disturbed behaviours they risk being denigrated, threatened with deregistration and/or the removal of foster children” (p. 25). It was found that most support was received from friends and family (55% of carers reported receiving a great deal of support from these sources) (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001).

Foster carers are often dissatisfied, as they do not feel adequately supported by the relevant government department.

Supporting carers financially

McHugh (2002) reported that the standard subsidy to meet the basic costs of care was felt to be inadequate by carers, agencies and other associations. It was reported that few jurisdictions were reimbursing carers by way of standard subsidy payments at a level that would meet the basic, everyday costs associated with fostering. Estimates of the costs of caring for children based on children living with their families were not adequate to meet the needs of children in out-of-home care, as children in care tend to have more complex needs than children who have never lived in care (e.g., they might have heightened physical and mental health problems). This was exacerbated by inconsistent departmental policies in relation to the reimbursement of carers, and caused high levels of stress for carers and non-government agency staff attempting to meet the needs of children. McHugh argued that a significant increase in the levels of subsidy payments for all children would be required if carers were to receive amounts closer to the “real” costs of fostering.

Research shows that the standard carer subsidy to meet the basic costs of care is inadequate. Estimates of the costs of caring for children based on children living with their families are not adequate, as children in care tend to have more complex needs than children who have never lived in care.

Carers’ experiences of violence, threats and intimidation

In a survey of carers by the Australian Foster Care Association (2001), nearly half of carers indicated that they received little or no support from the relevant departments and that this was particularly the case when there were allegations that carers had abused a child in their care. Australian foster carers’ experiences of threats, violence and intimidation by foster children were examined by Briggs and Broadhurst (2005) using data from two separate surveys that the authors conducted. The authors found that “foster care families are highly vulnerable to false and malicious allegations [that they perpetrated abuse] as well as intimidation, threats, violence and damage to property by foster children” (p. 25). Carers reported that the most pervasive effect of threats and violence was ongoing fear for not only their own safety, but for the safety of their family members.

Foster carers are highly vulnerable to false and malicious allegations that they have abused children in their care. Carers and their families are also vulnerable to intimidation, threats, violence and damage to property by foster children.

Departmental support for foster carers was reported by Briggs and Broadhurst (2005) as being minimal or absent and that those who had been assaulted or threatened received no counselling or assistance. The authors contended that the findings have serious implications for the training of carers, social workers and managers. Without further and ongoing training for caseworkers

and foster carers, the children are also at risk of heightened instability due to difficulties in retaining carers.

The apparent lack of support for carers who experience violence, threats or intimidation has serious implications for the foster care system, including the retention of experienced carers and outcomes for children in care.

Why do carers cease to foster?

In a retrospective study of past carers by the Victorian Department of Human Services (2003), most past carers surveyed (53%) reported that they had stopped fostering due to a change in their personal circumstances. However, 38% of carers left as a result of one or more negative experiences with foster care, including: the impact of fostering on their own family (26%), unreasonable demands by the system (18%), and frustrations arising from dealing with the department (17%). Past carers were significantly less likely to be satisfied than current carers and significantly more likely to have experienced difficulties in their fostering experiences.

Most past carers stop fostering due to a change in their personal circumstances. However, a large number of carers leave as a result of one or more negative experiences with foster care.

In another study, Gilbertson and Barber (2003) conducted interviews with 19 carers who had ended placements to identify issues that contributed to the placement deterioration and eventual breakdown. Provision of formal support and interventions to stabilise the placement were identified as factors that may have prevented placement breakdown. System factors were directly implicated in placement failure, and suggested that placement instability could be limited if carers were adequately informed, prepared, supported and consulted. McHugh and colleagues (2004) found that the existing carers they surveyed indicated that carers cease to foster due to burn out, lack of support, effects on their families, the foster children being difficult, or changes to their own personal circumstances. According to the carers, the negative aspects of fostering included: contact with birth parents (14%), stress and workload (13%), and the challenging behaviours of fostered children (12%) (McHugh et al., 2004).

Carers cease to foster due to burn out, lack of support, effects on their families, the foster children being difficult, or changes to their own personal circumstances. System factors are also directly implicated in placement failure.

Qualitative analysis by the Victorian Department of Human Services (2003) suggested that improved reimbursement packages, increased recognition and involvement (e.g., input into decisions regarding foster children), and increased levels of support (e.g., access to support services) were particularly associated with satisfaction. These three factors, along with improved assessment of and information about the child, were associated with current carers' willingness and ability to continue fostering.

Carer retention may be improved if carers are adequately supported and provided with increased recognition and involvement in case planning, along with better information about the child.

Better support for carers

In a study by McHugh and colleagues (2004), two-thirds of carers reported that they felt well-prepared to foster the children most recently placed with them. When carers were asked what could have prepared them more for caring, the most common response was the need for more background information about the child. Both the carers and those stakeholders involved in the provision of fostering services agreed that the provision of better support for carers would ensure more carers were retained in the system. Specifically, carers wanted caseworkers to work with carers and to build up ongoing relationships with the children (McHugh et al., 2004). Butcher

(2005) also noted that levels of support were reported by foster carers to be very important. The majority of the foster carers stated that they would like a dedicated 24-hour contact service or helpline available to provide assistance when required. The Australian Foster Care Association (2001) identified a need for improvement in the provision of training, information, respite, support following allegations of abuse, and financial support to carers. A study by Higgins et al. (2005) that examined the specific support needs of carers of Indigenous children had similar findings, with carers reporting the need for: adequate and timely financial support, respectful relationships with the department, and practical and emotional support. Carers of Indigenous children also reported that they felt better supported when they were adequately prepared for their role through appropriate pre-service training. However, carers in this study stated that the best way to support them was to provide services to meet the needs of children.

Carers could be better supported through improved reimbursement packages, increased recognition and involvement (e.g., input into decisions regarding foster children), better information about the child, and increased levels of support (e.g., access to support services and respite).

What future research is needed regarding carer retention, satisfaction and support?

There is a growing evidence base emerging from qualitative research and descriptive empirical studies in relation to carers' satisfaction with aspects of the out-of-home care system in Australia. However, there is a virtual absence of Australian empirical research comparing the demographic information, satisfaction and experiences of current foster families and those who have ceased or plan to cease fostering. As such, systematically developed evidence about what influences the overall satisfaction and intent of foster parents to continue to foster is lacking, and jurisdictions lack the indicators and data collection tools needed to accurately assess why families choose to discontinue fostering and whether any of these reasons is preventable. There is a need for studies of retention to employ a longitudinal design, where families who do and do not continue in the fostering role are compared on demographic characteristics (e.g., age, material resources, size of family, employment and educational status), psychosocial functioning (e.g., parenting style, parent temperament, family functioning) and fostering experiences (e.g., level and type of support received, types of children in care, placement breakdown). This research would provide an indication of the types of families who are most likely to continue fostering and the types and nature of support and assistance that may affect retention. This could improve service delivery and policy in the support of foster families and children in care, particularly for the types of families and particular situations of fostering (e.g., allegation of abuse, placement breakdown) that are found to be associated with the discontinuance of the fostering role. Such studies have been conducted in the UK (see Sinclair, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2004; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 1999) and the US (see Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001; Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998). However, the different social and political context in Australia (particularly the emphasis on family reunification) limits the extent to which international research can be generalised to the Australian context. Australian research is needed.

Systematically developed evidence about what influences the overall satisfaction and intent of foster parents to continue to foster is lacking. There is a need for studies of retention to employ a longitudinal design, where families who do and do not continue in the fostering role are compared on demographic and other characteristics.

Impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families

The impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families is related to the issue of carer support and satisfaction, and also has implications for carer retention. There was no Australian research on the impact of foster care on carers' spousal relationship or family functioning,

although these issues have been identified as areas for concern in international research (Sinclair et al., 2004). However, there was Australian research examining the impact of fostering on carers' natural children.

The studies

One publication identified discussed issues associated with the impact of fostering on foster carers' own natural children:

1. Nuske (2004), *Beyond the Double Edged Sword: The Contradictory Experiences of the Natural Children of Foster Families* (see Appendix, page 10).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding the impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families?

Nuske's (2004) study involved a small sample size and used a qualitative methodology, which restricts the ability to generalise. Although the study was methodologically sound, a single study is not sufficient to establish an evidence base in any area.

What do we know about the impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families?

The single research study identified (Nuske, 2004) that involved natural children applied a qualitative phenomenological methodology approach involving in-depth interviews with 22 young people (natural children). From the personal narratives of the natural children, an overall theme of "living within a contradictory experience" was identified, with six sub-themes: sharing and losing, being responsible and escaping, caring and resenting, being independent and belonging, having stability and living with change, and shouting and keeping quiet.

The single study in this area suggests that foster children do have an impact on natural children. Living with foster children reportedly encourages positive experiences (e.g., sharing, responsibility, caring and independence), but these are coupled with the contradictory experiences of loss (that is, sharing the attention of parents), resentment and a wish to escape.

What future research is needed regarding the impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families?

Further research is needed to investigate the impact of caring on carers' natural children. Research is urgently needed to investigate the impact of caring on carers' spousal relationships and family functioning. Research is also needed to investigate the link between the impact of caring on carers' natural families and carer retention and to identify ways of better supporting carers and their families.

Training carers

The issue of training is an important one for new and continuing foster carers. It is important that foster carers feel adequately prepared for their role, and training can not only assist in this preparation but can also increase their feelings of support and increase levels of carer retention. Furthermore, carers who are adequately prepared are also better able to care for children, contributing to better outcomes for children in care. Generally there are two types of training: pre-placement training necessary to become a foster carer, and post-placement training to assist carers in their ongoing skills and knowledge development. The Australian research into the sub-theme of training will now be discussed.

The studies

Four of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on training. They were:

1. Australian Foster Care Association (2001), *Supporting Strong Parenting in the Australian Foster Care Sector* (see Appendix, page 1).
2. Butcher (2005), "Upping the Ante! The Training and Status of Foster Carers in Queensland" (see Appendix, page 3).
3. Higgins, Bromfield and Richardson (2005), *Enhancing Out-of-Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People* (see Appendix, page 5).
4. McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski, and Saunders (2004), *The Availability of Foster Carers* (see Appendix, page 9).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding training carers?

Although methodologically sound, research on training for carers has tended to be largely descriptive and has focused on carer reports.

What do we know about training carers?

McHugh et al. (2004) reported that carers' views in relation to training were mostly positive: two-thirds of the carers surveyed reported their initial training as "good", 20% found it "reasonable", and only 3% found it poor. Over a third (39%) of carers said they would like additional training, but close to two-thirds said they would not. Two-thirds of carers felt well prepared to foster the children most recently placed with them. In comparison, a report by the Australian Foster Care Association (2001) identified training along with provision of support as areas in need of improvement. Consistent with the findings by the Australian Foster Care Association, Butcher (2005), in a study undertaken with foster carers in Queensland, reported that 50% of all foster carers surveyed had not completed any pre-service or induction training prior to receiving their first placement.

Although some carers feel they receive sufficient training to adequately prepare them for the role of caring, many did not. Some carers report that they did not receive any training prior to having children placed in their care.

In relation to training, Higgins and colleagues (2005) reported that carers of Indigenous children felt better supported when they had received adequate pre-service training. In particular, carers wanted pre-service training about how to work with the department. Non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children wanted training in Indigenous culture, and Indigenous carers (especially those who were part of the Stolen Generations) may also need cultural training to care for Indigenous children.

Both non-Indigenous and Indigenous carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may benefit from training to enable them to better meet the cultural needs of Indigenous children in care.

A major finding from the study by Butcher (2005) was that 98% of the foster carers wanted training to be practically oriented and nationally accredited. They also reported that the qualifications should be transferable and recognised within all Australian states and they also wanted recognition of prior learning and life experiences credited against any training the carers undertook. Both the key informants (100%) and the foster carers (65%) expressed their desire for specialist training to be available for the provision of treatment foster care. The social science experts interviewed for the study expressed the view that "specialist foster care training was 'essential' for foster carers if good outcomes for foster children are to be achieved" (p. 28). Butcher argued that the research findings indicated the need for more highly specialised and accredited training for foster carers than is currently available in Queensland.

Carers want training that is both practically oriented and nationally accredited and for specialist training to be available to enable carers to provide treatment foster care.

What future research is needed regarding training carers?

Available research into carer training has focused on carer reports as to whether or not they want more training or feel adequately prepared, rather than identifying what the knowledge and skills are that carers need to adequately perform their role. There is also a dearth of research evaluating the effectiveness of carer training programs in imparting knowledge and skills and adequately preparing carers for their role.

The professionalisation of foster carers

Children in care are demonstrating increasingly complex behaviours (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007), and the demands on carers have increased to include functions such as involvement in therapeutic services for children in their care, access for natural parents, and court proceedings. At the same time, there are increasing pressures on carers, as fewer carers are recruited and carer retention becomes an increasing problem. Within this context, there is growing demand for the professionalisation of foster care to be considered.

The studies

Two of the studies identified had findings that contributed to the Australian evidence base on the professionalisation of foster carers:

1. Butcher (2005), "Upping the Ante! The Training and Status of Foster Carers in Queensland" (see Appendix, page 3).
2. Smyth and McHugh (2006), "Exploring the Dimensions of Professionalising Fostering: Carers' Perceptions of Their Fostering Role" (see Appendix, page 12).

How reliable is the evidence base regarding the professionalisation of foster carers?

To date, there has been very limited research in Australia into attitudes of stakeholders (e.g., carers, young people and other professionals) regarding the professionalisation of foster care. One of the studies drew conclusions regarding the professionalisation of foster care; however, this was not the targetted area of study. Only one study was identified that specifically investigated carer attitudes towards the professionalisation of foster care. A single study does not provide a sufficient evidence base on which to base policy or practice decisions on this issue.

What do we know about the professionalisation of foster carers?

Among the major findings in the study by Butcher (2005), who investigated the training needs of carers in Queensland, was the demand for specialist training to enable carers to provide treatment foster care and the call for training to be nationally accredited. Butcher argued that the research findings provided evidence for the professionalisation of foster care, linked to increased payments and improved support for foster carers. Butcher concluded that these changes are very much needed if foster carers are to be recruited and retained in their role and to improve outcomes for children in care.

Carer requests for nationally accredited training and specialist training in treatment foster care may be an indication of carers' support for the professionalisation of foster care.

Smyth and McHugh (2006) found that the majority of foster carers felt that their current role was and should have been seen as semi-professional (56.9%) or professional (15.8%). The authors concluded that the findings from their study of NSW foster carers provided strong support for

adopting a more professional approach to the fostering role and that this may help assist the future recruitment and retention of carers.

The prospect of professionalising foster care in Australia needs more attention. Currently the majority of carers support this, but a significant minority do not.

What future research is needed regarding the professionalisation of foster carers?

There is a need for further research into carer attitudes regarding the professionalisation of foster care. In addition, the attitudes of other affected stakeholders will also need to be investigated. For example, some commentators have suggested that because carers do not receive a salary, children and young people in care are more likely to feel valued for themselves by carers. The attitudes of young people regarding the professionalisation of foster care will be an important issue to be canvassed. Research will also be needed into the impact of the professionalisation of foster care on children's outcomes. Finally, research will be needed to examine the economic viability and human resource implications of the professionalisation of foster care and the impact of professionalisation on the recruitment of carers, but also any unintended consequences this may have on recruitment in other related areas, such as non-government child and family welfare services or statutory child protection services.

What do we know from Australian research on foster families? A summary

- The majority of the population is not reached or engaged by current foster carer recruitment campaigns.
- Increases in female labour force participation are expected to contribute to a continuing decline in the number of foster carers over the next decade.
- Foster carer families are most likely to contain women aged 35–54 years who are not in the labour force. Most foster carers had always planned to foster or had known a specific child in need of care.
- The most common reasons given for not fostering are the disruption to the person's own family circumstances and the financial costs associated with foster care.
- Recruitment of Indigenous carers is both aided and hindered by several culturally specific factors.
- Broad-based media strategies are excellent for awareness-raising and creating an initial interest in fostering, but are less successful in the conversion of inquiries into actual carers.
- One of the "best" recruitment strategies is the use of current and experienced carers to recruit by word-of-mouth.
- Recruitment is an extremely time-consuming activity. At each stage of the application procedure, individuals withdraw or are rejected. An overwhelming majority of individuals who inquire about being a foster carer have not become carers ten months after their inquiry.
- The majority of carers feel they receive "good" or "just enough" support.
- Foster carers are often dissatisfied, as they do not feel adequately supported by the relevant government department.
- Research shows that the standard carer subsidy to meet the basic costs of care is inadequate. Estimates of the costs of caring for children based on children living with their families are not adequate, as children in care tend to have more complex needs than children who have never lived in care.

- Foster carers are highly vulnerable to false and malicious allegations that they have abused children in their care. Carers and their families are also vulnerable to intimidation, threats, violence and damage to property by foster children”
- The apparent lack of support for carers who experienced violence, threats or intimidation has serious implications for the foster care system, including the retention of experienced carers and outcomes for children in care.
- Most past carers stopped fostering due to a change in their personal circumstances. However, a large number of carers left as a result of one or more negative experiences with foster care.
- Carers cease to foster due to burn out, lack of support, effects on their families, the foster children being difficult, or changes to their own personal circumstances. System factors were also directly implicated in placement failure.
- Carer retention may be improved if carers are adequately supported and provided with increased recognition and involvement in case planning, along with better information about the child.
- Carers could be better supported through improved reimbursement packages, increased recognition and involvement (e.g., input into decisions regarding foster children), better information about the child, and increased levels of support (e.g., access to support services and respite).
- Systematically developed evidence about what influences the overall satisfaction and intent of foster parents to continue to foster is lacking. There is a need for studies of retention to employ a longitudinal design, where families who do and do not continue in the fostering role are compared on demographic and other characteristics.
- The single study in this area suggests that foster children do have an impact on natural children. Living with foster children reportedly encourages positive experiences (e.g., sharing, responsibility, caring and independence), but these are coupled with the contradictory experiences of loss (that is, sharing the attention of parents), resentment and a wish to escape.
- Although some carers feel they receive sufficient training, to adequately prepare them for the role of caring, many did not. Some carers report that they did not receive any training prior to having children placed in their care.
- Both non-Indigenous and Indigenous carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may benefit from training to enable them to better meet the cultural needs of Indigenous children in care.
- Carers want training that is both practically oriented and nationally accredited and for specialist training to be available to enable carers to provide treatment foster care.
- Carer requests for nationally accredited training and specialist training in treatment foster care may be an indication of carers’ support for the professionalisation of foster care.
- The prospect of professionalising foster care in Australia needs more attention. Currently the majority of carers support this, but a significant minority do not.

Implications

Recruitment

The limited available research on recruitment highlights the need for more research to be conducted in this area. We do know that word-of-mouth is an effective recruitment strategy, as are strategies that focus on recruiting carers for a specific child in need of care. The evidence base suggests for caseworkers and policy-makers that these two strategies are utilised in the recruitment of foster carers; however, more effective recruitment strategies are necessary to “tap into” the population that are not being reached by current strategies. Strategies that focus on

recruiting carers for a specific child in need of care, particularly a child known to the potential carer (kith or kin) are likely to be more effective.

Retention, satisfaction, support and training

A major finding from the research on the retention of foster carers is that many carers do not feel supported, either financially or emotionally, in their important role. This finding has implications for social workers who are working with foster carers, as the research demonstrates that there are ways in which social workers can improve the level and types of support needed. However, more importantly, social workers themselves need to be supported to do this by their government department and by their agency or organisation. Research is still needed in this area. It is also recognised that foster carers want more training, and that this training should be practically oriented and nationally accredited. Again, for carers to be provided with more training and for this training to be recognised as a nationally accredited qualification, this requires the involvement of governments and policy-makers.

The professionalisation of foster care

The professionalisation of foster care is a new issue in Australian out-of-home care. The research into this area demonstrates that the majority of carers agree with the prospect of providing foster care as a professional career. Professionalisation of foster care may be a viable placement option for some children and young people (i.e., those with high needs), and an attractive career choice for future carers that may assist in both the recruitment of new carers and the retention of experienced foster carers. However, there has been very little Australian research in this area to date. Further research needs to be conducted before making a policy decision of this magnitude.

Conclusion

There were a relatively large number of studies into foster families compared to other areas of Australian out-of-home care research (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007). However, the research fell into several sub-themes (that is, carer recruitment; retention, satisfaction and support; impact of fostering on carers' natural children and families; training; and the professionalisation of foster carers), with a small number of studies relevant to each of these areas. With the exception of research into recruitment, the research into foster families also tended to be largely descriptive or qualitative in nature. While there is a role for descriptive and qualitative research, research of this nature frequently can not be generalised to other samples. Quantitative research is needed in this area. There is also a need for research to evaluate models of recruitment, assessment, training and support of carers to determine what methods are most effective in recruiting and retaining carers, and to ensure that they are adequately prepared and supported to perform their important role. Overall, the research in the area of foster families shows that we still do not know enough about recruitment. Carers report needing more support and increased training.

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