An exploratory investigation into the experiences of Foster and Kinship Carers' within Wesley Mission Victoria

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Overview

- Wesley Mission Victoria's background
- Research background
- Methodology
- Key themes and findings
- Implications of the research
- Future research

Wesley OOHC Background

- Wesley has been supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians for over 120 years and operating Out of Home Care Services for children and young people for over twenty years.

- Wesley in the South division currently operates the following Out of Home Care Services: Foster Care, Kinship Care and Residential Care.

- Wesley in the South division currently has approximately 100 volunteer Foster Carers and approximately 80 Kinship Carers.

Research Background

- Despite recent contributions to the field there is still a general lack of academic research conducted about Foster and Kinship care in Australia.

  (Boetto, 2013; Horner, Downie, Hay, & Wichmann, 2007; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2011,2012)

- Some recent Victorian sector examples

  (Breman, 2014)

- The aim of the research was to explore Foster and Kinship Carers experiences of caring

Methodology

- Data Collection
  - Semi structured, in-depth interviews
  - Final schedule consisted of 13 questions
  - Transcripts were manually coded in NVIVO

- Recruitment and Participants
  - Total of 12 interview (14 participants)
  - Participants sourced from across WMV programs

Key Themes

- Primary themes
  - Carer Demographics
  - The Experience of Caring
  - The Impacts of Caring
  - Supports

- Themes are interrelated

Findings

- Foster Carer demographics
  - Majority female
  - Average age 56
  - Average years caring 10.1 Most carers still working, and most have biological children

- Kinship Carer demographics
  - Majority female
  - Average age 56 Average years caring 6.6 Majority of carers not working, most had biological children, and a majority of carers were looking after grandchildren or great nibbling's

Findings

- Experience of Caring
  - Positive Experience
    - “To see this wild and angry little person come into our house and now living on his own, earning his own money, moving on with his life and I go we had to have something to do with that” (Pf7).
    - “the positive side is that they’re not in foster care and they’re not being moved from house to house” (Pk11)
  - Negative Experience
    - **Foster Care:** theft, assaults, out of pocket expenses and lack of support
    - **Kinship Care:** Financial burden, family strain and lack of supports

Findings

- Motivations for Taking on the Caring Role
  - Foster Carers:
    - Influence from a family member or friend; Past family experiences; Spare room in the house.
  - Kinship Carers:
    - Family bond; Past family experiences; Children shouldn't be in foster care.
- How placements begin
  - Foster Carers:
    - "generally I've had ones that I've had five minutes' notice, I've had ones that have been dumped on my doorstep at six o'clock on a Friday night by a DHS worker that was going overseas and I've not even known their surnames or had any paperwork. That's the majority of the time" (Pf10)
  - Kinship Carers:
    - "No it was just something I did, It progressed that way, we couldn't watch them go through anything, we care about them, we love them, their our, their mine grandchildren" (Pk4)

Findings

- Identification
  - Foster Carers & Kinship Carers:
    - Almost half of the participants spoke of the difficulty in getting identification documents for children in care.

- Attachment
  - Foster Carers:
    - “she came to my care as rest-bite, I had her for a weekend. I immediately attached to this little girl” (Pf2)
    - “I don’t love them the same way I love my granddaughter, maybe it’s just me, I just don’t have the same feelings for them” (Pf3)

Findings

- Kids and Contact
  - Foster Carers:
    - Variety of contact arrangements; carers actively encourage contact; Issues dealing with paternal families.
  - Kinship Carers:
    - Mixed contact arrangements; Issues dealing with family

- Processing & Dealing with Trauma
  - Foster Carers:
    - Carers spoke of their own emotional difficulties working with traumatised kids (Vicarious trauma); Half of the participants had experienced physical and mental abuse as a carer.
  - Kinship Carers:
    - Dealing with disclosure; Explaining to children why they are in care.

Findings

- Impact of Caring
  - A majority of foster and kinship carers perceived that that the caring experience had made significant impact on them and their families.

  - Work and Financial
    - “They also need to see the look on my face when I open the electricity bill which of course another expense foster carers. Do you think they know how to turn a light switch off?” (Pf10).
    - “Hey we all work too, we’ve all got to survive somehow, and the way to survive is go to work, earn money. You guys aren’t paying us enough to sit at home and watch these kids 24/7” (Pf7)
    - “We get a huge amount of $6 maintenance from the parents which I think that’s farcical … doesn’t even buy milk and bread” (Pk9).
    - “Without DHS’ financial support, I don’t think I will be able to cope” (Pk6).

Findings

- Health
  - There was just so much happening and I was just getting more and more overwhelmed with everything so I rang up here and I went I'm breaking down (Pf7).
  - "I enjoy it, but I suppose everyone else says I get more stressed I suppose you do get more stressed" (Pf3).
  - "cause I started crying, I didn't know what to do I was. I've never heard of anything like that in my life, like I've heard it" (Pk4).
  - "just mainly that you lose your own life, like you lose your health, like my health has gone down to what it was. I was a reasonably healthy lady" (Pk12).

- Social Impact
  - Children
  - Partners
  - Friendships
  - Extended Family
  - Personal Impact

Findings

- Foster Carers
  - **Children:**
    - “don’t know what it was, whether she felt jealous, whether she felt I was gonna play favourites, I don’t know but it takes a little bit of time” (Pf8).
    - “They treat my son as their big brother, they treat my daughter as a big sister. And vice versa” (Pf7).
  - **Partners:**
    - “it can also cause friction between the two of us and it happened. But you could always solve that, never in front of child name removed” (Pf1).
  - **Friendships:**
    - “I think people understand and my friends are pretty grown up and responsible too, as much as they give me ma ribbing they also hold me in admiration too” (Pf10)
  - **Extended Family:**
    - my family are really supportive and really good in the sense …they’ll make sure they’ve got a little gift for Christmas or something like that for them, things like that (Pf10)
  - **Personal Impact:**
    - I’ve always been able to take my foster children wherever I went and I did take them wherever I went. If we ever went for a holiday they went, they came (Pf2).

Findings

- Kinship Carers
  - **Children:**
    - “Because not only have I had to deal with the children I've had to deal with her harassing at me and harassing at me day in and day out” (Pk12).
    - “were like a divorced couple, and I’m like, it’s quite funny, I found myself thinking, and I said to her as long as it doesn’t end up like it was between me and your dad” (Pk4)
  - **Partners:**
    - “It’s really hard to see, I think it contributed to [name removed] and I actually splitting up” (Pk9).
  - **Friendships:**
    - “I don’t have any friends anymore, that has just gone” (Pk4).
  - **Extended Family:**
    - “It’s hard work and I think I, it would be nice if my brother would have them a little more often” (Pk11).
  - **Personal Impact:**
    - “I would have done a lot more travelling, whereas you’ve got to change your focus” (Pk11).

Implications of the Research

- Putting the findings into our practice.
- Develop a policy and procedure to implement ‘transition interviews’ for Foster Carers.
- From a research perspective, how do we move forward.
- Explore evidence-based strategies to increase carer attendance and engagement with education and/or training across regions
- Investigate strategies to improve how contact occurs for case contracted children
- Review and develop ways to improve internal case management handovers