

Out of Home Care

Our Prime Minister and our state and federal Parliaments have apologised for the past injustices and wrongs caused by removing children from their parents and families. This happened with the so-called “Stolen Generation” of children with some Aboriginal heritage and the so-called “Oranges and Sunshine” children brought to Australia from Britain. At the time of those removals this was done supposedly because it was in the best interests of those children. How wrong those welfare authorities were. They knew what was best for those children but they were misguided and some even malicious. We now know this. Yes, apologies have been made but formal apologies do not undo the harm. They cannot. During the last century more than 500,000 children grew up in out of home care in orphanages, foster care, children’s homes and other institutions in Australia.¹ Most of those were not “Stolen Generation” or “Oranges and Sunshine” children. And, most of those were traumatised by their removal from their families and so many were subsequently abused in various emotional, physical and sexual ways by those entrusted with their care. And, to add to the abuse, many have lost contact with their own families or been alienated from them. We’ve had commissions of enquiry endlessly going through the massive scale of abuse and making recommendation after recommendation. With all that background of massive numbers of children enduring harm at the hands of the state, we now have in 2014 more than 50,000 children currently in out of home care in Australia² and the numbers are growing each year. The current number of children in out of home care has never been greater. And, that escalation in numbers is disproportional to current population growth. This is to our nation’s shame.

We know the harm inflicted upon children by their removal into out of home care. We know from the past. We know from the angst, the despair and even the suicides caused by the harm. We also know from the public apologies. Yet, our welfare authorities in each state continue with these removals. Why should we have 50,000 children removed from their parents? Our welfare authorities are out of control. There can’t be 50,000 kids in Australia who were at serious risk of being murdered or maimed. Why was there the necessity to remove?

Many will argue that if they were not removed there was a risk of them ending up like Kiesha Weippeart and Chloe Valentine. Yet, in most cases, like those two, the welfare authorities knew what was going on but did little or not enough. Each child was “known to the department”. It could be argued that they should have stepped in and removed the children before the grim reaper did the job for them. As it turns out, children are dead and parents are jailed - a lose/lose scenario. The only ones to gain are welfare authorities who might argue: “Bad parents. We told you so! That’s why you need our services.” Yet, some might argue differently: why did not welfare authorities intervene pro-actively to work with parents in order to make the child’s home environment a safe and nurturing place. The result could well have been very different with a win/win scenario.

Our society needs an about face turn around. Welfare authorities need to fix the problem not remove the kid. Sometimes, this might be expensive and hard dedicated work but lives might be saved and children not have to be apologised to by politicians at some future date. So, if there was a paradigm shift in focus away from merely policing child abuse to actually dealing with the causes

¹ Alliance for Forgotten Australians <http://www.forgottenaustralians.org.au/aboutAfa.htm>

² AIHW Child Welfare series 59, 2014, page 9

which can be economic, social and psychological, then there would be vastly less children taken into out of home care. There would be far less of a need for foster carers.

So, we need less children in out of home care and less foster carers. Our society needs to accept that parenting is not a dream run and that parents are not perfect. We need to ensure that the focus of welfare work done by child protection authorities is aimed at working with parents rather than policing parents and removing children.

In the meantime,

1. continued removal of children into out of home care should be minimised
2. foster caring needs to become almost redundant
3. long term foster care should be almost eliminated and adoption of children in out of home care should be illegal
4. removal at birth should be illegal (it is deeply offensive in our society)
5. foster carers (when they are absolutely necessary) must see their task of care as a very temporary one
6. foster carers should be compelled to support children in their care's need to maintain contact with parents and they need to encourage parent contact and not work against it
7. foster carers should not have contact with or try to work with parents as this may only exacerbate a parent's sense of somebody else taking over and stealing their child

Overall, child protection authorities must accept the fundamental need a child has for her/his parent(s). They need to accept this as a child's fundamental right.³ When things go wrong and authorities need to step in to help, not punish, they need to work with parents not against them. It is axiomatic that children need parents. It follows then, that departments need to work with parents and this is fundamentally in the best interests of the child.⁴ Foster carers need to know that is what is going on and that their rôle is a very temporary one. This sort of about turn in current policy with regard to out of home care is the only logical and humane way to bring down the ghastly figure of 50,000 kids in out of home care.

If this does not happen, there will definitely be more apologies in the future. And, we will continue to see an escalation in numbers of children in out of home care. We will all then be asking: "When will they ever learn?"

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Submission endorsed by the Management Committee
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³ UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, article 9: "States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will" This is a fundamental child right. Australia is a signatory to this convention and child protection authorities need to take it seriously. At present, they do not. At best, it is regarded as merely aspirational.

⁴ "If a community values its children it must cherish their parents." John Bowlby (1951), *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. Geneva: World Health Organisation, page 84.