Reforming out of home care

Implementing effective models of therapeutic care: establishing benchmarks for success

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Commitment to models of therapeutic care

ACF has 16 years in the delivery of therapeutic models of:

• Foster care
• Residential care
• Family group home care
• Kinship care

26 partnerships with general and Aboriginal out of home care organisations across Australia caring for more than 300 children and young people.

Masters study in 2008
The role of therapeutic care programs

• Internationally, out of home care systems are struggling to meet the needs of children and young people in care

• Local and international research has highlighted a range of entrenched problems in out of home care including placement instability, a lack of coordination and access to specialist services, and limited or inadequate models of care

• Increasingly, children in out of home care present with a complex matrix of needs and challenges that are often not well understood or responded to, resulting in their poor psychological, emotional, social and academic functioning

• Research and outcomes demand innovation and reform
The role of therapeutic care programs

• Out of home care not commonly been conceptualised as a form of therapeutic resource through which children are helped to recover from their emotional difficulties and supported to modify any challenging behavioural patterns.

• Care must be seen as an ‘active intervention’.

• ‘Therapeutic care’ - care that aims to address the emotional and/or behavioural problems of a young person via interventions carried out by carers providing day to day care of the young person under the guidance of a therapist and support staff across the environments within which children and young people ‘live, learn and play’.
• Despite its growing use with children deemed ‘very difficult to care for’, little is known about therapeutic care as it is generally practised

• Research is lacking regarding how carers affect the behavioural and emotional functioning of children in their care and what aspects

• Until recently, little attention has been paid to the systematic study of the potential impact of more therapeutically oriented care environments on children
Goals of therapeutic care programs

• Provide safe, stable and nurturing care for the child/young person
• Resource carers to provide therapeutic, reparative care
• Promote child/young person’s ability to recover from abuse, trauma and losses
• Ensure systematic co-ordination and consistency of responses
Outcomes for children and young people

• Placement stability
• Build connection and belonging
• Improved ability to establish and maintain relationships, demonstrate affection, accept limits and routines and participate in family tasks
• Improved school participation
• Improved social interaction with peers
• Significant improvement in mental health - ceasing medication
• Reduction in aggression and problem sexual behaviours
Benchmarks for Success - Program Elements

• Trauma informed
• Centrality of relationships as the vehicle for change using approaches to care that are intentional efforts to promote change
• Specialised carer selection, support and training
• Comprehensive assessment
• Therapeutic care planning must include multiple interventions across multiple environments directed as the level of the child, the family/carers/teachers and environment
• Care team approach
Why is a trauma informed approach important?

Summarising the trauma and attachment literature as it applies to supporting children in out of home care

• Trauma significantly alters baseline physiological arousal levels in children.
• Trauma reduces cortical capacity to regulate subcortical activation in children.
• Trauma disrupts memory functioning in children.
• Trauma disconnects children from relational resources that can mitigate its effects.
Why is a trauma informed approach important?

- Trauma restricts the attentional capacity of children.
- Trauma based behaviour is functional at the time in which it develops as a response to threat.
- Trauma limits children’s response flexibility and adaptability to change.
- Trauma undermines identity formation in children.

Mitchell 2008
Benchmarks for success – cultural considerations

• What do culturally safe and strong models of trauma informed care look like?

• Critical considerations:
  ▪ Workforce/carer considerations
  ▪ Traditional healing approaches
  ▪ Working together
Change management from within

• Implementation of therapeutic care programs requires organisational, cultural and practice change at all levels

and in partnership

• Success in achieving change using a partnerships between out of home care providers and clinical service providers
• Successful partnerships take a lot of work!
Benchmarks for Success - Systemic considerations

• Repeated reviews and available research into out of home care positions poor outcomes for children in care within a care system characterised by consistent themes of placement instability and inadequate and poorly resourced models of care to match the increasingly complex needs with which children present.

• Reform is challenging due to:
  ▪ Siloed/fragmented approaches to change
  ▪ Lack of understanding about the implications of implementing therapeutic models of care
  ▪ Lack of parallel planning and investment
Benchmarks for Success - Systemic considerations

Intervention where children ‘live, learn and play’

• Systemic alignment – multi-systemic approach
  - partnership approach

• Cultural and practice change across system is required

• Need to move from model development to system development

• Model implementation versus the politics of reform

• Local models tailored to local need

• Commitment to research to determine ‘What works’
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