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Supporting Families through Short-Term Foster Care—An Essay Review

Anthony N. Maluccio

Aldgate, J. and Bradley, M. (1999). *Supporting families through short-term fostering*. London: The Stationery Office.

This essay reviews a British qualitative study of short-term foster care from the perspectives of birth parents, children, foster parents, and social workers. Respondents highlighted the value of short-term foster care as a family support service and also offered many recommendations for improving service delivery. The study provides useful implications for restructuring child welfare services in the United States and for promoting cross-national collaboration in future research activities in the area of child and family services.

As in the United States, short-term foster care (or accommodation in the British context) is increasingly being used in the United Kingdom. This is in line with the principles embodied in The Children Act 1989 (England and Wales), which emphasizes partnership between child welfare authorities and birth parents to promote the welfare of children placed in out-of-home care or at risk of placement in such care. But how effective is short-term fostering in preventing long-term family breakdown? How useful is it as a family support program in the continuum of services available for children in families at risk of disruption? How can its effectiveness be enhanced?

In their intensive study, *Supporting Families through Short-Term Fostering*, Jane Aldgate and Marie Bradley (1999) examine short-term foster care in England from the perspectives of those most closely involved in it: birth parents, children, foster parents, and social workers. Using a qualitative-exploratory design, the authors trace the progress of a purposive sample of the above participants in 60 cases located in four local social service departments ranging from urban areas to smaller towns to rural settings. The researchers conducted informal, in-depth interviews with birth parents, foster parents, social workers, and children at two points in time (Aldgate and Bradley, 1999: 29):

- When the offer of short-term accommodation had been made and had been accepted by the family

- At a retesting after at least nine months had elapsed and the accommodation was ongoing or sooner if the arrangements had ended earlier

In addition, outcome measures were obtained through standardized tests with parents (Levinson's tri-dimensional locus of control test) and children (Kovacs Children's Depression Inventory).

The findings show that most parents felt that the service had helped to meet their needs, particularly in regard to offering time off from the children, strengthening their relationships with spouses or partners, and improving their own health and employment prospects. At the same time, parents expressed their concern about their social isolation and a longing for help to rebuild their links with relatives and with the community. The majority of children also liked the experience of short-term fostering, especially the attention provided by the foster parents, the feeling that they were treated as individuals, and the opportunities to play with other children in the foster family. However, most of the children resented being away from home. As found in other studies, they longed to return to their parents as soon as possible (Bullock, Gooch, and Little, 1998).

As for the foster parents, fostering provided an important source of income, but many of them expressed a number of concerns, notably in regard to their inadequate preparation for working with "demanding" parents and "aggressive" children; the frequent comings and goings of children; and the sometimes abrupt ending of the placement. Social workers, on the other hand, rated the service positively and felt competent in training and supporting carers and in empowering parents. They seemed to feel less adequate in working with children and unclear in consulting children regarding decision-making, a role that was required by the statutes.

In light of the paucity of research on client and worker perception of child welfare services in the United States, this well-organized and well-executed study is critical and useful, as it offers a number of messages for policy, practice, and research. In particular, it reinforces the importance of policies and strategies that empower families, promote continuing parent-child relationships while the child is in care, and treat short-term fostering as a *family support service*. Increased emphasis on such supportive services for vulnerable families could help deal with the danger of accelerating permanent removal of children from their families, which, as Pelton (1999) has charged, is often a consequence of current welfare reform legislation and programs.

In the area of practice, the study highlights the role of the social worker as a family support specialist and "care manager," the use of short-term fostering as a therapeutic

intervention for parents and children in appropriate cases, and the value of locating foster care services in the neighborhoods in which birth families live. In regard to research, there are implications for finding ways to promote the therapeutic use of parent-child visiting, strengthening the role of foster parents as consultants to the birth parents, engaging children in care in decision-making on their behalf, and promoting family reunification.

Although short-term fostering was found to be sufficient in most cases, there were situations in which more intensive and extensive services were needed to avert or deal with risks. For this reason, Aldgate and Bradley (p. 216) conclude:

Short-term accommodation, therefore needs to be available as one of a broad range of services for families under stress. Only by offering a large menu of family support services can there be more choices for families. Creating choice is in itself the foundation of community-based social services to promote the welfare of children in need.

The above conclusion is consistent with the recommendations made in recent years by various scholars in regard to improving or restructuring child welfare services in the U.S., empowering children and families, and enhancing child welfare outcomes. (See for example, Barbell and Wright, 1999; McGowan and Walsh, 2000; Pelton, 1992; and Waldfogel, 1000). In the long run, cross-national collaboration with researchers in England and other countries can help us achieve these goals. Attention to the work of Aldgate and Bradley can help stimulate such collaboration in the immediate future.

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