

Carers of Indigenous Children: Findings From a National Study

National Child Protection Clearinghouse



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Acknowledgments

- λ Like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land
- λ Presentation provides an overview of a report by: Daryl Higgins, Leah Bromfield, & Nick Richardson
- λ Thank participants from this project
- λ Funded by the Australian government
Department of FaCSIA on behalf of ACCAP



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Context

- λ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in out-of-home care
 - υ Indigenous children comprise 3.6% of the total population of Australian children
 - υ Indigenous children comprise 22% of the OOHC population
- λ There are insufficient culturally appropriate placements available for Indigenous children



Aim

- λ To identify barriers and promising solutions to the:
 - υ Recruitment
 - υ Assessment
 - υ Training
 - υ Support and
 - υ Retention
- λ of Indigenous carers and
- λ non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children



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Method

- λ Literature review
- λ Interviews and focus groups with:
 - υ Professionals (National)
 - λ State and territory departments
 - λ Indigenous specific community-based agencies
 - λ Non-Indigenous community-based agencies
 - υ Indigenous carers (WA&QLD)
 - υ Carers of Indigenous children (WA&QLD)
 - υ Indigenous young people in care (WA&QLD)



Recruitment

- λ Insufficient number of carers
- λ Difficulty in recruiting for some groups of children (eg disability, juvenile justice, short-term, no kin)



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At one stage there it was great, you know, you'd say "we're looking for carers you know, who have you got?" They'd say "We'll get back to you, no worries". So that used you to happen, but it's not now ... I think people have realised now that the type of kids that we do place are just really high maintenance.

INDIGENOUS AGENCY REPRESENTATIVE

Recruitment

- λ Past government policies and practices (both barrier and strength)
- λ Material disadvantage
- λ Mismatch between traditional child rearing practices and out-of-home care system
- λ Commitment to community (strength)



[Indigenous] people want to make sure that [Indigenous] kids are kept with their community. So they try and help out. It's our culture to keep our kids with us, so people volunteer.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

Assessment

- λ Cultural appropriateness of assessment techniques
 - υ Communication style
 - υ Culturally sensitive issues (eg being a victim of violence)
 - υ Higher rates of numeracy and literacy problems
 - υ Importance of consulting with potential carers' community as part of assessment



Families display some embarrassment when asked to fill out forms for assessment and some do not proceed with the application when they become aware of the detailed information required.

DEPARTMENTAL REPRESENTATIVE

It can take several visits over a period of months to draw out the required information. If it isn't handled properly, some families decide that the process is too invasive or involved and we only get half way through before they discontinue.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

Assessment

- λ Cultural appropriateness of requirements
 - υ Traditional child-rearing practices
 - υ Anglo conceptions of attachment and bonding
 - υ Police checks
 - υ Physical environment (eg number of bedrooms)
 - υ Potential benefits of kinship care



There are some things you can't get past. If there are sexual offences, or extensive drug trafficking offences - these are things you can't get past.

Many of our [Indigenous] people have histories-and I am talking about past histories-that are offences [Indigenous] people will get picked up for because they are [Indigenous] ... because they have had a couple of [drinks] ... And so it's being able to work with the department to filter through some of that.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

We had three children in foster care – young children. They were with a non-Aboriginal foster carer ... these children would cry all night. They couldn't sleep. During the day, the foster carer inevitably found them curled up in the single lounge chair sleeping together ... And so we asked the birth family about this and these children had never been parted. They slept in one bed. And so the foster carer put three beds in the same room and they slept beautifully. It was about acknowledging that these children had different needs.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

Training

- λ Training related to carers' beliefs about the type and quality of support provided
- λ When carers adequately prepared they feel supported
- λ In particular, carers wanted training about how to work with the department



If you're going to recruit people in, you need to let them know what to expect ... I need to understand their point of view, their legalities, their guidelines. I haven't had anything that tells me what I can and can't do. It's a lack of information.

INDIGENOUS CARER

Training

λ Non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous children wanted training in Indigenous culture



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CARER 1:

Do we worry about Westernising the [Indigenous] children?

CARER 2:

As least she'll get both sides of the world

CARER 1:

But she won't if she stays with me

CARER 3:

That's why it's vital to have cultural training

Training

- λ Indigenous carers may also need cultural training



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Even [Indigenous] foster carers need cultural sensitivity training because they can be a bit short about practices outside their connected community ...

Many foster parents have been foster children and lost their culture because they may have been fostered by non-[Indigenous] foster parents, so we need to help them re-connect with their culture and give them that strength that makes them stronger in doing the role of foster carer.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

Support

- λ Carers told us the best way to support them was to provide services to meet the needs of children



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The child's caseworker left Friday, they didn't even say goodbye to me, let alone the child.

NON-INDIGENOUS FOSTER CARE AGENCY REPRESENTATIVE

Counselling? It's a joke, when their mum passed away it took two and a half years!

INDIGENOUS CARER

We have problems with the school. There's not enough support. I've never met the education worker ...

INDIGENOUS CARERt

Support

- λ In addition, carers talked about the need for:
 - υ Adequate and timely financial support
 - υ Respectful relationships with the department
 - υ Practical and emotional support



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You shouldn't feel like you're begging.

INDIGENOUS CARER

When I ring up [the Department], they're ducking and hiding for cover. You get one school shirt – and it's white! There's not enough practical and material support.

INDIGENOUS CARER

Young middle class kids coming in and telling our families what to do. They carry their own baggage, morals and standards.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

Foster parents are part of the team and you have to respect that. Be respectful, friendly, negotiate, ring them when they need you, when they're in crisis don't leave them hanging.

NON-INDIGENOUS CARER

Retention

- λ Participants consistently told us that for Indigenous carers, recruitment not retention was the problem
- λ Once Indigenous people start caring few drop out
- λ However, carers are an ageing demographic and are having to stop for health reasons
- λ Carers may be temporarily unavailable for cultural reasons



We don't often have carers dropping out except for their own health.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

We are heavily reliant on middle-aged and older women ... The worry is that there won't be younger carers coming on board.

PEAK BODY COMMUNITY-BASED AGENCIES REPRESENTATIVE

It might be for family reasons, because they are staying out bush for a while or due to sorry business.

DEPARTMENTAL REPRESENTATIVE

Overarching themes

- λ Interlinked nature of key issues
- λ Children with complex and special needs - most children in care have complex or special needs
- λ Differentiating kinship and foster care was not useful for Indigenous Australians
 - υ most carers are kith or kin to children
 - υ Many caring for multiple children and have dual roles: kinship and foster carer



Promising practices

- λ Throughout this research identified many barriers for Indigenous carers
- λ Also identified many promising strategies to overcome these barriers ...



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Recruitment

We set up a community day at the local football club and worked with volunteers to set up a BBQ ... karaoke, face painting ... We had other service providers – non-Aboriginal providers there. We also had the Aboriginal health service there. We use it as a great promotional tool ... “Are you interested in becoming a foster carer?” When you see ... children having a fabulous time ... realise how important they are in our community ... it’s a really good recruitment tool.

AICCA REPRESENTATIVE

Assessment

In instances where a family was not approved, the AICCA was informed of the reasons this was the case. This enabled the AICCA to work with the family to make changes to pass requirements or even negotiate with the department to make concessions regarding particular requirements. This reflected a particularly strong understanding and partnership between the AICCA and the department.

AICCA AND DEPARTMENTAL REPRESENTATIVES

Training

I always wanted to be a carer. I thought I had a lot more to give. We had to do a couple of weekends of training. Then had self-assessments, home visits, and police checks. It took about six months. I'm glad we did all that training because it opened our eyes ... They told you bad case scenarios and talked about how the department works, which is a major issue. We also did role plays.

NON-INDIGENOUS CARER

Support

The support for our carers is really intense. We have an open phone line, which they can phone after-hours. Our worker does regular visits with them and sees how they're going. We involve the caseworkers who are handling the children and liaise with them around the children. Our worker and the caseworkers (from the statutory mob) do visits together ... Family support workers also look after children, as well as the biological family ...

INDIGENOUS DEPARTMENT WORKER

For a copy of the full report:

Higgins, D.J., Bromfield, L.M., & Richardson, N. (2005).
*Enhancing out-of-home care for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander young people.*

Access from:

[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/empirical/
empirical.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/empirical/empirical.html)



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