Towards new models of professional foster care*

Foster care for children and young people is in crisis in Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA, as elsewhere. For this reason, the proposal by Barbara Hutchinson and her associates (see Adoption & Fostering 27:3, 2003) is timely and noteworthy. In line with their argument regarding professionalisation of foster care services, Frank Ainsworth and Anthony Maluccio recommend that new models of foster care also need to be considered. Two models are suggested for further review: (1) Family for Family, which involves the recruitment of a foster family for a birth family; and (2) Circle of Friends, which is designed for children and young people whose behaviours exhaust traditional foster carers. If developed further, these models, like those of Walker et al (2002) and Chamberlain (2003), would add to the diversity of foster care services and make for a greater range of possible placements.

The reduced availability of foster carers also stems in part from the increase in women’s participation in the workforce, which has resulted in fewer women being available (Department of Community Services, 2002). There are other pressures as well as the complexity and magnitude of demands being placed on foster care. These include multiple placements of unrelated foster children with the same foster family, frequent placement disruption and replacement, and the complexities of child–birth family visiting, which may confound family reunification efforts. Furthermore, foster care services are confronted with an unmanageable demand for placements and a population of children and adolescents whose behaviours may make delivering a ‘stable alternative placement to parental care’ extremely difficult.

In light of the above noted developments, the call for professionalisation of foster care services by Hutchinson and colleagues (2003) deserves more detailed articulation and study, including careful costing of these proposals, and requires our attention and review. As these authors remind us, foster care was originally developed to provide for children whose parents were unable to care for them adequately. This problem often resulted from inadequate parenting skills or came about because of a parent’s (generally the mother’s) physical or mental health problems (including substance abuse). Sometimes foster care was needed due to abandonment by the parents, their incarceration in prison or placement in psychiatric hospitals. At any rate, while children in the above circumstances may have shown difficult behaviours, they were likely to follow a normal growth pattern once placed with an alternative family. Essentially, what foster care

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* The authors’ original article has been developed in response to a paper by Hutchinson et al (2003), published in the last edition of Adoption & Fostering.
offered, whether for the short or long term, was a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with an alternative family.

Increasingly, however, many young people move in and out of foster care across their childhood years (Festinger, 1994; Frame et al., 2000). They are then placed with different foster families and are required to adapt to a new neighbourhood and a new school on each occasion, a factor that contributes significantly to their poor educational achievement (Bhabra et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2003). New foster care models are needed that take account of these types of situations. We have termed these models firstly Family for Family and secondly the Circle of Friends. We put them forward mainly in conceptual form with less operational detail, as a way of opening up debate about potential new forms of services. (Related sources of information on implementing particular components of each model are available through websites of the Child Welfare League of America [http://www.cwla.org] and the National Child Welfare Resource Centre for Family-Centred Practice [http://www.cwresource.org])

Family for Family

Concept

This first model is consonant with the Shared Parenting projects in Canada (Landy and Munro, 1998) and various Shared Family Care demonstration projects in the USA (Barth, 2003). It would involve the recruitment of a foster family exclusively for a birth family in whose case the need for periodic foster care is anticipated. To this end, a foster family from within the same neighbourhood as the birth family would be selected. Once established, the arrangements between the two families would continue while the ‘foster’ children are growing up.

This is essentially what already takes place with many ordinary families who seek help with their children from grandparents or other adults rather than a welfare agency, while a particular difficulty is being addressed. Children in these circumstances may periodically reside away from their parents with kin or other known adults. Importantly, they would go to live with the same relative or adult on each occasion, thus avoiding the trauma of being in yet another unfamiliar place.

In the Family for Family model, the two families would be linked indefinitely to each other. The virtue of this type of arrangement is that when foster care is needed, the same family would provide it. This reduces the trauma of placement or replacement for the children. It would also mean that the children would remain in their own neighbourhood, attend the same school and, as the placement would be local, maintain easy contact with their birth parents. Furthermore, the placement would facilitate continuing connections between birth parents and child, thus also reducing the often negative impact of separation on the child’s growth and development.

The advantage of such an approach for the foster parents is that they would only be dealing with the one family and with the same child or children across time. There would thus be opportunities for them to get to know the birth parents and to see the children of that family grow into adulthood. The foster carers would get periodic breaks from serving as a foster family. In addition, the foster family would provide alternative long-term adult models for the foster children – models from which they could learn as they grew up. For the family needing foster care, the benefit would be instant access to family support and a long-term relationship with alternative carers. The birth parents would also always know where their children were living.

The advantage of this model for the children’s services agency is that it would ease the problem of finding a placement at the last minute, as it provides a guarantee of alternative carers. Better still, it is always the same placement and since the children already know the foster carers, the trauma of placement is reduced. In short, this type of service provides continuity of care, placement stability and a diminished likelihood of placement breakdown.

Operational details

One way to implement a Family for Family foster care project would be to adopt a community development approach to foster care recruitment. To do this, a
neighbourhood-based project co-ordinator would personally promote the project in childcare centres, schools and other child-focused venues in the neighbourhood. Once the project was known, the focus would be on the recruitment of Family for Family carers. The co-ordinator would get to know those local families who may need to use the project’s foster care services at some point. This would include identifying the friendship network of the birth parents (encompassing kin if they lived in the neighbourhood) and exploring the extent to which members of this network may be able to become a Family for Family carer.1 A further source of recruitment would be parents who use the same neighbourhood childcare centres, schools and other services as the family that is likely to need such a carer. Once identified as a potential Family for Family carer, the co-ordinator would introduce her or him to the family who may need this service and help both parties to understand the role and limitations of a Family for Family carer and establish a working relationship. Once in place, the co-ordinator would monitor the use of the Family for Family service and act as a resource person for the carer.

What is noteworthy about this approach to foster care recruitment is that it does not rely on media advertising or poster campaigns but on personal contact, word-of-mouth and neighbourhood network building. It also seeks to draw on neighbourhood ‘social capital’ or resources (Putnam, 1993) and build a family-centred foster care service. Family for Family carers will have to be assessed for their suitability as foster carers in the same way as carers who are recruited for more traditional services. They will still need to be trained and paid appropriately and to conform to the legal constraints that shape traditional foster care.

Circle of Friends Concept
This second model is designed for children and young people whose difficult behaviours all too quickly exhaust foster carers. These are the young people who do not live peaceably with others. They rarely fit comfortably into an ordinary foster family. Indeed, their placements constantly break down due to their difficult behaviour. Therefore, an alternative model to family foster care is needed for them. In such a model, instead of expecting one family to provide foster care for a child or young person, the responsibility is shared by a group of adults. These ‘Friends’ are consistently available to offer support to the young person, foster care when needed and respite care to one another. They become a circle committed to the long-term care of a particular child or youth and to ongoing mutual support for each other. The young person is surrounded by a network of adults who, when faced with demanding and difficult behaviours, have sufficient strengths to support each other, absorb such behaviours and help promote the child’s growth.

The chief advantage of this model is that the young person is able to find one or another adult who is willing to be with her or him. Foster care is always available, although it may not always be with the same adult; it will, however, be with an adult known to them. The circle provides the young person with continuity of care, regular placement stability and a series of long-term relationships, while also going a long way towards avoiding placement breakdown. For the Circle of Friends themselves, the benefit is that they have the opportunity to see a child grow and mature across time. They are also enabled to avoid exhaustion. Finally, from an agency perspective the potential for placement breakdown and the need to find yet another placement are considerably reduced.

Operational details
The notion of Circle of Friends has some links to the ‘wraparound’ service model from disability services that has only seen limited use in the child welfare sector. As Ainsworth (1999) explains, operationally:

Wraparound services are achieved through the appointment of a resource or

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wraparound co-ordinator/case manager/advocate who follows a family-strengths focused needs assessment. This co-ordinator recruits a team comprising the key stakeholders for children and families in a particular community. They typically are representatives from government and non-government human service organisations plus a range of community-based advocacy and self-help groups. Representatives from churches and groups such as Rotary or Lions organisations, the local Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Bureau and private employer groups are added so that the team reaches well beyond the traditional inter-agency working group. Through this process the team can access both the formal and informal resources available in a locality. The process is designed to encourage the community to take ownership of child and family issues and ‘want to take care of its own’. (p 140)

In a similar way, a Circle of Friends co-ordinator would promote the project and, ideally, recruit a team of neighbourhood-based carers. This might be achieved through a church organisation, a large local employer or a sports club that would be asked to sponsor a particular child or young person. Organisations of this type frequently look for opportunities for their members to provide services to the community. Thus, the notion of a ‘British Airways foster care youth sponsorship’, for example, may not be too fanciful. Furthermore, such a development would be very useful given the pivotal role education and employment play in the successful transition from foster care to adult life (Pecora et al, 2003). The project co-ordinator, much as in the Family for Family model, would introduce the Circle of Friends to the young person and help everyone to understand the role and limitations of this approach and establish working relationships. Once in place, the co-ordinator would monitor the use of the Circle of Friends service and act as a resource person for its members.

As with Family for Family, the Circle of Friends carers will still have to be assessed for their suitability as foster carers. They will also need to be trained and paid appropriately (although the sponsoring organisation may be prepared to cover some costs) and they will still have to conform to the legal constraints and processes that shape traditional foster care. Neither of the above models will necessarily or immediately alleviate the crisis in foster care. Nevertheless, they do have the potential to draw into foster care people who may not currently consider responding to a recruitment campaign. This is because each model offers a different type and level of involvement than the more typical family foster care approach.

The Circle of Friends model also offers the hope that some very troubled young people who currently fail in family foster care might be more appropriately placed. This in turn would reduce the pressure on family foster carers to leave a system that unrealistically expects them to be able to manage a range of extremely difficult behaviours. In effect, use of such a model would encourage family foster carers to remain in the system and carry out the essential tasks that they are best able to perform, thus contributing to the further development of foster care as a fundamental child welfare service in the contemporary environment.

It is our view that strategic service development should complement discussions about the professionalisation of foster care. It is better that new approaches develop in a planned way than haphazardly or by default because of operational, economic or other difficulties.

**Conclusion**

We believe the current foster care crisis can be alleviated – if not resolved – by having foster care services recapture their original purpose, that is, to provide a ‘warm, intimate and continuous relationship’ with an alternative family for a child who is in need of either short- or long-term care. As Hutchinson and her colleagues (2003) point out, traditional foster care was never intended to be a service for the most problematic children and young people whose difficult behaviours make a family placement highly inappropriate. The latter young people deserve and have a right to expect individualised treatment services that go
beyond what traditional family foster care, even in its most glorious moments, could reasonably be expected to provide.

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