



Promoting resilience in child welfare, edited by Robert Flynn, Peter Dudding, and James Barber, University of Ottawa Press, 2006.

This new book is an outstanding collection of articles on an important topic written mostly by Canadian, Australian, English and Irish scholars. It includes information and reflection on a wide range of topics including a conceptual framework for resiliency research and programs, stability and permanency in out of home care, children's perceptions of foster care, foster parenting practices and outcomes, the Looking After Children assessment system for children in out of home care widely used in Australia, Canada and England, youth emancipating out of foster care and positive life experiences which promote resilient coping in children and youth. Collectively, these articles articulate an approach to working with children in out of home care which is concerned with child well being and with the supports and conditions which make pro-social development more likely. These authors are far more concerned with the quality of foster parenting and with children's experiences in schools and in other community settings than they are with children's mental health programs and with "evidence based practice" as it has been recently defined and discussed in the United States.

Several of the book's chapters / authors deserve special mention:

"Promoting resilience in development: A general framework for systems of care," by Ann Masten (University of Minnesota) is the only chapter written by an American scholar. Masten defines resilience as "positive patterns of functioning or development during or following exposure to adversity, or, more simply, to good adaptation in a context of risk." Masten notes that resilience is a concept that can be applied to any living system or human organization such as a family, school or community. Masten asserts that biological and cultural evolution have operated to "provide children with the capacity for adapting and recovering from a wide range of adversities in the course of development" and that "The greatest dangers to children are posed by risks or adversities that damage or disable these protective systems (biological or cultural), or prevent them from developing normally." "Thus, children who lose or are separated from parents, or whose brains are damaged as a result of disaster (or child maltreatment - my note), are in much graver danger than children who have well functioning parents and central nervous systems."

Masten's list of factors associated with resilience in children and youth are familiar: an emotionally secure and nurturing relationship with a caregiver, bonds with pro-social adults and peers, talents and socially valued personal characteristics such as sociability and intelligence, the capacity for self regulation and a high degree of self efficacy (personal agency, initiative and industry), effective schools and opportunities to develop skills and talents. Masten also lists adaptation systems which further child and youth resilience suggested by this list; these systems include parent-child attachment,"

a brain in good working order", cultural systems of belief or practice, safe communities and social systems which support positive youth development.

Masten insists that "promoting resilience goes beyond the prevention of problems"; "In a resilience framework for practice, the goals of the intervention or program are stated in positive terms, often focused on promoting positive adaptation or development." Masten states that "Positive goals are consistent with the evidence concerning the role of positive achievements and processes in resilience and problem prevention." "...a resilience-based program requires measures that extend beyond symptoms, problems, disorders and risk factors to assess progress on positive criteria of child development." Masten believes that a resilience framework suggests three basic strategies for interventions: reducing risks, boosting resources "or engaging the powerful adaptive systems that normally protect human functioning and development."

Masten comments that "Experiments to create resilience through interventions at many levels with diverse methods ... are just beginning," and that "We stand on the threshold of a new age of resilience-focused research and practice..." Let's hope she's a good prognosticator though I have yet to notice any systematic approach to resiliency work with children in out of home care in this country and, as usual, Americans are far slower to recognize interesting child welfare developments in other English speaking countries than vice versa.

"Promoting resilience and permanence in child welfare," by Robbie Gilligan (Trinity College, Dublin) is an exceptionally eloquent and thoughtful essay on child welfare planning for children in foster care who have experienced the loss of parents and often siblings, extended families, friends, schools and neighborhoods. Gilligan is concerned that youth in care are at risk of becoming a socially excluded "ghetto population" with a master identity of "child in care" headed for "an endless tundra of aloneness and loneliness." Gilligan states that "I want to suggest that a sense of belonging should become very central in thinking about the needs of young people in care."

Gilligan emphasizes the importance of "positive school experiences in any one of the academic, sporting or social spheres" in the lives of traumatized youth. Even in the absence of success in school, Gilligan asserts that vulnerable children can be helped "by managing to build on even one positive factor in a child's circumstances" which can change the negative expectations of others about the child. Gilligan echoes themes from the research of the Valliant's regarding the importance of "childhood industry" in promoting better mental health and better inter-personal outcomes for children growing up in high risk social environments. "By this (childhood industry) they meant men who as children had showed a capacity to be active on a range of fronts, that is in regular part time work, household chores, school achievement, and involvement in extra-curricular activities." He continues "So encouraging young people in care to be active and to display initiative and self efficacy at home, in school, and in the wider world may have an important later pay-off for them."

Gilligan has much to say about the concept of permanence from a child's point of view. Permanency is, in part, a psychological state of mind (according to Gilligan) which children can often assess for themselves. Gilligan thinks that permanence has two main dimensions -- stability (staying put) and continuity (staying connected). Gilligan stresses "the significance of continuity of key connections in a child's life." Gilligan advocates that anyone engaged in planning for children in care consider the child's subjective sense of permanency, the cultural connectedness between the child's background and the new permanent family and the social connectedness between the child's original social network and her / his new family. Gilligan believes that "the child has to bring a sufficient amount of emotional soil from the old site to the new, if the new placement is to have a chance of taking hold."

Gilligan advocates for the creation of a "network for life" for every child in long term care. "Good planning (he states) is focused not only on this placement, nor only on securing the desired permanent placement. It is also about cultivating ties to a set of network members..." whom he describes as "guarantors" of the child's future. "The professionals' role, I would propose, is to cultivate the "guarantors", not to displace them," Gilligan asserts.

Gilligan is concerned that child welfare agencies are often too quick to sever a child's ties to her / his past social networks. Gilligan writes, "I say to my students that they should imagine meeting the child with whom they are dealing, grown to adulthood and imagine themselves justifying the choices they made or recommended for that child, choices that might have led on to cutting ties with siblings, relatives, schools or other key anchor points in a child's life."

Gilligan warns against about over-reliance on a single route to permanence like adoption or an overly narrow interpretation of the meaning of permanence, especially a meaning defined by bureaucratic policies and procedures. Gilligan's interest is in developing life long social connections and supports for children in care and in assembling combinations of potentially positive influences. He writes, "We should be thinking in terms of the legacy that we leave the young person to bring into and through adulthood," a legacy that will lead to stable relationships, stable employment and reliable long term social support.

"Psychosocial well-being and placement stability in foster care: Implications for policy and practice," by James Barber and Paul Delfabbro presents findings from a longitudinal study of 235 Australian children, ages 4-17, placed in foster care over a 12 month period of time in 1998-99. This study is one of a very few longitudinal studies of foster care, and its value is enhanced by interviews with many of the children as well as careful tracking of their placement histories. These authors found a high level of placement instability during the first four months of care as children were moved in planned ways to create better matches between children and foster parents and / or create potentially permanent homes. By and large, these planned moves had little if any detrimental effect on children's development and social functioning. In fact, for most of

the children "the experience of foster care was accompanied by developmental gains." "The overwhelming majority of respondents (children) liked living with their foster families and felt well cared for and supported." These findings regarding children's positive opinion of their foster care experiences are much like those of several other studies of foster children's satisfaction summarized in "Placement satisfaction of young people living in foster or group homes, " (Flynn, Robitaille and Ghazal), Chapter 11 in this book. Flynn, et al, comment that "We are apparently in the presence of a robust phenomenon that does not appear to be either sample-specific or country-specific" (p.200).

However, for slightly more than a fifth of the children in this Australian study, the picture was not so positive. The authors comment that "It is no exaggeration to describe these children as effectively homeless in foster care" due to their histories of "serial evictions" from one home or placement setting after another. These children tended to be older than the children stabilized in care after an initial move or two, they were more likely to be male and more likely (by far) to be conduct disordered. The authors state that "we found that every child who experienced at least two placement breakdowns (unplanned moves) due to his or her behavior in the first four months of foster care went on to become a member of the serially evicted group."

The authors conclude that "the data suggests that the experience of family-based foster care promotes the psychological well being of the majority of children who enter it" but that "We are led to conclude that family-based foster care is unsuitable for disruptive children as operationally defined in this study and that the child welfare field urgently needs to find an alternative." For these children, standard foster care is a "wretched" experience from which they need to be rescued, according to these authors. Barber and Delfabbro have little to say about what should be done for these children and youth other than to say that they are not advocating for a renewal of institutional care.

Christopher Lalonde's chapter, "Identity formation and cultural resilience in Aboriginal Communities," deserves mention because of the originality of the research it presents and because of its emphasis on community resilience and cultural identity and autonomy. Lalonde comments that in Canada "Some (indigenous) communities have no children and youth living in (out of home) care, whereas in others, almost 1 in 10 children is placed in care each year." Lalonde notes that "the rate of suicide for First Nations youth is much higher than for non-Native youth," i.e., "5 to 20 times higher for First Nations youth as a group." However, First Nation communities have highly variable rates of youth suicide. More than half of the communities in Lalonde's study experienced no youth suicides during the 14 years study window. A few communities experienced exceedingly high rates of youth suicide.

Lalonde's research has produced his conclusion that "the loss of cultural continuity puts whole cultural groups at risk." 'Perhaps differences in suicide rates between communities are associated with differing levels of success in their struggles to resist the sustained history of acculturative practices that threaten their very cultural existence," Lalonde hypothesizes. Lalonde has developed ways of measuring "the

extent to which these (indigenous) communities have taken active steps to preserve and promote their own cultural heritage and to regain control over various aspects of their communal life." Lalonde's measures include efforts to re-establish forms of self government, to reassert control over education, health care, fire and policing services as well as taking steps to erect facilities within the community devoted to traditional cultural events and practices. During a 14 year period, "success on each one of these measures is associated with a decrease in youth suicide." "For example, within Aboriginal communities that succeed in their efforts to restore systems of self government, the relative risk of suicide is 85% lower than in communities that have not," according to Lalonde.

"Resilience implies transcendence," Lalonde states. "The surprising outcomes -- the transcendence -- is not found in the single "hardy" or "invulnerable" child ... but in the existence of whole communities that demonstrate the power of culture as a protective factor." Lalonde attributes the protection of cultural identity to the power of cultural narratives to create and sustain an enduring sense of personal persistence and continuity over time. "In fact, Lalonde claims, it is only among those who have entirely lost the thread of their own continuity that we find increased suicide risk." "When communities succeed in promoting their cultural heritage and in securing control of their own collective future ... the positive effects reverberate across many measures of youth health and well being. Suicide rates fall, fewer children are taken into care, school completion rates rise, and rates of intentional and unintentional injury decrease," Lalonde maintains.

The chapters I have briefly summarized suggest the breadth and depth of perspectives in this challenging and fascinating book which offers practitioners the opportunity to think more deeply about the needs of children in out of home care and to expand the range of evidence which can be used to guide child welfare practice.