

What Did We Learn from “Bringing Them Home”?

The most recent data shows that children being moved into out-of-home-care in the Northern Territory is increasing at an alarming rate and that two-thirds of these children are placed with non-Indigenous families away from their communities. This shows just how little we have learnt through the agonising stories of others documented in the *Bringing Them Home* report of 1997. We appear to again be prepared to deny children the right to their home lands, their extended families, their language and their culture, rather than investing in their communities. This needs an immediate re-think.

The testimonies in the *Bringing Them Home* report were heart-breaking and it is unbelievable that we could be moving again in a similar direction in a misguided response to the absence of family services and supports which, if implemented, would go a long way to keeping so many children within their own families.

The report found the effects from forced removal of children were multiple and profoundly disabling:

Psychological and emotional damage renders many people less able to learn social skills and survival skills. Their ability to operate successfully in the world is impaired causing low educational achievement, unemployment and consequent poverty. These in turn cause their own emotional distress leading some to perpetrate violence, self-harm, substance abuse or anti-social behaviour.

It is hard to imagine the trauma that a small child must experience when removed from his/her family and community and placed into the strangeness of an unfamiliar language and environment. The issues of separation of young children from their primary care-givers are well known and well documented. The *Bringing Them Home* report draws on the research of Bowlby and others:

It has been argued that early loss of a mother or prolonged separation from her before age 11 is conducive to subsequent depression, choice of an inappropriate partner, and difficulties in parenting the next generation. Anti-social activity, violence, depression and suicide have also been suggested as likely results of the severe disruption of affectional bonds (Australian Association of Infant Mental Health submission 699 page 3 citing Bowlby 1988 page 174; supported by Dr Nick Kowalenko, Director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Royal North Shore Hospital, NSW, evidence 740).

Whether out-of-home care is through foster placement or adoption, it has been shown that removal should only be considered when all other avenues of keeping a child within the family have been explored. This is Australia's commitment as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: *these children shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of the group, to enjoy their own culture.*

Governments are often tempted to move towards solutions involving adoption because it is cheaper than alternative placement options but adoptions carry their own risks.

... those who have experienced deprivation or trauma before adoption, are thought to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing adjustment problems (Spark et al. 2008).

Where removal requires Aboriginal children to leave their communities, to whatever form of care, their loss is incalculable in ways far beyond immediate family considerations – it is the loss of ‘belonging’, the essential relationship with the land and an inherent right to maintain custom and culture.

The human cost of forced removals is high. With separation there is trauma. Again from the *Bringing Them Home* report the dangers of unresolved trauma are clearly spelt out:

Unresolved trauma and grief has its own severe consequences. There is an association between bereavement in childhood and later psychiatric disorder (Wolkind and Rutter 1984 page 47). The circumstances and consequences of bereavement render the child vulnerable to stresses, perhaps damaging the child's self-esteem and self-efficacy and often resulting in depression in adolescence and adulthood.

The risks to children from forced removals seem to be so rarely acknowledged by authorities, and even less the risks that will be carried through to adulthood. With the knowledge we have, there are

so many reasons to invest in better community support services to parents. It is almost impossible to understand why the NT Government has cut back its spending to the community sector by almost \$5M when early intervention and rehabilitation programmes are so badly needed.

Support provided to children growing up traditionally in communities is much broader than for children growing up in nuclear families who are most often separated by distance from extended family members. In communities other adults play significant roles in a child's life and have particular responsibilities for them. This has the distinct advantage in shared-care arrangements. It is common for Grandmothers and Aunts to have responsibility for, and to play very significant caring roles in the lives of young children. It should also be remembered that removal from family can also mean removal from community and with it a multitude of relationships.

This is not to imply that there are not real concerns for children whose parents are not able to contend with the responsibilities of parenthood. When there is poverty and disadvantage, providing good care to children is always stressful. Being able to regularly access and afford healthy food can be very onerous. Food prices are high in stores in remote Aboriginal communities. Accommodation is rarely a matter of choice. Overcrowding is the norm. Access to environmentally desirable facilities difficult, as can be accessing good water supplies and sanitary conditions in poorly maintained properties. These are all circumstances that can lead to depression, substance abuse and violence.

When children are deemed to be 'at risk' it is initially the community that should be mobilised to provide safety. The child's support networks in communities are already established and utilising a communal approach to ensuring that safety, seems the obvious way of protecting a child from further trauma and disruption.

Such approaches would require dedicated support from Government to ensure the availability of appropriate Aboriginal-managed family support programmes, and the capacity to establish planning processes such as Family Group Conferencing. These are not new ideas. Family Group Conferencing was successfully trialled in Alice Springs in 2012 and found to be beneficial. When Maori children in New Zealand are deemed to be unsafe, Family Group Conferencing is a mandated process.

The NT Government's concern for children is real. If it were to focus on ***Keeping Them Home*** with a commitment to community development approaches, it would find that community structures are in place to assist in the development of safety networks through extended family and others of significance in the lives of children. A re-think based on community solutions would have a far greater chance of providing care solutions that are least likely to cause long-term damage to the children involved.

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