
Book Reviews

Edited by Bernard Gallagher

‘The task of providing nurturing environments for children who have typically experienced loss, neglect or abuse in their earlier years’

‘Give confidence in the nurturing possibilities of long-term foster care’

Providing a Secure Base in Long-Term Foster Care by M. Beek and G. Schofield, BAAF, London, 2004. 272 pp. ISBN 1-90369-940-1 (Pbk), £13.95

The central profile of child protection work often focuses attention on whether children at risk should remain with their birth families or not. However, once children have been removed from settings which are not meeting their needs, and a decision made that they cannot return to birth families, the task of providing nurturing environments for children who have typically experienced loss, neglect or abuse in their earlier years falls to long-term carers. This book focuses on the efforts of long-term foster carers to provide such environments.

The book records the second phase of a longitudinal study to follow children who have been placed in long-term foster placements. Phase 1 in 1997–8 followed 58 children. Phase 2, on which the book is based, follows the progress made by 53 of those 58 children 3 years on. Basing their approach on attachment theory, the authors seek to explore how long-term foster carers can provide a ‘secure base’ to children who have experienced marked adversity and how these children can begin to progress.

The material is in four parts. Part I introduces research aims and key concepts then reviews the placement stability and progress made by the 53 children since phase 1. Part II details the progress made by the children by considering them in four groups identified by their apparent attachment behaviours. Those exhibiting ambivalent/resistant behaviours are referred to as ‘open book’ children; those with avoidant attachments as ‘closed book’; those with disorganized attachments as ‘on the edge’; and those with no obvious attachment problems as ‘rewarding’ children.

Part III breaks down the parenting role into five key dimensions—those of providing availability, promoting reflective capacity, building self-esteem, promoting autonomy, and promoting family membership. It then analyses how the foster carers’ ability to provide these five dimensions affected their ability to provide a secure base for the children for whom they cared. The inclusion of ‘promoting family membership’ as a dimension leads to a welcome analysis of carers’ ability to integrate foster children into their own families as well as accept the children’s birth families and appropriately manage contact. Part IV looks at how effective social work support was for the children in the study and provides a conclusion, with implications for practice.

The strengths of this book lie, on the one hand, in the nitty-gritty detail of what foster carers did to support the development of their foster children and the ways in which these children made progress. There is much here to give confidence in the nurturing possibilities of long-term foster care. On the other hand, there is useful analysis of how greater placement stability and better progress for children were correlated to certain characteristics of both carers and children.

One criticism I would make is of the authors’ terminology in labelling the categories of children with different attachment

behaviours. The reference to 'open book' and 'closed book' children is, to my mind, questionable; the use of 'on the edge' and 'rewarding' children regrettable. This point, though, should not detract from the overall value of this book for people working with children in long-term foster care.

The authors' final recommendation is that all agencies working with such children develop a shared understanding of their developmental needs and how early experiences have affected them. Reading this book provides a good starting point.

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Goodbye, Dearest Holly by Kevin Wells, Psychology News Press, London, 2005. 277pp. ISBN 0-907633-02-1 (Hbk), £15.99

'Can I stay up to watch the news?' When my 10-year-old daughter asked that question I was wondering 'Why?'. Ten-year-olds don't watch the news. 'I want to see if Holly and Jessica have come home.'

Holly and Jessica did not come home on August 4, 2002. We all watched in horror as the tragedy unfolded on our TV screens over the next 13 days, until their bodies were found in a ditch not too far from Soham.

Now Kevin Wells, Holly's father, has written about his family's ordeal after the girls went missing from the family barbeque on that warm summer's evening. He tells us about his daughter and her friend Jessica and the 'iconic picture' of the two friends that made world news. 'Holly pops on her Manchester United top and Jessica borrows Oliver's shirt as it is very cool to look the same. Holly is wearing her new necklace, which Jessica gave her. Jessica is also wearing a necklace and the girls are now convinced they're the trendiest of all young ladies. All is well in a small town in middle England' (p. 3).

He tells about how he and his wife realized that the girls had gone missing and the agony of the search. He tells us about the day their bodies were found, when their family liaison officer told them, 'The candle that has been burning for the last two weeks has just gone out. We are so very sorry' (p. 87). There is no way anyone can ever fully understand the emotional turmoil these families went through. We can only listen.

But then he devotes the next 200 pages to the process of gathering evidence for the trial, relationships with the police and family liaison officers, the law, the media, and the court proceedings. This is where we must learn. These are probably the most important pages for people working in the field of child abuse. It took 2 years before Ian Huntley was convicted for the murders of the girls and Maxine

'The candle that has been burning for the last two weeks has just gone out. We are so very sorry'

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