

Understanding children's behaviour key to foster care support

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Providing foster carers with accurate information about the behaviour of children in their care could reduce "placement drift" and encourage stronger family connections.

This is one of the findings of research undertaken by the University of South Australia's [Australian Centre for Child Protection](#) (ACCP) which saw a total of 200 foster carers being surveyed about how they can be better supported to look after [children](#) in care.

The research, which was recently presented at a major European conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, documented the [behaviours](#) that foster carers find challenging and that threatened placement stability while highlighting the importance of carers receiving accurate information

about children's behavioural needs, and of receiving flexible and high quality interpersonal support.

The problem behaviours included aggressive, controlling and defiant behaviour, anxiety focused behaviours, high risk behaviours including drug and alcohol use, and problems related to cognition, language and memory.

The ACCP's Dr Sara McLean, a registered psychologist in child and adolescent mental health, who undertook the research, explains that the impact of early adverse experiences including neglect may result in developmental disorders.

"Sadly, the behavioural and emotional problems of some children in [foster care](#) mean that they struggle to attain a stable and continuous relationship within a foster family," Dr McLean says.

"These children can experience 'placement drift'; moving from foster home to foster home, with repeated loss of social and community relationships. Without effective intervention, the impact of behavioural problems on children's educational, vocational and mental health outcomes is substantial."

Dr McLean highlights how supporting carers ultimately would improve the lives of those children.

"This program of research stands to have a significant impact on the lives of children in out of home care, their carers and those who work to support them," she says.

"By asking carers about the behaviours that they find problematic, there is an opportunity to develop more tailored supports that better respond to carers' needs.

"Developing strategies to better support foster carers to deal with challenging behaviours resulting from abuse and neglect will fill a significant gap in the current service landscape, and will have significant implications for reducing foster carer stress.

"It will also enhance the stability of children's lives, assisting them to reach their full social, emotional and educational potential."

Currently more than 39, 000 Australian children are living in foster care due to abuse or neglect in their family of origin – a figure which has doubled over the past decade.

The long term aim of this program of research is to develop more effective supports for foster carers and children placed in foster care by methods including:

- Working with foster carers, teachers and the community to explore why conventional behaviour management approaches may not be effective with some children in care and how to modify discipline approaches accordingly.
- Developing a user friendly, guided therapeutic approach that will identify areas of functional difficulty for children with behavioural concerns, encouraging supports that enable more effective responses to children with challenging behavioural concerns placed in foster care.

"Ultimately, we hope that this program of research will result in more tailored assessments, resources, training and supports for foster carers to manage brain-based challenging behaviour and therefore to enhance the stability of children's lives," Dr McLean says.

Provided by University of South Australia

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