VIEWS FROM THE INSIDE:
YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF
RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT

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ABSTRACT: The research described in this paper examined the views and perceptions of young residents of group homes and institutions regarding the services which they receive. A particular focus of the research was the extent to which young people participate in and feel they can influence the development of plans that affect their future. Findings indicate that young people hold very different perceptions and opinions about a wide range of relevant issues than do the child care workers and social workers who serve them; as well, they feel powerless and left out of the planning process. Implications for child welfare services generally and for child care practice specifically are discussed.

Child care workers pride themselves in their ability to relate to, understand and listen to their young clients. It would be expected, then, that young people receiving group care services would have ample opportunity to make known their needs, opinions and preferences, and to influence the formulation of plans and the design of services that they receive. Unfortunately, because young people are often reluctant or unable to articulate their perceptions, and because they tend to be viewed as immature and thus unlikely to hold reasonable and constructive opinions, it is often assumed that they are not capable of making a useful contribution to the planning of services that they are to receive. If the views of young people are unsolicited and unexpressed, they are unlikely to become genuinely involved in the planning of services.

The underlying assumption of the study on which this paper is based was that young people do have an important contribution to make to the service process and that their involvement in planning will enhance the effectiveness of services. The purpose of this research was to study and describe some of the commonly held perceptions of young people who are the recipients of group care services and to consider implications for child care practice. Similar studies in the past have focused on the perceptions of adult recipients of social work services (Maluccio, 1979; Mayer & Timms, 1970).

It is hoped that the information will be of use to child care workers and others who work directly with children. Knowledge of the views and opinions of young people receiving group care services may help to sensitize child care workers to issues and concerns that young service recipients commonly share. Because young people are often unable or unwilling to express their views directly, the worker who is sensitive to commonly held feelings and opinions will be in a better position to help young clients formulate and communicate their concerns, needs and goals. In short, by understanding and knowing young people's perceptions, child care professionals can more effectively involve young people in the planning of services that affect their lives.

While the perceptions of young people are the main focus of this paper, the study also gathered information about the views and opinions of other key participants in the service system: natural parents, child care workers, and social workers. Some of these findings will also be presented to examine to what degree the perceptions of young people are congruent with those of adults.

The presentation of findings is organized around the following thematic areas:

1. the situation leading to care,
2. the planning process,
3. the current living situation, and
4. contact with parents.

METHOD

A survey of all 38 children receiving group care services in one rural social services administrative region in Western Canada was undertaken in the early months of 1985. The region has a population of over 200,000 people and includes two small cities. The children ranged in age from nine to seventeen inclusive and resided in two small child welfare institutions and several group homes. Their child care workers, social workers and, where available, natural parents were also interviewed.

The in-depth interviews, which contained a mixture of open- and closed-ended questions, were conducted by nine social work students and two research assistants who had been trained by the authors. The consent of the respondents was obtained prior to the interviews. Only two children, and no one in the other groups, declined to be interviewed. By the end of the project, 36 children (95 percent of the sampling frame), and 14 of their natural parents had been interviewed. As well, all 35 child care workers who were key workers for these children and all 28 social workers assigned to the children had also been interviewed.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The situation leading to care

Young people enter the child welfare system for a variety of reasons. How these reasons are conceptualized can exert a decisive influence on the nature of services offered. For example, if the precipitating problem is considered to be a deficit in the child, services may tend to be child-centered, focusing on remediation. On the other hand, if the problem is viewed as one involving family relations, the services are likely to emphasize improving family interactions. It is obviously desirable that all participants in the service system conceptualize problems in a similar manner.

Several survey questions were designed to inquire into the children's perceptions about the reasons for their child welfare involvement. Moreover, we asked child care workers, social workers, and natural parents for the same information so that we could assess the level of congruence in the perceptions held by these various groups.

The responses of all four groups represent a standard range of child welfare problems, including parental drinking, child abuse, family conflicts and problematic child behaviors. To understand better how each group conceptualized initial problems, the list was collapsed into three categories of problems: *parent-centered, child-centered or family-centered* (see Table 1).

Table 1: **Problem definition**

PROBLEM TYPE	All Children	Children with Reasons	Child Care Workers	Parents	Social Workers
Parent Problems	15%	23%	31%	64%	43%
Family Problems	15%	23%	14%	–	11%
Child Problems	32%	54%	54%	36%	46%
Don't Know	38%	–	–	–	–
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	34	21	34	14	28*

*28 social workers representing 34 cases

Several conclusions may be drawn from the data presented in Table 1. First, over one-third of the young people indicate that they do not know the reasons for initially becoming involved in the child welfare system. We assume these reasons had been explained in detail to most children in group care; however, it appears that, for a sizable minority of children, the explanations were insufficient. If children remain puzzled about their involvement in child welfare services, it is unlikely that they will be very cooperative in implementing the service plan.

The large number of people in the *don't know* category distorts our understanding of the views of young people regarding the problems which led to their coming into care. When those children who were unable to identify the initial problem are excluded from the analysis, it is found that a smaller percentage of children (23%) identify *parent problems* than do members of the other three groups. On the other hand, a large percentage of children (54%) hold the view that child problems were the precipitating reasons for child welfare involvement. This is similar to the proportion of child care workers who emphasize the child's role in the problems. *Family problems* were the least frequently identified by all four groups.

It is perhaps understandable that young people view problems as attributable either to their parents or, more commonly, to themselves. The literature describes the self-blame and guilt feelings that many children who must leave their home have (Kadushin, 1980). It is disturbing however that professionals—child care workers and social workers—also tend to view problems as attributable to individuals, especially at a time when so much attention has been paid in the professional literature to the importance of regarding problems as occurring within ecological systems, of which the family is perhaps the most important (Garbarino, 1982; Hobbs, 1982; Whittaker, 1981).

The practice implications for child care workers are evident. Many of the young people served by child care workers probably overemphasize their personal role in their family's problems. Those child care workers who tend to emphasize the child's role in the problems, are unlikely to be effective in helping the child to arrive at a more balanced perspective. A family ecological system perspective, on the other hand, seems to provide a more constructive basis for helping. Such a view avoids placing excessive responsibility on the child or, as it sometimes happens, blame on the parent, leaving the worker in a more functional position to provide help. One objective of child care work should be to help young people arrive at a more realistic appreciation of the reasons for their placement in group care. This is a particularly important task early in the placement; when successfully accomplished, it creates the

conditions under which realistic and constructive service planning can occur.

The Planning Process

Planning is undoubtedly one of the most important activities under-lying effective helping relationships (Pincus & Minahan, 1973; Compton & Galaway, 1989; Germain & Gitterman, 1983). The concept that helping services are most effective when incorporated into a planned approach is now widely accepted. Ideally, planning should be a shared undertaking between the professional and the client, and should reflect the goals and aspirations of the latter. Because modern case plans tend to assign responsibilities to a number of people, clear and well understood plans are particularly important to guide the activities of the various partici-pants. The commitment of all parties to the plan is vital if everyone is to carry out his or her assignment. Thus, it is important that all parties understand and support the plans.

The survey questions focused on the case plan, which is addressed to the overall plan for services, including where the young person is cur-rently placed, and plans for future placement. In the jurisdiction where the study was conducted, the child welfare social worker assigned to the case was responsible for the content of case plans. We studied three aspects of the plan: (1) the amount of involvement young people felt they had in the design of the plan, (2) the level of approval the participants accorded to the existing case plan, and (3) the degree of agreement between participants regarding the contents of the plan.

With regard to participation in the planning, not one of the young people indicated that he or she had been involved in designing the plan. By contrast, 66% of the natural parents and 89% of the child care workers indicated that they had participated in drawing up the case plan. Based on our observations of child welfare practices, we would question whether the unanimous response of the young people that they had not been involved in planning reflects objective reality. At least some work-ers do attempt to involve young clients in decision making. However, the responses received in this study indicate that young people did not feel involved in the decision making that affected their lives. Through their responses they conveyed a sense of powerlessness, a sense of others controlling their lives. The response of one young person is instructive: "I was supposed to go home but a meeting took place between my social worker, staff (child care workers) and my parents, and I didn't get to go home."

Table 2: **Satisfaction with Case Plan**

	Children	Child Care Workers	Parents	Social Workers
SATISFACTION				
Very Unsatisfied	11%	3%	9%	–
Not Satisfied	15%	10%	18%	4%
Somewhat Satisfied	39%	45%	36%	52%
Very Satisfied	35%	42%	36%	44%
TOTAL	100%	100%	99%	100%
N	26	31	11	23

When asked to rate their general satisfaction with the plan, the various groups responded as shown in Table 2. Children and natural parents tend to be less satisfied with the plan than child care workers and social workers. As the data show, over 25% of the children express some degree of dissatisfaction with the plan. The responses to related questions indicate an even higher level of dissatisfaction with the plan. Seventy-one percent of the young people indicated that they would like to see *some changes* in the plan while 60% indicated that they would like to see the plan for the next placement changed.

Table 3: **Level of Agreement about Casework Plan**

	MEAN	MODE	N (Pairs)
AGREEMENT BETWEEN			
Child & Social Worker (SW)	2.9	3	20
Child Care Worker & SW	3.5	4	26
Natural Parent & SW	3.2	3	10

   CODE
   1 = Strong Disagreement
   2 = Moderate Disagreement
   3 = Moderate Agreement
   4 = Strong Agreement

Finally, we examined the degree to which various participant groups
had the same understanding of the objective contents of the plan as did
the social workers, who were responsible for case planning. The data,
presented in Table 3, indicate that child care workers and social workers
had the highest level of inter-agreement, with *strong agreement* being the
modal response, while children and natural parents indicated, on the
average, only a *moderate* degree of agreement with their social workers.
This suggests that young people and their parents tended to have a
lower level of understanding of the plan than did the child care workers.

There are important considerations for practice in these findings. The
most obvious is that considerably more attention should be paid to help-
ing young people become involved (and feel involved) in the planning of
services. Child care workers, who are in very close, continuous contact
with the children, can take a leadership role in this process. By initiating
discussions about the plan, workers can provide the young person with
the opportunity to seek clarification or information. Child care workers
can then interpret and explain the rationale for the plan.

Another important child care worker role is that of child advocate.
Where the young person is in disagreement with the plan or has ideas
or preferences that he or she would like to have considered in the plan-
ning process, child care workers should ensure that the young person
has the opportunity to present his or her views. This does not imply that
the child care worker has to agree with the young person, but only that
the worker will attempt to provide the young person with the opportu-
nity to be heard and will help the young person express his or her
views. Although, as the data presented in Table 2 show, child care
workers are likely to be satisfied with case plans, they still have a
responsibility to advocate for the different views that children and their
parents may have.

The Current Living Situation

The young person's placement situation is perhaps the most impor-
tant component of service. Certainly it is the most pervasive aspect of the
service and it would be expected that young people think a great deal
about their current living situation. A number of our questions were
designed to elicit young people's views about the placement process and
their current living arrangements.

Adequate preparation is one means of ensuring that the placement
gets off to a good start. Recommended approaches include discussions
with the young person and preplacement visits (Kadushin, 1980; Blu-

menthal, 1983). Almost half of the young people in our study indicated that they had not been provided with information about their current placement prior to their arrival. For children who had been briefed about their upcoming placement, social workers (50%) and child care workers (38%) were the main sources of information.

Table 4: **Preferences for Living Situation**

CURRENT PLACEMENT

PREFERENCE	Group Home	Institution	Total
Parents	63%	67%	65%
Foster Home	16%	—	9%
Group Home	11%	—	6%
Institution	5%	—	3%
Relative or friend	5%	33%	17%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
N	19	15	34

Having had little preparation, 60% of the young people reported that their initial reaction to the proposed placement was one of dislike. Although there were some variations in responses, this finding did not appear to be affected by age, sex or placement type. Our data show that these rather negative initial reactions continued and, in fact, increased as the placement proceeded. As Table 4 indicates, no children residing in an institutional placement, and only 11% of those living in group homes, rated their current placement as their preferred one over other alternatives. It is perhaps not too surprising that living at home was the most highly desired alternative, followed by living with relatives or friends.

It is disconcerting to find that young people hold so many negative views about their current living experience. Unless the living situation is experienced as positive and supportive, other services are likely to be less effective. For children living in substitute care placements, the living situation can represent a preoccupying consideration and the degree to which they are content in and accept their placement may determine the success of other services.

These findings suggest a number of desirable child care practices. It is recognized that child care workers are not primarily responsible for making the placement decision that brings young people to their set-

tings, nor for providing preplacement information to the child. However, where these tasks have not been appropriately handled, they are left with the responsibility of working with children who may feel angry, deceived and unhappy in their new placement. Our data suggest that child care workers cannot assume that the decision-making process will have been adequately worked through with the young person or that adequate preplacement information will have been provided. Group care programs should establish intake procedures that enable child care workers to be pro-active in meeting with young people prior to preplacement visits or placement. These opportunities can then be used to provide information about the program and to assess the young person's attitude toward the upcoming placement. Where necessary, the child care worker can request, or even insist, that the child welfare worker invest more effort into resolving any concerns that the child may have about the placement. In such situations the child care worker can assist the young person to express any concerns or reservations about the placement, as well as help him or her work through feelings, such as separation and attachment, that may affect the young person's attitude towards the proposed placement.

Table 5: Ranking of Likes and Dislikes about Living Situation

Rank	*Like*	*Rank*	*Dislike*
1.	People respond and relate	1.	Rules and restrictions
2.	Good food	2.	Other children
3.	Other children	3.	Facility inadequate
4.	Much to do	4.	Inadequate programs and outings
5.	Facility	5.	Allowance too small
6.	Not expected to be perfect	6.	Lack of privacy
7.	Freedom	7.	Bad food
8.	Problems worked out		

An understanding of the criteria young people apply to evaluating their living situation provides insight into what they value in a placement. A number of questions were designed to elicit this information and the main results are summarized in Table 5. As the responses indicate, relationships were the most frequently cited positive factors while rules and restrictions were most frequently mentioned as things disliked about the setting. The other residents were the next most frequently mentioned negative factor, and the third most frequently mentioned pos-

itive factor, underlining the importance of peers in group care. Looking at the positive factors as a group, it is noteworthy that young people value items relating to people, relationships and physical comforts more highly than they do the therapeutic aspects of the setting ("problems worked out"), which appears eighth in rank.

The implications for child care practice are clear. Although we are increasingly concerned, as a profession, with the provision of "treatment" services, we cannot afford to forget that, for young people, the residential program is not only a treatment agent but a place where they live. How rules, routines, interactions, facilities and other resources are organized can make the difference between a place where young people can live with some degree of comfort, happiness, harmony and dignity and a place where this is not possible. Child care workers should keep this in mind and attempt to ensure that, quite apart from therapeutic considerations, the setting offers a good quality of life. One way of ensuring this is by emphasizing the quality of interactions within the program, providing opportunities and help for young people to develop satisfying relationships with other residents as well as with staff. Another useful strategy is to create mechanisms, such as residents' councils, through which young people can contribute to the design and organization of the living environment.

Contact with Parents

In spite of the difficulties they may have experienced at home, family relations remain very important for most young people in care. Most children who participated in the study wanted more frequent and longer visits with their parents. This desire persisted across all age groups and both sexes although it was most pronounced in younger children and in girls.

Although over three-quarters of the young people indicated that they enjoyed their visits home, half the children over 15 expressed some reservations about their visits, compared to only 10% of the children 14 and under. The children were asked to describe the *best and worst things about their visits*. Almost all the best aspects concerned the simple enjoyment of spending time with family members. For young people 15 and above, the most frequent complaints about visits related to problems such as arguing, emotional outbursts and the emergence of old unresolved issues. For one-quarter of the children placed in institutions, the *worst aspect of visits* was that the institution made visits difficult, for example, through withholding privacy or allowing only short infrequent visits.

Child care workers and social workers were also asked to list the most positive and negative aspects of family visits. The professionals placed much less emphasis on the intrinsic value of family members spending time together than the young people did; rather, they tended to see family visits as practical lessons that demonstrated the wisdom of the case plan, particularly for children who were skeptical about it. For example, one-quarter of the child care workers said that the visits helped children understand why they had been removed from home, and one-third of the social workers said the visits made children realize that the family unit could not work. Not one of the children in our study described the *best things about home visits in these terms!*

This implies that young people and the professionals who work with them have different perspectives about family contacts. For young people in group care placement, family contacts are intrinsically satisfying. One can speculate that these visits represent the best means for maintaining a sense of belonging, culture and identity. Child care workers and social workers, on the other hand, tended to view family contact as a means of furthering treatment goals. In particular, family visits are valued as a forum for resolving problems.

DISCUSSION

The major theme that emerges from the survey results in the contrast between the views of young people and the views of the professionals who serve them. Young people tend to see the reasons leading to their involvement in the child welfare system differently from the adults who are providing them with services. Far fewer children than adults can see the impact of parental and family problems on their current situation. They are more likely, instead, to take the view that they are responsible for their own problems. This indicates the need for considerable work with the children in order that they may develop a more balanced perspective on their situation.

According to our findings, young people also feel left out of the planning process. Of all the groups, young people indicated by far the lowest level of involvement in planning. Not surprisingly, young people also showed the lowest level of satisfaction with the plans that were developed. To the degree that young people do not feel involved in the planning that affects their lives, it will be difficult to have them develop responsibility for their behavior and actions, a frequently stated goal of care. In such circumstances, it is more likely that feelings of powerlessness and dependence will increase, while the development of self-confi-

dence, self-esteem, and independent functioning will be inhibited. More-over, their understanding of, and commitment to plans, which they per-ceive as having been imposed, are likely to be limited.

Not involved in planning, young people feel relatively unhappy in their current living situations. Our study suggests that preplacement preparation tends to be inadequate, and many children enter their cur-rent residence with negative feelings. It is questionable whether these negative feelings are adequately addressed during the course of the placement, because as placement progresses, the opinions of children tend to become even more negative. If children are unhappy in their liv-ing situation, the impact and effectiveness of other services has to be questioned. In such circumstances, it is more likely that the attentions and efforts of all concerned will be focused on the placement itself, rather than on what help and services may be useful to the child in the context of the placement.

In considering placements, it is not surprising that children over-whelmingly express a preference for living with their natural parents. This can be easily understood; however, at times it is not a realistic choice. In such circumstances, the issue needs to be addressed and worked through with the young person so that he or she may come to accept that present circumstances do not make the option of returning home viable. Unless a young person is helped to come to such an under-standing, it is unlikely that any alternative living situations will be acceptable. Resolving differences about placement preference is vital because research has shown that many adults who were in care as chil-dren are confused even years later about why they could not live at home (Rest & Watson, 1984).

In relation to contact with parents, the young people in our study would prefer more frequent and longer visits. Again, young people and the professionals who work with them view these visits differently. Chil-dren find the visits a source of emotional support and satisfaction, while professionals tend to look at visiting primarily as formats for therapeutic gain. In fact, contact with the parents should serve both these purposes. Frequent and continuing contact between the young person and the fam-ily is vital if there is to be any chance of reunification, or if an under-standing about the necessity of the current alternative plans is to be achieved (Johnston & Gabor, 1981). At the same time, as the young peo-ple remind us, professionals should not forget that even without ulterior therapeutic goals, visits are intrinsically satisfying and necessary for the emotional well-being of young people who are out of their homes.

Overall, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that young people receiving child welfare services have many hopes and aspirations that

remain unfulfilled, and that they hold views that are quite different from the views held by the professionals who serve them. In reviewing the results of this study, it often seems as if young people and professionals are heading in different directions. The commitment of young people to casework plans and goals is necessary if service is to be successfully provided. The most effective means of obtaining this commitment is to involve young people in planning and to take their opinions into serious consideration.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We were surprised at the size of the gap between the perceptions of the young people in group care and professionals who work with them. While the data do not allow us to generalize beyond the jurisdiction in which the study was conducted, our impression is that practices in this jurisdiction are not atypical. Our expectations, based on first-hand experience in other provinces and states, are that replications of this study in other jurisdictions would result in similar findings.

Many child care workers and social workers practice with the intention of listening to their young clients and of involving them in key decisions. However, such efforts are not always successful. Workers need to be more aware of the issues that are likely to be important to children in care, and especially the issues that are of particular concern because of a child's age, sex, or ethnic background. Sensitivity, genuine commitment, as well as more effective skills in interviewing, counseling and planning are needed by workers. Such attributes will make it more likely that young people will be accorded the opportunity to express their views and opinions, and that these will be taken into serious consideration in the planning and design of services. It is not suggested that in each and every case children's wishes can be met. However, it is vitally important for child care workers and social workers to recognize when, in fact, circumstances do not allow plans to reflect children's aspirations. At such times, the fact that there is a difference needs to be honestly and openly acknowledged and effort must be invested into ensuring that the young person can understand and accept the necessity of alternative plans.

Young people have their own views and opinions about their situation and about the services they are receiving. They will share these views if given encouragement and the opportunity. If the services provided to young people are to be of real assistance to them, those closest to them—the child care workers—must ensure that young people are provided the opportunity to express their views and that, when they do, someone is listening!

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