

YELLOLY

KENT SPECIAL FAMILY PLACEMENT PROJECT

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION  
OF  
TWENTY-FIVE PLACEMENTS

by

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## PREFACE

Adolescents who for one reason or another cannot live in their own homes and are deemed "difficult" or "delinquent" have always pre-sented something of a problem to those concerned with their care. In general, the assumption has been that they are not suitable for foster-care in the community and need the structure of a residential home. The Kent Special Family Placement Project was set up to test this assumption. Was it possible for fosterparents without special training to accept difficult, withdrawn, sometimes violent youngsters into their own families, and to provide them with the support, security, acceptance, care and encouragement which many of them need? Was such fostercare a viable alternative to residential care?

Since the Project began, many similar schemes have come into operation all over the country but there has been little attempt to monitor or evaluate them in any systematic way, or to assess their gains and disadvantages. Do such fosterplacements work, and how well? How often do they fail? What do the adolescents themselves think of them? Do they reduce delinquent behaviour? These are some of the questions which urgently need answers. This evaluation was originally intended to provide some interim indication of how the Kent Project was working out, but was envisaged as a prelude to a more comprehensive follow-up study which could furnish more conclusive findings. While the conclusions contained in this report are regarded as generally encouraging, they represent only a small sample of placements and must be treated with caution.

For reasons of confidentiality, identifying data have had to be omitted and thus people tend to dissolve into figures and statistics. A brief portrait of two adolescents, somewhat disguised, may help to portray the kind of youngster the Project tries to help. Rachel was fifteen when she was placed with a Project family, who had three children of their own, all younger than she. Her mother had left the family when Rachel was three, and she has had no contact with her since, though she has tried almost desperately to trace her. She spent some years in a children's home and when she was eight went to live with her father and his new wife, but was an added complication to an already stressful marriage. The stepmother resented her, Rachel's behaviour became increasingly aggressive and difficult to tolerate, and finally she was asked to leave. In the next few years she lived in some five different children's homes and foster families. She is an intelligent

girl who can be likeable and fun, but also truculent, aggressive and entirely egocentric. She has had no constant caring person in her life and is distrustful of adults, whom she tends to keep at arm's length. She had also a very low sense of self-esteem and saw herself as unattractive and unfeminine. "How can you care about yourself if your mother didn't want you?" Although she wanted to live with a family, for the first few months she "gave them hell" – abusive, difficult, disappearing (sometimes for days at a time), sexually promiscuous and stealing from local shops. Gradually she came to feel accepted by the family, particularly the children who were genuinely fond of her and treated her as an older sister. As she came to trust and rely on the fosterparents, so she became warmer, more responsive and able to relate to them more spontaneously. She gained more sense of worth and identity, though her self-esteem is still precarious and she is vulnerable to set-backs. Although living an independent life, she remains in close touch with the Project family who are now "her" family.

Tony was described as "a pathetic product of a lifetime in care." As a child he was confined to his room for long periods and undernourished physically and emotionally. When his parents' marriage broke up he was cared for by other relatives, but remained a withdrawn, unresponsive, unhappy child. He spent some time in a fosterhome which broke down, in a residential school and in several children's home – he cannot remember quite how many. His cringing manner, allied with a desperate attempt to please and be noticed by the staff, earned him the intense dislike of his fellows, and he was invariably the victim of older more assertive children. He has committed a number of offences while with the Project family but these have diminished, though tend to recur in times of stress or anger. Other people have noted in him a great increase in self-confidence and assertiveness, reflected in his physical appearance; reflected also perhaps in his comment on his relationship with his social worker: "He's O.K. now I've told him what to do!"

The findings of this study are summarized on p.5. In brief, the central conclusion is that three-quarters of the adolescents appear to have benefited from their experience in the Project, and a quarter to have shown no evidence of change, or to have deteriorated somewhat. The main positive changes related to self-confidence and self-esteem, school or work progress, and the ability to get on with others. How far delinquent activities are modified is unclear: few ceased delinquent behaviour altogether, though there are some indications that the frequency of offences may have diminished in about half of the 14 who had been before the Courts.

I must express my thanks to all those adolescents, Project families and social workers who have been so ready to share their experiences with me, and from whom I learned a great deal during the course of this study.

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# KENT SPECIAL FAMILY PLACEMENT PROJECT

## INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

I was invited in the summer of 1977 to conduct an independent evaluation of the Kent Special Family Placement Project on behalf of Kent County Council Social Services Department, and with the support of the staff of the Project and its Advisory Committee. The general lines of the evaluation had already been the subject of earlier discussion between Dr. Morgan, Senior Research Officer, K.C.C. and Miss Nancy Hazel, the Project Organiser. Since by the summer of 1977 it was already late in the life of the Project (due to end in 1979) and the County Council was anxious to have an outside view without delay, it was not considered viable to undertake a prospective controlled study which would have taken up to four years to complete. Instead a retrospective but independent evaluation of twenty-five placements was decided upon, and K.C.C. made expenses and a small honorarium available for this purpose. My specific brief, therefore, was the evaluation of these twenty-five placements; it was *not* to evaluate the Project as a whole, and the limited and specific nature of this report should be borne in mind.

## 2. THE SPECIAL FAMILY PLACEMENT PROJECT

The Kent Special Family Placement Project was set up for a five year period in 1974 and is due to end in 1979. To date, placements have been arranged for about a hundred adolescents thought likely to benefit from foster care. The aims of the Project have been described by the Organiser, Miss Hazel, in a number of articles, but in brief its work has been strongly influenced by the Swedish model of child placement – the so-called ‘normalisation’ model in which about 80% of children and young persons in care live in the community rather than in residential institutions. The Project has adopted as its guidelines the principles of (1) *normalisation* – that is, life in an ordinary family rather than in a special institution; (2) *localisation* – the child should so far as possible remain in his own locality and near his family of origin; (3) *voluntariness* – the child and his family should always be in agreement with decisions affecting them, except in special circumstances involving urgency or danger; (4) *participation* – the child and his family should always be involved actively in decisions which concern them. All those concerned work to a written and agreed contract reviewed every six months. The Project is independent of Kent County Council, though actively promoted and encouraged by it. The premises and professional fees of foster parents are provided by Kent County Council, and other expenses by the Gatsby Foundation. A feature of the scheme is that the Project families are paid a professional fee in addition to the boarding-out allowance.

### 3. THE SAMPLE

This consisted of twenty-five consecutive first placements from 11.9.75 to 17.7.76. This was about six months after the first placements had been arranged, to allow for a 'settling-down' period, but still dates from the comparatively early days when experience was still being gained. Of the twenty-five, seven were girls and eighteen boys all aged between fourteen and seventeen years at the time of placement. At the time of writing this report, ten are still in placement, two of these having moved to a second Project placement; seven have terminated their placement as planned (one having had a transfer) and left the Project; and a further eight terminated their placement prematurely and left the Project. Those who terminated the placement prematurely or were transferred (eleven or 44%) will be discussed in Section 7. In all, the twenty-five adolescents had between them, including second placements, thirty separate placements.

### 4. CONDUCT OF THE EVALUATION

- (i) Two open meetings for Project families and social workers were held in September/October 1977 in Canterbury and Maidstone. The purpose of these meetings was primarily to tell them about the evaluation and how it would be conducted. As a result of these meetings, it was decided to interview Divisional social workers personally, rather than to ask them to complete a questionnaire as was originally proposed.
- (ii) Letters were sent by the evaluator or Director of Social Services seeking the co-operation of all respondents.
- (iii) Interviews were conducted in their own homes with foster parents. It was not possible to contact one Project family who had two of the sample adolescents. The analysis is somewhat complicated in that where there was a transfer more than one Project family was involved with the same child; in these instances, both have been interviewed, but only one (the 'principal' placement) has been included in the analysis with the exception of Sections 12 and 13 where all have been included. Further, three families had two of the sample adolescents and one family had three of the sample. In all, twenty-three foster parents were interviewed. In all except two

*Note:* One placement, of a severely subnormal boy, was excluded from the sample.

cases the interview was with both husband and wife, and in the other two, with the wife only.

- (iv) All those adolescents who could be contacted were interviewed, at home, lodgings or foster home. The interviews were private except for one who requested that the foster mother be present. It is extremely disappointing that due either to difficulties in establishing contact or for other reasons, only thirteen (52%) of the adolescents were seen.
- (v) Interviews were conducted with twenty-four Divisional social workers. One interview could not be arranged in time for the completion of this report. It should be noted that not all the social workers were directly involved at the time of placement and some had only a brief acquaintance with the adolescent: this accounts for most of the 'cant say' responses.
- (vi) No formal structured interviews were carried out with the Project social workers, but each placement was discussed with them after the interviewing programme had been completed.

The duration of the interview with foster parents was approximately 1½ to 2 hours, and a structured questionnaire was used, though the interview itself followed whatever pattern appeared most natural. Parts of the questionnaire required a rating on a five-point scale and this was completed as soon as possible thereafter. In most cases the interview with the foster parents was also tape-recorded; although of great interest, these tapes have not been analysed in detail and have mainly been used to supplement questionnaires and written notes.

It would have been desirable to interview the adolescent's family of origin; but this was not possible within the limitations of time and resources, and I have therefore relied on information supplied by the Divisional social workers and the adolescents themselves.

The major studies of foster care in the U.K. (Trasler 1960, Parker 1966, George 1970) have concentrated on success and failure in (long term) foster care, using as a criterion durability of placement. Thus Parker classed those placements where the child remained permanently

*Note:* For future reference, I estimate that each interview with the foster parents, including preparation, recording and travelling time took approximately six hours.

in the foster home as a success; those where the child was removed as a failure. This approach is not applicable in the present study where placements are all short term, generally about two years; further, a single criterion was regarded as inappropriate to this kind of study where it was hoped to provide some indication of the *degree* of change in relation to specified behavioural problems or deficits, which was not always related to durability of placement. So far as possible the terms 'success' and 'failure' have been avoided because of their rather global nature. Every effort has been made to reach an impartial assessment based on careful study of specified aspects of the placement concerned (i.e. inter-personal relationships, progress at school or work, relationship with family of origin, behavioural problems or deficits). Nevertheless the term evaluation implies a judgement, and the subjectivity which must go with it.

The evaluator had no contact with the adolescents prior to or at the time of placement, and therefore took as a base-line behavioural deficits or problems indicated in (a) the referral letter from the Division to the Project, setting out the circumstances and history fully; (b) Court reports from residential establishments where applicable; (c) the contracts drawn up with the adolescent at the time of placement; (d) the adolescent's perceptions of his difficulties; (e) the foster parents' perception of his difficulties. Target problems were then identified and I attempted to assess what change had taken place for each of these during the period of the placement for each adolescent, taking into account subsequent events where applicable. This assessment was based on (i) self-reports of adolescents; (ii) data such as employment record and Court appearances; (iii) the views of foster parents and social workers. Where there was evident improvement in two or more of the specified target problems, this was classed as 'benefited greatly'; where there was improvement in one of the problems, it was classed as 'benefited somewhat'; and where there was deterioration, as 'deteriorated somewhat' or 'deteriorated greatly'.

A number of problems quickly became apparent:-

- (1) As mentioned, only 52% of the adolescents were interviewed. In other cases therefore it was necessary to rely on the assessments of other people (social workers and foster parents) except where there was data as to subsequent convictions, employment, etc.

- (2) The foster parents and Project workers, very naturally, have a strong personal and professional investment in the Project and may tend unconsciously to highlight progress and minimise problems. On the other hand it could equally be argued that the foster parents are paid a professional fee in order to cope with 'difficult' adolescents, and that they will therefore stress the problems in order to demonstrate that they have earned their fee! My impression was that all the respondents were frank and open; nevertheless there may still have been some bias. This could account for the more positive ratings given by the Project workers and foster parents as compared with those of the individual social workers and myself.
- (3) What is being evaluated is not a single event but a dynamically changing and extremely complex situation; behaviour may change markedly before or after the precise point in time at which an interview takes place. For this reason the evaluation of placements still in progress is in my view questionable and may be misleading: a follow-up after a clearly defined and consistent interval is obviously a crucial consideration for future evaluations. This was highlighted by my visit to one placement which had continued very successfully for nearly two years, but had come to grief in a dramatic and violent way in the week prior to my visit.

## **5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

- (1) My overall assessment, taking into account changes in confidence, social skills and capacity for interpersonal relationships, as well as delinquent behaviour and other specific behaviour problems is as follows:

**Table 1: Adolescent Change During Period of Placement  
(Evaluator's Assessment)**

|                              | <i>No</i> | <i>%</i>   |    |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|----|
| Benefited greatly            | 12        | 48         | 76 |
| Benefited somewhat           | 7         | 28         |    |
| No apparent change/can't say | 4         | 16         |    |
| Deteriorated somewhat        | 2         | 8          |    |
| Deteriorated greatly         | 0         | 0          |    |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                | <b>25</b> | <b>100</b> |    |

Divisional social workers, Project social workers and foster parents were asked to give an overall rating. Those of the Divisional social workers (though reached in a different way) accord fairly closely with my own assessment, but those of the Project workers and foster parents are rather higher.

**Table 2: Social Worker and Foster Parent Rating of Adolescent Change During Placement**

|  | Divisional Social Workers |            | Project Social Workers |            | Foster Parents |            |
|--|---------------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
|  | <i>No</i>                 | <i>%</i>   | <i>No</i>              | <i>%</i>   | <i>No</i>      | <i>%</i>   |
| Benefited greatly/<br>very good progress | 10                        | 40         | 18                     | 72         | 12             | 48         |
|  |                           | 76%        |                        | 84%        |                | 80%        |
| Benefited somewhat/<br>some progress     | 9                         | 36         | 3                      | 12         | 8              | 32         |
| No change/can't say                      | 4                         | 16         | 4                      | 16         | 2              | 8          |
| Deteriorated somewhat/<br>Rather worse   | 1                         | 4          | 0                      | 0          | 1              | 4          |
| Deteriorated greatly/<br>much worse      | 0                         | 0          | 0                      | 0          | 0              | 0          |
| Not assessed                             | 1                         | 4          | 0                      | 0          | 2              | 8          |
| <b>TOTALS</b>                            | <b>25</b>                 | <b>100</b> | <b>25</b>              | <b>100</b> | <b>25</b>      | <b>100</b> |

- Notes*
- (i) Several respondents found it difficult to differentiate between 'greatly' and 'somewhat', so it is more useful to take these categories together.
  - (ii) The ratings between the different groups of respondents were not wholly comparable, in that Divisional social workers were influenced by events subsequent to placement, whereas foster parents were rating progress during placement.

A central finding is that 76%, or three-quarters of the adolescents, were considered to have benefited greatly or to some extent. Further while I assessed two adolescents as being rather worse during the time they were with the Project than they were before, none were considered by any of the respondents to have deteriorated greatly or to have actually been harmed.

- (2) The main positive changes related to increase in self-esteem and self-confidence, social skills, practical skills (such as the management of money, cooking, cleaning) school or work progress, and ability to get on with others. The evidence in relation to delinquent activities (which is numerically slight) is more ambiguous. Some modification of delinquent activities occurred in half of those who had previously been convicted of an offence. But overall, of the fourteen (56% of all) who had been previously convicted eleven or 78% were subsequently reconvicted for one or more offences. Only two of these fourteen have committed no further offences so far as is known. What may be more significant, however, is whether there is any discernible change in the *nature* or *frequency* of offences. Further analysis suggests that a diminution in the *rate* (but not type) of offences known occurred in exactly half of the 'delinquent' group (seven cases); in the other half no such diminution in rate (or type) could be detected.
- (3) Nine adolescents (36%)\* experienced a breakdown in placement in the usual sense of removal following a crisis or period of stress. This compares favourably with the 44% breakdown rate for fostered children in the care of K.C.C. in Dr. Roger Morgan's 1978 Children Survey. However it is not possible to make a comparison

\*If we allow for those apparently successfully transferred to a second Project placement following an initial breakdown, this figure falls to 33% of the total thirty placements.

with the major U.K. studies where breakdown was differently defined, though Gray and Parr (1957) found that 34.3% of all their foster placements had experienced blameworthy or possibly blameworthy terminations.

## 6. THE ADOLESCENTS

All except two of the adolescents placed had had experience of residential or institutional care, and several had been in children's homes nearly all their lives, or had a history of being in and out of care. Six had had previous experience of foster care, but only in one case did it appear to have worked out successfully. As might be expected (and this is a criterion for referral to the Project) they tended to be young people who had experienced severe rejection and a lack of basically good or 'good enough' primary relationships; none had a history of reasonably stable family life. They were often distrustful of adults and with little sense of identity or self-worth, yet with an amazing capacity to survive incredibly damaging life experiences and retain a sense of humour and ability to enjoy life. Nearly all were regarded by the social workers as disturbed in some way, whether this showed itself in delinquent activity; in aggressive, violent or abusive behaviour; or in withdrawal, depression and uncommunicativeness – perhaps the most difficult of all for the foster parents to cope with. Inevitably a study such as this tends to accentuate problems; it should also be said that those adolescents whom I interviewed were also friendly, articulate, and often very perceptive both about themselves and other people.

As has already been indicated, by no means all the adolescents had committed an offence (44% had not), eighteen (72%) were subject to a Care Order, six (24%) were in care under S. 1, and one (4%) under S. 2 of the Children Act 1948.

### Family Patterns

Only three of the twenty-five (12%) had contact with both parents; in one of these instances, both parents had remarried and neither was able to provide a home for the adolescent. Eighteen (72%) had contact with one parent, six with their father only, and twelve with their mother only. In most of these cases, the parent had remarried or acquired another partner. The remaining four had no parental contact. Twelve (48%) of those in contact with one or both parents had suffered severe rejection to such an extent that links with the natural parents

were virtually severed or were very tenuous indeed; a further four (16%) had experienced some degree of rejection but maintained links with the natural parent(s). Altogether in 40% of the cases there was no family of origin in contact, and in 60% there were links, in that there had been at least one contact with a natural parent during the period of the placement, or there was contact with other close relatives such as grandparent or siblings.

Those fifteen (60%) where there was some contact with the family of origin deserve further attention because one of the aims of the Project is to foster and maintain links with the family of origin, where this is possible and the adolescent desires it. Thus the model of fostering is an inclusive not an exclusive one. In many instances, much work by the Project families and Divisional social workers had gone into discussing with the adolescent the reality of his family situation, helping him to understand what had happened to him and come to terms with it, and to understand (perhaps with some compassion) the problems which might have faced his parents and prevented them from giving him the care and affection he should have had. The harsh truth is that many of these adolescents *had* been let down, but nevertheless had a capacity to accept that fact and to make their own lives in spite of it.

To recapitulate: ten (40%) had no contact with their family of origin; fifteen (60%) had some contact. Of the fifteen who did:

four were no longer in touch, and did not wish to be (in each case contact had been slight for years)

eight maintained a strong link with their family of origin (at least monthly contact)

three maintained some or occasional contact, but the relationship was poor.

Thus in all eleven (44%) had contact with their families of origin, but in all but three there was little likelihood of a home ever being available to them with a natural parent; such children have been aptly described as 'orphans of the living'.

Not a great deal of change in the adolescents' relationships with their family of origin was noted, but in six instances Divisional social workers thought they had improved between placement and time of interview; in six cases they thought they had either not changed or definitely had deteriorated; in two of these last cases, it was thought that the social

distance between foster family and natural parent had led to a weakening of bonds with the latter.

### Problems

The main problems reported by the foster parents were as follows:

**Table 3: Adolescent Problems Reported by Foster Parents**

|   | <i>% adolescents</i> |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. Problems in relation to family of origin or personal history | 100%                 |
| 2. Breaking and entering, larceny, petty thefts                 | 48%                  |
| 3. Inability to trust or relate to others                       | 40%                  |
| 4. Aggressive or violent behaviour                              | 28%                  |
| 5. Non-attendance at school; poor school attainment             | 28%                  |
| 6. Fear reactions; lack of confidence                           | 20%                  |
| 7. Withdrawn, uncommunicative behaviour                         | 16%                  |
| 8. Unacceptable personal habits                                 | 16%                  |

Other problems experienced in one or two cases only included enuresis, lying, excessive drinking, childish behaviour, inability to stick to a job.

The main benefits or positive changes noted by foster parents were as follows:

**Table 4: Adolescent Benefits Reported by Foster Parents**

|  | <i>% adolescents</i> |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. Educational achievement                                 | 52%                  |
| 2. Increased confidence, self-esteem                       | 48%                  |
| 3. Increased ability to relate to others                   | 44%                  |
| 4. Increased ability to cope with own aggressive behaviour | 20%                  |
| 5. Improvement in delinquent behaviour                     | 28%                  |
| 6. Better understanding of self and family                 | 16%                  |
| 7. Ability to cope with job                                | 16%                  |
| 8. Improved practical skills                               | 16%                  |

Also mentioned in one or two cases were increased capacity for self-assertion, the development of new interests, and overcoming enuresis.

Many of the problems had been identified by the foster parents and specifically worked at: for example, by coaching, by encouragement in relation to school work and negotiation with teachers; by careful attention to the management of money, cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.; and by bringing problems or difficulties into the open and talking them over.

### **Offences**

As indicated, the evidence relating to delinquent activities is ambiguous; the number of adolescents involved here are very small (14 cases) and the number of offences actually committed may greatly exceed those that result in prosecution. It is, therefore, difficult to obtain accurate information. In all, eleven of the fourteen convicted of an offence prior to entering the Project were re-convicted for one or more offences committed after joining it, and the other three have committed no further offences so far as is known (with the exception of one very minor traffic offence). On looking more closely at those who were re-convicted, no change could be detected in the nature or type of offence committed, but there was some evidence of a diminution in the frequency. In addition to the three who had steered clear of the law altogether, a further four (comprising in all exactly half the 'delinquent' group) showed a reduction in the number of offences when those committed in the year prior to entering the Project were compared with those committed subsequently. As an example, two of these had several convictions for breaking and entering and taking and driving away, prior to and early in their Project placement, but appear on follow-up (one to two years later) to be reformed characters; at any rate no further offences are reported by them or the social workers.

For the other half, (three of whom terminated their placement prematurely and were in their placement less than a year) no such encouraging pointers can be detected. Four have since had Borstal sentences, and in the other cases there is no evidence of any diminution in the rate of offences – in two cases probably the reverse. The findings on this point are, however, very inconclusive, and a more systematic and comprehensive follow-up urgently needs to be undertaken to throw further light on this point.

7. **TRANSFERS AND PREMATURE TERMINATIONS**

Eleven (44%) of the adolescents terminated a placement prematurely, for the following reasons:

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Death of foster parent | 1 |
| To be with sibling     | 1 |
| Placement broke down   | 9 |

Of the nine (36%) where the first placement terminated following difficulties, three were transferred to other Project families, two apparently successfully in that they were still in placement at the time of writing, while one stayed only a few weeks in the second placement before being arrested and removed. The other six went into some form of residential care or lodgings. Thus 36% of the adolescents experienced a breakdown in placement. If we count transfers as separate placements – a total of thirty placements in all – 33% of all placements were ‘breakdowns’; this term is used reluctantly since it give a misleading impression of total rejection, while having the advantage of accepted usage (a period of crisis necessitating the removal of the child from the fosterhome) and comparability across studies. While in some cases, the term ‘breakdown’ is apt, in others the experience was positively used. For instance, in one such breakdown, the transfer to another Project family was carefully planned, and the adolescent continued to keep in close touch with the first family, has roots there, and is regarded with affection by the children as well as the parents. Despite the physical move, the adolescent’s relationship with the Project family remains close and significant and a source of security. In a second case, despite the violent circumstances which gave rise to the breakdown the adolescent has since re-established contact and visits the Project family from time to time. Of the nine breakdowns, three left at their own wish, and six were either asked to leave or did so by mutual agreement because of abusive violent behaviour or sexual promiscuity when the safety or health of the children was considered to be seriously endangered. Four of these nine placements had lasted four to six months, and five between eleven and twenty-two months.

The five placements which had lasted for a substantial period (11-22 months) are of particular interest, because in each of these, the adolescent had established a firm position for himself within the Project family, was accepted by the children, and seemed to be progressing well. The numbers involved here are very small and do not permit of valid

statistical analysis of the differences between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' placements; nevertheless some impressions of factors which may possibly have contributed to the breakdown may be useful.

- (1) The relationship with other Project children in the family appears to be critical. In six of the nine breakdowns (and four of the five long-established placements which terminated) the adolescent either found his still precarious security threatened by the arrival of a second Project adolescent (even though he had agreed to it); or as a new arrival himself was seen as an interloper by another Project child already established in the family and was the victim of subtle bullying. Two of the adolescents specifically mentioned the arrival of a second Project child as a problem for them. One left the placement after nearly two years and only a few months before the contract expired; he commented that when a second boy arrived the foster parents "were all for him". It is probably not without significance that the first boy, whose non-attendance at school had been a recurrent problem, was extremely proud of gaining C.S.E's while in the Project; whereas the second arrival was particularly bright and probably destined for university thus rather overshadowing if not eclipsing the achievements of the first. Although this is classified as a breakdown, in retrospect the adolescent regards the placement as having represented a period of achievement for him, and rates it positively, though he has not remained in touch with the foster parents.
- (2) Some adolescents who have been severely damaged by their life experiences may find family living, with its expectations of sharing, give and take, and consideration for others, too difficult to cope with. Family relationships are perhaps more intense than any other, and require both flexibility in accommodating to the needs of others and a certain degree of social and interpersonal skills. In three instances, the household came to be dominated by an egocentric, aggressive or violent youngster, and even the most tolerant and accepting of foster parents (and some of them coped with very disturbed behaviour, verbal and even physical assaults for many months) reached a threshold of tolerance when younger children became afraid.\* Such cases fortunately were rare. One of these 'difficult' youngsters recalled the Project family as "a very

*Note:* Other studies suggest that disturbed, aggressive or provocative behaviour tends to have a negative influence on the outcome of placements.

statistical analysis of the differences between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' placements; nevertheless some impressions of factors which may possibly have contributed to the breakdown may be useful.

- (1) The relationship with other Project children in the family appears to be critical. In six of the nine breakdowns (and four of the five long-established placements which terminated) the adolescent either found his still precarious security threatened by the arrival of a second Project adolescent (even though he had agreed to it); or as a new arrival himself was seen as an interloper by another Project child already established in the family and was the victim of subtle bullying. Two of the adolescents specifically mentioned the arrival of a second Project child as a problem for them. One left the placement after nearly two years and only a few months before the contract expired; he commented that when a second boy arrived the foster parents "were all for him". It is probably not without significance that the first boy, whose non-attendance at school had been a recurrent problem, was extremely proud of gaining C.S.E's while in the Project; whereas the second arrival was particularly bright and probably destined for university thus rather overshadowing if not eclipsing the achievements of the first. Although this is classified as a breakdown, in retrospect the adolescent regards the placement as having represented a period of achievement for him, and rates it positively, though he has not remained in touch with the foster parents.
- (2) Some adolescents who have been severely damaged by their life experiences may find family living, with its expectations of sharing, give and take, and consideration for others, too difficult to cope with. Family relationships are perhaps more intense than any other, and require both flexibility in accommodating to the needs of others and a certain degree of social and interpersonal skills. In three instances, the household came to be dominated by an egocentric, aggressive or violent youngster, and even the most tolerant and accepting of foster parents (and some of them coped with very disturbed behaviour, verbal and even physical assaults for many months) reached a threshold of tolerance when younger children became afraid.\* Such cases fortunately were rare. One of these 'difficult' youngsters recalled the Project family as "a very

*Note:* Other studies suggest that disturbed, aggressive or provocative behaviour tends to have a negative influence on the outcome of placements.

nice family, they were very good to me”, but “I was very difficult then and it just didn’t work out.” Basically he did not want to be there, and behaved in such a way that it became impossible for him to stay. Nevertheless he regards the Project as a good thing, though for selected children of a rather younger age group.

- (3) A child who has never had the opportunity to establish basic trust and who defends himself against possible hurt by keeping the world at arms’ length, may experience the affection he receives and comes to feel for others as something he both wants and at the same time is threatened by. The solution to this dilemma may be to act in such a way that he compels the family to reject him. This can be seen both as an escape from the complexity and demands of feeling, and also as self-destructive, perhaps indicating a feeling that one’s world is bound to collapse in the end, so there is nothing to be lost.
- (4) Role relationships within the foster family may be far more confusing for an adolescent than for a younger foster child. This is especially true, for instance, when a young man of seventeen or eighteen is placed with a comparatively young couple and the age difference between himself and the foster mother is quite small. The relationship is a close and intimate one. Yet it is not that of mother and child, nor is it overtly sexual (though there may well be sexual feelings which have to be dealt with in some way by both) and there are no clear and socially established guidelines to help him to deal with it. Further, he brings to the relationship hopes and expectations coloured by his own particular experience of earlier significant relationships. One foster mother thought that a Project boy because of his own great deprivation, really came to believe she *was* his mother, and became jealous of her maternal relationship with her own rather young son. Whether this particular interpretation is correct or not, there was evidently an intensity of feeling and a strong fantasy element around this relationship which may have contributed to the violent behaviour which ended the placement.

In another instance (which was not a termination) the adolescent brought with him a hatred and distrust of women, particularly

in a maternal role (negative transference) which made his relationship with the foster mother in the early months hurtful and turbulent. This might well have led to breakdown, but in this case the foster mother had a great deal of insight into the boy's feelings and the way his perceptions were shaped by his (appalling) early experience, and was able to weather an acutely distressing phase. As this was worked through there was a considerable gain in self-esteem and in the capacity for warm, spontaneous and reciprocal relationships with the foster family.

As with all fostering there is a strange paradox. The foster child is accepted and treated like one of the family, and may even come to *be* part of the family; yet there is a difference in that he is not of their blood, a difference which is accentuated by the particular structure of the nuclear family. Where the family system is extended, more loosely-knit, with less clearly-defined boundaries, the assimilation of additional members may be much easier. This difference is also accentuated by the fact that the foster parents are paid. While there is no evidence at all of an inverse relationship between caring and being paid, the professional fee undoubtedly did matter to the adolescents, and was a fact that they had to come to terms with.

- (5) Several respondents thought that a critical period was shortly before the adolescent is due to come out of care. This may create anxiety or panic which manifests itself in aggressive or delinquent behaviour.
- (6) In three cases, ties with a natural parent were very strong, and this may also have made for problems of adjustment to the Project family. In each of these cases, the relationship with the foster parents remained at a comparatively superficial level, the adolescent kept much of himself 'outside' and had little investment in developing affectional ties with the foster parents.

## 8. SELECTION

The evaluation was concerned primarily with adjustment and outcome and the selection of adolescents or of foster parents was not specifically considered. though some aspects are relevant to this. In the majority of

cases (64%)\* the placement was completed as planned or was continuing and we may regard these as 'successful' in terms of the criterion of durability; 76% were considered to have benefited, whether or not the placement was completed as planned. In these cases events appear to have justified the initial selection and matching. My impression is that five (20%)\*\* of the initial placements were inappropriate, either because the adolescent was unmotivated, or because the Project family could not cope with the particular kinds of problems thrown up (especially when the wellbeing of their own children was involved); or a combination of the two. One of the five is still in placement, and the other four are included in the breakdowns. It is of course easy to make this kind of observation with hindsight: as against this must be set six placements which could be thought, on the evidence, as risky (because of the foster parents high expectations, their lack of tolerance of natural parents, family stresses, or severe behaviour problems in the adolescent) but which to date have worked apparently well. There is little hard evidence as to what makes for successful fostering (though the foster parents' approach to child care, characterised by warmth, support, and generous sharing relationships may be crucial) and these observations should therefore be treated with caution.

Divisional social workers were asked whether they regarded the first foster home as suitable for this particular adolescent, and rated them as follows:

**Table 5: Divisional Social Workers' Assessments of Foster Homes**

|                     | <i>No.</i> | <i>%</i>   |
|---------------------|------------|------------|
| Very suitable       | 11         | 44         |
| Reasonably suitable | 9          | 36         |
| Not at all suitable | 2          | 8          |
| Can't say           | 2          | 8          |
| Not assessed        | 1          | 4          |
| <b>TOTALS</b>       | <b>25</b>  | <b>100</b> |

*Note:* \*This figure differs slightly from that on P.8 because the adolescent transferred because of the death of a foster parent has been counted here as completing the placement as planned

\*\* One of these was not arranged by the Project but was subsequently included in it.

They had some reservations about three placements (in addition to the two regarded as not suitable) on the grounds either of the foster parents high expectations of the adolescent's achievement, which they felt could be experienced as pressure, or because of the foster parents' lack of tolerance of the family of origin which led to difficulties in working with them.

Divisional social workers were also asked if they would have recommended the foster home for this particular adolescent. Fourteen (58%) said they would; six (24%) said they would not – but in three of these six cases the social workers considered that it had in fact worked out well against expectation; two said they had reservations but could not give a definite 'Yes' or 'No'; and two felt they had insufficient knowledge to judge.

On the whole, therefore, Divisional social workers expressed a high degree of satisfaction with these placements – 80% were considered very or reasonably suitable.

## 9. THE ADOLESCENTS' VIEWS

Only thirteen (52%) of the adolescents were interviewed, for the following reasons:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| No reply to letters  | 4 |
| Unable to contact, though believed willing to be interviewed | 3 |
| Refused to be interviewed                                    | 2 |
| Living outside County  | 1 |
| Not contacted on social worker's advice                      | 2 |

Nevertheless, sufficient information was available from other sources to make a reasonable judgement about their progress during placement.

It is possible that the three not seen who expressed willingness to be interviewed could be contacted eventually; in each case their address had changed, or they had no fixed address, or did not wish to be contacted through it. It must be assumed that the four who did not reply to any of the letters did not wish to be seen; only one of these was still in care and had contact with a social worker. It is likely that those inter-

viewed were in general those most satisfied with their experience in the Project.

Of the thirteen seen, nine were still in placement (one after a transfer from another Project family) and three had left the placement prematurely. Ten of the thirteen rated the Project as having been 'very helpful' to them, one as 'fairly helpful' and two as 'not at all helpful'. Typical comments from those who found it helpful were: (A) (still in placement) "I've changed a lot"; "I get on better and don't get in fights at school so much". (B) (completed placement and working): "There isn't a family in the world like them. I felt at home there in the first ten minutes". "I'm their other son". "If he was skint, it wasn't discussed behind closed doors, it was discussed over the supper table and I could make some suggestions as to what to do." (This boy claimed to have committed over a hundred offences, but has had no court appearances since leaving the Project ten months ago. The Divisional social worker thought his time with the foster parents had 'changed his life'). (C) (still in placement): "I've made something of myself". In particular he thought he got on better with other people. He felt accepted as one of the family, and it mattered greatly to him that the first Christmas he got the same present as the foster parents' own son. He liked the way problems were openly discussed, and he felt fully accepted as one of the family. (Having no family of his own, he has virtually been assimilated into the foster family and will remain in contact when he leaves care. This boy had had a lifetime in care, and there is no doubt that his self-confidence and ability to cope with life have changed very markedly). (D) (placement terminated after a few months): "They had big ideas but they were always skint". "He (foster father) was big-headed; he knew everything better than anyone else. It narked me so I tried to get him narked". "I couldn't bring friends in". (This boy did not wish to transfer to another family, but has settled fairly happily in residential care where relationships are less intense, and there are a number of staff and peers to whom he can relate. Foster care was probably not suitable for him; he found living with a family restricting, and they found him aggressive and difficult. He himself would prefer to see more hostels for adolescents rather than an extension of foster care).

Entering a family with its particular culture, life-style and patterns of sleeping, eating, leisure activities and role-relationships, demands a great deal of adaptability on the part of both the adolescent and the family. Several foster parents mentioned as things they found difficult to tolerate: eating habits, unacceptable personal habits, dirt, smell,

untidiness, carelessness in relation to property and furniture. This last is not necessarily intentional destructiveness, but may reflect experience of residential care where clothes and furniture are replaced by the authority, and are not thought of in value terms in the same way as in a private household. Adolescents themselves mentioned food as particularly significant, and the extent to which they felt Project families were ready to accommodate to unusual and perhaps (to them) bizarre eating preferences was a matter of great symbolic and practical importance to the adolescents. One wanted nothing but a particular brand of soup when she arrived at her placement: the foster mother promptly stocked up a cupboard full of tins so the adolescent could help herself whenever she wished; this evidence of care was very significant to the girl concerned.

These comments are by no means trivial. Food has long been recognised as having great symbolic significance, particularly for very deprived children. Further, there is some evidence that careful matching of life styles in the smallest detail is important to successful foster placement.

Two adolescents commented that they would like to have had more support outside the placement. When the heat was on, the foster parents had their groups, as well as the social workers and the informal network to turn to. Many of the adolescents did not have this and the possibility of support groups for them might be considered.

## 10. EFFECTS ON PROJECT FAMILIES

Foster parents were asked to rate how well the Project adolescent got on with their own children.

**Table 6: Adolescents' Relationships with Children of Foster Parents**

|                | <i>No.</i> | <i>%</i>   |
|----------------|------------|------------|
| Very well      | 6          | 24         |
| Fairly well    | 8          | 32         |
| Fairly badly   | 1          | 4          |
| Very badly     | 2          | 8          |
| Not applicable | 6          | 24         |
| Not assessed   | 2          | 8          |
| <b>TOTALS</b>  | <b>25</b>  | <b>100</b> |

The two who got on very badly were among the premature terminations, and the one who got on fairly badly in fact remained for fifteen months as planned. On the whole the Project adolescents established good relationships with the foster parents' own children. If these were younger the Project adolescents were very often treated as an elder brother or sister, though their attempt to assume this role and the authority which goes with it could also be resented. The acceptance and liking of the children was important, and some of them became very attached to the Project child.

Foster parents were also asked what were some of the pro's and con's of fostering, and whether they would do it again. Most (68%) found it sufficiently rewarding to say they would do it again but two said they would not. The impact on family life was very great, particularly where there was more than one Project adolescent in the family; one foster mother commented that she and her husband could never go out together and that their social life was virtually non-existent as a result. Others mentioned the emotionally taxing nature of the work which left them feeling drained and exhausted. Many of the foster parents had devoted great thought and patience to helping the adolescent with his (usually) many problems and to thinking through how difficulties and crises could most constructively be handled as they arose, sometimes to the extent that their own children received less attention.

## 11. PROJECT GROUP MEETINGS

Project parents were asked to assess the usefulness of the group meetings for them:

**Table 7: Foster Parents' Assessments of Group Meetings**

|               | <i>No.</i> | <i>%</i>   |
|---------------|------------|------------|
| Very useful   | 11         | 48         |
| Fairly useful | 4          | 17         |
| Neutral       | 1          | 4          |
| Not useful    | 2          | 9          |
| Not assessed  | 5          | 22         |
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>23</b>  | <b>100</b> |

*Note:* Because of the length of the interviews, the question regarding their perceptions of the specific purposes of the meetings had to be omitted.

In all 75% found them very useful or fairly useful, and several commented that they were essential in providing an opportunity to share problems and to learn from other people's experience, and that they could not have coped without them. Those who only found them fairly useful either found them superficial, or felt that the meetings were dominated by one or two foster parents and they themselves did not really fit into the group. Only two regarded them as not useful. There is no doubt that the groups serve a highly important function in supporting the primary caregivers, and in enabling levels of disturbed or problematic behaviour to be tolerated which might otherwise have led to premature termination. It would be of great interest to compare the level of fostering breakdown in schemes which do and do not have group support of this kind.

## 12. SOCIAL WORK SUPPORT

Foster parents were asked to rate their degree of satisfaction with the social work support they had received both from Project social workers and Divisional social workers.

**Table 8: Foster Parents' Satisfaction with Social Work Support**

| Foster Parents      | With Divisional Social Workers |            | With Project Social Workers |            |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|
|                     | <i>No.</i>                     | <i>%</i>   | <i>No.</i>                  | <i>%</i>   |
| Very satisfied      | 4                              | 17         | 18                          | 78         |
| Fairly satisfied    | 2                              | 9          | 4                           | 17         |
| Neutral             | 5                              | 22         | 0                           | 0          |
| Fairly dissatisfied | 3                              | 13         | 0                           | 0          |
| Very dissatisfied   | 8                              | 35         | 0                           | 0          |
| Not assessed        | 1                              | 4          | 1                           | 4          |
| <b>TOTALS</b>       | <b>23</b>                      | <b>100</b> | <b>23</b>                   | <b>100</b> |

This should not be taken as indicating that Divisional social workers were necessarily less good than the Project workers. In many cases there had been several changes of Divisional worker over the past three or four

years, and one Project adolescent had had some twelve social workers during the course of his life; the Project staff had however remained the same, with the addition of one new member. Further, Project staff had a specialist function and a limited caseload, and provided a high level of commitment and professional support. All were of senior social worker status and very experienced, whereas some of the Divisional social workers were trainees or comparatively inexperienced. The Project staff therefore had some very obvious advantages, and it is evident that the Project families thought highly of the support they received.

There are however some less evident reasons for the low level of satisfaction expressed with the support received from the Divisions.

1. There is a lack of clarity in the role of the Divisional social worker vis-a-vis the Project worker. As set out in the contracts, the support of the foster parents is undertaken by the Project staff, while the Divisional social worker is primarily in contact with the adolescent and his family of origin. In practice it is difficult to separate the needs of the foster parents from the needs of the child, and in most cases the Project worker became the key support. The Project was set up as an independent and innovative venture, and this was probably essential in successfully implementing new ideas. Organisationally, however, the independence of the Project tends to encourage conflict between the professional workers, and it is very much to the credit of the social workers concerned that co-operation was generally good and conflict occurred so seldom (only in four cases were relationships between Project and Divisional staff poor). Even so, the role of the Divisional workers was less clear than that of the Project staff; often they tended to be seen as a provider of financial and material resources, and because of other pressures, were sometimes happy to accept that role leaving 'the heavy stuff' to the Project worker. This was by no means always so, and some of the Divisional workers had worked regularly and consistently with the adolescent, helping him to sort out the facts of his life, to understand himself and his situation and gain a sense of personal history and identity; a great deal of assistance and encouragement was given too with jobs and lodgings, and often this support continued after the adolescent was no longer in care.
2. Some foster parents found it hard to accept that the Divisional social worker held delegated accountability for the adolescent in care. While it is obviously desirable that the views and experience of the

primary caregivers should be treated with far greater respect than has always happened in the past, there remains a clear legal responsibility upon the County Council. It is therefore essential for social workers and foster parents to work together for the good of the child. The attitudes of some foster parents towards K.C.C. were so negative that even the most experienced and sensitive social worker would be hard put to it to achieve a working understanding. The Project families represent a new development in the care of children; they are articulate, experienced, ready to do battle for their Project children and have a strong sense of corporate identity and commitment to their work. Yet one has the impression that a satisfactory *modus vivendi* with the Divisions has still to be worked out. It is not yet clear what aspects of authority can or should be delegated to foster parents, and on what basis of experience or training. On the one hand, professional foster parents are trying to achieve an established and recognised status and feel 'kept down' by social workers; on the other there is a certain ambivalence on the part of some social workers which may convey itself subtly to the foster parents and affect working relationships.

### 13. DIVISIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Divisional social workers were asked for any general comments on the Project and its relation to the work of the Divisions. Nine made no comment. Seven thought it was a very useful resource and would like to see it extended. Three disliked the scheme because they felt it had created an elite group of foster parents and that this was inherently unfair to 'ordinary' foster parents, many of whom were coping with equally difficult problems; this was basically an argument for extending the same financial rewards across the board, and not for abandoning paid fostering.

#### **Foster Parents Additional Comments**

1. Nearly all thought the boarding out allowance was inadequate and said that they subsidised this from the professional fee. Most of the foster parents thought that the professional fee either was adequate or would be adequate if it were taxed at source; most thought that the same flat rate should be received by all. Several felt that what expenses and reimbursements could be claimed (e.g. travelling for court appearances) should be made clearer.

2. Several wanted more written information about the background and history of the adolescent; this seemed variable as between different placements.
3. One or two foster parents expressed concern as to the selection of foster parents, and thought that some of their colleagues were lacking in insight and not very suitable.
4. Others would have liked a greater involvement by residential and Divisional social workers in the Project; more psychiatric backup; some kind of short-term crisis accommodation or crash-pad when family relationships were under severe strains; children to be placed at a younger age.

#### 14. CONCLUSION

The results of this evaluation are extremely encouraging: almost two-thirds of the placements were successful in that the placement was completed as planned (64%) and three-quarters (76%) of the adolescents were considered to have clearly benefited during the period of the placement. Given the degree of social and emotional deprivation which these adolescents had experienced a much more pessimistic conclusion might have been anticipated. This finding does however echo other studies on adoption and fostering in the United States. Kadushin (1970) writes of the adoption of older children: "Other studies have come to the same unexpected conclusion with similar expressions of surprise; in each instance children turned out to be more 'normal', less 'maladjusted' than they had any right to be, given the trauma and insults to psyche experienced during childhood." (p.212) In another American adoption study, Weller (1965) noted that "older adopted children . . . despite extended exposure to massive deprivation, have indicated a degree of responsiveness to a restitutive environment and a reversibility of early psychic damage which seems to exceed even the most optimistic assessments of the studies on maternal deprivation and separation we have seen thus far" (quoted Kadushin, p. 164). The resilience and adaptability of the adolescents in the Kent Project was very striking, and although the past does shape perceptions and may leave lasting legacies, it is probable that social workers have tended to over-emphasise the traumatic effects of early experience. There are also strong forces in the present, in the living context, which make demands on the individual to which he has to respond and come to terms. A living situation with foster parents who care genuinely but non-possessively and possess a

good measure of insight, tolerance, and ability to cope with withdrawn or aggressive behaviour, may provide a good preparation for the kinds of situation likely to be experienced in the adult world.

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