Children in Residential Care: A wicked problem?

Mary McKenna
Flinders Law School
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Mary.McKenna@flinders.edu.au
A wicked problem

- Difficult to clearly define
- Highly resistant to resolution
- Interrelationships multi-causal and unstable
- No clear solution
- Socially complex
- Appear intractable
Children in residential care

• At what level of the system should changes occur?
• Numbers in residential care in SA increasing
• Indigenous over representation
• Often leads to adult criminality and homelessness
History

• Removal of children leads to problems
  – The Stolen generation
  – The Forgotten generation
• Re-discovery of child abuse in 1970s
• Legislation & policy changes
• Reporting and investigation
• Types of abuse
SA abuse and neglect
1978-1997

Notifications
Substantiations
Residential care: Children & young people

- Significant behavioural problems
- Complex trauma
- Often extreme violence
- Intellectual disabilities and mental health problems
- Criminal behaviour
- Family access frequently unsettling
Residential care: Staffing

- Poorly trained to deal with complexities
- Inadequate supervision of staff
- Low paid, undervalued
- Lack of continuity of care
- Dealing with complex ‘red tape’
- Significant OH&S problems
- Variation in provision of care
What works?

• Well supported staff
• Increased professionalisation of workers
• Adequate staff training in complex trauma and therapy
• Time to build trusting relationships between staff and young people
• Mentoring of young people
• Post placement support
Some questions to consider

- Is the problem the child protection system itself??
- Does the system re-victimise?
- Is the standard of care set by the system too high?
- Is the family preservation approach the most appropriate alternative?
…more questions

• Should we revisit the idea of mandatory notification?
• Is residential care necessarily negative?
• Should it be short term or long term?
• Would it work better if more children were placed in residential care before multiple failed placements?
• Should more children be adopted… and earlier?
Solving wicked problems

• A shared understanding of problem
• Shared commitment to possible solutions
• Holistic thinking
• Innovative flexible approaches
• Stimulating debate
• No quick fixes
• Often unintended consequences
In conclusion

Protecting Children is Everyone’s Business: The National framework for protecting Australian’s Children 2009-2020

We may be dealing with a wicked problem but.....

• A public health model building on strengths rather than deficits offers significant hope for the future.