

Open adoption for babies and children from care

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Barnardos adoption program

Thirty years experience of referrals of children very damaged in care system

Born out of the difficulty of finding stability in foster and residential care

Why open adoption?

- International research on stability- stronger attachment
- Greater sense of belonging- being loved
- Social recognition – like marriage
- Children’s preference- feeling normal
- Long term family’s preference
- Adults who grew up adopted show better outcomes
- Lifelong commitment – beyond 18 years

Which children are suitable for open adoption

- Program limited to:
 - Children already permanently separated by the Courts from their families with no hope of restoration
 - Open adoption - Order requires contact between birth parents and children (part of legislation)
 - Non-Indigenous children
 - Carefully assessed families – intensive casework needed
 - Many referrals have come from intensive restoration teams

How many children?

- 39,600 children in care (AIHW 30 June 2012)
- 29,362 finalised guardianship (AIHW 30 June 2012)
- Excluding Aboriginal children (one third)
- Not involved in kin care (half)
- Casework assess as best option adoption (one half)
- Rough estimated of 1,500 children

Ongoing numbers

- Nationally 14,191 admitted to Orders in 2011-12
(3,017 in NSW)
- Finalised, Non-Indigenous, not with kin, ?suitable for adoption
- Approximately 1,000 p.a

What are the alternatives for these children?

- Over 25,000 children and young people currently live in long term out-of-home care (for more than two years) in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Table 4.2).
 - 2011/12: 25% under 5 years old.
 - *Nationally, at 30 June 2012, about 4 in 5 children (81%) had been in their current out-of-home care placement for more than 1 year—ranging from 72% of children in Victoria to 88% in South Australia. Almost one-third (30%) had been in a continuous placement for between 2 and 5 years, while a further 38% had been in a continuous placement for 5 years or more (Table 4.2).*
- In long term care there is a likelihood of experiencing 6-8 foster placements
 - Children feel stigmatised - 'not normal'
 - Children never feel that they entirely belong
- Adolescent homelessness from the care population is very high

FEW POLICY OPTIONS

- Third part orders can be overturned and stop at 18 years
- Reform of foster care is stubborn
- Early intervention is not stopping entries to care

Young children most significantly affected

- Approximately one quarter of all children entering home-based care under the age of 5 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Table A1.24).
- Babies severely disrupted in the first years
 - We have referred babies who have had 5 or more placements
 - significant emotional and developmental problems the impact of broken attachments is now better understood and neurobiology of trauma



What the children say:

**2007 Survey of 21 adopted children
(Developing Practice 2007, Cox et al.)**

**Felt loved, wanted, had adults who cared
and were interested in them as a person**

Felt stable and safe

Commented on availability of food

**Talked more to adoptive parents and loved
them more.**



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Australian adoption rate low

- Adoptions 2012-13 – 78 or the 81 foster carer adoptions occurred in NSW. Only 12% of known children adoptions were under 5.
- In US- 53,000+ pa
- In UK- 6-8% of all children in care adopted

Overview of Find a Family study

300 Children entered
July 2002- June 2012 ie
ten years

(74 from intensive restoration
program TFC)

164 remained at end of
study (40 from TFC),

71 exited (12 from TFC)

65 children were
adopted over ten years
(22 from TFC)



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During this period

- 100 adoptions were completed (some entered care earlier)
- Work was done with more to prepare for adoptions

Study of ten years of open adoption

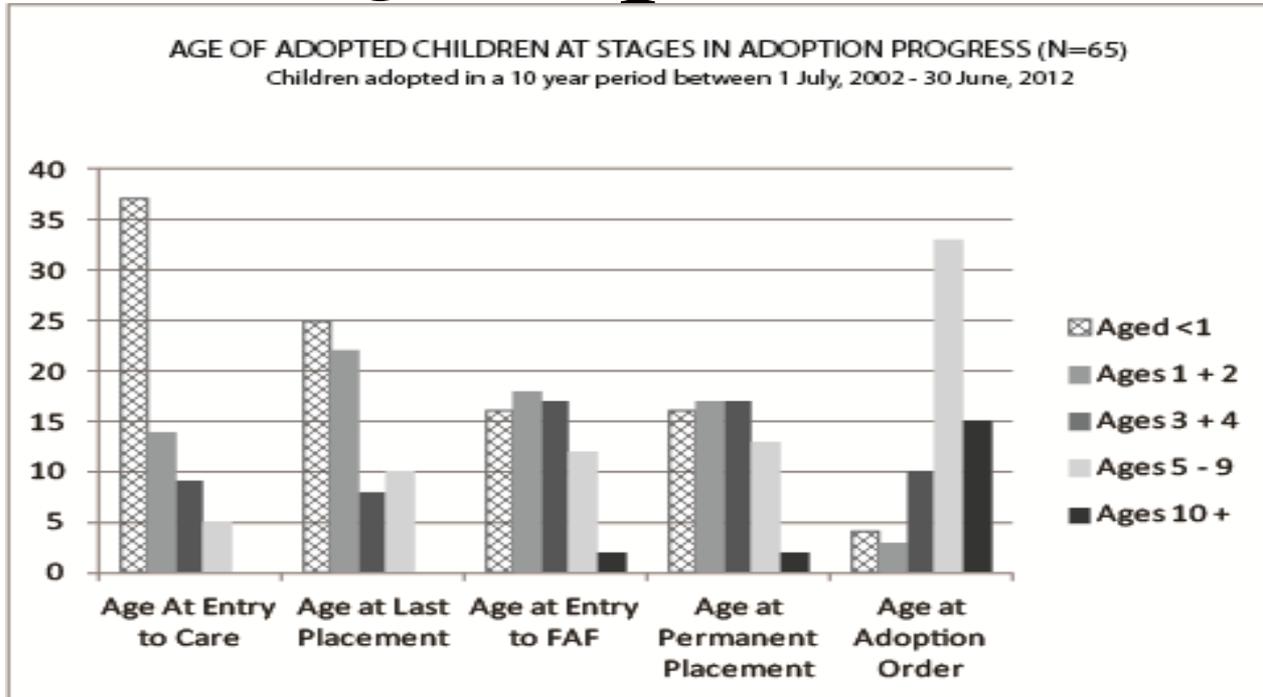
- NSW Find a Family program has an average of 180 children in permanent foster care in the program in any one year.
- One third adopted or with adoption plan- at a range of ages
- Many have significant behaviour problems making foster care unstable, were in sibling groups and have previously experienced multiple placements



Birth parents experience

- Already dealing with permanent removal
- Few contested the adoption: 9/65 contested and only 2 adoptions were contested by both parents
- 6 young people consented to their own adoption (only consent needed from those over twelve years of age)
- Ongoing contact – only 6 parents failed to have contact

Age of the 65 adopted children

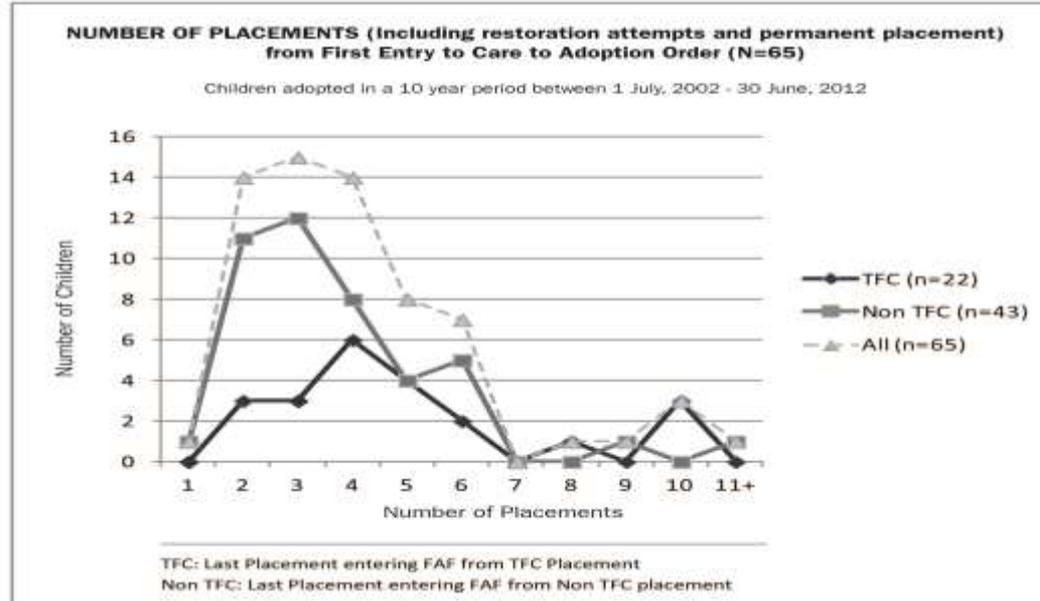


Age 0-12 on entry

- At entry: 0-3 years were highest percentage
 - 37 under one at last crisis entry
 - 47 were under age 3 at last crisis entry
- At adoption: most completed by age 5-9

Placements history of children

Stability in Find a Family is 73% by first placement and 93% by the second placement (Tregeagle, Cox et al. 2011).

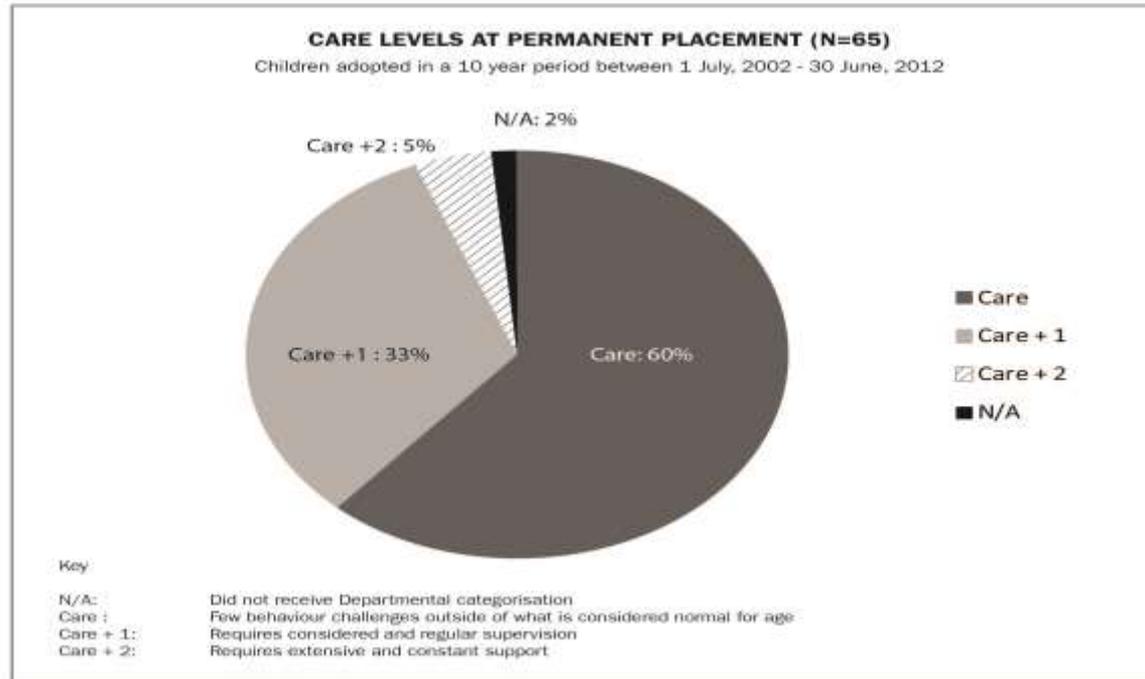


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Placement History

- Worst experiences were of 10-12 placements
- Twenty-two children had experienced 5 placements or more

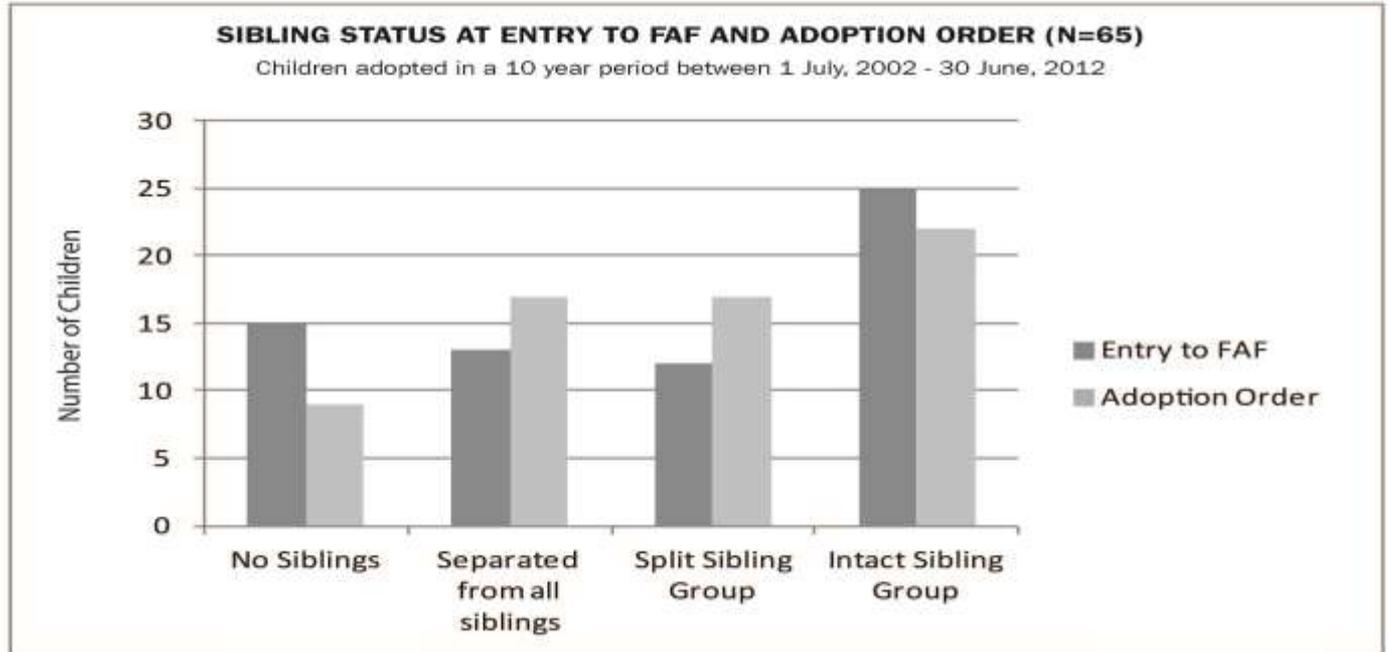
Behaviour of children



Behaviour problems

- 38% had significant problems
- 5 required extensive support

Siblings



Siblings- patterns changed

- Ten children in intact sibling groups post adoption- with two groups of 3 siblings placed

During adoption process:

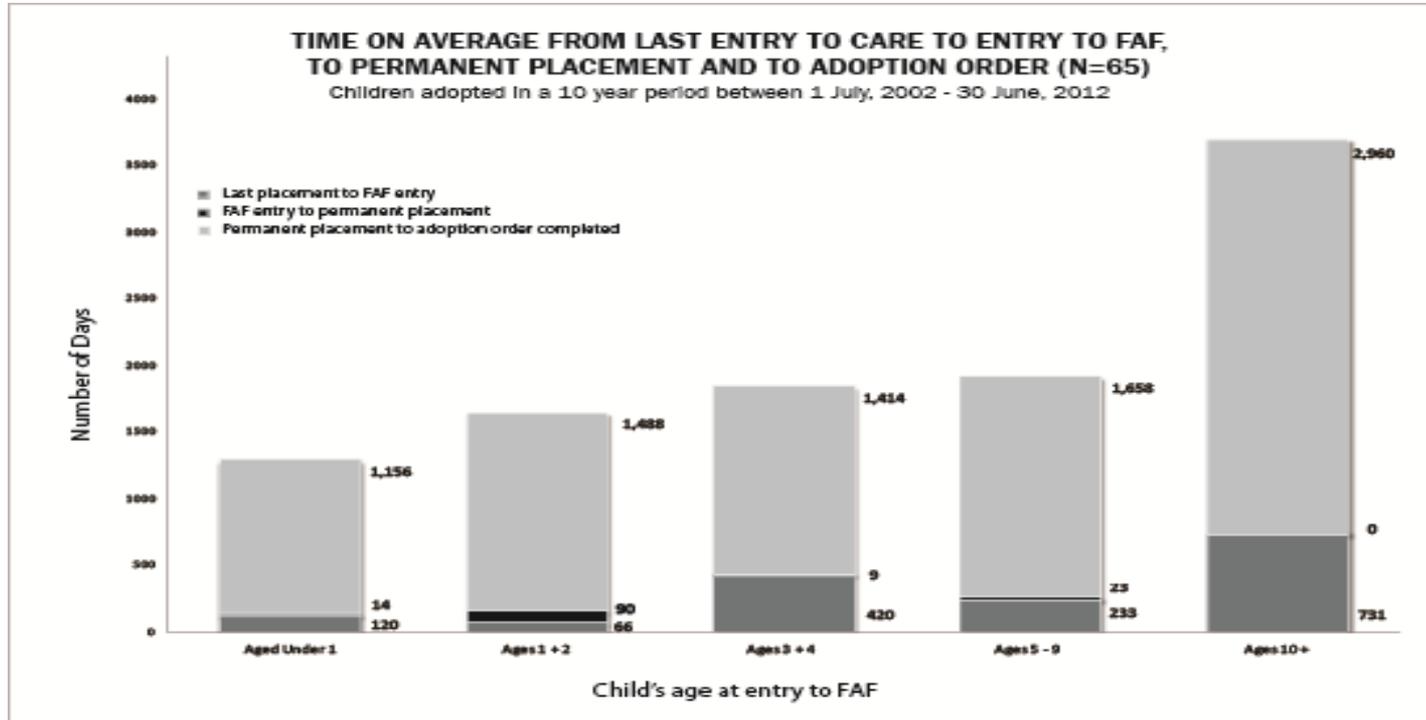
- Some separated (13 were originally with siblings)
- 46 already separated and some siblings were united/reunited
- 6 were 'single' children

How long does adoption take?

- Related to age of child
- Average time from last crisis placement to adoption is 4.4 years
- Babies - 4.5 months to permanent family, 43 months to adoption finalisation
- Children over 10 years– 24 months to permanent family and 123 months to adoption finalisation
- Less time for children from the TFC programs



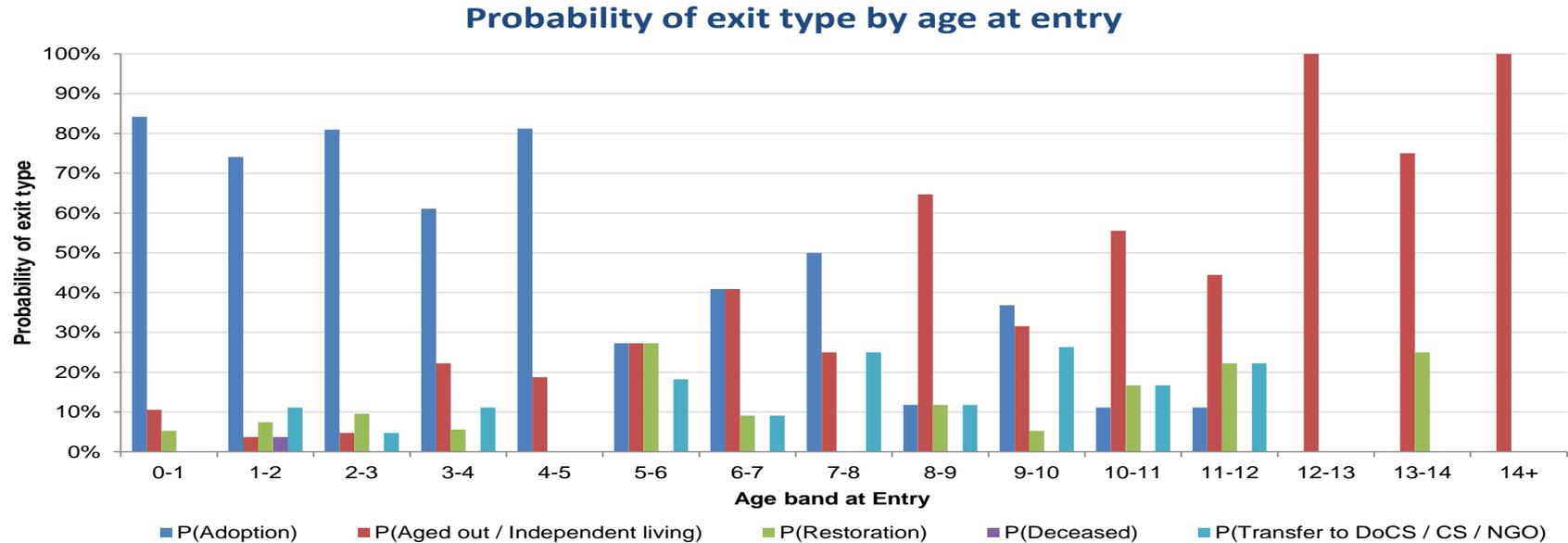
How long does it take?



What happened to the others

- Studied 74 children from intensive restoration program
- 22 adopted
- 12 left for kin, independent living
- 40 remained:
 - » 7 planning for adoption
 - » 5 with previous carers who didnt want to adopt
 - » 7 discovered to be aboriginal
 - » 2 self restored as older
 - » 3 in kin
 - » 2 in bridging and uncertain outcomes
 - » 1 disability
 - » 13 in long term care with no adoption plan

The likelihood of adoption ?



Probability of adoption changes with age

- The advantage of a system is that children find permanency even if adoption cannot occur
- Some from TFC stayed with those carers
- Others remained with foster carers
 - Where there was strong bond
 - Where foster carers did not want financial burden
 - Where new family was reluctant

Our learning

- Pro-active approach essential
- Specialist skills needed in welfare and legal spheres
- Adoptions are most timely with intensive restoration placements integrated
- The younger the child the easier to recruit and stop damage
- Birth parents see the importance of adoption for the child
- Children grateful and consent to their own adoption wherever possible

TWENTY YEAR OUTCOMES STUDY BEING PROPOSED WITH
PROFESSOR HARRIETT WARD

**Consider the child's
right to a family and
to have
developmental
needs met**



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Concern with Concurrent Placements

- Australian system finds permanency faster –no adoption orphans
- Our system avoids issues of ‘ambiguity’ for workers, carers and children
- Our system is easier for birth families- separation of decisions and workers
- We work with over twos and sibling groups (doesn’t happen in UK or US concurrent placements)
- Possibility of discovering Aboriginal heritage means flexibility needed
- Potential carers more likely to come forward here



What are the alternatives?

- Third Party Orders
 - Legal challenges rarely successful but destabilise placements
 - Do not give guarantees over 18 years

Foster care reform- Queensland and Victorian recent experiences

Early intervention- yet to see impact on significant substance use, mental illness, chronic homelessness

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