**Deinstitutionalisation- a global effort to improve developmental outcomes for children**

The December 2023 issue of Adoption & Fostering includes an article from the English and Romanian Adoption Study (ERA) established by the late Professor Sir Michael Rutter (Rutter & Team, 1998). The prospective longitudinal study follows a cohort of adoptees into young adulthood who experienced severe deprivation in Romanian institutions during their early life. The study published in this issue explores the voices of a subgroup of the original participants who have become parents (Kennedy et al., 2023). Their reaching parenthood makes us acutely aware of the passage of time. It is hard to believe that it has been over 30 years since the devastating pictures of children living under inhumane conditions in Romanian institutions were broadcasted across the globe. The living conditions were filthy without sufficient food, interpersonal care or cognitive stimulation (Sonuga-Barke et al., 2017).

In the years to come, the findings from ERA influenced guidelines for clinical practice and diagnosis. Its data contributed to the re-classification of attachment disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the NICE guidelines on attachment in children in care (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (UK), 2015) and the Practice Parameters for the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (Zeanah et al., 2016). It has become part of the AQA A-level Psychology syllabus and is included as a case study in many developmental psychology textbooks. Lastly, it inspired international campaigns for the deinstitutionalisation of children (e.g., Lumos, 2016).

Sadly, neither institutional care, nor the factors that lead to its establishment in Romania are a thing of the past. In an attempt to increase the population, the dictator Nikolae Ceaușescu banned contraceptives and abortions leading to almost a doubling of maternal death rates due to unsafely performed “illegal” abortions. Families were often too poor to provide for their children and had to give them into the “care” of the state (Hord et al., 1991). Looking at the political shift to the right in many countries (or within individual states in case of the US), women’s rights to their own bodies are again under threat in the United States (Davis, 2022), Poland (Kehmová, 2023) and Italy (Caruso, 2023) to name a few.

Institutional care is still the reality for millions of children with estimates ranging from 3.18 to 9.42 million. The regions with the largest numbers of children living in institutional care are south Asia, Europe and central Asia (2.14 million combined; Desmond et al., 2020). While often wrongly referred to as orphanages, it is important to stress that across the world 80% of children in institutional care have at least one living parent they could be reunited with ((Csáky, 2009)). Particularly in lower income countries, abuse or neglect are *not* the main reasons for children entering institutional care (IJzendoorn et al., 2020), but poverty (Better Care Network, 2017). Another reason contributing to placement into institutional care which should be highlighted is the stigma associated with children born to unwed mothers in some countries, including Saudi Arabia (Albar, 2016; Aldoreeb, 2021; IJzendoorn et al., 2020).

While quality of care differs between institutions, staff-to-child ratios are usually insufficient and classed as “globally depriving” (IJzendoorn et al., 2020). The negative long-term consequences of institutional care on development have been well established (Berens & Nelson, 2015; IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2017). Deinstitutionalisation on the other hand seems to provide developmental catch-up with regard to growth, head circumference and cognition, but not socio-emotional development according to a meta-analysis (IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Because of their strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, the authors however stress that their analysis likely underestimates the positive effects of deinstitutionalisation. Within the Bucharest Early Intervention project, where children were randomly assigned to a limited number of foster-care placements or care as usual (remaining in the institution), a positive effect of foster care on internalising problems was found (King et al., 2023).

Reforms in childcare provision between 2005 to 2012 have already led to replacement of hundreds of institutions across Europe and Central Asia with family-based care. For instance, the number of children in institutional care has reduced by 50% in Moldova and 28% in the Republic of Macedonia (UNICEF, 2018). Further key policy and practice recommendations for deinstitutionalisation have been issued by the Lancet Commission “Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children” (Goldman et al., 2020). In addition to recommendations around the transition to family-based care, they include the *prevention* of child-parent separation through early multilevel support.

While deinstitutionalisation is not an easy task, it is a necessary one to improve children’s long-term developmental outcomes. The importance of prospective longitudinal, natural experimental research designs to inform policy and practice change must be underscored. Given that it has already been 30 years since the plight of institutional care in Romania was broadcasted to the public, acceleration of deinstitutionalisation should be a global effort.

**The current issue**

In one way or the other, the articles in this issue can be grouped under the topic facilitators and barriers to wellbeing. In the study by Kennedy and colleagues (2023), mothers with a history of early institutional care and their adoptive parents voice benefits and challenges of becoming a parent. Amongst the benefits is a sense of pride in the new role. The case study by Zhu et al. (2023) explores if the wellbeing of care-experienced young people can be increased through a compassion-focused therapy group (“Building Your Self-Confidence”). On the flip side, O’Sullivan reports on the experiences of Special Guardians (all grandmothers) and the complex emotions they are experiencing due to their role including guilt, inadequacy and empowerment.

Two articles explore the impact of structural changes on wellbeing of young people in care. Alyson Rees reports results from the Fostering Well-being programme which aims to improve children’s wellbeing by including the foster carer into the child’s professional support team. Amongst other elements, the programme produced masterclasses in co-production with foster carers and care-experienced young people. Lastly, Mandi MacDonald reports on a service evaluation of a specialised residential facility providing short-term placements for children who have already experienced multiple care disruptions with the aim of achieving placement stability and long-term wellbeing.

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