

A kit of their own

Lael Sharland, Nadine Kilmister and Fiona Coy outline the development and production of personal kits for children and young people in care

Introduction

Personal resource kits were developed for children and young people in the custody and/or guardianship of the Chief Executive of Child, Youth and Family as a result of recommendations made in the ministerial review undertaken by former Principal Youth Court Judge Mick Brown in 2000. Judge Brown emphasised the need to ensure that children and young people are the central focus of care placement and that care management is carried out in accordance with the objectives of the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989. He further recommended that 'children and young people in care be provided with kits containing age-appropriate information about being in care and their rights, a scrap book and personal record of being in care, and a suitable bag or backpack for their belongings, inscribed with their name'.

In 2002 an intra-agency project team comprising members from the Child, Youth and Family national office teams of communications and service policy and development was established to implement this recommendation by producing a backpack containing the kits recommended by Judge Brown. The project team adopted a participatory approach in content and design and so engaged with children and young people in care or who had a previous involvement with Child, Youth and Family.

Methodology

The methodology focused on the impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) on the extent and nature of participation by children and young people in the decision-making process. The complementary interface between UNCROC and the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act supports the view that children's 'expressed needs are relevant to the construction and implementation of social policies and practices' (Mayall, 2000). We explored the literature as widely as possible for examples of participation and analysis of what works. For a full list of references please see the Child, Youth and Family intranet, under 'links' on the home page.

For this project, information was gathered from a number of groups.

1. A group of children and young people from each Child, Youth and Family residence aged from 11 to 16 years. All participants were subject to Family or Youth Court orders.
2. Two focus groups – one in Wellington, made up of young people aged between 11 and 16, and one in New Plymouth, made up of children aged 8 to 11.
3. An ad hoc group of young women who were in care.
4. A support group for young people and adults who had previously been in care.

We adopted a group interviewing technique, which is a qualitative methodological approach to gathering information that is both inductive and naturalistic. The process allows participants to express their thoughts, ideas and experiences, and, in this respect, their information is not able to be easily measured or statistically tested. Semi-structured interviews and discussion sessions in the groups allow participants to 'describe their experiences of the world' (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991). The use of both open and closed questions is an opportunity to gain greater insight. Foddy (1993) discusses the advantages and problems when constructing questions and surmises that a 'judicious mix of open and closed questions is best' as responses will then 'reflect the respondents' worlds rather than the researchers' '. Data produced in this manner is rich in detail.

Group forums provide credibility and validation of the children and young people's views and wishes and, in turn, this provides a description of their perception of being in care. Benefits include obtaining large and rich amounts of data in the respondents' own words and the opportunity to address gaps in service delivery. This can lead to creating a product that is child-focused, and meaningful and relevant to the children and young people.

Focus group forums do present challenges. The small number of participants limits generalisation to a larger population. An opinionated member can also bias results and the interaction between participants may not be independent of one another. To relieve our own anxiety about appropriate participation, and its limitations, we were significantly reassured by

the literature that described what was important to children and young people in care, and their views on being consulted.

The participants

A project team member consulted with each residential manager who arranged for the young people to select a representative group from among them to present their issues. The four residences (Northern Residential Centre, Lower Northern Residence, Kingslea and Puketai) were then involved in the project.

A meeting was held with social workers and supervisors from three Wellington Service Delivery

Units (SDUs). Social workers then nominated children and young people aged between 11 and 16 years. The children's caregivers were contacted and arrangements were made to meet with the children and young people in their homes. At these meetings voluntary participation was again emphasised. Those who chose to consider the project were left with an invitation and consent form and a few days later each child and young person was contacted. Six young people agreed to participate.

In New Plymouth, a teleconference was arranged with site supervisors and they were briefed about the project. The supervisors then advised social workers who identified children they believed would be appropriate focus group members. The social workers spoke with the children and their caregivers about the project and, again, six children agreed to participate. In both Wellington and New Plymouth the participants were transported to and from the meeting venues, where workshop materials and some

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mock-up products were available to stimulate discussion and enable feedback on preferences and views. A few months later the two groups were reconvened and participants shown the results of their combined efforts – personal kits with the key contents they had decided were most important, in the colours and designs they selected. As a sign of appreciation, after each focus group session these participants were given a \$30 voucher from either a stationery or music store.

There was a key facilitator for each focus group session and in Wellington the project team joined the group for parts of the day. A shared lunch and a tour of the Beehive provided much needed opportunities for free communication and engagement between the young people and adult team members.

Product development

This engagement with the young people was essential, and their possible distrust of authority figures made a careful and thoughtful process equally essential. Through not only asking questions but involving the young people in a range of activities and watching their responses to each of the products, we learnt about their preferences and needs. Feedback on the content important to the participants was recorded and their artwork was gathered for favourite colours and styles.

Judge Brown's recommendations provided a base from which to develop the resource kits. Residential participants, while ambivalent about the concept of the memory book, confirmed the need for a rights and information product and

clearly preferred something in a card size rather than a pamphlet.

Group participants in New Plymouth and Wellington were shown mock ups, which included different bag types, books, posters and rights information.

Production

DNA, the design agency, was briefed on the basis of this feedback. Any design group contracted by Child, Youth and Family must clearly

understand the importance of the “no brand” look and, in this instance, be able to bring the participants' thoughts and feelings into the final product. When working on a project such as this, it is essential to remember that the children in care are already regarded as “different” and singled out by their peers. The products had to be functional and ordinary, not “way out” or identifiable, and this was a key message from the groups. The results

of these efforts culminated in the production of the first draft resource kits. These were checked by all those who had been consulted originally (providing they were still available) and received their approval.

Resource kits

The resource kits are available in two types: one for children up to seven years old and the other for those aged eight and over. The backpacks are blue, black and green, and these colours were unanimously chosen by the focus groups. The design is trendy as well as sturdy



and functional. Cross-over bags were provided as examples but the groups felt that these would date too quickly. The pack was a requirement of the Brown Report and, because the design and colours was chosen by the group participants, we were confident it would be used. To date, this has proved correct. They can be replaced annually.

The memory book was very popular and some of the participants began writing and drawing in the books as soon as they received them. The books include a few pages of prompts to help fill in information such as:

- personal details and characteristics
- favourite people and things
- skills
- background – reasons for being in care
- family – who they see, when and, if applicable, who they don't and why
- caregivers – who they are with and why
- people to talk to about what is happening
- social worker's name
- special memories
- friends' names and other contacts.

An important feature of these books is that they are private and belong to the child or young person exclusively. They are a portable place to write things about themselves and memories of their life. They are not a case recording mechanism and, unless the kids choose to show them, social workers cannot access them. They can be replaced on request.

Disposable cameras were included as part of the packs because feedback from the groups indicated they did not have many photographs of themselves or others in their lives. As some

children move frequently, taking pictures is a way to keep a record of special moments, friends, schools and other important things. The cameras may also help caregivers and the children and young people participate in recording and making sense of changes in the child's and young person's life. This item is a one-off.

Basic toiletry items were included because of specific feedback from the ad hoc focus group. Having their own toiletries, such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, body wash, comb etc, when they arrived in care was a comfort. The kit for the younger children has a child's toothbrush and toothpaste. These items are provided only once.

A concertina fold card was cheap, simple to produce, small enough to be hidden in a wallet and colourful enough to be easily found. The slogan 'life is choice – and it's mine' was printed on the card. Often children in care feel they have no choices – they have been taken from their homes and may be living with people they do not know. The theme has a two-part message: to reinforce that there are choices about what to do and the positive message that life is good. The choices of images, bombing and colours all come from the feedback and drawings done in the focus groups. The card contains information that was discussed by the older focus group participants and includes:

- general rights (UNCROC) and their rights if picked up by the police
- pocket money guidelines
- minimum wage requirements
- a space to write house rules, other important information and phone numbers.

They are replaceable on request.

A \$5 telephone card is included in the older age kit to allow the young person to contact whoever they may need to, such as caregivers, family or friends. This item is a one-off.

Based on feedback from the groups, we suggested that social workers include any other material that could be useful in specific situations, such as street maps for kids moving to unfamiliar neighbourhoods, bus timetables, other personal items, toys and school materials from home. Information from SDUs suggests there is wide variation in this practice because different sites choose the items that they identify as meeting local needs.

Current status

Over 6,000 complete kits have been distributed – 45 per cent to children aged seven and under and the remainder to those over eight years of age. Feedback to date is positive, but there are some concerns that not all children in care are getting the resource kits when they should. Further evaluation is required to determine whether the pack is still meeting the needs of children and young people in care.

Learning points

Several key learning points and observations have emerged through this exercise. One of the most important points is that this experience confirmed that children and young people prioritise having their say, and being listened to, over getting their own way. When given the opportunity and appropriate information, children and young people can make informed choices and decisions that are positive, purposeful and practical. The completed kits

reflect this. Adults, the other professionals, who were informed about the project all had ideas about items they thought should be included in the kit, but the children and young people made their preferences clear. They identified items and styles which were fashionable and meaningful for them.

In terms of care experiences, the literature indicates that key issues such as contact with original family and siblings, confidentiality, the importance of the social worker as a constant in their lives despite caregiver changes, participation in planning and reviews, and the importance of an advocate

are what is important to children and young people (Munro, 2001). These themes resonate with our experience of the focus groups and are reflected in the resource kits' contents.

Some staff were concerned that bringing children

together was an invasion of their privacy and they may not want others to know they are in care. There was no evidence of this in either the Wellington or New Plymouth groups. It may have drawn the children closer together because they met others with similar life experiences. The younger children were forthcoming in their reasons for being in care and explained without prompting why they weren't able to live with their parents. They provided assurance later in written feedback that they felt good about getting together, and that they had gained a better understanding of their rights from the experience.

The kit provides social workers with a tool to engage in a meaningful way with the children

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and young people they are responsible for. The memory books are designed to assist in dealing with issues of particular importance to the children and young people, such as information that is sometimes confusing, grief and loss associated with separation, a sense of belonging, and the development of new ties and emotional bonds.

The intra-agency collaboration process was an essential component that contributed to an effective response. The members of the project team brought different strengths and abilities. Members from service policy and development had skills in the area of interviewing, gathering information and children's issues around participation and care, and the communications representative was expert in product design and development. Bringing these skills and abilities together created a pack that children and young people can call their own.

Following this exercise, and with a taste of participatory success, we continued to explore opportunities to engage young people in care in further developmental processes, especially in service policy and resource development. We soon realised that an ongoing collective voice in this would provide a more substantial and meaningful interaction for children and young people in care. Shier provides an assessment tool to help understand individual and departmental

commitment and plan ongoing participation (2001). The path from ratification of UNCROC over 10 years ago to now has been marked by significant improvements in awareness of the importance of listening to children's voices.

This exercise showed what we could achieve in terms of participation on specific issues. Our challenge now is to find ways to secure the ongoing involvement of children and young people in care in consultation processes relevant to many areas of Child, Youth and Family. We have taken the first step on that path, and have just achieved approval for a youth in care reference group to be established under the leadership of the Chief Social Worker's Office.

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