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Fostered children 'disturbed'

27 February 2006
By ELEANOR WILSON

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Children in foster care are at high risk of experiencing mental health problems, according to the findings of a survey by a Christchurch doctor.

The study, carried out by Canterbury University's Dr Michael Tarren-Sweeney with Professor Philip Hazell for the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP), looked at nearly 350 cared-for children and found they had "exceptionally poor mental health and socialisation".

Tarren-Sweeney, a senior lecturer in child and family psychology at the School of Education, said the study was the first of its kind.

"More than half of boys and girls were described as having clinically significant psychiatric disturbances.

"These disturbances were complex and characterised by attachment difficulties, relationship insecurity, sexual behaviours, trauma-related anxiety, conduct problems and defiance, and inattention or hyperactivity, as well as uncommon problems such as self-injury and food-maintenance behaviours."

He said ensuring there was proper psychological support for children and their carers was essential in the light of the findings.

Christchurch Family and Foster Care Association chairwoman Pamela Turner said 39 years as a foster carer had taught her to expect children in her care to have psychological problems.

"I think it's the separation from their parents, basically, the separation from their own mum and dad, no matter how good the foster carers are and there're some very, very good ones."

The reasons for the children being taken from their parents could also contribute to poor emotional health. "I don't think I know any foster children that aren't emotionally disturbed or, in

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the long term, won't have mental-health problems," Turner said.

She said children often were moved from family to family and, even at a very early age, that could cause emotional and behavioural problems.

The most disturbed children tended to go through even more placements – as many as one a month – because carers could not cope, causing the children further psychological damage.

"If they're moved around from place to place, they're not going to form any attachments," said Turner.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, where a child has been affected by their mother's drinking during pregnancy, and the impact of drug addiction in mothers also contributed to such conditions as hyperactivity.

She said some children had counselling through the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), if they had been the victim of a crime, or received some help from Child, Youth and Family services (CYFs), but support was not always available for them or their carers.

"They have to realise, these aren't like other kids. They've been through a lot," said Turner.

The study, being published by the Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, asked the carers of 347 children in court-ordered foster care and kinship care with relatives in New South Wales to complete a mail survey using child behaviour and assessment checklists.

Its findings are to be used by the RACP, which represents more than 9000 doctors in New Zealand and Australia, to draw up a policy on healthcare for children in out-of-home care.

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