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The main thing is knowing that you have support behind you: The Lived Experience of Children in Therapeutic Foster Care


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Treatment and Care for Kids (TrACK) program: an overview

- The TrACK program was the first therapeutic foster care program in Australia, explicitly founded on emerging trauma knowledge
- It was designed to offer a **therapeutic, trauma informed foster care placement experience** to children and young people who had experienced residential care and/or multiple placements.
- As such, the TrACK program was developed as an **alternative to residential care** for children who had experienced trauma and had complex needs

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Overarching premise of the program


- Relationships and environment are the primary therapeutic 'tools'
- 7 vital components:- bodily comfort/differentiations/rhythmic interactions/predictability/dependability/personalised training/carer care
- Team around the child/ young person: creation of a therapeutic environment and community

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Elements of TrACK Program Design


Core elements of TrACK include:

- **Capable, trained carers who were prepared to commit**
- **A Care Team**
- **A Therapeutic Specialist**
- **Manageable Caseloads**
- **Discretionary Funding**
- **A model based on emerging knowledge**

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A three phased approach

1. Placement Orientation
2. Placement Integration
3. Placement Consolidation

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Evaluation Design

The study design was informed by a mixed method approach. An international literature review scoped the context of the Treatment and Care for Kids Program.

Client file data from **2003 to 2017** was examined

In depth individual and focus group interviews were used as a means of capturing detailed stories and to ensure that the voices of young people, and carers and other professionals were captured appropriately.

Narrative inquiry as a research method has been identified as having particular appeal in 'its capacity to deal with the issues of human centeredness and complexity in a holistic and sensitive manner' (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.64)

Findings: client profile

48 children and young people have experienced the TrACK program. There are **thirty-one former and eighteen current** children and young people.

19 of the forty-eight people came to the TrACK program directly from a residential care program.

What was particularly striking is the extreme **instability** that some of the children had experienced prior to TrACK, with **15 children having lived in more than six placements before TrACK.**

History of Adverse Childhood Experience

ACE Category	Number of Children
Parental/carer criminal behaviour (moderate/severe)	25
Parental/carer mental illness (moderate/severe)	20
Parental/carer substance use (severe)	28
Exposure to parental/carer violence (severe)	32
Multiple Placements prior to TrACK (more than 6)	15
Environmental neglect	25
Emotional Neglect (moderate/severe)	32
Emotional/Psychological Abuse (moderate/severe)	35
Sexual Abuse (severe)	10
Physical Abuse (severe)	30

Outcomes

Placement Stability

One measure of stability is the actual length of stay in the TrACK program. As noted, many children referred to this program had experienced multiple placement disruptions and as a consequence had not had opportunities to form lasting secure relationships.

The median length of stay for those young people who are former clients of the TrACK program is 2 years and 9 months. The range of stay varies from a minimum period of 5 months to 9 years and 2 months in TrACK. **Importantly, of the cohort of 30 former TrACK clients, only three of these identified a placement breakdown as the reason for exiting the program. Thus, the remaining 27 children left the program in a planned manner.**

Arousal and Self Regulation

As is common with children who have experienced trauma at a young age, young people in TrACK had difficulties recognising, identifying, expressing and regulating their emotions. After being placed in a TrACK placement, carers are trained in how to help the child regulate their emotions during heightened arousal moments. Carers and young people spoke of real gains in this area.

As one of the carers reported, the journey towards emotional regulation is far from complete but every day, she is happy to observe the little milestones of her children as they attempt to make sense of their "wounded souls".

The relational context for TrACK children

A clear finding regarding relational capacity were the consistent reports of improved, stable and warm relationships that had formed between children, and their carers. ... in spite of the initial presentation of extreme behaviours which were not conducive to forming a relationship, as a result of repeated opportunities taken by carers to respond gently and to remain regulated, children began to trust and to heal.

Children were noted to be now able to accept affection. In instances where they felt like active participants in the family, they were described by carers as 'developing into a mature and likeable [people]' and where they enjoyed shared interests, hobbies and recreational pursuits with their carer family.

Finally, relationships with peers continued to be a challenge for the majority of past and present TrACK clients.

Multidimensional Aspects of TrACK Design

TrACK is a multi-dimensional program involving critical roles and responsibilities, which work in partnership surrounding the child, across three phases of program operation. Implementing a phased approach to care enables a more holistic and longitudinal approach to the child, recognizing that damage that took years to accumulate may equally take years to ameliorate .

The professionals comprising the Care Team include the carer as an equal, empowered participant who experiences support, education and advocacy from other members of the team.



from deprivation and threat to stability.....

This evaluation found that after more than fifteen years of operating the TrACK program the dominant theme is one of being stable and settled as they approach adulthood.

The term 'stability' here refers not only to placement but also:

- stable and secure relationships within a family environment.
- stability of 'place' and connections to local community
- stability of informed professionals who form a team around the child.
- knowing and being known by the school and being a stable and active participant in learning and friendships.



From Stability to Integration

The second theme integrates the work of Dan Siegel (2012) and shows how children move from stability to integration. Integration shows the penultimate stage that indicates a child has successfully healed not only their physical and emotional wounds but also feels wholesome in their soul and spirit.

At this stage, children and young people are able to experience love, develop trust and be integrated in a family system to which they [can] fully belong.



Integration is about Love

Based on the findings in this evaluation, a key outcome has been found and theorised. The caring environment should provide comfort and joy to the child.

We argue that for children to feel accepted, complete, and for them to feel safe and to finally integrate in the family as a whole, they need to feel deeply loved that is: experience a deep sense of care, concern, and connectedness.



Integration through values transmission and development of empathy

Another way in which TrACK children showed integration and consolidation was by developing empathy and values quite similar to the people that they considered family. Value transmission however, is still an area currently unexplored in research. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent different models of therapeutic foster care may assist the development of values such as empathy within the child or young person in care. This is an important consideration as the capacity for empathy is associated with generally positive life outcomes and as indication of healing (Morelli, Lieberman & Zaki 2015; Howe 2012).



Darren's story

"I feel 100% that this is the right place...I have settled down"

Darren is 18 years old and has aged out of the TrACK program. He was accepted into the TrACK program in 2010 following multiple failed placements in the generalist therapeutic care.

As a child, Darren experienced severe emotional and physical neglect. His home environment featured substance abuse, extreme violence and criminal activities. In 2008, after a failed kinship placement with his maternal grandmother, Darren's mother relinquished his care, citing inability to manage him and his brother's behaviours. As a result, Darren and his brother were removed from the care of their mother and placed in residential care where he continued to feel isolated, unwanted and unloved.

Darren initially presented with a range of challenging behaviours. The care team described his behaviour as "oppositional, controlling and irrational." He had trouble building trust with others, struggled with learning difficulties, acute sexualised behaviours, as well as internalised emotions where he blamed himself for his mother's rejection while at the same time assuming care of his younger brother.



Darren's story

The care team further stated that Darren had "elevated depression, experienced dissociation and avoidance and had trouble regulating his emotional arousal". A paediatrician also diagnosed Darren as having behavioural difficulties including opposition defiant behaviours, suggesting inattention and hyperactivity, anxiety and delayed behavioural development.

Darren has shown enormous progress. The care team have noted that Darren has a much improved self-esteem, reduced anxiety and is building positive relationships with peers and adults. Darren is now able to regulate his emotions and manage his anger issues successfully, and there has been no reported cases of inappropriate sexual behaviours since he stated his TrACK placement. He has much improved emotional and physical health and has a strong sibling relationship with his younger brother, which had been threatened in residential care where the two boys were constantly pitted against each other.

We [the researchers] spoke to Darren and he presented as a gentle, well-humoured, mature, responsible, well-adjusted 18-year-old young adult with career aspirations in the sporting industry. In the future, he hopes to play cricket or footy at a professional level as he has already been identified as having strong and competitive talent both by his school and Nationally.



*Daren continues to live with his foster parents as a completely included member of the family despite the fact that his foster care arrangement ended at the age of 18. His family have told him that he has a home with them for the rest of his life, which has created a sense of stability and love for him. He knows he has a home for life. **As Daren says “the main thing was knowing that you have that support behind you.”***