

System fails foster children and parents

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New research shows that early intervention and support for families is critical if foster children are to be reunited quickly and safely with their birth parents.

The UNSW study, "Accomplishing Permanency: Reunification Pathways and Outcomes for Foster Children," launched this week, followed 168 children from 96 NSW families over a four-year period. The study explored the perspectives of caseworkers, carers and parents in the NSW Barnardos temporary care program.

"Provision of intervention and support is currently sparse and infrequent," said the study's chief investigator, Associate Professor Elizabeth Fernandez. "Policies of family preservation emphasise reunification of children with their birth families wherever possible but this can only happen if the proper support is provided to parents."

Current national data shows the number of children in out of home care in Australia has increased by 33% since 2007, with NSW recording one of the highest rates, equal to the Northern Territory.

"Reunification needs to be planned and purposeful to avert children experiencing multiple placement changes and disrupted attachments," said Associate Professor Fernandez.

Children with [parental substance abuse](#) issues had an 86% lower rate of reunification; children in care for abuse/neglect had an 83% lower rate; and those in care for reasons relating to [domestic violence](#) had a 73% lower rate of [reunification](#).

From the cohort of 168 children, 53% were reunified during the study, however almost a quarter of the cohort took 12 months to be reunified with their families and 13% of children had already experienced five foster care placements prior to their current placement.

Associate Professor Fernandez launched her research at a UNSW symposium, A Systemic Approach to Admission to Care, a review of 20 years of temporary family care.

International guest speaker Professor Harriet Ward, Director of the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University, discussed the impact of abuse and neglect on babies and young children in the UK.

"The solution to [children](#) peddling in and out of care is to understand the factors contributing to adverse parental behaviour," said Professor Ward. "We need to realistically assess parents, their difficulties and whether they can be overcome."

Provided by University of New South Wales

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