



The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2800

To the Secretary,

I write in response to your advertisement for submissions related to the proposed **Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care**. I offer my thoughts as an experienced Foster Carer. In this capacity I have worked with various foster care agencies, as well as the Department of Human Services and a Permanent Care agency. I also offer my thoughts as a well educated parent and practicing Primary School teacher. After 5 years of waiting my husband and I were awarded legal guardianship of a child in our care last year.

It is heartbreaking to hear that the figures for voluntary foster carers are on the decline whilst the number of children who need this help is on the increase. Only last week, Mr. John Gates, Oz Child CEO was quoted on this very topic in our local paper. Oz Child figures indicate a drop from 13,500 foster families in 1999 to 8000 in 2001. Mr. Gates went on to say that the lack of local foster carers has resulted in children under protective orders being placed in care over 40 km away from their community, at times.

I have listened with interest when the topic of foster care is discussed on talkback radio and it seems to me that the future for foster care is bleak if the callers are any yardstick of public sentiment. A recurring theme/concern raised by carers seems to be that **the rights of the child in care are being overlooked in favour of the rights of parent and birth family**. Disparity exists between amount of **support and rehabilitation given to parents with the goal of the reunification of families** and the support offered to children placed on protection orders.

By way of example I recall attending a meeting at DHS where our child was represented by my husband, myself and a foster care worker. The mother arrived supported by at least 5 or 6 workers or more from various social services.

As an educator I am aware that there are optimal conditions for learning. These conditions include a stable and predictable environment, holistic knowledge of the student, individual and /or small group support and communication between home and school. Experience tells me that these essential ingredients fail to be provided for children in care and that long term this can create social and emotional problems as well as the more obvious academic issues.

Stable and Predictable Environment:

I believe valuable learning time is lost by children in care –particularly those in the early years of schooling.

The little fellow in our care was eight when he arrived and had already attended several schools. He was taken out of school each week by various social workers to visit his mother in rehabilitation. Additionally, our child had 3 hours after school with his maternal grandmother twice weekly, plus regular weekend stays with grandmother.

As a result of all that was happening in his life, our little fellow failed to grasp very much of Grade 3 learning and he became totally confused about who had any authority in his life.

'The Apartment (Department) says I can see mum....' Etc. Almost a 'Big Brother (TV) type of relationship for the child and mother.

Parents of children in Care are given multiple *chances* to change reform and rehabilitate their behaviour.

We were told only that the child in care had a parent in rehabilitation. What we were not told and found out down the track was that this was about the fifth opportunity this parent had been given to dry out. The fifth time or so that our child had been left in limbo believing he would be able to move back with his mother. This child was given false hope and I don't believe this was fair.

Holistic Knowledge of the Student/Communication:

When children are placed in foster care and/or within the school system, the exchange of information is minimal to protect the privacy of the parents.

We received no information about vaccinations status, past illness', hospitalisation, dental history etc. We only found out, by chance when our child's mother died, that she had Hepatitis C and Cirrhosis of the liver. This lady also suffered from Bi Polar and major eating disorders. This is important information and yet neither ourselves or the school were privy to it.

It is difficult for foster parents and schools to offer the best care for students in foster care since they are given so little information to work from.

It took us a long time to work out that our child had been physically abused, that he had viewed and heard information and acts which were totally inappropriate for his age. Once we had this information we were better able to address his needs and fears and understand his behaviours.

Social and Emotional Issues:

These issues affect both the child in care and the foster carers. Social workers seem to change constantly, making it difficult to develop a trusting relationship with a social worker over any length of time. A new worker entails the inevitable 'getting to know you' discussions – for the benefit of the new worker - which is hard on both the child and foster parents as everything needs to be restated and re-explained.

We hear much about 'the process' so I have included an example, as follows,

On one occasion, unsupervised access was increased for the child in our care and his parent. This decision was made knowing that the parent was drinking again. The parent had a row with her boyfriend whilst our little fellow hid in the toilet. The child was returned in the middle of a storm having somehow managed to find his way back to us with a very drunk mother. I was told by a social worker that access had been increased because 'the mother had to be given an opportunity to fail 'big-time' so the process could move forward.

Meeting with DHS personnel were routinely scheduled during the working day which was difficult since we both work full-time and there is a limit to the generosity of employers. We were told that DHS workers finish at 5pm.

Finally, the financial assistance offered for raising a child in foster care is no incentive for inspiring the interest of quality foster carers.

Yours Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Clare S. Ziino". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

Mrs. Clare S Ziino