Position Statement 59
The mental health care needs of children in out-of-home care

June 2009

Definition

Out-of-home care is one of a range of services provided to children who are in need of protection and who are unable to live with their parents. Out-of-home care includes residential care, home-based foster care and placement with relatives or kin.

Background

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) is committed to informing and advocating for the appropriate mental health care for children in out-of-home care in order to assist them to achieve their full potential as healthy adults.

Children in out-of-home care experience high rates of developmental and mental health problems. The psychopathology is complex and is currently not well understood, however research suggests that its origin lies in insecure attachments and the cumulative effects of childhood maltreatment. Childhood maltreatment prior to entry into care is common amongst these children. Also, the high prevalence of intellectual disability in this group adds to the complexities of mental health needs. These children warrant special attention and priority access to multi-disciplinary mental health care that is competent in meeting their complex care needs.

The number of children aged 0-17 years in out-of-home care has doubled over the past decade in Australia and increased by 45% since 2000 in New Zealand. In Australia the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care is 8 times that for other children. In New Zealand, Māori children account for 46% of children in care.

Recommendations

- Access to competent, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary mental health services needs to be a priority for children in out-of-home care.

- Increased understanding of the mental health needs of children in out-of-home care by other health professionals should be encouraged to allow effective and cost-efficient ways of providing accessible and timely professional mental health care to this vulnerable group of children.

- The influence of culture on the aetiology and manifestation of mental health problems in Indigenous and Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children in out-of-home care needs to be well understood and translated into the policies and practices associated with caring for these populations.

- Continued research related to children in out-of-home care should inform policies and practices. Further clinical research into the psychological and pharmacological treatment of the complex psychopathology of children in out-of-home care should be encouraged.
Assessment and treatment principles:

1. The early identification of any child in the general community at risk of neglect due to parental mental, physical or social incapacity and the initiation of support strategies.
2. The early identification of and permanent placement of children at risk of chronic maltreatment.
3. Every child entering out-of-home care has a multi-modal mental health assessment as part of the admission to care process.
4. Any child already in care, who does not already have a diagnosis of mental illness, has a multi-modal mental health assessment completed as soon as possible.
5. Children entering or already in out-of-home care, identified through the multi-modal mental health assessments as exhibiting potential psychopathology, undergo a comprehensive mental health assessment within 30 days of admission.
6. All children with intellectual disabilities entering out-of-home care have a comprehensive mental health assessment routinely.
7. A profile based on a developmental framework of psychopathology that identifies the risks and protective factors that contribute to the dynamic of resilience is documented for each child as part of the comprehensive assessment.
8. Treatment plans are developed that organize and prioritize interventions in the major areas of the child’s life i.e. home, peers, school, with the emphasis on enhancing strengths through therapy or activities to promote the child’s development. These plans may include medication to reduce symptoms and facilitate functioning.
9. Provision of integrated multidisciplinary services competent in meeting the complex mental health needs of children in out-of-home care.
10. Children in out-of-home care with mental health problems are given special attention and priority access to mental health services.

To assist in achieving progress in relation to these principles, the College, through its national and regional structures, will work towards:

- Engaging collaboratively with State and Territory Health Departments and Child Welfare agencies in their efforts to establish or enhance systems to ensure all children in out-of-home care are assessed for mental health problems and adequately provided for.
- Creating opportunities to share current knowledge about the neurobiology of maltreatment with other disciplines and organisations as a way of increasing the understanding of the mental health needs of children in out-of-home care by other health professionals, and promoting further research.
- Including the mental health needs of children in out-of-home care in Australia and New Zealand in the core curriculum for specialist training of child and adolescent psychiatrists.
References

For a full list of references please refer to:

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. The Mental health care needs of children in out-of-home care: A report from the expert working committee of the Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. RANZCP, Melbourne. 2008

Adopted: May 2009 (GC2009/2)
Currency: Reviewed every 3 years (next review May 2012)
Owned by: Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry