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“Young children (0 to 3 years) placed in residential care institutions without parents are at risk of harm in terms of attachment disorder, developmental delay and neural atrophy in the developing brain. The neglect and damage caused by early privation of parenting is equivalent to violence to a young child.”

This quotation is from the Executive Summary of the EU / WHO research project “Mapping the number and characteristics of children under 3 in institutions across Europe at risk of harm.” (University of Birmingham, UK Centre for Forensic and Family Psychology ISBN: 0-704-42502-5). This important research report has highlighted the damage which can be done to babies and young children who are placed long-term in “Baby Homes.” Many of these Baby Homes are organised in such a way that babies cannot receive the consistent one-to-one care needed for their optimal development.

In many countries Baby Homes are run by Health Ministries and they place high emphasis on hygiene and the physical care of the children with less emphasis on the interaction necessary for their social and neurobiological development. Poor staffing ratios and the shift-working systems employed in institutional care add to the problem.

It is not as if the effects of placing young children in Baby Homes for long period are unknown. Goldfarb (1945) and Bowlby (1951) were particularly influential and highlighted the emotional, behavioural and cognitive impairment of these children. Langmeier & Matejcek’s research on psychological deprivation in infancy was followed by the 1963 film “Children without Love.” This won both professional recognition plus three awards at the Venice Film Festival but was banned by the Czechoslovak authorities. Numerous other studies have followed and these, together with the development of “attachment theory” (Bowlby 1969), have led to a rethink of placement policies in many countries.

Matejcek: *“For children to develop well, be healthy, self-confident, and useful to society, they must come to as little harm as possible. They should live in the kind of family surroundings that provide the necessary stimuli, appropriately varied and diverse, corresponding to their stage of development. These stimuli, together with the surrounding environment, should create for children a meaningful world permeated with love in the family and free of feelings of insecurity, anxiety or danger. In the*

harmonious surroundings of the family children should form their first and most important emotional bonds, and they should gain the important feeling that they mean something to others around them. This is a positive identity, the awareness of one's own self and one's own worth. For a good development it is also necessary to respect the child's need to have an open future, meaning being able to look forward to or expect something. All of these needs of children should be and are fulfilled when children live together with those to whom they belong and who belong to them. When any of these needs are not met, it is bad for the child."

The EU / WHO research found that in Europe in 2003 Norway, UK, Iceland and Slovenia no longer placed young children into institutional care unless they needed medical treatment. If children needed to be placed outside of their families they were placed in foster care or into adoptive placements. The report shows the proportion of children aged under 3 in institutions with 11 or more children for more than 3 months. With their long history of using residential care "new-EU" countries have the highest proportions but Belgium, Finland, Spain, The Netherlands, Portugal and France are also in the top half of the "league table".

IFCO has noted that in many countries world-wide official policies and working practices are slow to change despite overwhelming evidence of the harmful effects of placement in Baby Homes. An over-emphasis on the rights of parents rather than the rights of children together with slow bureaucratic and judicial systems often mean that vital decisions for young children take much longer than is in their best interests.

IFCO has often heard the arguments that developing family-based alternatives would be expensive, that nobody would volunteer to foster, that if you pay foster parents they will only do it for the money, that staff in residential homes would lose their jobs, and that children can recover anyway! Great progress has been made in confronting these arguments in Romania where official policy is now not to place any child under 2 in a Baby Home. Italy has declared that it will close its Baby Homes in 2006. New-EU Slovenia only places babies and young children in foster care. Similar developments are taking place in some other new-EU countries, in Latin America and in many other parts of the world.

These moves to family placement of children must be well planned and adequate foster carers must be recruited and trained well before closures of institutions take place. For a time, the two systems may need to run side-by-side. The World Bank has offered to help with finance for these transitional arrangements.

IFCO receives regular requests from around the world for help with the development of family-based solutions for children in out-of-home care and is eager to help. However, we are clear that any development of foster care must be not seen just as a cheaper option. Adequate resources must be invested in good social work with birth and foster families both to help prevent breakdown and to support the reintegration of children where appropriate. Foster and kinship carers equally should receive good training, supervision and support of placements. Care plans should be made and regularly reviewed. The views of birth parents and children should be sought and treated with importance. Siblings should wherever possible be kept together.

Foster care takes many forms and is not the answer for all children. Some foster care is short-term with the objective of reuniting children with their own families, and some is quasi-adoptive. Kafala and in-country adoption are important alternatives for children with long-term care needs. However, “permanency” policies should not ignore the views of young people some of whom do not wish to be adopted.

IFCO has noted that in some countries and regions the money and influence of the international adoption lobby may hamper the development of in-country adoption and foster care. Immediate events after the Tsunami disaster gave the world an uncomfortable insight into some of the worst aspects of the international trade in children.

IFCO urges the UN CRC, States Parties and international donors to monitor and help develop in-country family-based placement solutions for children in out-of-home care, particularly babies. International adoption should be seen as a last resort where all other options have been fully explored and only where all stages of the process are transparent and demonstrably free from corruption.

The UN CRC preamble says: “The family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment of growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children... The child should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”

Let us all work together to give every baby the chance to grow up in a family as quickly as possible!

Chris Gardiner.

President, International Foster Care Organisation. 30/6/2005