

Tenterfield: My happy childhood in care

Margaret Irvine

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When I first saw this book, I was slightly taken aback by the title. This personal reaction caused me to reflect a little on how residential care is represented in the wider world. I reached the conclusion that both the media and certain policy documents paint such a poor picture of residential care that we become shocked if anyone says a good word about our profession. Yet in my own experience, I know that a huge amount of excellent work happens. I would say that the majority of young people with whom my colleagues have worked would admit to being better off for having experienced true caring relationships from residential child care practitioners. This book is an affirmation of my personal experience and that of my colleagues.

The author was in care in a residential home in the Lothians, called Tenterfield. She lived there from the age of two until she left care at the age of 16 years old. This is a very simple and readable story of her life in Tenterfield. When I started to read the book I could not put it down, as it was such a positive endorsement of good residential child care. When I was thinking about attachment in relation to this book, two main points emerged. One was that the staff were constant and consistent figures in Margaret's life, especially the head of home. The other was that Tenterfield was the placement of first choice for Margaret from an early age, not into a place of last resort which is what modern residential child care in Scotland has become. Margaret knew from the earliest days that this was her home and that her staff cared deeply for her. In her small anecdotal narratives, her sense of being loved and cared for shines through. Attachment is about people in relationships and Margaret had these relationships in abundance.

I then thought of resilience in relation to Margaret's story. Once again there was a clear message. This home worked on a resilience-building framework before the concept of resilience was ever widely known! Children were encouraged and rewarded for educational achievement. They were provided with good nourishing food, and healthy activities. When they were older they were encouraged in their skills and talents and they were also helped to find appropriate employment. They could return to the home when they were older, so maintained their secure base. Indeed, when her birth parent let her down, Margaret's wedding reception was held at Tenterfield, where the staff laid on the celebrations. The staff in this house worked to build on all of Margaret's strengths and took great pride in her achievements.

I would recommend this book to all practitioners so that they can reflect on how important relationships are in outcomes for the children in their care. The staff at Tenterfield were not qualified in the academic sense but they embodied Roger's core conditions of warmth, empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard. In terms of building attachment and resilience, this staff group were naturals!

As a final comment, I would have to say that social policy still holds dogmatically to the substitute family, and this harms residential child care's ability to be a long-term placement of first resort. Margaret's experience at Tenterfield shows what residential child care has the potential to provide. As such I would also make this book required reading for our policy makers.

Irene Stevens
Lecturer
SIRCC

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