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Book Review

Challenging the conventional wisdom about residential care for children and youth: A good place to grow

By Bruce Henderson

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I need to be clear that I do not come to this review as a dispassionate or objective reviewer. Quite the opposite. I have been an advocate for the premise of this text for a great many years, and I was engaged with the author as an informal advisor as he wrote this book. However, I believe this is an important and timely text that deserves to be widely read by all those involved in the residential child care system, at any level, and in any jurisdiction. To my mind, this book is overdue. It offers a rigorous examination of over 400 references from the international literature on the provision of residential care for young people, undertaken by an expert in research methodology with an open and curious mind about what the evidence tells us about the effectiveness of residential care for children and youth.

The conventional wisdom that Henderson identifies is the belief that residential care, ongoing 24/7 care outside a family setting, is harmful for children of any age. As such, any such placement should be a last resort and for the shortest possible time period. All children and youth should be with their own families or, failing that, in family foster care, kinship care, or adoption. Those who hold these views will likely hate this book as, in my experience, their minds are firmly made up and invested in eliminating virtually all residential care. However well-meaning the intentions of these critics of residential care, this text demonstrates



that there is no significant research base for such a position. To the contrary, there is significant and growing evidence for the provision of good quality residential care for children and youth for whom family-based care is not appropriate or efficacious. As many readers of this journal will know, there are significant numbers of young people in every society for whom, for many different reasons, any type of family-based care is not appropriate or effective.

In Chapters One and Two Henderson sets the scene. He briefly presents his own journey to writing this book and then situates it in the context of current anti-residential care lobbying in the US. He also identifies a set of assumptions characteristic of the conventional wisdom.

Chapter Three provides a very useful overview of how to read research literature, so that readers themselves can consider the literature from an evidence-based perspective. In this way, readers are introduced to how Henderson approached his research review and can thereby follow his subsequent analyses with an informed and critical mind.

Chapter Four explores the hostility expressed towards residential care for young people, and systematically examines the various purported 'authoritative' statements condemning residential child care. Henderson demonstrates that most of the credible research used to support the conventional wisdom is based on studies done with infants in deprived environments, such as the infamous Romanian orphanages under former President Nicolae Ceaușescu. These studies are inappropriately generalised to all forms of residential care for all ages of young people by opponents of residential care.

Chapter Five then examines the growing evidence that counteracts the conventional wisdom. Some readers of this journal will be aware of some of the research cited by Henderson, but this broad overview of recent research will offer a useful basis for confidence in the importance of good quality residential care as part of child welfare and mental health systems. While we would all agree that bad residential care needs to be immediately improved or eliminated, there is solid evidence that residential care can be a positive option for some children, with certain needs, at specific times in their lives.

Chapter Six suggests that we already know a good deal about what comprises quality residential child care, and in Chapter Seven, Henderson presents two quite different models that both have a significant research base, and which have evidence-based status at the 'promising practice' level with the California Clearinghouse on Evidence-Based Practice. I am very familiar with one of these models, the Cornell CARE Program Model. Over the past 15 years or so, this approach to quality care, with its articulated values, principles and practices, has been demonstrated to be applicable not only to the provision of residential care, but also to foster care, educational settings, and community-based programs.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, summarises the book's conclusions and sets out the findings of this impressive research review in succinct terms, and this



should be required reading for anyone who manages, provides, funds, or assesses residential care for young people. In fact, I think it would be of great benefit if every funding application for residential child care could have a copy of this text appended to it. The major limitation to anyone actually doing so is the current cost of the hardcover edition. Regrettably, it exceeds \$120 US, even with an introductory discount. The good news is that the publisher, Routledge, is committed to bringing out a soft-cover version about a year and a half after initial publication, which should lower the cost considerably and make it more widely accessible. Also, the e-book version will be available after December 1, 2023, for purchase at \$47.65 and a six-month rental will be \$29.13

(<https://www.routledge.com/Challenging-the-Conventional-Wisdom-about-Residential-Care-for-Childre/B-Henderson/p/book/9781032564739>).

An important feature of the book is a set of extensive references following each chapter, totalling over 500 in number. This is a valuable resource for anyone wanting to explore the literature on residential care and its effectiveness in more depth, such as graduate students doing related research. Another feature I enjoy about this text is the pleasantly readable writing style of the author. A book such as this could have been a rather dry and pedantic treatise appealing only to avid researchers. Fortunately, Henderson writes in a direct and somewhat personal manner while maintaining a high degree of academic rigour. For example, I particularly enjoyed such succinct and straight-forward statements as the following.

I do not intend to be defensive. Those who support high-quality residential care have been too defensive. However, let me be clear again about what I am *not* saying. First, not all family-less children and youth should be in residential care. Residential care is not for infants or young children except in emergencies. High-quality residential care should be available for older children and adults as one option among many. It should be a matter of fit. (Chapter 1)

About the reviewer

James P. Anglin is an emeritus professor in the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Canada, and a research affiliate of the Residential Child Care Project, Bronfenbrenner Centre for Translational Research at Cornell University. He is a member of the editorial board of FICE-International, this journal, and six other CYC journals. He regularly contributes articles and chapters to international publications, supports graduate students, and has a passion for the history, evolution and enduring value of the child and youth care profession. He is also a member of the International Work Group on Therapeutic Residential Care.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

