

PURPOSE

This A3 presents information on the needs and circumstances of children who may satisfy the criteria of a subsequent child, who came to our notice over the 2018/19 financial year. These children were younger siblings of children in Home For Life placements. Our Phase One report [REP-OT/19/12/375 refers] presented initial data on the outcomes for these children, and noted that we would undertake further analysis of the reasons these children entered care. We have undertaken qualitative analysis to do this, and summarised findings here.

QUESTION

We wanted to know what are the needs and circumstances of tamariki who enter care and have a parent who will not be resuming care of an older sibling. An initial sample of 82 tamariki was identified as entering care in 2018/19 and having a sibling already in a Home for Life placement. 11 tamariki were excluded because they were either first born, had no siblings in permanent care or they had entered care outside the study period, leaving 71 tamariki in the sample. In this group there are 53 tamariki Māori, and this includes 8 children with Māori and Pacific heritage. While it is not possible to make population estimates, based on this sample, the findings do provide an indication of the issues faced by these tamariki.

We reviewed CYRAS case notes relating to this group, exploring the needs of tamariki and their whānau, safety issues, the process for entering care, their current placement and return home plans.

What are the needs and circumstances of tamariki who enter care and have a parent who will not be resuming care of an older sibling?

Reports of Concern and Tamariki Needs

- This sample was young - 75% were pēpi under 2 years when Oranga Tamariki was notified about these concerns.
- The Health sector reported (32%) of tamariki and Oranga Tamariki social workers notified (25%). Corrections, Police and Anonymous notifiers also frequently reported concerns.
- In more than half of the reports (62%) notifiers referred to the removal of a previous child from care of their parents.

Caregivers* and their needs at the time of Assessment

- Most tamariki were looked after by parents or stepparents (87%), with a smaller group already cared for by whānau.
- 69% of tamariki had caregivers assessed as having alcohol and drug issues, 58% had caregivers involved with partner family violence; 44% had caregivers with mental illness; and for 21% a primary caregiver was described as having intellectual disability.
- Of the 49 primary caregivers with alcohol and drug issues, 71% were also involved with partner family violence.

* Caregiver refers to those persons who had the care of tamariki prior to their entry to care.

Whānau Circumstances and Housing Issues at the time of the Report of Concern

- More than half (58%) of caregivers were reported as having housing needs.
- This included (32%) who were homeless or transient, staying in a car, camping grounds or with friends.
- For (13%) of tamariki, their caregivers had been recently evicted or the loss of their home was pending.
- A further group (10%) were living in houses described as unsafe, unhygienic or unheated.
- Finally, a small group (3%) were living in boarding houses or emergency housing.

Abuse Findings and Safety Concerns at the time of the Report of Concern

- Neglect was the most common primary abuse finding type (58%) made for this group.
- Safety concerns relating to these findings mostly involved poor care environments and poor care supervision (80%).
- Exposure to partner family violence (49%) and exposure to caregiver alcohol and drug use (42%) were other safety concerns that were identified alongside these poor care environments.

Reasons for Entering Care as described to the Family Court and FGC Decision Making

- In most cases (76%) Affidavits referred to previous unsuccessful attempts to support caregivers who were unable to sustain any changes.
- Despite many pēpi being notified before their birth, most of this group (86%) entered care via a without notice application for a s.78.
- For almost all tamariki (93%) entering care on a s. 78 order, affidavits referred to older siblings being removed from parents' care.
- For a large group of tamariki (69%) their FGC did reach agreement.

Return Home and Support for Cultural Identity Development

- Current placement for this group of tamariki was predominantly (63%) with whānau.
- For another group (16%) they were already in return or remain home placements.
- The remainder (19%) were with NGO or non-kin caregivers.
- Overall, for most of the group (72%) there was no intention to return tamariki home.

Tamariki Needs

There were low levels of pēpi needs identified either in the Report of Concern or in subsequent assessments.

This is likely to be a group of vulnerable pēpi having been exposed to trauma relating to family violence and parental substance abuse.

These findings suggest that considering infant mental health could become a focus of assessment. This would assist caregivers to interpret tamariki behaviours and better understand their needs.

Engagement around Caregiver Needs

Custody applications often referred to caregivers' positive engagement with services relating to these needs. Barriers to engagement that were described included avoidance, non-attendance, threatening behaviours, isolation, transience and minimising child protection concerns.

Underpinning poor engagement were the needs of caregivers who are recovering from addictions, mental health problems and family violence.

Some caregivers were reported as engaging with services but were described as unable to benefit due to lack of insight and inability to apply learnings.

Living Circumstances

While living situations varied, the most common situation was where both parents were living together or one parent with a partner. Single parents were sometimes living with flatmates or with other adults in emergency or temporary housing.

There were shared care arrangements where whānau and parents lived together but, in some instances, tamariki had been moving between multiple households for some time. Other living situations involved mums who were pregnant and in prison, and in two cases tamariki were living with their mother in a refuge.

Instability in many of these living arrangements was driven by homelessness and family violence.

Abuse Findings for Unborn Pēpi

Pēpi are often assessed before birth in order to develop care arrangements to secure their safety and wellbeing.

For unborn pēpi it can be difficult to determine what is the appropriate finding to use to reflect a whānau environment where there is alcohol or drug use, family violence and poor prenatal care. Despite similar whānau circumstances, social workers can make different types of abuse findings, with some recording emotional abuse or neglect findings or even “not found” at the end of the assessment. More guidance may be needed to support social workers making findings for unborn pēpi.

Applications made Without Notice

These applications frequently cited serious, imminent risk to safety, with s.39 warrants expiring and pending or recent birth.

Mutual mistrust and poor relationships between caregivers and Oranga Tamariki underpinned these situations with fear of flight described.

There was some evidence that a different approach, such as engaging with the whānau earlier and holding a Whānau Hui and/or Family Group Conference, may have prevented the need to apply to the Family Court for a section 78 order, and secured safe whānau care.

For a small number of tamariki the need for more intensive whānau support or access to a residential programme was a factor in the s.78 application.

Cultural Identity Development

Whānau placements were described as fostering cultural identity by reflecting te ao Māori, enhancing whānau connections, developing te reo and linking tamariki to marae.

Kura (School) kaupapa and kohanga reo were also described as supporting te reo and offering tamariki opportunities for cultural practice and performance.

Kura were valued in supporting cultural identity development amongst tamariki when whānau connection was not strong at home.

Kairaranga and Iwi groups are involved in finding whānau placements and helping to develop pepeha.

IN SUMMARY

These findings suggest the importance of building engagement with caregivers where there is poor trust and avoidance, working effectively with caregivers with addictions and family violence issues, supporting caregivers with intellectual disability and learning needs and assessing infant mental health. Developing ways to secure safe whānau care is critical. This should occur through early engagement with the whānau during the prenatal period, and may prevent the need for statutory care. The extent to which tamariki are already moving informally to whānau care after an Oranga Tamariki assessment through whānau hui and FGC plans, is an important focus for further research.