

05/03/13

Dear Commissioner Carmody,

I write in regards to the *Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry*. As a researcher in the field of child protection, I believe my empirical research findings, both published and in progress, have insight to offer in regards to adoption as one response to permanency planning. Below I outline briefly these findings in terms of what they suggest about the utility of adoption in this regard, and provide recommendations were adoption to become standard practice.

1. My research on representations of adoption available in the public domain would suggest that whilst the rights and desires of children placed for adoption have to some degree been given greater recognition, less recognition has been accorded to the rights of birth parents, both in terms of adequate support prior to removal, and to maintaining connections with children after removal into out-of-home care. The point of these findings is not that Australian child protection agencies do not adequately attend to issues of support, reunification, and best connections. Rather, the point is that public awareness of the factors that lead children to be removed from their birth parents, along with public attitudes towards birth parents in general, are at best dismissive, and at worst negative. The concern this raises - given that potential adoptive parents are likely exposed to public representations of adoption (and birth parents specifically) prior to adopting children - is that attempts at ensuring best connections with birth parents may be stymied if adoptive parents hold negative perceptions of birth parents, or if more broadly they view connections to birth families as unimportant.

**Recommendation:** That any move towards adoption as a mode of permanency planning must involve public awareness campaigns aimed at addressing negative perceptions about adoption more broadly (especially, as the Commission's document 'Options for Reform' suggests, past adoption practices in Australia may predispose the general public to viewing adoption in a negative light), as well as negative perceptions about birth families specifically.

2. My research with adults who have entered into permanent care arrangements in Victoria (which in many ways are not dissimilar to adoption) suggests that negative public and media representations of birth families very much impact upon the attitudes of those who undertake permanent care. Many who were interviewed expressed an unwillingness to engage with birth families, and a desire to distance themselves from the child's birth families (for example by changing the child's last name to their own). Whilst of course in some instances this was because birth family members represented a risk to both the child and their permanent care family, this was not always the case, and even in cases where risks were evident, this did not necessarily warrant preventing children from having any knowledge about, or connection with, their birth families.

**Recommendation:** That any move towards adoption as a mode of permanency planning must involve the following processes: 1) adequate assessment of potential adoptive parents as to their perceptions of birth families and their willingness to support best connections, 2) serious consideration of the implications of allowing adoptive parents to change the names of children whom they adopt, 3) ongoing financial support for all parties to ensure that best connections can be maintained (which may include support workers to facilitate access between children and their birth families, and support for adoptive parents to transport children or otherwise provide

materials for maintaining connections). The model of Other Person Guardianships currently in place in South Australia may serve as a useful guide for practices that both facilitate permanency, whilst also ensuring that best connections with birth families are maintained. In sum, these recommendations encourage a move beyond the rhetoric of open adoptions, and towards practices where best connections with birth families are actually possible.

3. Finally, my comparative research on cohorts of permanent carers in Victoria, foster carers in South Australia, and adoptive parents across Australia, suggests that whilst these are all valid modes of family formation that must be treated as such for those who enter into long-term care arrangements with children to whom they are not biologically related, at the same time close attention must be paid to the beliefs about children that adults bring with them when they enter into such care arrangements. For example, some participants in each cohort spoke of children who could not live with their birth parents as being damaged or as in need of rescue. This is a common public perception of children living in out-of-home care identified in previous research I have conducted, and one that often warrants a paternalistic or benevolent response from adults. Such an approach, it may be argued, 1) does very little to examine why children cannot live with their birth parents (and thus, as per the points above, does very little to recognize the experiences of birth parents), and 2) treats children as objects rather than as citizens with rights.

**Recommendation:** That any move towards adoption as a mode of permanency planning involves both public awareness campaigns and individualized provision of information to potential adoptive parents that challenges stereotypes about children who cannot live with their birth parents. Relatedly, it is important that the assessment of potential adoptive parents moves towards the disaggregation of out-of-home care so as to facilitate the channeling of applicants into areas most suited to them. For example, certain applicants may be better disposed towards involvement in reunification work or emergency or respite placements (all of which require specific training and knowledge so as to best work with children and birth families). Another example might be applicants who, despite a keen desire to raise a child, might not be suitable adoptive parents due to inherent and enduring negative attitudes towards birth families, or stigmatizing views of children placed for adoption. In sum, these recommendations indicate the need for recognition of those beliefs and views of adoptive parents that best lead to positive outcomes for children (including connections with their birth families), and that adoptive parents must be targeted for those whose beliefs and views are most likely to facilitate such outcomes.

I share these findings and recommendations in the hope that they may contribute to an evidence-based discussion about what might constitute permanency planning in Queensland. I have included below references to my published work on these topics, and am happy to give further verbal testimony in regards to other not yet published aspects of my research.

Sincerely,



Dr Damien Riggs

**Riggs, D.W.** (2012). Intercountry adoption and the inappropriate/d other: Refusing the disappearance of birth families. *Social Policy and Society*, 11, 455-464.

**Riggs, D.W.** (2009). Race privilege and its role in the 'disappearance' of birth families and adoptive children in debates over adoption by non-heterosexual people in Australia. In D. Cuthbert & C. Spark (Eds.) *Other people's children: Adoption in Australia* (pp. 161-175). Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

**Riggs, D.W., King, D., Delfabbro, P.H. & Augoustinos, M.** (2009). 'Children out of place': Representations of foster care in the Australia news media. *Journal of Children and Media*, 3, 234-248.