

FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY



The mental health needs of very young children in 'Out Of Home Care':

A profile from the Gumnut Clinic in Western Sydney

by

Romina Alexandra Tucker

B.A (Psych), PG Dip. Psych (Child and Adol) (Dist)

A thesis submitted to the School of Psychology for the degree of

Doctorate of Clinical and Health Psychology

March 2013

Statement of originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Acknowledgement of authorship

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis contains a paper of which I am a joint author. I have included below a written statement from my supervisor attesting to my contribution to the joint publication.

Romina Alexandra Tucker

Date:

Supervisor's statement

I, Assoc. Prof Michael Hunter, attest that Romina Tucker was heavily involved in all aspects of the journal article including literature review, planning, data collection, collation and analysis, as well as article writing and submission.

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my supervisors Assoc. Prof Michael Hunter and Dr Donna Gillies for their support and guidance throughout the research project, and more specifically their assistance with the hospital and university ethics processes, data analysis and thesis preparation.

Thanks also to my esteemed colleagues and mentors from Redbank House, in particular Dr Megan Chambers, Dr Sarah Mares, Dr Alison Saunders and Margaret Goldfinch, for their contributions in establishing The Gumnut Clinic, graciously allowing me use of the client data, undertaking the assessments and providing me with feedback on particular sections of this thesis.

Additionally, I would like to thank the Department of Family and Community Services for their unwavering support throughout my studies, and to the children and families who were assessed at The Gumnut Clinic.

I would like to acknowledge the ongoing encouragement I received from my friends and family.

Finally, I especially wish to thank my husband Daniel for his ongoing emotional support, patience and understanding throughout the completion of my degree and to my precious baby girl Mia Isabelle and baby boy Anderson for motivating me to the finish line.

Contents

Statement of originality	2
Acknowledgement of authorship.....	2
Supervisor's statement	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Structured abstract	7
Scope	7
Purpose.....	7
Methodology	7
Results	8
General conclusion	8
Implications	8
List of tables	9
List of figures	10
Critical literature review	11
Early childhood development	11
Biological factors	12
Impact of adverse early experiences.....	13
Health outcomes for maltreated children.....	14
Psychological and social factors	15
Impact of adverse early experiences.....	17

Health outcomes for maltreated children.....	20
Protective factors	23
Early childhood is a critical time for early intervention	23
Very young children in out of home care in NSW, Australia.....	28
Key policy reforms and research over the past 10 years	29
Conclusion	35
Aim of the study and hypothesis	35
Journal article: Manuscript submitted for consideration	39
Abstract	40
Background.....	40
Objective.....	40
Methods	40
Results	41
Conclusions.....	41
Keywords	41
1. Introduction.....	42
2. Method	45
2.1 Participants	45
2.2 Demographic information	46
2.3 Instruments.....	46
2.4 Procedure.....	50
3. Results	53

3.1 Sample characteristics	53
3.2 Demographic.....	53
3.3 Clinical diagnosis	55
3.4 Behaviour problems.....	57
3.5 Carer stress	60
3.6 Interaction of key variables	60
4. Discussion	62
4.1 What proportion of very young children are showing real problems? .	62
4.2 Limitations	65
4.3 Conclusion and implications	67
Acknowledgements.....	69
References.....	70
Highlights.....	79
Extended discussion.....	86
References.....	95
Appendix A	110
Evidence of publication status for journal article	110
Appendix B	112
Children and Youth Services Review guide for authors	112
Appendix C	122
Figures referred to in the extended discussion.....	122

Structured abstract

Scope

This research project firstly involved coordinating the establishment of The Gumnut Clinic, a specialist mental health assessment clinic for children aged 0 to 5 years living in out of home care (OOHC), as well as being part of the team undertaking the assessments over a 16-month period. To promote awareness about the social emotional needs of very young children in care a paper describing the establishment of this clinic, the approach to assessment, and the challenges the clinic encountered has been published (Tucker & Mares, 2013).

The current thesis is based on the analysis of aggregated patient data for children aged 0 to 5 years in OOHC attending the Gumnut Clinic in 2010-11.

Purpose

Children and young people in OOHC have significant mental health needs. However, most research about child mental health has neglected the needs of very young children even though they represent a vulnerable population at high risk of social, emotional and developmental problems. Hence, this research project aimed to assess the rates of mental health problems and explore the demographics of very young children in OOHC to increase awareness of their mental health needs.

Methodology

The paper included in this thesis reports the findings from the retrospective exploratory data analysis of 34 children assessed at the clinic. This analysis included clinical and demographic information elicited from referral documentation and the assessment report, as well as scores from the following measures used in the assessments: Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social Emotional (ASQ: SE), Parent Stress Index: Short Form (PSI: SF), Child Behavior Checklist 1.5 to 5 (CBCL), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Assessment Checklist for Children (ACC) and the Caregiver-Teacher Report Form (C-TRF).

Results

A substantial proportion of the children assessed at the clinic presented with social emotional difficulties, with 25 out of the 34 children seen receiving at least one mental health diagnosis. Furthermore, the mean score and 95% confidence intervals for each measure were compared to population norms which showed the scores obtained by the clinic sample were consistently higher than those obtained by normative samples.

General conclusion

Children aged 0 to 5 years living in OOHC have significant mental health needs. Sufficient and adequate provision of specialist mental health services for very young children, together with additional research focusing specifically on their mental health to inform assessment and treatment practices is required.

Implications

In light of the importance of intervention during early childhood, further research into the mental health of very young children in care is required. It is essential that these children not only receive early screening and assessment, but that they also have access to appropriate forms of early intervention and treatment.

List of tables

Critical literature review

Table 1: Key Australian research about children in care conducted during the past 1 years	33
---	----

Journal article

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the sample demographics.....	80
Table 2: Child Behavior Checklist and Caregiver-Teacher Report Form, raw scores.....	81
Table 3: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and Assessment Checklist for Children, raw scores	83
Table 4: Parental Stress Index: Short Form, raw scores	85

List of figures

Graph 1. Bar chart showing the age at entry into OOHC	109
Graph 2. Bar chart showing the number of previous placements	109
Graph 3. Bar chart showing the time spent in their current placements	110