

**Time for Kids Inc.:
Client Perspectives on Intervention and Assistance**

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Executive Summary

Since its inception in 1960, *Time for Kids* has placed several thousand children in respite foster care. Whilst there are many stakeholders involved in this process, it goes without saying that the most important of these are the children placed with families from one year to the next. This report outlines in detail the experiences of a range of past clients (aged 18 to 26 at the time of interview) who were asked, chiefly, to make an assessment (however summary or definitive in nature) concerning their experiences of respite foster care and its overall impact on the course of their life to date. By way of overview, the following key points emerged from interviews (n=11) undertaken with clients:

- Placement provided clients with the resilience needed to overcome or neutralize the risk factors typically associated with juvenile offending;
- Participants offered overwhelmingly positive statements concerning the relationship between placement and their life course (saying that respite foster care positively impacted levels of self-esteem, confidence, resourcefulness and sense of identity);
- Placement through *Time for Kids* resulted in the development of broader expectations and possibilities for participants and provided a more diverse and inspiring exposure to the world;
- The placement experience played a significant role not only in each participant's childhood, but, by default, in their psycho-social development as young people;
- Participants drew very positive connections between the quality of the placement experience and the fact that carers were volunteers (that is, good faith in the motives of carers was maximized from the earliest possible moment in the placement event due to removal of financial reward);
- Nearly half of those interviewed are involved in ongoing relationships with their carer family (i.e. relationships which have persisted beyond the services and initial contacts provided by *Time for Kids*);
- *Time for Kids* was unanimously lauded by participants for their unobtrusive "behind the scenes work" and for providing a seamless transition from having to live at home (often under very stressful conditions) to being able to live with a respite foster family;

- Participants' most significant experiences occurred within the context of the second or third family with whom they were placed and with whom they tended to form a lasting bond;
- Nearly half of participants remarked, unprompted, that they would be more than willing to provide respite foster care for a child in need (complementing any current and future efforts to expand the volunteer base in South Australia).

Context

In late 2004, *Time for Kids Inc.* (hereafter *Time for Kids*) contacted Dr Mark Halsey (then based at Flinders University and now at the University of Melbourne) to conduct a small scale research study of the experiences and viewpoints of select persons assisted by the agency in years past.¹ The report detailed below is therefore based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews² with past clients who were asked to narrate and assess, in their own words, the significance or otherwise of being placed in respite foster care over time.³ The overarching question guiding the *Time for Kids: Client Perspectives on Intervention and Assistance* report was/is:

How has placement by *Time for Kids* (or its equivalent namesake in decades past) impacted the life-course of particular clients?

This is clearly a very broad and somewhat ambitious question to pose and, as such, I make no pretence toward developing a comprehensive response.⁴ Rather, I have sought to provide as rich a snapshot as possible into a small but experientially significant group of clients, as a means of surveying the types of emotions, turning points, difficulties and relationships emerging from those assisted by *Time for Kids*. Due chiefly to budgetary and time constraints, it was necessary to privilege depth of information over and above breadth of data. Nonetheless, even within the relatively small number of participants interviewed for this study (n=11), there was, naturally, a wide and varied array of reflections and experiences offered up by each person. But equally, there were certain key recurring themes and sub-themes which emerged across all interviews. I would therefore contend that whilst there would obviously be great diversity across the population of individuals assisted by *Time for Kids* over the last four decades (n=approx. 3,500), that many themes highlighted in this report are likely to preempt or resemble those residing within this larger population. In short,

¹In effect, this study complements and supplements the predominantly statistical and descriptive overview previously given by the author of this report entitled, *Time for Kids: An Interim Evaluation*, completed in March 2004.

²I want to express my sincere thanks to Mr Benjamin Pederick for his work in carrying out interviews and for his assistance in organising data for this study. In addition, I want to thank and congratulate the young persons who consented to be interviewed for this report. Without their co-operation, this study would clearly not have been possible.

³Anyone familiar with carer services and literature will know of the wide range of terms used to describe the support provided to children by various guardians/agencies. This report, it should be noted, focuses solely on the viewpoints of those placed in *respite foster care* which centres on the periodic, holiday and/or weekend placement opportunities (of a defined or indefinite duration) provided by persons/families who so volunteer their time and are assessed by *Time for Kids* as fit and proper to care for “their” clients. Unless otherwise indicated, and to avoid repetition, terms such as “carer family”, “carer(s)”, and “foster family”, all mean “*respite foster care*” or “*respite foster family*”.

⁴For larger scale (longitudinal) studies of foster care the reader is directed to the seminal works of Fernandez (1996) as well as Barber, Delfabbro and Gilbertson (2003).

whilst I do not and cannot defend the comprehensiveness or representativeness of the stories told by those interviewed for this study, I do uphold the intrinsic value of these narratives, since they emerge from real lived experience of respite placement.

At another level, I note that it is probably impossible to gauge the precise impact of any “single” event on the course of an individual’s life – especially, as proved to be the case in this study, where the key event (i.e. placement) was still a relatively recent occurrence in each person’s biography. The initial intention of this study – which would have heightened the capacity to say something meaningful about impacts over the life course – was to interview a number of clients placed in each of the four decades since *Time for Kids* commenced providing respite foster care in 1960. However, due to insufficient records detailing the precise whereabouts of past clients, the participants in this study were ultimately recruited using a combination of typical and convenience based sampling techniques (Patton, 2002: 209-57, esp. pp. 236 and 241-46). In typical case sampling,

[C]ases are selected with the cooperation of key informants, such as program staff or knowledgeable participants, who can help identify who and what are typical...[T]he purpose of a qualitative profile of one or more typical cases is to describe and illustrate what is typical to those unfamiliar with the setting – not to make generalized statements about the experiences of all participants. The sample is illustrative not definitive. (Patton, 2002: 236)

This closely echoes the tenor of the sampling and recruitment process used in this study. The researchers relied fairly heavily on the knowledge and judgment of the key contact person(s) at *Time for Kids* to provide details of past clients more likely to fall under the category of a “typical client” as opposed to those who might more accurately fit the concept of “special” or “extreme” cases. The sample had a convenient strand to its formulation insofar as the key contact person(s) generated a list of potential participants whose residential/contact details were readily retrievable by the contracting organization. It was this list which the researchers subsequently referred to when recruiting participants.

As mentioned above, 11 participants in three states (South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia) were contacted and agreed to take part in this study. The five females and six males interviewed ranged in age from 18 to 26 years and all but one had been placed with a minimum of two families. All participants came from a single parent background with most first having been placed between the ages of seven and 10 years. This meant that for some participants, their first experience of respite foster care occurred up to 20 years prior to being interviewed for this study. All participants (excepting one who for quite complex reasons remained with the same carer throughout his placement) needed to visit with successive families before a “good

match” was eventually found for each. Once this synergy between client and family was in place, participants reported establishing long-term relationships with the same family which extended beyond periodic placement and in some cases lasted well beyond the age of 18 (i.e. into adult years). Excepting one interview conducted over the phone, all interviews took place in one-to-one format at locations mutually agreed by interviewer and participant, and lasted up to one hour in duration.

Given the characteristics of the sample (specifically, their fairly close chronological proximity to the event(s) in question), it is important to note that participants narrated the significance of their experiences not so much in terms of a “life-course” (since this was something perceived to reside more within the future than the recent past), but in terms of their psychic and social development as children becoming young adults over a specified period of time. In other words, the “ultimate” or “actual” impact of their placement is not something entirely amenable to discrete and definitive summary. Instead, the impact of placement proved to be a process given to reinterpretation (according to memory, subsequent life experiences, etc.) over time. There is every chance, therefore, that each of the participants interviewed in this study might offer up very different (or more or less intense) reflections of their placement(s) were they to be interviewed in, say five, or even 10 years time. Again, this is not to discount the “validity” or significance of themes emerging from the current series of interviews. Rather, it is to simply acknowledge the infinite array of factors/forces which can influence how people recollect and ascribe value to particular aspects of their life course.

Time for Kids has, as mentioned, provided respite foster care for children up to the age of 18 for in excess of four decades. It is a not-for-profit organization funded jointly through the South Australian government as well as, and importantly, via endowments and philanthropic contributions. In the context of South Australia, *Time for Kids* oversees the placement needs of around 10% of all children placed in foster care (as opposed to respite foster care) situations in any one year. As of July 2004, around 1900 children were receiving some kind of fostered assistance in South Australia. This assistance was provided by approximately 900 carers (of a kinship and non-kinship kind) ‘registered under the Family and Community Act 1972’ (South Australian Policy Online, 2004). In the Australian context (and correct to 2003), around 20,000 children reside in foster care on either a permanent or periodic basis (National Child Protection Clearing House, 2005, p.1). It is estimated that, as of 2001, there were around 8,300 carers across all states and territories (McHugh, 2002, p.1). In 2001-02, expenditure on “out-of-home care services” totalled nearly half a billion dollars (National Child Protection Clearing House, 2005, p. 4). In short, out of home care for children is (or should be) a significant issue on the political and budgetary landscape.

There are at least two emerging national trends which are of particular relevance to the current study and which need to be viewed as framing the themes and issues detailed below. The first of these is that, 'Between 1997 and 2003 the number of children in out-of-home care has risen by 45% (an increase of 6,318 children)' (National Child Protection Clearinghouse, 2005, p.1). This, as is well known by those in the field, is in large part a direct result of the deinstitutionalisation policies of the 1980s and 1990s. The second and related trend is that, 'Fewer people are becoming foster carers' (Office for Youth, Children & Family Support, 2004, p.2). This is particularly worrying given that the peak national foster care bodies (i.e. the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia, the Australian Foster Care Association, and the Association of Childrens' Welfare Agencies) have recently stated that, 'Foster care is the backbone of child welfare services and is undergoing a crisis in recruitment and retention partly due to poor reimbursement' (McHugh, 2002, Addendum, p.1).

Time for Kids, it is prudent to note, is by no means immune from either of these trends. However, several respondents for this study told of the significant difference between traditional forms of foster care, that is, fostering that is both permanent and paid, as against the kind of service provided by *Time for Kids*. Participants specifically remarked that the *Time for Kids* model of short term, or respite care, was more productive both in terms of maintaining a "healthy" psycho-social development through childhood and adolescence, and with regard to developing positive relationships with their "foster" family whilst maintaining (even strengthening) existing (biological) family ties. *Time for Kids* does this with what can only be described as a miniscule annual budget – which goes primarily toward assessing new carer applications and to remunerating the staff of the organization. Carers approved by *Time for Kids* are not remunerated in any way for their time, work, and dedication (travel costs associated with having to collect a child from a rural, regional or remote location can be reimbursed). This lack of remuneration is a double edged sword. On the one hand, and as narrated by several participants, it enables clients to put aside any notion that their respite foster care family is engaging them "just for the money". But on the other hand, the lack of remuneration – and, dare it be said, public recognition – must to a very real degree impact the number of persons/families willing to open their homes to children in need from year to year.

With these contextual remarks in mind, I now move to the main part of the report. I have chosen to structure the discussion around the framework extant within the interview schedule (see Appendix 1). In doing so, I have sought to maintain something of the integrity of individual narratives whilst simultaneously earmarking the key themes to emerge across all stories. Of course, no report can do justice to all the nuances and points of difference within various biographies. And in this sense,

the report is to a large degree summary in nature. However, it is hoped that audiences will approach the various sections of this report as opportunities to engage directly with the voices of those who are best placed to comment on the impact of respite foster care in their lives: namely, clients themselves.

One final note concerning the subject matter explored during interviews. Whilst the brief for this project was chiefly to record the positive aspects associated with respite care, participants were nonetheless given every opportunity to highlight or speak in more depth about some of the shortcomings experienced during placement. There was only one substantially “negative” comment made about placement. This turned on the troubled and sometimes turbulent circumstances of one’s “original” family environment being brought into even sharper focus by the time spent in a more ordered and less frenzied setting. As one participant put it,

- Participant: [When you] see what other families are like, [it] make[s] you a little bit more hassled that your family is like the way [it is]...I used to go home and...it did make me depressed because you see how a normal family is and you spend the weekend there, and um, you come back to your family, and like, yeah this is my proper family, and like yuk, yuk, yuk...
- Interviewer: Did that cause a rift between you and your [biological] family?
- Participant: Sometimes it did yeah...I did just feel weird and sometimes I’d lash out at...my family because I thought compared to [my respite foster] family, like, they’re just sort of shit... Apart from that it was a magical little trip. (H)

This was the only comment to emerge in this vein. It is possible that other participants may have had similar thoughts or moments within their placement experience. If so, these were not relayed during interview. In such cases only three possibilities come to the fore: participants chose not to divulge such experiences; participants had forgotten about such moments; or participants made the critical judgement that such moments were not significant to the narration of their overall impressions of their time spent in respite foster care.

Initial contact with *Time for Kids*

Overwhelmingly, participants resided in sole parent familial scenarios where the ability of the parent/guardian to constantly provide adequate emotional and physical support was significantly compromised by various life events (such as separation from a partner, having to care for up to six other children, having to work fulltime, and so forth). Most participants were too young to recall the specific details of how their parent/guardian were first made aware of the service provided by *Time for Kids*. Most speculated that it was likely to have been through conversation with a social worker or the like. In one notable instance, the mother of one of the participants remarked off tape that no government agency ever mentioned *Time for Kids* to her as a possible

support option, despite a constant and lengthy search for such assistance. Uniformly, participants did not narrate their experience in terms of contact with *Time for Kids* per se, but instead chose to speak of their first experiences with a “new” family or the meeting of a “new” best friend. Accordingly, the fact that *Time for Kids* was mentioned mainly in secondary terms to the primary and lived experience of spending time with a foster family, acted very much to enhance the creation of ongoing and *mutually* rewarding relationships. The following remarks speak to the unobtrusive aspect of the organization in participants’ experiences.

...They’ve [i.e. Time for Kids] ... let it flow and I’m sure that’s how they want it to work. They want to stand back. They want to find a family for a child and they want it to work, to gel between them. They don’t want to have much of a say, that’s why it works. (A⁵)

I think it was more so me mum ringing around, finding somewhere where I can go on the weekends and get away. I don’t really remember S.O.S.⁶ or Time for Kids that far back. I think I was about 7 years old, I can’t really tell you how I got into to it, it was just something through me mum. (B)

Family first placed with

Persons providing respite care ranged in kind from single women with no partner or children of their own, to large and small nuclear families, to elderly couples whose grown children had left home. Many of the families lived in country areas, or at least in a region significantly different from the domestic environment of the child being placed. In many cases interviewees remembered little about the first family as most participants were placed at a young age.

Interviewer: What were the first family you visited like?

Participant: They lived in the country somewhere I’m not exactly sure where they were but they were nice...They had two daughters. I think one was my age and one was my sister’s age. She’s 16 now. Yeah they were really nice, (laughs), I can’t remember them much now because it was so long ago. (C)

In addition, the initial family with whom participants were placed most often proved to be unsuitable in that the child or the family chose not to continue the visits. As such the most significant experiences were mostly connected with a second or third family with whom participants formed a lasting bond.

Interviewer: Why did you stop seeing the first family?

⁵Interviewees are referred to by a randomly assigned letter of the alphabet (e.g. A, B, C, etc.). In addition, the names of carers as well as suburbs and place names have been changed and in some cases removed from the text to protect, as far as is practicable, the identity of participants.

⁶S.O.S. is shorthand for S.O.S. Families for Children – the former name (up to 2004) of *Time for Kids Inc.* Prior to this it was known as The Society of Sponsors.

Participant: They wanted a younger girl, their grand daughter had moved away and they wanted to replace their grand daughter and I was a lot older than her. (D)

Interviewer: Was [the most recent family] the only family you visited?

Participant: I think there was...a family in [the country] that I went to in the school holidays one time. I think there was about four kids and I didn't really feel comfortable, because I kind of felt like they were doing a charity kind of thing for me. I was kind of made to feel that they were doing a really good thing for me, and they were like showing their foster children around and it felt like they were doing it for themselves and not for some one else and so I didn't go back there. Then I remember there was another older lady that I went and saw who was just a bit old and a bit strange for me. (E)

Period of time placed with family

The vast majority of interviewees reported being of the age of seven or eight when first placed through *Time for Kids*. As stated above, first families were often unsuccessful placements and therefore the number of visits rarely exceeded one or two occasions. In contrast with the period of time spent with the first family, participants reported developing lasting relationships with subsequent families spanning years (even up to two decades). In five of the 11 participants interviewed, relationships with respite foster carers are ongoing ('I was with them up until I was 18, which is how long S.O.S. has the program for. But now I still see them quite often' (F)). It is important, however, to realize that at the time of interview the eldest respondent was aged 26 years. As such, it is not possible to conclusively say that "life long" relationships have been formed through these placements. However, the types of connections generated through placements spanned a number of permutations, as it were, including those which brought together biological and foster families, participants' own young children and foster families, and participants and the foster family's extended network of relatives and friends. The period and frequency of contact with foster families varied from being quite prescriptive and regular (e.g. one weekend in every fortnight) to being effectively spontaneous in keeping with the nature and intensity of friendships struck (i.e. invitations to reside with a family over and above a fixed schedule of visits).

Interviewer: How long have you been seeing [your foster family]?

Participant: Since 15 I was seeing my [biological] dad occasionally and that was every second weekend but like I wasn't really comfortable with that, so I went once a month, maybe one weekend. But then after I stopped seeing my dad it [i.e. visits to my foster family] was probably more frequent, and then it became less time managed, it was just like [they'd] call me and say do you want to come over for the weekend or like take me on holidays...They'd go camping and I'd do that...or we[d] meet for coffee or go to the movies. [After time] it wasn't regimented any more. [We] just expected to see each other because it's just what you do. It was frequent, at least once a month and

now it's just what ever when ever. It has turned into a family. Like you wouldn't regiment seeing your parents, like I don't think that would be really appropriate, they wouldn't appreciate it. So it's just been, like, I remember once asking, "When do we have to stop seeing each other?", [and they're] like, "We don't ever have to". Like I used to have it in my head that I had to be in this but then I realised that it's just a relationship, family, yeah. (E)

This passage exemplifies the ideal of respite placement insofar as something which was orchestrated or purposefully "set up" evolved over time into something entirely natural. This is a theme which recurred across many interviews and speaks to the way in which the temporary provision of care is perfectly capable, given the right conditions, of morphing into a permanent relationship.

Nature of placement experience

Comments in this section are limited solely to participants' views of placement as a *process* – that is, as something which necessarily involves a degree of administration and "management" over time.⁷ The absolutely critical point to make in this regard is that all participants were, on reflection, quite struck, as alluded to earlier, by the markedly seamless and unobtrusive manner by which *Time for Kids* was able to locate and place participants with prospective families. This is highly significant since a basic first principle of respite care is to avoid as far as is practicable the emergence of feelings amongst clients (i.e. children) that they are somehow objects to be moved or "trialed" from one place to another. In this regard, almost all participants attested to the efficient and empathetic means through which they found themselves spending "time out" with another family.

Interviewer: In general, how would you describe the experience of being placed as a five year old?

Participant: Well that's what I mean. When I was five I didn't really see it as a placement. I wasn't going to a program. I was just going to a friend's house. Um, so it became very normal going over to [Michael's] house, doing stuff with [peter and Julie]...It wasn't, "Okay, this weekend we're going over to [Peter and Julie's] house". It was, you know, Michael calls up, "Come over A". It was made very normal. I never saw the whole program, I never saw S.O.S. people coming to assess, or checking up. I never saw that. So I was never part of a program, per se...I was just going over to a friend's house. But now that I know that there was a program behind it, you can see how successful it was...It was never forced upon us. There was such a natural progression. (A)

⁷ The lived experience of placement is dealt with in subsequent sections below.

Range of experiences and activities

The participants' recollections naturally include a diverse range of significant events, regular activities and memorable adventures. Perhaps of most significance was the fact that each participant eventually settled with a family of striking difference to the child's "original" home environment. As such, one of the benefits expressed by participants was being given the opportunity to engage with alternate ways of life, which, for many involved traveling to places they had never previously imagined venturing to. The following extended excerpts give some clue as to the range of activities undertaken and their significance to participant's lives, and, more pointedly, socio-developmental process.

I loved going there. Sometimes I didn't want to come home I was having such a good time with them...I still see them now. (F)

...One time I got riding on the back of a motorbike. That was really cool and probably the first time I rode on a motorbike. And going up to feed the cows with the dad...And...driving past their high school with the [...] girls and mucking 'round and stuff like that. And decorating ginger bread men on the kitchen table and we just made a massive mess. [I remember they] tasted like pure sugar...We [also] went fly fishing, that was really fun. After a little while of not being able to catch anything we went to the ponds where they just fed the fish so we caught millions of fish. I caught about nine fish. We've got heaps of photos too. The best thing about that was we got to take them home, and there was a fish and chip shop across the road and they cooked it for us so it was fresh. And that holiday was the first time I went on a fishing charter, and...I caught a flat head and we ate it for dinner. Yeah we caught a few fish that day and it was beautiful out on the sea. (D)

[G]enerally we'd go out four-wheel driving and we'd go to dinner with their friends, we'd stay home or we'd go to the beach. (G)

[W]e'd go on heaps of holidays...Every summer we'd go down to [a little place on the coast] and we'd stay in the caravan and we'd camp out. Enjoy the beach, go boogie boarding...I don't remember a family holiday that our mum had. So I was so lucky in that respect. We'd go up to the river, and get fish...You know, it was awesome...It just was really the opportunity to do so much! Basically holidays, meet new people doing things I wouldn't get a chance to do. (A)

Like, we went out fishing and we went out on speedboats and stuff, just mucked round with the kids, like fishing, bike riding and yabbing. Like I'd never been yabbing before and we were just catching heaps of yabbies. Yeah it was good fun. (I)

[We] used to go swimming in the swimming pool they had in their backyard...I'd just play cricket or golf, up and down the street or in the driveway. [There] was always a number of things that we'd do, you know get on the little three wheeler kids bikes things and chase each other around on them and play hide and seek and what not, you know. Play darts in their games...room that they had and go and see [Pam and Robert's] actual children. And you know one of them, we'd go there and they had a slot car set there. And we'd sit up in their room while Nanna and Pop [i.e. Pam and Robert] talk[ed]...And we'd always just have lots of fun, you know...[There] was always someone else there to get along with and we were never there

by ourselves. We always had someone to play games with and that. They always had plenty of board games and TV and whatnot, what we wanted to do sort of thing. Yeah it was always fun. (B)

...We went out bike riding and that. They just generally stayed at home a lot of the time. Played computer games, that's pretty much what happened. Playing computer games and also playing in the creek and stuff, pretty much what you do at that age. (H)

For the majority of participants, therefore, placement through *Time for Kids* resulted in the development of broader expectations for themselves and of others, as well as a more diverse and inspiring exposure to their world.

It definitely shaped who I am. It's given me such a compassion for other people, to see the best for people...Recognising what was done for me really makes me want to go, "Hey, I want to help others", and in the same respect that I wasn't aware that I was being "helped" I want to do that for other people. You know, make it so natural for other people. Ah, it just [makes] me happy to think what I've made of this opportunity and what this could mean for others. (A)

You kind of learn a lot of new skills seeing people that you haven't before. ...Like more communications skills, and things like that. And just being positive and being able to, you know, go and talk to people that you haven't met before...It makes you feel really good about yourself as well. So instead of feeling really crappy about yourself, it just makes you feel a lot better as a person, so yeah its really cool. (C)

Recollections of time spent with foster families

One of the recurring themes of participants' narratives was the successful matching of child to foster family, and the creation of bonds which ranged in intensity from basic feelings of being accepted into a home as contrasted against the emergence of real and lasting senses of belonging within new and extended networks of family and friends.

Every day was just so much fun, they were my best friends and they still are. I never get told off for anything. And [the mum] would always come home from work and she'd buy us both [i.e. her biological daughter and the foster child] a pair of earrings or she'd buy us clothes or a jumper or something cute like that, just to make me feel even more comfortable with them. (D)

They treated me like their family, like I was their daughter...It sort of felt like a dream childhood. (F)

The following passage succinctly and graphically illustrates the way in which a seemingly fleeting or trivial event could be interpreted in quite complex ways by participants – serving to bolster one of the key components necessary for a successful placement, and for a placement to evolve into something more than a set of staged meetings or hesitant series of interactions). This component of, course, is trust.

... I remember one time I jammed my finger. We were in the city doing some shopping at the markets and [my carer] jammed my finger in the door by accident and she felt so guilty. And I just remember I was like “Oh, oh”, and she just grabbed my hand and put the whole thing in her mouth and just started sucking it. And I was just like, when she did that I was just like, “Okay, you clearly feel really comfortable with me. Like, [you’re willing to] suck[...] my hand”...It made me feel really good, because she wasn’t like “Oh, I didn’t know what to do”. And I mean she wasn’t a parent before me, but she completely instinct[ually] turned up and like[d] being my parent...and she just knew what to do. And it just really [put me at] ease[]...It [wasn’t] like she was sucking someone else’s hand. It was [like] her own daughter’s hand she was sucking. She didn’t feel the slightest strangeness about it. I always remind her of that every time I’m hurt, I’m like “Do you want to suck my hand”. I was so shocked, because I pulled back my hand when it hurt but she just grabbed it, and in the middle of the city as well, after walking around all day touching everything. But she didn’t care. She just started sucking away the pain. So there, that’s a good story. (E)

Ultimately each participant remembered events particular to their own experiences, making it impossible to provide a definitive account in this forum. However, it is safe to conclude that for all participants the placement experience played a significant role in their childhood, and, by default, their development as young people. For some it was like going on holiday (‘I thought it was always like a little holiday on the weekend’ (J)); others viewed placement as an opportunity to enjoy the continuous (as opposed to brief or fragmented) company of trusted others who could act as mentors and guide them through new experiences (‘Just their company ... was good, you know. Like, I’m into cooking...so [I] always [used] to stand around and watch Nana cook, or watch Pop making something, or building something or whatever...I was always around somebody. I was never the only young child there at the time’ (B)); and for others placement was a concrete demonstration that there is “good” in the world and that it is possible to place faith in such people (‘I think just staying with them and getting to know them, and knowing that there’s other people out there [who] even though you haven’t met them [...] can be really nice and like come to know you and care about you as part of the family as well...’ (C)).

The following excerpts provide a more extensive account of some of the more exemplary memories narrated by participants.

Interviewer: Is there any story that exemplifies your experience of *Time for Kids*?
Participant: Um, I went fishing a lot...with them and we’d just like talk a lot for like hours and hours, and that was, yeah, pretty productive in my life, for me, things like that, yeah it was pretty good, just got a lot of stuff off my chest.
(K)

I just had this kind of huge family existence, that’s what resonates for me the most. Just being completely acknowledged by people that don’t owe me one single thing but treat me like their own...I was just normal to them and nothing out of the ordinary. And that’s what so special

about it you know nothing out of the ordinary, and that's the wonderful thing about it, just being [Carol's]. (E)

...Riding the sheep. Like how many people can say they've ridden a sheep before? It was fun. I remember that because when I went up with my little brother he fell off and got trampled - by the same sheep he fell off of! And he was like laughing and stuff, so it was good...That's probably the best memory from up there...[Another] thing I liked about being up there was they had morning tea. We didn't have morning tea down here. So it was good. And they had morning tea [and] afternoon tea. So for morning tea you got cakes and stuff and then you got your lunch as well. So it was good, I liked morning tea...They bake their own cakes, and everything is from scratch. Not out of a packet. And they make ice cream and it was good to learn all that stuff as well. I enjoyed it up there. (I)

The most [enjoyable memory was] probably when we went to some sort of adventure thing that S.O.S. had on. And it had, like, little miniature trains and I ended up jumping on one of them like miniature trains with my stack hat on going round proud as punch sort of thing. I've still got the photo at home, or at mum's place, of it. Yeah that's most probably the one. (B)

Coming from my [own biological] family there wasn't...a lot of time you'd spend with your brothers and sisters and you wouldn't get an opportunity to do a lot of stuff. So being at [Michael's] gave me an opportunity to do a lot of things. I mean getting bigger birthday presents and stuff like that, sharing someone's birthday. I mean the main thing was just going to some one's [house], sleeping over at some one's house. That would never happen [in my own family]. And you know, getting a choice of things, like "What do you want for dinner tonight [A]?" It's like, "What?!" You know, getting my own...bed, my own room sometimes. Because you know at my house we were sharing rooms with 3 or 4 of us. You know, I'd have my own choice of room [and]...hav[e] a shower to myself...[W]e had to always share baths when we were younger...Ah, having a bike, you know. [Michael] would always have his old bike and I would be on that, because I never had a bike of my own. Just having other friends to kind of hang out with, because none of us were really quite close that we wouldn't really associate with many other people. So I got to meet [Michael's] friends. I mean, you see other people at school, but its really only when you hang out in the street and ride bikes, you know stuff like that, [that you make real friends]. (A)

From these comments it is manifestly apparent that respite care provided the key means through which to grant a series of experiences and emotional support which were literally extraordinary – that is, beyond ordinary or routine experience – in the lives of these participants.

Overall assessment

This section, and the section to follow, address in targeted fashion the *raison d'être* of this study. Specifically, they depict participants' own sense of the nature and impact of placement over time – offering a retrospective assessment as to how respite care has influenced participants' sense of self and their lives and pathways more generally. As a means of avoiding any tendency to speak for or in place of participants, I have

chosen to relay in extended fashion, the precise manner by which interviewees summed up their placement experience.

Interviewer: Overall how would you characterize your experiences?

Participant: Um, [extended pause], it's hard to think about it. But...when I was down there it felt, well, it's almost like a home away from home. (J)

Bloody brilliant...Yeah it was always good fun and I always used to come back with a smile on my face, you know. I'd say to me mum, "Oh me and Pop, or me and Nanna did this [on such and such] weekend", something like that, you know. It was always...good fun...I don't think I could really say anything bad about them. You know the whole experience of just going with somebody else for the week end – considering at first they were complete strangers, and...then now, even up to now, I've still got both of their numbers in my mobile. [It's] [j]ust I don't really get around to ringing them that often. Still [if I was in the same city] I'd most probably go back...tomorrow and go out and visit them. Still remember where their old house is and their new one that they've moved to now...All I can really say [...] to S.O.S., [is] thank you for putting me in their care when I was going to their place, sort of thing and they [were] always lovely people to get along with. (B)

Oh, it was really good! Yeah, they were so welcoming and stuff. It was like a really good boost of confidence to be able to stay with them. They just made you feel somehow that they really wanted to know what was going on in your life. Yeah, they just had a real interest in what was going on...Definitely very positive!...[I]t is a bit...character building...It was just really good. It...helps with confidence...being with complete strangers and meeting new friends...It's like [having] a completely different second family you know. (C)

[T]he whole thing was good. I enjoyed going there a lot...I've [been able] to experience certain things I wouldn't have [otherwise been able to] with my [biological] family...And they took good care of me and always made me feel like real comfortable. How can I put it, they sort of made me feel like I was part of their family, which was real good, I felt welcomed and at the same like, yeah, comfortable, where I could like get out of home, so it was definitely good. Like I could just like escape for a weekend from all the troubles that I had at home. So yeah in general I'm glad there is an organization like [S.O.S. / *Time for Kids*]...because before I went there I was in foster care a lot and I hated the way they treated me in foster care whereas this family was different. Like, they weren't getting paid to look after me pretty much whereas in foster care they do, pretty well much, like day care because I went to a lot of day care as well. So going there, they were genuine people, they weren't doing it for the money or anything else. They just wanted to help out a random kid. Whereas in foster care and something like that they make you feel like shit pretty well much and they treat you pretty bad. So that was one definite positive thing about it. If it wasn't for them I probably would have been in foster care a lot more...I think of them from time to time, and remember certain things that I did with their family and that, and you just ah, like, yeah, I can honestly not say that I think...it's a real good thing. Like whoever started the whole organization, like I definitely would give props to them because of what they have done. I mean...yeah it is really good...Like, whoever started the whole organization was definitely using their noggin! (H)

Positive, very positive. It was good for [my carer family] as well because they got to like spend time with someone, yeah. But I think it is a good idea. It gives my mum a break and me a break, yeah, and you have some fun as well. (K)

It is the best times of my childhood. Like when I think of my childhood I think of the [Evans'] and all the memories that I have... We just all just go out together and each time has been awesome... just being in a proper family. I don't know, just having fun. [James] is definitely a Dad to me. And [Rosie's] my second mum. And [their daughter's] my little sister and my best friend put together. (D)

Like, some of my friends when we were in primary school were like, "Oh why can't we do that?" We'd come home and tell them about what we'd done on the school holidays and they'd rather do that than sit around at home. So like I said it was a good thing for my mum like for me... Yeah it's good to have it there. (I)

... It was just completely stimulating and I just loved going there and I got so excited and it was not even like a holiday house. It was just like, "Oh, I'm going to... my other mum's house". I'd have a great time... It was just so different and it was so stimulating so I was just like dancing around... and I was just like singing, and, you know. And everyone just thought [my carer and myself] we were like mother and daughter, and we'd just pretend we were because it was easier than having to explain everything to people. It was really fun, it was just fun and I could just come out of my shell and I'd really feel like she'd support me, kind of like boost me up, to boost up my confidence, and like, you know, really "Oh you know you're great, you do this...", and just really make me feel good and adventurous and not so quiet like I was before. Like I could just run around the house... and feel completely supported by her. (E)

It was great, what I saw, I got to see what the dynamic [of a family] was, what they were like as parents. They were role models to me, and to how the family should be run too... I liked the fact that I had my own time with them, and I was not alone while I was there... they gave me understanding, yeah, I have no regrets about staying with them. (G)

What stands out in these excerpts is the degree to which respite care is narrated not so much in terms of a past event disconnected to current senses of identity, but as a process which very much informs the intensity of their self-esteem, their levels of confidence, their levels of resourcefulness, and more plainly, but just as significantly, their degrees of happiness and contentment with who they have become.

Enduring effects of placement experiences

It is quite difficult to accurately obtain the exact impact of respite care on participant's lives. Indeed, interviewees often paused for considerable periods upon being asked to tell of the nature of the link between time in respite foster care and the path(s) their lives have taken in ensuing times. Having said this, most offered considered and overwhelmingly positive statements concerning the relationship between placement and their life course. Again, so as not to speak in place of participants, each has been quoted in an extended manner.

I wouldn't be the person that I am right now if it wasn't for the [Evans']...Like, [at] 13, you know, when you go through that whole teenage stage, I used to always feel like when ever I went there I could just be myself, and I could find myself again...(D)

I think I was like, yeah, really, really, really lucky. It really helped me get back on my feet in life. (F)

I don't know what I'd be like [I hadn't experienced respite care]. I'm sure I'd be similar to what I am now. I may not have the courage I have, or the resilience, or the ability to be able to be in some positions that I am in, like moving [interstate] on my own and being able to do that. I think it takes a lot of strength to be able to do things like that...So I think I've learnt a lot of courage from the two women that are really strong in my family [i.e. my biological mum and my foster mum]. I think it has been completely positive, it has just boosted me even more than what I could have been before I met [Carol]...I wouldn't be different, I'd be still doing what I am doing. But I probably wouldn't be doing as well as what I am. I probably wouldn't be as confident...I wouldn't be as happy and independent. (E)

Interviewer: [Do you see] [a]ny links between th[e] experience [of respite care] and your life today?

Participant: I don't know. Like, honestly I couldn't tell you. Oh, you could [say that] going up there and meeting new people you have to be like more forward and stuff. Like probably in a way like I'm not that shy now meeting new people. Like I can go up and talk to anybody else. Maybe that's like one of the things, which has helped me because like not being shy, so I can just meet random people, so it was good...So yeah I liked it, I suppose that's...something that it did for us. (I)

[I]t definitely shaped who I am. Its given me such a compassion for other people, to see the best for people...Recognising what was done for me really makes me want to go, "Hey, I want to help others", and in the same respect that I wasn't aware that I was being "helped", I want to do that for other people. You know, make it so natural for other people. Ah, it just gets me happy to think what I've made of this opportunity and what this could mean for others...I sometimes think of all those children out there still standing on the river bank wanting to getting across, waiting for the opportunity to arise, waiting for this program to come into their lives, you know. And my life could have gone down a totally different path, it made a difference. For that reason it makes me feel real optimism, whether it's through S.O.S. or what ever I do...or just in general life, helping someone out on the bus. It's just [that] I got framed by the experience into thinking about what other people need in their lives. It's quite simple. It's just if you are exposed to something you learn from it, and that's what happened. (A)

Interviewer: Can you draw any link between [who] you [are] today and these experiences?

Participant: Definitely...you kind of learn a lot of new skills seeing people that you haven't before...Like,...more communications skills, and things like that. And just being positive and being able to, you know, go and talk to people that you haven't met before and things like...It makes you feel really good

about yourself as well. So instead of feeling really crappy about yourself, it just makes you feel a lot better as a person, so yeah it's really cool.

Interviewer: Will this influence you throughout your life, do you think?

Participant: [Where I was], it's a completely different family. Like, the dynamics out there, at their home, is completely different to what mine is and has been before. So, I kind of see people differently, and you can kind of understand a bit more about how they act and why they do, just how they do certain things and things like that. (C)

What these passages indisputably point toward is the fact that family (both conceptually and in practice) can transcend paternity.⁸ It was clear that for many of those interviewed relationships with their carer families were based on infinitely more than obligation or charity, and even on something more than friendship. Instead, and for a significant number, the relationship between carer(s) and child is ongoing – not simply “like” or “resembling” family, but *experienced as family proper*, as it were. Indeed, some participants have now become parents themselves and their children have in turn been introduced and become part of an extended family setting based on the placement experience.

When collected together and presented in the manner laid out above, it is exceedingly easy to think that “happy endings”, for want of a better phrase, would somehow always have eventually come to the fore for each of the participants in this study. But I would strongly caution against such a deterministic, even teleological, reading of people's lives. There is nothing inevitable or readily predictable about where one is headed. Conversely, it is possible to know with far greater surety the conditions which have framed people's biographies (past trajectories). Like any group of people, the participants in this study had wide and varied factors affecting their lives from quite a young age – sometimes it was conflict within the home environment, sometimes it was the neglect which often results (unintentionally) from a sole parent having to juggle the competing needs of work, children and a problematic (ex)partner. And sometimes, the situation is far more serious than any of these – such as when respite foster care literally provides respite (opens up the space) for addressing the trauma suffered within one's “original” or biological family. As one participant remarked,

When I was a little baby I got on my back cigarette burns. My mum started to use me as the human ashtray, and now and then – it depends on what kind weather...[there] is – but, um, the cigarette burns actually show up, because they're white on my skin. Yeah, there's some on my neck and a few on my back as well. And on some days it stands out, otherwise it just blends in with my skin colour. (J)

⁸Thank you Benjamin Pederick for phrasing the matter in this way.

I cite this excerpt not for rhetorical effect, but to add force to the notion that respite foster carers engage with persons from very diverse backgrounds, and, in some sense, confront reasonably complex challenges (such as how best to restore trust and respect within the day to day lives of the children they take into their homes). It would seem, on the basis of narratives collected for this study, that clients believe their various emotional, developmental and social needs to be not only met, but well exceeded by the placement(s) organised through *Time for Kids*.

Concluding remarks

In light of the above themes and excerpts, it is manifestly clear that *Time for Kids* has played an integral and productive role in the lives of the young people taking part in this study. Obviously, it would involve something of a leap to suppose that the experiences of this group of persons precisely mimic the experiences and viewpoints of all those assisted by *Time for Kids* since its inception. But that has not been the purpose of this report. Indeed, this study is less about numbers of participants than it is about the stories behind the numbers of persons placed by *Time for Kids* from year to year. This is a critically important point to grasp since it is all too easy to dismiss the narratives of a small group of individuals as somehow insignificant or not reflective of the larger group of which they are a part. However, I would caution that the “larger group” of most concern here is (or should be) that which surrounds and infuses the lives of those interviewed (namely, respite foster carers, “original family members”, extended networks of friends, and so forth). Ultimately, it is the way in which respite foster care works to sustain or bring these parties together in often difficult circumstances that matters most.

The benefits flowing from the service provided by *Time for Kids* fall not just upon the client – that is, the child put into a placement. Instead, and as evinced by the narratives cited above, *placement is a collective experience with collective benefits*. It is probably no exaggeration to say that children and carers alike “grow” and/or take away new skills and perspectives from the process of respite foster care. Indeed (and although the voices of carers are to some degree present within the stories told by participants), it would no doubt prove worthwhile, at some future point, to record and explore respite foster care from the perspective of carers themselves. This would help to provide the best and most well-rounded picture of the impact which *Time for Kids* has had (and continues to have) upon the several thousand young lives it has assisted to date.

From a criminological standpoint, the odds of a child or adolescent leading a conventional law abiding life can be judged broadly against one’s continuing proximity to certain protective or risk factors – typically assessed at individual, family, school, peer group and community/societal levels.

Risk factors predict increased risk for developing a problem or disorder. Protective factors, on the other hand, are conditions that counter risk factors or increase resistance to them, and thus inhibit the development of problems even in the face of risk exposure. (Howell, 2003: 103)

In the context of the support provided by *Time for Kids*, the family becomes the immediate (manifest) variable amenable to intervention. The placement of children in respite contexts where ‘cohesion, warmth, harmony, and the absence of neglect’ (Garmezy, 1985, cited in Howell, 2003: 106) consistently prevail, constitutes a concrete example of engaging a protective “milieu”. Perhaps of greater importance, and as well established in criminological literature, interventions at any “one” of the key risk factor “domains” can influence the nature of interactions and events occurring across other domains as well. As Howell (2003: 106) puts the matter in his meta-review of the literature on risk and protective factors for juvenile offending and anti-social behaviour,

protective factors may interrupt the causal processes through which risk factors operate...[A]n intervention that reduces family conflict may interrupt a chain of risks connecting the family environment with negative peer affiliations and drug use.

There is, on the basis of the narratives highlighted above, very good reason to believe that time spent in respite care has had countless tangible and intangible impacts on the life-course of each participant. When children enter a respite family scenario, each, in effect, enters into a new network of values, social relations, and activities. This might not always prove to be immediately rewarding for, or recognizable to, the client, but with time, and in hindsight, each participant spoke of the way in which their ability to change or to envisage different futures, developed in concert with repeated exposure or proximity to alternative supportive environments.

The best way to ensure that children do not become attached to anti-social, criminal or violent pathways, is to provide them meaningful opportunities to learn and put into practice the values and skills associated with conventional life. It is worth recalling here the words of one participant already quoted above,

It was great, what I saw, I got to see what the dynamic [of a family] was, what they were like as parents. They were role models to me, and to how the family should be run too...I liked the fact that I had my own time with them, and I was not alone while I was there...they gave me understanding, yeah, I have no regrets about staying with them. (G)

This statement – typical of those interviewed – has all the hallmarks of protective factors coming to the fore and of the provision of the psychic and familial space

within which to literally learn about how a family should or could function. This leads to the critical point that whilst placement is both limited in time and to a particular place, the knowledge and experiences – indeed the “lessons” – learned from being placed in respite care endure well beyond the final “stay” with a carer family.

In criminological terms, placement not only reduces key risk factors (poor school performance, involvement with illicit drugs, exposure to verbal, psychological, physical or emotional abuse, negative peer group) through immersion within a protective scenario (stable familial network, positive peer group, culture where education is valued and able to be consistently accessed). In addition, and most significantly, *placement builds resilience*. The emergence and ongoing presence of resilience is in many ways the key indicator of the success of respite foster care for the group of clients interviewed for this study. Resilience denotes the ability of an individual to maintain a positive and productive life-course despite the continued existence of certain risk factors in that individual’s life. The concept of resilience has considerable relevance here, since respite foster care does not and *cannot* equip clients with the skills to solve all the dilemmas and conflicts pervading the “original” home environment – an environment to which each inevitably returns. Instead, respite care instills new and varied ways of coping with what might previously have presented as impossible or traumatic scenarios. It does this because clients assisted by *Time for Kids* develop – through periodic and sensitive contact with “model” carers – a sense of self connected to people and things beyond their initial familial context and problems (and permits to the biological parent or guardian the time and space within which to work through particular pressures giving rise to the need for respite care in the first instance).

It is, as hinted at earlier, impossible to know precisely the course each client’s life would have taken were placement not to have eventuated. But what is sobering, and what can be stated with certainty, is that of those young persons entrenched deep within cycles of crime and violence (whether in South Australia or elsewhere), the majority evince troubled and volatile familial backgrounds. On this basis, respite foster care can be said to provide a unique medium through which attachment and commitment to conventional values and routines can be sustained (or re-instated) at key developmental stages of childrens’ lives.

It would seem fitting to close this report with the words of those interviewed for this study. Immediately below, therefore, are several excerpts which stand as overwhelmingly positive testimony to the work undertaken by *Time for Kids*.

Interviewer: Would you take in a child through the *Time for Kids* program yourself?

Participant: Yeah. I mean for the reasons that I was kind of involved as well. It's such an empowering thing...I would even adopt a kid and stuff like that you know...There's nothing wrong with taking a child into your home...I mean...its got to be a positive thing...to provide a child with options, you know... (A)

[I]t's made me want to do the same. Like, [when] I've got a bit older and when my baby gets a bit older, I'd love to do the same thing, straight out like...Shit,...I'd like to have a couple of kids like come and stay with me and...my family. So yeah it was really good. (H)

Interviewer: Would you take a [child] in through *Time for Kids*?

Participant: Yeah I would, I wouldn't even think twice about it, because I think of the bloody positives that its done for me. I'd be happy to try and give the positives to another child, you know what I mean? I am happy to hand on the experience I've had with S.O.S or *Time for Kids*. I wouldn't even hesitate to even do something like that. (B)

These statements – centred on the notion of yesterday's clients becoming tomorrow's carers (or yesterdays children becoming tomorrow's responsible guardians) – stand, in effect, as the strongest evidence that *Time for Kids* has provided (and is providing) a critically important and sensitively administered service for those who need it most.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

Time for Kids Inc.: *Client Perspectives on Intervention and Assistance*

1. Can you tell me something about how you came to be involved with *Time for Kids* (or equivalent)?
2. Can you tell me about the family you were first placed with? (What they were like?; Where did they live?)
3. For what period of time were you placed with this family?
4. In general, how would you describe this placement experience?
5. What sort of things did you do during your placement time?
6. What did you *like* about staying with this family?
7. Was there anything you didn't *like* about the placement?
8. Do you have any particular fond memories of your time with your family?
9. Were there other families that you were placed with in addition to the first family you told me about?

If [YES]: REPEAT 1 to 9

10. Overall, how would you characterise the time you spent with your foster family (or other assistance received through association with *Time for Kids*)?
 - Do you think the organisation has played a positive or negative role in your life? (Why do you say this?)
11. Is there any story or incident you wish to relay to me which you think casts some light on the nature of your experiences with *Time for Kids*?
12. Looking back at the placement experience, is it possible to draw any link between your time in respite foster care as against your life today?