



# Factors influencing decision making about the placement of children in care: Development of the Child Placement Questionnaire



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## ABSTRACT

Child protection practitioners are frequently presented with the challenges of making decisions that have considerable impact on the lives of children and their families. Research in this area has primarily focussed on intake, investigation and reunification decisions, and reflects the importance of considering the role of the decision maker and the decision making environment in decision making. Despite over 43,000 children living in out of home care in Australia at June 30, 2014, the decision making processes leading to finding children safe and secure long-term out of home placements are considerably under-researched. This study aimed to develop a tool based on the theory of planned behaviour framework, measuring the theoretical determinants of practitioner behaviour; attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, in order to examine the intention of child protection practitioners about placing children in out of home care. The resulting measure, the Child Placement Questionnaire (CPQ), was evaluated by experts and piloted with a sample of 53 child protection practitioners working in the Australian out of home care sector. Individual items were reviewed for their relevance. Participant responses reflected a positive intention to place children in kinship care, but highlighted the importance of pragmatic constraints when placing children. Future research should focus on psychometric evaluation of the measure with a larger sample.

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## 1. Introduction

The primary goal of child protection practice is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children. In order to achieve this goal, practitioners are faced with the challenge of assessing risk and harm to children and identifying the appropriate interventions (Parada, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007). Practitioners must consider a range of complex, and sometimes competing, factors to make decisions that may have a profound impact for children and their families (Stokes & Schmidt, 2012; Toros, 2012), while navigating the interaction between organisational and systemic guidelines and their own professional judgement (Drury-Hudson, 1999; Forkby & Höjer, 2011; Gillingham, 2011; Parada et al., 2007).

There are a number of important decision making points in child protection practice. Of the limited research available, a considerable amount focuses on decisions at the stage of intake to the child protection system, and investigation of allegations of abuse and neglect (Beckett, McKeigue, & Taylor, 2007; Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003; Hackett & Taylor, 2013; Hughes & Chau, 2013; Khoo, Hyvönen, & Nygren, 2003; Moraes, Durrant, Brownridge, & Reid, 2006; Parada et al., 2007). Other research considers decisions after these reports have been substantiated,

whether to provide in home treatment or to remove the child from their family for alternative care (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Britner & Mossler, 2002), and later, whether children should remain in care or be reunified with their families (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008). Despite over 43,000 children living in care in Australia at June 30, 2014 (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGP], 2015), and hundreds of thousands of children living in alternative care internationally, research regarding the decision making process leading to identifying suitable alternative caregivers for children who cannot remain at home has received minimal research focus to date (Chor, 2013; Crea, 2010).

In Australia, the term 'out of home care' collectively refers to the alternative options for children who are unable to remain at home because they are at risk of abuse and neglect. These alternative options include home-based care, where the child is placed either with a member of their family or community (kinship care) or in a family setting with a carer not previously known to the child (foster care). A third type of out of home care in Australia is care in a staffed residential facility where children are often placed in small groups. This is known as residential care.

Research indicates that children in all types of out of home care, compared to children in the general population, do not fare as well on a number of important psychosocial outcomes (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003). As adults, they continue to be a particularly vulnerable population

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who are likely to have poorer psychological, social and educational outcomes (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Osborn & Bromfield, 2007). While these outcomes may relate to their experiences in care as well as those prior to entering care, attention has been called to the importance of providing placement options that address the psychological, emotional and behavioural needs of children in order to improve outcomes for this population (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001). There is limited research comparing outcomes for children between placement types, and no definitive answer as to a type of out of home care that will always best address these needs. What is known, is that children who feel safe and secure in a stable out of home care placement are likely to experience better outcomes than those who experience multiple placements (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Cashmore & Paxman, 2006). This suggests the potential significance of the placement decision for the outcomes of children in out of home care, and highlights the importance of understanding how this decision is reached.

Ideally, children are matched to the caregiver based on their individual needs. Increasing pressure on the out of home care sector in the form of high numbers of children remaining in care, difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable carers and the urgent conditions under which children may be removed from home means that this is not always possible in reality. Although kinship care is the fastest growing type of arrangement in Australia, the lack of research regarding the placement decision means that the factors that lead some children to be placed in kinship care and others in foster or residential care are not yet understood.

In general, research examining decisions regarding the removal of children from home and subsequent placement in out of home care has applied the strategy of administrative data or case file analysis (Beeman, Kim, & Bullerick, 2000; Bhatti-Sinclair & Sutcliffe, 2012; DePanfilis & Girvin, 2005; Fluke, Chabot, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Blackstock, 2010; Grogan-Kaylor, 2000). This approach focuses on the role of the characteristics of the child and the case in producing decision outcomes. Studies that have sought the views of practitioners have additionally noted that the realities of making decisions in an environment where often the information available is limited, may force practitioners to rely often on their own intuitive judgements to make predictions about future risk due to receiving incomplete or inaccurate information about the case (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Hackett & Taylor, 2013). Considering the characteristics of the decision maker is therefore likely to be of great importance in understanding all decision making in child protection.

As well as considering complex sets of case characteristics often with limited time, resources and information, practitioners must also manage their responsibilities to a range of stakeholders. When placing a child in out of home care, practitioners must balance their obligation to the child and their family while adhering to legislation and organisational policy (Tilbury, 2007). Additionally, in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all children within their jurisdiction, practitioners are performing a service to the public, and the outcomes of their decisions are subject to the scrutiny of the wider population through reviews, inquiries and in the media (Stokes & Schmidt, 2012). The highly regulated and high stakes nature of the decision making environment suggests that examining the role of the practitioner in the placement decision without accounting for environmental and societal factors would therefore limit our ability to explain the decision making process.

The complex and emotional nature of child protection means that decisions are never completely free from bias (Jones & Gupta, 1998), and that professional judgement and the requirements and expectations constructed within organisations and society often interact (Keddell, 2011). Despite the importance of the placement decision for outcomes for children in out of home care, no attempt has been made to measure how these factors relate to where children are placed. A theoretical approach that acknowledges the beliefs of the decision maker, as well as the influence of the organisation, system and society on these beliefs is therefore required in order to provide insight into the factors that influence the placement decision.

### 1.1. The Theory of Planned Behaviour

The process of matching children to out of home placements takes place in a complex and high stakes environment where time, resources and information are often at a premium. Application of theory to this decision must therefore take into account the personal beliefs of practitioners, as well as the impact that the environment and its pragmatic constraints have on these beliefs.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TpB, [Ajzen, 1985, 1991]), provides a useful theoretical framework for examining how all of these types of factors determine how practitioners select placements for children. The theory has been applied widely in order to the study health related behaviours, and has performed well as a model to explain intention in this domain (Godin & Kok, 1996). While the theory has not been applied to child protection practitioner decision making, it has been used to measure the influences on teachers' and nurses' decisions to report suspected child abuse and/or neglect with some success (Ben-Natan, Faour, Naamah, Grinberg, & Klein-Kremer, 2012; Feng, Huang, & Wang, 2010; Feng & Wu, 2005), providing a point of comparison for some of the complexity of decision making in the field.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour is an extension of Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action, which describes intention as the primary determinant of behaviour. Intention is made up of attitudes about the behaviour and the subjective norms, or social pressures regarding the behaviour. TpB expands this model to include the effect of an individual's perceived control over performing the behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). Applied to the placement of children, the theory suggests that the more positive the practitioner's attitude and societal beliefs towards a placement, and the more control the practitioner believes they have, the stronger the practitioner's intention will be to place a child in a particular placement, and the more likely it will be that this will occur (see Fig. 1).

Given the complexity of decisions about the placement of children in out of home care, operationalising the factors influencing this decision is important for understanding and improving policy and practice about these decisions. No empirical measure of these factors currently exists. The aim of this study was therefore to develop a measure based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour that could be used to examine the intention of child protection practitioners when making placement decisions for children in the child protection system.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design

This study was carried out in two stages, between June and September 2013. Stage 1 involved development and initial validation of the Child Placement Questionnaire (CPQ), a vignette survey based on guidelines for Theory of Planned Behaviour (TpB) measurement (Ajzen, 2002; Francis et al., 2004). Stage 2 is a cross-sectional, between- and within-subjects analysis of scores on a pilot of the CPQ with child protection practitioners working in the Australian out of home care sector. Stages 1 and 2 of the study were granted approval by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee.

### 2.2. Stage 1: measure development

The Child Placement Questionnaire (CPQ) is a vignette survey specifically developed for this study. The CPQ has been designed, based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour to:

1. Measure the intention of child protection practitioners about the placement of children in out of home care
2. Examine the attitudinal, normative and control factors related to this intention, based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

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