

# **International Foster Care and the Kids United Home: A literature review and comparison of residential homes worldwide**

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## Background

Kids United Home, run by Beyond Social Services, is a short-term residential care programme for children aged seven to fourteen years old (referred by MCYS or within Beyond) who are unable to remain at home for various reasons that affect their well-being. Beyond Social Services works towards minimizing the ill-effects of an out of home placement, and puts into place age appropriate interventions that address the children's developmental needs, while also helping to reintegrate the children back into their natural support network.

Over the last decades, research has been conducted to highlight the harmful effects of large scale institutional foster care on children. While large group homes were once the norm for children in out of home care, these institutions have now been restructured as smaller, family style homes, in which children are better able to maintain a sense of normalcy over the course of their development.

In 1948, The Children's Act emerged in the United Kingdom as an extension and clarification of the laws and responsibilities that were in place for children under the English Poor Laws, as World War II had left many children orphaned and emotionally disturbed. The Children's Act, which was written ten years prior to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, stated that authorities must act in the best interest of the child. This Act is derived from work done by the Curtis Committee, "whose remit was to investigate the care of children deprived of a 'normal' home life" (Parton, p.4, as stated in Milligan and Stevens, p.241), and which required authorities to provide care in a manner similar to that available to "children in the care of their own parents" (Parton, p.5, as stated in Milligan and Stevens, p. 241).

## Literature Review

According to The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, whose prime objectives are to improve international understanding of issues relating to children's rights and to help facilitate the full implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it has become the norm across Europe to shift from large scale institutionalized care, to a smaller and more personalized style of care.

“Most countries have developed policies to create smaller homes supplying more personalized care than the large-scale establishments. They have also sought to restructure the large institutions – for example, by providing care in smaller groups and by promoting opportunities for children to mix with the local community and to receive education with their peers” (UNICEF, 2001).

The research centre has also found that many European countries have also created strategies that encourage providers from NGO's and the private sector to develop services in order to address the need for small group homes for children in out of home care (UNICEF, 2001).

More specifically, the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre produces individual reports for each country in Central and Eastern Europe. Previously, Eastern European countries have been known for their large scale orphanages in absolute dire conditions, often resulting in children being diagnosed with a variety of developmental delays and health issues. However, new research indicates that even the Eastern European countries are re-structuring their institutionalized care facilities. For example, in Hungary:

“In order to modernize upbringing in residential care institutions, the law aims at creating a network of residential care institutions building on small communities with a small number of children (not more than forty in one home), which would more efficiently prepare children for independent life. The law also supports the replacing of large residential care institutions with family type homes (with no more than twelve children in one home), and the creation of special care homes, a type of institution

housing not more than fifteen children with serious behavioral, learning difficulties or with health problems” (Hungary Country Statistical Team, 2006).

In Scotland, it has also become the common practice to specialise in a more individualised care plan for children in foster care, which is synonymous to one of the programme components of Kids United Home. It ensures that the living conditions of the home provide the children with the opportunity to live a normal life.

“The nature and function of residential child care has changed greatly over the past thirty years, as units have become smaller and care has been more individually planned and reviewed. One of the major changes has been that the size of units has reduced dramatically. The five or six bed unit has become the norm, and some organizations are moving to even smaller scale provisions” (Milligan and Stevens, p. 241-42).

The Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care developed the National Care Standards and the National Minimum Standards, which are the benchmarks by which all residential care facilities are recorded and examined. “The standards state that your daily life in the care home should be as similar as possible to that of other children and young people” (Milligan and Stevens, p. 242). Other aspects of this include maintaining similarities outside of the home, including encouraging and supporting the children to take part in activities, including sports, leisure, and outdoor activities (Milligan and Stevens, p. 242).

The Goteborg University Department of Psychology in Sweden also supports the family style of residential care, as in documented in a thesis by Bengt Anderson, who comparatively studied residential care in Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. Anderson describes one model of residential care from the United Kingdom, which is considered the basis for residential care practice, and has also been documented as practiced in Sweden. It is based on the assumption that children in residential care

need to experience ordinary, every day experiences. “The daily life should resemble that of an ordinary family and the social environment should be as homelike as possible (Anderson, p. 16).

The structure of residential foster care has changed greatly over the years as “large institutions were considered as harmful to children and younger persons, and were replaced with smaller living units (Anglin, 2002; Department of Health, 1998; Sallnas, 2000, as stated in Anderson, p. 19).

In the United Kingdom, the size of residential homes are kept small, and can vary from three or four beds, to up to twenty, with a staff varying from six to thirty persons (Department of Health, 1998; Sinclair and Gibbs, 1998, as stated in Anderson, p. 20). In the United States, there is also a tendency to make residential homes smaller, and with fewer beds. The use of smaller homes, and specifically, homes that employ coupled foster parents, is developed out of Social Learning Theory, which argues that people learn their behaviours by observing and imitating the behaviours of others. In small group homes that are led by coupled or married foster parents, there is more opportunity for the children in the homes to observe, learn, and imitate the positive behaviours exhibited by their foster parents. This technique is known as the Teach Family Model or Multi Treatment Foster Care (Anderson, p. 21). Ultimately, the importance of small group homes has been largely recognised in the United Kingdom and United States.

There are also residential homes in Australia that follow a similar format of small, family style residential homes. There has been a decline in residential care in Australia (as well as in most Western countries), as foster care and other forms of small scale out of home care have taken a precedence over larger institutions, as research has identified

factors from this kind of care as having a undesirable impact on children's emotional, social and cognitive development (ACWA, p. 2). For example, in New South Wales, the Associate of Children's Welfare Agencies published a report that indicated where new action needed to take place in regards to residential facilities. This report stated that an effective and contemporary residential care system would be characterised by:

“-Low numbers of staff or group home ‘parents’ who have sufficient time and skills to engage positively with residents and build relationships characterized by trust and hope, and;

-Generally a small number of residents per household” (ACWA, p.3).

Similarly, small scale residential foster care is also available in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong Christian Services supports and assists families temporarily in the care of their children. They have been running small group homes since 1994, and each home has a capacity of only eight children. These homes “provide a home-like environment for the children until they can return to their families, or a long term alternative living arrangement is achieved” (retrieved from [www.hkcs.org](http://www.hkcs.org) on 11 September 2008).

Finally, the Infant Jesus Centre, located in Singapore, “provides residential care for children between the ages of two and a half and thirteen years. Children are accepted into the residential care programme when they meet eligibility requirements such as low income, a need for protection and care, and children that are in moral danger” (retrieved from [www.ijhcc.org/homes\\_ijc.htm](http://www.ijhcc.org/homes_ijc.htm) on 7 October 2008). This residential program houses eight children, and has just one house mother, as well as additional staff who work with the children on a daily basis. Despite the small size of this facility, it continues to function more as a long-term institution, with a focus on teaching the children to become independent and to become equipped with skills to manage themselves, as often times

their parents are not able to do so. However, the plan for each child is individually designed to fit each child's needs. Clearly, the Infant Jesus Centre is at an advantage by capping their capacity at eight children, thus allowing for the individual needs of the children to be more easily met.

### Visits to Privately Run Homes

At the Agape Family Life Home, just outside of Beijing, China, it was observed that the home, which bears the physical appearance of a traditional, Western style home, truly is a home to the physically disabled children who live there (Personal visit, August 2007). The children live in a family style atmosphere that is led by the house mother and father. During the day, the younger children are in school, while the older children are off at work. The children spend their free time playing and engaging with one another, eating their meals together, and act and behave with each other like siblings.

“If the foster home is really a home, the people inside are like family. The children see one couple as parents. Although you have staff that come and go every day, they are just that - staff, but the house parents are the key. The children call them Mom and Dad, they can come to them and let them know their needs, their cares and their desires. The house parents are the ones they (the children) see as real parents, because they don't leave everyday and return the next having a different life to live. I hear all the time how the children express their needs to them, and just one example is Steven. Steven is on an adoption list, and has told our house Mom he does not want to be adopted - he's already part of a family. Love, close contact, and security are what make a house a home” (Keith Wyse, personal interview, 2 October 2008).

The positive implications of family style residential care has carried its reputation even further, and has also been seen firsthand at Dar El Maged, located in the Maadi suburb of Cairo, Egypt. This residential dwelling is home to six young boys and two young girls, who are cared for by five rotating house mothers (Moataz Sedky, personal

interview, 10 October, 2008). The home is comfortably furnished, and quite large and modern by Egyptian standards. The children turn to the house mothers in times of both happiness and in despair, and looked to the house mothers for guidance regarding interacting with new adults entering the home, clearly illustrating a strong and healthy attachment (Personal visit, December 2007). These young children have recently entered Kindergarten, and spend their free time together as well, doing art work, playing on the playground in the homes' small garden, swimming, and other sports activities. "They are so attached to each other...they act like one group and it is hard for them to leave each other" (Moataz Sedky, personal interview, 10 October, 2008).

#### Kids United Home - Singapore

Kids United Home, run by Beyond Social Services is a home that understands the importance of ones' environment, and the impact that the environment has on social and emotional development. Although they are a small home, Kids United Home does not believe in trying to replace parents or caregivers with "house parents." As a short term facility for children in out-of-home care, Kids United Home believes that it is important to respect the roles of the parents and caregivers in the lives of the residents, and to ensure that a bond between family members and residents stays in-tact. There are three main goals of Kids United Home: to help children away from their families to regain a sense of normality by providing them a safe & nurturing environment, to give children the support and opportunities to develop their character & maximize their potential to the fullest, and to help children reconcile their natural support networks. This is done through six main programme concepts:



- Family Strengthening
- Individualised Development Plans
- United Time
- Community Bridging
- Staff Reflection
- Partnership Management

At Kids United Home, a small group manager works with four children, and often times, this cluster is made up of sibling groups. The small group manager is able to focus on the individual needs of each child by creating an individualised development plan. The small group manager also ensures that each child is able to maintain a sense of individuality and identity, despite their communal living situation. The children are also given a chance to take part in the decision making process, as it is important for the children to have a voice in regards to their own well-being and their day-to-day living situation. This process is also important developmentally, as the children learn how to live and work with others, while being able to voice their opinions, make educated choices, and reinforce the development of their character. Between the house managers and small group managers, the children are also given the opportunity to participate in group activities, sports, outings, and other age appropriate events that inspire a sense of normalcy in their otherwise uprooted childhood.

Finally, Beyond Social Services works closely with the staff of Kids United Home to ensure the best possible utilisation of the residential setting for the development of its residents. This includes strengthening the different relationships between staff and residents, as well as relationships between residents and their natural support networks. Through appropriate staff training and reflection, the staff of Kids United Home are able to remain attentive and considerate of the unique needs of their residents and their

families. The relationship between Beyond Social Services, Kids United Home and other appropriate authorities is also a key factor in ensuring the ongoing success of this program.

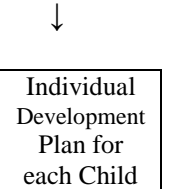
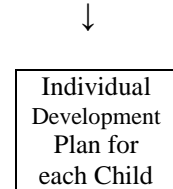
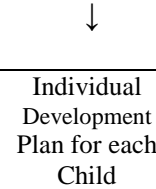
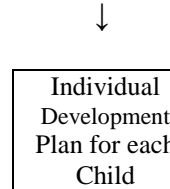
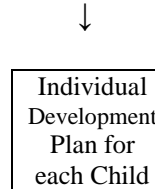
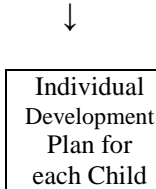
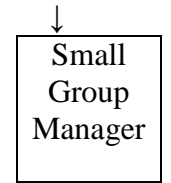
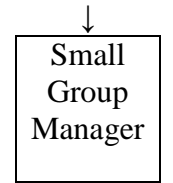
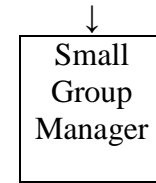
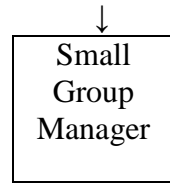
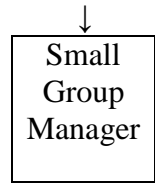
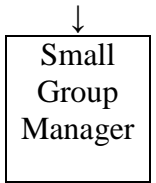
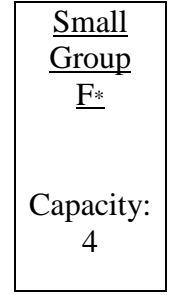
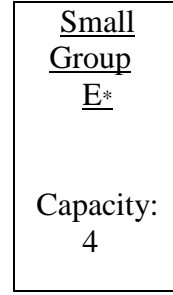
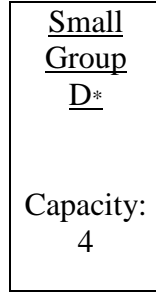
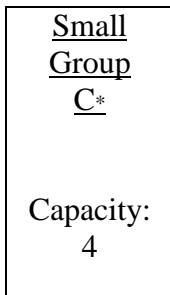
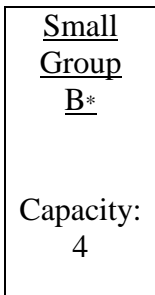
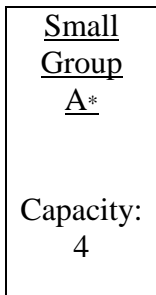
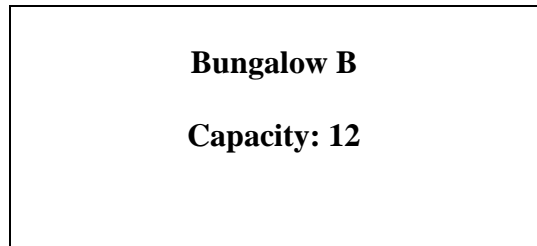
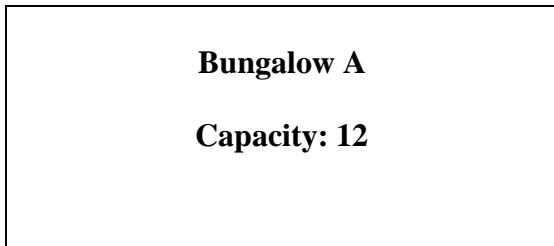
### Conclusion

It is clear that the Kids United Home is a residence that is aligned not only with the current trends in foster care by providing a small group setting, but is also in line with previous and current research, that supports a smaller environment, with individualised care plans, as opposed to larger scale institutions that have proven to have detrimental effects on children's overall development. Whereas in larger group homes, a child may simply be identified by a number or a behaviour, smaller homes allow for a child to regain a sense of normalcy in their already uprooted lives, and develop a sense of belonging within a smaller community that is able to focus on their specific needs. Although the ultimate objective for the children in care of Kids United Home is reunification, it is clear that the design of the home, the programme goals and components, and staff development and training are designed with the best interest of the child in mind.

**Table 1.1 – Number of Residents and Staff by Country/Home**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Name of Home</b>	<b>Number of Residents</b>	<b>Number of Staff/ House Parents</b>	<b>Ratio of Staff to Residents</b>
Australia	NA	10 or fewer (retrieved from <a href="http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/aus/aw07/aw07-x04.rtf">www.aihw.gov.au/publications/aus/aw07/aw07-x04.rtf</a> on 13 October 2008)	NA	NA
China	Agape Family Life Home	12	6	1 : 2
Egypt	Dar El Maged	8	5	2.5 : 4
Hong Kong	Hong Kong Christian Services	8	NA	NA
Hungary	NA	12 to 40	NA	NA
Scotland	NA	5 to 6	NA	NA
Singapore	Infant Jesus Center	8	1	1 : 8
Singapore	Kids United Home	24	6	1 : 4
Sweden	NA	3 to 20	6 to 30	3 : 2.125
UK/USA	NA	3 to 20	6 to 30	3 : 2.125

# Kids United Home



\*When possible, small groups will contain sibling groups

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