

Alliance for Forgotten Australians



Forgotten Australians:
Supporting survivors of
childhood institutional
care in Australia



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This booklet is designed to inform and assist doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, dentists, social workers, counsellors and welfare workers.

It will also be an essential resource for service delivery organisations.

It aims to give health and other professionals the background information they need to recognise, relate to and assist people who are experiencing long term trauma because of a childhood spent in orphanages or Homes – the Forgotten Australians.

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Alliance for 
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Who are the Forgotten Australians?

The people who identify as Forgotten Australians are now adults, some of them in their thirties, some very elderly. They are survivors of the institutional care system, which was the standard form of out-of-home care in Australia for most of the 20th Century. The 2004 Inquiry of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee¹ estimated that more than 500,000 children have experienced life in an orphanage, Children's Home, gaol, training school, adult psychiatric (asylum) hospital, or in foster care and other forms of out-of-home care in the 20th century in Australia.

The reasons children were placed in institutional care varied:

- Some were removed from their parents and made State Wards and/or placed in State care, because the State considered their parents unfit or the children at risk.
- Some had parents who were dead, in prison, missing or otherwise unable to care for them.
- Others were placed by their parent/s because the parent/s could not provide for them. Sometimes these parents had to work and used the Home as a form of child care. If they could, they paid maintenance to those running the institution. Many children were in Homes simply by reason of poverty, in an era of almost no community or government support for families in crisis or need; many children had fathers and mothers who returned traumatised from war service.

¹ The report is titled, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*. Available online at: http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac_ctte/inst_care/report/index.htm

- Some children were placed in institutions simply because their parents had separated or divorced.
- The Forgotten Australians include Indigenous children, many of whom were removed because of their race, and child migrants.²

Given the high number, it is likely that most services and practices already have Forgotten Australians and their families among their clientele.

The Senate Inquiry allowed many people who had been children in the Australian institutional care system to tell their stories – often for the first time. This brought their experiences back to them and caused great pain for them and their families.

Australian Apology

On 16 November 2009, the Australian Parliament, through the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, formally acknowledged and apologised for the experiences of Forgotten Australians and Child Migrants, their harsh treatment and their ongoing trauma. It is hoped that the public recognition of their needs increases awareness and stimulates improved responses from governments, past providers of “care” and the health and welfare community.

² See the other reports in the trilogy, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, April 1997; and *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record – Report on child migration*, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 30 August 2001

Where will you meet Forgotten Australians?

Many Forgotten Australians are already in the health and welfare system, seeking and receiving help for conditions such as mental illness or substance abuse. They may approach service delivery agencies because of a specific issue such as homelessness or family violence or unemployment. They may come to the notice of child protection agencies or the criminal justice system; they may already be in prisons or in mental health facilities. They will almost certainly be among your existing clients, usually without mentioning their abuse. That abuse is, however, often the root cause of their problems.

Some may openly identify as Forgotten Australians; others may use other terms.³ Some will need your understanding and assistance to help them acknowledge and speak of their experiences.



Four little girls polishing at a children's home. Photo reproduced courtesy Edith Cowan University, Museum of Childhood Collection, WA.

3 The Australian Senate called them "Forgotten Australians". Other words are also used by some of the people themselves, including "care leavers", "Homies", "State Wards" and "ex-residents". "Forgotten Australians" is considered the least likely to give offence.

What did they experience?

The Senate Committee reported that they had

...received hundreds of graphic and disturbing accounts about the treatment and care experienced by children in out-of-home care. ... Their stories outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault. ... neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare. (Forgotten Australians, xv)

There was a systemic failure by governments and providers to give children care and protection.

Separation, Abandonment and Loss of Family

These children suffered from deep and lasting feelings of separation and abandonment. The loss of family, usually including separation from siblings, caused grief, feelings of isolation, guilt, self-blame and confusion about their identity.

Deception

Many children were told (untruthfully) that their parents were dead or did not care about them. Parents were told that their children had been moved or had misbehaved and could not be visited.

Neglect and Exploitation

The Senate report also revealed a history of neglect and cruelty by institutional staff and management, of abandonment and exploitation that have left the victims, Australians and

child migrants, physically and psychologically scarred. Physical deprivation was common. Children were cold and hungry. Hard physical labour was part of their daily lives. Particularly demeaning and very difficult tasks were given as punishments.

Sustained Brutality

Punishments for very small offences or perceived disobedience could be harsh and cruel – severe physical attacks and beatings are reported by many. Alternatively, children were locked in a cupboard or a cell in solitary confinement or made to stand for many hours in one position.

Bed-wetting was punished with beatings, cold showers and humiliations, e.g. parading naked past others. Some children were subjected to genital shocks with electrical diodes.

Sexual Assault

Large numbers of these children experienced sexual abuse and assault. This came most commonly from the “carers” themselves, but also from visitors to the orphanage and from other children.

Poor Health Care, including Denial of Dental Care

The Senate Inquiry heard many stories “of minimal medical attention...and often lack of or late treatment of injury or illness for which many care leavers have suffered long term complications. Dental health was also poor”. (*Forgotten Australians*, p.111)

Some children also suffered long-term physical consequences of ill-treatment or abuse.



Working in the garden at the Hay Institution for Girls. Photo reproduced with permission from the NSW Department of Community Services.

Denial of Educational Opportunity

Children in institutions generally did not receive a good, or even adequate, education. Children commonly did the domestic work involved in running the orphanage, cleaning and cooking for long hours. As well, many children were put to work earning income for the institution. Children as young as 8 were often put to work on farms or laundries run by the institution. Additionally, children who are abused or neglected, who have untreated health problems or who are subjected to constant accusations of stupidity and worthlessness find it difficult to concentrate in a learning environment.

Removal/Loss of Identity

Children's names were often changed to suit the institution, and personal records are generally sparse. Many children were told their parents were dead (often untrue) or had abandoned them (when parents had been refused visiting rights). Children were told they were bad, worthless and in need of reshaping. It was easier to change behaviour and suppress their own personalities than to risk the punishments that came to "bad" children.

Indigenous Forgotten Australians

Many Indigenous children were among the Forgotten Australians, losing their connection with their culture and land.

Drug Testing

In some institutions, new drugs were tested on children.

Lack of Post-Care Support

At around 15, most young people left institutions with few resources or life skills, often with functional difficulties resulting from their experiences. The transition period proved very difficult and led to many adopting criminal habits to survive.



Reproduced with permission, Hood collection, State Library of NSW

The long term impacts

Being separated from their families as children, most Forgotten Australians grew up deprived of the love, support and individual attention children need. In addition, many suffered physical deprivation and abuse. Forgotten Australians have complex and specialised needs which are often not being met. It must be emphasised that the lasting impacts outlined below by no means apply to all adults who were in institutions as children; but the Senate report concluded that:

*the outcomes for those who have left care have, in the main, often been significantly negative and destructive.
(Forgotten Australians, 145)*

Forgotten Australians are survivors. Many have great strengths. Others retain childhood coping strategies that can make dealing with other adults difficult.

Among the lasting effects are:

A lack of trust and security

Feeling abandoned by parents, often separated from siblings and suffering maltreatment at the hands of (socially respected) authority figures, many Forgotten Australians learned to trust no-one and to live with the stigma of not having a family.

A lack of social skills

Childhood abuse can hinder the development of normal, healthy life skills. Abused children miss out on learnings such as expressing feelings appropriately, relating to others and developing trusting relationships.

In a very fundamental sense, children who have never been interacted with have no idea how to interact with others – and no idea that they are not actually doing so. (Penglase, 307)

Risk behaviours

Self harming, substance abuse, seeking risky situations, sexual risk, suicidal thinking and actual suicide are not uncommon.

Inability to form and maintain loving relationships

One profound impact of institutional life is the difficulty in initiating and maintaining stable, loving relationships. Many Forgotten Australians have broken marriages. Many have lived alone all their lives, and some have chosen not to have children.

Inability to parent effectively

Lack of loving role models, combined with poor treatment at the hands of so-called carers, have left many Forgotten Australians unable to love and care for their children. Abused themselves, many learned no other way of treating their own children, and the intergenerational neglect and violence continues. They may have a history of notifications under the child protection system of the State or Territory; they may even have had their children removed. Many, of course, do not abuse their children; nevertheless, they may have little capacity or knowledge to be strong and appropriate parents because they have grown up without parental role models.

You learn to be a mother by having one, so I made all the mistakes...too close or too distant, no boundaries or too many, no idea at all just what is good for children and what isn't. (Penglase, 26)

Poor Health

Physical injuries and untreated illnesses cause lifelong pain to many Forgotten Australians.

Mental Illness⁴

- **Depression** is the most common mental illness experienced by survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and this is often linked to PTSD (below). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the suicide rate among this group is high.
- Many also suffer from symptoms of **anxiety**, including panic attacks, nausea or sweating. Fears that appear irrational may be related to painful childhood experiences.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** comprises distressing memory-experiences, in the form of flashbacks, along with symptoms of anxiety or depression.
- **Dissociation** also occurs, evidenced by such symptoms as an absence of awareness of external events, or the absence – or alteration – of a bodily sense over a period of time.
- Survivors can experience **psychosomatic illness**, where physical symptoms of mental pain can include chronic pelvic pain, irritable bowel syndrome or severe headaches.
- **Personality disorders** – entrenched behaviour patterns based on the overuse of certain personality traits – and **severe borderline personality disorder** (characterised by self-harming behaviour and difficulty in maintaining long-term relationships) often reflect childhood abuse. An abused child learns survival strategies which go on being used in adulthood, instead of developing the emotional and behavioural skills needed to cope with adult life situations.

4 This section relies heavily on Mammen, pp. 82-96

Working with Forgotten Australians

Developing trust and conveying belief

Children in institutions were generally told that they would not be believed if they spoke about their abuse. Many tried, and found this to be true. As adults, they still feel reluctant to talk about their experiences to anyone who has no knowledge or understanding of the basic facts about their history. This can extend even to spouses and children. They can even begin to doubt themselves:

A survivor whose abuse experience was not believed in childhood might continue to doubt their adult views and experiences. (Mammen, 69)

Support organisations report many cases of people who have not, after 20 or 30 years of marriage, ever revealed their childhood experiences to any family members.

Forgotten Australians do not expect to be believed, and they have tried to put the past behind them. For these reasons, they find the revelations very painful. This limits the capacity of many health professionals to diagnose and treat Forgotten Australians' trauma – the deep-seated cause of their physical, emotional, sexual or mental health problems.

Fear of authority; be aware of power issues

Insecurity translates to a fear of authority, extending to bureaucracies of any kind. Many react with anger or fear when

they experience frustration or think they are being bullied. It is important to understand that the feeling of helplessness in the face of power is very long-standing and deep. Service delivery agencies can seem faceless and hostile to people who don't expect to be heard or treated fairly.

Counselling a survivor of abuse demands sensitivity and patience. It is very important to allow the survivor to keep control, including over the pace of disclosure, and to build and maintain trust.

Equality in the interactive process and a collaborative style with regard to advice and opinion help to counter the past power imbalance. (Mammen, 40)

Consult and show respect

Involving Forgotten Australians and their families in the design of programs aimed at assisting them will show respect, reassure and not re-victimise them.

Identify the survivor's strengths

All survivors have strengths and coping mechanisms. Work with the survivor to help them recognise these and tailor them to develop effective and appropriate responses.

Involve Family

Include survivors' families in the healing process. They need to understand the Forgotten Australians' experiences and how they impact on the lives of all family members.

Proving Identity

Proving identity can be very challenging for Forgotten Australians. States and organisations that ran the children's institutions did not put a high priority on preserving records. Accessing those records that do exist can be time-consuming and difficult and painful. Access is compounded by the fact that names were frequently changed when children entered care – either to avoid confusion (“We already have a Shirley”) or because the person in charge simply preferred another name. It can be impossible for Forgotten Australians themselves to know whether they received the appropriate vaccinations or had certain childhood diseases.

Names were changed again, by many Forgotten Australians themselves, when they left care. Some have married and had children under their new names, despite the fact that the names are not always legally registered.

Literacy and Numeracy issues

Because of their neglected education, many Forgotten Australians still cannot read or write or do basic sums. The shame attached to illiteracy can prevent them from seeking treatment or assistance. It is important to make information available in other than printed forms and to respond quickly to signs of discomfort from someone asked to read something or to complete a form.

Be aware of gender issues

Working effectively with a Forgotten Australian may be influenced by your own gender and their experience of abusers, especially in a counselling situation. It may be necessary to ask whether they would prefer a counsellor of a different gender.

Fear of physical contact

In cases of sexual and/or physical abuse, there can be a lasting fear of physical contact. It can, for instance, be very traumatic to go to a dentist or to be examined intimately by a doctor.

Fear of institutionalisation

As the Forgotten Australians age, one of their fears is of being institutionalised again. No matter how pleasant or friendly the proposed “Home” may appear, the memory of their helplessness in the face of ill-treatment is likely to provoke resistance and terror. Allowing Forgotten Australians to be supported in their own homes for as long as possible is one response; when they can no longer safely stay home, the institution needs to work with them and their families to deal with their fears, involve them in decision making, remain aware of their history and be responsive to their needs.

Group work

Group work can assist some survivors to combat isolation and the feeling that their own truth is too painful and shameful to reveal. Others, of course, prefer one-to-one interaction with a person they trust.

Care for health and welfare workers

Ongoing work with survivors of abuse can be challenging and emotionally demanding for counsellors and health workers. It is important to ensure workers are adequately supported, so they can maintain their equilibrium and professionalism and continue to provide effective assistance.

References

Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children. Report of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee, August 2004

The earlier reports in the trilogy, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, April 1997; and *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record – Report on child migration*, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 30 August 2001

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The Alliance for Forgotten Australians

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA) is an organisation which promotes the interests of the estimated 500,000 people known as Forgotten Australians, who experienced institutional or other out-of-home care as children and young people in the last century in Australia, many of whom suffered physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse while in 'care'.

AFA members are a national advocacy alliance of Forgotten Australians and supporters, who work in partnership to advocate for and promote national policies and services to meet the needs and interests of Forgotten Australians.

Vision

The Alliance for Forgotten Australians is committed to recognition and healing for Forgotten Australians and encourages their active engagement in the development of policy and services, which are person centered and strengths-based, and which create opportunities and pathways to improve the lives of Forgotten Australians.

Mission

AFA's mission is to promote and encourage greater recognition for Forgotten Australians. AFA advocates for national policies and high quality services available in each State and Territory which are tailored to meet the needs and interests of the estimated 500,000 Forgotten Australians. AFA strongly encourages inclusion of Forgotten Australians in service planning and delivery. AFA seeks to improve outcomes for all children and young people affected by current child protection systems and policies.

For information about the National Network of Find and Connect services for Forgotten Australians phone 1800 16 11 09.

Please visit the AFA website where information and services relevant to Forgotten Australians is updated regularly:

www.forgottenaustralians.org.au

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