Boarding Out

c. 1844 – 1960s

Details

Boarding out was the term used to describe the placement of children and young people in foster care in private homes. Nineteenth century reformers advocated boarding out because it provided more of a family life than the big institutions. Under the boarding out system, government agencies paid foster parents a weekly fee – the boarding out allowance – to cover the cost of a child's board. The term boarding out eventually changed to foster care but it persisted into the late 1960s.

The boarding out movement became popular during the late 1860s and 1870s, when Britain and Australia were starting to worry that large institutions did not adequately prepare children for life as respectable working-class citizens. British social reformers Florence and Rosamond Hill played a leading role in campaigning for boarding out to replace institutional 'care', especially for young children. The Hill sisters thought that institutions could be good training grounds for children approaching working age, but also that good working-class homes could properly prepare children for their working lives.

Two South Australians, Catherine Helen Spence and Caroline Emily Clark, were significant figures driving the introduction of boarding out in Australia. In 1893, Spence reported to the International Congress of Charities, Corrections and Philanthropy on the success of the boarding out movement in Australia. She claimed that the introduction of the boarding out system had emptied Australia's 'barrack-like institutions', with the result that the government only needed to provide a central receiving depot before suitable homes could be found.

Spence's words reflected the belief, underpinning the child rescue movement which emerged in the 1880s, that environment was stronger than heredity: 'By getting hold of the children we strike the most effective blow at the hereditary pauper, criminal and lunatic, the curse of modern civilisation'.

Tasmania was one of the first Australian colonies to introduce boarding out. The Tasmanian government introduced it in 1844, when the Convict Department took over Queen's Orphan Asylum and then refused to accept destitute or orphaned children who did not have convict parents. Instead, the government paid families £10 a year to take these children in. The local Police Magistrate supervised the scheme and was supposed to make sure that the children were properly looked after. Joan Brown points out that this was purely a cost cutting measure by the Tasmanian government, rather than being driven by a desire to keep the children out of institutions. In 1846, when the Convict Department agreed to accept the children into Queen's Asylum again, the government removed them from the foster families and placed them in the institution (Brown, 1972).

Later in Tasmania in 1862, the government began giving food and other assistance to destitute people not living in an institution, a system known as outdoor relief. William Tarleton, the Police Magistrate, administered it with the help of a small number of staff in the Office of the Inspector of Police. Some of the assistance went to children waiting for a place in an institution. Instead of placing them in one, Tarleton set aside a small sum of money to pay people in the country to look after them.

Tarleton faced opposition to the boarding out scheme from the Surgeon-Superintendent of Queen's Orphan Asylum. According to Joan Brown he dealt with it by stating that:

There can be no doubt that this mode of dealing with children if carried out under proper conditions, most nearly approaches ordinary home life, and affords the best substitute for true parental training. If entrusted at an early age to the care of kind and well conducted persons, children will soon regard them in the light of parents, whilst the latter, on the other hand, performing constantly towards the children all the offices of a parent, learn to take a warm interest in them, and thus a bond of mutual affection springs up which goes far to replace the want of real parental love. In the free atmosphere of a respectable household, where there is no daily round of depressing monotonous discipline, but where unrestricted association of brothers and sisters, and friendly intercourse with school fellows and neighbours are permitted, the healthy growth of natural ties and domestic affections is promoted, and the children are surrounded by humanising influences of infinite value which are not brought to bear on them under any other system or in any institution.

In South Australia, the practice of boarding out began in the 1850s. Children could be placed with or without the payment of a government subsidy. Boarding out was first incorporated into legislation in the *Destitute Persons Relief Act* 1866.

In New South Wales and in Victoria, boarding out became part of the child welfare landscape in response to widespread criticism about the way destitute and neglected children were treated, by being massed in large institutions such as industrial schools and asylums. In Victoria, the 1872 Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline condemned the industrial schools system, and urged that it be replaced with the boarding out system, 'under which the children would be boarded in respectable cottagers' homes, under regular supervision by honorary local Ladies' Visiting Committees'. An amendment to the *Neglected and Criminal Children Amendment Act* 1874 contained the first legislative provisions relating to boarding out in Victoria, with s.16 providing that children in industrial schools may be boarded out. In practice, the government had been boarding out 'neglected' children for a number of years by the time the amendment was passed.

In New South Wales, following criticism of the conditions in large institutions such as the Roman Catholic Orphan School, the Protestant Orphan School and the Randwick Asylum for Destitute Children, boarding out was seen as a positive improvement, that provided 'waifs and strays' with a fresh start, freed from the monotony of the barracks but also from the influences of their own families, which were seen to be damaging.

The term 'boarding out' was first introduced to Western Australia by the (reformist) Inspector of Charities, Mr James Longmore, in his annual report of 1897. Longmore stated in 1900 that:

This system for dealing with some young children is a sound one, which has stood the test of experience. It has its foundations, the family system, and is, if properly carried out, free from what is artificial or unreal. It must not, however, be forgotten that as a rule people do not take children for the love of them, and no system requires so much care and systematic inspection as boarding-out. Continuous vigilance is necessary to prevent abuses.

Under the boarding out system, government agencies paid foster parents a fee – the boarding out allowance – which was usually around five shillings a week but could be more for babies or children needing extra support. In New South Wales from 1896 the mothers of destitute children could receive a half-rate of the boarding out allowance, if they were considered 'deserving'.

In New South Wales where boarding out was widespread, the State Children's Relief Board considered all children in its care to be boarded out, whether they were fostered or not. NSW institutions like the Mittagong Cottage Homes were considered to be within the boarding-out system, as were probationary farm Homes and babies' Homes (Parry, 2007).

In New South Wales, the [Aborigines Protection Board](#) rarely boarded out Aboriginal children, preferring the methods of apprenticeship or institutionalisation for the placement of children and young people (Parry, 2007).

Much of the clerical and inspectorial work associated with the boarding out system was conducted by committees (sometimes known as 'ladies committees'), who were responsible for visiting and supervising the foster homes. In Western Australia, Annual Reports of the State Children and (later) the Child Welfare Departments list the names of members of Boarding Out Committees in metropolitan and regional areas. The purpose of these committees was essentially to promote fostering among people in their district, raise funds and keep an eye on children in out-of-home 'care'. As the 1927 Annual Report of the State Children Department explained: 'The homes of foster parents in addition to being visited by our lady Inspectors are also visited by members of the Boarding-out Committees where such exist, who report periodically to the Department on a special form provided for the purpose.'

Barnard writes of how, in Victoria, the Catholic hierarchy resisted the move away from institutions towards boarding out from the 1870s, a a major reason for the Catholic institutions' opposition being that boarded-out children would be sent to the State school nearest to their foster home, rather than receive a Catholic education within institutions (Barnard, 2005).

Boarding out became less common in Victoria from the 1920s due to a shortage of foster parents. This saw a reliance in Victoria (as distinct from other jurisdictions) on non-government institutions such as children's Homes (of various denominations) for the care of state wards. The government had hoped that boarding out would entirely replace the need for institutional 'care', except for the children in reformatory schools. During the 1930s in it became very difficult to find enough foster homes to accommodate all eligible state wards, and by 1940 the majority of state wards in Victoria were in institutional placements.

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Gallery

Happy Christmas time faces

Description: This is a copy of a photograph from the *Sunday Times*. It shows a crowd of children enjoying a Christmas Party which was held at Government House. A party was organised each year by the metropolitan boarding-out committee for children who were in out of home care in and around Perth, Western Australia.

More info

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