

Caring through eyes of a child

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A pioneering virtual reality (VR) film series has been trialled by one of Australia's leading foster care agencies, offering foster and kinship carers the chance to put themselves in the shoes of a child in their care.

The short VR movies, which have been piloted by the not-for-profit foster care agency Key Assets Australia, begin in the womb, with a voice-over narration from an unborn baby explaining how their early life experiences are impacting them.

In this first vignette, users hear muffled shouting from outside the womb – an argument between a man and a pregnant mother-to-be. At one point, the womb buckles, evidencing physical abuse even before birth.

In the next scene, set a few years later, users find themselves in a grimy room littered with bottles, ashtrays, dirty nappies and junk food wrappers. A male figure, possibly the father, shouts directly into the camera; the mother later calls the user filthy and disgusting and threatens to cut off all their hair.

The effect is visceral, giving a startlingly realistic picture of the impact abuse and neglect can have on the developing brain, and demonstrating how early trauma may affect a young person's behaviour in later life.

"The VR videos show how these early, early experiences are laid down in the baby's body, to become somatic memory. And it opens up really good conversations about intrinsic memory that is being created before children can talk," says Jane Rabie, a therapist at Key Assets involved in the VR trial.

The pilot involved 200 users across New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland and was conducted between September 2020 and February this year. The aim was to see how VR might help provide training and support to those who have children in their care and how it could aid the recruitment of prospective carers.

The VR experience, says Rabie, allows users "to understand what's underneath the behaviours that we often see children presenting with. So we see the tip of the iceberg; we see their (emotional) dysregulation, we often see their anger... and they're showing us that their in-



Understanding what a young person has been through helps foster carers develop their capacity to respond in a way that helps them recover from past experience

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ternal world is confusing and mixed up and very disorganised." "From a therapeutic perspective you really get to start unpacking what life would be like for these young people," she adds.

Created in consultation with social workers and therapists, the

films help carers understand what their foster children have experienced in a very tangible way, says Meagan Probert, national practice development manager at Key Assets.

"We could simply show our tailored video content in 2D, but to view these scenarios in 3D and experience heart beats, brain synapses, and to see the point of view of a child or young person actually activates a deeper understanding of the experience for the participant, providing a bigger and more memorable impact," Probert says.

The pilot has had overwhelmingly positive reactions, with carers and therapists reporting excellent, learning experiences.

Unquestionably, some of the VR films can be difficult to watch, so the Key Assets team was care-

ful to present them in a controlled environment.

"We do regular check-ins because the videos can be quite triggering for carers, especially those who have had their own trauma history, and might be triggered by loud voices, or by intimidating people coming at them," Rabie says.

Accordingly "there is a warning at the beginning to say that if at any point you feel claustrophobic or you feel vertigo or nauseous – or you just feel unsafe, please take it off."

The majority of users, however, said that despite the challenging subject matter, the experience provided them with a greater understanding of the perspectives of children in care and facilitated useful discussions.

Some of those discussions centre on the second collection of films offered in the VR experience which pick up slightly later in an abused young person's life, presenting different ways foster carers, teachers and authority figures can more effectively deal with a fostered child's challenging behaviours.

"The reality is that most young people who come into care have faced traumatic experiences at home such as abuse or neglect," says Probert, and "even when carers have successfully raised their own family it is unlikely they would have dealt with the response and behaviours that stem from trauma, so they need to learn different strategies to manage this behaviour."

Building their comprehension

about what a young person has been through helps foster carers develop their capacity to respond in a way that helps them recover from past experience.

"Physical and emotional safety is created through predictable and stable caregiving."

"Children need to learn about normal family relationships with carers who will be alongside them as they rewire and meet early developmental milestones they missed, setting them up to manage life's ups and downs."

The VR experience being trialled by Key Assets plainly does not address every problem that might be suffered by a child in care, but neither is it designed to. "It is a conversation starter," says Rabie, "one for especially difficult conversations."

Foster care goes digital: building virtual foundations

Raising one foster child can be hard enough, but raising foster twins is an even greater challenge. "Everyone thinks 'twins what a nightmare, it is double trouble', and I really don't think it is," says foster carer Terry Kwok*. "Actually, it's more like 30 per cent more work," he adds with a smile.

Kwok and his partner have been looking after their foster twins for four years, having been matched with them by the non-government, not-for-profit foster care agency Key Assets back in 2017. During that time the pair have watched with pride as the two boys have begun to grow and flourish.

The pair arrived in Kwok's home having experienced an extremely traumatic start to life. Both their birth parents struggled with substance abuse and eventually gave the boys to their grandmother, who, after realising she too couldn't look after two energetic six-year-olds, made the difficult decision to put them in departmental care.

For Kwok, his own path to being a foster carer began somewhat serendipitously. "I was just looking at Facebook five or six years ago and this ad appears that says 'same sex carers wanted in WA'," he says. "And I did a double-take thinking 'they must be talking about Washington not Western Australia, because we definitely can't be that progressive over here'. But then I looked into it and followed the link and it was Australia. So I clicked the call-to-action button and they [Key Assets] ended up calling me the very next day... So that's how we fell into it."

This digital origin story is not uncommon. Key Assets finds an increasing number of its carers online and through social media. Indeed, engagement with new technologies is a central tenet of Key Assets' approach to developing new and innovative services for children and young people in out-of-home care. The agency has worked hard to establish its digital credentials, building a range of online tools for its staff and carers alike.

This includes carer support groups, which exist both in the real-world and the virtual, that allow carers to get together to discuss their challenges and their successes. In the early days of the pandemic many of these meetings shifted online entirely, as people hunkered down at home.

Key Assets has also developed its own in-house e-learning tool which it calls Learning Connect – a flexible system that hosts resources for carers and tools and documents for staff.

The agency also provides each of its carers and their foster children with their own Key Care Team, which "is made up of important services, supports and people who work together to create a nurturing, therapeutic environment in order to achieve safety, stability and well-being for children and young people," says Key Assets chief executive Dr Dianne Jackson. In effect, the team is a personal network of social workers, therapists and trainers who operate in tandem with children and their carers.

According to Kwok, this team has been crucial to his own ability to offer good care – especially throughout the pandemic. "Key Assets supports us by giving us sessions with therapists and social workers," he says. "When we were in lockdown there were a lot of phone calls, and in fact when COVID first hit everyone was hid-

ing out at home, including the social workers. Everyone was playing catch-up with technology at the time as well. Video conferencing was quite a new thing to everyone. Now it would be quite a different story."

The most recent addition to Key Assets' digital offering has been the virtual reality (VR) film series it has been piloting – a trial in which Kwok took part.

"When we first started with Key Assets, we did weeks and weeks of training with other carers who told us all these terrible things that children go through, which is quite triggering for some people. But it's completely different when you put on that VR headset," Kwok says. "The clips are filmed from the child's perspective, so when you put on those goggles, you are basically putting on the child's eyes and seeing and hearing everything that they are seeing and hearing. And that was quite confronting."

"I remember after my partner and I had finished the session and took our goggles off, I think we were dumbstruck and couldn't speak for a good half a minute. We just couldn't say anything. We've heard all these stories about what our children went through, you know the kind of environment they lived in and things like that, but when you actually put on that headset and watch a scenario set in extremely poor conditions, I think it brings it a lot closer to home. Eating scraps off the floor and scavenging for food; this is stuff we knew our kids were doing, but to actually see a child do that is quite confronting."

According to Kwok, the VR experience in concert with Key Assets' other digital tools set him up well for the reality of being a carer. "I think it is terrific," he says. "There is no point in sugar-coating this experience and what the children go through. Fostering is not easy, and what these kids have seen isn't easy either, so I think anything that can help carers build their empathy for these children can only be a good thing."

Of course, technology still has its limits – which is why the role of foster carers is so critical. As Dr Jackson says, it is the foster carer who is "central to the Key Care Team model. Carers act as the 'agent of change', with the extended responsibility of providing therapeutic foster care to the child or young person". The various digital and other services the agency offers are "not intended to replace the responsibilities of the foster carer," she says "but rather, to extend and enhance those responsibilities."

Kwok understands the critical importance of the tangible too. Three weeks ago he and his partner put the finishing touches on the new four-bedroom home they have built – a project that has engaged the twins at every stage. "We have involved the kids in the process," says Kwok. "We showed them the land we had bought, and we showed them the slab being laid. Plus we took them to the construction site when the structure was going up."

The metaphor of his foster family building solid foundations together is not lost on Kwok. And it obviously isn't lost on the children either. "For them there is an ownership to the process and pride as well," he says. "The boys are not just going to yet another person's house – this is the house that we all built together."

*names changed to protect identities

Pioneering experience provides extra support for carers

JUDITH WILKINSON



Virtual Reality technology is being increasingly used not just for games but to educate and inform people in a wide range of settings. Key Assets is breaking new ground in using VR in the coaching and support of foster carers.

Foster carers will often say that being a carer is one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives. They may also tell you that it is one of the most challenging. Foster carers

willingly open their homes and their hearts to children and young people in need, but can be left baffled by angry, suspicious responses from children to whom they show only patience and kindness.

Consider this scenario: Ben, a foster child, is found scribbling on his bedroom wall. The foster carer, Liz, moves to sit beside him and gently explain why it is a rule of the house that people do not scribble on walls, then offer him an alternative activity. But before she can do this, Ben lashes out, emitting angry screams and kicking at her. Liz is shocked, unsure what has prompted this violent reaction, and puzzled about what she has done wrong to provoke this. The answer is that Liz has done nothing wrong. What she is seeing is the response of a child who has

suffered trauma. Childhood trauma, resulting from neglect and abuse, impacts on children's brain development. Their experiences of being harmed by their caregivers teaches them not to trust those who are supposed to look after them, and to expect all adults to be a threat to them. They have learnt that the world is a hostile place, and they need to learn to look after themselves if they are to survive. Thus, they become hyper-vigilant, always on the alert for where peril may lurk.

Their brain is wired to move quickly to a "fight or flight" reaction to protect themselves from danger. Such children will see a threat which is not apparent to others because what they are reacting to is not what is happening now; they are reacting to what has happened to them in

the past. So our young wall artist, Ben, has learnt that adults moving towards him, looming over him, when he may have been doing something he shouldn't, results in him being hurt and abused. He is not responding to his gentle carer, Liz; he is responding to what has happened to him repeatedly in similar situations and which he expects to happen again.

Foster carers can feel hurt and be discouraged when they and their family are working hard to welcome and support a foster child only to encounter reactions such as Ben's.

Key Assets highly values our foster carers as essential members of the team and we don't want to lose them. Thus, we recognise the need to prepare foster carers for what they may encounter, educating them about

the trauma many children who come into foster care may have suffered and the adverse impact this has had on their brain development. This helps carers build an understanding of children's behaviour and how best to respond.

Using VR adds a whole new dimension to this knowledge and understanding. VR immerses foster carers in the child's experience as they actually see the world through a child's eyes. Using the headsets, they are in the position of a child living in unmet needs, witnessing violence, being screamed at by an angry parent. This opens a whole new breadth of appreciation and empathy with what a traumatised child has been through and leads to a deeper understanding of why they respond the way they do.

Living with a foster family in a predictable, supportive, safe environment will begin to heal the child's trauma.

We work with our foster carers so they care for a child in a way that helps the child to regulate their emotions and gradually build trust in other people. When carers, using VR, gain a dramatic insight into the world through the child's eyes, they are much better equipped to do this.

Key Assets is pioneering the use of VR to provide an extra level of support to our foster carers who are ordinary people doing extraordinary work with vulnerable children and young people.

Judith Wilkinson is group director of business development at Key Assets

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