

MRW/AJ.

24

7th December, 1962

REPORT OF VISIT TO RETTA DIXON HOMES.

On the 28/11/62 the Administrative Officer (G.W.) accompanied by the Senior Social Worker paid a visit to the Retta Dixon Homes by arrangement with the Superintendent, Mr. M. Pattermore.

2. The purpose of the visit was to obtain information regarding the management of the Home and the method and type of planning for the children in the Home. The Superintendent gave the following information.

Staffing.

Superintendent (1)
Assistant Superintendent (1)

Cottage Parents -

3 married couples -
Two in their 30's and
One in their 40's

Two of these couples have 2 children each.

1 single woman approximately 50
Elderly widow approximately 56
1 part-coloured trainees from New South Wales
about 21 years of age.
1 Nursing Sister (untrained but experienced).

Training. Mr. Pattermore agreed with the principal of the Director of Welfare that staff should be trained prior to coming to the Territory. Mr. Pattermore indicated that his Board in Sydney was anxious to give intending house parents some training at a cottage system home in the States before bringing them to the Retta Dixon Home, but that this was often difficult to arrange.

Qualifications of Staff. So far as the Aboriginal Inland Mission Board was concerned, the prime consideration for the selection of staff was that the applicant had a clear calling or vocation for the work. It was felt that if this attitude of ^{mind} existed when duty commenced under the difficult conditions in the Territory, turnover of staff would be small. The need for staff was made known through the official journal of the Aboriginal Inland Mission and the Mission Board in Sydney arranged interviews and appointed staff for Darwin.

Staff Difficulties. Mr. Pattermore discussed some of the problems relating to staff at the Retta Dixon Home. In particular the problem of house parents' young children was raised and Mr. Pattermore indicated that he felt that the house parents must realise that for the purposes of the home, all children, their own and the residents of Retta Dixon Home were to be treated alike. (The Administrative Officer (G.W.) raised the point that although was this theoretically commendable many practical issues made it impracticable, particularly for the young married couples with young children as at Retta Dixon.)

Mr. Pattermore said that one particular family was having a great deal of trouble in relation to a 6 year old child who was originally adopted by them from the Retta Dixon Home about 12 months ago. It was not made clear whether this child was adopted away from the institution and then returned with the parents when they took up duties but it is thought that this was what has happened.

Apparently the difficulty in relation to this child arose for "staring." It seems that the other children stare at her and that this habit spread to the State school children. Mr. Pattemore related how he had spoken with the children a number of times and has now threatened that they will be punished severely if they continue to stare at this child. When asked what positive action he thought would be advisable in this instance, Mr. Pattemore replied that the trouble arose out of "ganging up" and that he would smash any "ganging up" by children.

The Administrative Officer (G.W.) felt that it was not wise at this stage to point out to Mr. Pattemore that formation of gangs by children was perfectly normal behaviour.

Accommodation. Very young babies were admitted in the first instance to the Clinic, but were transferred as soon as feeding habits were established.

Method of selection for various cottages depending on vacancies in the cottages. Generally families were kept together. At present there are 67 children accommodated at Retta Dixon Home.

Education. Mr. Pattemore stated the importance of secondary schooling is frequently stressed to the children, but that most are anxious to leave school as soon as possible. When Mr. Pattemore was asked what steps were taken to encourage secondary education he said that the children were just talked to. When the Administrative Officer (G.W.) asked regarding homework arrangements, Mr. Pattemore revealed that he felt that homework was unnecessary and indicated failure on the part of a school to do its job. He said that neither he nor his wife had been required to do homework and as far as he was concerned, neither would the children at Retta Dixon Home. However, where homework was set by the school, the house parents supervised the children immediately after tea. He thought that very few of the children had any homework set by the school.

At this stage a discussion developed regarding the need to satisfactorily meet the demands of enquiring minds in young children, and the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent both agreed that it might be a good thing to introduce some material whereby the children could do art and craft work. At present there are no special facilities, even for colouring and drawing by the children. Mr. Pattemore said that if they wanted a pencil and piece of paper they could get it, but up to now nobody had asked for paints or blackboards.

"It is felt that the attitude of staff at the Retta Dixon Home toward modern child care is woefully lacking and that we, for the sake of the children, should feed information to the Superintendent."

Recreation. The children are encouraged to play in their own cottage groups rather than as "mobs". Several of them attend groups such as the Girls Life Brigade, they are never taken to the pictures, but occasionally educational films from the National Film Library are shown at the Home. On Sunday the children are encouraged to stay at home and read, going for walkabout is discouraged as they seem to go wild when they get in the bush.

Pocket Money. Pocket money is always given to the children and varies according to age with a limit of 9/- per month. The money is given to the children in a lump sum at the beginning of each month and they may spend it as they wish. Children who are members of organisations are given extra money to cover subscriptions. Extra pocket money is also given at show time, Christmas and at the school fete day. (The attitude of the Superintendent towards pocket money

is commendable but the thought of giving young children a month's pocket money at a time is questionable."

Punishment. Punishment is generally left to the cottage parents unless they feel that they are unable to cope with a particular situation. Punishments usually consists of extra duties, but these are often treated as a joke by the children. Mr. Pattemore was asked regarding corporal punishment and he said that he is the only one who inflicts corporal punishment. Mr. Pattemore used his trouser belt and hit the children on the legs when occasion demanded. Such punishment has only been required about three times in the last five months. One child received about 12 strokes on the legs some months ago for sex play with a little boy. She was about 13 years of age. At the time Mr. Pattemore spoke to this girl and warned her of the dangers of such behaviour and told her that he would have to punish her so as to impress upon her the seriousness of her misbehaviour. Mr. Pattemore was asked whether this punishment had had good effect and he replied that she has been a model child since.

(The Senior Social Worker who was present told the Administrative Officer (G.W.) afterwards that the Headmaster of Nightcliff had pointed out this same child to her recently as his most potential trouble maker. He said that the Retta Dixon children generally knew far too much about sex and that she was one of the main instructors.)

Prior to the appointment of the present Superintendent, corporal punishment was administered with a cane, mainly for swearing.

Records. It was pleasing to note that the Retta Dixon Home kept a reasonable comprehensive record of each of the children.

Outside Contacts. Most of the children who have no family ties write to and receive letters and presents from interested persons in other States. This system is carefully organised by the Superintendent and often leads to holiday arrangements. A record is kept of every letter sent and received.

General Comments. Mr. Pattemore has recently introduced a system whereby the cottage parents report in writing on the children weekly. Cognisance must be given to the fact that the present set-up is only of recent origin and every help must be given to the Superintendent to assist him in caring for the children. However, there are many features about the control of the Retta Dixon Home which require careful investigation and assessment.

Note from A/D(R). Would Administrative Officer (G.W.) please check on the diet at Retta Dixon Home. (One tin of fruit per week per cottage?)