

**LIKING OR DISLIKING CURRENT HOME: LISTENING TO CHILDREN WHO  
RESIDE IN STATE-RUN CHILDREN'S HOMES AND FOSTER HOMES IN  
MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract**

Residential child care is widely known in Malaysia, but this is not the case for foster care. Studies of foster home are limited and not popular as compared to studies of children's home. This paper presents children's immediate responses of like or dislike about the two mentioned substitute homes. 25 foster children and 27 children in children's homes were interviewed. All participants are Malay and aged 10 to 15 year-old. Findings show that more foster children liked their foster homes as compared with their counterparts in children's homes. Outing, foster mother, and comfortable living setting were some of the reasons given by the foster children. Conversely, children in children's homes disliked their homes mainly because of the pooling system, regulations and staff's attitudes. Overall, foster home appears to be a better received placement than children's home. Nevertheless, children's narrations imply that the main attributes to children's views about their homes are the quality of reciprocal interaction and level of personal acceptance.

**Introduction**

Children's home and foster home are not uncommon substitute placements in the west, but Malaysians mostly have limited ideas about the differences between children's home and foster home. The history of substitute placement in this country may explain the limited understanding of the general public towards foster homes. Private children's home was established as early as 1865 in Penang (Fulcher & Faizah Mas'ud, 2001) and the first state-run children's home was established in 1935 in Malacca (Social Welfare Department of Malaysia, 2012). Conversely, the first state-run foster home was only established in 1988 in Kuala Selangor.

State-run children's home in Malaysia, *Rumah Kanak-kanak*, is managed by the Social Welfare Department of Malaysia. There are 10 of these homes located in most of the states in Malaysia except Kedah, Johor, Kelantan and Terengganu. The homes provide institutional care to children who are separated from their families. Caregivers in the homes are official staff employed under the welfare department. Each home was initially designed to accommodate 100 residents. However, total residents of some children's homes have currently exceeded the limit.

State-run foster home, *Rumah Tumas Harapan*, is also managed by the Social Welfare Department of Malaysia. There are nine foster homes which in total providing 26 houses for children in need of care. Approximately 6 -10 children are placed into each house and taken care by a married couple or a mother. The caregivers are not official staff from the welfare department. They are known as foster parents where the father has to seek for his own employment, while the mother is a full time care taker of the children and the house. The houses are built and donated by private sectors and managed by the foster parents with support from the welfare department. Foster parents have autonomy in arranging daily routine for the children.

Studies and knowledge on foster homes in Malaysia are very limited as compared to children's homes (Nor Amni Yusof, personal communication, June 16, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore children's immediate responses on liking or disliking their current homes. Moreover, it is believed that situation in foster home can be better understood by comparing both children's home and foster home.

### **Literature Review**

A few local studies have been conducted on state-run children's homes and foster homes, however the aspect of liking or disliking current placement has not been fully explored (e.g. Amir Awang et al., 2005; Salma Ishak, Jusmawati Fauzaman, Noor Azizah

Ahmad & Fuziah Shaffie, 2010). Moreover, unique features of foster homes were mostly overshadowed by the extensive focus on children's homes in these studies.

Various studies on residential child care and foster care are widely found in western countries. However, many researchers claimed that there are little substantive studies in advocating children's voices during their stays in children's homes or foster homes (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004, McAuley, 1996, Whiting & Lee, 2003). Many of the studies are quantitative oriented and from adult's perspective. For instance, in Hegar and Rosenthal's study (2009) on 1415 foster children, some of their core instruments (e.g. CBCL and TRF) were completed by caregivers. This implies that some of their findings on children are actually perceptions of the adults and may not represent the inner thinking of the children.

Very few studies explored the aspect of like or dislike towards placement. Some of the studies used retrospective approach by getting data from the ex-residents of children's homes and foster homes. For instance, Mckenzie (1999) contacted 1589 ex-residents of orphanages on their experiences during the stay. He found that 15% of participants felt lack of freedom and 12% experienced excessive punishment during the stay. Conversely, 50% of them positively valued the basic amenities provided in residential care. 60% and 59% of them had gained personal value and direction, and sense of self-worth during the stay respectively. Mckenzie's (1999) study shows that most of the ex-residents displayed positive views to their children's homes.

Similar example also found in foster care studies where Schiff (2006) examined 94 alumni of group homes on their experiences of leaving care. By conducting telephone interview to the respondents, 83.7% of them considered the experiences in care were good or very good. Indeed, 92.3% of the alumni have good or very good quality of relationships with their group-homes parents. One of the alumni even said that "...*They were like our parents and when they cut off from us it is like losing parents.*" (p. 349).

Besides retrospective approach, few studies interviewed children who resided in children's homes or foster homes. For instance, Fox, Berrick, and Frasch (2008) interviewed 100 foster children (6 to 13 years) and found that 66.6% of children perceived their current foster homes as the safest place on earth and 84% of them felt very safe in the foster homes. However, only 24% of them perceived their current foster homes' neighbourhood as very safe.

Similarly, Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) interviewed 223 children (aged 10 and over) from 48 children's homes. Their study shows that 40.9% of children felt residential care placement was a good idea, while 25.9% thought it was a bad idea. The rest 25.9% had mixed feelings of both good and bad on residential child care. In a follow up study after 6 to 9 months of the first interview, Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) found that 72.9% of the children perceived the residential child care as a good thing.

The above child-centric studies provide general idea that most of the children in children's homes or foster homes like their placements. However, these studies provide limited children's narrations in explaining the aspect of like or dislike. Indeed, no direct comparison is made by these studies in looking at children's homes and foster homes. Thus, more children's narrations are needed to explore why a child likes or dislikes a substitute placement.

### **Method**

Findings presented in this paper are taken from researcher's current study on three state-run children's homes and five foster homes in Malaysia. By using purposive sampling, 27 and 25 Malay children, aged 10 to 15, in children's homes and foster homes were interviewed respectively. All the 52 interview sessions were conducted only after receiving caregivers' written consents and children's verbal consents. The interview sessions focused on children's narrations on four main issues of behaviour, health, education and placement in

their living settings. The study design is developed based on subtle realism and interpretive perspective, and is informed by the Bronfenbrenner Ecological System Theory and the Symbolic Interactionism. The study has received approvals from the Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister Department (EPU), Social Welfare Department of Malaysia (JKM) and also has gone through an ethics review by the NUS Institute Review Board (NUS-IRB). This paper presents a small portion of preliminary findings gathered from the children's narrations on placement issues.

### Results<sup>1</sup>

The question of like or dislike the current home was an exciting topic for children in this study. They immediately made the decision of like or dislike once the question was asked. Only one child from children's home was indecisive. Table 1 shows that more foster children (76%) liked their current homes as compared with their counterparts (41%) in children's homes. Conversely, more children in children's homes (56%) disliked their homes than foster children (24%).

Table 1 - Liking or Disliking Current Home

	Like	Dislike	Uncertain
Foster Homes	19	6	-
Children's Homes	11	15	1
Total	30	21	1

#### Foster Children Who Liked Their Homes

Nineteen foster children liked their current homes. They liked the home because of the outdoor activities. Several children described outing as the most excited activity during their stay. Besides the outing, foster mother is another reason given by the children. Children who liked the foster home would not have much trouble with their foster mothers. Indeed,

<sup>1</sup>This section is reproduced from author's preliminary draft of thesis which is still in progress at Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore. Hence, organization and interpretation of the findings presented are yet to be finalized.

they appreciated the commitments from their foster mothers. For instance, F11 (Girl, age 14) was very straightforward in praising her foster parents during the interview.

*“... [I] have good [foster] parents. Good [foster] parents... [I] have everything here. [Everything is] complete. [I] don't need to be like certain people [who] have to find their own money for study... everything right? So here, [I] have people to support [the financial burden]... [it is] like [I] have everything.”*

Another example is from F15 (Girl, age 15) who shared what she learned from the foster mother.

*“This house is really good... because as a girl [in this house] she knows how to cook, she knows how to clean, everything. My [foster] mother always teaches me like that.”*

Besides the outing activities and the foster mothers, three foster children, F21 (Girl, age 15), F23 (Girl, age 11) and F25 (Boy, age 12) liked the home because the house was beautiful, clean and had fewer children. Furthermore, according to F14 (Boy, age 14), opportunity to study and have good foster brothers were the main reasons of liking the foster home.

*“[I] can study comfortably... study. [I] have good [foster] brothers. Since I have been staying here, [foster] brothers [have been] all nice [to me].”*

#### *Children in Children's Homes Who Liked Their Homes*

11 children in children's homes liked their current homes. One of the popular reasons given by the children was the indoor and outdoor activities organised in the children's homes. The following are two selected examples given by R6 and R20.

R6 (Girl, age 14) liked the home as there were many activities to be participated. She was a brass band member.

*"[It is] best [because we] can learn what we can't learn at outside. What I mean is [I] can join the brass band."*

She was also a National Champion of the Al-Quran Recital Competition organised by the Social Welfare Department. She had an active lifestyle at the home.

*"...a lot [of activities]. Sometimes they organised competition between [welfare] institutions right? I participated. For example, the Nasyid Singing Contest and the Al-Quran Recital Competition. If we participate at the district level, we can compete with other district... then we can be representative of Negeri Sembilan, and the winner can go travel to other State (for following competition)."*

She was very satisfied with the home as she was in a prestigious position in the home. She was the Head of Religion and in-charge of religion matter among all the children in the home. She did not reveal this information until the very end of the interview.

R20 (Boy, age 10) liked the home for the outing, indoor activities and the available facilities.

*"... [We have] small mosque. [We have] playground over here.... [The home] here have [tuition] classes, [it is the] for example Maybank's class (Activity organised by the Maybank). Then [we] have visitors came right?... [We have things] such as donation. [Things] like that."*

However, there are two children who liked their homes but giving contradictory narrations. R11 (Boy, age 13) liked the current home as he experienced more freedom as compared with his former children's home. To him, freedom was referred to the liberty of disobeying the staff due to inconsistent implementation of rules and regulations.

*"If at Children's Home C (his former home) around 10 o'clock... 10 o'clock [we] already go to sleep. Here (current home), it is okay if you [choose] want*

*to sleep or want to play. But at night, officer (staff) will ask [us] to sleep. Kids over here don't want [to sleep]. They like to play, so [they] run and let the officer chase [from behind]."*

Similarly, R18 (Girl, age 10) was satisfied with facilities in the home but was annoyed by other children's behaviour. She even cried for being a victim of beating.

*"Because here [I have] been beaten, [my belongings have] been stolen,.. [I have] been scolded, and then when... we have done the work that he/she asked us to do, we have worked. He/she still asked us to keep doing it, he/she accused us for not doing it even though we have done it. He/she said we didn't do the work. But we [have] done it. (sound a bit angry)... Sometimes (Crying) ah because they beat... over there (mentioned the name of bully)... They beat [us]. They took that (marker pen) to sign the name [on me]... sometimes she pinches [my stomach]."*

### **Foster Children Who Disliked Their Homes**

Relatively not many foster children disliked their homes. A few foster children did so mainly because of lack of activities in the home. A foster girl blamed her foster mother for not taking them out for activities. F24 (Girl, age 14) complained that,

*"But this is extremely... no freedom. [They] did not bring [us] for outdoor activities. I'm jealous with [children] in Foster Home A. they went to Sunway (shopping and recreation complex)... [they were] brought to Sunway, picnic, [went to] Genting, went to Malacca right?... [That's why] I'm jealous. [Foster] Mom didn't organise that [activities]... [I] have been got an earful [from the foster mother]... [She does] not allow us to do activity that we want, that is what I hate most."*

However she wanted to stay in the foster home. To her, disliking the home and her decision to stay were two different matters. This is true because children who liked the homes might not choose to stay in the home if options were given<sup>2</sup>.

Another reason given in disliking the current home was Ghost. Only two foster children talked about this when explaining their dislikes. F22 (Girl, age 11). *"No (soft)... [I] like the school here, [but I] don't like staying here!"* This is due to her obsession on ghost at night.

*"When [I] want to sleep at night the moment I close my eyes, [I] will think of ghost. Afraid [of it] every night likes that, so [I have] difficulty to sleep... (Is there Ghost in the house?) No. But [I] really have that kind of thought. [I] like to think something that is not exist."*

Although F22 (Girl, age 11) disliked her current foster home, she appreciated the home in providing space for her to study. She could partially concentrate on her study while staying here.

*"[I] can fully concentrate on the subjects because [my] young sister doesn't disturb me anymore. Although [I] can fully concentrate, [I still find it] hard to focus on what is taught by the teacher on the subjects."*

F19 (Boy, age 15) stayed in the current foster home more than 11 years. He gave the same reason as F22, but he claimed he had seen ghosts in one of the foster houses. There are four foster houses in the Foster Home D, two each in the upper area and lower areas.

*"[I] had once... the house was empty, it had only been a month after people had moved out. During that time I stayed at the upper area (next to the haunted house)... I was loitering, I wanted to bring something up (from the*

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<sup>2</sup>The related data and topic of desired placement are not included in this paper.

*lower area)right, [because] my belongings was left over there, and through the keyhole of the door I saw something moved... bondot!!(a random word expressing shock)..."*

Based on researcher's observations on F22 and F19 during the interview sessions, the ghost stories had significant meaning to them. Their tones were serious but they narrated their stories lively. They were in doubt whether the researcher would believe their stories.

#### *Children in Children's Homes Who Disliked Their Homes*

About half (56%) of children in children's homes disliked their placements mainly because of the pooling system, regulations and staff's attitudes. For an example, R16 (Boy, age 14) explained,

*"Sometimes I got pissed off with the staff. Sometimes my friend and I were sleeping, when he came into the room (the hostel) with his motorcycle, he pressed the [horn] 'beep! beep!'. [He] came into [our] room with his motorcycle."*

He complained the incident to the principal of the home but he was not satisfied with the given explanations.

*"The Principal said the staff didn't know. As the staff was in hurry. Later Principal would look and talk to him... So many excuses."*

Besides the staff and the system. R19 (Boy, age 11) disliked the home because some children did not do the housework and therefore he was beaten up by the elder children. The elder children in the home were about 12 years old. He blamed the others for not washing the tray but at the end he admitted that he did the same mistake.

*"Sometimes... sometimes... [I] was beaten (very soft)... here sometimes was like... ahh... [I] can watch TV [but] sometimes [I] can't... [I] was beaten... if one person doesn't wash the tray... all [of us] would be punished. Because*

*many of them [don't want to], if lazy. all [of us] would be punished to sweep the floor because [one person] doesn't wash the tray. They would say, 'I have washed it, I have washed it' [They just] don't want to admit. (Who would beat you?) Senior... Our senior who supervised [us] because I didn't wash the tray.....He beat but not too hard. He beat softly only."*

Although children in children's homes hated their homes, they appreciated some aspects of the homes. Children in this category were relatively small. For instance, R1 (Girl, age 15) disliked the home but she felt the home was helping her in study. Most of her free times were used for revision. This explained why she said the best thing in the home was able to concentrate on her study.

*"... I normally finished doing all the school works on Friday. At night I do revision. So the next morning [that I] can have some rest, because I normally do revision at night. In the afternoon, nothing... nothing needs to be done. That is the only free time for me... [time to] reading story books."*

The pleasure of breaking the rules in children's home provides some consolations to the children's dissatisfaction of the home. R27 (Boy, age 11) disliked the home but he liked the Nasyid Music (Islamic Music) in the home and the best thing for him was to skip the pooling by pretending to be asleep.

*"[I like] sometimes someone listens to the Nasyid [music], sometimes... [I] don't line up [for the pooling], sometimes [I just] pretend to be asleep."*

### **Discussion**

The results indicate more foster children liked their homes as compared to children in children's homes. Foster children liked their home for the outing activities, foster mother and some because of the physical amenities of the house. Children in children homes disliked their homes mainly because of the pooling system, regulations and staff's attitude.

Various western studies show that children in children's homes liked their homes (e.g. McKenzie 1999; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1998; Smith, McKay, & Chakrabarti, 2004; Southwell & Fraser, 2010). However, this is not found in this study and more children in children's homes disliked their placements as compared to foster children. Children's narrations especially those from children's homes mostly indicate sense of "demeaning" as found in Colton and Roberts'(2007) study. The differences of the results in this study as compared to the western studies could be attributed to two important concepts, namely reciprocal interaction and acceptance.

Children's explanations are mostly related to their caregivers and counterparts in the homes. The two microsystems were repetitively used by the children to either praising or blaming the current placements. For instance, there are foster children and children in children's homes who disliked their homes for the similar reason: their caregivers. Hence, if the children had positive reciprocal interactions with the caregivers and counterparts, the children would mostly like their placements. Although some children in children's homes disliked their homes because of the protection system at the homes which is known as pooling requirement or regulations, their narrations show that the macrosystem do not fully responsible for their preferences. Indeed, children's preferences are associated to the quality of reciprocal interaction with the caregivers and counterparts during implementation of the protection system.

Narrations from R11 and R18 show the appearance of personal acceptances. Although they narrated their children's homes negatively, they generally liked their placements. This is also found in R1 and R27's narrations where they disliked their homes but provided positive insights about their homes. Indeed, the "Ghost" issues as main reason of disliking the homes by F22 and F19 further imply the complexity of the children inner thinking. Hence, individual level of acceptance does make a different to the perceived

negative or positive environment. This reflects the child own self-indication process that determines whether he/she likes or dislikes the home without influences from the environment or the reciprocal interactions. As explained by Blumer (1967, p. 141), self-indication is refer to *“a moving communicative process in which individual notes things, assess them, give them meaning and decides to act on the basis of the meaning... not explained by the environment pressures, external stimuli...”* Based on the Blumer’s explanation, it is argued that the children’s acceptance levels could moderate the outcomes of the reciprocal interactions in making decision of liking or disliking current homes.

The relationship between the reciprocal interaction and acceptance is yet to be clarified in this paper due to limited data used. These two elements are believed to be the main attributes in deciding children’s likes or dislikes. This implies that to understand children’s views on the placements is to explore the reciprocal interaction and acceptance of the children.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explores the children’s liking or disliking their children’s homes or foster homes. Overall more foster children liked their placements as compared with their counterparts. Although children’s narrations were mostly negative on children’s home, data in this paper are limited and many other issues of behaviour, education, health and placement are excluded. As a result, it is overly simplistic to conclude that foster home is better than children’s home. Children’s narrations show that their preferences may not be simply determined by the setting of the homes. Indeed, it is reasonable to suggest that children’s reciprocal interactions with the multiple systems and their levels of acceptance could be the main attributes in liking or disliking.

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