



# HOMES

## Away From Home

by Eunice Man & Karen Kwok

Children who have to leave their parents for whatever reasons can still be given home-like care and parent-like love in other places, although it is still not quite the same as being in one's real family, according to welfare services providers.

"I'm delighted when I notice the children's growth. They're more willing to share their feelings and live in a disciplined and regular way," said Anita Tai, a 26-year-old house parent who has been working in the Evangel Children's Home for nearly three years.

Having her third placement in the Evangel Children's Home, she

worked as a fulltime house parent after graduating from the Department of Social Work at Hong Kong Shue Yan College (which became an university in December 2006).

The Children's Home is a residential care service for children who have to leave their parents suddenly due to family problems. In theory, a children's home caters for children aged from six to 18.

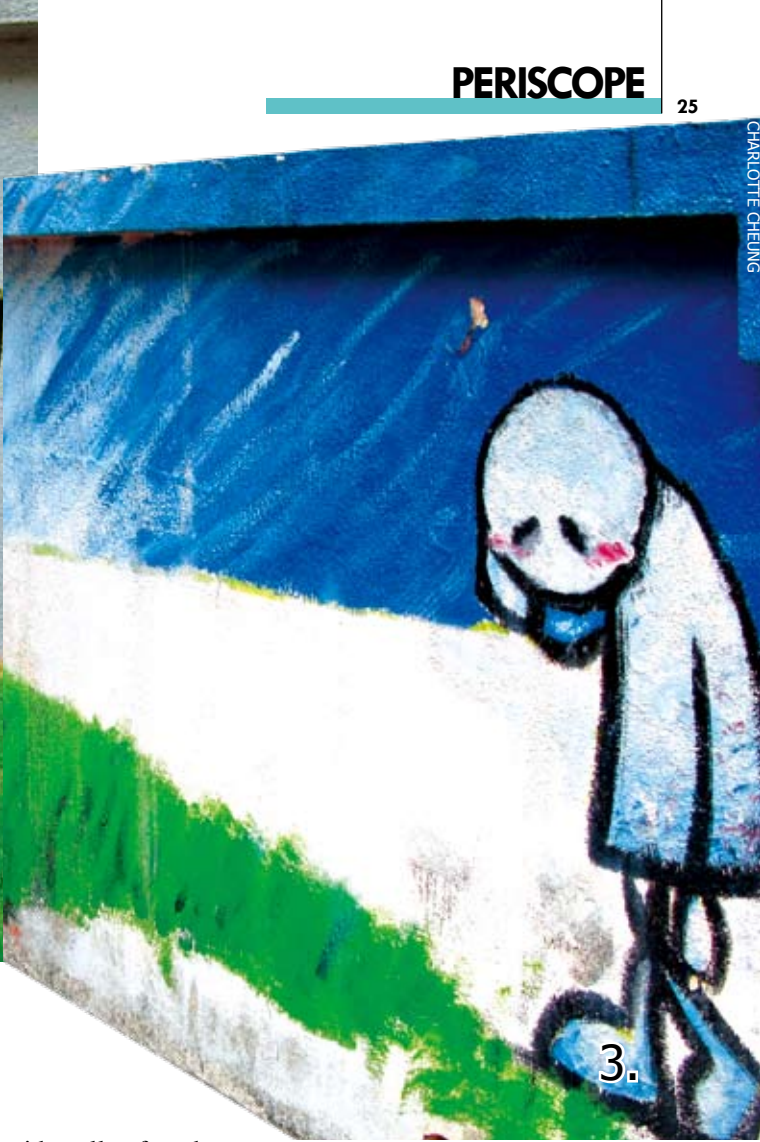
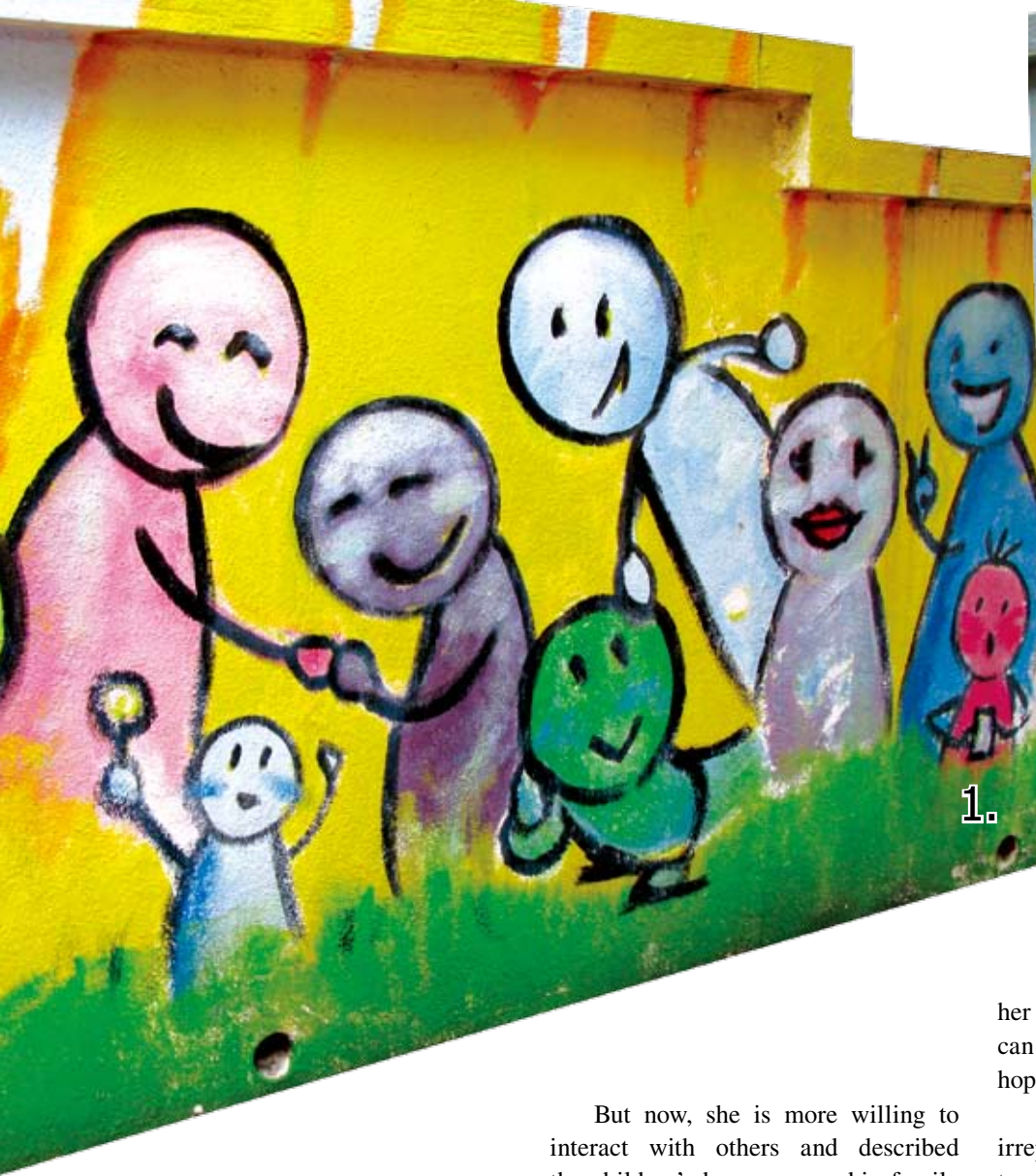
"A house parent is a person who helps them to grow physically and mentally. We are different from other social workers as we live together with the children and take care of them. We

build up close relationships with the children," Miss Tai continued.

She explained that many children lack basic living skills and disciplines in daily lives such as bathing, going to school and even having meals.

She recalled she was quite shocked when she received a report of a 14-year-old girl and her sister who hurt each other with sharp objects. Due to emotional instability, she was afraid that the girl may be violent to others.

Fortunately, after living in the children's home for over a year, she found that girl was not as disturbed as she had thought. That girl can now



live in a normal way and interact with others in the children's house.

"I treat the children as my family, I feel like I'm an elder sister of all of them," Miss Tai smiled.

Winnie, who turns 18 soon, has changed a lot from the time she got to Evangel in 2006. Soon she will leave to join her mother.

When Winnie had just arrived at the Evangel Children's Home, she was self-defensive and afraid that she would not get along with others. To avoid interacting with other children, she signed up for many extra-curricular activities so she would go back to the children's home late.

"I was late so I had my dinner while they were bathing, and when they were chitchatting, I went to bath," she said.

But now, she is more willing to interact with others and described the children's home as one big family where she obtains a sense of security as her basic needs are provided.

"I'm happy to be able to get along with the other kids and house parents now. I even have two friends, one is my roommate and the other is our house parent, Anita," she said.

She even does not mind telling her good friends in school that she is now living in the Evangel Children's Home. She will explain to them that her stay is not due to a serious family issue or behavioural problem.

"But one thing I find inconvenient is that I have to apply one week ahead if I want to go out with my friends during weekends," she looked at the staff nearby and laughed.

Although she is happy with her life at the children's home, she still misses

her mother. "I spend as much time as I can with my mother during weekends. I hope to live with her again," she added.

"After all, parental care is irreplaceable though we try our best to provide children with a family-like environment," said Vivian Law Mei-chun, the superintendent of the Evangel Children's Home.

"For example, we can't give all of them an affectionate hug like their parents. There're many children here, others will be jealous if we only hug one of them," she said.

Most of the children who live in the Evangel Children's Home are 12 to 16 years old. Some of them have emotional problems, fight with others and even hurt themselves. What the staff can do is to listen to them and provide them a safe and stable environment. At least, the children need not to worry about basic necessities, according to Ms Law.

She admitted that sometimes she does not know how to deal with problematic children, she just tries

her best to understand them. "Their behavioural problems are indeed very complex and may due to long-stored unhappy memories, which aren't likely to be solved overnight," said Ms Law who has been the superintendent for about 12 years.

She recalled once that there was a girl in the children's home who lost control due to emotional instability and had been isolated from other children in a room. She started yelling, banging the door and throwing things.

Ms Law suddenly got inspiration and started to write messages to the girl and slipped them under the door into the room. "I told her that I still love her and want her to stay with us until she is 18 years old. I also looked forward to her form five graduation," she said.

Receiving messages continuously from Ms Law for about half an hour, the girl finally calmed down. Although the girl's problems could not be solved immediately, the relationship between them has improved.

"One day, I incidentally found that she had kept all the messages in one of her books. What you see as a little thing may give the children great encouragement," she said.

Apart from children's home, small group homes are also provided for children who have had problems with their own families, which aims at providing children a family-like environment. "The concept of a small group home is that it operates like a big family, with younger and older members," said Viola Yeung Yu Siu-ying, Assistant Chief Executive of S. K. H. St. Christopher's Home.

According to Mrs Yeung, a small group home is actually a residential flat where the house parents and children (including the house parent's own) live together. Children's homes are more like hostels and can accommodate more children while small group homes



COURTESY OF THE EVANGEL CHILDREN'S HOME

1 - 3. Drawings on the wall by the children in the Evangel Children's Home

4. Vivian Law Mei-chun, the superintendent of the Evangel Children's Home, says it is important to provide children with basic necessities and sense of security.

are usually ordinary flats holding eight children of different ages.

To ensure that all the children in the flat get enough attention and care from the house parents, a helper is assigned to share the housework like cleaning and cooking.

“Though they’re paid, being a house parent is a full-time involvement,” said Mrs Yeung.

Instead of forming a big family like children’s homes and small group homes, foster homes provide a true family environment for children to learn and to be independent, according to Bridget Yu Chan Wai-ping, Assistant Principal Social Service Secretary of Integrated Family Service of Po Leung Kuk.

Under the foster home system, only one child will be assigned to a family.

Usually, children who are under 10 years old will live in foster homes as they need more looking after.

“It’s hoped that the (foster) home can provide a secure and stable environment so the foster child can learn more about how to get along with others, solve problems and how to think more about their future life,” said Mrs Yu.

Mrs Yeung, a foster parent who did not want to disclose her name, agreed that it is important to be a positive influence on her seven-year-old foster daughter and instill in her right values. “I know she grew up in a dysfunctional family. There’re a lot that she lacks. I give her more care than my own child,” she said.

Foster children who come from problematic families need more

attention, love and acceptance. “My foster daughter just wants to have a normal family, like going to school with her mother and having meals together, but she didn’t even have such simple things,” Mrs Yeung added.

She recalled one day when she was helping her foster daughter to take a bath. The girl told her that she wanted to call her mummy instead of auntie. The girl told her the same thing not long after arrived in Mrs Yeung’s family six months ago. She had thought she was saying this just to please her.

“But indeed, she likes to call me mummy because I take care of her like her own mother did,” she said. “Whenever I spend time listening and talking to her, I always get a warm feeling when she says this.”

## Know More About the “Homes”

### Children’s homes

- Relatively larger in size and have a high capacity thus can hold more children. For example, there are about 70 children at the Evangel Children’s Home.
- There are rules that the children have to follow, for example, they need to return to the children’s home before a given time, say, before six o’clock.
- The children have to arrange their own timetable and share the housework together.
- The children are allowed to go out or back to their families during weekends when getting permission in advance.
- House parents are employed to take care of the children. They work in shifts and have to stay overnight at the children’s home for a few nights each week.
- Children’s homes takes care of children aged from six to 18, but usually children who live in there are 12 years old or above.

### Small group homes

- House parents are a couple who live with eight children as well as also their own children in an ordinary residential flat, such as in Tin Yiu Estate in Tin Sheung Wai.
- An additional helper will be employed to share the housework.
- Eight children of various ages will be assigned to a small group home in order to form a big family.

### Foster Homes

- A regular family takes one child in and he or she will be part of the whole family.
- Usually, younger children (normally, under 10) will be assigned to foster homes as they need more attention and are easier to take care of.
- If foster parents find themselves unable to take care of the child, he or she will be referred to another foster home or assigned to a small group home or children’s home.

There are two types of foster home services - normal and emergency:

- The normal service is for the children who will live in the foster homes for a longer period of time, usually ranging from a few months to two years.
- The emergency service is for children who cannot go home due to particular reasons and have to live in foster homes for a shorter period of time, usually no more than six months.

### Other Details

Children enter these residential care services according to a centralised system of the Social Welfare Department or other organisation.

House parents, for small group homes and foster homes (including other family members), will be interviewed and assessed beforehand to see whether they are suitable for the position.

To apply to be a foster parent, call the Central Foster Care Unit of the Social Welfare Department by 2573 2282.