

Could have been a lot worse ...

The harshness of life in care homes is chronicled in Phil Frampton's moving memoir. So why does he believe it is better than being fostered?

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Phil Frampton stands outside the mock Tudor pile in Southport where, as a Barnardo's boy in the 1950s and 1960s, he endured a childhood of loneliness, corporal punishment and awful food. Then he makes a startling claim: compared to children in care today, he was lucky.

Frampton chronicled a life of neglect and desolation in that home - along with the best efforts of a well-meaning matron - in his memoir, *Golly in the Cupboard*. Yet he argues, in a Channel 4 programme to be broadcast on Friday, that the modern emphasis on foster care for nearly 90% of looked-after children is misguided. "This place gave us stability," he says. "We stayed in the same schools, so our education wasn't disrupted. It meant we learnt to care for each other, to respect each other, even to love one another. Sibling families were catered for, so that brothers and sisters didn't have to be split up."

Frampton believes they came out broadly on a par with working-class youngsters of the time. He went on to university and a life in politics and journalism. Two apparently well-rounded former housemates of Frampton's appear in the programme: Dave runs his own concrete business, and Zelda is a dance teacher. They say they wouldn't have wanted to be fostered, and found stability and mutual support in that smelly, rambling home.

Frampton argues that the swing towards fostering - in 1970, almost 40% of looked-after children were in residential care, compared with only 12% now - has been successful for some, but a disaster for many. He claims that foster placement breakdowns are endemic, leading to children moving as many as 58 times - a situation made worse by the serious shortfall of foster carers that leaves 16,000 children awaiting a long-term foster home.

"Thousands are leaving care today with no qualifications, nowhere decent to live, traumatised by their experience of being in care," Frampton says. "The government should hang its head in shame that one-third of those living on the streets have been in local authority care."

Frampton, who suffered two failed foster placements, suggests the "radical solution" of providing more residential homes, rather than children being "pushed into fostering". He says: "We should accept that the children are not in ideal situations, and provide modern, homely, professional children's homes with well-trained staff, close personal care and good food, where children can be given the stability they most need."

There is a fairly settled modern view, from the government to voluntary childcare organisations, that fostering should be the first option for most children, particularly young ones. As David Holmes, chief executive of the British Association for Adoption & Fostering, puts it: "The message from children is that they want the chance to be 'normal'. They need a positive experience of family life."

Looked at historically, though, Frampton is only returning to a debate that has rumbled on since the state-funded childcare system was established by the post-war Labour government in 1948.

Overwhelming priority was given to fostering then, but gradually the system was rebalanced towards

providing more places in children's homes; by 1970, 39.7% of looked-after children were in residential care, while 42.5% were in foster care. The emphasis swung back dramatically towards fostering in the mid-1970s, the renewed belief that a family home was the best option coinciding conveniently with a government drive to cut costs. Last year, according to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), only 8,787 (12%) of Britain's 72,634 looked-after children were in residential homes.

There is, Frampton claims, little serious debate about whether this preference is right, and the DfES does not compile statistics on the levels of breakdown of foster placements.

Mike Stein, professor at York University's social work research and development unit, explains that residential care is often appropriate for young people with specific behavioural or emotional needs, with siblings who could not otherwise be accommodated together, or for teenagers looking for a "springboard to independence" rather than a new family attachment.

Hilton Dawson, chief executive of Shaftesbury Homes, agrees with Frampton that the emphasis has swung too far. He says: "Residential care is being used too often as the last resort, but it works for some young people, particularly adolescents. A healthy proportion would be a lot higher than 12%."

Frampton's angry sally against the "destruction of young lives" caused by too much instability can be taken, at the very least, as a call for urgent improvement based on rigorous research of what works best for the children.

- Phil Frampton's documentary, *The Insider: Bring Back the Orphanages*, will be shown on Channel 4 on Friday at 7.30pm