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Children's care experiences were almost down to chance, abuse inquiry told

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Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Variations in practice meant it was down to chance as to whether a child had a positive or negative experience in care in the first half of the 20th century, an inquiry has been told.

Professor Andrew Kendrick described the lack of consistency in foster care and residential care from 1900 to 1948 as a “systemic weakness”.

He also spoke of large care institutions at that time as “sterile” environments that failed to recognise children’s needs for basics such as personal belongings and space.

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Professor Andrew Kendrick

Prof Kendrick, emeritus professor of social work at the University of Strathclyde, compiled a report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry looking at various aspects surrounding the care of children in Scotland dating back more than a century.

The report drew evidence from a number of written publications.

Asked about places such as voluntary homes or orphanages before 1948, Prof Kendrick told the inquiry of the “impersonality” of the establishments.

He told the hearing in Edinburgh: “There is no recognition of the need for children to have, say, personal belongings, private space.

“One thing that struck me is the extent to which cleanliness was almost seen as the absolute priority.

“Children scrubbing floors or cleaning woodwork or polishing brass, in voluntary homes and approved schools, it was a constant theme – that these institutions might gleam and sparkle but they were so, in a sense, sterile as well because of this.”

Prof Kendrick says there was little opportunity for play and recreation (Andrew Matthews/PA)

He added: “If you have large numbers of children and a relatively small number of staff then everything becomes rigid and routine, everything has to be done by the bell and everything was done by the bell.

“Children would get up, they would be marched to the shower or washed, they would be marched to breakfast, they would eat in large canteens ... in this sort of wholesale way, they would have relatively little opportunity for play and recreation.”

The witness told senior counsel to the inquiry Colin MacAulay QC the recruitment of foster carers and residential staff was done on a “very ad hoc basis”.

He told the inquiry: “One of the major systemic weaknesses is around simply the variability of practice.

“Sometimes it is almost by chance whether a child has a positive experience of care, either foster care or residential care, or they have a very negative experience.”

He told how the almost 50-year period was characterised by a shift towards looking at children’s emotional and mental well-being but the rigidly-structured regimes remained.

Prof Kendrick said: “(There were) major concerns about the nature of accommodation, both in residential and foster care.

“Children spoke of going hungry whilst in care. That lack of individuality was marked out by clothing, uniforms in institutions ...

“Because of the rigidity of the regime there’s a lack of opportunity in terms of recreational and leisure facilities.”

The inquiry, before Lady Smith, continues.