



Reshaping Doomed Lives: Work life of Houseparents in a Child care Facility

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Aiza E. Minalabag¹, RCrim, ORCID No. 0009-0005-6863-8814
Atty. Dodelon F. Sabijon², PhD, ORCID No. 0009-0002-4130-5786

¹Master of Criminal Justice Education, University of Cebu, Sanciango Street, Cebu City, Philippines

²Dean, College of Criminal Justice, University of Cebu, Sanciango Street, Cebu City, Philippines

Abstract

Globally, houseparents serve as one of the primary emotional anchors for a number of children survivors sheltered inside a child care facility including the Philippines. However, while institutional focus remains on children's recovery, it is timely relevant to delve the lived experiences of houseparents having direct contact with these children. This study explored the work life experiences of houseparents in a child care facility. Houseparents are residential caregivers that takes the role of parents in child care facilities. This study was conducted specifically in a Home for Girls in Leyte. Conducted between January and May 2024, the study delved into the experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations of houseparents. The researchers utilized qualitative phenomenological approach, using a validated interview guide. An in-depth interview and focused group discussion were conducted involving 10 houseparents with 3 years of working experience. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006) was utilized to analyze data. The results revealed finding meaning and fulfillment through hopeful transformation, navigating varied behavioral attitudes, seeking emotional relief through temporary isolation, and commitment in the face of uncertainties and instability. Building on these insights, it is recommended that national and local government units establish comprehensive support systems for houseparents, including sustained funding for psychological intervention programs that address occupational stress and emotional resilience. Regular and structured training modules should be institutionalized to strengthen competencies in managing diverse behavioral challenges among children in care. Furthermore, the implementation of secured tenure policies, equitable salary adjustments, and provision of adequate incentives are essential to promote stability and professional commitment within caregiving roles. Fostering active community engagement in child welfare initiatives will also reinforce collaborative responsibility and enhance the sustainability of residential care programs. Finally, future research should examine the impact of occupational stress on the work performance of houseparents, as well as the implications of insecure job tenure on the transitional development and sustainability of child care facilities.

Keywords: Houseparents, child care facilities, phenomenological study, occupational stress, tenure security, community engagement



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INTRODUCTION

Houseparents play a vital role in providing consistent care and support inside child care facilities, acting as substitute parents for children who have often experienced significant trauma and instability. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023) at least 2.7 million children who are living in different child care residential facilities worldwide are victims of abuse and exploitation. Thus, this alarming situation necessitates a united and coordinated among the government and non-

government organization to protect children from abuse. The focus is centered on how governments, communities and institution can strengthen their capacity to safeguard the rights of children for survival. Establishing child care facilities worldwide answered the needs of children survivor.

In the Philippines, there are 197 child care residential facilities licensed and managed by faith based and non-governmental organizations; while 46 facilities across the region are managed by the government (Sina-

on et al., 2022). Home for Girls is one of those child care facilities funded and operated by the government under the Department of Social Welfare and Development. The established number of child care facilities highlights the crucial need for houseparents, key persons who will play a major role in sustaining the institution's missions towards children. They provide care, treatment and guidance in a therapeutic environment.

Parenting, nurturing, and educating children are humanitarian obligations that must be fulfilled by the family, the community, and the state (Gomonod et al., 2025). In this context, Suryaningsi et al. (2022) emphasized that because children are still immature in their physical, mental, and intellectual development, they require protection, care, and guidance from adults, which makes the role of houseparents in residential child care facilities essential. Moreover, caring for foster children in child care facilities is particularly crucial given the nature, types, and profiles of the clients being served. These children come from heterogeneous backgrounds and possess varied personalities and risk factors, with some experiencing psychological and emotional disturbances (Hagaman et al., 2010). These differences in personalities, backgrounds and experiences of children in a child care facility complicate the work life of houseparents. In the study of Fuentes-Balderrama et al. (2020) one of the top challenges for the houseparents in residential care is handling children's behaviors and attachment. Barroso et al. (2018) found out that varied behavior of children caused psychological distress, frustration, insomnia, and lack of control for houseparents. Therefore, a comprehensive investigation into this matter is necessary to acknowledge the complex role of houseparents.

The main objective of this study is to explore the work life of houseparents in handling children survivor in a Home for Girls facility. This research provides information on the various experience of houseparents, specifically on their positive and negative experiences, their

coping strategy to the challenges and their aspiration for their service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal Framework. The Philippines, being one of the signatories to the UN Conventions on the rights of a child is mandated to meet children's basic needs and help them reach their full potential. The government and other concerned agencies has answered the needs of these children through the creation of different programs and policies. In addition, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), a primary agency that adheres to the protection and welfare of children keep an eye to ensure that programs are carried effectively (DSWD, 2022).

In the policy of the State to protect and rehabilitate children damage and threatened by circumstances the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) as a primary agency responsible in promoting the quality welfare of our Children was challenged to achieve best interest of young children. Part of promoting child's welfare are child care residential facilities built to serve as an alternative home and to create an alternative family to children (DSWD, 2022).

According to Republic Act. No. 7610 or "An Act Providing for Stronger Deterrence and Special Protection against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination" published on July 22, 1991, the State shall intervene on behalf of the child when parents, guardians, teacher or person having custody of the child is unable to protect the child against abuse, exploitation and discrimination. In addition, it is the Policy also of the state to protect and rehabilitate children gravely threatened or endangered by circumstances "which affect or will affect their survival and normal development and over which they have no control." This includes exposure to armed conflict, hazardous work conditions, life on the streets without adult care, extreme poverty or lack of basic services, victims of disasters, and other analogous situations beyond their control,

as defined under Republic Act No. 7610 (Republic Act No. 7610, 1992).

In the Philippines, child care facilities are operated by both Government and Non-government Organizations. This child care residential facilities from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) are still an accredited and licensed agency by the Department of Social Welfare and Development. According to the data from DSWD (2022), there are 197 child care residential facilities licensed to manage by faith based and non-governmental organizations in the Philippines. While 46 facilities across the region are managed by the government through the DSWD and are dependent on the government funds. These residential care facilities vary in capacity from four (4) to 490 children (Sina-on et al., 2022).

Aside from the child care facilities run by the national government and private entities, there are also facilities operated under the Local Government Units where their funds are dependent to their local expenditures and revenue generations (Council for the Welfare of Children, 2010).

One example of the child care facilities in the Philippines that provide context on the experiences of houseparents is the Home for Girls. Home for Girls is a child care shelter facility run and funded by the National Government under the DSWD. It provides housing, education and livelihood supports to girls who are victims of child abuse and exploitation and had been taken custody by the state. Children clients of the Home for girls are referred by the Police, Government and Non-Government Organizations, Local Government Units and family of the victims or concerned citizens. However, as the need arises, the center also consider children who are victims of other forms of abuse such as physical and psychological and children in situation of armed conflict, victims of child labor, trafficked children and the like in consideration of the lack of child agencies on the region. The home offers a continuum of center-based residential services of 24-hour care service under the

guidance of trained staff with a structured therapeutic environment geared towards clientele rehabilitation. The comprehensive program of treatment and rehabilitation carried out by the strong workforce of the institution from different profession who involve their child clients in a nurturing environment to ensure that they can root and grow in their six (6) months to one (1) year residency in the institution before they are moved to a foster family or when they are ready to return to parents, nearest relatives or legal guardians/ foster family (DSWD, 2023).

According to the DSWD (2022), there are a total of eight (8) Home for Girls residential facilities in the Philippines run and funded by the National Government through the DSWD. These facilities can be found in only in eight regions of the country, which is from Region 1,2,7,8,10,11,12 and CARAGA region. Girls under the age of 18 who are abused children, with special needs and cannot be adequately cared for by their own families or relatives for an extended period of times can stay at the Home for Girls which is a temporary residential institution that is open 24 hours a day and, seven days a week.

In Region VIII, there are three (3) child care residential facilities operated by the DSWD. One of those three is the Home for Girls which caters children 7–17 years old in providing care, treatment and rehabilitation to abused and exploited female. Second is Reception and Study Center for Children that caters 0–6 years old who are abandoned, neglected and surrendered children. Last is the Regional Rehabilitation Center for Youth that provides care and rehabilitation to children aging 9-17 years old who become in conflict with the law (Martillano, 2025).

Role of Houseparents. Houseparents refer to residential parents who are responsible in implementing the basic need, well balanced and organized activities that represents a family-life-like structure experience for children under their care. In addition, houseparents are employees of residential care facilities for children in charge with the responsibilities for

the general care and development of children, implementation and coordination with other units on the status of child development, reporting to the administration any unusual incidents and physical condition of children and performance of other administrative task (DSWD, 2022). Furthermore, they are also primarily responsible of the children's daily living experiences that will help established relationship with others, implementation of house rules, giving age-appropriate work assignments to children for the latter to gain life skills, teaching children personal care, ensure proper clothing, food and nutrition's. Houseparents are also involved in the psycho-social activities for children like accompanying them in their medical checkups and therapies. Likewise, they assist children in their educational needs such as helping them in their school assignments and representing them in schools. Even social workers and other residential staff like teachers and medical personnel are dependent on houseparents feedback with regards to the daily progress of the children. In the book of Fahlberg (2012), he mentioned that houseparents are responsible for creating an environment that allows the child to form a healthy child-parent relationship. He added, children in foster care need to developed both an increased trust to others and stronger self - reliance.

Behavioral Problem of Children Challenges the Work Life of Houseparents. In the effort of creating established child parent connections, challenges may always come along the way. There are studies that parenting style used by houseparents on children's behaviour problems has effect to their development. According to Fuentes-Balderrama et al. (2020), the quality of the emotional relationship with houseparents and the kind of discipline they use as regard internalizing and externalizing problems are different compared to real parents especially when they are not familiar with the behavior of their child clients. Study have shown that even biological parents experience psychological distress, frustration, insomnia, and lack of control taking care with their own children how much more of those who are not the real

parents (Barroso et al., 2018). According to Lamberte (2018), one of the top challenges for the houseparents in residential care is handling children's behavior. Their behavioral related problems are caused by child traumatic experiences which would be difficult for houseparents to handle. Furthermore, children who have suffered abuse and neglect may have present significant behavior problem including emotional instability, depression and a tendency to be aggressive or violent with others (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2008). Residents of Home for Girls were victims of abuse, wherein either family members or relatives are the perpetrators. They also came from broken families and mostly live with their stepfathers and grandparents after being abandoned by their parents due to death, separation or work abroad (Rago-Castillo, 2014). To become a houseparent is a responsibility to treat a childlike their own it also requires tough mind and body to surpass this grueling but rewarding journey all along. Given these realities, the role of houseparents in residential care facilities is both complex and demanding, requiring not only parental commitment but also emotional resilience, appropriate parenting skills, and institutional support.

METHODS

Design. This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenology research design. Thus, this type of research brings added dimensions to the study of human experiences through qualitative research. Transcendental phenomenology (TPH), largely developed by Husserl (1931), was a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experience. Transcendental phenomenology is relevant to this research problem because it enables an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of houseparents in residential care settings. By focusing on participants' conscious experiences and meanings, this approach allows the study to uncover the essence of caregiving challenges that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.

Population and Sampling. This study included ten (10) houseparents from Home for Girls in Leyte, Philippines. Four (4) informants participated for in depth interview and six (6) for Focus Group Discussion (FGD). All participants were chosen through purposive sampling where all of them are houseparents with more than 1 year of experience in service. All are female houseparents with the age of not less than 18 years old but not more than 50 years old and has a direct contact with the children inside child care facility. Residential staff, psychologist and social workers are excluded as respondents.

Instrumentation. The researchers used a self-made interview guide, which served as the primary data collection tool. The questions were developed to obtain the necessary data in a convenient and specific manner. It was carried out through individual and small group discussion. The interview followed a semi-structured format, with the primary goal of gathering the needed data from the informants. Inquiries about the informants' personal circumstances was purposefully placed on the first part of the interview guide to determine the informants' qualifications. Part 1 of the interview guide dealt with the informants' positive and negative experiences as houseparents; part 2 of the interview guide was devoted to the informants' coping process with their experiences, and part 3 dealt with the aspirations of the informants in improving their services. Transmittal letter was submitted to the concerned authorities. Before the conduct of the study, the researchers sought first the validation of the interview guide from experts and panelists. After approval was granted, the researchers then proceeded to conduct the interviews and group discussions.

Data Collection. The researchers proceeded to conduct four (4) in-depth interviews and one (1) focus group discussion (FGD) with six (6) discussants. The interview was administered personally using the language the informants are comfortable with and was conducted according to their time availability. Informants received a consent form before the start of the

interview. After they had permitted and affixed their signatures to the consent forms, the conduct of interview started. The researchers introduced themselves and discussed the purpose of the interview. The interview commenced by asking questions regarding the personal background of the informants. Afterwards, queries concerning their experiences, coping process and aspirations were asked. In the conduct of FGD, the researchers selected discussants who share common characteristics relevant to the study in order to acquire rich data. This was conducted in a place where the discussants are comfortable. Everyone was encouraged to participate and to keep the focus on the topic. After the interview and focus group discussion, the voice recording was transcribed and translated.

Data Analysis. In the analysis of gathered data, the researcher sought meaning from all available data using Thematic Analysis (TA). In particular, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six (6) phases of thematic analysis are hereby applied. Initially, the researcher familiarizes himself through transcription, reading and re-reading the data, and noting down initial ideas. Second, the researchers generates initial codes systematically across the entire data set and collates data relevant to each code. Third, the researchers searches for themes by gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Fourth, the researchers reviews the themes if they work with the coded extracts and the entire data set or generate a thematic 'map' of the analysis. Fifth, the researcher reviews the themes to refine and generate clear definitions and names for each theme. Lastly, the researchers produces the report. The researchers used data source triangulation to verify the accuracy and veracity of the theme. This was utilized to verify the themes by reducing single source bias, confirm a recurring pattern, and strengthen the thematic saturation.

Ethical Consideration. All ethical standards and considerations are embedded within a designed informed consent encompassing the purpose of the study, benefits, risk, voluntariness and

confidentiality. Only the researchers have access to the responses and data of the research as these are protected and guaranteed by the confidentiality clause in the informed consent. This rule aims to protect the identity of the participants before the panelist, faculty, local government administration, and other equally related authorities or offices. All corroborated observations of the researchers were included in the data analysis to ensure a partial and non-bias report. This also reduced any misrepresentation and fabrication of the data either with or without intention from the researchers.

RESULTS

The experiences of houseparents provide an understanding on their work life. Through an inclusive investigation of the experience of houseparent, four themes were revealed. These themes described the positive and negative experiences, the coping strategies and the aspiration for their service. The following are the themes that described the experiences of houseparents.

Positive Experiences

Theme 1. Finding Meaning and Fulfillment through Hopeful Transformation. This theme depicts the positive experiences of the informants in handling children survivor. The study's result revealed that houseparents find their happiness and joy witnessing the resilience, growth and transformation of every child they are serving. Various experiences were shared by the informants. This is actually evident in this statement made by Informant 1 as she recalled her experience during her encounter with these children:

"When a child shared their past, it means that they are in a coping process, their wound are slowly healing. And when I see that their self-worth was restored, I was happy, since we also have a session with this child, I can see their different burden and how they went through and how they become strong and survive to that situation"(Informant 1)

Moreover, it was corroborated by the statement made by Informant 9 as she described her experience of joy seeing the improvement from these children during their stay at the center. She said:

"Through the activities that we conducted these children admitted here in our center don't even talk maybe because of their bad experiences, but when we conducted activities, we see their improvements and development. They actively participate to the activities assigned to them like dancing, singing, drama and if they are not that shy and if they can present their activity well, it boost their confidence more and it is our happiness and joy to see them like that" (Informant 9)

Furthermore, Statement 1 and 2 was further corroborated by the statement made by Informant 10. She said:

"I am happy if they realize that they can do amazing things and they discover themselves that they have talents and potential thus they become more confident"(Informant 10)

Negative Experiences

Theme 2. Navigating Varied Behavioral Attitudes. This theme depicts the informants' negative experiences in dealing with different children with different emotions, behaviors, and attitudes. This reflect how challenging and often arduous their journey has been while trying to reshape and transform the lives of these children.

According to Informant 1, every day is a nightmare when the behavioral problems of these children come out, as depicted in this statement:

"If these children become stubborn and talk bad words, those are my nightmares every day, but I do understand why they are doing that way, especially when these children had tantrums, because we cannot avoid that. There will be a time during duty, something is really going to happen like that"(Informant 1)

Informant 2 also shared her experience. Accordingly, she felt frustrated because of their attitude, thus, saying:

“They really have their different attitude and behavior which put us in a difficult situation. One thing maybe because they have different backgrounds and struggles. Like when we try to talk to them, and they will just turn their back and just ignore me and if I have a task given to them, they are disobedient, which is frustrating on our part”(Informant 2).

The experience of difficulties in dealing with attitude and behavior problems was also mentioned by Informant 9, saying:

“But there are children who really have worst behavior and attitude. The most painful is, they will make it a reason to become more stubborn, if they are corrected. It seems that they become more stubborn because they are reprimanded in a gentle way”(Informant 9)

Coping Strategies

Theme 3. Seeking Emotional Relief through Temporary Isolation. This theme portrays the way houseparents find relief from stress or emotional pain by withdrawing from interactions and spending time alone. Spending time alone allows individuals to reflect on their experiences and emotions without external distractions. Informant 8 stated:

“What I did is I turned my back and leave them, then entered a place like our CR and there I breathed to let my emotions out for a few minutes” (Informant 8)

Informant 9 also added about what she was doing if a child talk to her in an unpleasant way: *“If the response to me by this child is different, I really need to move for timeout and leave. I am thankful to my workmates who are like a support group. I asked them to be there for a while because I am not feeling well that is my way to survive that day because tomorrow is another day, I should not be stock on that day and I need to find ways”*(Informant 9)

Furthermore, statements made by the Informants 4 and 9 were further corroborated by Informant 10. She said:

“For me, when I was at the peak of my emotions I always go out to adjust myself for me not to be in a conflicting situation to these children. This is because I understand and I know my role. I walk out, release my emotions and look for a place where I am comfortable before I returned to the child”(Informant 10)

Aspirations for their Service

Theme 4. Upholding Commitment in the Face of Uncertainty and Instability. This theme reflects the dedication, determination, and steadfastness of the houseparents despite facing unknown or unpredictable circumstances. It underscores the importance of true, enhanced, and effective service to children. As told by Informant 1, she aspired to continue her service more knowledgeable than before to change more lives, even though she has no secured tenure, thus:

“Here, our tenure is not that stable and still not secure. But if there's an opportunity outside that is more secure, why not, but I'd rather stay here if the institution will still give us chance to continue with more knowledge because I will miss these children, it is a different feeling to be one of a reliable pillar of them to change their lives”(informant 1)

Informant 6 also added about her desire to continue and improve her service better even though she is unsure how long she would be with them. She said:

“Our work is a part of our system, if we are not here in a day, we really miss them. Our commitment is here because like if we were off for two days then when we come back it seems that we are off for a month. We are committed to our work and to the children we serve because love, our love is here although I do not know until when I will be with them but as long there are still chances to continue to serve them better than the past”(Informant 6)

Furthermore, statements made by the Informants 1 and 6 were further corroborated by Informant 9. She said:

“For me since I’m only at my 2 years of service, I am not sure of my situation here but even though I have so much motivation and part of that is to give the true service to clients because if I cannot make them better maybe I am one of the problems and I am not an effective mother to them”(Informant 9)

DISCUSSION

Through the use of qualitative phenomenological approach, results and findings were identified and categorized. Thematic analysis revealed the participants experiences, coping strategies, and aspiration. This section presents the discussion according to the study's research questions. The study revealed that houseparents found meaning and fulfillment if they witness the resilience, growth and transformation of every child they serve.

According to Maslow (1943), human motivation stem from a hierarchy of five fundamental categories of physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. This also aligns with Erikson's (1963) concept of generativity, where adults find psychological maturity through the act of nurturing and shaping the next generation. By witnessing a child's transformation, houseparents receive tangible evidence of their task significance (Grant, 2007), which transforms a high stress occupation into a purposeful vocation. Essentially, the nurtured environment creates feedback as the child roots and grows, the houseparent's own need for esteem and purpose is validated, sustaining their motivation despite the emotional labor inherent in that environment.

The houseparents' fulfillment is a testament to the idea that human well-being is a progressive journey. As they secure the fundamental safety and physiological needs of the children they move beyond mere service delivery into a state of self-actualization. In relation, this validates the theoretical assertion that as individuals

progress through these needs, they experience a greater sense of fulfillment. For these houseparents, witnessing a child's transformation is the catalyst that allows them to better comprehend human well-being not as a static goal, but as a dynamic process of overcoming adversity.

One of the challenges experienced by the houseparents revealed that dealing with different children with different emotions, behaviors, and attitudes are their struggles. They emphasize their challenging and arduous journey in their effort to help these children recover from their past. The experiences of the informants in changing lives is not easy; it involves enduring various obstacles, setbacks, and challenges that test endurance and determination. It also requires mental, emotional, and physical toughness to overcome an exhausting and draining journey. Dealing with these children exhibiting negative behaviors had a significant impact on houseparents. It could be emotionally draining, cause feeling of frustration, anxiety and stress.

The findings also revealed that houseparents often employ isolation as a primary coping mechanism to manage the experienced challenges. Unlike those who seek external social support, these houseparents prefer to find solace and recuperation in solitude. This intentional withdrawal allows them to lessen their suffering by creating a space for reflection. For these houseparents, being alone provides a necessary emotional recovery period, free from the external distractions and high stakes demands of the residential care environment.

It was also found that the aspiration of houseparents is to be committed to their service, despite uncertainties and instability of their job security and tenure. Houseparents still reflect their dedication, determination, and steadfastness despite facing unknown and unpredictable circumstances in their job security. This underscores the importance of true and effective service associated with faith and determination as they continue to pursue and uphold their responsibilities despite not

knowing what future holds. Evidently, the findings clearly highlight a remarkable commitment among houseparents, who maintain high levels of dedication despite the precarious nature of their job security. This steadfastness validates Deci and Ryan's (2012) assertion that intrinsic motivation, rooted in a sense of autonomy and personal values, can override external instabilities. Furthermore, this dedication in the face of unpredictable circumstances mirrors the calling orientation described by Wrzesniewski (1997), where the work is perceived as a moral obligation rather than a mere economic transaction. By grounding their service in faith and determination, these houseparents utilize their inner psychological resources to buffer against the stress of tenure instability, suggesting that for these individuals, the humanitarian impact of their role outweighs the structural uncertainties of their employment.

Conclusion. The results provide varied experiences among houseparents handling children survivor in Home for Girls. While these individuals find deep fulfillment in witnessing the growth and resilience of the children they serve, they simultaneously face significant challenges. Specifically, managing the diverse and often difficult behaviors of the children serves as a major source of stress. Furthermore, houseparents maintain a strong aspiration to continue their service despite thinking on their job security and future tenure. To manage these pressures, they have adopted specific coping strategies, such as seeking solitude through self-isolation to find emotional relief and recovery.

Recommendations. The study's results have emphasized several recommendations for houseparents in handling children survivor.

Psychological support. The concerned agency needs to pay attention to the emotional stress experienced by houseparents. In this regard, the DSWD should institutionalize regular mental health evaluations for houseparents, with interventions such as clinical counseling and peer support groups which should aim to

build emotional resilience and compassion satisfaction. Such programs ensure a sustainable workforce capable of providing high-quality, long-term care for children survivors while safeguarding the houseparents own psychological well-being.

Comprehensive Policy on Tenure. The DSWD should devise a policy that will protect the tenure of houseparents; in this way, they may feel secured in their jobs and receive the commensurable benefits they deserve.

Regular Trainings. The DSWD and other partner agencies should allocate funds and resources to support the regular trainings and workshops that will further enhance their capacity in dealing with varied behavior of their child clients.

National and Local Collaboration. DSWD-Home for Girls should strengthen national and local collaboration to enhance the policy on protecting the welfare of houseparents to carry out the institution's mission to serve child clients.

Community Support. Community should engage actively in programs that require their support and initiative; in this way, houseparents will feel that they are not alone in shaping the lives of children.

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