



BOOK REVIEWS

Children and families: Australian Perspectives

edited by Freda Briggs

St Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994 186p. \$22.95 (p/b)

This book sets out to examine how families cope with a number of aspects of today's rapidly changing society which impact on families and children. It is a collection of essays by researchers and workers interested in this field. Freda Briggs sets the scene with discussion of the family as an institution and the changes to it. Chapters follow on fathers, Aboriginal children, poverty, inability to provide care, welfare law, dangerous families, consumer capitalism and the impact of television. All involve issues of pressing contemporary relevance, but as Briggs points out (xiv), our appreciation of issues to do with the family, even to the extent of acceptance of research findings, is often coloured by the powerful influence of our own views of our personal family experience. Workers with families in Australia are likely to be exposed to a wide range of strong opinions and emotions, 'a smorgasbord of family lifestyles, expectations and values' associated with our multicultural society. (xiii)

The first chapter looks at marriage, cohabitation and divorce, noting trends and changes in attitude and paying particular attention to the impact on children.

'the marriage rate is the lowest, the participants are the oldest and divorce comes much sooner and more frequently than at any time in Australian history.' (p2)

Barry Burdon's chapter on fathers in families has gathered quite a rich array of Australian research to illustrate differences in the way fathers and mothers tend to interact with children (in play for example), the power of interactive effects between partners and the children; and the changing scene of parental involvement and parental presence. There are 412,100 Australian families with only one parent in residence and 48,500 with a male as the sole parent. Among the many items of interest were: the positive view some 70% of children in one study had of their relationship with father; the all too clear mismatch between the workplace expectations; and how fathers adapt as primary care givers.

Jim Harvey picks up the issue of multicultural Australia. Between 1947 and 1993, Australia's population has grown from 7.5 to 17.5 million, a third of the

increase due to migration. There are now over 100 different ethnic groups speaking about 80 different languages living in comparative peace in Australia. He uses two case studies to point out the cross cultural complexities and some constraints on adaptability - law and custom stop short of polygamy and female genital mutilation. The voices of women and children have begun to enter the social history and will shed light on the migration process, racism, refugees and the Australian identity including the lot of Aboriginal Australians. Anne Scheppers makes the point that all workers in child and family services need some understanding of Aboriginal history, culture, current issues, racism and the context of Aboriginal children's lives. Pointers are provided to sources of additional information and advice is given about traditional culture and its influence on children and child rearing ways.

The political aspects of child and family poverty and inequality in the lucky country are explored by Freda Briggs. Key events in recent economic history are considered along with pertinent numbers. Policy settings, the greed of the eighties, indebtedness and data on bankruptcy provide a backdrop for discussion of the rural crisis, indices of poverty and the prominence of certain groups among the poor. Colleen Fitzpatrick and Freda Briggs examine the changed situation of dramatic decline in the number of babies available for adoption and the consequent shift to special needs and intercountry adoption. Attention is given to respite and foster care, emergency care and family preservation programs and many of the issues which arise in caring for children in these settings. Management and co-ordination of inputs from other services is also addressed, especially the role of the school in avoiding family problems being compounded by education problems.

The welfare of children and relevant legal issues are covered in a chapter by John Carmichael and Rick Sarre. A substantial discussion of the Family Law Act and the Australian Family Court is included, giving some history and contemporary context plus details of the volume and form of its recent work. The work of associated services, notably mediation, is also considered. Surrogacy and IVF are touched

on before a substantial discussion of custody, guardianship and access, as well as recent attempts to deal with child maintenance under the *Child Support Assessment Act* 1989. Other interesting issues raised in this chapter include children giving evidence, the ability of the law to determine the 'best interests of the child' and the validity and value of the adversarial method in justice processes.

Child Protection issues are canvassed in a chapter by Marie O'Neill titled 'Dangerous Families'. Research and evidence about violence in the home are discussed and attention is drawn to some of the prominent cases which have served to focus public attention on these issues in recent years, and have resulted in changes to systems and the law. The theme of dangerousness is pursued, noting that a popular press concentration on cases involving death of or caused by children can diminish the appreciation of the difficulty of dealing with the large number of cases of child abuse and neglect now reported. It is undeniable that there is a need to provide reliable services to assist both victims of abuse to deal with the harm they have suffered, and perpetrators to come to grips with their own problems and those they caused others. Serious efforts need to be made to address what is seen as a high tolerance of violence in the Australian culture.

Beryl Langer provides an account of the economic features of modern childhood. Notable are the shift of the household from being a site of production to being primarily concerned with consumption, and the penetrating power of the marketers to enlist children directly. The book ends with a penetrating chapter by Glenn Cupit on the influence of television. Cheap, available and generally safe, it has become a person-sitter, a focus for social interaction of groups with limited resources, and a companion for the socially isolated. However a range of research, including his own, is cited in support of the view that a link between television violence and aggressive behaviour has been established and that the question has moved to the search for explanations of the effect.

The book provides an account of the state of play in areas of concern to practitioners and policy makers concerned with

the well being of families and children. It provides research findings, current concerns and statistics for each of the are as chosen. It is a useful ready reference

for those wanting to quickly get in touch with current issues around the topics on display, as a starting point for decision making, action or further research.

Reviewed by Lloyd Owen,
Senior Lecturer, Graduate School of Social Work,
La Trobe University

Helping bereaved children

edited by Nancy Boyd Webb

New York: Guilford Press, 304p.

This excellent book appears to have been neglected in the sparse reflects the reluctance of many adults literature of children and bereavement. Perhaps this, even professional workers, to deal with the issues of death and hence assist children to do so. Boyd Webb's book is useful for academics practitioners and parents and is written in a style that makes it meaningful for the different perspectives the reader may take. The book is so designed that the first three chapters focus upon a theoretical overview of the children's experience of bereavement and follows with application of this in providing a framework for assessment of a child who has undergone a bereavement, distinguishing between 'normal' and 'disabling' grief. The remaining two-thirds of the book, which is written by Boyd Webb and other contributors, provides a well balanced integration of theory, and illustrates this by case studies.

The book commences with a theoretical review of children's experiences of death. Boyd Webb compares the experience of bereavement of children and adults. She provides a good review of a child's stage of conceptual development in relation to understanding bereavement, but cautions in the strict application of these stages recognising that all children develop and mature differently. She also provides a review of the influence of religion and culture on the child's experience of bereavement and, later in a case study,

discusses the issue of the therapist dealing with parents' religious attitudes to death that the therapist may not share.

The case studies presented are selected for the different experiences of grieving according to the form of loss the child suffers. The two broad categories are: death in the family; and death in school and the community. Within the first category, the content addresses death of a grand-parent, terminal illness and death of father, accidental sibling death and the joint loss of death of a god-parent and separation of parents. Each case study addresses theory and presents the case, including narrative, and the therapists' planning, feelings and responses. The manner of presentation allows the reader to make their own assessment of the material presented by the child as well as understanding the therapists' responses. Although there are a number of different authors of these chapters, the style of writing is similar (or well edited!) and communicates the material well. This section also includes a group therapy intervention when children have suffered a personal loss. It also demonstrates the different manner in which children do grieve. This section also has a case in which a young child (2½ years old) witnessed his father shoot his mother and then himself. The case illustrates the importance of assisting a young child to grieve and presents a creative, sensitive the effective way in which to do so.

The category of death in school and the community is particularly relevant as children face unexpected violence and death in the school and the community. The cases presented, which include death of a peer, of a teacher, of a counsellor and in a classmate's family, explore post-traumatic stress disorder and suggest approaches for working with individual children, groups and staff. This section would be very useful to school counsellors as well as others working in communities where children have experienced such losses.

The book clearly illustrates that disabling grief can occur for many children and requires direct intervention. It also illustrates that with appropriate intervention children can learn to face their grief and move on with life. An underlying assumption of the book is that a loss is not something to 'get over', rather it is something to come to terms with emotionally and conceptually so that it does not impair the child's future life. A major strength of this book is the obvious respect the authors have for their child clients and their families. This fact, coupled with the theoretical presentation and integrated case studies, make this book a very valuable one for those interested in working with children.

Reviewed by Margarita Frederico
Assoc. Professor of Social Work,
Australian Catholic University

Unequal lives? Low income and the life chances of three year olds

by Tim Gilley and Janet Taylor

Brotherhood of St. Laurence, 1995, 173p. RRP \$16.00

This is the fourth book in a series published by the Brotherhood of St Laurence on their impressive longitudinal 'Life Chances' study which is following through a cohort of 167 children born in inner urban Melbourne in 1990. Readers may have seen some of the families in

this study appear in a television program recently shown on SBS which was based on this study. The program provided a very human face to the study and a glimpse into the everyday lives of a small number of the families. This book fills in the detail behind the faces, and presents

us with a picture of how low income appears to be shaping the experiences and opportunities of children in the 1990s. From its origins in the 1930s, the Brotherhood has fought poverty by combining direct assistance to the poor with advocacy and social action. Its high