

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,
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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.

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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

quality research is one of the tools of its advocacy role.

Tim Gilley and Janet Taylor are to be congratulated, not only for the research itself, but also for the fine job they have done in presenting the findings in a very readable and clear style. The quantitative data is interspersed with the words of the families, and the technical detail is located in the appendix. The book is a must for those currently involved in, or preparing for a career in community work, children's services, policy and program developments, and last, but not least, for anyone interested in families and social justice.

Unequal lives, which consists of ten chapters, opens with an overview of the study and the demographic profile of the families. This is followed by chapters organised around the following themes: income; children's health and development; stresses on families and their supports; employment and unemployment; housing and the local neighbourhood; utilisation of services; and maternal perceptions of the children and their future. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study at the state and federal level. While it is a study of families in a particular location, it has broad relevance to Australian families and communities.

The community from which the families were drawn is a fascinating microcosm of certain parts of Australian society. Like other inner urban areas in Australia, it has undergone a process of gentrification over the past two decades. Yet the slum reclamation programs of the 1960s, which replaced nineteenth century workers' cottages with high rise public housing estates, have ensured that the process of gentrification has been incomplete, resulting in a highly diverse population in terms of income. The availability of public housing has also ensured an ethnically diverse population reflecting different waves of migrants and refugees. These days, Vietnamese, Chinese and Hmong make up the main non-English speaking language groups.

The families were recruited into the study through their local maternal and child health service when the babies were six months of age. This is a universal service utilised by 98% of Victorian families with infants, and a positive relationship between the parents and the maternal and child health nurses has proved to be a valuable point of entry for a number of studies. Paradoxically, while the families rated this service more highly than any other, the future of the maternal and child health service is now under grave threat as a result of changes in State govern-

ment policy, local government restructuring and compulsory tendering of services.

It would be wrong to assume that low income is the sole determinant of children's and families' well-being, or to stereotype families according to their income or family structure. There are clearly many factors 'internal' to the family as well as 'external' to it, which shape the vulnerability and resilience of families. While the authors do not overstate their case in this respect, and show something of the diversity of experience within different income groups, the study focuses on the impact of low income. Factors which this study found to be associated with low income include: sole parenthood; unemployment; non-English speaking background; and a lower level of education.

The study provides rich data for hypothesising about how the socio-economic status of the family actually impacts upon children. In reflecting upon this in the light of the data presented, it seemed to me that poverty can be described as having both direct and indirect effects, and that it is probably the latter which has the greatest impact. This is not to say that the direct effects of poverty are unimportant. For example, some of the low income parents reported that they sometimes could not afford to clothe and feed their children adequately, and a few parents spoke of their children going without medication they required. Somewhat less direct is the impact on children's well-being which results from the correlates of low income with adult health-related behaviours - for example, the lower rates of breast feeding and the higher rate of parental smoking found among low income families in this study.

But perhaps of greatest significance are the complex indirect effects which impact on children via the higher levels of social stress and lower levels of social support experienced by low income parents in the study. This is not to imply that all low income families are highly stressed and lack social support, or that the reverse is true of high income families. But the stresses are different in kind and in magnitude. For example, some of the mothers in the affluent families reported being stressed by juggling the demands of employment and the raising of very young children. However, the low income mothers in the study reported a broader range of stresses, including financial pressures, housing problems, and more frequent and more serious disagreements with their partners, friends and relatives. This interactions of high social stress and low social support is probably the key to the indirect effect of poverty on children's

well-being, with the intervening variable being the impact of this on the psychological well-being of parents and the morale of the family as a unit. This in turn shapes how parents perceive and interact with their children.

It is therefore not surprising that this study found that mothers in low income families were more likely to rate their children's health as fair rather than excellent, even when there was little difference in the health status of the children from low and high income families. Similarly, mothers in low income families were more likely to perceive their child as having a difficult temperament and to report having problems managing their child. Another major Australian study, that of Williams and Carmichael, has identified maternal depression in low income and socially isolated migrant mothers as a strong predictor of speech delay and behavioural problems in children at four years of age. A clear picture is beginning to emerge from such studies.

The Life Chances study adds to this picture by capturing the 'macro' factors, such as longterm structural unemployment, interact with the 'micro' factors within the family. This should remind those of us who are concerned about child development or problems such as child abuse and neglect, that we must not become so immersed in the psychodynamics of the family that we lose sight of the broader social and political context in which families are embedded. This is not a new idea. Child development psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner has been urging us for decades to recognise the significance of 'the ecology' of the child, yet in current debates on issues like child protection or maternal depression yet in current debates on issues like child protection or maternal depression, poverty is typically ignored, despite its strong association with such problems.

How low income affects the life chances of children may prove to be fundamentally about how such factors shape family cohesion and morale. We now have enough evidence which tells us that children are more likely to thrive when nurtured by parents who are given reason to hope rather than reason to despair. By their very essence as the next link in the intergenerational chain, children bring hope to their parents and to their community. Our task as a society is to provide an environment for families in which hope can be sustained.

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