



# Guest Editorial

## 5<sup>th</sup> Australasian Child Abuse and Neglect Conference Edition

Penny Armytage and Elizabeth Armitage

This special issue of Children Australia is concerned with child abuse and neglect and child protection. It coincides with the Fifth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, 'Taking Responsibility-Sharing Solutions', which will take place in Melbourne between 16 and 19 October. The conference is hosted by the Victorian Department of Health and Community Services and auspiced by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. The aims of the conference are:

- to promote the development of an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to the protection of children from abuse and neglect;
- to advocate for the rights of children and young people in Australia;
- to strengthen the commitment to the prevention of child abuse and neglect; and
- to provide professionals with current research and information on child abuse and neglect programs and services.

In his Presidential Address to the recent 10<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect (Kuala Lumpur, September, 1994), Dr Richard Krugmann stated that:

It is only through the open public discussion of not only what we want but what we can do within available resources that we can have a successful child protection and prevention strategy for children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides an excellent infrastructure for the development of such a child protection policy. We can all agree that children should be free from abuse and neglect and have the opportunity to grow and develop to their potential, but what about the details?

In Victoria, a dramatic increase in demand upon the statutory child protection service has required us to have a closer look at the details of what we want and what we can do.

The aims of the forthcoming conference reflect the growing awareness among child welfare and child protection professionals in Victoria, as well as interstate and abroad, that we must now focus our attention upon preventing child abuse and neglect, finding the best balance between services for children in need and achieving better outcomes for children



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who become the subjects of child protection investigations and interventions. Over the past 18 months in Victoria we have witnessed a 50% increase in the number of children reported to the statutory child protection service run by H&CS. This significant change in the reporting behaviour of the community and of professionals can be accounted for by a number of factors: the introduction of mandatory reporting legislation; professional education; and, growing community awareness about child abuse and neglect, fuelled and reflected by the electronic and print media in news and entertainment. Statistics from other states, the UK and the USA show similarly high increases in reports to child protection agencies.

Victorian experience, and overseas experience and research, suggests that in many countries statutory child protection systems have become the recipients of an ever widening array of concerns for children, ranging from cases where children have suffered serious or life threatening injury to cases of concern for the general well-being of the child.

In Victoria and elsewhere, the proportions of notifications which are reported but not investigated, and investigated but not substantiated are very high. The number of reports of suspected child abuse and neglect will always be higher than the number of investigations and substantiations because legislation and the community expect the state to limit its intervention to situations in which children are at risk of significant harm. However, the greater the discrepancy between the number of reports and the number of cases actually substantiated, the weaker is the system's capacity to respond effectively to cases where children are proven to be in danger. Of further concern is that the increasing absorption of the statutory child protection service in sifting for evidence of serious harm amongst the thousands of reported suspected cases of child abuse and neglect, most of which are not substantiated, is also at the expense of promoting the quality of life for the greater number of children who are known to be in other kinds of need.

Unless the professional community joins together through the open public discussion of not only what we want but what we can do within available resources, these disconcerting trends are likely to continue.

One of the greatest problems for professionals required to exercise judgement about child abuse and neglect, and for members of the community concerned about the care of children in their family, is that there are no absolute, hard, scientific definitions of what constitutes abuse or neglect. We doubt that there ever will be. Nevertheless, the development of a shared, clearer understanding within the professional community and the broader community of the core business of the statutory service, of when to define adult behaviour towards children or parenting styles as abusive and when the state should intervene, is one crucial means of reducing the present imbalance.

It is timely to remind ourselves that statutory child protection services are intended as a service of last resort. They are the final, most drastic and intrusive option, on a continuum of services our community provides to care for and protect children. Judge Fogarty, in the Review of Child Protection Services, February 1989, described statutory child protection as a limited interventive service, an emergency service provided by society to meet real or threatened harm to a child. It should not be confused with a long-term social welfare program. In Victoria, as the number of reports of cases of suspected child abuse and neglect which are assessed as not justifying investigation or substantiation continue to rise, it is increasingly obvious that many of these children and families would fare better if they were able to access appropriate universal and specialist family support services.

The future for children in need of extra support and protection does not lie in a continual increase in the number of child protection workers employed to search for evidence amongst increasing numbers of reported cases of suspected child abuse and neglect. In part, the future lies in a greater emphasis on broadening the network of community based primary care services and specialist care services, better targeting and co-ordination of services, clarifying the core business of the statutory child protection services and working towards better outcomes for the children who do require state protection.

An important, recent UK publication, *Child Protection: Messages from Research* prepared by the Dartington Social Research Unit, summarises the key findings of 20 research programs into child protection in the UK (a review of this report appears in this issue of *Children Australia*). These research programs were initiated by the Department of Health in response to the problems arising from the Cleveland inquiry and other child protection inquiries which raised questions about the ways in which child welfare agencies handle cases coming their notice. There are many salient messages contained within this research summary and analysis. It is important reading for practitioners working in the field of child welfare and child protection. The authors argue that the research points to the need for policy and practice changes which reconsider the balance of services and alter the way in which professionals are perceived by parents accused of maltreating their children. They are not arguing that we take unnecessary risks with children's lives, rather, amongst other things, that we need to be clearer about the threshold for statutory intervention and that we need to keep family support services firmly in mind when child protection investigations are considered or underway.

The future for children also lies in a high investment in programs which work to prevent abuse of children and reduce the need for protective intervention. The proposition that if it is possible to prevent child abuse, it is morally indefensible to

wait until a child has been harmed before responding is indisputable.

The Australian Child Abuse Prevention Strategy is a major joint initiative by the federal government and all state and territory governments. It aims to prevent child abuse and to promote an environment which supports families and communities as well as helping them to meet their responsibilities to care for and protect children in order to redress the concerning imbalance between intervention and prevention. It marks the beginning of a change in thinking about child welfare and child protection of which the re-evaluation of the role of child protection services within the broad child welfare service network is a significant component.

Dr Richard Krugmann, paediatrician and past president of ISPCAN, lists the following essential component parts of a prevention strategy: professionals and other competent people who know the limitations of their knowledge working in multidisciplinary units; clear policy direction from informed political leaders who will avoid the 'quick fixes'; a probing, educated press that avoids the easy superficial approach and educates the public to the complexity of the problem; and programs that are based in sound research and have an ongoing evaluation component.

It is also time to be very honest and state publicly that it is unreasonable to expect that professionals will ever fully compensate children who have been abused, for the harm they have suffered within their families. There is no magic. Our knowledge is limited and it is imperfect. That much said, children who need our help, indeed all children, have the right to expect we adults will place a very high priority on ensuring a service system which will respond to their needs for protection and recovery now, and one that will contribute to the prevention of future child abuse; a service system which is based on the best and most reliable expert knowledge available to us right now. This is the standard to which it is reasonable to hold accountable the actions and decisions we take on behalf of children who need our help.

Richard Krugmann and the members of the Dartington Social Research Unit provide us with a strong reminder of the need to base our practice and program planning upon authoritative knowledge about what is known to be good and bad for children, in the long and short term, and upon programs which are known to work well.

Informing ourselves and keeping up to date, through conferences, journals and, training sessions, is crucial. It is our hope that the Fifth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, *Taking Responsibility- Sharing Solutions*, will provide participants from a wide range of professions and work places, who are committed to making a difference to the lives of children, with an excellent opportunity to share information and knowledge about current best practices in the detection, management, treatment and prevention of child abuse and neglect.

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