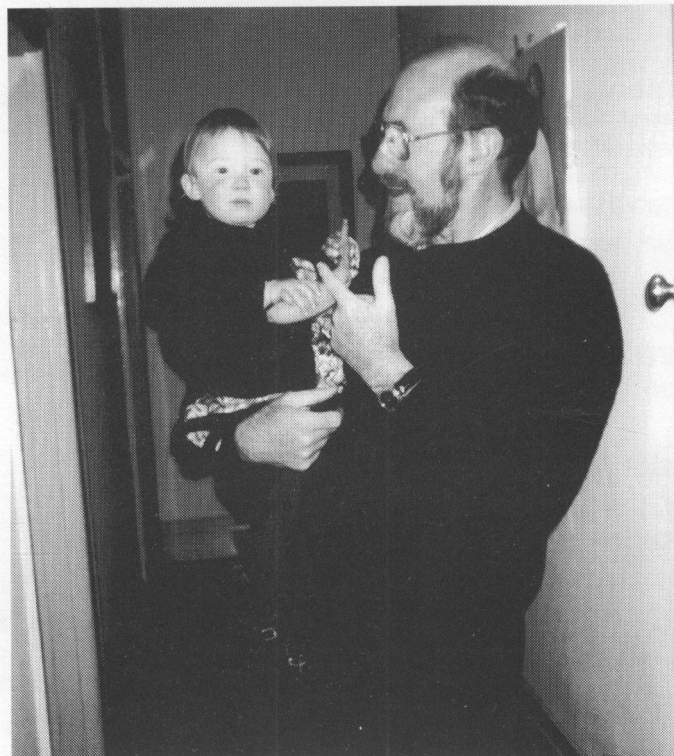# Editorial

As 1995, The International Year of Tolerance heads for the horizon, it gives way to the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty 1996. A noble, daunting, most would say impossible aim. Some political sensitivity attaches in Australia to the notion of doing away with poverty. The well intentioned declaration of Prime Minister Hawke that Australia would do away with it for Australian children led into political hot water. Its seeming unattainability may have engendered apathy and in some instances, blaming the victim. Poverty, like tolerance, as a term is interpreted in different ways by many, and as a phenomenon has many facets. Some of these we hope will be explored with next year's lens. One would hope though, that the difficulties do not inhibit the search for answers to poverty and its many associated ills and impacts on the lives of children. Without doubt, for many, it causes or exacerbates suffering and disadvantage.

What of tolerance and valuing diversity - has the year led to much reflection on it? Is the year passing without grabbing much attention from major opinion leaders, such as the mainstream media, the Council of Australian Governments and its member Parliaments, the board rooms of business including those of transnational interests, and the many peak bodies in communities of interest which try to grapple with principle and see the big picture on behalf of their constituents. I suspect not a great deal. More may emerge in time from ideas generated during the year. Some would say we have it here anyway, after all Australia is a relatively successful multi-cultural community. Others have said that tolerance as a goal does not go far enough - acceptance, collaboration and cooperation are more worthy objectives. Many were diverted by pressing present priorities, Australia was remembering the losses of war fifty years on; contemporary economic viewpoints force the balancing of budgets; and reform agendas, amounting to major paradigm shifts, have many agencies and their members grappling for a clear sense of the rules of the game and a picture of the future.

Overseas we have seen some horrific examples of what can happen when tolerance is in short supply and prejudice spills over into war. We have also some notable retreats from open conflict and painstakingly wrought agreements in the direction of peace - not without martyrs. We should not underestimate the difficulties involved in such diplomacy nor should we avoid trying. While noting an inevitable element of pragmatism in politics and diplomacy, it is tragic that Australia's position in relation to the sanctioning of land mines as a legitimate weapon of war is so soft. Such indiscriminate and monstrous machines which cause daily carnage and cost a fortune to find and remove should have no legitimate place in our world. Our political leaders do need to act. At the very least, the future manufacture and sale of land mines should be criminalised. A further chance to take a position on this occurs in January 1996. To unscramble some words tangled in the computer in issue No.2 of this volume of *Children Australia*, 'progress on an issue such as this, might restore some faith in political systems and leadership for our young people. Faith that our leaders might be up to tackling the demonstrated dangers of other technological wizardry and the emotional hurt and attitudinal bankruptcy which fosters terrorism and other forms of fanaticism and cruelty'. On a similar theme, attention has been drawn to the way in which children have been caught up directly into armed conflict. The use of children as soldiers adds another dimension to the other forms of tragic victimisation seen in our wars of this decade. The release of UNICEF's annual *State of the World's Children* report provides more evidence of this sort, as does one of the books reviewed in this issue.

At home, it seems important to review our notions of locality and community, our conceptions of civil society. The real tests of well being are how things work and how things look from any house in any street or on any farm, or for some today, the park bench, the cardboard shelter or the 'hot rocks' in the city square. One of the consequences of budget balancing has been the merging of many services and a tendency in the direction of more consolidated units serving larger geographical regions or larger population units. In some instances this is justified by capacities of staff and clients to be more mobile, in others modern forms of communication render geographic proximity less necessary.

Many kinship groups communicate frequently by phone. We know though that isolation, a lack of a sense of belonging and self worth and anxiety about the future impact negatively on families and the community in general. They especially impact on young people. The numbers are not good just now when we count, among young people, school drop outs or push outs; unemployment and underemployment, homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, depression and suicide, excessive risk taking, anxiety disorders and offending behaviour. They might be worse and a majority do cope, but the numbers are not good. So many of the solutions to these problems seem to fare best in environments which have a sense of community, and better still in an inclusive and fair civil society which provides a clear opportunity to contribute, a sense of respect for self and respect for the rights of others. The 1995 Boyer Lectures, recently delivered on the ABC by Eva Cox, provide much food for thought in this vein. She provides a timely reminder of the importance of social capital. The lectures were also accessible on the internet.

In this issue of Children Australia, the contributors focus attention on some of the important institutions which bear on the lives of children, especially those who are troubled or in trouble with the law. Two messages emerge overall. The first concerns the significance of attitudes and capacities, within institutions like the family, the school and the legal system, being able to cope with the developmental needs of children and young people in the society of the nineties. The second concerns the ability of systems and programs to work together with their clients in understanding the problems and finding and implementing the solutions.

Richard Hil and Anthony McMahon raise questions about the absence of family voices in research on juvenile justice. As intimate and interested stakeholders, their perspective is a key component in the understanding of events. It is refreshing to note recent trends in the crime and delinquency field in the direction of restorative justice. An approach much more inclusive of the perspectives of victim, offender and the community. The kith and kin networks of people directly involved in offending episodes and the aftermath, can be a rich source of guidance, as well as being a neglected area of need.

Jenny Luntz in the second of three articles, discusses a project undertaken in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. The aim was to improve access to services for children and young people who typically required multi-agency involvement for emotional or behavioural problems. A model emerged, but implementation was largely swept aside as a change of Government shifted the agenda. It appears important for the learning not to be lost.

Jeff Dorman raises some issues of importance at the family/school interface. From a vantage point of the school, observations are made about the role of families in education among a number of variables influencing educational productivity. Specific attention is given to the learning environment in the home, homework and television viewing. This observer hopes that the outcome would be positive learning climates at home and in school, as for many young people neglect or oppression can impinge on the freedom and motivation to learn.

Marlya Juchnowski describes a TAFE course developed for Home based child care and a study which aims to test the views and competence of caregiver students involved in it. A fairly clear theme is the argument for professional child care. An important issue, though it opens a Pandora's box when linked to caregiving generally and parent education. Issues around measuring competence, regulating caregiving, and what level of skill and training might be necessary for what function come to mind. Internationally, some movement in the direction of a more professional version of foster care has been evolving for some time as a response to

some of the more challenging needs of troubled children and families. The notes from the New South Wales Play Groups Association serve as a reminder that much has been done by parents collaborating to access ideas and facilities to enhance their natural roles.

In relation to sexual abuse, Christine Eastwood and Wendy Patton focus on disclosure and its aftermath for young women when legal process follows. Their report provides an in-depth look at the issues through the experiences of five women and includes a useful review of the literature. Clearly our traditional systems of justice seem sometimes to compound and exacerbate the problems they are intended to resolve.

Roger Rees and Bill Young have been undertaking some work which must qualify as action research. It appears to be involved in doing much good for its participants, who in the mainstream education systems of today are disadvantaged. 'Bored Witless' provides an apt description of much of the shortfall; 'Born to Fail' sets the story in its research context. Schools are fundamentally important primary care environments. It is essential that they be properly skilled and equipped to contribute positively to the range of developmental tasks their young proteges are tackling within them.

Chris Goddard returns with some observations on the power of words. Talking about what is not said as much as what is, is a proper post-modernist pursuit. So also is looking for odd connections which might reveal doubtful agendas and new ways of looking at things. Beyond the blatant choices of words pitched at selling print, there are stories of real poignancy, cruelty, fearsome frailties and ambivalent viewpoints which can be lost in the language we choose to manage our daily round.

A final editorial note to unscramble a few more words from page 2 of issue No. 2. The point is worth reiterating. 'For better principles to prevail in this society, we need the institutions we employ to do our work, in both private and public sectors, to recognise and demand a social conscience and a community building responsibility'. Their roles do go beyond satisfying shareholders and winning the next election.

Lloyd Owen, Editor.