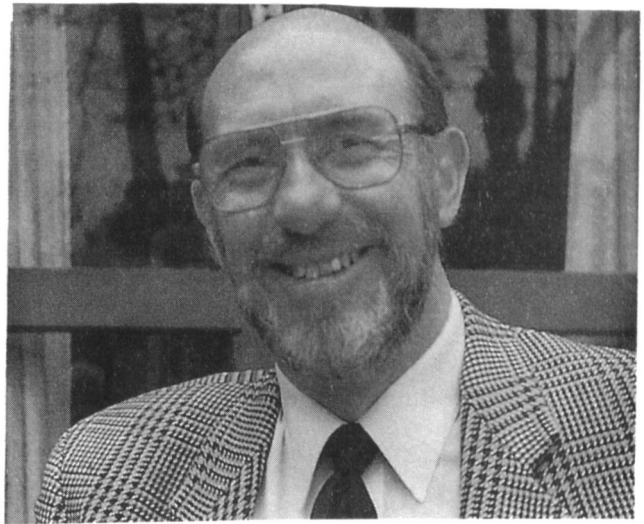


Editorial

Lloyd Owen



Time, how did it get to be such an enemy? Perhaps it's a millenium bug infection. As we look around in this second half of 1999, we are surrounded by conferences we would like to go to, books and articles we would like to read, an array of issues crying out for exploration and a pile of commitments – the things we said yes to (or didn't say no to) with deadlines and various degrees of accountability attached. Not to mention the unexpected and unintended, the things that did not work as anticipated, the things that emerged some way down the track – things which just take more time to work out or work through. To add insult to injury there is this sense that one should have known, that it is all in the planning, that it is a matter of being efficient, being a careful custodian of time, that we should have thought of that beforehand. Perhaps technology can fix it by reducing the human problems, though on performance to date it seems likely to introduce some new ones.

My attention was drawn recently to some work being done in the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (web address: www.ciar.ca). Professor Mustard had delivered an address in Canberra pointing out that, if we were to view human history as a one year time frame to date, in the last two weeks of the year we have unleashed a set of drivers of rapid change of staggering proportions. We simply cannot afford to let economic, social, political and environmental matters get out of touch with each other. We need to take some time to listen to each other, to reflect on the complexity and fullness of our humanity, our potential to do good or harm and the fragility of the biosphere we inhabit. In work with children and young people, time is a fundamentally important ingredient, time to do things together, time to communicate, time to develop trust, time to show we care.

The core interest areas of this journal revolve around child and family welfare, out of home care and the service systems our society puts in place to address some of the unhappy and uncomfortable people issues such as the protection of children and youth from abuse, neglect and self harm and systems like juvenile justice, which in part at least exist to protect the interests of adults and of their peers from the behaviour problems of children. Hopefully such systems are keenly concerned with the interests of the children themselves. To what extent as practitioners and researchers are we interested in ideas such as quality of life and human dignity. It seems very much so, if we heed some of the developments which have been growing and maturing over

the last decade or so. As a starting point one might visit some ideas which have developed around the elusive concept of quality of life. We quickly arrive at an appreciation that it involves both subjective and objective dimensions, both attitude and material circumstances play major roles. Again from Canada we find a research group exploring quality of life in terms of *being*, *belonging* and *becoming*: being – our physical, psychological and spiritual selves; belonging – ourselves in relation to others in family, school, work, leisure and community; and becoming – our choice and chance for further growth development and change. Such ideas stand up well among some of my recent encounters.

Child protection is a field which echoes with disquiet about its exponential growth and the destructiveness of its blaming culture. For those not so close to it, it seems simple – protect the child first then catch and punish the perpetrator. This belies the complexity, the confusion, the uncertainty and the pain with which those involved are often struggling. With this in mind I was interested to read the careful layering of elements which comprise the recently developed Victorian Risk Framework. While acknowledging that we cannot overlook the risk of harm, or retreat from the need to make carefully considered judgements, it is crucial to insert an orientation which builds on the strengths in families and which is sensitive and respectful. This message was powerfully reinforced by the appearance of a new book, *Signs of Safety*, by two Western Australian practitioners, Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards. These very experienced workers have painstakingly taken solution focused and strength based perspectives to new heights of practical expression, starting with the referral and investigation end of the system. Collaboration and partnership with children and parents finds practical meaning and expression in a solution and safety oriented approach.

Attention was also grabbed by the need to respond to the agenda of the meeting in September of practitioners, policy makers and researchers from around the world who are using and experimenting with the *Looking After Children* assessment, case planning and review system developed to achieve better outcomes for children and young people in out of home care. The system appears to be attaining increasing relevance to a wider group of children at home as well and has attracted much interest in Australia. One of the interesting features of the system is the attention given to some dimensions of life beyond those commonly appraised

by case planners. In addition to health, education, family and social supports, and emotional and behavioural development, the system also addresses concerns and developmental opportunities around *identity, social presentation* and *self care skills*. The extent to which these issues are addressed appears to have a substantial bearing on self esteem and the opportunities presented to a young person and their ability to take advantage of those opportunities. Each of these dimensions, along with the others, is explored in some depth in the reader developed in 1996 edited by Sonia Jackson and Sue Kilroe (*Looking After Children: Good Parenting Good Outcomes: READER*. London: HMSO). Discussion of them points to the way early childhood development provides a platform for the avoidance of later problems or the easier resolution of them if they do occur. But equally the importance and potential productivity of later attention, therapeutic intervention and training receives emphasis. A recent English discussion paper on issues to do with young people leaving care, *Me, survive out there?*, reinforces that message even further. Dignity and coping skills are precious commodities for us all.

My third set of absorbing experiences concerns indigenous Australians. I was privileged to introduce Dr. Mick Dodson, now Chairperson of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, in delivering a keynote address at the IFCO International Foster Care Conference. He gave life to the enormous expanse of painful territory traversed by the inquiry into the stolen generation, but he gave it with great dignity, wisdom and a challenging spirit of reconciliation. I believe a similar spirit from another indigenous Australian was displayed recently by Aden Ridgeway in his maiden speech to the Australian Parliament, not shirking the difficulty of the issues or the pain of events, but looking forward with commitment to a better world for all. Such endeavour, I think, demands attention to a renewed emphasis on community. Notions of community in child abuse prevention have also been explored in a recent issues paper by Adam Tomison and Sarah Wise from the National Child Protection Clearing House (Issues in Child Abuse Prevention, No. 11, Autumn 1999, AIFS).

Contributors to this issue of *Children Australia* span a range of issues but have in common references to dignity, resilience and self determination. The first is an article from Queensland by Margaret Ah Kee and Clare Tilbury on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. In discussing the operation of the policy in Queensland, questions are raised about the continuing over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system and about the high preponderance of them still with non-aboriginal care givers.

The paper emphasises the significance of the self determination of a culturally aware community of interest.

Jan Mason and Jan Falloon from New South Wales report on some research exploring children's perspectives of child abuse. The question of agency, another way of talking about power in decision making or self determination, is raised in their article, *A children's perspective on child abuse*.

Sue Howard and Bruce Johnson from South Australia also report on some research in their article, *Tracking student resilience*. Drawing inputs from a randomly selected group of 9-12 year old children, they have been following up the stability of resilient and non resilient behaviours. Many insights are drawn from the observations of the children about what makes a difference in their lives. The study adds weight to the growing amount of evidence about risk and resilience factors present in family, school and community which interact with individual characteristics. Knowledge of what makes a difference could empower children and families to act better on their own behalf.

Linda Mondy and Patricia Kiely from New South Wales report on a project to trial and evaluate a Family Group Conference approach to developing solutions in referred child protection cases. Their article, *Family Decision Making: Good Practice in Child Protection Solutions*, indicates positive early responses from families and workers.

Jenny Luntz in her article, *What is Mental Health Consultation?*, discusses the background literature and thinking based on experience in child and adolescent mental health in the evolving model of consultation applied in Victoria. Another article will follow in a later issue with a more 'how to do it' focus.

Phillip Swain draws on knowledge of the law, ethics and practice to explore the issue of procedural fairness. Client perceptions of fairness can make a great difference to the establishment of productive working relationships, quite apart from general professional principles of social justice. His article, *Procedurally Fair? Fairly Procedural? ...Ethics, fairness and welfare practice*, uses social work practice and codes as examples.

The books reviewed in this issue provide interesting personal insights from people who need the help of good child and family welfare systems, as well as from people wanting to deliver them.

Chris Goddard in his regular contribution contrasts the exercise of technological, information and economic power with the world community's poor showing in the goal of education for all by the year 2000.

Lloyd Owen

War isn't child's play... So why are more than 300,000 children being used as soldiers?*

As this issue goes to press, we acknowledge the disturbing developments in East Timor, and note an important conference in progress in Melbourne concerning child soldiers, organised by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. We look forward to any hopeful outcomes from the conference regarding this very serious problem.

* reproduced from the Australian Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers conference brochure