

1976

Children Australia
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2005

Children Australia ... Keeping us focused and connected

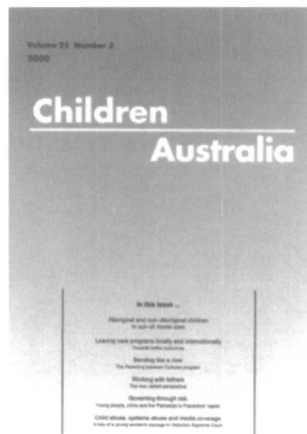
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Children Australia is a friendly journal. It is accessible, readable, contemporary, and straight forward. It has always been intended as a forum for practitioners and external commentators alike. The editorial policy has been relatively relaxed, with assistance provided to ensure a good spread of contributors. A quick scan of papers published over the last four years shows a predominance of papers from academics, primarily within schools of social work. These are enriched by contributions from writers from community development, youth services, child development, psychology, policy studies and history, often giving an extra critical slant or a sharp specialist focus that might otherwise be conspicuously missing. Personally, I really appreciate this interdisciplinary conversation and hope it will be preserved and developed.

As we peel back the layers, it is clear that these academic papers are balanced by a large grouping from practitioners, practitioner-academic collaborators, and practitioners engaged in advanced study related to their practice. *Children Australia* is a direct channel of communication back to the field for those many practice-research studies that would otherwise be buried in University libraries in the thesis collections. These and the other 'academic' papers are, in turn, frequently dependent upon service system data and agency-based research activities, often initiated by practitioners and program managers. Thus this remains an 'insiders' journal, in which all of us who practise in different ways (in direct service, program and systems management, policy and research) turn our critical eye on the issues and achievements of the field. The articles are substantial papers on substantial issues, and each edition is enlivened by sharp editorial comment, splashes of news and reviews, and recently by Jennifer Lehmann's short creative pieces. It's a welcome mail drop.

True to the history of the field of 'child welfare', out-of-home care remains a major preoccupation for this journal, and rightly so. We long for, but can hardly imagine, a time when we might feel truly satisfied that we are 'getting it right' for Australia's children who cannot live at home. In *Children Australia* in recent years we have had some excellent contributions on such recurrent concerns as sibling placement, leaving care, trauma and attachment difficulties in care, placement disruptions, supply and demand issues in foster care, indigenous children in care. We have been reminded (for our service arrangements often seem to 'forget') of the importance of parents for children in care. We are jolted into noticing (for our vision becomes blurred sometimes) the enormity of the impact of the care system on children's lives, and those of their families and carers.



The other major 'bread and butter' strand for the journal is parenting and family services. Bridging the realms of early intervention/child development services and remedial/protective family services, these contributors share innovations and explore substantive practices. They drive home children's developmental imperatives, and call on programs to attend to the serious issues confronting families who come to these services, and to the statutory child protection services: substance misuse, mental illness, poverty, separation crises, family violence, the marginalisation of

fathers. The range of these contributions illustrates how extraordinarily flexible and creative family services have to be, and how crucial it is for the child and family services field to join with specialist adult services in innovative ways if families are to be helped to rear their children well at home.

A third feature of the current *Children Australia* is its attention to issues of justice, and particularly procedural justice for children and young people. This journal has

thrown its support behind organisations such as CREATE, and has provided a forum for those children's and youth services workers (practitioners or academics) who are exploring non-tokenistic methods for promoting children's voice and participation in those services that are ostensibly there for them. It tries to keep us honest and attuned to children's experience.

Children Australia today is an important vehicle for communicating ideas, research and practices across the community of child and family services. Lorraine Redshaw, the journal's editorial assistant, tells me that the journal is distributed to a wide variety of organisations and individuals, including: academics and academic libraries (Australia-wide), government departments (Commonwealth, States, Local), peak bodies, legal institutions and services, hospital social work departments, child and adolescent mental health services, schools, early childhood organisations, and parenting organisations. Major child welfare agencies receive the journal, as do various programs operated by them: out-of-home care, relationships/family counselling, family support, child protection and treatment programs. Every Australian State is represented, including major cities, country towns and rural areas. There are some overseas subscribers, mainly in New Zealand, but also in the US and UK, and one in Japan. Gratis copies of the journal are sent to various agencies in Africa, India, Indonesia. It has become a reliable feature of our practice landscape.

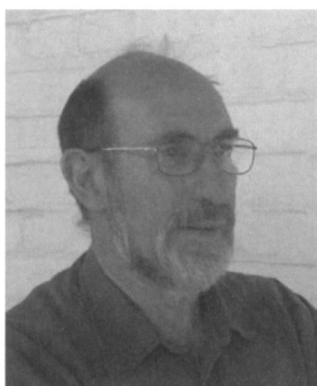
If *Children Australia* is a significant tool for us in this field, I wonder how we are using it? For me, it helps me reflect on our service provision nationally, providing welcome relief

from my immersion in the Victorian service system rhetoric. It helps me to incorporate ideas from diverse sources into my own research and teaching, to identify emerging tensions, and it encourages me to continue to tease out the perennial dilemmas. It is central to my efforts in educating prospective child and family social workers, a new generation to tackle our many unresolved problems. The journal's contributors provide us with data, analysis and program and policy suggestions that collectively we can use to inform our policy debates, improve our program designs, refine our practices and guide our research. It is vital that we continue to develop and refine our scholarship and reporting, so that viable and transferable programs with strong outcomes can be widely publicised as a matter of course. Equally, we might turn our attention to reporting what is not working, and spare others the costly mistakes that might otherwise be made. As a continuing forum for such conversation, *Children Australia* helps maintain a community of scholar-practitioners committed to keeping children in mind – in our own and in the public mind.

Children Australia is what it is because of its writers, and the team that puts it together, but it is substantially what it is because of the long-term guiding hand of Lloyd Owen. He has nurtured warmly his contributors, upheld a wider perspective on our field's challenges, and shared with us his abiding commitment to the well-being of Australia's children and young people, thereby reminding us all of our ultimate line of accountability. He is a living treasure. ❖

THE CHILDREN AUSTRALIA 2005 TEAM

L to R: Jennifer Lehmann, Lloyd Owen and Lorraine Redshaw



Our thanks to reviewers ...

Over the past five years, over 100 people – experts in a diverse range of topics from all walks of life – have been kind enough to give generously of their time and attention to review papers submitted to *Children Australia* for publication.

The *Children Australia* editorial team would like to take this opportunity to thank all those unidentified but hardworking people who are so vital to maintaining the high standard of the journal and providing valuable feedback to authors.

To give readers and authors an indication of what is involved in reviewing submissions to *Children Australia*, Jennifer Lehmann has contributed the following piece from the perspective of the reviewer.

The reviewer speaks ...

Jennifer Lehmann

It's usually the end of a long day — perhaps the end of a long week — when that anonymous article is drawn from the pile of 'things to do'. And it seemed like a small task when I agreed to be a reviewer for that journal article. I was interested in the topic ... I *am* interested in the topic! I also support the aims and focus of the journal. After all, it's one that melds practice and theory, and creates dialogue and debate amongst a range of professionals working in the child, youth and family sector. But I'm a little weary and I'm hoping to find energy and passion in the paper I'm about to tackle — an energy that will carry me through the next few hours of reading, thinking and writing that review report.

I like to be captivated ... by the skill of the writing, by a new perspective, an in-depth focus or new information. This is probably a tall order and I'm painfully aware of my own early attempts at writing articles. It takes time to become familiar with the journal genre. However, I'm determined to listen for the voice of the author and to see what I can learn. Sometimes this is somewhat tricky, not the learning, but the author's voice; especially when several people write an article together. Each wants to make a contribution, but often writing styles differ and there's a risk of blandness developing as the pieces come together.

As I settle to the task and check the instructions for reviewers, I decide on where to start. It's not always at the beginning of the article, though usually I read the abstract first. The abstract should provide me with a clear and succinct outline of what I will find in the paper, define the topic and summarise the arguments to be made and/or the results of the author's study and thinking on the matter. Funnily enough, it's often the references I then peruse. Why, I wonder, as I write this piece? Probably because it gives some distinct impressions — about the attention to detail and consistency in using the author/date referencing style; about the way the author uses work preceding their own and acknowledges what's gone before; and about a commitment

to pursuing the relevant knowledge base. When definitive or contemporary literature has been omitted in the reference list, I always wonder if the author is aware of its existence, chosen to ignore or omit it, or worse still, hasn't bothered to do a literature search at all! How frustrated I get when references are missing or scrappy! 'Send it back' is too often a first reaction!

Opening paragraphs of the body of the article usually set the scene in greater detail. I find myself looking for background information — for a demonstration of thorough and balanced knowledge of the topic; even if the author later disputes commonly held ideas. The context of theory and practice is important, particularly for newcomers to the sector who may not understand what came before or what has led to the current situation. It is also useful for those considering their working career; students who make judgements about the capacity of professionals in the field from what they read through those years of study. It is useful, as the author, to imagine the readership of the journal and the potential to be quoted out of context ... and build in early protection!

By halfway through the article, the linking of sentences and their ideas has become one of the considerations for publishing purposes. I ask myself: am I still following the logic of the author's points, or have I become lost or confused? It's always so easy when writing about a familiar topic to forget that the reader may not have the same level of knowledge on the subject; and to make assumptions about the depth of the reader's understanding. And it's the middle of the paper that usually contains the 'guts of the matter', so here I search for the evidence that supports the writer's arguments and later conclusions. The complexity of the situation being discussed can't be denied, but am I able to 'move with' the author through the points being made?