What have we said? What have we done?

Jennifer Lehmann and Larraine Redshaw

In the thirty years since *Children Australia* (formerly *Australian Child and Family Welfare*) commenced publication, a wide range of topics concerning children, young people and their families have been addressed.

In the early years, the contents of the journal reflected its role as the quarterly journal of the Child and Family Welfare Council of Australia (later known as the Children's Bureau of Australia) and in some ways functioned as a newsletter. Amongst the articles appeared brief reports, comments, announcements, news from each state and territory, and information on appointments and retirements. By the mid-1980s, it had settled into a pattern of greater concentration on submitted articles.

Glancing through the journal contents pages from the past 30 years has offered an interesting overview. So many of the topics remain the same – albeit from different perspectives in some cases: domestic violence, child abuse, juvenile justice and young Aboriginal people, foster care, child care, foster care and foster care recruitment, to name a few. It seems that, despite our best efforts, many problems persist. And in some cases, it appears that we have travelled in a full circle. The first issue in 1976 featured an article by Sister Agatha Rogers, 'The passing of an era ...', concerning the closing of St Catherine's Children's Home in Geelong. Twenty-two years later, Kevin Bain wrote an article in support of residential care in some cases for children with disabilities; and support for residential programs in certain circumstances has also appeared in more recent articles (Ainsworth 2003; Jenkins 2004).

At regular intervals the bigger picture of child welfare, children's rights, and directions in policy and service development have also marked shifts in focus and thinking.

Scattered throughout the more predictable subjects for attention are also some more unusual ones. For instance, in 1977 an article by Margaret Donagan, Charge Sister at Winlaton, described in rather explicit detail the technique she had used to remove 'some hundred odd tattoos of

varying sizes and situations from young adolescent girls' as an alternative to 'costly' plastic surgery.

> The criteria before commencing such a procedure should be clearly defined and ... the girl is assessed to establish her readiness and degree of desire for removal. Threshold of pain is important and this is largely determined by the former.
>
> (Donagan 1997)

Various approaches to working with children and their families have also received attention and, while we are familiar with narrative, strengths-based, and behavioural therapies, one edition of the journal in 1980 addressed the topic of 'milieu therapy' to address the problems of 'that small slice of grossly deprived anti-social children for whom long term planned environment therapy is essential'. The article by Richard Balbernie describes the approach of the Cotswold Community in England to re-integrating the 'unintegrated':

> These are those who are continuously ruled, swamped and overwhelmed entirely by the most primitive instinctual impulses and reactions of a very primitive and paranoid nature and who, at root, totally distrust adults and their environment.
>
> (Balbernie 1980)

The extreme difficulties in treating such young people are spelt out, with warnings against provision of 'an eternally nurturing environment' because 'to encourage a dependency ... is disastrous always'. The effect of the work on the staff also comes under scrutiny – coping with such confronting behaviour in some circumstances leading to 'one person after another coming to a sticky end'. And finally a note of warning:

> I would end by enjoining you to hold fast to your public support for people, for the individual, with skill and imagination, and to

watch out for any efflorescence of grandiose top down blueprints and ideologies which may be concretised, for these concretisations have a habit of crumbling fairly quickly. These create the elegant hollow places where theory obscures actual practice and reality.

(Balbernie 1980)

In 1981 a paper by David Palmer titled 'Behind every good soldier ...' described 'how the wives and families of servicemen experience service lifestyle, military communalism and isolation from civilian host communities'. This paper raised a number of issues which, in the ensuing life of *Children Australia*, have not re-emerged.

Traditionally, a serviceman's life has not been family orientated. Households are regularly unsettled by postings, delays in being assigned married quarters ... Marital relationships and children's education are commonly thought to suffer as a result of these disruptions ...'

(Palmer 1981)

Concern is expressed for the 'army child's home situation' with regard to 'authoritarian tendencies', although other views are also expressed:

'The army is a totally unnatural life. The soldier feels obliged to be scary. I mean, their discipline style just becomes a habit.'

'... I can point to examples where the guy goes all out to be a good father, perhaps because he feels guilty about being away so often.'

(Palmer 1981)

Army wives, it appears, were generally fairly isolated from their host community:

Perceiving themselves as transients in the community, army wives naturally enough seem more likely to identify with others in similar situations rather than develop contacts of any depth with more permanent local residents.

Civilian stereotyping of what is 'typical army' also hinders inclusion of the military family into the host community. ... Such generalisations by civilians is a constant source of irritation for many army wives.

(Palmer 1981)

Army life, it seems, can cause other difficulties:

... the solidarity of virtually an all male fraternity has its unfortunate side in exacerbating pressures that already exist in civilian society. Australian concepts of mateship are enshrined in the exaggerated

masculinity of the army life, to the detriment of the family.

(Palmer 1981)

Another topic apparently receiving little attention since 1982 is 'prisoner' mothers, although it was touched upon by Karen Healy, Denise Foley and Karyn Walsh in their article 'Families affected by the imprisonment of a parent' in 2001. In 1982, the author, Dennis Challinger, comments:

Two situations need to be considered. Firstly, when the child is an infant, say up to three years of age, there are problems concerning mother and child living together during mother's imprisonment. Secondly, when the child is older but not yet mature, there are problems concerning the child's access to mother, and the extent of decision making with respect to the child, allowed to mother while she resides in prison.

A *special institution* for housing prisoner-mothers and babies is the most obvious alternative [to closed prison]. ... an obvious political problem with this is that the establishment of such a facility would probably attract the criticism that prisoners are coddled. Plainly those who might make this criticism need to be made aware of the benefit to the children involved.

(Challinger 1982)

It is interesting to reflect on the number of mothers in detention centres who struggle with their prisoner status whilst raising children, but *Children Australia* has received no papers on this topic.

One issue in 1987 was devoted to responding to natural and 'man-made' disasters – a concern that has re-surfaced for those involved in more recent disasters in various parts of the world. One article by Ruth Wraith and Rob Gordon described the responses of individuals and families in the face of disaster, painting a familiar picture as described in many recent news reports on the events in New Orleans.

... the predominant experience is confusion. It occurs because disastrous events, by their very nature, disrupt the expected familiar pattern of life. The physical environment is usually drastically altered; sometimes it is almost unrecognizable. Death, injury or the threat of them, introduce new and powerful experiences of danger. Evacuation and the influx of combatant and relief workers replace ordered and familiar community life with a disoriented, emotional mass of people.

In this, as in any situation of confusion, people fall back on what is familiar, to orient themselves. This means they may not immediately recognise what is new and unique to the disaster. They tend to focus on definite, tangible problems. The overwhelming physical needs are quite rightly the first to be addressed. Many physical requirements have to be met in a matter of hours. When concentrating on providing necessary services, it is difficult to be understanding of the new personal and community responses that take place.

(Wraith & Gordon 1987a)

The same authors also address the myths of response to disaster by people and communities, eg, people in danger panic; people only think of themselves in the face of personal danger; people who do not show signs of stress are not affected by the disaster; children are too young to be affected:

> The strong need to know how people react leads the media to present many accounts of people coping with disaster. The various character types and their responses can readily be predicted. These accounts rely on emotion for their popularity, but lead to grossly inaccurate descriptions of human behaviour.

(Wraith & Gordon 1987b)

The fear of nuclear war was the subject of an article by Phillip Slee and Darryl Cross published in 1988. This article was based on the authors' Australian study of children's fears. It is interesting that to date children's fears of terrorism, climate change and other potential threats have not attracted attention in the child welfare literature.

> As adults, it is tempting to dismiss children's fears of such things as animals, the supernatural and physical events as vivid aspects of their imagination and to reassure ourselves that such fears are relatively minor or of limited concern. To this extent adults fail to realise children's fears reflect something of their understanding of the world and their place in it.

(Slee & Cross 1988)

According to the study, the most frequently occurring fears for children aged 4-7 years were snakes, followed by burglars; for children aged 8-12 years, they were war, then burglars; and for 13-19 year-olds, war, then snakes.

> What seems especially alarming in the present study is the emergence of nuclear war as a primary fear even among young children. This finding highlights the very real need for adults to address the issue themselves and to be

prepared to assist children in dealing with this fear.

(Slee & Cross 1988)

And for those who are currently interested in sustainability and the importance of holistic approaches to well being, a 1989 article by Jane Picton about the Kevin Heinze Garden Centre carries messages that will resonate. The Garden Centre was established by Kevin Heinze after he had come across something similar overseas – 'a garden for people with disabilities – one to work in, not just to sit in' – and was the result of the efforts of many dedicated, mainly volunteer, workers. The Garden Centre was used by a wide variety of people, some with physical disabilities, some with intellectual disabilities, young and old.

> In the Garden Centre there is growth – growth in the garden and alongside is the growth of people, and not just the people with disabilities, who are the ones that it purports to offer a service to, but the staff and volunteers and others associated with the centre too. Everyone learns so much and particularly with the participants. ... Although the gardens often look attractive, that is not the main aim – how people are welcomed, accepted and cared for is more important. ... everything takes time and perhaps the final result is not always perfect but something has been gained by the 'doing'.

(Picton 1989)

The topic of children's 'voice' and participation in decisions about their lives has gained currency over the years. While the question of 'right' is addressed more often, the issue of real participation in the processes of decision making appears first in the journal in 1985 – International Youth Year (IYY). An article by Lloyd Owen includes a definition of participation from the IYY 1985 brochure:

> PARTICIPATION is about young people:
>
> - having the right to make decisions about their own lives and the things that are important to them
>
> - having the skills to make these decisions and carry them through
>
> - having a meaningful say in family, school, work, Government, and in other aspects of their lives.

The author concludes:

> As a social ecological viewpoint, overall attention is drawn to the capacity of individual young people to participate in the affairs of society at large. In an increasingly complex world competing environmental influences vie

for attention and response. Young people need knowledge and skill obtained from growth promoting relationships to negotiate their way in the world. Empowerment can be one product of participation in the surrounding powerful environment, as can be wisdom and a sense of social responsibility, all much needed qualities in the modern world.

(Owen 1985)

In 1999, Jan Mason and Jan Falloon wrote on children's perspectives on child abuse:

In this research there was a strong emphasis by the children and young people on their sense of exclusion from and devaluing by adult society, which they conceptualised as significant in defining and perpetuating structural inequality. The construction of childhood as a period of exclusion from adult society, in conjunction with the familization of childhood which ensures dependency within the family, precludes children's agency in resolving abusive situations. The lack of possibility of agency for children and young people as it contrasts with other oppressed groups was reflected in the comment, 'We're similar to a minority group, but we don't get as many rights'.

(Mason & Falloon 1999)

Then in 2001 there were four articles concerned with participation from varying perspectives: listening to children (Mudaly & Goddard); facilitating participation (Cashmore & O'Brien); developing a model for participation (Mason & Urquhart); and involving young people in selecting program staff (Kiraly).

When a child, who has been sexually abused by his or her father or father-figure, says in counselling, 'I want Dad to come home', a number of questions are posed. Whose voice is the counsellor hearing? Is the child under pressure to say this? How do we as counsellors, interpret and respond to what children or young people say in counselling?

(Mudaly & Goddard 2001)

... it is important that individuals and agencies ... ask themselves: 'Are we doing a good job of involving children and young people?' ... While the process of answering these (checklist) questions will hopefully challenge practice, it may also prove useful to compare the adults' responses with those of the children and young people in their care. It is likely that this will confront workers with a contested view of the

opportunities they provide for the participation of children and young people in care ...

(Cashmore & O'Brien 2001)

There is a considerable amount of research indicating that from the perspectives of children much of the decision making which occurs around meeting their needs in substitute care is ineffective. This research typically identifies that children feel they are treated as objects, with their needs being discounted. ... We believe it is crucial at this stage in substitute care policy making to strive to implement processes and strategies which have the potential to address social justice issues which will enable children's needs in substitute care to be responded to more effectively than has been the case in the past.

(Mason & Urquhart 2001)

... the involvement of young people in staff selection is a positive process which adds unique additional information to the staff selection decision. ... The writer calls for further work in this area, and the dialogue about this practice to continue.

(Kiraly 2002)

Despite Meredith Kiraly's final plea, relatively little on this subject has come the way of the journal since then, although in 2003, Elizabeth Reimer contributed a literature review on the topic, and in 2004, a paper was published which described a model of young people's participation originally initiated by the Mackay Whitsunday Region of the Department of Families in Queensland (Daly, McPherson & Reck 2004).

Children and young people in care are more than individuals who are to be protected and case managed. They have a lot to say about their experiences. A culture of research and action learning ... is enabling these voices to be heard. SPLAT [Super Participation Learning Action Team] is a simple organisational framework bringing together a range of key stakeholders, including children and young people in care, to plan and activate opportunities for positive participation. It builds relationships and connects people otherwise isolated and disenfranchised within the system. While it is important that opportunities continue to be explored so that the voices of children and young people in care are heard, it is imperative that their voices are listened to and that changes continue to be made as a result.

(Daly, McPherson & Reck 2004)

In spite of it having become a major concern, there have been only two articles published on bullying, the first titled 'What children tell us about bullying in schools' by Ken Rigby in 1997, and the second titled 'What hurts? The reported consequences of negative interactions with peers among Australian adolescent school children' by Ken Rigby and Dale Bagshaw in 2001.

> ... relatively little attention has been paid to how children themselves feel about bullying, how they react to it, and how ready they are to take concerted action to counter it in their own community. ... Knowledge gained from children is important for two reasons. Firstly, although awareness of the sad consequences for children of continual bullying is certainly increasing, there is still on the part of some schools and some educational authorities a marked reluctance to acknowledge how serious it is; and secondly, if planned and effective action to stop school bullying is going to happen, we need to know what schoolchildren themselves are prepared to do to rid our schools of this persistent problem.
>
> (Rigby 1997)

> Many schools are now responding positively to the problem of peer aggression. Unfortunately, however, there is still a tendency for schools to regard physical aggression as by far their major concern. Physical aggression is, of course, not uncommon in schools and must be addressed, but it needs to be emphasised that other modes of ill treatment are more common and often as damaging, if not more damaging, to the well-being of children in schools.
>
> (Rigby & Bagshaw 2001)

In tracking topics that have appeared in *Children Australia* (and *Australian Child and Family Welfare*) over the years, it seems that fathering is also an area that has been relatively neglected. It is therefore pleasing to see more attention paid to this important area in the form of articles published in 2004 and again this year (Paull 2004; Fleming 2004; Killeen with Lehmann 2004; King 2005) covering issues such as parent education for fathers, the support needs of non-residential fathers, the importance of fathers in building stronger families and the non-deficit approach to working with men in family relationships.

> Much is known about mothering but little about fathering as it relates to parenting. ...We know that active parenting by fathers is important for the emotional and cognitive development of both girls and boys, and that there has been a positive change in the participation of fathers in their children's lives. We know too that a small

number of fathers (compared with mothers) currently attend parent education programs to assist them to gain further skills to nurture and manage their children. The challenge for parent educators is to increase the participation rate of fathers so that it is seen as normal for both mothers and fathers to want to learn to be the best parents they can be.

> (Paull 2004)

The challenges to address concerns of clients and workers continue, but *Children Australia* retains an important role in bringing together research, theoretical perspectives and practice experience. In this way it provides a base from which some of Australia's most important child welfare developments can be shared and tracked as the years pass.

No doubt there will continue to be attention to areas of our work that pose ideological and practical dilemmas, and there will be new thinking about emerging areas of child and family work. Predictions are a dangerous thing, but we wonder if the focus may need to shift to working with climate refugees, survivors of pandemics and families with children who have been left in largely uninhabitable locations as a result of poverty and inability to afford a place in those areas where water and arable land are at hand. Mixed with these issues are the energy and mobility questions that arise as oil runs out and governments become even less powerful than corporations. But let's not be too pessimistic. The human race is hardly an endangered species and the creativity and determination that has placed us in the current context of living will no doubt remain to move us forward as we meet new challenges. ❖

We have briefly researched articles which have appeared in the journal in the course of its existence, and we may have failed to pick up on some articles concerning what we perceive to be less mentioned topics. We offer our apologies to the authors concerned if this is the case.

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Children Australia Volume 30, Number 3 2005
9