

Welcome to the first edition of *Children Australia* for 2007. The year is, of course, well under way and for many there will be the added concerns of the drought and the question of climate change. Many of us are hoping for a very wet year, amongst other things, while some of our colleagues in the south east of Australia have been doubly troubled by both fire and flood; and Canberra has recently contended with a metre of hail. The stresses of coping with the complexities and uncertainties of life are considerable and we appreciate the difficulties such experiences place on families. It is good to see that an Australian Youth Climate Coalition was formed in November 2006 and is already taking action to address the needs of future generations in relation to this issue. Their motto — *Rescue our Future* — is a strong rallying call as they seek to ‘mobilise our entire generation in the struggle for climate justice and a clean energy future’ and the Coalition is ‘demanding immediate and meaningful action on climate change by government and private sector leaders’.



The development of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition is timely given a study in the UK, reported by Alan Jones, found that children are gravely concerned about climate change. Titled ‘Children losing sleep over global warming’, Alan Jones’ summary stated:

Half of children between the ages of seven and 11 are anxious about the effects of global warming and often lose sleep over it, according to a new report.

A survey of 1,150 youngsters found that one in four blamed politicians for the problems of climate change, while one in seven said their own parents were not doing enough to improve the environment.

The most feared consequences of global warming included poor health, the possible submergence of entire countries and the welfare of animals.

Most of those polled in the survey by supermarket chain Somerfield understood the benefits of recycling – although one in ten thought it was linked to riding a bike.

Pete Williams, of Somerfield, said: ‘Kids are exposed to the hard facts as much as anybody. While many adults may look the other way, this study should show that global warming is not only hurting the children of the future, it’s affecting the welfare of kids now.’

And speaking of advocacy and people finding avenues to have a voice on the big issues, I recently became aware of The Centre for Civil Society which is a public policy and social innovation think tank. Their website states:

We are committed to strengthening civil society and empowering people in families, communities, associations and small enterprises. We are the only think tank in Australia committed to a wide-ranging agenda of empowerment of the little people. <<http://www.civilsociety.org.au/>>

Perhaps there are opportunities for some of the families, individuals and groups we work with to get in touch with the Centre.

Possibility, probability and causality...

Preparing for teaching in a human development subject this year led me to reading ‘The Intergenerational Transfer of Psychosocial Risk: Mediators of Vulnerability and Resilience’ by Lisa Serbin and Jennifer Karp, published in the *Annual Review of Psychology* 2004, Volume 5 – an article that reviews research on the passage of developmental and behavioural difficulties from one generation to the next. What was interesting about this paper – and pertinent to the programs undertaken in the child, youth and family sector – is the clarity with which the authors discuss the difference between ‘risk’ (higher probability) and ‘causality’. They state:

... ‘risk’ is the probabilistic notion that within any population there will be a range of outcomes, both good and bad. ... it is possible to identify factors that predict, modify or moderate the probability of specific developmental trajectories towards particular outcomes. ... Risk factors, although predictive, are not necessarily causal (Serbin & Karp 2004, pp. 336 & 337).

One of the difficulties for professional staff charged with the responsibility for making significant decisions about the lives of children, young people and their families is the dilemma of judging the potential for adverse outcomes. High risk of adverse outcomes, or statistically significant probability of a certain outcome, is not the same as knowing that an adverse result will definitely occur. There can be marked differences between the behaviours of a parent and those of their child – albeit this might be after the passage of some years which, in itself, is part of the dilemma – as young people make choices that significantly change the course of their lives, often defying the odds that appear stacked against them. We have all witnessed the individual who achieves high academic attainment after years as a young offender, or the young parent who actively and articulately chooses very different childrearing practices following exposure to family violence in her own childhood.

As professionals, we need to avoid confusing the concept of risk, or heightened probability, with certainty and causality. We might also do well to put much more effort into providing disadvantaged children and young people with increased opportunities for significant relationships; and exposure to a range of experiences that enhance desirable outcomes. This may require community development approaches that serve to strengthen the options in the immediate neighbourhood of the child. We may need to rethink the nature of the education of children whose lives are disrupted so that they are not ‘lost’ in large class groups and exposed to the risk of dropping out, afford them stronger supervision and boundary setting and perhaps even expose them to much stronger moral teachings about appropriate behaviours. This no doubt sounds idealistic and some would raise questions about such approaches, but post-modern attitudes and current economic policies are not serving our most disadvantaged children well. Choices for the most vulnerable children are increasingly limited by the growing

disparity in wealth and opportunity in our society – a society that has never fully embraced equity for the disadvantaged and is now moving its attention to environmental issues which may serve to further disadvantage the disenfranchised.

We may be too occupied, also, with the regulatory and legislative structures that seek to limit risk to children and keep us accountable. While both the reduction of risk and accountability are important ingredients in the work we do, sometimes there's not a lot of time or energy left for the building or re-building of children's lives beyond the basics. If we want to reduce the number of children presenting to child protection services, we need to look beyond basics and provide our young generation with significant and meaningful relationships and opportunities. We may need to be less concerned about privacy and more concerned about surrounding children with a community of engaged adults. And we may need to assist in quite specific ways – enhancing capacity to concentrate, enhancing ability to articulate ideas and feelings, and providing an advocate 'friend' who stays engaged with the child in the long-term.

So much of the lives of children and young people are in 'byte' size pieces as adults dish up a constant diet of brief encounters whether through the media and television, our contacts with them, their families and neighbourhoods, or through structures of education. The irony is that people have an almost infinite capacity to learn and change across their lifespan of perhaps 80+ years, but they need a foundation upon which to build, which probably has more to do with significant and positive relationships than anything else.

And returning to Serbin and Karp (2004) – yes, there are higher-than-tolerable risks that children of parents with a variety of behavioural problems, low educational attainment and low socioeconomic status will repeat the pattern. But knowing this, we must act in ways that maximise young people's awareness of choices so that early disadvantage remains firmly in the realms of 'at risk of' and is not perpetrated on the generation to come.

... and on to other matters

You will have noted some changes to this edition – not the least being the new cover design. We were seeking something a little more contemporary and Tim Eichler came to our aid with a design for 2007. This year we are also endeavouring to expand the contents of the Journal. We continue to welcome comments, letters, notes on practice experiences and book reviews, along with the refereed articles that are our mainstay and core purpose. The Editorial Board are assisting with news from the States and Territories to ensure a national perspective is maintained. However, we have a 'gap' for an Editorial Board member from Tasmania after the resignation of Scilla Sayer. Scilla has been on the Editorial Board since its inception in 1999 and we have appreciated her contributions over this time. We wish her well in the new directions her work is taking her.

Following the distribution of the Special Edition last year, we received several positive responses from Ministers and Departments acknowledging the young people leaving care issue, all of which were welcome. In our new 'Forum'

section we have published the letter received from the Hon John Cobb MP, who was the Federal Minister for Community Services at the time. However, we note that Mr Cobb has recently moved from Community Services and Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion has taken his place.

In this Edition we have a number of interesting papers. Lynda Campbell's paper returns to an examination of some of the service system changes that have threatened the viability of foster care, while drawing attention to some enduring qualities of foster care that are important to preserve. She takes as her starting point the report *Prospects and Tasks in Foster Care* by Len Tierney published in 1973 and, as you will see, there are some interesting elements of foster care that are as worthy of consideration now as they were then.

Susan Costello and Caroline Tehan report on study groups for advanced caseworkers in Anglicare Victoria conducted during 2003-2005, which aimed to provide senior practitioners with peer support, education and discussion. A collaborative approach using adult teaching principles and strategies formed the foundation of this work and central to each session was a case presentation from one of the participants which provided an opportunity to integrate learning with theory and practice. The result of this approach reduced the isolation experienced by participants in their work, increased their confidence in engaging family members, including fathers, and broadened their conceptualisation of family problems.

Shurlee Swain writes about the evidence from a range of Victorian child welfare organisations, arguing that there is evidence in the archives both for the existence of institutional abuse and of individual and systemic responses to the problem. However, she cautions that 'the evidence is not always found in the obvious places, nor does it support a simplistic explanation of the prevalence and tolerance of abuse in such settings.'

Frank Ainsworth has provided us with a 'bold opinion piece' which discusses the emerging calls for re-introducing residential care as an option for out-of-home care for children. This paper raises the issue of what knowledge and expertise is needed if residential care is to avoid being abusive and Frank has laid down the gauntlet in welcoming responses to his ideas.

Jim Poulter's paper discusses the notion that children are the biological property of their parents. Referring to child welfare legislation and his own extensive experience over many years, Jim examines the capacity of the new legislation in Victoria 'to address the negative effects on practice of this persistent notion' and his reasons for some guarded optimism.

And finally, our congratulations to Professor Chris Goddard, our Editorial Board member for Victoria, who is about to take up a new position as full-time Director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse which was established in May 2006 at Monash University.

Jennifer Lehmann