

decisions for themselves, but rather needs to be variously tailored to reflect their emerging autonomy. It is their *perspectives* on the proposed or possible care arrangements – not their *wishes* about them – that need to be considered.

This is a critical book examining an important and immensely difficult – for *everyone* involved – area of socio-legal practice. It presents succinct and well-supported findings and recommendations, and the use of extensive participant quotes adds to the richness of the arguments presented here – in this book itself, as with the subject matter of the research, the ‘voices’ of the participants are at the forefront. *The Voice of a Child in Family Law Disputes* should be of interest and relevance to the several disciplines and practitioners who deal with the Family Court and family law matters, and to those involved in policy and legislative reform. The nature of family law disputes is that some will never be able to be adjudicated without anguish for those involved – the fracturing of some relationships necessarily involves distress. However, as the authors conclude (p.219), perhaps the way forward in family law disputes is to abandon the idea that children and their best interests need to be protected *from* participation, and to develop ways to protect them *in* participation.

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REFORMING CHILD PROTECTION

B. Lonne, N. Parton, J. Thomson & M. Harries
Taylor and Francis, London, 2008, 213 pp.

This is an important and, in our view, a praiseworthy book. It is primarily, but not exclusively, written by Australian social work academics and is probably the most important book on this topic for more than a decade. In the introductory chapter, the authors of the book introduce their central thesis. They state that:

Fundamental to our analysis is the reality of the now well recognised systemic failure of the child protection systems that operate in Anglophone countries and their underlying paradigm (Lonne et al. 2008, p. 3).

Following this bold statement, the authors assemble the evidence in five chapters from both national and international perspectives, to support this claim. In Chapter 6, there is presentation of a Child and Family Reform Agenda, and in Chapter 7, a New Ethical Practice Framework is outlined. Chapters 8 and 9 of the book are

about Effective Organisational and Service Delivery Models and Planning and Implementing Change. Finally, Chapter 10 of the book reflects on Change and the Future of Child and Family Well-being Practice.

The countries that they identify as Anglophone are the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom (now separately Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), Australia and New Zealand. The claim is that these countries have a more or less common approach to the protection of children which is characterised as follows:

- they tend to use the term ‘child protection’ services;
- most of them are highly forensic and focused primarily on assessment of risk to children by family and caregivers;
- services tend to be extremely managerialised structures and processes with priority given to risk-averse practices and highly legalised procedures;
- the referral portal tends to be one in which reports and referrals are for ‘children at risk’ rather than ‘child or family need’;
- most have mandatory reporting legislation (or its equivalent such as reporting protocols) that require the reporting to a statutory authority of any concern about harms or risks to children;
- prevention and family support are generally accepted in the policies of the statutory authority for child protection, but are secondary to the primary role of child protection.

(Lonne et al. 2008, pp. 3-4)

Against this background, these authors then identify what they see as the challenges, including:

- the need for a renewed focus on child and family well-being rather than on investigation and surveillance;
- a new ethical framework with a well-articulated value base;
- return to a relationship-based practice and genuine partnership with children and parents;
- professional and public health approaches that accept and manage risk;
- a renewed emphasis on the importance of working locally and assisting families;
- accessible and integrated programs and services that are embedded within neighbourhoods and communities;
- engagement between practice-informed management and front-line child and family-informed practice, and
- a long-term focus on outcomes for children, families, neighbourhoods and communities ‘over time’.

(Lonne et al. 2008, p. 7)

The final result is a plea for a new child protection paradigm that:

- suspends belief in the way we are claiming to protect children in Anglophone countries;
- engages with an evidenced-based critique of the significant iatrogenic outcomes of contemporary Anglophone child protection practice;
- listens to children, parents, families and communities;
- attends to alternative international approaches;
- pays attention to the voices of indigenous and minority peoples;
- reviews the ethical principles that should inform how we work with children and families;
- reinstates management arrangements that restore trust and respect for judgement to professional practitioners; and
- is honest with the public about the limits of our capacity to protect all children.

(Lonne et al. 2008, p. 14.)

The argument presented in this book challenges current beliefs in the child protection sector. Those who are convinced that the investigative/forensic/prosecutorial model, commonly in use in Australia, is the best available child protection model will reject the book's conclusion that a shift in practice is needed. Children's rights advocates who have fought hard to make sure that children are not left in abusive situations, where substance abuse and domestic violence (Humphreys & Stanley 2006; Maluccio & Ainsworth 2008) consumes the adults, may also have objections. No one wants children to be left in abusive situations and that includes Lonne and his colleagues. But there is a growing awareness that the 'best interests of the child' construct (Goldstein, Solnit, Goldstein & Freud 1998) has been implemented in some cases in ways that are harmful to children and families. Lonne and his colleagues are not the only scholars to question current beliefs and the underlying values that currently dominate child protection practice (Melton 2008; Platt 2008; Thompson & Thorpe 2003).

One criticism of this work is that it treats all of the different Anglophone communities as if they were identical in culture, philosophy and legislation to child protection practice. This is clearly not correct. It may have been more appropriate and effective for Lonne and his colleagues to compare the different systems and, to analyse the outcomes in each of these countries as there are some aspects of each system which work better than others. This does assume that reliable outcome data is available and this may not be the case. For example, research on the use of the assessment framework in England (Department of Health 2000) has produced interesting results about the effect of a less coercive

approach to child protection than is offered by the investigative/forensic/prosecutorial model (Platt 2008).

But even with that question, the book represents a major assault and challenge to how child protection is currently practiced in Australia. This challenge has been a long time coming. What these authors have to say deserves our attention. To ignore what they say can only be to the detriment of Australia's most vulnerable children and families. This is a must read book even for those who may disagree strongly with the proposals presented for a new way forward for child protection.

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