

It must have been a wrenching day of intense emotions for the 900 or so people who attended Prime Minister Rudd's Official Apology to the Forgotten Australians held at Parliament House on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2009. And watching the occasion broadcast on television, one could see the tears of pain, relief, sadness and success on the faces of the audience. But also evident was the resilience, tenacity and determination of those who endured the losses and separations, and of those who have spent years of their lives lobbying and advocating for the nation's recognition of what is a significant population of people in our country who have faced disadvantage layered upon disadvantage.



The Apology was long overdue, but came with an almost overwhelming focus on the suffering and abuse perpetrated within institutional care, made all the worse because it was at the hands of those charged with providing if not love and human warmth, at least decent care and education. It was not a time for sharing the stories of rather better experiences, but as we go forward, it is incumbent on all of us involved in the care of children to address the complexities, the barriers and the disadvantage in a balanced manner, and to recognise what worked for a number of children in spite of the poor resourcing and limited understanding of children's needs.

One such story came unexpectedly from a man who spent years, on and off, in institutional care. 'We knew where we stood,' he told me. 'It was always fair. We knew what the punishments were for stepping out of line.' I expressed concern about what sounded harsh and unyielding, but received the reply 'I would have made nothing of my life without that discipline. I needed that structure so I could learn to discipline myself. And now I care for my mother because she is frail, and I know how to manage. I got an education that I would have missed completely if I'd been left to run the streets.' And he's not the only one with memories of a better life than it might otherwise have been without being in care.

However, like most of my colleagues, I'm still uncomfortable about the nature of care, past and present. And I feel concerned that in spite of all the years of effort by those engaged in the care and wellbeing of children, the very same disadvantages and abuse could be, and are, perpetrated against children and young people, though not necessarily intentionally. We have, as a society, a major barrier to overcome in relation to children—the notion that they are the property and responsibility of others which still infiltrates so much of the policy and legislative arrangements. Rather we need to establish a societal perspective that children, and their care and education, is the responsibility of us all and must

take precedence over all else, except perhaps our endeavours to secure a planet that is livable.

The collective sigh of relief that came after the economic downturn has put us right back on the 'money track'. The pursuit of wealth and growth, power and control, has resumed with merely a backward glance at the possibility of an alternative approach to living as a community. Those in the for-profit child care industry have been able to walk in and out of service delivery; we continue to subsidise those busy accumulating

wealth and possessions in the field of education; and we continue to struggle with the idea that children with complex care needs—and even basic care needs for that matter—can make do with the least trained and poorest paid carers/staff in the nation. Not much will change in the sector unless there is a major attitudinal shift towards the nature of childhood, the importance of high quality and skilled care with the very best of facilities, support and education. Perhaps I'm an idealist, but there's got to be a better way. Too much depends on individual effort rather than sound structural and institutional arrangements for out-of-home care. By this I don't mean that we want more regulatory frameworks and more rules, more assessment and more administrative requirements that are already sapping time and energy. What is needed is the on the ground, 'wrap around' care for children and young people that begins in the family home and reaches out to ensure that, when things are not going so well, there are many alternatives that are available. Not all parents are able to cope with the pressures of children, but most want to remain engaged with their children, and vice versa. Perhaps the notion of Mirror Families, the topic of the first of the papers in this edition, offers some hope that we can begin to focus more attention and creativity in the way we respond to our children and young people, and their needs.

Claire Brunner and Cas O'Neill report on the 'Mirror Families' program which is being piloted in Victoria and South Australia at the present time. This early intervention approach focuses on how a 'village', or extended family, can be created for each child, so that lifelong (and beyond) supportive relationships can be established and nurtured. The key question which informs the model is: 'Who will be there for the grandchildren?' As the authors point out, foster care is in crisis in most western countries, including Australia. Increasing numbers of children are being placed in out-of-home care at a younger age due to a range of issues, including parental substance abuse. It is the underlying issues that this program seeks to address before families and children are in crisis. The aim is to provide positive, lifelong outcomes for children and young people at risk of being placed in out-of-home care or who are already in care. While some will think

this conceptual approach is not new, it reinforces the knowledge and strengths of building close, long-term supports around children so that there are significant adults to whom they are able to turn as they develop through to adulthood.

Moving to a different topic, we are pleased to welcome a paper from Dr Michelle Tannock from the University of Nevada in the USA. This paper addresses the topic of children's rough and tumble play and provides an interesting overview of the issues that those providing child care need to address in relation to play that might otherwise be seen as undesirable. Michelle offers descriptions and a possible way in which the elements of rough and tumble play might be categorised. Based on a research study undertaken in Canada in which this form of play was carefully observed and documented, the paper concludes with an example of effective policy development that can lead to childhood educators developing effective strategies to successfully incorporate rough and tumble play in their early childhood settings.

In the centre section of the journal you will find a short commentary written by Steven Baker and me following our journey to Germany earlier this year. Steven, together with Catherine Cameron and Matt Holmes, accompanied me to Germany where we found there was much to be learnt. I had visited Coburg and Nuremberg back in 2003, but on this occasion our little group was fortunate to be able to visit a number of services and meet a variety of social workers and other professional staff providing services to children, young people and people with disability. I hope you will enjoy this short piece—together with the photos (in colour, thanks to the generosity of our printer) which provide some supporting images for the commentary.

In our previous edition, you will remember the first of a series of papers by Stephen Larmar and Julie Clark concerning the management of challenging behaviours. In this edition, we continue the series with the second of the papers, this one

addressing offensive behaviours that may be evidenced in children and young people. A number of practical approaches which carers can utilise to respond proactively to such behaviours is provided together with several case examples. With so many reports and anecdotal evidence of the complex and difficult behaviours faced by carers and case managers, this paper is timely, and should provide food for thought.

And the final article for 2009 is by Michelle Wickham whose key concern is the support and care of mothers whose children are removed from their care at birth. Michelle, a hospital social worker, describes and explores the legal and practical issues associated with removing babies from their mothers immediately following their birth. The impacts both on hospital staff and on mothers when a decision is made by child protection authorities to remove an infant have far-reaching consequences for all involved, quite apart from the issues of trust, support and follow-up that Michelle highlights. This paper focuses on the NSW legislative framework for response in such cases, but the issues raised will resonate well beyond NSW to other state jurisdictions in Australia.

Finally, our book review has been provided by Professor Chris Goddard who reiterates the need for society to develop more positive attitudes to children and their needs. The book reviewed is *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* — and it's probably a useful note on which to finish.

As we come to the end of another year, I would like to offer special thanks to those of you who have reviewed papers, provided book reviews and other news for the journal this year, and to the Editorial Board members for their support in 2009.

Jennifer Lehmann

**Children Australia** is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. Peer reviewed papers are expected to meet contemporary academic standards. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. Such papers may include: short commentaries on practice issues that are essentially based on observation and experience; reports on program approaches, initiatives or projects that are both short and unreferenced; historical overviews; short papers that respond to a peer reviewed article published in an earlier edition which adds to informed debate or provides an alternative perspective. It is anticipated that no more than one such paper would be included in each issue.

In order to clarify which articles have been reviewed and which have not, we now include a symbol at the end of each article as follows: ■ = peer reviewed article □ = non-reviewed article