

By the time you read this 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Children Australia* for 2010, we will have voted and, having had a most unusual outcome, arrived at the decision as to which party will provide us with a Prime Minister. What a very serious 'show' our elections have become, with the major parties competing for public attention and following the contemporary trend of making promises which most members of the public distrust, it seems. It makes me wonder if the politicians of all parties are really playing to a relatively small group of swinging voters, and this is hardly a responsible or useful way to run a country. However, it is clear that elections set something of an agenda for the services we offer to children, young people and their families, those with mental health issues and those seeking asylum and their human rights.



The NSW Labor Minister for Community Services, Linda Burney, speaking at the recent ACWA Conference in Sydney, stated: '...this is a very important election. It will determine Australia's future.' She went on to say that the Federal Labor Government's focus on the interests of children was essential to maintain, listing the wide variety of issues that have direct and indirect impacts on Australian children, and stating that the development of National Standards and frameworks are essential components. Certainly, the promises about developing national standards, programs and increasing funding were impressive, but there are questions to be asked about the cumulative impacts because, although disadvantaged children are receiving more, so are 'advantaged' children whose parents already have well paid work and are able to access private schools, for instance. Australia's systems of funding education, health and other services has continued to draw criticism and debate due to funding decisions that increase the opportunities of advantaged children, while those with whom we work are never able to catch up.

In recent weeks there has been much rhetoric about 'ordinary Australians' and people having a voice and a fair go, some attention to health and employment structures, and some focus on education. However, this tends to be done on the basis of first promising funding for people whose vote might be obtained through such tactics and then stating that savings will be made in other, less popular, areas of government activity. My interest in this election period focussed on what it is that ordinary Australians appear to want, and I have been somewhat concerned that the various forms of media have portrayed Australians as essentially selfish—as primarily concerned about having a home, a job and access to healthcare, and keeping asylum seekers out. We don't appear to have moved our thinking, as a society, from individual

wants (as opposed to needs) to social benefits that necessarily require us to pay taxes.

All this might seem remote from our daily business in the human services sector, but it is fundamental to our ability to support and enhance the wellbeing of our clients. There has been concern expressed about the high youth unemployment since the economic downturn which is running at some 30% in 17 areas of Australia (ACOSS/Jobs Australia/The Salvation Army, 2010) and clearly there is an acute need to

provide improved responses and supports to children experiencing neglect, violence, inadequate care and lack of resources, all of which lead to the problems with which we are so familiar. Perhaps we need to draw on some of the 'disaster-related' language and models to more strongly embed ideas about the trauma and long-term harms to children and young people in the minds of the general public. Trauma resulting from bushfires, floods and earthquakes seems to attract more attention and understanding—as well as contributions—than do the circumstances of many of our own children, yet the impacts of abuse, violence, poor mental health and neglect have similar, perhaps even longer-term, outcomes. And I have to ask the question: Does the development of National Standards or frameworks change the nature of the responses and care, or do they set benchmarks? We have diverse communities in Australia and a tendency for government to see frameworks and standards as underpinning funding, with resulting services that are essentially prescribed. This is not the path that leads to innovation and responsiveness to unique circumstances, nor to the support of people who are seeking services that can be responsive to their specific needs. We need to draw attention to eligibility criteria that have the potential to exclude, ensure genuine choice is offered in terms of the nature of the services provided, and develop real flexibility that can ensure adjustments can be made according to environmental and social contexts, along with individual needs. These issues are just as important as making statements about standards and awaiting evidence-based knowledge about outcomes that is, itself, developed according to socio-cultural and economic context and value positions.

And now to the content of this issue of *Children Australia* which I trust provides both interest and choice in terms of topics we have chosen.

The South Australian longitudinal trends in child protection are the topic of the paper by Paul Delfabbro, Craig Hirte, Ros Wilson and Nancy Rogers. They have analysed records with results that highlight the increasingly early involvement of child protection systems in children's lives and higher annual incidence rates. Together with several other significant

findings, this paper includes discussion of the implications for mandatory reporting.

Frank Ainsworth and Patricia Hansen explore the issues of confidentiality in their paper titled 'Confidentiality in child protection cases: Who benefits?' There have been a number of practitioners who have voiced concerns about the advantages of confidentiality, and critics of the current systems that have deleterious impacts for some families and children when child protection issues have arisen. This article investigates both the legislative aspects and the, perhaps, unintended practice outcomes.

Rosemaria Flaherty and Rodney Cooper have been engaged in piloting a parenting program in a rural context and this will be of interest to those who work in rural and regional areas where services are limited. The particular program – *1-2-3 Magic* – has a number of benefits for parents who are unable to attend long-term educational programs due to costs of travel and geography. Using T-test analyses, the results of their evaluation of the program indicated that carers who received the intervention reported significant improvements in their mental health and discipline practices, and a significant reduction in child problem behaviour compared to the waitlist control group.

This issue carries the final of the four papers written by Stephen Larmar and Julie Clark that have addressed the management of challenging behaviours in children and young people. This final paper looks at pro-active responses to delinquent behaviours of young people in out-of-home care. It highlights the importance of viewing delinquent behaviours in context, of maintaining support and avoiding labelling, being assertive as a care provider and endeavouring to build connections for young people whose social connectedness is frequently poor.

Elaine Nuske presents a paper drawn from her research into the perspectives of biological children of foster parents. This seldom heard group provided data that indicates the complexities biological children face when sharing their home with foster children. They want to support and share, yet also experience dilemmas about speaking up about their needs. The article will no doubt be significant for those practising as foster care workers who have long had dilemmas

about the balancing of foster children's and biological children's needs.

In the *Practice Perspectives* section, Cas O'Neill has provided us with a brief report on the results of a survey carried out earlier this year by the Post Placement Support Service and the Foster Care Association of Victoria to ascertain home based carer and professional support needs.

Finally, we have published two book reviews in this issue, including one that I have prepared after receiving a copy of *Bereaved Mother's Heart*. This is something rather different from the books normally reviewed in *Children Australia* and will no doubt be of interest to those who work with parents experiencing loss and grief. The second book concerns children's connections to the natural environment and led to me following up information on this topic. I found an American website for an organisation called The Children and Nature Network [<http://www.childrenandnature.org/>] that supports a range of international initiatives and research on this topic. It may be of interest to those of you wanting to develop programs or build connections with other practitioners engaged in child development and the natural environment.

This issue brings news of retirements—firstly, that of Dorothy Scott whose contribution to the field over many years has been highly significant. I remember being a social worker at Allambie Reception Centre in Burwood (Vic) when Dorothy came to investigate the nature of the institution and the processes that brought children into care. Since then she has had a distinguished career in academia and has been committed to research and the development of knowledge to inform child welfare practice throughout Australia and beyond.

Regretfully, I must also announce that *Children Australia* will lose the services of long-time Editorial Assistant, Lorraine Redshaw, when she retires at the end of the year. Lorraine has been involved with the journal and our Editorial Board, reviewers and authors for many years, and we will miss her knowledge and expertise in the production of the journal. We wish you well, Lorraine, for your retirement.

Jennifer Lehmann

*Children Australia* is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. 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