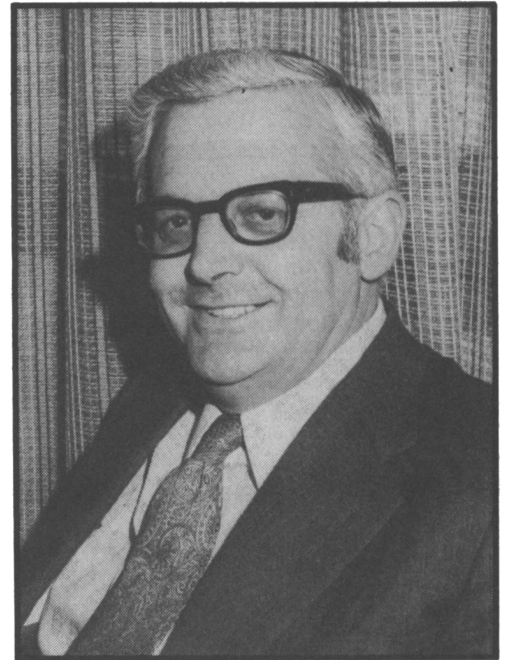


THEORY AND PRACTICE IN CHILD CARE

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This is the text of an address given to the Victorian Child Care Conference held at Lorne in July.

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As a welfare administrator, the opportunities to visit child caring establishments are many. It is like visiting another world. They are a mixture of "The Sullivans", "The Waltons", "The Brady Bunch", with an air of unreality because time has passed them by and the new society of the present time calls for radical service delivery style. Alternative child care is developing in kids shelters to provide some of the elements needed in a modern world. What formalised child care often supplies is an expensive, stylised anachronism which does not need committees on how to change but accountants who can manage to wind down activities and allow re-investment in care which will meet today's challenges.

Question

Let me pose a question. If tonight you were given the absolute power and financial resources to supply services for needy children in this State, would you continue the organisation to which you now belong? If your answer is no, then

how are you going about disbanding it? Unlimited resources are never going to be available, so the resources you have must be the resources you use. Gain to children will occur from venturing forward without too much anxiety about throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Maybe the baby needs a different bath!

Accessible

Care must be accessible to local communities, must involve the child and the attached adult, develop community supports and be flexible to enable those who need support to keep their dignity as full persons. Institutionalized care cannot do this, and there is evidence which suggests that communities, or at least members of communities, can if enabling structures are developed to assist. Some of you will react by suggesting that there will always be need for formalized institutional care. My rational consideration suggests you could be right, however I am sure that the quantity available in most Australian communities is excessive. The process of change

will never occur unless a co-operative Government and child care focus grasps the task of developing creative alternatives.

Theory Supports Change.

Theory as known today in child development, supports the pressure for change. The theory is not just child psychology but includes the broadest sociological trends which must be understood by all in child care.

One example of these trends is the changes in the family. The definition of this entity used to be easy and most of us thought of mother, father, plus 3 or so children with extended family support in close proximity. Latest statistics on family size show it is averaging 2 children, with the chances of intact father/mother relationships lessening at a rapid rate. The alternative forms of living are gaining prevalence and the purist family theories are out of step with society in practice.

Our child care programmes are, in the main, based on the family — our buildings were called family centres, family group homes, family cottages and in the early establishment days of these, we struggled to find family parents who could manage in this concept. The changes came quickly with salary awards to staff, and the idea of a family changed to accommodate “shift” parents. New administrative practices grow up to accommodate this, but the idea becomes a shell in practice.

The issue is what theory of group living and living skills will replace this so that the best of values of co-operative living and simple patterns of real sharing can be developed.

Another example of these trends is the change in values which make it difficult to maintain consistent

teaching. The value of preparation for a life of work is questioned when the number of young people in long term unemployment is high and children at risk are the ones who find it hardest to obtain employment. Should our concerted effort be towards leisure skills and rewarding craft skills to supplement unemployment benefit?

The value of preparation for the future for work or life gives way to a new concern for the value of today's experiences. It is not acceptable any longer to develop practices on the theory — today's child to be prepared for tomorrow's adult — it is the theory of today, and its satisfaction.

Maybe this is sound as the uncertainty of the future will prevent us modelling and conditioning children for stereotype roles, and the emphasis on today may lead to realistic structuring of life in a participatory form rather than pupil/teacher relationship.

Changes

The changes in the community could also be considered in light of the growth of the women's movements, with the increased participation of women in the work force and the new acceptability of child caring facilities in day centres, to mention just two areas. What has become acceptable is what ten years ago was seen as poor family and child care. As a matter of fact, many discussions ranged on the development of emotional disturbance in a child for the working mother family, the single mother and step-relationships. Theories are changing to accommodate these new phenomena, and communities are seeking to change support structures to assist the practices.

Has the child care field remained static whilst all these changes have taken place? The Annual Reports

for Victorian Care institutions suggest some movement towards changing practices, but might I suggest the needs in the area of child care requires an avalanche?

The child care supports to children in local communities, the need for emergency and immediate care for abused children, and some adventurous steps in care are needed.

The Child's “Needs” To Be Himself:

Urie Bronfenbrenner, in an article in *Psychology Today*, May, 1977, entitled “Nobody Home” suggested that:

“there has to be at least one person who has an irrational involvement with that child, someone who thinks that kid is more important than other people's kids, someone who's in love with him and whom he loves in return. A colleague of mine once said, “You can't pay a woman to do what a mother will do for free.” If you substitute ‘person’ for ‘mother’ I'd agree. You can't pay for an irrational commitment. And yet a child needs that. He needs somebody who will not just be there certain hours and then say, “I'm off now, I work nine to five”. Notice I said at least one person. One really isn't enough”. (1)

In another part of the article, Bronfenbrenner lays out what he sees the ideal situation to be:

“It's good for a child to be in the company of people who are crazy about him for a substantial number of hours every day. I'm sure of that. But it is also good to be with people who are not crazy about him. He needs both kinds of experience. He needs some mothering, some fathering, some day care, even some coolness towards him. But all of

these needs must be met. Our country's problem is that we're not meeting these needs properly. Increasingly we're not caring for children at all." (2)

The most rejected, distressed and disturbed child should be guaranteed these basics at least. The quality of the child care system will be measured not on what the majority of children get, but what is done for those most in need. We in child care must be in amongst those most needy, and yet it appears that our organisation forms or our willingness is lacking this missionary zeal.

The Child's Needs and the System:

The Norgard Report, 1976, suggests that this is so.

"Our work has led us to a two-fold conclusion: not only is there a disconcerting degree of malfunction in many aspects of the existing child welfare system, but the system itself is in many ways inappropriate for contemporary society. We have indicated a number of areas in which immediate, minor changes would lead to a degree of improvement, but have also gone much further in calling for a more fundamental revision and reorganisation of the State's existing child and family welfare system." (3)

Emotional Appeal

Those of us who know the child care field realize that there is a strong emotional appeal to gain assistance for 'orphan' children. It is because of this fact that children's welfare has a strength of bargaining not available to those who work with adult welfare needs. Even within children's welfare there is a hierarchy of emotional appeal work for greater response to the abandoned baby, the handicapped and

young child rather than the delinquent or emotionally disturbed.

Our caring systems have grown up with these inequities so that resources do not go to those with the greatest need but are distributed in favor of particular groups.

Child care needs will only be resolved fully in a total system of care and it would appear the only way to get this is by emphasis on the local communities supporting their own needy and receiving resources according to indicated needs for that community.

The words "co-ordination" and "integration" of services are constantly used in Annual Reports and they are evidence of dis-satisfaction with the "going it alone syndrome", but the lack of constructive answers to the issues raised suggest that it is trendy to talk about it but threatening to plan action.

With the above issues in mind, I have tackled some of the concerns which arise from these comments. It is an attempt to look at the practices which should cause concern as we search for the theory of child care for the 1980's.

The "Ward of State" Concept, and Voluntary Admission procedure.

'And the Magistrate said to the mother: "Your children are not receiving the care they should be and I have therefore decided that they should be made wards of the State so that they can receive the care you cannot provide." A judgement of enormous importance! There is a possibility that the mother may again regain some interest in the children, but from now on she has a competitor. The assumption the Magistrate makes is that there is something better, and so often at the time of the decision, there could appear to be nothing worse. I

wonder, however, if our arrangements for children of this type are only better than worse for the child, or are they so outstanding, so caring in their approach that we can assure the Magistrates that the services are nothing but the best.

Apart from the fact that we still rely on Courts to make these decisions in too many cases, there is a desperate need for us to re-assert an obligation to updating the processes which are antiquated and disillusioning for the child, the parents and the workers.

Ward of State

"A ward of the State". How appropriate are such words for the labelling of a child in a modern community? It is a difficult concept and in some States it means a Ministerial ward and in other States it means controlled by the Director — a person they never see, and yet a person, a name who comes into their lives and makes some incredibly important decisions about how they are to live.

Phantom Syndrome

It is not only a case of the "Ward of State" having a phantom syndrome. Phantom superintendents or directors who administer child care units and have responsibility for the voluntary children placed in their care may, in some ways, be a less healthy method of operating. An article by Shostack "Staffing in Group Homes" in **Child Welfare**, May 1978, makes interesting comments on these problems and extends the issue into a concern of professional staff. The study looked at 18 organisations providing group home care and found that 11 had directors in distant locations — often many miles away — and that the directors adhered to a 9-5 work day which limited face to face contact with the youngsters who were in school for most of that period. (4).

Voluntary admissions to a private organisation, if that organisation is approved, can receive payment nearly equal to that paid for the "Ward of State". This must be heralded as an improvement on the system where a child was made a Ward of State in order to receive such payments. But the dangers of such a system need careful assessing as the child could be put away without any consideration other than the parents' needs or organisational willingness.

Maybe both systems need change and there should be a major start at looking for contractual agreements which are neighbourhood and community strengths. The concept of care contracts involving neighbours, child and the parents, with State and voluntary organisation support as a right, is a model which should be investigated.

Changes to Meet New Administrative Style:

To be specific, let us consider the significance in relation to Ward of State and Voluntary Admission which needs urgent co-operative concern. What is really happening in the field of placement of children in institutions? Between 1972 and 1977, the number of wards of State dropped from 7,236 to 6,395 — a reduction of 11%. At the same time, the number of wards in voluntary homes dropped from 2,488 to 1,825 — a drop of 27%. This appears to be an overall reduction in the use of both procedures, but in 1977 there was an accompanying increase of 217 voluntary admissions paid for by the Government. The total number of voluntary admissions in 1972 and 1977 has been unobtainable, but the indications are that they will increase and, I have been informed, this is already occurring in 1978. This should be a matter of concern.

The placement process still looms large as a method of assisting

children. The theory is, I expect, that their continuing in their known circumstances is intolerable as it will cause trouble for other community members or adversely affect the child emotionally. I doubt if this is so as so many return home again after a short time. The alternative to placement is support resources in the community and this does work as has been evidenced by the South Australian experience. In South Australia in 1972, there were 3,111 Wards of State. By 1977, this figure had been reduced to 1,819. Of those in 1972, there was 1,328 in placement other than their own home (711 in foster homes (54%), 516 in children's homes (39%)). In 1977 there was a greater percentage of the Wards of State in placement other than their own home, namely 1,241 which represents 68%. Of these, there were 630 in foster and family homes (50%).

Voluntary Scene

In the voluntary scene, the question reflects a massive reduction in numbers. 1972 — 492 children and in 1978 — 245 in care, which represents a 50% decrease. Commitment to community support services, increased field staff and programmes to assist families have made the difference.

The System's Point of View

Organisations to care were established — what happens to that theory in practice?

There is no doubt that children with problems are essential to maintain our systems. Rapid cure programmes and community cures would put many of us out of work. How often do we use the phrases for a child in relation to the decision to return home: "This child is not ready yet . . ." Readiness is a concept which varies with the assessors

and sometimes a child is ready when we find him disruptive to the programme or sometimes not ready when he is malleable to the wishes of staff.

Two examples of the system's point of view which is often expressed will add to this point.

The Norgard Report states:

"there was a general consensus that children in homes are 'different' from those in past years. They expressed a view that children are on the whole happier in their children's home experience than earlier generations, but paradoxically, that they are also 'more tense', 'more disturbed' and more prone to question decisions." (5)

Paradoxically

The word 'paradoxically' seems unnecessary and it may be that words such as "which makes them more tense" etc., would be more appropriate. Next year the "International Year of the Child" will be concerned with children's rights.

That paradox is certainly a preserving of the system's point of view and a child in the system may really feel difficulty.

Example

Another example is in relation to comments on loss of parent interest. Quite recently I have been made aware of the way in which systems to care, rehabilitative or care, promote an isolation by the administrative and professional processes. Visiting usually occurs on weekends and it appears consistent policy that those with the greatest authority have weekends off. Doctors are hard to find in hospitals and superintendents in children's homes. The feeling of powerlessness and ignorance, plus the problems of mass visiting, compound the difficulties. Parents do not always maintain interest and part of this is

related to the hurt and guilt of apparent failure and so often we fail to relieve this.

The double orphan benefit not only goes to persons with both parents deceased, but to those who are not in contact with both parents. The administrative and care systems must ensure that the very system we conduct does not produce double orphans for the future.

Being a Child in Care Makes You Different

The theory is that you are 'different' otherwise you would not need residential care. The process will ensure you are different if you weren't. The label sticks and whether it is foster home, group home or institution, there is a labelling process. We have to change this discrimination and it may be the only way it will happen is by the full change of the system.

Therapeutic

The system is therapeutic and it would be interesting to see what this does in practice. Is assessment done of the presenting problem or of all the problems of the child? Admission to placement is not an agreement for major scale interference in the child's life. Our protectiveness and caring often allows us to usurp tasks which are often other person's, particularly the parents responsibility.

It will not be long before all files kept by organisations such as ours will be open to those involved. Some of the subjective data and the wide scale interference will come under scrutiny and it is wise to consider what intervention is necessary.

Different

A child in care should be able to be different, meaning unique, as his personality requires. Where his dif-

ference may lead to social ostracising or anti-social behaviour, intervention is necessary, but let us be careful not to inflict a sameness on all the children we care for. The right to be different is an important right which must not be curtailed by the needs of the system. Let not our therapeutic knowledge distort our understanding of the height and breadth of normality in the functioning of children's lives.

The Private Market

Victoria has a strong spirit of private enterprise in its child care market. Sixty-eight organisations (6) provide care and for those who support the voluntary field against the Government endeavour, this monopoly of the service provision should reflect the strengths of such effort. Many books of theory have been written extolling the virtues within a system of flexibility, creativeness, spontaneity, cost efficient and personal service possibilities. Is this happening in practice? It may well be in the child care field, and as an outsider I cannot judge that, but as a result of reading the Annual Reports, my assessment is that child care is providing a reasonable product but the market has changed.

This paper has mentioned some of the possible discrepancies between theory and practice and tried to emphasize the changed market. **The Norgard Report** gives guidelines to develop a new masterplan based on many of your own ideas, and I hope that the next years in child welfare will reflect major organisational changes and an upsurge in flexible, accessible service delivery.

That Government is essential in all this process is a truism not worth debating, in Victoria \$13 million essential. This is 80% of the running costs, so do they demand 80% say in the direction of service provision?

There is an enlightened programme for welfare service delivery and it needs a proactive not reactive child care programme and a willingness to be a service delivery organisation within a network of human services and not the dominating partner. Too much time can be spent on co-ordinating and integrating committees and not enough on the nitty gritty of service.

Conclusion:

It is difficult for an outsider to appraise the work quality. What was obtainable in written form did not put together the precis. The reports certainly expressed and reflected the central concern for the child. This energy and resource redirected is necessary by the country at large, working in different service delivery forms.

A small indication of concern was that of the 1,420 wards of State placed in the year 1975, 980 returned to their parents/relatives, 200 were either returned to reception centres or transferred to another children's home, 240 needed hostel, adoption, fostering and other situations. (7)

Let me record these statistics briefly:

1. 980 children did not need child care establishments as there were places for them. Maybe those places needed community support services, but what an expensive and disconcerting disruption to their lives. (68%)

2. 200 children were moved around the system and as Norgard reports, "usually as a result of behaviour problems". (8)

More can be learnt of a system's rigidity by those it rejects than those it keeps. This is a high number of mobiles and I wonder how many are at the parents' or child's request? (14%)

3. 240 appeared to need the full residential child care system to await hostel, foster care, adoption or other locations. Some of these could, I am sure, be handled by the regional emergency service so that the minimal interference in their lives is apparent. (16%)

Victoria could reorganize its total child care field by not admitting 70% to care and reallocating 50% of the resources to commonly based operations. The children to be helped in residential care will be the most needy and will need disproportionate service allocation to ensure they are helped without rejection.

This is a tremendous challenge for the "Year of the Child 1979", but one worth full consideration.

References:

- (1) *Psychology Today* May 1977, page 43.
- (2) *IBID.*
- (3) Page 11.
- (4) Pages 309-318.
- (5) Page 167.
- (6) *The Norgard Report*, page 162.
- (7) *Norgard Report*, page 166.
- (8) *Norgard Report*, page 165.

COUNCIL REPORT

Child Care or Children's Weeks are now celebrated in all States and territories, having originated in Victoria about 20 years ago. The observance in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Northern Territory now all coincide with Universal Children's Day, the fourth Wednesday in October, Tasmania's Children's Week will be coming up in early November — other States celebrate at different times of the year.

These weeks originated in the concerns of people in the residential child care field, and on the whole, still reflect this emphasis. Two years ago, Victoria changed the title of their celebration to "Children's Week", noting that if the week was concerned with **all** children, children in care would still be included. In the International Year of the Child, 1979, it may be necessary to celebrate a "Child Care" week, however, to bring to the notice of the community the needs of that small group of children for whom the community must act as parent, at least temporarily.

There do appear to be problems in the way Child Care Week and/or Children's Week is celebrated. On the whole, visibility is low. The weeks tend to be **about** children and not so much **for** children. Child Care Week in N.S.W. was criticised by one group for being too self congratulatory, and not dealing with issues and services relevant to many groups within the community.

I have noted in Queensland that various specialist groups or interests tend to sponsor — and attend — their own activities, without much overlap or interchange. There have been seminars for staff of children's homes, a seminar on community programmes sponsored by the Office of Child Care, a seminar sponsored by the Foster Parents Association of Queensland, and a Universal Children's Day celebration. On the whole, there were different faces at each gathering. A pity, because the integration and co-ordination of services for children and families is of prime importance. Services and programmes reinforcing, supplementing, or substituting for, the natural family should not be isolated units, but a continuum of community supports.

However, Child Care and Children's Weeks offer evidence of the genuine concern of their sponsors for the lives of children. The weeks are not the private preserve of any one group, and offer an umbrella for anyone concerned about children to have their say or push their barrow (regardless of mixed metaphors).

And back for a moment to the International Year of the Child. The planning organisation in Australia is complicated, with committees at the Commonwealth Government, Commonwealth/State Government, State Government and non-government levels. There is danger of overlap and duplication, danger that we will have several separate IYC's instead of one. But, like Child Care and Children's Weeks, IYC will offer the opportunity of an umbrella under which anyone who has something to do or say, for or about or with or by children, will be able to do just that.

The Child and Family Welfare Council of Australia has committed its fullest support to IYC. We have high hopes for a year of the **child**, and not merely children's or community organisations. But we must admit to keeping our fingers crossed!

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