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Editorial

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Welcome to the year of 2014, which will no doubt be as busy as ever for us all. This year we hope to bring you some different content in the journal including a 'Themed' Issue in June that will focus on Family Inclusive Child Protection Practice.

Editorials are seldom the first thing that people turn to when reading a journal and it is not always an easy task to anticipate what topic might be of interest when writing for a broad audience interested in child, youth and family issues. However, beginning a New Year often prompts one to reminisce, and one of my recollections earlier in the year was the business of parenting a child who had some unusual characteristics, which indicated giftedness – not always an easy road for parents or for the child concerned. So, to start the year I thought I would share some of my thoughts on the challenges faced by children who are gifted or have marked talents that are not always so evident to those who don't live with them and watch their development over a long time.

One of the very first issues for a parent is wondering if their child is 'special' because of the behaviours they observe. Of course, every parent thinks their child is special – and special can mean many different things according to context, circumstances, values and beliefs – but appearing to be special in the sense of gifted in some way is not something that is easy to discuss with others because of the risk of being considered a biased parent unable to make an objective assessment. In addition, most of us want our child to live a normal, happy and satisfying life with family and friends who are supportive and nurturing. Naming a child as special in some way immediately brings a different sort of attention to them and this might not be beneficial to their development in the long run. However, there is no avoiding the business of a child who displays qualities that differ from other children of their age – like being able to read before preschool years have been completed, showing intense interest in, and curiosity about, one or more activities and thus having knowledge beyond their years on unusual topics, being somehow 'over-sensitive', or having a concentration span that clearly exceeds the norm (Wellisch & Brown, 2012). The Department for Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria) (DEECD) (2013a) provides a list of the attributes displayed by gifted children on its website at: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/giftedpotential.aspx, and states: '. . . research has consistently shown that the accuracy of parent identification, particularly in the identification of younger students, is high' (DEECD, 2013b).

While definitions vary, as noted by both Ziegler, Stoeger, and Vialle (2012) and Carman (2013), there are 11 traits that are generally proposed and, though gifted children have most of them, they might not have all (Wellisch & Brown, 2012). IQ testing is one method for determining giftedness, but there is also qualitative information that needs to be used in making the determination. Observation of children's behaviour and development over time may aid the determination of giftedness, as it is the longitudinal aspects of behaviour, rather than the taking of a snapshot, that provide a holistic picture of their capacities.

Many gifted children remain unidentified and are not necessarily high achievers in the academic sense (Figg, Rogers, McCormick, & Low, 2012). Some become quickly frustrated and disinterested in school-based learning regimes, with most children aware they are different to other children. Parents may unwittingly exacerbate challenging behaviours if they are unable to recognise the additional, and different, needs of their gifted child. For instance, they may be concerned about their child's need for greater solitude, and pressure their child to participate in activities such as sporting teams; or parents may be reluctant to validate their child's passionate interest in a topic, or unable to afford to access the specialist teaching required for developing musical or other talents.

Gifted children, even if identified as such and supported by parents, do not face an easy time of it; and the education and parenting of gifted children is an area that is under-researched (Morawski & Sanders, 2009), with sometimes contradictory research findings (Zeigler et al., 2012). For a start, being different from one's peers in a society that places great emphasis on the role of the peer group in development is problematic (Wood & Craigen, 2011). For instance, we are encouraged to believe that children should be interested in talking with other children of their own age. What then, if the child finds kids of their age boring or, at best, uninteresting? What if a child shows a definite preference to be with people who are older because they are intrigued by new knowledge and more complex ideas? And, perhaps worse, what if a child is 'twice-exceptional' (Wellisch & Brown, 2012), having gifts in some areas and challenges in others—like the child whose language is highly developed, but can't do maths? Twice-exceptional children are those with gifts, but who also experience a form of disability, and most teachers in pre-school and primary school are unprepared for the gifted child, let alone the one who is twice-exceptional. Given that teachers seldom come across gifted children, this lack of expertise in identification and response is hardly surprising, although the 5-Year Strategy developed by DEECD (2013c) may make a difference. Teaching staff are also under pressure and seek to facilitate a productive class atmosphere for their pupils. Even if they do notice a child with unusual gifts, they may believe that children should be educated together with their peers, seeking to normalise the gifted child's classroom and learning experiences rather than supporting acceleration of their learning (Kronholz, 2011; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; VanTassel-Baska, 2013a).

I have observed the responses to parents of gifted children, albeit some years ago now. It was common for teaching staff to make it clear that there was a set progression for children attending the childcare centres prior to going to kinder and on to school, so parents were understandably confused when told unexpectedly that their child was ready for kinder at 3½ to 4 years of age. On starting school early due to giftedness, parents have been met with statements like: 'Your child will probably be in Prep for 18 months before starting in Year 1', only to find that the child is moved 6 months later to a Year 1, or combined Year 1 and Year 2, group. The lack of consultation and formation of an agreed education programme means that parents lack understanding of the school's expectations and their child's school progression plan. Parents who have to move to another area and change their child's school confront further issues. One of these is being told that the child is too young for the grade he/she is to enter, or that difficulties that emerge from the child being 'young for his/her grade' are essentially the parent's or child's fault. Bullying, introversion and unusual interests all serve to differentiate the child from grade peers, but these are often discussed as problems of the child's making. It is no accident that many parents of gifted children hold a healthy disrespect for the school system and continue to battle on with the difficulties of raising a child who is gifted. What these parents and their children face is a form of disadvantage that we don't often talk about; and this is known to lead, in some instances, to self-injury (Wood & Craigen, 2011).

However, understanding the issues does not make the task of educating these children any easier for parents or teaching staff if the resources are not made available. Further, it appears that it is not until high school that a more focused education programme can be put in place – at least in Victoria. DEECD in Victoria lists 36 secondary schools that are part of the Select Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) programme (DEECD, 2013d), but there are only four 'selective entry' high schools in the state that provide for these children from Years 9 to 12 – and they are not located within easy reach for regional or rural kids, being based at Werribee, Berwick, South Yarra and Albert Park (DEECD, 2013e). There are also some noticeable gaps – no SEAL programme in Bendigo, Mildura, Hamilton or Ballarat, for instance. So while this summary is Victoria-centric, one has to wonder what happens when it comes to educating gifted children residing in other parts of Australia, particularly the more remote rural areas.

One of the difficulties in Australia is the cultural attitude towards people who are too different from the norm – and the 'tall poppy' syndrome applies here too. However, in other countries, particularly in the Middle East and the Asia Pacific countries, giftedness is being celebrated and promoted with attention to educational advancement through differentiated instruction (VanTassel-Baska, 2013b). This is based on the belief that it will be these young people who will bring economic advantage, entrepreneurship and leadership to their country, offering global competitiveness (VanTassel-Baska, 2013b). Australian attitudes to the inequities presented by giftedness may well influence how teachers and school systems regard differentiated education for gifted children. However, it is clear that the in-depth responses required, the understanding of talent and the possible additional support required for sound psychosocial development of children and young people who are different due to giftedness are yet to become established as a normal part of our educational system. While this continues, parents will continue to struggle with the broader range of developmental needs of their gifted kids, many of whom set themselves high standards, tend to perfectionism and suffer the impacts of careless criticism by peers and adults unaware of their need for acceptance and support. As Morawski and Sanders (2009) have commented, the parents of gifted children often have no one to turn to for help with their unusual child.

Turning to the content of this issue, we have been able to bring together an interesting range of papers on a variety of topics. The first of these is a commentary by Chris-Maree Sultmann that considers the risks of being risk adverse. Chris talks about a growing tendency to overprotect children

and steer them away from activities like making their own way to school or climbing to the top of a tree that were once considered part of everyday childhood. Risk-adverse attitudes are sometimes boarding on the absurd, with the irony being that restricting children from 'risky' behaviours might actually put them at risk of not developing important characteristics like independence and resourcefulness. She says that risk aversion has also crept into the child protection system and that we are in danger of 'disempowering and de-skilling' child protection workers by developing a risk-aversive child protection culture that takes the 'safe' option as opposed to helping workers manage risky situations. The safe option often includes the removal of a child, and while this may remove physical risk, it does not necessarily take into account an emotional risk associated with removal.

The second paper reminds me that the world that children are raised in today is very different to the world that their parents and grandparents experienced when they were young. Today's young people are faced with an unprecedented level of information, opportunity and choice. However, rapid changes in cultural norms and expectations have left many of us reeling and unsure about what aspects of modern life are and are not beneficial for the healthy development and wellbeing of our children, and indeed how childhood should be defined. Jonathon Sargeant surveyed adults about their conceptualisations of the 'tween' years in relation to the key themes of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and found that the majority of respondents believed that tweens had the capacity to think about their future; can be responsible for their actions; that their family is still the most important relationship to them, but their peer relationships are becoming more influential; that tweens are more materialistic than in previous generations; and that their views were mixed with regard to tweens' right to participation versus the need to protect them from negative influences of the media.

In the paper that follows, Philip Siebler and Christopher Goddard have provided us with a compelling and important insight into the physical and psychological impact of parental military deployment on children and adolescents. While there is great admiration and appreciation for the work that servicemen and servicewomen assume while on military deployment, perhaps less present in our minds is the impact this can have on their children. Parents described their children's adverse reactions to deployment, which included behavioural, physical and emotional problems. The overwhelming majority of respondents said that the services they were offered or engaged in were not adequate and were of limited help with identifying and treating difficulties encountered by their children. The authors discuss implications for policy and service delivery.

Elizabeth Reimer's article explores the impact of the working environment on the parent–worker relationship in the family services sector. Her discussions with parents, family service workers and supervisors supported earlier findings that aspects of the work environment have an important influence on the parent–worker relationship, but of particular relevance was the pivotal role that other staff members have in developing a positive parent–worker relationship. Parents' interactions with other staff members fostered client comfort, openness to change, their sense of empowerment and ownership of the service, and confirmed the relevance of the support they were receiving. This research has important implications for broader practice-based policy and procedures beyond the direct parent–worker relationship.

An emerging area of focus appears to be the role and engagement of fathers in human service interventions and this topic is taken up by Joseph Fleming, Andrew King and Tara Hunt in their paper entitled 'Just call me Dad . . . '. The concern expressed is that some services need to engage fathers more strongly in initiatives to support and address family and children's issues, due to the concomitant health and wellbeing engendered. As Joseph notes, the majority of staff in human services are women and this may be a factor that adds to the challenges faced by fathers in dealing with welfare-related services. Some suggestions are offered that might be of interest in developing programmes that include fathers and, at a time of proposed change in the structure and delivery of services, it is timely to re-visit how we can make services more inclusive.

The next paper in this issue is on the topic of animals in the lives of children. We are all aware of the fear that some children have of animals, especially dogs, and of various tragic events in which children are injured or killed in dog attacks. However, we are equally aware that contact with animals has health benefits, and hence the development of a variety of animal-related visiting services for elderly people, 'Riding for the disabled' and other programmes that are based on contact with animals. Neerosh Mudaly, Amanda Graham and Nerys Lewis reports on the impacts of an Animal Assisted Education and Therapy programme used in working with homeless children traumatised by domestic violence. While the authors acknowledge a more in-depth study is required, there is anecdotal evidence, supported by this study, that children benefit in a number of ways from contact with animals, particularly in expression of emotions, development of empathy and nurturing behaviours, and a greater sense of wellbeing.

In our final paper for this Issue, we present an article on the topic of Individual Care Packages. Ryan Ogilvy and Damien Riggs interviewed nine young people who had, at some time, experienced Individual Packages of Care (IPC) as part of their foster care experience. As an alternative to traditional foster care, IPC offers young people stable accommodation with professional carers. The participants of this study reported both positive and negative experiences associated with the IPC placement and the professionals associated with it. They found there to be challenges with professional practice, including carers preparedness for placement and social workers lack of time and resources. They also found, however, that the placement worked quite well

for some young people who had experienced challenges in their traditional foster-care placement. This study gave a voice to young people in care, and has resulted in an article that provides an interesting and succinct account of their experiences and opinions of the IPC model of care.

In closing, Rachael and I wish you a successful 2014 and hope you find the journal content stimulating and useful in your practice.

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