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## Editorial

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Editors, *Children Australia*

We would like to begin this Editorial by expressing our thanks and appreciation to Frank Ainsworth for his many years of dedication and ongoing support for *Children Australia*. Frank has a long and esteemed history of providing counsel to families, practitioners, organisations and the court system on issues relating to child protection in NSW and beyond. Frank is well known for his cross-examination of the child protection system, its successes and failures; and is always keen to voice his opinion for change and improvement. He is an advocate of family inclusive practice and believes the child protection system should be working towards keeping children in their homes as much as possible. Together with John Berger, who also has a longstanding association with the child and family sector in Australia and is currently the CEO of St Barts in Perth, Frank has brought together a number of contributors to this themed issue, which examines issues of family inclusive practice, family preservation and areas for improvement to the broader child protection system.

The protection of children is not only a cultural and moral imperative, but a legislative requirement in Australia today. The protection of children starts in the home, but where parents are unwilling or unable to care adequately for their children, human services are required to intervene on a child's behalf. On the whole, Australian child protection policies and systems have developed and progressed to accommodate the needs of children and their families. There are, however, varied views about the way in which this social problem should be managed, both systemically and at an individual level. For example, there is a long-standing debate about the nature and frequency of removing children from their homes and placing them in out-of-home care. Opinions are often influenced by the presence of a critical incident of child abuse (usually the death of a child), the availability of alternative care and shifts in the risk averse/tolerance culture in child protection practice.

At one end of the debate are those who believe that the level of child removal is too high and that there should be improved efforts to support parents so that their children can remain in the home. Parents should be given, with adequate guidance and supervision, every opportunity to improve

their parenting and family wellbeing, so their children can avoid out-of-home care. To this end, some practitioners are advocating family-inclusive approaches to child protection. The first paper herein provides an historical account of an emergent organisation called the Family Inclusion Network (FIN). FIN was first established in Queensland in 2006 in response to the marginalisation of parents within the child protection system. It provides parents with support and advocacy to help enable reunification when their children have been removed from their care. In this paper, Frank Ainsworth and John Berger report on studies that highlight parents' feelings of powerless, the arbitrary nature of child protection decisions and practices, as well as the perceived disrespect, dishonesty and manipulation by some child protection workers towards parents. They outline the purpose of the organisation and its benefits.



FIN's services are structured and delivered in different ways by the different member organisations. For example, some are staffed by professionals and others by volunteers, and they each offer varying levels of face-to-face, telephone and web-based services. The core objectives, however, remain the same – those of support and advocacy in a non-judgemental environment. The second paper in this issue provides an excellent example of the way a FIN organisation works. In their paper, 'Resourceful friends: An invaluable dimension in family inclusive child protection practice', Ros Thorpe and Kim Ramsden describe the way in which the Townsville arm of the network is structured and utilised by their community. Their fundamental values lie in dignity and justice for all people, and they use the 'resourceful friends' model of practice as a way of providing their workers, clients and community with a compassionate service while trying to navigate the child protection system. The authors discuss in detail the way in which they implement the resourceful friend's model of practice, and how this is received by clients and workers. The Townsville FIN operates with, for and by family members to not only support each other, but also to lobby for systemic change. In addition to individual support, the organisation tries to build community capacity, contribute to education by offering field placements, and contributes to research with the inclusion of two post-graduate students who are examining radical social work. This paper reports on the experiences of families and supporters in relation to their involvement with FIN Townsville, which, on the whole, appears to be positive. Both family members and volunteer supporters report mutually beneficial experiences.

Organisations like FIN are of great benefit and support to parents whose children have been removed from their care, but there are also a number of programmes aimed specifically at helping parents build their parenting skills and confidence in order to prevent the removal of their children. While some children need to be removed from their homes to avoid harm, there is growing evidence to suggest that their removal can be equally harmful and contributes to poor outcomes. As such, a number of family preservation programmes have been developed to help enhance parents' skills and abilities, to avoid having to remove children from their care. 'Family Preservation' (FP) programmes respond to a need for in-house child protection by providing intensive parenting intervention. Maureen Long and Margarita Frederico report on parents' experiences of their participation in Melbourne-based FP programmes. The authors' aims were to give a voice to parents who had participated in an FP programme and to document what aspects of these programmes led to positive change. The authors were particularly interested in assessing whether participation influenced parents' self-esteem and their capacity to provide a positive experience for their children. They found that the FP programme promoted hope and inspired parents to envisage an alternative, more positive, family life. On the whole, where parents had felt oppressed and judged by

other child and family services, particularly child protection, they felt more supported and that they were working in partnership with their FP workers to achieve real results.

Both of these papers provide small, but positive evaluations of family inclusive practice. They also contribute to what the next author, Russell Hawkins, is advocating in his paper 'Family inclusive child protection practice: The need for rigorous evaluation'. Russell reports on an international review of innovations in child protection, noting eight key trends. These trends had in common strong evaluative foundations but, as Russell argues, if family inclusive practice is to gain greater acceptance, especially by bureaucrats, policy makers and holders of the purse strings, sophisticated forms of programme evaluation will be required. A number of Australian programmes have been able to demonstrate rigorous evaluation processes and programmatic success, one of these being the Triple P programme. The author promotes family inclusive child protection practice due to its sound theoretical and value-based rationale, believing that it offers a remedy to some of the failures observed in current practice, with the potential to improve client outcomes and staff job satisfaction. However, the pace of adoption of this model may be enhanced if a team approach between researchers and practitioners is able to develop good-quality evaluation designs which produces objective data.

What have been well researched, however, are the effects of not only child abuse and neglect on children's physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing, but also the effects of removing children from their families. The aforementioned family inclusive practice and family preservation programmes are designed to not only benefit parents who might need extra support and guidance, but also to ameliorate the negative effects experienced by children who are removed from their home. In an effort to protect children from harm we place them into foster care, but for many this can create additional adverse outcomes. In their paper, 'Family foster care: Can it survive the evidence?', Frank Ainsworth and Patricia Hansen discuss the potential problems with placing children in out-of-home care. They talk about the issues of increased criminal behaviour, mental health, homelessness and poor educational attainment that may have been exacerbated by their removal from their families. The authors recommend both a reduction in the reliance on foster care by establishing better in-home child protection mechanisms, but for circumstances where the removal of a child is necessary, the institution of a professional foster care environment.

This paper is followed by an Opinion piece by Frank Ainsworth and Pat Hansen. Frank is one of a few people in the sector prepared to challenge issues associated with funding, the focus of services and costs associated with the provision of services at differing points in the lifespan of children subject to abuse. He also raises the issues of how statistics are arrived at, including the issue of adding drowning to child death figures. Frank's commentary will challenge

the views of some people in the field to think again about the goals we set and our approaches to achieving these.

The second part of this issue consists of four papers. The first of these is by Erica Frydenberg, Jan Deans and Rachel Liang, and discusses the evaluative information obtained about a programme titled 'Families Can Do Coping'. While further use of the programme and its evaluation will be useful, early results are very positive. The authors describe the programme in some detail, which is of particular use to those constructing and delivering parent education services. On a different note, Gaye Mitchell investigates the prevalence of children with disabilities in out-of-home care and the challenges of providing care for them. Gaye identifies a lack of educational achievement and participation in social, cultural and recreational activities, and inequities in funding across different programme areas. This results in some children with disabilities continuing to be substantially disadvantaged. In conclusion, Gaye proposes a number of recommendations for changes to practice, programme and policy to improve outcomes for children.

Moving to a very different, but topical issue, Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry write on the emerging phenomenon of youth 'sexting'. This issue presents a range of unique legal, policy and educative challenges; and their article addresses four key issues in recent responses to youth sexting behaviours: (1) the definitional dilemmas surrounding the term 'sexting'; (2) the inadequacy of existing legislative frameworks for responding to these behaviours; (3) the problematic messages conveyed in anti-sexting campaigns; and (4) the relative silence around gender-based violence in non-consensual and abusive encounters. The authors argue that young women's 'risky' sexual behaviour is being censored, leaving gender-based violence unproblematised, and

suggest that more nuanced understandings of sexting that distinguishes between the consensual and non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images must inform legal, policy and education-based prevention responses to the misuse of new technologies.

Finally, Mohammed Al-Motlaq and Kenneth Sellick explore the responses of class peers to children with asthma. Using a quantitative investigation, the authors developed and applied a new scale for measuring peer attitudes, which has led to the establishment of the Peer Attitudes toward Children with Asthma (PACA) scale. It was interesting to note that, generally, peer attitudes to children with asthma are positive, but some children thought those suffering asthma received more attention from teachers. This suggests that continued education about asthma is necessary in the school context.

In conclusion, we are delighted to inform you of an exciting special issue we will be producing in 2015. The Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) is holding their inaugural biennial conference in August 2014 (for conference details <http://www.childtraumaconf.org/>). ACF is bringing together local and international speakers to present articles on issues of trauma. Together with ACF, *Children Australia* will be bringing a good number of these papers together in a two-part special issue. The first of these issues will be available in March 2015, and will consist of keynote speakers' presentations. The second will be available in hard copy in June 2015 (but it is anticipated that these will be available online prior to this time) and will comprise papers from local presenters about contemporary issues in Australia and beyond. We look forward to bringing you these special issues, and, as always, we are keen to hear from you if you are willing to carry out reviews of these and other manuscripts.