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Children Australia: Building knowledge – Improving outcomes

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On behalf of Children Australia and our Editorial Board, we take this opportunity to recognise the passing of some truly inspirational leaders. They each have made significant contributions to Children Australia but, more importantly, have been fierce advocates for children, young people and families and the workforces and services that assist them. Urie Bronfenbrenner once said that every child needs someone in their life who is 'irrationally crazy' about them: advocates that fight for the rights of the child while pulling up their sleeves and taking action. We recognise Joe Tucci, Frank Ainsworth and Lloyd Owen and send our condolences to their families and loved ones, and thank them for their legacies. This first issue includes tributes for Joe Tucci, written by Janise Mitchell, and Frank Ainsworth, written by Elizabeth Fernandez.

Welcome to the first issue of the relaunched *Children Australia*. In this, our first editorial, we take the opportunity to reflect on the journal's history and our vision for the role it might play in times to come. Now, more than ever, we need a forum to bring together

children, young people, practitioners and researchers to find new ways of responding to some 'wicked problems' while exploring contemporary challenges that children, young people and families now encounter. In creating such a forum, *Children Australia* will play a vital role in considering ways both challenges and responses play out in the Australian context. Australia has a unique and precious history of more than 65,000 years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have deep knowledge of the importance of creating connections for children – to Country and to community. Yet, legislative and policy frameworks often sit uneasily with that knowledge. *Children Australia* creates an opportunity to celebrate Indigenous knowledge, to critically assess what works for children and what does not, and to bring new ways of thinking and doing. The richness of Australia's multicultural history also makes us unique, with locale-specific needs and opportunities that the journal will explore. Our vision is for the journal to be a vibrant, critical and constructive forum for developing and sharing policy and legislative approaches and

service models that are appropriate for Australia's unique social, cultural, historical and economic contexts, while engaging with and contributing to ideas globally.

Australian Child and Family Welfare was first published in 1976 by the Child and Family Welfare Council of Australia, edited by Denis Oakley and Peter O'Connor. In 1990, OzChild became publisher and the journal's name changed to *Children Australia*. From 2005 to 2020, the journal was published by Cambridge University Press and edited by Jennifer Lehmann, who was joined by Rachael Sanders in 2011. Like many valued and valuable things, *Children Australia* stopped publication during the COVID-19 restrictions – leaving an archive of research and commentary that remains an incredibly valuable resource for researchers, practitioners, communities and families.

In 2023, the Centre for Excellence for Child and Family Welfare took the bold and important step of re-establishing *Children Australia*. This issue signals the launch of a reinvigorated iteration of the journal that builds on the powerful legacy that came before. *Children Australia* is a testament to the vision of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, and to the commitment of those who have contributed to the journal since its beginnings in 1976. A publisher's welcome, written by Deb Tsorbaris, CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, is included in this issue.

As editors-in-chief, we are delighted to be part of the new *Children Australia* – and we acknowledge the work of those who came before. Our national journal has a crucial role to play.

We have seen very significant developments in policies and services for children and young people over the recent decades. This year (2024) marks the 35th Anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) by the United Nations General Assembly. As is so often commented upon, the UNCRC rapidly became the most widely ratified of all human rights treaties, and its influence has been significant. Australia ratified the UNCRC in 1990. Since that time, Commissioners for Children and Young People have been established in all Australian states and territories and at the national level. We are delighted to have, in this issue, a commentary from the National Children's Commissioner, Anne Hollonds, who explores how well child safety and wellbeing are prioritised in Australia. Charters of Rights have been established for specific groups of children, particularly those in out-of-home care. Across Australia, governments at all levels, service providers and organisations of all kinds have established youth advisory groups. In this issue, Deb Tsorbaris calls for the creation of a National Strategy for Children and Young People that includes children and young people's voices and sets goals for thriving.

Much has been achieved since *Children Australia's* origins in 1976 and as a result of the influence of the UNCRC. Yet, deep challenges remain. One in six children in Australia live in income poverty (Davidson et al., 2023). Sole-parent (most often single mother) families are far more likely to experience poverty. In some communities, over 40% of children are growing up in income poverty (VCOSS, 2023). While poverty is fundamentally about material deprivation, it also narrows children's opportunities and places high levels of pressure on relationships (Bessell &

O'Sullivan, 2024). At the end of June 2022, 61,100 children were on care and protection orders and 45,500 children were in out-of-home care. Across Australia, child protection and out-of-home care systems are under pressure and not serving children well (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). Indigenous children are significantly over-represented in those and other systems: 19,400 (57 per 1000) Indigenous children were in out-of-home care, compared with 25,900 (4.8 per 1000) non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). The legacy of genocide and child removal is deep.

Many children and young people experience maltreatment in their families, communities, institutions and online, the extent to which was revealed by The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Mathews, 2023). The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse heard confronting evidence of the failure of institutions to protect children and put in place a range of reforms. Yet subsequent research indicates that, too often, children feel vulnerable, powerless and unsafe (Moore, 2017). Rates of family violence are shockingly high, even as important policy shifts are underway. A series of royal commissions and inquiries have revealed deep structural and systemic challenges. The 2007 Northern Territory Intervention and the treatment of child asylum seekers both speak to the disregard of children's human rights in recent policies. In 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that mental ill-health now accounts for 13% of the disease burden among 10–19-year olds globally (WHO, 2021). In Australia, mental health is a major challenge facing children and young people. New challenges are emerging in the context of social media and the unexplored frontiers opening up as a result of new technologies. *Children Australia's* aim is to go beyond documenting these challenges, to identifying and debating the causes and contributing to solutions.

The story for Australia's children is mixed. Among the challenges, there are powerful, child-centred examples of change, of good practice and responsive policy. In 2009, Australia's first National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children was adopted, signalling a commitment from Australian, state and territory governments and the non-government sector to ensure the safety and wellbeing of Australian children. The current national framework – Safe and Supported – is in place from 2021 until 2031; it commits to the vision that 'children and young people in Australia have the right to grow up safe, connected and supported in their family, community and culture. They have the right to grow up in an environment that enables them to reach their full potential' (Department of Social Services, 2021). In 2024, Australia's first National Early Years Strategy was launched. The adoption of the National Early Years Strategy signals the recognition of building supports around children and families in the first 2000 days (Department of Social Services, 2024). It opens the way to developing child-centred policies beyond the early years and highlights the clear and urgent need for a quality evidence base to support better outcomes for all children and families.

In this context of achievement and ongoing challenges, *Children Australia* has a crucial role to play. The journal aims to provide the quality evidence base needed to share, celebrate and replicate what is working and to bring change to what is not. In doing so, the journal aims to showcase diverse evidence types, from scholarly research to practice evidence, from lived experience to

the perspectives of children and young people. In this first issue, *Children Australia* includes articles on child safe standards by Philip Mendes and Marcia Pinski, on assessment tools for understanding risk related to harmful sexual behaviours by Amanda Paton, Sian Burgess and Leah Bromfield, and on the Australian Child Maltreatment Study by Daryl Higgins and Ben Mathews. Karen Guo's contribution explores parents' understanding of children's learning within Australia's Early Years Learning Framework.

Children Australia is committed to highlighting the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and to showcasing Indigenous knowledges that, for millennia, have provided care for children and connected them to Country and community. As a nation, we have much to learn from Aboriginal Elders, knowledge holders and communities on how we can help children thrive. *Children Australia* has a part to play in helping to share that knowledge.

Although we, like many, were disappointed that the Australian community did not support The Voice, we are committed to walking with our Aboriginal colleagues, Elders and communities and hope that *Children Australia* can be a place where we can engage in vital discussions about issues such as self-determination, Indigenous knowledges and traditional parenting practices that might be more fully embedded within the service system and academic landscapes.

In coming issues, *Children Australia* will provide a forum for sharing, learning, discussion and debate. The journal will not shy away from the difficult issues, and will highlight systems, policies and services that fail children and families and the ways in which structures create, exacerbate and perpetuate inequality and discrimination. It will also showcase what is working: good practice that advances children's human rights, contributes to child-inclusive policy and services and creates strong and safe

communities and institutions for children. In doing so, the journal aims to provide the diverse, quality evidence base needed to ensure children, young people and families thrive.

We are also committed to ensuring that children, young people and families are given the opportunity to engage in these discussions and are excited to invite them to share their views and experiences through *Children Australia*. As researchers and practitioners, we believe that, unless we engage children, young people and families and work together to find solutions, contemporary policy and practice will fail to meet the mark.

Central to the aims of *Children Australia* is the development of a knowledge communication platform for the child, young people and family services sector that promotes evidence use and creation and builds capacity. In doing so, the journal aims to reflect and represent the rich knowledge across the sector, and to foster connections between the sector, academic researchers, families, children and young people. Such diversity of knowledge and experience will enrich policy and practice and lead to better processes and outcomes, whereby children and young people are valued members of our community, and their rights, interests, experiences and ideas are always, in the language of the UNCR, a primary consideration.

As we embark on this ambitious journey, we welcome your contributions and hope to hear from you how the journal can best serve your needs and the topics you would like us to pursue.

In closing, we thank the Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare for their leadership and investment in reinvigorating *Children Australia* and our dedicated Editorial Board, who have worked hard to ensure that the journal is a success.

We invite you to join us – and to share in the building of knowledge to ensure all children, young people and families in Australia achieve the best possible outcomes.

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