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PRACTICE EXCHANGE — A NEW SERVICE

Australian Child and Family Welfare will include a new feature, 'Practice Exchange', giving the opportunity for agencies to share news of new and revised programmes or services, and new approaches to practice.

At a recent seminar on adoption research sponsored by the Institute of Family Studies, the need for such sharing on practice issues was emphasised by the participants, who were mainly adoption practitioners.

Australian Child and Family Welfare will therefore open its pages to practitioners in any child/family related area to share practice issues. This is a multi-disciplinary journal, and contributions to 'Practice Exchange' from people in welfare, education, health and other fields will be welcome. It is envisaged that items will be no longer than 1000 words.

Contributions to 'Practice Exchange' should be forwarded to the Editor.

CHILDREN AND THE FAMILY FORUM: A REPORT

by Yehudi Blacher* B.A. (hons) M.A. (hons)

INTRODUCTION

The "Children and the Family" forum, jointly sponsored by the Victorian Child Development and Family Services Council and the Institute of Family Studies, was held at the Community Welfare Training Institute, Melbourne, on Tuesday, 31 March 1981.

It was attended by approximately 140 people — representatives of both State and Federal government departments as well as a plethora of voluntary agencies and research organisations involved in the provision and evaluation of child and family services.

The purpose of the forum was to provide an arena in which researchers, field workers and administrators could come together to discuss current and future research priorities in the area of child development and family services.

For the Child Development and Family Services Council there was a second reason for sponsoring the forum. The Council saw this occasion as an opportunity to publicly announce that it had begun its work of advising the Ministers of Community Welfare Services and Health, on programmes and policies to be adopted "in matters relating to com-

CHILD ABUSE

cont from previous page —

towards making it easier on the child in such cases, removing the horror and lengthy and painful experience of ordinary court procedures.

It has been found that depression and guilt were universal among children who have been sexually abused.

Child sexual abuse is rarely talked about and because of this people think it is rare.

Yet as long ago as 1969, an

American study estimated it was at least as prevalent as child battering.

The remedy to this?

Once you know the full extent of child sexual abuse and all the sickening details it is easy to take a pessimistic view.

Perhaps the problem will never be completely wiped out but it is something we can reduce.

Education in schools and through the community about the responsibilities of parenthood and the

behaviour that is deviant to it is a must.

Child sexual abuse can also be reduced by greater education and aid to parents, encouragement to seek counselling before marriage, stricter controls on pornographic material and a greater community concern and discussion on the subject.

Bringing it out into the open is the first step in reducing the horror of child sexual abuse and exploitation. ●

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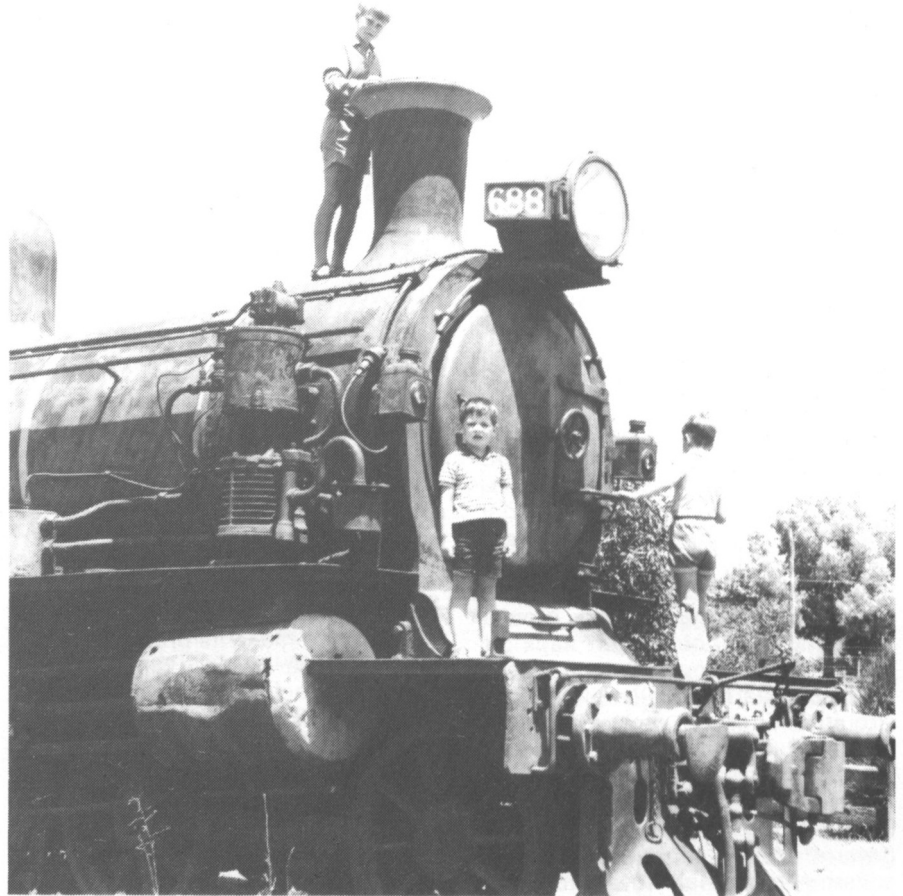
munity, family, youth, child care and development. . .” As such it was interested in establishing a network of contacts with individuals and organisations who could assist it in its various deliberations.

The forum was divided into two major sections; a morning session which was intended to present a series of broad background perspectives of child and family research issues and an afternoon session which was intended to focus on particular areas of research — such as child maltreatment, the problems of children in ethnic families, children’s sexual development and handicap and the family — in some depth.

THE MORNING SESSION THE BROAD PICTURE: CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH ISSUES

The session opened with a paper by *Dr Don Edgar (Director, Institute of Family Studies)* entitled ‘*Research on the Child’s Experience in Family Life*’. The central point of Edgar’s paper was that one cannot adequately understand the functioning of the family as a unit (and, by implication, the mechanisms which contribute to family stability or breakdown) without an appreciation of the differing perspectives through which that unit is viewed by its constituent members. The family makes demands upon and fulfills the needs of each of its members differently. These needs and demands vary according to time, place and family type and it is crucial that the researcher appreciates the complexity of these multiple dimensions.

According to Edgar, most research into the family has hitherto examined the family unit from the parental or adult perspective, with the child seen as the passive recipient of values and attitudes passed down from above. In contrast to this child-passive image, Edgar argues that the child is, in its own right, an active component of the family, affecting the behaviour of its parents and siblings as its behaviour

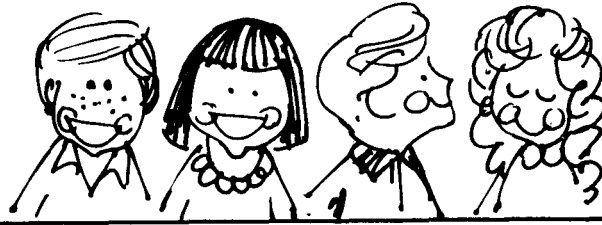


*Yehudi Blacher is the research officer for the Victorian Child Development and Family Services Council and the Victorian Correctional Services Council. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author and in no way reflect the views of the Councils or the Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services.

is affected by them. In order to fully develop this dynamic model of intrafamilial relationships, Edgar suggested that child-eye perspectives of the world needed to become a standard and integrated aspect of research across the entire range of family situations and types.

The second paper of the morning and, judging from the discussion it generated, the highlight of the first session, was a paper by *Dr Terry Carney (Lecturer, Law School,*

Monash University) entitled *Children’s and Parent’s Rights*. Carney’s paper was a polemical review of his experiences, over the past decade, in working for legislative reform in the area of children’s rights. His intention was to draw some conclusions about the role of advisory bodies in the processes of reform which would be of relevance to the future work of the Child Development and Family Services Council.



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Looking back over his work on several reports and papers and membership of numerous committees, subcommittees, workshops and councils which in one way or another touched upon the issue of children's rights, Carney argued that "nothing of significance had occurred in this area".

He identified two major reasons for this failure; the lack of sustained commitment to reform on the part of successive conservative governments and a lack of will on the part of bureaucrats and administrators in actively pursuing change. Carney described a number of mechanisms whereby governments and bureaucracies could stifle the work of advisory and reforming bodies. These include insufficient provision of material resources and support staff, the appointment of overworked and/or underqualified persons onto committees, distancing advisory groups from the seat of power, lack of bureaucratic cooperation and the tactic of establishing enquiries into enquiries. Together, he argued, these and similar mechanisms served to frustrate and ultimately exhaust the energies of those who, with the best intentions and generally at the government's own request, advised government on legislative reform.

Carney suggested that these observations were of particular relevance to the future success of the Child Development and Family Services Council. Noting that, according to its statutory functions, the Council could only act on ministerial request and approval, Carney argued that these provisions severely limited the Council's independence. As such there was the danger that the Council would be nothing more than an adviser in the passive sense — in Carney's own words "a plaything of the Minister, part of the charade that lulls the community into believing that something is or will be done, when in fact it is not".

During the discussion which this paper generated the Chairman of the Child Development and Family Services Council, Mr A.J.A. Gardner, had an opportunity to reply to some of Carney's points. He challenged Carney on two issues: firstly he did not agree that the Council would simply be another body passively advising its Ministers. While it was true that the Council was formally constrained by having to act primarily at the request of the Ministers, the Chairman hoped that, in practice, the Council would take the initiative, and actively seek Ministerial approval to investigate issues which it thought were important enough for the Ministers to be advised about. Secondly, he suggested that Carney did not fully appreciate the potential power possessed by the Council by virtue of its statutory obligation to report annually to Parliament; an obligation which provided the Council with a forum, independent of the Ministers, in which to make its presence felt.

The issue of the difficulties of achieving legislative reform was also taken up by Ms Anne Gorman (*Executive Director, Planning Research and Evaluation Division, N.S.W. Department of Youth and Community Services*). Abandoning the paper on which she had originally intended to speak, Gorman decided to relate her experiences as a former director of the N.S.W. Family and Children's Services Agency. This Agency was established by the Labor government in 1977 to act as a reform and review body for family and children's services in N.S.W.

Like Carney, Gorman's story was one of frustration and disillusionment with the existing structures of reform. She had come to the conclusion that reformers needed to develop an acute and sophisticated sensitivity to the functioning of political, administrative and community processes. They had to learn to manipulate these processes to the greatest advantage and not merely

rely on the formally prescribed channels of communication.

On a more concrete level Gorman's experiences had led her to the conclusion that advisory bodies, financially dependent upon government for their existence, could never be sufficiently forceful vehicles of social reform. What was needed, she suggested, were external independently funded advocacy groups such as the U.S. Children's Defence Fund, which had community backing and sufficient resources to pursue reform without fear of sanction.

Ms Marie Coleman (*Director, Office of Child Care, Department of Social Security, Canberra*) gave a rather brief paper on *Child Welfare Research*. She began by outlining a number of projects funded by the Office of Child Care. On a more theoretical level Coleman suggested that it was critical that future research establish broad social indicators of human well being, rather than continually focussing on human pathology and that it was important that welfare programmes have an evaluative component built in from their inception.

THE AFTERNOON SESSION: SPECIFIC AREAS OF RESEARCH

Ms Alison Goding (*Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services Branch, Victorian Education Department*) opened the afternoon session with a paper on *Children in Ethnic Families*. She gave an overview of the sorts of problems faced by migrant children in their first years in this country — such as communication difficulties, social isolation and feelings of cultural deprivation.

She emphasised the enormous diversity among Australia's ethnic community and warned about projecting conclusions drawn from research into particular groups and communities onto the 'ethnic community' as a whole.

Goding concluded by suggesting a number of areas which, she believed,

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needed researching. These included an examination of changes in role functioning within ethnic families as they go through the process of socialization and an examination of modes of integrating immigrant families into school programmes.

Probably the best researched paper of the forum was that delivered by Ms Helen Webberly (Research Officer, Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services) on *Child Maltreatment*.

Webberly's paper was a review of some post-1973 English language research articles on child abuse and maltreatment. She said that the type of work published tended to fall into four main categories: (i) descriptions of children and parents involved in maltreatment — attempts to develop social, economic and psychological profiles of both victims and abusers; (ii) reports on treatment outcomes for victims; (iii) methods of early detection of 'at risk' child; (iv) descriptions of treatment services.

Because of a lack of time, Webberly chose to concentrate exclusively on the literature dealing with treatment services. She critically evaluated half a dozen treatment programmes described in the research literature. These included a Home Start programme for preschoolers a hospital family development project being undertaken in Los Angeles and a New York Foundling Hospital Centre Program.²

Webberly noted that it was symptomatic of the state of research in this country that all the services evaluated were from overseas. In Australia to date, most studies had been of a descriptive kind.

She concluded that it was in the area of treatment evaluations that future research ought to concentrate. In particular, she singled out the need for evaluations of children's treatment services.

The third paper of the afternoon was delivered jointly by Professor Ronald Goldman and Mrs Juliette

Goldman (Departments of Education and Sociology, Latrobe University, Melbourne) on *Children's Sexual Development*. This paper was a report on research that the Goldman's have been conducting into children's conceptualization of their physical and sexual development on a cross cultural basis. The research was undertaken to close a gap in the knowledge of children's sexual development insofar as little work had hitherto been done to elicit children's views with respect to their sexual values, expectations and needs.³ In this they concurred with the central point of Dr Edgar's paper.

Unfortunately the Goldman's limited themselves to discussion of this piece of research thus depriving the forum a more general assessment at research in this area; an assessment which may have put their own work into a clearer perspective and given some indication of the areas upon which future research ought to focus.

The penultimate paper of the forum was given by Dr Evelyn Ogren (Director, Research and Development, Yooralla Society of Victoria) on *'Handicap and the Family'*. In a well researched paper, Ogren attempted to identify gaps in research in the field of handicap in the family. She suggested that research should focus on two distinct yet interrelated areas: the assessment of the impact on the family of a disabled child and the impact on a normal child living in a family with one or more disabled parents. After an extensive survey of the literature (which will soon be published by Yooralla in the form of an annotated research bibliography) Ogren suggested a number of areas for further research. These included research into the impact of the child's disability on the father, research into factors contributing to family stability in the face of disability, and an examination of the effects of a disabled child on its siblings particularly with

respect to identifying maltreatment risk factors.

A BRIEF ASSESSMENT

In terms of its objectives, as outlined at the beginning of this report, the forum was only a partial success. The intention of providing an arena for researchers to discuss future needs and priorities was limited by the fact that only a minority of speakers addressed themselves directly to this question. Carney and Gorman evaded it entirely. The Goldman's were too specific in their focus and Coleman and Goding too impressionistic to be of much assistance. Only Edgar, Webberly and Ogren stayed within the prescribed parameters.

On the other hand some of the other papers were in themselves very interesting. This was particularly the case with the political issues raised by Carney and Gorman — serving to highlight both the possibilities for positive work and dangers which could await the Child Development and Family Services Council in the future.

The forum although perhaps failing to map out concrete directions for research, served to tap a multiplicity of resources which both the Council and the Institute — according to the respective needs — could utilize. Moreover according to many who participated, it provided a much sought after opportunity to meet with colleagues in the field of child and family services. ●

- (1) Community Welfare Services Act 1978 S.12(10)
- (2) Full details of this and other papers will be available in the forthcoming Proceedings of the Children and the Family Forum to be published by Child Development and Family Services Council and Institute of Family Studies.
- (3) The preliminary results of this research are available in monograph form.