



Editorial

In this issue the focus is on child protection. Children are by nature vulnerable and the manner of their passage to maturity is vital in its impact on this rich and beautiful planet. For many, probably most of us, the birth of a new child in one's own family is an intrinsically positive event. The attitudes and behaviour they manifest as adults will be influenced in many ways by the players and events encountered in their childhood. Yet daily in so many cultures and communities, children suffer, many perish and many are accumulating unwarranted burdens.

We are reminded from time to time that children have sometimes been regarded as chattels, and there have been significant differences between cultures and times concerning the way childhood is perceived. At times it has been clear that they have been contributors to family economy and survival. In many instances they represent a burden for communities and caregivers. In nature they appear mostly as an investment in the survival of the human species or one of its many sub groups. Though where there is a mismatch of numbers and the conditions for sustenance, humans, not infrequently, threaten the survival of each other. They are most often a joy to their intimates though a source of great pain when things go wrong.

Can it be said though in 1990, that among sentient beings, violence against the vulnerable should never be justified. Also that parenthood is understood and enacted in a way which ensures nurture and eschews neglect. That where individual failure is unavoidable, collective responsibility prevails. That exploitation of the weak by the strong is a matter for condemnation. The evidence too clearly shows that it cannot. As evidenced by the very recent World Summit for Children attended by an impressive array of world leaders there is recognition of the need to act and hopefully a willingness to do so by enough of the present generation to make a difference.

The summit organised by UNICEF made a declaration and adopted an action plan directed at some of the most pressing concerns impinging on the rights of children. The plan sets out the following seven key goals to be achieved in all countries by the year 2000.

- Reduction of the 1990 under five mortality rates by a third, or to 70 of 1000 live births, whichever is the greater reduction.
- Halving the 1990 maternal mortality rates.
- Halving the 1990 levels of severe and moderate malnutrition among under five year olds.

- Providing universal access to safe drinking water and safe sanitary waste disposal.
- Providing universal access to basic education, and completion of primary education by at least 80% of primary school age children.
- Halving the 1990 adult illiteracy rate, with particular emphasis in female literacy.
- Protecting children in difficult circumstances, especially in situations of armed conflict.

In some respects the summit and these resolves might be seen as the next step on from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child explored in the last issue of *Children Australia*. The framing of each goal reflects stark and incontrovertible evidence of the plight and need for so many of the world's children. The need for such goals is startling from the vantage point of the bulk of Australian society, though again, as recent issues of *Children Australia* have clearly shown, these primarily third world objectives, do apply to a significant number of black Australians. Further, the attitudes and ways of doing things which permit these problems to exist as global problems, are not difficult to find in contemporary Australian society and we should be mindful of biological and social bottom lines as we structure and negotiate daily life about us. It is remarkable, in the light of apparent sophistication and technological competence, that political and economic impediments to action often appear insurmountable. Will it be possible for the kind of intelligence and energy so readily applied to profit making, competition and aggression to be used for environmental and social well being? One fears that the intelligence of the market place does not too readily address the needs and risks for children.

When one turns, as we have in this issue of the journal, to the protection of Australia's children, there is some comfort in noting that the intentional abuse and exploitation of children is generally abhorred by many (Martin and Pitman, 1987) and serious intentional perpetrators appear to be relatively few in number. They do exist however and stopping them and preventing their proliferation is one bottom line. Child abuse goes beyond such circumstances. Peter Boss offers this definition: "child abuse in its widest sense means the curtailment of normal development of a child occasioned by deliberate or neglectful action by an individual, a group of people, or even a whole society. In its narrow sense, child abuse occurs when a child experiences some physical, emotional or mental damage, occasioned other than through accidents, by the behaviour of one or more individuals." (Boss, p.5, 1986). Of

considerable concern in this respect however are the results of recent examinations of domestic violence and homelessness which suggest a significant degree of institutionalised tolerance of violence toward women and children in the home and among youth on the streets. A tolerance and set of expectations which, in the past, appears to have inhibited protective responses by authorities such as the police and other community members and agencies. Also evidence that abuse often begets abusers now appears to be relatively strong. (Victorian Community Council Against Violence, 1990)

Of concern also however are those who do not set out to abuse or exploit children, but under pressure, stress or frustration in the face of their own unmet needs, lose control or find some rationalisation which results in them taking advantage of the child's vulnerability. Most adults can probably recall moments of anger or despair in themselves of sufficient strength to make a child a victim of aggression, manipulation or exploitation. This recognition should be sufficient to establish the view, that we need supportive and responsive families and social networks which can absorb or control our excesses and weaknesses before they reach serious proportions. That our own nurturing and balanced opportunities for learning about life and social relations will often influence our capacity for self management in times of adversity. Where there are shortcomings in natural parenting and helping networks the work of well designed family support programs becomes crucial. In a world which in some ways has increased in complexity and its capacity to confuse as well as to educate, parent education is an increasingly recognised need. Readers will find the study by Clara Bookless-Pratz and Peter Mertin providing much food for thought and action in this area.

Perhaps accounting for more victims overall, yet often oblivious to their effects on the socio-cultural risks for children, are the actors and decision makers who Garbarino 1982 would describe as operating in the child's exo-system. Micro-systems and macro-systems even economists would probably understand as the words figure prominently in their own jargon, noting though a closer proximity to the individual in the usage of 'micro' in the human services. Meso-system variables, such as important linkages between home and school, are also relatively readily understood in their impact on the child's opportunities. Exo-systems however are those parts of a child's world not directly connected or concerned with his or her welfare, but, because of decisions taken about the business at hand, an impact in the child occurs. The bomb on Hiroshima aimed at stopping a war killed a lot of children, the retrenchment of a father or mother might violate a child's schooling, housing policy might split a family, budget restraint might eliminate access to infant welfare or the only chance in a lifetime for pre-school. Poor management practice or self interested union pressure might foster the institutional abuse or neglect of children. These things accentuate the need for decision makers to stay close to community life, something which seems to get a bit harder as the territory or organisation gets bigger. Therein lies a challenge for those whose business might have an exo-system impact in the lives of children. To what extent should powerholders exercise responsibility in their decision making for the effects of policies or decisions on the children of customers, constituents or employees?

Recognition of child abuse and the dramatic demand for child protection services within health and social and community services industries have been a feature of developed nations since the child maltreatment revelations of the 60s and 70s. From a beginning in long recognised failures of parenting and neglect, especially in poor socio-economic circumstances, the spectre of physically battered children across a broader spectrum of social classes began being exposed. To that has been added the snowballing disclosures of many adults about their sexual exploitation as children. These and the ensuing disclosures of children themselves draw attention to fundamental behavioural boundaries and the fear and suffering of a significant number of

children. It seems likely also that these problems may be accentuated in society where the bonds of personal commitment may loosen, fluctuate or break causing parents and siblings to move through separations and reconstituted or blended family groups. Of course as well, the tightly bound family units in which complementarity takes on pathological dimensions have also accounted for many abused and neglected children. The cycle of violence, substance abuse, physical, sexual and emotional victimisation are commonly encountered by workers in the child protection field. Peter Hiller and Chris Goddard's study provides an example.

If there was uncertainty in the past, community outrage, media publicity and court conclusions have combined to make workers who are directly involved to feel bound to act and various groups have increasingly been pressed to do so by mandatory reporting requirements in legislation. On the other hand, an equally vociferous public backed by court decisions, are also poised to punish workers who intervene too zealously and the shortcomings of state intervention and guardianship have been frequently brought to attention in reviews of legislation and/or practice. These shortcomings are pointedly illustrated at the individual level in the article by Frank Bishop. One approach now being explored involves intensive family support of the type described by Brian Mitchell in his article. One example is the American Homebuilders program providing time limited intensive responses to families in deep difficulty with parenting and coping with life's demands. There appears to be a need for more accessible crisis care, family and marriage counselling, access to practical help, conflict resolution, family reunification and safe and resilient supported accommodation for youth than is at present available. The need and wish for young people has been put forward by Karen Piper and Greg Smith, though Commissioner Burdekin has been critical of agency efforts to date. Graduated levels of intervention should be available with a high degree of accountability.

Willingness to address problems is indicated in the contributions to this issue from each Australian state and territory, yet from field feedback we know that each is grappling with financial stringency severe in proportion. Governments and communities should maintain an approach of openness in examining these issues and researching and evaluating our responses to them. The bottom lines adopted will mark the maturity and humanity of our community. The anecdotal experience of workers suggests that the evidence is there but succinct authoritative statements tend to be hampered by shortfalls in coverage, overburdened individual workers or teams and failure to build into programs and fund adequate research and evaluation. It is clear that events within families and intimate relationships account for a great deal of child abuse. Also important is the degree of support and control exercised by the social network and community surrounding the family. A considered view will reveal the impact of a wide range of political, social and economic factors bearing on the abuse, neglect and well being of children.

Chris Goddard again aided by Kieran O'Hagan has provided some useful information about sexual abuse and book reviews by Patsy Littlejohn, Sally Berkovic and Lesley Hewitt add to the array of very experienced contributors to this issue.

References:

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