



Book Reviews

Aussie battlers – families and children in poverty by Jenny Trethewey

Collins Dove in association with the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence, Melbourne, 1989. 184pp.

Too many Australians believe that poor families, by their fecklessness and failure to plan, are the cause of their poverty. This book should help explode that view.

Every three months or so the press carries the stories about adjustments to the poverty line and estimates of numbers living below it. These estimates and the related analyses that constitute the bulk of research into poverty and inequality in Australia are essential. But on their own, they lack a human dimension. This book provides a valuable balance.

From mid 1985 till mid 1986, Jenny Trethewey and a small group of associates from the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence had regular contact with 57 families with incomes on or below the poverty line, living in or around Melbourne. For one fortnight each month an adult member of the family kept a detailed diary of the family's income and expenditure. This, together with their comments and observations made by the Brotherhood researchers who called each month, constitute the evidence drawn on by this study.

After an introductory discussion of views about and research into poverty in Australia, three chapters tell in turn the stories of ten families: five sole parent families, three unemployed families and two low wage earner families. These briefly and simply describe, month by month, how each family tried to cope on an income below their needs over the year of the study. Mostly brief description, each story is enlivened by the words of the diary-keeper. A following section deals in turn with a number of policy issues which these experiences raise. Families in poverty need a paid job, an adequate income, decent housing and help with the costs of ill health. *Aussie Battlers* makes it clear that

families on low incomes do take great care with their expenditure; they have to, there is so little to spend. They also have to consider trade-offs most Australians would balk at; do they pay their bills out of this fortnight's pension cheque and cut their food to a minimum or do they try and ensure the family eats sufficiently before they pay rent or electricity? They do not indulge in frivolous expenditure but sometimes they cannot shop as efficiently as they would like because the cheapest lines of food are at supermarkets and they cannot afford to run a car, without which the supermarket is inaccessible. Where they do own a car, it will be old and inefficient and require frequent running repairs. If they do own a car it will often have been given to them as a gift by parents: the importance of assistance from parents and other relatives is a recurring theme in the lives of these families. So too, is dependence on emergency relief from community welfare agencies, although this is sometimes not as helpful as it might be. To survive on income provided by Commonwealth pensions or benefits is just not possible.

Poverty is particularly hard on kids. School excursions are a constant dread; not being able to invite school friends home adds a further social dimension to poverty. Their stories show, too, that although Medicare has been a boon in helping families cope with greater than average frequency of ill health it has not solved all their health problems. Dental costs are a constant worry, while special equipment, such as spectacles, specialist shoes, Ventolin aspirators and the like are unaffordable.

Bad housing contributes to ill health (so too, does the constant stress of trying to cope on a low income). No family was adequately housed by contemporary Australian standards;

those who rented privately paid far too much for substandard accommodation, those fortunate enough to occupy public housing still paid a lot for low quality flats or, if they were lucky enough to have a house, they still had problems obtaining maintenance. Several were desperately trying to buy a home but all they could afford were small and desperately in need of repairs which they could not afford, or in the country around Melbourne which imposed further costs of isolation, higher food bills and the like. The families described in this book seem caught in a vice and no matter how carefully they budget, how hard they work (or try to find work) after a year the positions of most seemed hardly changed and for some had worsened.

The solutions for these families is startlingly clear. They all need a higher income and ready access to particular services when they are required. Government pensions and benefits need to recognise the costs of children. Since the research, the Federal government has significantly increased levels of child-related payments and rent assistance for families renting privately. Jenny Trethewey notes this but estimates that many of the families would still have income below the poverty line and even those who would now be above it, would still, on their own evidence, live lives deprived of some of the necessities which middle Australia takes for granted.

Aussie Battlers covers similar ground to Philippa Smith's *Living on the Edge*, published by ACOSS in 1982 (and now out of print). That earlier study interviewed and collected expenditure details from 90 low income families living in Sydney. Overall it told a similar story. It provided a more detailed analysis at some points, but lacked the time

dimension that comes from collecting evidence from families over a long period of time. *Aussie Battlers* is more readable than the ACOSS study. The next study should be to conduct a similar survey of middle and high income families. This will enable clearer comparisons to be drawn between the fortunate and the battlers of our society and may help people realise that inequality is deeply embedded in the structures of

Australian society.

Aussie Battlers is an easy book to read. Ideally it would be read by all Australians. Failing that, it should be set reading for all courses preparing professionals who will work with low as well as middle and high income Australians. It should be read by all preparing to work in child care, teaching, nursing, medicine and social work at the very least.

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Discipline – a positive guide for parents by Martin Herbert

Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989. 141pp.

At first sight this book looked like just more of the many behaviourally-based child management guides for parents. This impression was dispelled by the material in the first three chapters on the values, philosophy, reasons and goals which have to do with why parents might want to use the advice in this book. Indeed, even as the emphasis shifts in later chapters to discussion of behaviour change techniques this is always done in the context of the values and expected personality outcomes related to appropriate use of this knowledge. Herbert's approach softens and humanises a body of knowledge which is sometimes perceived by parents, and indeed, many helping professionals as excessively mechanistic when applied to children's behaviour. In other words, Martin Herbert does what many other authors in this area do not, he deals with the issue of appropriate beliefs about child management. Without addressing this issue, many parents may not be given the intellectual fortitude they need to apply the techniques with the necessary persistence and consistency.

Chapter four, "How behaviour is learned", goes on to explain basic behaviour principles such as reinforcement and extinction in everyday language. This is followed up in chapters five, six and seven with discussion of the appropriate use of penalties and how these should always be used after trying, and in combination with, positive techniques

designed to emphasise development of prosocial behaviour. In short, Herbert promotes a constructional approach to behaviour change.

I thought the principles and techniques were well presented in practical contexts which displayed a thorough going understanding of the demands of family life as well as of the principles presented. One minor negative reaction on my part was to the rather drawn out (I thought) Time Out procedure. His procedure involves responding to non-compliance with a repetition of the instruction and a further warning about Time Out for continued non-compliance before actually applying Time Out. Many children will choose not to cooperate with parental requests till warned of the consequences of not doing so, rather than learn to cooperate more quickly as would occur with a less drawn out procedure. But this may well be a plus for the group of parents I see this book appealing to.

At the end of the section on techniques, Herbert adds valuable material on self control techniques for parents as well as children and sums up the previous material with a few pages on problem solving which gives parents a stepwise framework within which to apply the earlier material.

There is also valuable material on how to understand anger and aggression in a developmental context. Herbert discusses practical methods of dealing with this problem area with emphasis on teaching

children alternate behaviours such as problem solving. Chapter 10 then deals with issues of responsibility and freedom in teenagers and provides a sensible and balanced discussion of the issues. A further chapter on television and its potential influence on children's current and future behaviour gives a balanced exposition of the views for and against viewing violent material. Herbert gives sensible and non-alarmist advice for parents in this area of concern to many responsible parents.

Overall this book does an excellent job of presenting in a palatable format what modern empirically based psychology has to offer in the area of positive approaches to child discipline. Its strength is that it does so in the context of consideration for the values and beliefs which stand behind successful child rearing practice. It will appeal most and be most useful to educated middle class parents with humanistic concerns about their child rearing. It is not a simple how to do it book and therefore would be most useful for helping professionals where there is a need for bibliotherapy material with parents who need supporting material related to appropriate values and beliefs in child management.

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