

Editorial

Guest Editor: Elizabeth Fernandez

Child welfare has experienced many new developments in policy and practice in the last decade – developments that have been dictated by political and social pressures, by international influences and by discontent with responses to children. Key discourses have emerged around developing and monitoring indicators of child well-being, operation of child protection systems and their impact on children and families, the need to strike a balance between protection and prevention, and concerns about suboptimal outcomes for children and young people in care and those transitioning from care. This special edition of *Children Australia* brings together keynote papers from the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) 2008 biennial conference in Sydney. The papers included in this collection span a range of topics aligned with the core themes of the conference: Safety and Well-being, Out-of-Home Care, Social Disadvantage and Building Community Capacity.

There has been a growing attention to the issue of children's well-being and the emergence of national and international initiatives to measure and monitor children's well-being. Normative frameworks, including children's rights, developmental theories and methodological advancements, have provided the lenses to understand and promote child well-being outcomes. The United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child and UNICEF's State of the World's Children annual reports have played a significant role in promoting interest in this field, triggering the growth in 'State of the Child Reports' published by Government and research institutes to profile children's status in specific areas (Ben Arieh & Goerge 2001). Initiatives to monitor children's well-being also stem from accountability and outcome oriented public policy which demands accurate representations of the conditions of children and programs designed to address such conditions. The scope and measurement of child well-being is constantly expanding to become more inclusive of positive and negative outcomes, protective factors and negative behaviours; future and current well-being; and children's perspectives, in addition to adult perspectives (Bradshaw & Barnes 2007).

It should come as no surprise that the concept of well-being should be extended to the well-being of children in care. As out-of-home care policy has evolved over time, the goals of safety, stability and permanency have assumed priority. The need to focus on child well-being and on developmental outcomes such as health, education, family and social relationships, emotional development and identity has become an evolving agenda in policy, practice and research (Parker et al. 1992; Wulczyn et al. 2005).

In relation to child protection, the widespread adoption of the policy of mandatory reporting has been an integral part of building a child protection agenda to further children's safety and well-being. However, the policy is also accompanied by increasing recognition of its implications for children and families, particularly the over-inclusion of vulnerable, low-risk families in an unnecessarily adversarial and investigative response. The unintended consequence has been an avalanche of child abuse reports, changing the nature of child welfare in that statutory child welfare systems have been consigned to

receiving, investigating and substantiating reports, a restricted view of helping families and children. There have been calls for child protection systems to respond differentially to cases involving high-risk maltreatment as opposed to cases where families need services and less coercive responses (Waldfogel 1998) and diverse pathways to service (Wood 2008).

The ascendancy of mandatory reporting has had an impact on child and family services. With the increased investment of resources in investigations and substantiation of reports and greater use of legal intervention, preventive and supportive services for children and families have diminished in priority. Further, unsubstantiated reports lead to harsh interventions into the lives of families who find themselves enmeshed in the net of child protection in order to access services (Gibbons, Conroy & Bell 1995) and, as a consequence, become alienated from potential sources of help and support. The focus on investigation and detection has also obscured the prevalence of child and family poverty, the negative impact of which is widely documented (Lindsey 2009; Vinson 2007). In Australia, 14.9% of children are said to be living in poverty (Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell 2001). This is not to suggest the perpetration of criminal physical and sexual abuse on children is not a compelling problem. The concern is the emergence in recent years of systems strongly focused on intervention involving notified children, leaving substantial numbers of disadvantaged children unserved or under-served.

A further theme in the critique of current child welfare approaches is their residual and reactive focus. There is wide support for the public health perspective because it privileges prevention over the reactive focus and advances our thinking about child well-being into a broader social context. With its emphasis on a continuum of universal primary prevention to tertiary services, and its acknowledgement of multifactorial causes, it shifts the analysis beyond individuals and families to community-based, interdisciplinary and interagency interventive strategies (Wulczyn et al. 2005)

Integral to protective intervention is the issue of definitions of harm and the setting of thresholds. The expanding definitions of 'harm' and 'risk' and the lowering of thresholds expose families to high levels of surveillance and intrusion (Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997). Thresholds for intervention framed in terms of 'risk of harm' and 'best interests of the child' afford wide latitude and scope for intervention given the open-endedness and malleability of these concepts (Fernandez 1996). This is best highlighted in the experiences of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children where determinations of 'best interests' have led to the continuing over-representation of Australian indigenous children in care. At issue is the potential for class and culturally biased discriminatory decision making in child protection and removal decisions, compounding social disadvantage and social exclusion.

The tools and concepts used to assess thresholds are the subject of a wide literature. The limitations of risk assessment models in capturing a holistic evaluation of both risk and protective factors, and strengths and deficits in parenting environments is acknowledged (Rycus & Hughes 2008;

Wood 2008, 9.227). The search for credible, needs-based, assessment models have led to alternative frameworks. Alternative models which are less focused on episodic events and which address wider ecological factors are emerging as promising practice developments and are explored in this issue.

Turning to the contents of this issue, the first of the articles, focusing on the theme of child well-being, comes from Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, who examines the challenging subject of how objective and subjective measures of child well-being co-vary across countries. Professor Bradshaw explores the various correlates of a recently published index of child well-being in OECD countries and analyses large scale international data related to child well-being collected from a number of westernised countries, including Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada and a number of European countries. Principal findings emerging from the analysis are the relatively poor results obtained from the US and UK across a variety of indicators, and the lack of consistency observed across indicators. For instance, Sweden was found to have the best material standard of well-being but scored poorly on measures of behaviour. His commentary on subjective well-being indicators is particularly illuminating. Professor Bradshaw urges us to consider the limitations of objective measures and focus on subjective dimensions of well-being, arguing that credence should be given to children's views and reflections on their lives and relationships.

In the next article, Professor Mark Courtney addresses the issue of outcomes for children in care and the associated accountability and responsibility of the State to nurture a focus on child well-being. Critical of the dominant emphasis on safety and permanency in US child welfare policy, he argues for child well-being to be the overarching goal of child welfare systems. Professor Courtney's overview of selected empirical studies focusing on educational outcomes and transitions from care and his exploration of the linkage between safety, permanency and well-being are informative and resonate with local concerns. While there is growing awareness and acknowledgement of vulnerabilities and diminished life chances of care leavers in Australia and overseas, the commitment to providing extended support in matters of housing, further education and access to employment is the focus of ongoing work in this area.

The theme of the paper by Professor Cindy Blackstock is an important one which resonates with contemporary Australian debates and the context and experience of Australian Aboriginal children. Drawing attention to growing evidence of the role of structural factors in predisposing Canadian First Nations children to higher risk of social disadvantage and coercive interventions, the paper offers a succinct overview of the North American and Canadian literature on the evidence of over-representation, ethnicity and racial disproportionality at all levels: reporting, substantiation, entry to care and permanent care decisions. Professor Blackstock makes a compelling argument for poverty, preventative service provision, family structure and other inequalities to be included in analysis of child welfare trajectories of over-representation at all levels, and advocates development of

both mainstream and Aboriginal data systems to capture reliable estimates of disproportionality.

The next article by Associate Professor Robert Chaskin speaks to a wide audience of practitioners and policy makers concerned with strengthening communities and enhancing their collective ability to address shared needs and problems. It invites us to think about community level processes and dynamics. It explores different ways of thinking about community as a framework to inform policy and practice with children, youth and families. Of particular relevance is the discussion on community capacity building and strategies for building it in disadvantaged communities. Significantly, the work originates from the leading edge centre of community analysis, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Moving on to the important agenda of prevention, Associate Professor Diane DePanfilis' paper draws on the phases of prevention science to elaborate the implementation and evaluation of the community based prevention program, *Family Connections*, that works with families in their homes and neighbourhoods to reduce the risk of child neglect. Drawing on a public health paradigm and a resilience orientation, Dr DePanfilis' paper stresses the identification of both risk factors that precipitate neglectful parenting and the protective factors present in parents' personal and interpersonal systems that reduce the likelihood of neglect. Findings from the comparative analysis of program outcomes associated with duration of interventions are important to note. The paper offers key messages supporting the use of conceptually sound program models and an integrated evaluation strategy.

Concluding this collection, the final article continues the theme of working with vulnerable families. Child welfare practitioners undertake assessments in a political climate that underlines risk assessments as a focal point for planning interventions. The contribution by Professor Marianne Berry and Associate Professor Scottye Cash describes a family assessment instrument – designed to facilitate holistic child protection assessments and strength based practice with families and children. As a strength based, theoretically supported and empirically validated family assessment instrument, it offers a promising tool for assessing family and child functioning and conceptualising outcomes in child welfare services. The article offers an informative and critical review of the issues in risk and safety assessment and merits and limitations of prevailing models.

Countries differ in their culture, policies, programs and the values underpinning their interventionist approaches. These differences are crucial in determining whether evidence from a particular country is applicable cross-nationally. It is hoped this collection will provide useful and easily accessible evidence and the opportunity to compare trends and findings across countries, and contribute to advancing our knowledge in this complex field.

I would like to acknowledge Dr Jennifer Lehmann, Editor, *Children Australia*, for the opportunity to assemble this international collection from our eminent authors, and thank Lorraine Redshaw for her painstaking editorial assistance. I would like to express thanks to the authors for their valuable

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Andrew McCallum, CEO
Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA)

Welcome to this special edition of *Children Australia* devoted to the keynote addresses and discussant responses at the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) conference in August 2008, ACWA being the peak body for Child and Family welfare agencies in NSW.

The conference is held every two years and is now widely regarded as a major event on the calendar for child and family practitioners, policy personnel, researchers and academics in Australasia. The 2008 conference was also a celebratory affair as it coincided with the 50th anniversary of ACWA.

More than 1000 delegates from across Australia and internationally attended over the 3 days with the opportunity to choose from over 60 sessions including keynotes addresses, workshops, papers and master classes. On the third day participants could also register for the *Management and Leadership Institute*, which focused on climate change and the community sector and took the form of a colloquium chaired by Dr. Jennifer Lehmann from La Trobe University Bendigo and included a number of recognised experts on the issue. The theme was chosen to bring to the fore a topic that, whilst high on the national and international agenda, has largely occupied the personal discourse within the context of the community services sector workplace.

The overall theme of the '08 conference was *Responding to Children, Young People and Families in a Civil Society*, broken down into four sub-themes, *Social Disadvantage, Safety & Wellbeing, Building Community Capacity and Out of Home Care*. The major theme and sub-themes were chosen in synergy with ACWA's strategic direction and in an effort to broaden the discussion around child protection as it is being played out nationally and internationally at the present time.

We were heartened by the eminence of the international and national speakers that accepted our invitation to present as their specific areas of expertise allowed for a tapestry of views seldom assembled at one conference. We were determined that our conversations would be broad and capture the larger vision of *child well-being*, as a necessary starting point if we are to truly tackle the vexed question of child protection at the highly publicised and politicised 'pointy end' that is statutory child protection. In the NSW context and the recently released *Wood Report*, the influence of these conference messages is already making itself felt.

The legacy of conferences such ACWA08 cannot be underestimated and to have this compendium is a bonus which will hopefully become a must read for anyone who aspires to improve the long-term circumstances of children and families in this country.

Our thanks to all the contributors – not only those included within these pages, but all who participated in ACWA08.

Children Australia is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. In order to clarify which articles have been reviewed and which have not, a symbol is included at the end of each article as follows: ■ = peer reviewed article □ = non-reviewed article