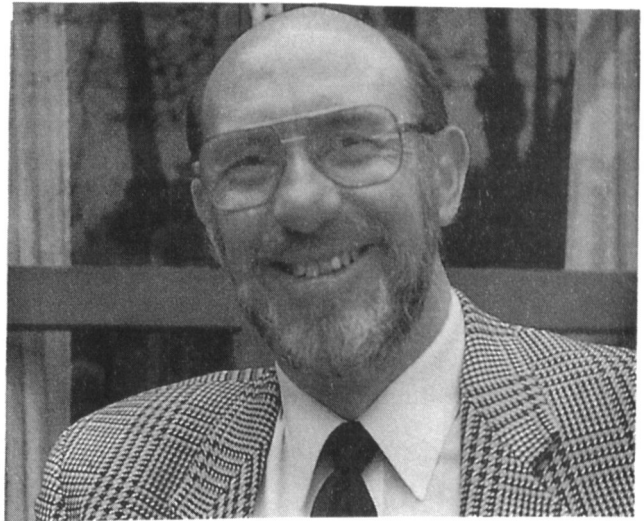


# Editorial

Lloyd Owen



As this issue of *Children Australia* goes to press we look forward to the latter half of 1999 and some interesting events, including the International Foster Care Conference in Melbourne and the 7th National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Perth. The titles of both reflect the language of a passing era when we reflect on the nature of the child, youth and family welfare field and the array of service forms which have emerged in recent years. One would not want to diminish the intrinsic worth embodied in the idea and the act of fostering nor the significance attached to naming acts of abuse or neglect. It is important though to take stock of the meaning attached to these words and whether they lead policies and programs in the most fruitful direction, or whether they impose practical or psychological barriers on needed developments or new ideas.

Foster care has a history, as does residential care, attached to the child saving movement which in its more excessive forms sought to remove children from parents perceived as unworthy or bad and to exclude the parents from the child's future. It was often called substitute care. It often failed to account for the consequences of breaking important bonds without a full and honest appraisal of the circumstances and options for action. Sometimes it has compounded earlier failures for the developing child with more shortcomings in relationships, more fragmentation of life space and more failure across the many dimensions of the life course. By the same token, it has often provided opportunity for children and young people to escape from abusive situations, or to join a wider circle of support around a stressed or overloaded family, staving off the breakdown of important relationships and maintaining developmental impetus while solutions to other problems are found. The form taken by the booming growth in child abuse investigation services has been questioned – especially so when growth has come at the expense of a more comprehensive set of services to strengthen and help families manage the challenges of child rearing, a task often complicated by some of the features of modern life.

Recent decades have seen a shift in service systems toward an array of services designed to keep birth families operating, aiming often at improved parenting. Parent education, parenting skill development, family mediation, family support, family preservation, family reunification and family

therapy are categories commonly found in the literature and guides to services. At the same time there has been a firm policy shift in out of home care services toward a family focus. For the thirteen thousand children and young people across Australia under protection orders, many of whom are not able to stay at home with parents, we have seen the growth of kinship care or kith and kin care sometimes arising out of family conferencing processes. These are the first line of home based out of home care services. Beyond them come respite care, temporary family care, short and long term foster care, adolescent community placements, permanent care and adoption. All now carry an expectation that relationships with birth family and culture of origin will be clearly acknowledged and, to the greatest extent possible, involved in the ongoing life course of the child or young person. This is often not easily accommodated. Home and family space are deep with feeling and meaning, in our culture often bastions of privacy and not easily shared or exposed with vulnerabilities to the gaze of accountability or threatening competition. Furthermore as the candidates for care become more those that are left, where other options have not succeeded, the task of caring can be stretched to the exceptional end. Accommodating a hurt and angry adolescent as a household member, whether acting out or withdrawn, can bring a raft of tensions and surprises. It can be sometimes uplifting but it might also be exhausting and, when other relationships are also involved, it can be fracturing.

In Australia we are just coming to grips with the need to more actively manage these issues constructively. There has in many places been a continuation of attitudes and practices which solved the problem by cutting off the troublesome relationships. This may sometimes be necessary but often the good relationships were taken away as well. In other instances elaborate access rituals have developed, backed by an array of complex and sometimes costly legal mechanisms of varying degrees of workability but rarely researched or evaluated. Often the answer to difficulty has been to dump the problem on any available placement and hope that it will be fixed or for some to allow or even encourage independent living at an age we would not countenance for our less vulnerable progeny.

We have come through a phase in which the more expensive option of residential care has also been somewhat denigrated and run down, while remaining the option utilised for more difficult situations. There have been few careful examinations of the service mix most likely to achieve good outcomes or the best way to match models to needs. Instead models have more often emerged and declined with prevailing ideologies and fiscal regimes. The role of residential care in Australia tends to be negatively recognised and poorly understood although there is often anecdotal evidence of good work being done.

For some young people, care continues with supervision or custody in the juvenile justice system, some others circulate around the systems for the homeless. Some of those and others find the world of addiction and the array of services connected to that condition. Others encounter the realm of mental health services. A welcome array of research is beginning to appear or to be commissioned around these issues although it seems that many busy practitioners rarely get a chance to read it. Some major efforts seeking to inform practice are worth watching as initial phases of activity draw to a close and decisions are made about what will occur next. These are the National Crime Prevention Strategy, the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy and the AusEinet intervention program funded under the National Mental Health Strategy – see their web sites:

<http://www.ncavac.gov.au>, [www.ncavac.gov.au](http://www.ncavac.gov.au)

<http://www.aifs.org.au/external/ysp/>

[www.aifs.org.au/external/ysp/](http://www.aifs.org.au/external/ysp/)

<http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/>

Each has contributed much to thinking about prevention and early intervention on developmental pathways. There are also many focused endeavours of agencies, small research teams and postgraduate students (who are often also full time workers trying to do something toward understanding and improving practice) which eventually struggle into the light of day. Current examples include the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme study, *Young people leaving care and protection*, and the handbook, *Recruiting and selecting residential care workers*, published by Kildonan Child and Family Services. Contained in both of these are very visible contributions from young people who have experience of our systems. Their inclusion through the Australian Association of Young People in Care and its many strategies, and the inclusive approaches of agencies themselves must add to the quality of research and the policies and programs likely to follow. Hopefully our understanding of how to protect children and care for them constructively as they grow will improve and be backed up by those holding the keys to resources.

Contributors to this issue show that there is much to share in the way of ideas. A team from Burnside, Roslyn Leahy, Claerwen Little, Linda Mondy and Dianne Nixon, draw on their experience in New South Wales and specifically an evaluation with pointers for good practice and future research in their article 'What makes good outcomes for children in foster care?' Emilia Renouf again reports on an overseas conference and developments in Australia of children's contact centres. This provides a basis for further urgently needed discussion around service development here. Louise Keogh and Ulla Svensson report on some research into a foster carer recruitment program pointing to the need for better follow up for inquirers if unintended attrition is to be avoided. The recruitment effort is a substantial ongoing task for agencies and the cost of doing it well needs to be factored into funding formulae and unit costs which influence service purchasing. Cas O'Neill and Deb Absler provide the last article of the trilogy concerning the utilisation of services in a mental health clinic by the in care population. Philip Mendes draws together some themes from Marxist and feminist viewpoints as they are applied in critique to child protection services dealing with physical abuse and neglect. With case study illustrations he points to the need for service systems to account for structural influences but this does not absolve services from the need to act at the individual level. Sharon Turner, Peter Monk and Bala Mudaly share some practice observations on their work with male sole parents. Their work underscores the need to reflect on gender and cultural influences in accessing and utilising services and supports. Chris Goddard in his regular contribution tackles the tough territory generated when children commit crimes as heinous as the murder of James Bulger. Such rare but extreme events have pressed our morals, our laws and our institutions in ways the media find hard to resist. He centres our thinking on the everyday need to treat the offending of children with care, with justice and with compassion for all involved.

As this issue goes to press, we are also engaged in discussion about the needs of the child, youth and family welfare field for information. Oz Child have reached the conclusion that it is no longer possible for them as a service agency to continue subsidising to the same degree the operation of the Information Service and its closure has been announced for the end of June this year. The journal production has been part of that service. There is however a commitment to continue support for the journal which, with considerable honorary input, largely pays its way. However, it has brought into sharper relief questions about how this field can find ways to have its information needs met so that good practice ideas and research can be shared. Any bright ideas would be welcome.

Lloyd Owen