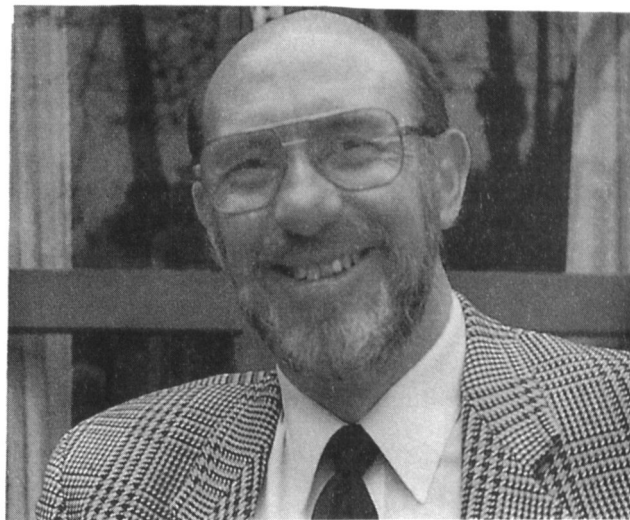


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

As this second issue of *Children Australia* for the year 2000 goes to press, we find ourselves looking forward to the forthcoming World Forum 2000 in Sydney in August. The Annual World Conference of the International Forum for Child Welfare, it will incorporate a Management and Leadership Institute on 7 and 8 August and the Children First Conference with the theme 'children first in the new millennium' from 9 to 11 August. The conference hosts, IFCW, ACWA and CAFWAA and their supporters, the New South Wales Department of Community Services, the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, will add to and take advantage of the climate of anticipation surrounding Sydney's role as host to the forthcoming Olympic Games.

The juxtaposition of these events leads to some reflection on the value of bringing together people from many cultures to compete according to shared rules; to better performance through personal and team endeavour; and to tackle hard issues in a climate of collaboration and altruistic concern for a better world. The thing that sets apart community service organisations and the not-for-profit sector is the focus on goals which are essentially non-commercial. The principal reason for existence is to respond to needs which are unlikely to be met via the market place and the usual systems of supply and demand. Sometimes this will mean providing direct service in a philanthropic way, sometimes it will mean blazing a trail or paving the way to some new principles or new approaches which might be taken up by the marketplace or by later legislative arrangements and public provision.

In the year 2000 there are many apparent needs to be addressed in the field of child, youth and family welfare. There remains however much ambivalence, uncertainty and pain attached to deciding on the means to address these needs. It seems that we are often caught in an adversarial and blaming culture with high levels of accountability for intention and behaviour while at the same time, the principles underpinning our judgments are poorly articulated and poorly researched. The information age has provided us with new tools which could better enable us to hear the voices and understand the plight of people in difficulty, although the same tools can strengthen the arm of those who

exploit others and they are likely to be most accessible to the more advantaged in the community.

Recent work has drawn my attention to how little we have actually known about outcomes for our young people leaving the care system when policy and legislation have been in the process of formulation. It is interesting to reflect also on the assumptions which underlie the conclusions reached and the form subsequent action takes. In general, care legislation in Australian jurisdictions has moved to limit support to these young people as involvement tended to be seen as punitive and intrusive in the private domain and justified only to prevent significant harm. The result appears to have been a rather legalistic system which, together with a long period of financial stringency, falls short of seeing many young people through to adulthood and which has been very limited in respect to prevention and early intervention. By the time problems pass the eligibility threshold, solutions are often less accessible and often more costly. Work on earlier intervention and leaving care has exploded in recent years in the UK and initial movement is slowly appearing in Australia (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Maunders, Liddell, Liddell & Green, 1999; Green & Jones, 1999; Mendes & Goddard, 1999; Clare, Moschini & Murphy, 1999).

I was reminded recently of one of Edward de Bono's (1985) approaches to applying our thinking capacities to problem solving. The scheme involves creating different mental sets in approaching the problem by putting on and taking off each of six different coloured hats. Each hat suggests a mind set to adopt in thinking about and discussing the problem or proposed action. A white hat represents neutrality and objectivity and the gathering of facts and figures. A red hat suggests anger (seeing red), this is intended to give the emotional view. The black hat suggests gloom and negativity focusing on negative aspects, why it cannot be done. A yellow hat is sunny and positive and directs attention to optimism, hope and positive thinking. A green hat suggests abundant vegetation, fertility and growth representing a mind set of creativity and search for new ideas. A blue hat is cool and represents an overarching sky and relates to control and the organisation of the thinking process (de Bono 1985). By systematically marshalling these different mind sets in canvassing solutions we are more likely to underpin our views and ensuing action with better information. Of course

in 2000 we may be more cognisant that colours may carry cultural connotations and we should be more sensitive to power inherent in language and discourse. Nonetheless we are reminded of the value of applying time, variety of attitude and experience through consultation and creativity to the kind of issues we frequently encounter in this field.

The immediate future contains the manifest issues of division in our society and reconciliation. The community at large will be dealing with changing the taxation system and the implications for private and public resources. Policy dictates that we come to grips with issues of family responsibility, self sufficiency, welfare dependency and mutual obligation. Beside these things, Victorians received a sharp reminder recently of the need to be concerned about how conducive local communities are to opportunities for healthy development and positive futures for young people. A relatively wide ranging study of risk and protective factors affecting the well-being of the young people was carried out with a sample of just under 9,000 year 7, 9 and 11 young people in 150 metropolitan and 60 non metropolitan Government, Catholic and independent schools. The results were related geographically to local government areas. They included a picture of higher and lower concentrations of risk and protective factors and evidence of a strong link between risk and protective factors and behavioural concerns. Findings include:

- alcohol (46 per cent) and tobacco (24 per cent) continue to be the most prevalent drugs used by Victoria's young people;
- one in five of Victoria's young people report emotional problems, and females are twice as likely as males to report these problems;
- by the age of 16, about one third of Victoria's young people have had sex but less than 50 per cent of Victoria's sexually active young people use safe sex practices;
- more girls (14 per cent) than boys (9 per cent) were found to be at risk of homelessness (DHS, 2000:4).

The results point to the need for local consciousness and the possibility of positive outcomes across a range of behavioural concerns if common risk factors can be addressed at the community level.

It is important to observe that the majority of young people do make the transition to adulthood positively and without major problems. The report suggests however that between 10 and 20 per cent of young people will engage in one or more serious problem behaviours between the ages of 12 and 18 and that increases in problem behaviours such as substance use, depression and suicide, homelessness, school exclusion, violence and sexual activity in young people, have been observed and documented over the past 20 years (DHS, 2000:2).

Contributors to this issue of the journal take us some way into a number of the complex concerns facing the field. Dorothy Scott shares with us a keynote address delivered last year to the Strengthening Families Conference in Newcastle. She draws on insights gleaned from an ecological approach, research evidence and innovative programs to warn against

economic reductionism and psychological reductionism. She argues for a breadth and depth in our approach to strengthening family and community in ways which counteract what has been described as the 'social toxicity' (Garbarino 1995) of the developmental environment for children. Max and Margaret Liddell provide a much needed comparative look at some aspects of child protection legislation in Australia's eight States and Territories. Paul Delfabbro, Jim Barber and Lesley Cooper provide a soundly researched view of the degree of placement disruption experienced by 235 children aged 4-17 years referred for new out of home care placement in South Australia between May 1998 and April 1999. Results reveal a considerable degree of placement disruption and the authors begin consideration of the reasons for this and the consequences of it. Michael Clare reports on an interesting approach in professional education of social workers which aims at better preparedness for working with families. Acknowledging the highly charged nature of much family work, including family group conferences, the approach utilises 'family of origin' as a means to insight and better management of these significant aspects of ourselves we take into practice. Juliette Goldman and Usha Padayachi draw on a sample of 427 university students in Queensland to explore characteristics of child sexual abuse perpetrators. By so doing they add some useful data to this relatively poorly researched field in Australia. John Evans explores the question, 'where do the children play?' Recognising the significance of play in developmental processes and the implications of form, opportunity and context, makes this an important agenda item for parents and policy makers. Due to other commitments, Chris Goddard is taking a break from his regular contribution to *Children Australia* for this issue.

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