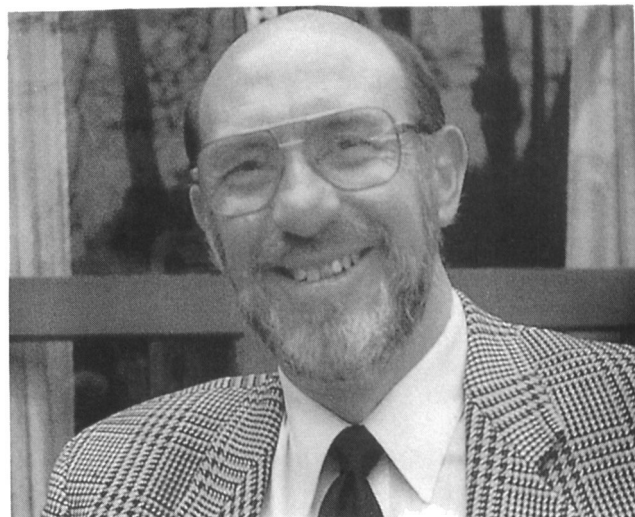


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

Oh my! How suddenly it got to be 2001. It is a year in which Australia celebrates the centenary of Federation. It is a year internationally to celebrate the idea of voluntary effort – the United Nations declared International Year of Volunteering. There remains no shortage of challenges in the task of building a secure, nurturing and stimulating world in which children can grow and develop toward a reasonably fulfilled adulthood and contributory citizenship locally and globally.

It is worth remembering that learning processes do not stand still. In every waking moment the developing child is reaching out to satisfy needs and curiosity. The various viewpoints about learning would suggest that much comes from watching and imitating the attitudes and actions of others. Role models are therefore important. Much learning also comes from the conditioning processes behaviourists point out to us – the classical conditioning of stimulus and response connected closely in time. Recognising the array of stimuli possible throughout extensive sensory apparatus, it is often important for the nurturing parent to work on which fears and gratifications are connecting to events and behaviours. Similarly the parent is challenged to negotiate many of the rewarding and punishing consequences of behaviour, in effect dealing with operant or instrumental conditioning. Finally there is the role of developing insight through the human capacity to observe, reflect, reason and build up a store of knowledge which might be used on life's pathway. When helpful things are not being learned, unhelpful things may be. Rarely, however, is nothing happening. When children are being abused, conscripted into armies, or left lonely and fearful, they are usually collecting baggage likely to influence both their own and others' futures. In noting that most of parenting is largely a voluntary effort, society appears to expect much from these volunteers.

In my view there remains much conflict and confusion about how to place resources, which both nature and human ingenuity provide, into a position of support for parenting tasks and other great concerns, such as caring for our environment. Parenting is, I think, in large measure the ultimate in volunteering, so much so that, when substitute care is called for, a remarkable array of expectations emerge

concerning how much should be paid for and how much should not. It is time, I suspect, that, even if there is little in the way of cash transfer, there should at least be acknowledgement that very serious work is being undertaken and that it has a real cost, an opportunity cost and, in some instances at least, massive downstream cost implications. Investment in family support, investment in good preschool activity and childhood development, investment in education and health, are fundamental to civil society. They are not matters for meanness, yet the business of ensuring ready access to sound children's services is often treated with meanness and unrealistic expectations. Contributors to this issue point to an array of failings, most of which bespeak a narrowness of perspective and a meanness about resources. I have yet to see sufficient resource levels being applied to universal preventive services and secondary services. In a small number of instances, large resources are devoted to time limited, narrowly targeted, high risk situations. This will continue to be necessary though optimising application and maintaining the requisite timing and flexibility to attain successful outcomes remains a challenge.

Philip Mendes shares an analysis of the macro-political climate of the Victorian Government led by Jeff Kennett and many aspects of its impact on child protection services in that State. His article 'From minimal intervention to minimal support' points to the difficulties which flow from the enthusiastic application of public choice theory, an ideology which has swept around the world in recent decades, but also to the significance of maintaining a balanced array of services of universal, secondary and tertiary form. What is provided and how it is provided are both important aspects of enabling people to cope and help themselves. You can't get blood out of a stone. All governments today are challenged by resource management issues, but the rhetoric of partnerships and collaboration sounds a bit more hopeful than raw competition.

Another contemporary product of social governance and social arrangements appears to be rising prison populations. In August last year, Australian Institute of Criminology figures cited in the *Melbourne Age* (22/8/00:8) showed an increase in the decade from 1988 to 1998, from 12,321 to 19,906 – a rise of 62%. This is a consequence of a number of

things, including an increased frequency of imprisonment for some offences, and also some lengthening of sentences, which have the effect of increasing the number incarcerated at any point in time. Karen Healy, Denise Foley and Karyn Walsh cite these figures and similar overseas trends, while pointing to the fact that many prisoners are parents and their incarceration raises a range of very significant issues for children. Their article about families affected by the imprisonment of a parent points to a lack of both attention and data, as well as the costly consequences of typically simplistic law and order responses. Their research, however, leads to some very practical considerations which are much in accord with the rising interest in restorative justice principles. Restorative justice seeks to mitigate the harm flowing from offending, including taking into account the involvement and interests of all who suffer consequences – the victim, the offender and, in this case, the offender's family.

Meredith Kiraly, in her article on the involvement of young people in selecting staff, reports on an exciting trend flowing in part from the attention given in recent years to giving children and young people in care a voice. The work of CREATE in Australia and similar representative groups overseas is showing what a perceptive and helpful form of involvement in creating better services this can be. This is an empowering and skill building process in itself, while potentially enhancing employment and quality of service outcomes.

Brenda Clare from Western Australia, in her article on meeting the health care needs of children in out-of-home care, utilises the idea of care journeys and a focus on the health care needs of children to again draw attention to the significance of the impact of a care system in which transience and uncertainty are typical features. The differentiation into care profiles of *passers through*, *repeaters*, *movers* and *stayers* used in the Western Australian study helps to shed light on medical conditions which can be missed, or diagnosed but not treated. Again this is a matter with potentially large, costly and long term consequences.

Judith Lancaster, in her article 'Who benefits from the equalising of age of consent provisions', takes up the implications of the New South Wales Wood Royal Commission recommendation concerning the age of consent, which appears to be based on gender equality grounds but which may have the consequence of increasing the vulnerability of children at risk. This complex and little debated subject stands among an array of competing rights. Hopefully this article will lead to more careful consideration and discussion of the issues involved.

Dr Cas O'Neill has reviewed three books for us, all of them concerning adopted and foster children. One offers insights into the adoption process from the perspective of the children themselves; the second emphasises the importance to one another of siblings in placement; and the third offers practical help in discussing difficult issues with adopted and foster children.

Lloyd Owen