

Editorial

In this special issue of *Children Australia* we welcome to the role of Guest Editors Dr Frank Ainsworth and Dr Judy Cashmore. Both have been significant contributors to research in child, youth and family welfare. They have worked hard to bring readers some overseas perspectives and some very useful Australian contributions to the task of building and consolidating a national research agenda for children in out-of-home care.

Lloyd Owen, Editor



This special edition of *Children Australia* focuses on a number of issues concerning research in relation to out-of-home care in Australia. It developed from the discussion at a workshop convened by the co-editors of this special edition on behalf of the National Child and Family Welfare Research Coalition (NCFWRC) and provides some background to an agenda building process. The workshop was on 'Building a research agenda for out-of-home care' at the September 2002 conference *Evidence Based Practice in Child and Family Services: What Works?* in Sydney (organised by ACWA, CAFWAA and NAPCAN).

The focus of the workshop was on:

- identifying key policy and practice issues in out-of-home care where (further) research is needed;
- devising a sequenced ten-year knowledge-building research timetable;
- promoting individual and collaborative research projects.

Professor Peter Pecora, the Senior Research Director from the Casey Family Programs in Seattle, and keynote speaker at the conference, contributed his experience and expertise to the workshop. He outlined the current Casey research projects (<http://www.casey.org>) and other US agenda building initiatives (National Council on Research in Child Welfare, 1994) and highlighted some of the difficulties that had been encountered and how these had been addressed. He also offered advice, using overseas research, about inadequately or inappropriately using overseas research, and wasting resources by replicating studies that have already been done elsewhere rather than focussing on topics about which we still have little evidence.

Participants in the workshop then proceeded to generate and prioritise a list of questions they saw as important research topics or questions they would like addressed to improve practice. The first article in this special edition by the co-editors outlines the results of this process and the reasons why a national research agenda in this area is needed. It also suggests that what is needed to make this agenda work is a commitment to research, adequate funding and access to reliable data as well as an understanding of how to translate research findings into practice.

The other articles in this edition have been selected to represent issues that deserve research attention or which influence the research process in relation to out-of-home care in the Australian context. They cover practice issues, research methods and the critical issue of data collection and data access. The articles provide a sample of the issues that child and family services need to explore. Unfortunately, space restrictions prevent this special edition of *Children Australia* from offering a wider coverage of these issues. Hopefully, other articles that were proposed, but not accepted for this edition will still be written and appear in future editions of this journal.

The first article by Paul Delfabbro and Jim Barber, 'Before it's too late: Enhancing the early detection and prevention of long-term placement disruption', deals with the issue of placement disruption, one of the most significant practice issues in this area and one that requires urgent attention. Delfabbro and Barber's findings suggest that it is possible to identify at intake those children who will go on to experience a disproportionately high rate of placement disruption. Further, their findings suggest that there is an approximate threshold or point beyond which children subject to placement disruption begin to experience significant deterioration in their psychosocial functioning. If it is possible to identify these children early after entry to care and to predict that children who are not settled within the first year of care are at risk of further harm, it indicates a point at which intervention for children failing to adapt to care may be tried. Delfabbro and Barber argue the need for evaluating and targeting treatment programs for children with challenging behaviours, but are also well aware of the methodological and definitional issues associated with the use of terms such as 'challenging behaviours', 'externalizing' behaviour or 'conduct disorder'.

The next article by Anthony McMahon and Lucinda Reck, 'Well-being for Indigenous foster children: Alternative consideration for practice research', provides a useful and creative alternative way for determining the indicators of well-being for Indigenous children in Australia. As McMahon and Reck point out, 'status indicators' typically describe the status of children in care in regard to reason for coming into care, length of time in care, racial or ethnic identity and whether specific bureaucratic milestones have been reached. Their article puts clearly on the table the need for a child-focussed approach rather than one which serves administrative decision-making. It also broadens the scope of 'status indicators' to include the explicit requirements arising from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. Given the heavy over-representation of Indigenous children and families in the population served by child and family services and the particular vulnerabilities and issues associated with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, this is a critical issue and the basis of an extremely important contribution. Their proposed use of measures of well-being as indicators of the effectiveness of foster care for Indigenous children is an important topic for further debate and development.

From the same school of social work, Jane Thomson and Ros Thorpe offer another key article, 'The importance of parents in the lives of children in the care system'. They outline what we do know from the scant research about the parents of children in care and what we still need to know, including the need for a theoretical framework that includes the implications of attachment, loss and grief, and power. As they point out,

A deeper understanding from a loss perspective would help clarify appropriate ways of working with parents, facilitate their involvement, participation and partnership, maintain family connections and thereby enhance the possibilities of restoration for some children in care and of continuing life-long family ties for most others.

They also draw attention to the enduring presence in child and family services of 'parent blaming' policies and practice that, in an era of family-centred and strengths-based approaches to practices, needs considerable revision. That both of these articles are from the School of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University is a tribute to the effort of this school in developing a foster care research program in northern Queensland.

Jan Mason, Robert Urquhart and Natalie Bolzan raise some ethical and methodological issues about engaging in participatory research with children and young people in care in their article 'Defining children's needs in out-of-home care: Methods and challenges of a collaborative research project'. They describe the challenges in engaging and involving children and young people in research efforts, and also outline the processes involved in a collaborative research process involving a non-government agency and university researchers. Clearly, what they are attempting is very

demanding, both for the researchers and the children involved in this research. They have lessons for other researchers who may seek to follow a similar research route. Readers who have a particular interest in these issues may also find an article by Thomas and O'Kane (1998) on the ethics of the participatory approach with children very useful; they also outline the advantages and the benefits for the reliability and validity of the research process in this article.

Finally, two articles draw our attention to available Australian data sets and how they might be used and developed for research purposes. Access to reliable data is the cornerstone of future research endeavours. To date, data about child and family services has not been readily accessible. Any attempt to remedy this situation is more than welcome. Sarah Wise explores the possibility of 'using *Looking After Children* to create an Australian out-of-home care database'. She provides a useful outline of the short-comings of existing data collections on children in out-of-home care in Australia and the reasons why Australia-wide data is essential as a basis for improved research and as evidence of what is needed and what might help in achieving improved outcomes for children. She also outlines the potential for the LAC system as a child-focussed set of measures for research purposes as well as acknowledging the challenges in its implementation.

Helen Johnstone, formerly with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, in her article 'The national out-of-home care data collection: Where to from here?' outlines the arguments for a national database in Australia and sketches some of the issues associated with managing such a database when the States have different legislation, policies and practice and provide their data in aggregate format from their own administrative databases according to defined counting rules. Johnstone also points to the possible developments and the benefits that would come with such data being available in unit record format. In short, what this would mean is that the data would include certain information on individual children rather than pre-determined aggregated data. It would provide much greater flexibility and allow researchers and policy makers to obtain answers to questions that cannot be asked of the aggregated data with pre-defined coding and categories. More importantly, it could provide a greater focus on *children* rather than the *service system*; in particular, it could provide information about children's pathways through the system and their placement stability rather than an account of their entry and exit from the service system. This development is sorely needed but other initiatives such as the development of a national non-government database are also likely to be needed before researchers can be sure of getting access to a reliable range of data sources.

WHAT NEXT?

Taking the research agenda forward and developing an action agenda based on it will require energy and commitment. There are, however, indications of various attempts at the national, state, and agency level to do so, including moves to

develop cross agency-university collaboration as well as interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration. The inclusion of vulnerable children and young people and particularly those in the child protection and out-of-home care 'systems' needs to be a vital part of the development of the broader research and longitudinal study projects currently under way through the Australian Research Alliance of Children and Youth and associated developments. It is likely, however, that the real results of this effort and the operationalisation of the ideas discussed at the recent agenda-building workshop will require a 10-year timeline before they become readily apparent.

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GUEST EDITORS

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- Thomas, N. & O'Kane, C. (1998) 'The ethics of participatory research with children', *Children and Society*, 12, 336-348.

If any researchers or practitioners are interested in the National Child and Family Welfare Research Coalition (NCFWRC), you can contact those involved at c-fwelfare@aifs.gov.au or subscribe to this list by sending a message to majordomo@aifs.gov.au and typing in the body of the message: subscribe c-fwelfare

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