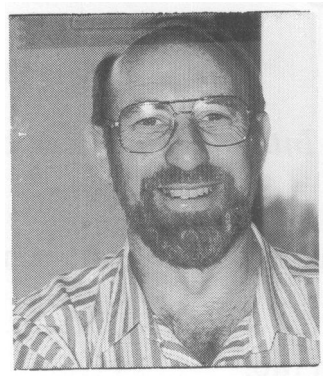
Editorial



This issue marks the end of the International Year of the Family (IYF) 1994 and ushers in the International Year for Tolerance (IYT) 1995. Both provide powerful triggers for reflection. We might first ask what has emerged as a consequence of having the family on the agenda for twelve months? Has it made a difference so far? Has it set in train processes which shift the course of human affairs in Australia in a more worthwhile direction for families? Has or is the world becoming a more friendly place for children?

Yes and no. Various conferences and events have been held in each State and Territory. Many organisations have taken the opportunity to refresh their family focus. Some may have introduced a family focus. The importance of the family as a source of support and an agent of socialisation has frequent rhetorical recognition. Decisions are being 'taken in industrial relations and social security arenas in Australia with the aim of becoming more family friendly. While we continue to adjust to the effects of the White Paper on Employment released earlier in 1994, the Australian Government plans to release a family policy, originally scheduled for early in 1995 but now postponed till later in the year.

Closely connected to the somewhat fluid concept of family is the notion of 'household', an easier entity to study and count. The idea of 'home' is also something much harder to count, but is of resounding importance to the inner world of each of us. But policy often falls short, and child and family welfare services struggle continually with a range of opposing forces to meet the need we all feel for some physical space somewhere, backed by a psychological sense that we have a home. That is somewhere to feel safe, somewhere to rest and recoup our energy and strength, somewhere to generate our contribution to positive citizenship. In these ways and more, homes are important productive entities. We might ask how, then, can we overcome the many social and economic forces which, intentionally or unintentionally, destroy the opportunity for people to have and retain a stable home? As we enter 1995, conflict, poverty and homelessness are major challenges still facing policy makers and practitioners at global, national and local levels. Their impact on children may be variable and relative, but for many it is clearly beyond a defensible level.

Conflict and the consequent displacement of people are all too often features of everyday life in the affairs of nations. Homes are destroyed in wars, families are damaged, dispersed and displaced. Kidnap and murder of villagers and travellers; artillery shelling of towns and cities; roads and fields sown with land mines are some of the all too evident signs of inhumanity abroad. Millions of asylum seekers are on the move and in refugee camps, often far away from home. Australia has a major probelm in this area and a very dubious record in our management of it.

Also in this country, broken and bitter families, industrial conflict, the pursuit of litigation, backlogged courts, a widening gap between the haves and have nots, and the abuse and exploitation of children comprise risks and wreckage for some people. In spite of the work of mediators and arbitrators, it is clear that we have a long way to go in discovering how best to manage prejudice, frustration and competition and steer in the direction of win win outcomes. At the very least, serious effort and resources are required to keep these risks within boundaries which do not violate the safety of the home to which each of us needs to belong.

A frequent precursor to conflict, and a variety of other ills, is poverty and its consequent demoralisation. It is responsible for another wave of people abandoning home to seek relief or improvement in their economic circumstances. Internationally, the export of labour is second in value only to the oil industry. Many overseas workers then send money back to their home countries, but it is a trade which is often accompanied by substantial social costs to the people involved and their families. Allied to this is the presently only partly visible sex trade of children, young women and young men. When families sell the their children for this, or other forms of child labour in conditions which are damaging or debilitating, we have to question the morality of the political and economic systems which both enable it to happen and fail to provide sufficient remedy. There appears to be a need for a system which provides economic support for parenting, caregiving and community development roles. The market place appears to have difficulty recognising exploitation as an unacceptable cost and going beyond the elusive 'trickle down' in ensuring family and community quality of life. The extra step, it seems, has to come from government as well as the market, an enlightened empowered community, or a partnership.

In Australia, the debate around the definition of the family continues. For our purposes, what matters is that the family, in all its forms, relates to its place in the physical, social and economic fabric, and the roles it performs in establishing identity and a developmental environment for children. This entails adults within it, or associated with it, having time for children, listening, talking, sharing, showing how. How should we finance this function? It involves access to food, clothing and shelter; the wherewithal firstly to survive and secondly, to have the means to negotiate a positive image and place in society in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. So many of our insights, our models, and our shaping through approval and disapproval of our conduct, have foundations in the daily round of family life. Some families get into a state which falls short of providing the conditions for protection and positive socialisation, some indeed contain actively negative learning environments. A small number warrant extreme intrusive intervention. Most, like those negotiating the transitional overloaded periods in their life course, need

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ready access to supportive services able and willing to boost the family strengths and capacities.

Isolation and overload stand out as contributing factors among burgeoning protective services notifications concerned with parenting, as do the complications of drug and alcohol problems, psychiatric and intellectual disabilities. There are now many examples, scattered around Australia, of service innovation in family support programs and family oriented services. Many of these services struggle for survival, with insufficient resources to meet the demand. There is a need for them also to be better described and more accessible. Initiatives in case management are developing on a number of fronts, and 1995 may see some welcome improvements in this respect.

We should turn our attention also to the new year and ask what frame of reference does a year for tolerance provide. 1995 marks the 50th anniversary of the birth of the United Nations and the commencement of Australia's post war migration program. That half century has seen the growth of a remarkably diverse, multi-cultural society. Tolerance and broad cohesion are to be found among contemporary Australian values. The year marks also the 20th anniversary of the passage of Australia's Racial Discrimination Bill, in which we codified the inclusiveness of our society. The Minister responsible for national government activity for IYT, Senator Bolkus, indicated that 'themes for the year will be justice, inclusion, acknowledging rights and responsibilities and respect for difference and diversity,' (press release October 7). The year has also been declared by the UN to be the first year of the International Decade for the World's Indigenous People. Australia will host in Sydney, (26-28 April) the first Global Cultural Diversity Conference. Among all of this, there will be room to reflect on what makes home a good place to be.

Contributors to this issue take us across the spectrum of individual, family and community action for child welfare. Howard Bath, drawing on data from the relatively new Welfare Division of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, provides a state by state comparison of out-of-home care in Australia. It reveals a general picture of low rates on international comparisons (this may involve underservicing), considerable reliance on foster care, but some marked differences between Australian jurisdictions. Yet again emerges a disturbing, though in his words, 'a not entirely pessimistic' picture of the disproportionate involvement of Aboriginal children in the system. Better approaches to obtaining data about our work is a clear need. Paul Ban and Phillip Swain complete their report on the family decision making project with some hopeful signs concerning its addition to the array of responses to child protection needs.

For the students of Australian family law, Frank Bates draws on his involvement with the Patterns of Parenting Report to comment on some of its recommendations. Included are the abandonment of terms like 'custody' and 'access' and moves to enable more cooperative parenting. It seems likely that these approaches will find their way into legislative amendments during 1995. Frank Ainsworth and Rick Small have contributed an article on Family Centred Group Care Practice. This approach deliberately builds a family focus into residential group care. Steps are being taken to use the approach in a project in the United States. By arrangement, this article is also being published in that country in the *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work*. Sandy Wilson and her colleagues from Queensland take up the oft neglected but extremely important theme of preparing young people for leaving care. 'Breaking the Cycle: Taking Responsibility for Independence' draws attention to the fact that our work is not done until we see the young person connected to a viable social network, with opportunities and the skills to take advantage of them.

In the second of their two articles, the team from the University of South Australia present the need and some strategy to 'change individual and community attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and circumstances' which allow child abuse to occur. Prevention of child abuse, it appears, has more to do with a climate which legitimates the seeking of advice and support and provides access to help when it is needed, rather than having the orientation and resources pitched to points after the event. Some, including David Thorpe, based on his study of child protection practice in Western Australia, argue a pressing need to reframe our conception of child abuse away from 'can we make a case?' toward 'what help is needed?' Thorpe's book *Evaluating Child Protection* we hope to review in a later issue. At the same time, strong community reaction often leads to more proscription of practice based on worst case scenarios and the doubtful belief that legal action will solve the problem - it may help in some cases, it may be crucial in some others, but for some it is plainly damaging. There is also room, it would seem, to consider the consequences for children of the use of the term 'abuse' and the response it evokes. On the other hand, one would never want to condone behaviour which causes children harm. In the months leading up to the next Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect (October 95 in Melbourne), we hope to advance the much needed debates around these issues.

Also included in this issue is the text of an address by Peter Newell entitled 'Putting and end to Physical Punishment' It is a cogent examination of the issues and arguments involved, and describes his experience of the EPOCH campaign launched in the UK in 1989. In addition to having the potential to make the world more friendly for children, education for more peace in the world should get a boost where the cessation of violence against children in the home can be achieved. Chris Goddard's column reports further on an example from the UK of the emotive issue of organised or ritual abuse. This subject requires carefully considered attention. Its potential to set off moral panic and injustice is great. Denial or avoidance of the issue, and its entanglement with other difficulty concerns, such as 'false memory syndrome' may also lead to harmful actions or omissions. The task of advancing our understanding in these areas, though challenging, is vital for the well-being of children, families and our community.

LLoyd Owen