

Governments across the world are currently investing considerable resources in the widespread implementation of programs of parent education. Parent education is being seen, in this context, as an efficient element in a strategy towards the prevention and ultimate reduction of such social ills as child maltreatment, school drop out, juvenile crime, youth homelessness, and alcohol and drug abuse by children and young people.

Often a specific causal analysis underlies such investment in parent education. The analysis stems from firmly held assumptions that the responsibility for child rearing rests exclusively with parents. It is a short step from such assumptions to the conclusion that social ills of the kind just referred to are the outcomes, in the main, of inappropriate parenting. It follows, on this analysis, that if parents can be trained or educated to perform their child rearing roles more effectively than many of these problems will be avoided.

To conceptualise parenting in this manner is to overlook the social context within which parents devote themselves to the task of caring for and rearing their children. Let me refer to this orientation as *parenting without parenthood*, by which I mean the attempt to attribute child outcomes to the responsibility of parents, without regard to the social and economic circumstances within which parents and their children have to live their lives, or to the value and status which society attaches to the parenting role.

Some social analysts, of course, take the opposite tack and endeavour to analyse child maltreatment, juvenile crime and the like exclusively in terms of the pressures which poverty, unemployment, poor housing, racial discrimination and ill health create for parents. From this perspective, poor child rearing outcomes are construed as the inevitable consequence of being obliged to bring up children under such adverse conditions. This orientation could be labelled as *parenthood without parenting*.

A full understanding of the processes and outcomes of rearing children in contemporary society requires, of course, that consideration be given both to parenting *and* to parenthood; to the ways in which individual parents go about the tasks of providing for, caring for and interacting with their children, *and* to the economic conditions within which those tasks are framed, as well as to the social and political attitudes and values that inform the status bestowed upon parents and their children in contemporary society. This is the inclusive approach to understanding family and child development advocated by social ecologists like Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Garbarino (1995).

This is not to argue that training and education for parenting and parenthood have no part to play in family policy. An



## DIRECTOR'S REPORT

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ecological orientation, however, would seem to require the adoption of more elaborated concepts of parenting than have informed the development of many contemporary approaches to parent education. An ecological orientation would

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also seem to require that programs for parents should include 'bottom up' as well as 'top down' components. Moreover, an ecological orientation would see parent education as only one element, and not necessarily the most important element, in an integrated system of support for vulnerable families. Let me address each of these points in turn.

### Restricted and Elaborated Concepts of Parenting

Many of the most widely adopted parent education programs focus almost exclusively on how parent-child interaction episodes can be managed so as to secure parental control over the child's immediate behaviour, particularly where matters of discipline are concerned. This socialisation strategy is advocated in the belief that it is the most efficient way to ensure that children will maintain acceptable standards of behaviour in the long term.

Such programs tend to conceptualise child rearing as a skills based process. To be effective, parents need to be equipped with a repertoire of child behaviour management skills and principles which, once acquired, can be applied more or less programmatically to a range of commonly occurring parent-child interaction routines, frequently identified as 'problems' – eating problems, sleeping problems, whining, disobedience, temper tantrums and so on.

Such highly focused approaches can have the consequence, perhaps unintended, that with respect to parenting, 'one size fits all'; parents whose children are not

behaving acceptably are at fault because they are not doing their job properly. Similarly, among parents who are experiencing difficulties, the 'one size fits all' approach can engender an attitude of self blame; they perceive themselves as failing as parents because they have not learned the 'correct' way to bring up their children.

It is a short step from analyses based on such restricted concepts of parenting to the conclusion that the remedy is to expose parents to structured training in behaviour modification, in the course of which effective behavioural management principles and practices can be communicated. Also, if 'improvement' in child behaviour does not flow from such training, it can be maintained not that the training is inappropriate or inadequate but that parents are failing either to acquire or to implement the skills demonstrated in the program. Thus the *parenting without parenthood* principle can be preserved intact.

If adequate strategies are to be developed to enhance how children are cared for in vulnerable families then our concepts of parenting need to be elaborated to extend beyond concerns with parent-child behavioural interaction, to encompass the entire range of activities through which children are cared for and nurtured on a long-term basis. Similarly, analysis of parenting needs to extend beyond mere behavioural sequences to encompass the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values and aspirations which parents bring to the task of rearing their children. Further, analysis needs to be informed by appreciation of the socio-economic conditions under which the roles of parenthood are being undertaken and which may facilitate or inhibit the effective fulfilment of these roles. Such would be the preliminary steps towards an ecology of parenting.

### 'Top Down' versus 'Bottom Up' Approaches to Parenting

As indicated earlier, many contemporary parent education programs are based on behavioural analyses of parenting. Such analyses, themselves a product of Skinnerian learning theory, involve a number of steps. First, the global notion of parenting is broken down into a number of specific tasks, including such everyday child care routines as toilet training, eating, sleeping, dealing with a temper tantrum and so on. For each situation a desired or desirable behavioural outcome is identified – on the convenient assumption that such outcomes are value neutral and unproblematic. The precise behavioural components of each outcome are then elaborated in temporal sequence and a pattern of reinforcement identified which, if implemented appropriately by the parent, will result in shaping the child's behaviour

towards the desired outcome. Thereafter, an intermittent pattern of reward or reinforcement of the outcome itself is assumed to be efficient in ensuring its maintenance over time.

The following vignette illustrates how these processes can be simplistically adapted to the behavioural shaping of polite requesting, the objective of which might be to ensure that a child will always ask for things 'nicely'.

*A four-year-old approaches her mother and whines, 'I need to have a biscuit, I want a biscuit.'*

*Parent: 'Please, Jennifer, ask for the biscuit nicely. Say, "May I please have a biscuit." So, what should you say when you ask nicely?'*

*(Demonstrates target behaviour and requests child to repeat.)*

*Jennifer: 'Mummy, may I please have a biscuit?'*

*Parent: 'That's much nicer. Of course you can have a biscuit.' (Verbal and material reinforcement of desired behaviour.)*

*(Later)*

*Jennifer: 'Mum, please may I have another biscuit?'*

*Parent: 'You asked nicely that time too, but it will soon be time for tea so I don't think it's a good idea to have another biscuit now. But you can watch TV or play a game until tea's ready.' (Verbal reinforcement of desired behaviour plus behavioural diversion.)*

What this approach asks us to accept is that all of parenting can be separated into such simple, highly structured, behavioural episodes and that by the judicious manipulation of rewards or reinforcement, parents can shape children's behaviour to any desired end.

It is important to note that such analyses are appropriately described as 'top down' in the sense that they have been developed more on the basis of the construction of hypothetical learning sequences that begin with the desired end point and work backwards from there, than upon observation of the activities of ordinary parents engaged in the everyday rearing of their children.

Behaviourally oriented parenting programs have their origins in Skinnerian

## Institute hosts Family Research Conference

More than 250 delegates from government, academia, service provider agencies and the media attended the fifth Australian Family Research Conference, hosted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in Brisbane, on 27–29 November 1996.

The Australian Family Research Conference is organised by the Institute every three years to provide a forum for reporting the results from current family research being undertaken in Australia and overseas, and as such provide an important link between diverse groups of service providers, government and non-government decision makers, and academia.

As at previous conferences, the objective was to clarify, in a changing policy context, the role of research and researchers in the formulation of family policies and programs. It was this objective that gave rise to the theme of this year's Conference – *Family Research: Pathways to Policy*.

Conference sessions addressed a wide range of areas, including living standards, aged, parenting and carer issues, family values, families and the media, work and family, service delivery and how to make research relevant to policy.

### **Some conference highlights**

During the three days of the Conference, more than 100 presentations were made by Australian and international researchers. Keynote speakers and others addressed major areas of family policy and service provision.



In the opening session delegates were addressed by the Federal Minister for Family Services, the Hon Judi Moylan. Mrs Moylan spoke about the role of research and data in informing the development of family policy in a context of changing community expectations, attitudes and standards. Mr Ron Burke, from the National Australia Bank – the Conference sponsor – gave an address entitled, 'Replenishing our stocks of social capital: the role of the corporate sector'. Dr Harry McGurk, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, spoke about families in a caring society.

The first day ended with two major conference 'events'. Professor Paul Amato from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, spoke about the intergenerational transmission of divorce and the impacts of divorce on intergenerational relationships. Then a new publication from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Remaking Families: Adaptation of Parents and Children to Divorce*, by Dr Kathleen Funder, was launched by

Justice Michelle May of the Family Court of Australia. (For details of this book, see the Institute Publications section of this issue of *Family Matters*.)

In Thursday's Plenary Session, 'Family welfare: whose responsibility?' was the question under discussion by Professor Bob Officer, from the Melbourne Business School, and Professor Bettina Cass, Dean of Arts, Sydney University. Professor Bob Gregory gave the final keynote address which explored the implications of our changing economy for families and family policy now and in the future.

### **Conference papers published in this issue**

We are pleased to publish in this issue edited versions of four of the papers presented at the Conference.

*Stretched Lives: Working in Paid Employment and Caring for Elderly Relatives*, by Elizabeth Watson and Jane Mears.

*Family Law Reforms and Attitudes to Parental Responsibility*, by Kate Funder and Bruce Smyth.

*Children's Responsibilities to their Elderly Parents*, by David de Vaus.

*Meeting the Support Needs of Families with Dependent Children Where the Parent has a Mental Illness*, by Vicki Cowling.

**The next issue of *Family Matters* will contain a full report of the Conference, and a comprehensive selection of papers presented.**

learning theory. Other programs, such as *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* (Dinkmeyer and McKay 1976) or *Parent Effectiveness Training* (Gordon 1970) are based on different theoretical assumptions. Nonetheless, they remain top down, in the sense that they are developed from theoretical assumptions about the nature of children and about what parenting *should* involve, rather than from systematic observation and analysis of actual, everyday parenting.

Top down programs have been developed, by and large, on the basis of deficit models of parents. They encourage an attitude that, without input from experts, parents are likely to get things wrong. Such 'expertism', such colonisation of parenting as the provenance of experts, entails the danger, in fact, of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy to the extent that it encourages parents to distrust their own competence and to believe that they must be instructed by 'experts' so as to achieve competence in child rearing (O'Brien 1991).

The fact of the matter is that the majority of parents have been successfully rearing children to live reasonably productive lives and become contributing members of society for generations, and are still doing so. Moreover, comparative research tells us that there is no one expeditious model for successfully rearing children but a wide variety of modes and models (Weisner and Gallimore 1977). The research evidence tells us also that parents adopt different strategies with different children so that even within the same family, parenting

frequently differs in content and is distributed and experienced differently between siblings (Dunn and Plomin 1990).

These are arguments for a 'bottom up' approach to the development of parent education. Such an approach would involve analysis of the outcomes from longitudinal, naturalistic studies of the child rearing strategies of parents from representative samples of families, stratified by geographical, social and economic circumstances; of the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes values and aspirations which inform those strategies; of the outcomes for children and of the structural, personal, psychological and other characteristics that differentiate between parents coping successfully with the tasks of parenting and those coping less well.

### Towards an Ecology of Parenting

As suggested earlier, research of the kind just outlined would constitute the first steps towards a social ecology of parenting. It would inform understanding of the ways in which individual, social and economic factors combine to influence how children are being looked after in families. Outcomes from such research would create a resource for policy makers and planners concerned to ensure an integrated, whole of government response to the support of families in general.

Such research would also provide the basis for an ecologically valid approach to identifying the needs of parents who are not coping successfully with child rearing

and who require more tailored support. Education and training would be but one component of such support. However, such education and training programs would themselves be informed by research on how ordinary, caring, effective parents engage with the task of bringing up their children, and by an understanding of how the lessons from such research can be used to develop and deliver supports for families coping with parenting under stress and adversity.

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## National CommunityLink Sponsor of Institute's Family Research Conference

Australia's leading bank and one of its largest companies, National Australia Bank, was the sole sponsor of the Institute's fifth Australian Family Research Conference.

The sponsorship is part of the National's CommunityLink program – an integrated series of projects designed to address issues of concern to communities throughout Australia.

The National is concentrating its funding on issues related to families, youth, education, leadership and community services.

According to General Manager Group Corporate Relations, Mr Ron Burke, there is a need for closer cooperation between the corporate sector, government, and community representative organisations in addressing social issues. This theme will be explored in Mr Burke's presentation during the Conference.



The National has a particular interest in the concept of social capital, or the ability of communities to work together to address issues and provide necessary services for their citizens.

The National takes an active role in working with community representative organisations to develop 'self help' and leadership development projects designed to improve social capital.

The approach of the National was recently highlighted in a keynote address by the head of the company, Mr Don Argus. In delivering the 1996 Copland Address to over 300 representatives of business, the education sector and the media in Sydney, Mr Argus noted the need for major companies to take a more active role in addressing social issues.

The National's CommunityLink initiative comprises major sponsorships, a community consultation process, and 'outreach' projects to provide National employees with opportunities to take an active role in volunteer and community service organisations.

The National Australia Bank's support of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Family Research Conference reflects this interest.