



AUSTRALIAN FAMILY
RESEARCH AND POLICY

News

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As this issue of *Family Matters* focuses on young people, so do the reports from our corresponding consultants. Topics covered include youth suicide prevention, sibling relationships and divorce, adolescent health and child protection, as well as reports on indigenous families and domestic violence.

Youth Suicide Prevention

Western Australian social worker, Stephen Edwards from YouthLink, Royal Perth Hospital, reports that the Federal Government's National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy is a \$31 million four-year coordinated approach to preventing youth suicide, commencing in 1995. There has been a wide range of funded initiatives including policy and planning activities regarding best practice, research, education and training in youth suicide prevention involving community members, non-professional workers, and clinical or non-clinical professionals.

The strategy has included both whole population activities and other measures deliberately targeted to population sub-groups or individuals most in need.

Recently the strategy released \$3 million for the development and implementation of programs for parents to maximise young people's mental health. This component of the strategy will focus less on suicidal behaviour, and more on the delivery of a combination of primary and secondary prevention measures aimed at enhancing relationships between parents and their children. Community based programs will be offered to parents throughout Australia using existing evaluated models.

In addition to direct service provision, another component of the program for parents (and friends) of young people will be the production and dissemination of a publication which will be a mix of primary health messages aiming to provide parents with ways to broaden their young people's coping strategies, and in turn maximise their mental health. Secondary prevention information allowing parents to better understand and respond to distress in young people will also be distributed. A scheme entitled *The ARs*, previously used

This column is designed to keep readers informed of contemporary developments that matter to families. Compiled from reports provided by a panel of corresponding consultants with expertise in the many dimensions of family research and policy making, the column provides a snapshot of family research and policy issues from a range of research perspectives and geographic locations around Australia. We encourage readers to contact their local Family Matters corresponding consultant to advise them of significant happenings and developments that may be of interest.

to train general practitioners in youth suicide prevention, will be adapted, outlining ways parents can: Recognise the signs of distress in young people; Raise the issue with the young person; Realise the risks; and Respond.

In association with YouthLink (Royal Perth Hospital), a state-wide mental health service for at-risk young people, Stephen Edwards will develop and distribute 1.5 million copies of a publication entitled *Living with Young People*. It will be adapted for the Aboriginal community, as well as being translated into Vietnamese and Cantonese.

Sibling Relationships and Parental Divorce

The University of Queensland Family Centre has received a grant from the Australian Research Council to work with the

Family Court of Australia in a study of the function of sibling relationships for children during and following the divorce of their parents. A key focus is how supportive sibling relationships tend to be, and the factors that predict whether those relationships are constructive and supportive for both the children involved, for only one of the children, or are destructive for both children.

The researchers are also interested in whether children with a sibling cope better with the divorce than those with no siblings, and therefore whether only children going through the divorce of their parents may need to be supported in other ways.

The research is expected to provide an increased understanding of the role of the sibling relationship in divorcing families, and this increased understanding should have important implications for decisions about the placing of siblings following divorce, and also about the support needs of children experiencing parental divorce.

Adolescent Health

In 1996 a survey about adolescent health was administered to 1939 students from 18 schools in the Illawarra region of New South Wales. Boys and girls in Years 6, 8 and 10 completed questionnaires on their leisure and health behaviours. There were five broad areas of interest: physical exercise and television watching; safety; alcohol and tobacco consumption; injuries in past 12 months; psychosocial health and bullying.

The results suggest that the health of Illawarra adolescents is typical of adolescents in Australia. While adolescents from non-English-speaking backgrounds were less likely than those from English-speaking backgrounds to do physical exercise outside school and adopt road-safe behaviours, such as wearing seat belts, the similarities between the two groups seem to be greater than their differences. A number of issues are of equal concern among adolescents from both non-English-speaking and English-speaking backgrounds, in particular the





high prevalence of smoking and binge drinking, stress and lack of confidence among girls, and bullying among boys. Girls were less likely than boys to take vigorous exercise, or to injure themselves, but more likely to wear seat belts.

The prevalence data were collected by the Illawarra and South Western Sydney Area Health Services in collaboration with New South Wales University School of Community Medicine, and will be used for population health monitoring.

Further information can be obtained from Dr Victoria Westley-Wise, Illawarra Public Health Unit, Illawarra Area Health Service. Phone (024) 226 4677.

Child Protection

A charter for children and young people in care – 'Commitments in Care' – has been developed by Future Echoes, the South Australian branch of the Australian Association of Young People in Care, the Department for Family and Community Services (now part of the Department of Human Services) and the Office for Families and Children.

The Charter arose out of a conference where children and young people spoke passionately about their concerns and the changes which they believed would make a difference to their lives.

Four central principles, based on the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child, underpin the Charter: recognition of children and young people as consumers of services; respect for individual circumstances and needs; empowerment of children and young

people; and involvement of children and young people as partners in planning their future.

In addition, the charter contains a series of commitments by Family and Community Services to all children and young people in care. These include the involvement of children and young people in policy and service development and decision making, participation in case planning and review, provision of services which assist children and young people in care to reach their full potential as individuals, and cultural responsiveness and relevance of alternative care services. The Charter is currently in the process of being implemented.

Further information may be obtained from Jennifer Harvey, Office for Families and Children. Phone (08) 8226 6685.

In New South Wales a number of government reports and inquiries in relation to parents, children and families are currently underway or about to be released.

The value of parents and parenting to the community is the subject of the New South Wales Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues' inquiry into parent education and support. The terms of reference require it to report on the state of parent education and support in New South Wales, especially in relation to parenting children under the age of five years. It is concerned with the accessibility, relevance and flexibility of existing parent education and support programs, as well as the need for coordination, monitoring

and the evaluation of such programs.

One reason for increased interest in the inquiry is that it fits with increasing recognition of the need for prevention and early intervention. A number of government and non-government agencies (such as Burnside) in New South Wales and elsewhere are recognising the need for a better balance between prevention and intervention and treatment, especially in relation to juvenile crime, health, and child abuse and neglect. The inquiry is expected to report by about mid-1998.

The second annual report of the NSW Child Deaths Review Team is to be released this week. It presents data about the 1201 children under the age of 18 in New South Wales who have died since the Team was established 18 months ago.

While many of the deaths as a result of illness and congenital abnormalities were not preventable, others were potentially avoidable. These included accidental deaths as a result of drowning, farm accidents, and the non-accidental deaths of children and young people as a result of homicide, suicide or fatal abuse and neglect.

The focus of the reviews in this report on children known to the New South Wales Department of Community Services before their deaths, confirmed the findings of previous reports concerning problems with inadequate risk assessment and investigation, and poor communication among agencies who held relevant information about the

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child. Future reports of the Team will focus on adolescent suicide and the drug-related deaths of babies.

A copy of the report is available from the NSW Child Deaths Review Team. Phone (02) 9286 7204.

A recently released report on research by the NSW Child Protection Council highlights the benefits and barriers to children and young people in care being able to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. The findings challenge established notions of adults having the ultimate control over the lives of these children and indicate that children and young people generally do not want to determine the decisions; they just want to have a say and have their feelings and views respected.

The project, conducted by Pam Spall, Paul Testrol and Ruth Matchett, was based on the views of young people aged 10–17 years, their parents, foster carers and agency personnel, peak bodies and consumer groups.

A user-friendly report for children and young people was produced, as well as the main research report. Both are available from the Child Protection Council. Phone (02) 9286 7276.

The fourth significant New South Wales report concerns the proposed Children's Commission following Justice Wood's Royal Commission recommendation that a Children's Commission should be established in New South Wales as a supervisory agency to ensure that key agencies worked effectively in children's best interests.

In late December 1997, the New South Wales Government released a Green Paper on the Children's Commission. It covers a range of issues but does not provide an overall model for a Commission. It focuses on the possible conflict of interest among various elements or functions of the Commission and outlines three options for handling complaints. All these options involve various degrees of change or dismantling of the Community Services Commission, a move resisted by a number of non-government agencies.

Submissions were due on 31 March 1998. If and when a Commission is established in New South Wales, that state will become the third (following Queensland and Tasmania) to legislate

for a Children's Commission. While a federal Children's Commission has been urged by various children's advocates for some time, following the joint report by the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission ('Seen and Heard') on children's priority in the legal process, an Office for Children within government rather than an independent commission seems likely.

Indigenous Families

Several themes of interest to indigenous families will be pursued by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), Australian National University, in the next five years including: measuring the nature and extent of indigenous poverty; analysing the interactions between the Social Security system and indigenous incentives to work; and looking at indigenous labour market flows and job search behaviour and examining the policy impediments to improving poor socio-economic outcomes of indigenous Australians.

Measuring indigenous poverty

This work will include: a detailed description of 1996 Census data on income, education, employment and housing; inter-censal data comparisons providing insight to ongoing trends in indigenous poverty; and a cohort analysis of income using the last three censuses to enable analysis of the dynamics of indigenous poverty.

Social security and indigenous incentives to work

CAEPR researchers will examine the financial incentives to find work. A particular research focus will be the relative size of DSS payments and expected wages among the indigenous unemployed, those in the Community Development Employment Program, and those not in the labour force. Self-employment may provide one means for escaping indigenous poverty or, at least, becoming less dependent upon social security. CAEPR researchers will construct an international literature review of race and self-employment and analyse the prospects for and determinants of indigenous self-employment using

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey and 1996 Census data.

Indigenous labour market flows and job search behaviour

The foreshadowed construction of longitudinal data on DSS clients should provide a unique opportunity to analyse the flows of indigenous people between labour market states and welfare benefits. If longitudinal data from the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs on indigenous job seekers becomes publicly available, then it should be possible to analyse job search behaviour of indigenous people who have been registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service.

Domestic Violence

An interim evaluation report on the Violence Intervention Project (reported in the last issue of *Family Matters*) being undertaken in the northern suburbs of Adelaide has been released. The aim of the project is to provide a coordinated response to the needs of women and children subject to domestic violence and provide more options for men to change their violent behaviour.

The project involves all agencies with a role in the criminal justice response to domestic violence, including the police, courts, corrections, and specialist workers for men, women, and children. The interim evaluation report states that 'the Violence Intervention Project provides an enlightening case study in the development of a set of values and a theoretical concept into a service model of national and international significance'.

As the interim evaluation has been prepared ten months into the project it has not been possible to comprehensively assess client outcomes at this stage. Interagency coordination between relevant agencies appears to have improved significantly, a major factor in providing a prompt and effective response to domestic violence.

For further information contact Sue Foster. Phone (08) 8226 6718.

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