

New research partnership formed at Australian Institute

Thirty-five key researchers in children's health and development attended a workshop held over three days on 22–24 February 2001 at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the formation of a new National Research Partnership for Developmental Health and Wellbeing, drawing together researchers from a wide array of disciplines.

The motivation behind the proposal to form a partnership was the conviction that a new era of interdisciplinary, intersectoral work is needed if we are to address the research and policy issues affecting child wellbeing in this rapidly changing society (see also Fiona Stanley's article in this edition of *Family Matters*).

The meeting was organised by a steering committee comprising Professor Graham Vimpani (University of Newcastle), Professor Fiona Stanley (Institute for Child Health Research in Perth), Professor Alan Hayes (Macquarie University), Professor George Patton (Centre for Adolescent Health, Melbourne), Professor Brian Oldenburg (School of Public Health, Queensland University of Technology), Dr Wayne Smith (National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health), and Associate Professor Ann Sanson (Australian Institute of Family Studies). As an institution, the Institute has a keen interest in promoting the welfare of children in their family and community contexts. It also sees itself as able to play a useful role in encouraging and coordinating research endeavours. It was therefore logical that the Australian Institute of Family Studies should host the workshop.

A multitude of interacting factors impact on children's wellbeing and development, ranging from the biological to the socio-cultural. Therefore, there were researchers at the workshop whose expertise covered antenatal development, infant development, parenting, child care, education, children with disabilities, and adolescent development, as well as biostatistics, epidemiology, economics and social policy research. A number of the key institutions around Australia with an interest in children were represented. These are listed below. This rich mix ensured that discussion was lively and stimulating.

After a welcome from the Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, David Stanton, and introductions, the history to the proposed partnership was outlined (Graham Vimpani) and the meeting's goals and agenda were presented (Fiona Stanley).

The first paper made the case for the importance of the early years for outcomes across the lifespan ("What is the relevance of child and adolescent development for outcomes in education, health and life success", authored by G. Vimpani, G. Patton and A. Hayes (chaired by Ann Sanson; discussant Steve Zubrick). The second presentation argued for why multidisciplinary research is now so crucial, since we know that the complex intersecting influences on children's development fall into the province of medical researchers, psychologists, sociologists, economists and others, and input from all are needed if we are to truly understand the causal pathways to good and poor developmental outcomes ("Modern concepts in causal pathways



Ann Sanson, Australian Institute of Family Studies.



Margot Prior, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, and Fiona Stanley, Institute for Child Health Research.



Jan Nicholson, Queensland University of Newcastle.



Michael Bittman and Judy Cashmore, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.



Jane Dixon, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University, and Kerin O'Dea, Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin.

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thinking”, by F. Stanley, A. Sanson and T. McMichael (chaired by George Patton; discussant Margot Prior).

These papers set the scene for why a partnership was needed. A discussion followed on how such a partnership might operate, with various models of governance presented and critiqued for their relevance to the group’s particular concerns – “The potential roles of a research partnership and options for its governance”, by F. Stanley, B. Oldenburg, G. Patton, and G. Bammer (chaired by Alan Hayes; discussants Mike Sawyer and John Ainley).

Over the course of the three days’ meeting, the consensus grew that the partnership could have a critical role in facilitating a new era in research in human development, and that we could indeed work together effectively. It was decided that Fiona Stanley should be the interim Chair of the partnership for the next 6–12 months, with the committee which organised the workshop continuing as the interim partnership steering committee.

One immediate possible role for the partnership was to facilitate a collaboration of researchers to bid for the proposed Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), funded by the Department of Family and Community Services as part of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. There was therefore considerable discussion about this proposed study.

On Friday morning, a paper summarising longitudinal research on children in Australia and overseas helped to frame the role of the proposed new study (“The state of longitudinal research in Australia and internationally:

Lessons learnt”, by J. Nicholson, A. Sanson, L. Rempel, D. Smart and G. Patton (Chair Steve Zubrick; discussant Ruth Morley). This paper discussed the range of potential designs for the study, the limitations of past research, and the exciting directions being forged in new large-scale longitudinal studies getting under way overseas.

This was followed, in the afternoon, by general discussion about whether the Research Partnership had a role in LSAC (Chair Brian Oldenburg; discussants Ann Sanson, Steve Zubrick). While it was acknowledged that a single study can never be “all things to all people”, there was a strong feeling that LSAC offered a unique opportunity for ground-breaking research which could guide policy on children and families in the immediate and longer term, and that its impact would be far greater if partnership members covering a range of disciplines, perspectives and geographical areas collaborated on the project, rather than competing with each other.

This discussion was extended on Saturday morning (co-chairs Graham Vimpani and Ann Sanson), with detailed discussion about how a consortium of partnership members should best be organised. The unanimous view was that the Australian Institute of Family Studies should be the lead agency in putting in an expression of interest with seven other institutions and a number of individual consultants.

The workshop ended with a discussion of future plans for the partnership, led by Fiona Stanley (see Stanley elsewhere in this edition).

Australian Institute of Family Studies researchers who participated in the workshop were Ann Sanson, Ruth Weston, Sarah Wise and Matthew Gray. Throughout the workshop, the level of support provided by Institute staff was exemplary and warmly acknowledged by all. Jan Gillies from the University of Newcastle helped organise the meeting, and Grace Soriano of the Australian Institute of Family Studies ensured the smooth running of the workshop.

Ann Sanson is the Acting Research Manager at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

ATTENDANCE AT THE WORKSHOP

The following seventeen organisations were represented at the workshop.

- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Australian Council for Educational Research
- TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research
- Women’s and Children’s Hospital/University of Adelaide
- Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne)
- National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (Australian National University)
- Institute of Early Childhood/Psychology (Macquarie University)
- Charles Sturt University
- University of Newcastle
- Social Policy Research Centre (University of New South Wales)
- Queensland University of Technology
- University of Queensland
- Griffith University
- Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin
- Menzies Centre for Population Health Research (University of Tasmania)
- “beyondblue”, The National Depression Initiative



of Technology, and Graham Vimpani,



Fiona Stanley, Institute for Child Health Research.



Alan Hayes, Macquarie University, and Linda Harrison, Charles Sturt University.

Pictures: Ruth Weston