

Leah Bromfield: This presentation was excellent, providing a solid evidence base for the prohibition of physical punishment. The legal condoning of physical punishment creates complex problems in defining child physical abuse and determining the thresholds at which physical punishment becomes physical abuse. The inappropriate use of physical punishment results in many families becoming involved in statutory child protection services. The evidence presented in this paper shows that physical punishment is harmful to children as well as showing that there is growing support from governments internationally for the prohibition of physical punishment.



A longitudinal evaluation of family group conferencing

Patricia Kiely, Uniting Care, Burnside, Sydney.

Family Group Conferencing in child protection aims to allow families to participate fully in decision making about their children who have been or are considered to be at risk of abuse and neglect. The model is based on a number of values that include the importance of the family in children's lives. It works from a strengths perspective, respecting the family's cultural context in decision making, sharing power with families and involving children in care and protection planning.

This process is based on the belief that by involving the wider family in case planning it increases the possibility that the child will be cared for within the kin group, families will be more committed to work with a plan, and that relationships between family members will be improved.

This longitudinal study reports the outcomes for children and families up to five years after they participated in a Family Group Conference to plan for the future welfare needs of their children. This group was compared with a sample of similar families who were subject to more traditional case planning procedures.

The most compelling finding was the increased respite and foster care provided by the kin group for the "conferenced" families especially for children under the age of 12 years. Community agencies provided the majority of support services for both groups increasing the percentage for the "conferenced" group post-conference. A reduction in the rate of reported abuse for the "conferenced" group indicated that safety and welfare of the children was well maintained.

Daryl Higgins: The Clearinghouse supports research that provides an "evidence-base" for practice. Family Group Conferencing is now employed to varying degrees in all Australian states and territories. While it has been found to be effective in other countries, there was a need to confirm the effectiveness of Family Group Conferencing in the Australian context. This paper showed several advantages of Family Group Conferencing compared with traditional case-planning procedures.

"Children in out-of-home care" was the general topic for the next group of three presentations attended by Clearinghouse staff.

Implementing a community visitor program for children in foster care

Barry Salmon, Commission for Children and Young People, Queensland

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian in Queensland has recently experienced significant changes to its legislation, which have considerably enhanced and extended its powers and functions. Included in the changes is the expansion of the statewide Community Visitor Program to provide advocacy and support services to all children and young people in foster care in addition to those living in residential care facilities. This extension markedly increases the reach of the Community Visitor Program and the Commission's ability to oversee the interests and wellbeing of some of Queensland's most vulnerable children and young people. This presentation will discuss the expanded Community Visitor program and its progress since its inception in February 2004.

Leah Bromfield: In this paper, an exciting new development in out-of-home care practice was described. The Clearinghouse considers the Queensland's Community Visitor Program to be an example of best practice in monitoring the wellbeing of children in care, providing children in care with an independent advocate and ensuring the needs and opinions of young people are given a voice.

Carers' perceptions of their fostering role

Ciara Smyth, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales
Marilyn McHugh, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Australia is experiencing major difficulties attracting and retaining foster carers. This crisis in recruitment coupled with the increasingly demanding nature of the fostering role have focused attention on whether fostering can continue to rely on voluntary carers or whether it needs to become more professional. This paper examines data from a 2003/4 survey of foster carers in New South Wales commissioned by the New South Wales Department of Community Services. The research explores carers' perceptions of the nature of the fostering role and examines these in relation to three dimensions of the professionalisation of foster care identified in the literature: training, support and payment. The research findings indicate that the majority of carers surveyed believe fostering should be regarded as a professional or semi-professional role. Among these carers, there was a higher level of support for the three dimensions of the professionalisation of caring examined, compared to foster carers who regard their role as voluntary. Differences in perceptions of the fostering role were not attributable to other socio-demographic characteristics examined, aside from education levels. This paper also addresses the policy implications of these findings for the future recruitment and retention of carers.

Nick Richardson: There is very little knowledge about what influences the overall satisfaction and intent of foster parents to continue to foster. Listening to and understanding the voices of carers is very important in designing an alternative care system that retains carers and ensures a consistently high standard of care for children that is provided by foster parents. The findings in this paper – which draws on carer perceptions – add to the body of knowledge in this particular area of out-of-home care research.

Children with high support needs in Australian out-of-home care: A national comparative study

Paul Delfabbro, Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide
Alexandra Osborn, Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide
Mignon Borgas, Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide

Previous research by Barber and Delfabbro (2004) indicates that approximately 15 to 20 per cent of young people in Australian out-of-home care have significant emotional and behavioural problems that often condemn them to a life of repeated placement instability and further psychosocial harm. This paper reports the findings of a national comparative study of over 300 children (drawn from South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria), all of whom had experienced placement instability due to behavioural problems within the previous 12 months. The study examines their social and family background, psychosocial profile, service history, and current status in each of the care systems. The results provide an opportunity to document the similarities and differences between young people referred for services across the different states, as well as a vehicle for assessing the potential effectiveness and transferability of service responses. Taken as a whole, the results highlight the need for a more integrated national approach to the protection of children with high support needs in Australian out-of-home care.

Leah Bromfield: In the Australian audit of out-of-home care research, Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004) lamented the lack of multi-state longitudinal research. This paper presented findings from an ongoing multi-site study of the outcomes of children in care, and is the first step in a much needed national approach to out-of-home care research.

In addition to the presentations the Clearinghouse staff attended, in her Communications Officer role, Ellen Fish spoke to those attending the conference about the services offered by the Clearinghouse at a Clearinghouse display of publications and resources. There was a fair bit of interest in our work, as well as in our issues papers and recent newsletters, which disappeared off the table in droves!

Networking by Clearinghouse staff throughout the conference proved very fruitful. Many professional connections were established and opportunities for collaboration have arisen. Ellen Fish and Leah Bromfield attended a professional development day in Sale (Gippsland, Victoria) in response to an invitation that Wendy O'Brien extended at the conference. After meeting Paul Delfabbro and Alexandra Osborn at the conference, Leah Bromfield had discussions with Paul and Alexandra about their out-of-home care research. While visiting Adelaide in February, Alexandra subsequently applied for, and was offered a research officer position with the Clearinghouse and assisted with a current project documenting the findings from the Australian out-of-home care research. The New Zealand Families Commission has invited Clearinghouse researchers Daryl Higgins and Leah Bromfield to visit both the Family and Children's Commissioners when they attend the Tenth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Wellington, New Zealand in February 2006. You'll be relieved to know that amongst all this networking, the Clearinghouse team did find time to eat and drink at the evening events!

For full details on all the conference papers please visit the following website: www.aifs.gov.au/institute/aifrc9/papers.html