

exchange

emerging ideas for policy & practice

... complexity
requires
practitioners to
have a special
trinity of values,
knowledge and
skills.

It is an honour to be invited to write the introduction for this issue of *Exchange*, focusing on **complexity**, which I hope will be a source of stimulation and discussion in many workplaces. The breadth and depth of the articles highlighted in this issue reflect the complexity of practice.

If we were to take 'a day in the life of a child protection worker' we would find a complexity of situations which mirrors the issues covered in these articles: engaging parents with an alcohol dependence; responding to the family dynamics of adolescent sex offenders; understanding and addressing the psychological impact of abuse and neglect on children; and working across professional and organisational boundaries to deliver a comprehensive service to families with multiple and complex needs.

Such complexity requires practitioners to have a special trinity of values, knowledge and skills. Values are at the core of relationship-based practice in which empathy, respect, genuineness and optimism (ERGO!) need to be nurtured. Knowledge for practice comes from both the growing body of research and the reservoir of practice wisdom of experienced practitioners. The skills or the 'art and craft' of practice can be seen when we respond to both the 'states of affairs' (material needs) as well as the 'states of mind' (emotional needs) of vulnerable children, and their families and carers.

We are witnessing a renaissance of interest in families with multiple and complex needs, the proportion of which increases as we move across the spectrum from child protection notification to out-of-home care. Adult specialist services in fields such as mental health, drug and alcohol treatment and domestic violence are increasingly recognising the need to respond to the needs of children. Similarly, those in child protection settings are increasingly recognising the need to respond to such issues if we are to reduce the risk and impact of child maltreatment. The potential of holistic family centred practice beckons.



Professor Dorothy Scott
Director, Australian Centre for Child
Protection

understanding families with long-term and complex needs

This UK study sought to identify the characteristics and pathways of long-term and complex families to better understand their needs and the service responses required.

This article reports on the second stage of the study which involved interviews with 28 experienced multi-disciplinary professionals - those typically in attendance at the child protection case conference. The aim was to gather the views of different professional groups involved in the identification and management of child protection concerns.

All of the interviews identified a range of family characteristics that contribute to making some families and their situations more difficult to help. These include: intergenerational family problems; social isolation; the depth and range of problems faced by families; and specifically; the co-existence of alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Assessments were identified as being crucial in managing these situations.

The way staff approach and treat people was viewed as extremely important when working effectively with complex families. Specific skills to address parental anxieties and defensiveness is key, as is the delivery of a seamless service whereby the professionals involved

work closely to provide tailored services. The need for better multi-disciplinary relationships is identified, including more in-depth information sharing with a focus on a considered analysis of the issues in the family and ideas about how to move forward. The importance of General Practitioner involvement is also emphasised.

Organisational arrangements that positively support workers in complex cases include improved access to specialist therapeutic services and worker stability.

Devaney, J 2008, 'Inter-professional working in child protection with long-term and complex needs' *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 17: 242-261.

Email library@dfc.sa.gov.au for a copy of this article.



reviewed by **Rachelle Richards**

A/Supervisor, Strong Families Safe Babies, Families SA



This article clearly highlights that the issues we face as Families SA workers are felt in other jurisdictions as well, including overseas. The families we work with are similar in that they have comparable life experiences that have brought them to the attention of child protection services. And, as with our clients, their issues are usually multiple, entrenched and mutually reinforcing.

Several strategies are recommended for working with these families, such as holistic assessments including information from numerous sources that is more than just a descriptive account of events; engagement skills of the worker particularly around parental defensiveness and anxieties; collaboration of professionals with clearly defined roles and considered analysis of family issues including ways forward; and organisational arrangements that improve outcomes such as better access to specialist therapeutic services and worker stability.

The professionals interviewed for this article all demonstrated a very strong desire to make a real difference to the lives of children and their families, very similar to Families SA workers. As such I found this article to be very interesting and confirming of our experiences as child protection workers.

disengagement of hard-to-reach families

Based on a data subset of 'hard-to-reach' families that emerged during an evaluation of the Family Alcohol Service (FAS), this study explores reasons for disengagement. It reveals a range of views, experiences and processes which gives voice to families who are rarely heard.

For the families in the study, child protection was a major feature and often the reason for referral to the service. Parents identified their drinking behaviour as long-standing with numerous periods of relapse. Binge drinking was the common drinking pattern and largely utilised as a coping mechanism for past and ongoing pressures. Depression, domestic violence, relationship difficulties and bereavement were prevalent issues impacting on families' capacity and willingness to engage with services. Children were identified as living in real hardship and experiencing a wide range of problems.

FAS used an approach underpinned by an understanding of the psychological and emotional pressures experienced by parents and knowledge about the developmental needs of children including the impact parental alcohol use may have at different developmental stages. To encourage parents to take a risk and engage, FAS directed particular attention

to their initial contact. Conscious effort was placed on normalising family difficulties and emphasising the ways in which FAS might help. They found that improved retention was achieved by:

- encouraging all family members to attend
- involving children early in the referral process and using age-appropriate materials
- joint agency working
- clarification around expectations and responsibilities
- follow up letters and home visits encouraging re-entry in a positive way
- using peer support from family members.

Parents especially valued workers they could trust and who were confident in helping them communicate difficult emotions.

Taylor, A, Toner, P, Templeton, L & Velleman, R, 2008 'Parental alcohol misuse in complex families: the implications for engagement' *British Journal of Social Work* vol. 38, pp. 843-864.

Email library@dfc.sa.gov.au for a copy of this article.



reviewed by **David Magor-Hampel**

Senior Policy & Program Officer, State-wide Services, Families SA

The article led me to think about how we work in Families SA with families where alcohol and other drug use seriously affects the care and safety of children. Given the high prevalence of alcohol misuse as a contributing factor in child abuse and neglect, the issues will be familiar to those working with children and families in direct service roles.

The article raises awareness of the powerful influence of fear of removal of children, stigma and denial as barriers to full disclosure and engagement of parents and the cumulative impacts of multiple problems as a factor contributing to disengagement. The article provides useful suggestions for service delivery and planning about how to minimise barriers to engagement, including attending creatively to processes causing anxiety and uncertainty, joint meetings between parents, service workers and referrers, working in ways that establish a client's trust and confidence as well as highlighting the need for trust and clarity between agencies as a "precondition" for effective engagement and work.

As the service in which the study is focused is not a child protection service and is primarily focused on alcohol use rather than substance use more generally (although secondary use of other drugs was not excluded) there are some limits in how applicable the findings are to Families SA practice settings. In particular the fear of removal is likely to be stronger in intervention by child protection services, although where illicit drugs are being used statutory authority can provide some additional ways of promoting engagement. The article will be of interest to those in service delivery roles seeking to promote the engagement of parents and other care givers with drug and alcohol treatment services.



understanding the impact of abuse and neglect

This study explores the impact of child abuse and neglect on children's development and wellbeing and is located within the Take Two program, a Victorian state-wide developmental therapeutic service for child protection clients. The focus is on cumulative experiences of abuse and neglect and their consequences.

The analysis of data relating to 499 children is presented. The majority of children were over 12 years and 15% were Aboriginal children. Almost all children (97%) had experienced multiple types of abuse and neglect and most were experiencing extreme or severe difficulties associated with this experience.

- 62% met the criteria for at least one mental health diagnosis (Reactive Attachment Disorder and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder were the most frequent diagnoses)
- 38% had issues regarding school attendance
- 20% of the children displayed sexualised behaviours
- 20% of children had made either an attempt at suicide and/or exhibited suicidal ideation
- 16% had speech or language difficulties

- Aboriginal children had a higher rate of problems with school attendance and were at increased risk of sexual exploitation and related behaviours

Findings highlight the challenges experienced by many children and those who care for them, in particular, how violence towards children impacts on their development and wellbeing. It points to the need for safe, reparative healing experiences and for therapeutic intervention to take a systems approach as well as a direct therapeutic approach with the child. Finally, any analysis of the impact of the experiences of abuse and its consequences should be seen from within a holistic perspective ensuring that it is the whole child and his or her development towards a positive future that is the focus of intervention.

Frederico, M, Jackson, A & Black, C 2008
'Understanding the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people referred to a therapeutic program' *Journal of Family Studies* vol 14, pp. 342-361.

Email library@dfc.sa.gov.au for a copy of this article.

reviewed by **Madeline Barklay**

Clinical Psychologist, Country Office, Families SA



The article provides a useful review of the literature in relation to the sequelae of child abuse and maltreatment, and provides an overview of the Harm Consequences Assessment (HCA) scale used in Victoria. It is a useful reminder of the cumulative impact of recurrent abuse and the differing presentations and stages of children's response to trauma. The results suggest that children referred to services were likely to have experienced two or more types of abuse and neglect, and nearly two thirds had experienced four to five types of maltreatment.

There are a number of methodological issues with the study, most of which are adequately addressed by the authors. Specifically, the cohort studied was self-selecting, meaning some of the reported results were unsurprising. Further, the notion that 97% of children who experience abuse are likely to have experienced more than one type of abuse is foreseeable when you consider that most forms of abuse would also constitute emotional or psychological abuse, which the authors operationalise separately.

The HCA appears to be a useful assessment tool, which focuses on the child's cumulative experience of abuse and neglect, rather than the latest incident. It also reminds us to consider a range of behaviours in the context of trauma, allowing for targeted, holistic and individualised intervention that is both systems and child focused.

The article is highly relevant to child protection and reinforces current knowledge and research regarding the consequences of child abuse.

profiling intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders

This research provides a profile of the families of intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders (IASOs) who attended a 12 month community based treatment program. Data was gained from a sample of 38 adolescents and their parents via intake and closing interviews designed to explore the impact of treatment on family functioning.

The findings of the study were largely consistent with other research. Common factors associated with intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders include: separation from a parent; prior victimisation; social isolation; psychopathology and behavioural problems. Prior to treatment, the adolescents were described as impulsive and aggressive with poor social skills and few peer aged-friends. Family environments were described as disorganised, unstable and adversarial. A lack of family support for the young person was evident, as was a lack of understanding of how family factors could impact on child behaviour.

The clearest impact of treatment was improved family functioning. The young people were less impulsive, able to articulate strategies to help in stressful situations and better able to develop and maintain peer relationships. Home environments improved with better communication and less conflict. Useful aspects of the program for parents were learning how

to manage the sexual abuse within the family, family conflict and setting boundaries. Parents valued the opportunity to learn and discuss parenting skills with people who were experiencing similar problems.

Adolescents from non-intact families and those who were victims of abuse prior to offending were less likely to complete treatment. Improvements were more likely when at least one parent was involved in the program. It was important to address the additional problems within the family in order to make progress with the adolescent. Engaging families through a non-punitive, therapeutic and supportive approach may encourage at-risk families to seek assistance and help break the cycle of intra-familial sexual offending.

Thornton, J, Stevens, G, Grant, J, Indermaur, D, Chamarette, C & Halse, A 2008 'Intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders: family functioning and treatment' *Journal of Family Studies* vol 14, pp. 362-375.

Email library@dfc.sa.gov.au for a copy of this article.

★★★★☆ reviewed by **Bernie McGinnes**

Manager Strategic Policy, Major Projects, Intra & Intergovernmental Relations, Youth Justice, Families SA

There is a dearth of research analysis about the impact of family functioning on the emergence of intrafamilial adolescent sex offending. This study makes a useful contribution to this research base by identifying what may work, particularly with intact families, to restore family functioning post identification of intrafamilial adolescent sex offending.

From a practice perspective, the study provides a number of useful reminders for both policy and direct service practitioners. Intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders are not a homogenous group; there is variation evident in offender profile characteristics and types of offending. Individual adolescent treatment is important but so too are family-focused and holistic modalities of intervention.

The primary author of this study makes the observation that to date 'reactive and punitive views of the behaviour of young sexual offenders' (for example, mandatory reporting) have not halted cycles of abuse. Instead proactive and supportive approaches (for example, anonymous report lines) are required to encourage at-risk families to seek assistance early to help break the cycle of intrafamilial sexual offending. The study itself does not contribute any new knowledge to this long standing debate nor give support to the authors' position. Notwithstanding, it is always useful to be reminded that a balance of strategies is required to ensure that families with the capacity to take proactive action to stop abuse are encouraged, not punished, for doing so.



research in focus



Refugee Services: Andrea Tschoner, Ayen Kuol and Nagita Kaggwa

Building cultural awareness and understanding

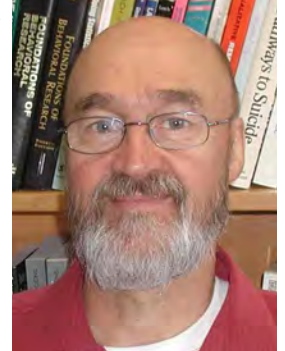
DFC recently hosted a seminar *Responding to the needs of families from refugee backgrounds* at The Parks Community Centre.

The seminar featured researchers Dr Fiona Arney, A/Professor Carol Irizarry, Dr Keith Miller and Paul Atem, who presented on the specific settlement challenges and issues for refugee young people, their families and communities.

This was followed by some wonderful presentations from the staff of DFC Refugee Services about

successful services and programs they have been involved in – such as *The Incredible Years Program*, *Tree of Life* and the *Congolese Soccer Program*.

Many of you may also be interested in viewing the DVD produced by DFC staff member, Ayen Kuol, who teaches African men to cook in *Ayen's Cooking School*. Email library@dfc.sa.gov.au for a copy.



Dr Keith Miller

Two of the featured researchers, A/Professor Carol Irizarry and Dr Keith Miller from Flinders University, have been working on a project in association with Refugee Services: *Review of Alternative Care for*

refugees, due for completion mid 2010.

Key findings from this project and the other presentations from the seminar can be found on the DFC Research Unit webpage at: www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/



A/Professor Carol Irizarry

library news with Jenni Burgess

These books, suggested by staff, were recently added to the Library collection:

Howe, D 2008, *The Emotionally Intelligent Social Worker* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke England.

This book introduces readers to the fundamental part emotions play in effective and responsive professional practice.

Flynn, RJ 2006, *Promoting resilience in child welfare* University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa.

Discover more effective ways of improving the lives of young people being looked after in out-of-home care.

Granville, J 2006, *Care Stories: A training film and book for those working with looked-after children and young people* Tavistock Training Publications, London.

Nairne, JS 2009, *Psychology* Thomson/Wadsworth, Australia.

Emphasises critical thinking and active learning. Provides current, comprehensive, and practical coverage that can be applied to everyday life.

Hunt, J et al. 2008, *Keeping them in the family: outcomes for children placed in kinship care through care proceedings* British Association for Adoption & Fostering, London.

researchers in focus

As part of his PhD studies Steve Mather is currently undertaking research into case planning with young people involved with Families SA Community Youth Justice Teams. The focus of this study is the relationship between organisational context, the design of case plans, the day-to-day realities of case planning and the ways in which clients come to be described and understood.

This is the first study of its type conducted to look specifically at the activity of case planning. The study aims not only to shed some light on how case planning is done, but also on those factors outside a client's personal situation (eg the design of case plans) that may influence how a client comes to be described and potentially the services they receive. Ultimately it is hoped the findings of this study will benefit clients, the organisation and practitioners.

A significant aspect of this research is that it involves a comparison of case planning in South Australia and Sweden. The aim of this comparison is to better understand the influence of context on case planning (and not an evaluation of practice or outcomes). Sweden has been chosen as a comparison because its youth justice system has important similarities and differences to South Australia's (eg Sweden's age of

criminal responsibility is 15 years, whereas in South Australia it is 10 years).

The research will involve interviews with 25 youth justice practitioners in Families SA and Sweden. In addition, policy, procedure and practice documents will be analysed. Research participants will be interviewed once, lasting up to an hour. Practitioners will be asked to discuss their day-to-day experiences of case planning. Participation is entirely voluntary and confidential.

The research study has been approved by the Families and Communities Research Ethics Committee (FCREC).

If you would like to participate and are involved in case planning in community youth justice, Steve will be conducting interviews from October to December 2009. If you have any questions or would like to participate please contact him on 8201 2598 or steven.mather@flinders.edu.au

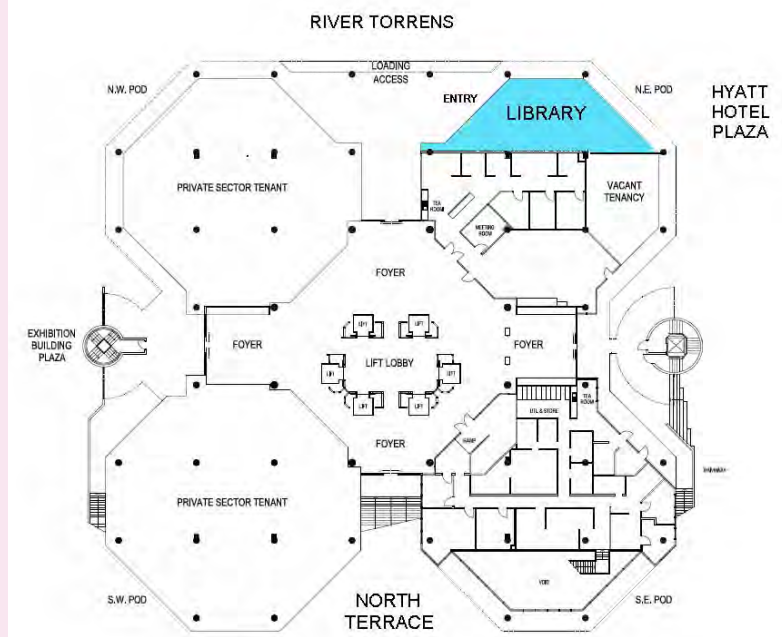
Steve is currently on leave from Families SA to enable him to complete his PhD.

library news cont.

We have moved

Come and visit our new location on the Plaza level of Riverside Centre, at the rear of the building on the Hyatt side. Free tea or coffee, badges and giveaways!

The DFC Library can be contacted on (08) 8413 9028 or email: library@dfc.sa.gov.au



researchers in focus (cont.)

Research Project: *Playfulness in Preschool Children - The Impact of Parent Characteristics and Child Abuse and Neglect*

Hello, I'm Shelley Wright, lecturer in occupational therapy at UniSA, and I'm currently conducting research on playfulness for my PhD. I am particularly interested in playfulness because of its link to coping skills, an important characteristic for children who have experienced trauma. My interest in the impact of child abuse and neglect originates from my work at ACT for Kids (previously the Abused Child Trust) in Brisbane.



The first study of my PhD includes 125 children, and explores the links between child playfulness, parenting style and attachment behaviour. I am about to embark on the second study of my PhD and am seeking help from Families SA staff to recruit 4-year-old children who have been the subject of a substantiated notification of abuse and/or neglect. The project involves a brief interview with parents/caregivers and a 15-30 minute videotaped observation of each child's play at their kindergarten/preschool. I will be contacting District Centres in the near future with further information, and you are also welcome to contact me with any queries.

The study has been approved by the Families and Communities Research Ethics Committee (FCREC).

Shelley Wright

PhD Candidate and Lecturer (Occupational Therapy)

University of South Australia

ph: 8302 2693 email: shelley.wright@unisa.edu.au

research seminar

Child-focused approaches in homeless service delivery

Date: Wednesday 2 December 2009

Time: 9am to 12.30pm

Venue: Bradley Forum Room, Hawke building
UniSA city west campus, North Terrace

RSVP: By 25 November to
researchcommunications@dfc.sa.gov.au

A cross-agency seminar for practitioners and policy makers focusing on the specific needs and services for homeless children and their families.

This seminar will:

- identify and explore the specific needs of, and issues for, homeless children
- provide an overview of promising practices and services in responding to homeless children in South Australia
- discuss implications for service delivery, service planning and support a child-focused approach.

Hosted by the Department for Families and Communities in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

Speakers will include:

- Professor Dorothy Scott, Australian Centre for Child Protection
- A/Professor Kath Hulse, Swinburne University

contribute to Exchange

Exchange is produced by the Research Unit, Business Affairs, Department for Families and Communities.

Your comments and feedback are welcome. Also, if you have any article suggestions for future editions or would like to be an article reviewer, please contact researchcommunications@dfc.sa.gov.au

Editor: Dr Helen Jeffreys

Editorial advisory committee: Rachel McCall, Vicki Sellick, Jennifer Burgess, Tina Shettigara, Claire Horgan, Fiona Curnow and Amanda Liston.

© Department for Families and Communities
Printed November 2009
Publication Number: DFC B054

The information in this publication can be provided in an alternative format or another language on request.
Please contact (08) 8207 0218.