

# Community Services Research to Practice Update

*A regular update on the latest national and international research*

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## Research Publications – What's New!

### Research to practice

*The Research to Practice Program provides an essential link between the latest research and Community Services staff.*

*As part of this important initiative, the Research to Practice Update encompasses a broad range of research publications and resources to reflect the diversity of Community Services staff.*

*If you have any comments or suggestions about how we could improve this Update to make it more useful or relevant to your work, please email the Research to Practice Team at:*

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### Child Protection

**Effective casework practice with adolescents: perspectives of statutory child protection practitioners.**

Schmied, V., & Walsh, P., 2010, *Child and Family Social Work*, 15(2), 165-175

Many child protection practitioners struggle with the complexity of problems and the limited casework time for adolescent cases. However, there is little research on child protection practice or case management that can guide a practitioner working with adolescents in the child protection system. The aim of this study was to explore and describe the nature of effective child protection practice with adolescents from the perspective of statutory child protection practitioners in one state in Australia. Data were collected through focus group discussions and interviews with child protection practitioners and managers currently working with adolescents ( $n = 44$ ). A grounded theory approach was used to identify the dominant themes or categories and form linkages and relationships through constant comparison techniques. Seven key categories emerged from this analysis: characteristics of the young person and their family; 'walking it together' - the centrality of relationships; 'looking back/looking forward' - practice strategies; practitioner attributes and skills; 'walking a fine line' - working with the families of adolescents; 'walking with services' - effective inter-agency work; and organisational context in effective child protection practice with adolescents. Key implications for practice and areas for further research were discussed.

### Learning to Reduce Risk in Child Protection

Eileen Munro, (2010). *British Journal of Social Work*, 40 (4), 1135-1151

This article argues for a systems approach to learning how to improve performance, conceptualising child protection services as complex, adaptive systems. This requires an acceptance of the complexity of the work, the essential role of professional judgement and the need for feedback loops in the system where lower-level workers are not afraid to communicate honestly about their experiences, both good and bad, and senior managers treat their feedback as a valuable source of learning. It is argued that current strategies to manage risk in child protection are, paradoxically, making it harder for professionals to learn how to protect children better. Three factors are identified as combining in such a way that they promote a culture in which professional practice is being excessively controlled and proceduralised: the person-centred approach to investigating child deaths, the blame culture and the performance management system. The way they reduce the opportunities for learning are explored.

### Recognition of neglect and early response: overview of a systematic review of the literature

Taylor, D. B. & Scott, J. (2010). *Child and Family Social Work*, 15 (2), 248-257

This paper summarises the key findings from a systematic literature review that sought to identify existing evidence about the ways in which the needs of neglected children and their parents are signalled and the response to those needs. The review included 63

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studies from 1995 to 2005. The evidence suggests that, while there is little evidence about how needs for help are directly signalled, there is considerable evidence about how needs are indirectly signalled. There is evidence that professionals can identify signs of neglect, but are not always clear about the best response. There remain gaps in evidence about how best to respond to neglected needs, especially within schools.

## **Witnessing domestic abuse in childhood as an independent risk factor for depressive symptoms in young adulthood**

Russell, D., Springer, K. W. & Greenfield, E. A., (2010). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34 (6), 448-453

This study addresses the relationship between retrospective reports of witnessing domestic abuse in childhood and levels of depressive symptoms in young adulthood. It examines whether the association between having witnessed violence in childhood and depression is independent of having been the direct target of sexual and/or physical abuse, as well as other characteristics and experiences linked with family violence. Results provide preliminary evidence that frequent exposure to domestic abuse is an independent risk factor for depressive symptoms in young adulthood. Results support a renewed call for (a) increased attention to depression among children exposed to adults' interpersonal violence, and (b) greater efforts to bridge prevention and intervention efforts regarding domestic violence and child maltreatment.

## **Early Intervention**

### **Someone to check in on me: social capital, social support and vulnerable parents with very young children in the Australian Capital Territory**

Winkworth, G., McArthur, M., Layton, M., & Thompson, T. (2010). *Child and Family Social Work*, 15 (2), 206-215

Although knowledge of how social support can mediate stress is now well known, finding ways to enable isolated parents to access social resources that could make a positive difference for children during their critical early years remains difficult. This paper reported on the findings of a telephone survey aimed at understanding levels of social capital and social support experienced by isolated parents raising young children on their own in Canberra, Australia. Specifically, it discussed a successful methodology for reaching isolated parents, those whom services find hard to reach. The survey found that despite the relative affluence of Canberra's population, there is a significant group of parents who are isolated from both formal and informal support and the social capital that can help them cope with the stresses and demands of raising young children. These parents were unsure where to get parenting information and had a strong sense that they were judged by their local communities and services. The study recognised lost opportunities by general practitioners and other widely used systems such as public housing and security to take more proactive roles and connect parents to formal service support systems. Flexible, affordable child care was identified as an unmet need for these parents, not only as a source of relief from extreme isolation but also to enable them to work or prepare for work through study.

### **Neighbourhood influences on young children's emotional and behavioural problems**

Edwards, B. & Bromfield, L., (2010). *Family Matters*, No.84

The small body of research into neighbourhood influences on children's outcomes in early and middle childhood has shown that neighbourhood socio-economic disadvantage has been consistently associated with a range of social, emotional and behavioural problems for children, even when controlling for family factors. This study investigates the effects of neighbourhood socio-economic disadvantage, residents' perceptions of the neighbourhood and neighbourhood social processes on 4-5 year old children's hyperactivity, emotional symptoms and peer problems using data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*.

### **Low-income single mothers' community violence exposure and aggressive parenting practices**

Zhang, S., & Anderson, S. G., *Child and Family Social Work*, 32 (6), 889-895

This study examined the association between maternal community violence exposure and parenting practices, with a sample of low-income single mothers from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCW) and related in-home child survey. Psychologically aggressive and physically aggressive parenting practices were measured with two subscales derived from the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTSPC). Community violence exposure was measured with items indicating being a witness to or victim of community violence. Bivariate analysis indicated that the intensity of community violence exposure was positively associated with both types of aggressive parenting practices. In the multivariate analysis, mothers with

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moderate and high levels of community violence exposure were 2.1 time and 2.4 times, respectively, more likely to engage in a higher level of physically aggressive parenting, when compared to mothers with no exposure to violence. Such rates were 1.7 and 1.8 times higher with respect to psychologically aggressive parenting practices. The findings highlight the need for expanding research to better understand the association between community violence and the wellbeing of children and families, and suggest the importance of supporting low-income single mothers who have been exposed to community violence through effective parenting programs and other community social services.

### Out-of-Home Care

#### **Mental health services for children and youth in the child welfare system: A focus on caregivers as gatekeepers**

Villagrana, M., (2010). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32 (5), 691-697

Caregivers serve as gatekeepers for children while in the child welfare system, but few studies have focused on the caregiver and the factors that influence the use of mental health services for the children under their care. The purpose of this study was to examine the child's mental health need, the caregiver's level of stress, depression, and social support, and the utilisation of mental health services by children using the three most common types of caregivers in the child welfare system (i.e., birth parent, relative caregiver, and foster parent). Data comes from the Patterns of Care (POC) study of five public sectors of care. The present study examined parents/caregivers and

youth from the child welfare sector. Findings suggest that while birth parents were more likely to endorse more risk factors for themselves, and the children under their care had a higher level of mental health need, they were the least likely to utilise mental health services for the children under their care. Implications for the child welfare and mental health systems are discussed.

#### **Placement decisions and disparities among Aboriginal groups: An application of the decision making ecology through multi-level analysis**

Fluke, J. D., Chabot, M., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B. & Blackstock, C. (2010). *Child Abuse & Neglect* 34(1), 57-59

This Canadian paper examined the relative influence of clinical and organisational characteristics on the decision to place a child in out-of-home care at the conclusion of a child maltreatment investigation. It tested the hypothesis that extraneous factors, specifically organisational characteristics, impact the decision to place a child in out-of-home care. A secondary aim was to identify possible decision making influences related to disparities in placement decision tied to Aboriginal children. The research suggests that the Aboriginal status of the child and structural risk factors affecting the family, such as poverty and poor housing, substantially account for this over-representation. Practice implications are discussed.

#### **Foster parent parenting characteristics that lead to increased placement stability or disruption**

Crum, W. (2010). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32 (2), 185-190

Although child welfare agencies attempt to provide effective care,

often these agencies find themselves fighting losing battles. Either foster children are too difficult to manage, or foster families are too quick to terminate their parental responsibilities because they feel overwhelmed or believe they do not have the skill to effectively interact. Despite the reasons for placement disruption, children are the losers because they are not given the opportunity to form bonds with adults, maintain school placement, or learn healthy coping skills. Empirical evidence identifies the characteristics of foster children who are likely to experience placement disruption and the flaws of the foster care system; however, it does not identify parenting variables that might affect placement. This aim of this study was to identify parenting characteristics of foster parents that are likely to increase placement stability or disruption. Foster parents of public child welfare agencies completed the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory to measure parental characteristics and the Parenting Alliance Measure to determine perceived alliance between foster parents. One result showed that foster parents who are not extremely firm in their limit setting were more likely to have longer placements. A parenting style that firmly enforced rules but is nurturing was seen to be the most effective and have the best outcomes. Foster parents who established rigid and firm rules were more likely to experience multiple placement disruptions. These foster parents were less likely to seek input from their foster children and to perceive their parenting role as being in charge. One concerning finding was that almost 40% of foster parents reported that they derived little pleasure from being a foster parent. Practical implications are discussed.

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## **Young children returning home from care: the birthparents' perspective**

Montserrat F. M., Mcsherry, D., Larkin, E., Kelly, G., Robinson, C. & Schubotz, D., (2010). *Child and Family Social Work*, 15(1), 77-86

While a wide range of literature exists on the experiences of children in foster care or adoption, much less is known about children who return home from care to their birth parents. This paper focuses on the perspectives of a small sample of birth parents of young children who returned home from care. It draws on findings from the Northern Ireland *Care Pathways and Outcomes* Study that has been following a population ( $n = 374$ ) of children who were under 5 years and in care in Northern Ireland on the 31st of March 2000. As part of this study, interviews were conducted with the foster parents of 55 children, the adoptive parents of 51 children and the birth parents of nine children who had returned home from care. The paper explores the birth parents' views on how they coped while their child was in care, how they were coping after the child had returned home and how their child was faring at home. Results revealed that these parents, and their children, were experiencing multiple difficulties and struggled to cope after the children had returned home.

## **The association between length of stay in residential care and educational achievement: Results from 5- and 16-year follow-up studies**

Ringle, J. L., Ingram, S. D., Thompson, R. W. (2010). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32 (7), 974-980

Research on the relationship between length of stay in out-of-home residential care and

educational outcomes is scant and has yielded mixed results. This study investigates this issue by examining the relationship between length of stay in family-style residential care and education achievement. Participants belonged to one of two cohorts that were part of a larger follow-up study designed to measure functional post-departure outcomes. Cohort 1 had departed care 5 years earlier whereas cohort 2 had departed 16 years earlier. Findings for both cohorts reveal that longer lengths of stay are predictive of obtaining at least a high school education. Older admission age was also found to be a predictor in the 5 year cohort. Results do not support the notion that longer lengths of stay are counterproductive. On the contrary, these results suggest that longer lengths of stay in quality residential care may benefit not only the youth and their families, but society by reducing the societal cost (e.g., lost wages, crime) when an at-risk youth does not receive sufficient treatment.

## **We care about care: advice by children in care for children in care, foster parents and child welfare workers about the transition into foster care**

Mitchell M. B., Kuczynski, L., Carolyn Y. Tubbs, C., Y. & Ross, C. (2010). *Child and Family Social Work*, 15 (2), 176-185

Twenty children in foster care, ages 8 to 15 years, provided advice to children in care, foster parents and child welfare workers about ways to assist service delivery during the transition into foster care. The children discussed the importance of tending to experiences such as foster home expectations, the importance of time and information, the new foster/parent-child relationship, coping with stress, the ability to be engaged in decision-making, the benefits of foster care and the need to build a trusting and personal relationship between children in care and their caregivers. The importance of listening to children's experiences of the

transition into foster care and incorporating their advice into future research, policy and practice will be discussed.

## **The perspectives of young children in care about their circumstances and implications for social work practice**

Winter, K. (2010). *Child and Family Social Work*, 15(2), 186-195

Recent reviews of research regarding children in care have concluded that there remains little research which specifically focuses on young children. This paper presents the findings of research carried out with a sample of young children in care (aged 4-7 years) regarding their perspectives of their circumstances. The findings reveal that they have deeply held views regarding living with risk; removal from their families; unresolved feelings of guilt and loss; and not being listened to. This paper considers the implications of these findings for social work practice. It concludes by stressing the capacity of young children in care to express their perspectives, and the importance of practitioners seeking these views and incorporating them into assessment and decision-making processes.

## **Frequent moving has a negative affect on the school achievement of foster children makes the case for reform**

Allen, B. & Vacca-J., A. (2010). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(6), 829-832

This study investigates how the frequent school and home mobility of foster children affects their overall academic achievement in school. It attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How is school achievement affected by the mobility of foster children?
2. What can society, as well as state and federal governments do to establish long-term consistent care

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that will ensure long-term success and achievement of all foster care children?

3. What can school and welfare agencies do to help improve the academic achievement of foster care children?

Foster children are subjected to many obstacles during their education in public schools. Most of these children move from school to school because they frequently change foster homes. Since improved academic achievement in school is important to all foster children, this study examines the dilemma of the foster care child in the classroom. Furthermore, this study examines the academic performance of children in foster care and describes what the research believes can be done to solve this problem and improve the chances for the foster child's academic success.

## Other

### **Commitment to child welfare work: What predicts leaving and staying?**

Faller, K. C., Grabarek, M. & Ortega, R. M. (2010). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32 (6), 840-846

This study describes results related to worker turnover from a longitudinal study of public and private agency child welfare workers in one state. Findings from 460 new workers were examined for reasons respondents took their jobs and chose child welfare work, their commitment to their agencies and to child welfare for two and five years, and the relationship of these variables and demographic variables to whether they were still in their positions at follow-up. Among the findings were that public agency workers endorsed significantly higher levels of commitment on three of the four

commitment variables and were significantly more likely to have taken their jobs because of good pay, benefits, and advancement opportunities than private agency workers. In contrast, private agency workers endorsed taking the job because it was the only job available and it was a good first job to take at significantly higher rates than public agency workers. Variables that predicted staying on the job were having viewed the state's Realistic Job Preview before taking the job, good supervision, and higher job satisfaction

## Reports

### **Community services 2008-09**

Australian bureau of Statistics (2010)

This publication contains summary data on expenditure on community service activity by government and private sector organisations. Data are presented by type of community service activity, State and Territory and profit status. This publication also contains data on income, expenditure, employment and volunteers in the following community services sectors: aged care residential services, other residential care services, child care services and other social assistance services

### **Sexual violence and Indigenous victims; women, children and the criminal justice system (2010)**

Indigenous Law Centre, (2010)

The Indigenous Law Centre (Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales) is conducting a research project funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department examining the experiences of Indigenous victims of sexual violence in the criminal justice system.

In this first phase, the project examines the way Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander female and child victims are dealt with by the courts through an analysis of court/sentencing decisions.

The majority of cases involve female victims between 11 and 15 years of age perpetrated by people known to them through family or community ties. Victims often face community pressure urging them not to proceed to court with complaints.

## Books

**Domestic abuse is never acceptable: A manual for working with women who have experienced, or are experiencing, domestic abuse.**

Nicci Vella, N., & Murdin, M. (2009). Russell House Publishing. Lyme Regis, 82pp

Group work has been regarded as a significant, effective and sometimes transformative intervention for domestic violence survivors. This intensely practical supplement manual provides a group work program consisting of a series of exercises and handouts for group work with women survivors of domestic abuse. It is clearly written and is accessible to both experienced and inexperienced facilitators. The authors hold a depth of experience and hand down the practice wisdom of many practitioners. Different materials from poems to active group building exercises to discussion triggers are available. This manual is an excellent baseline group work resource and makes an important contribution to working with women affected by domestic abuse.

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## Child Welfare Supervision: A Practical Guide for Supervisors, Managers and Administrators

Potter, C. & Brittain, C. (eds), (2009). Oxford University Press, New York, 375 pp

Expert supervision is paramount in developing a professional and well-trained workforce. This guide is aimed primarily at front-line childcare supervisors. Although written from an American perspective it can easily translate into other social contexts. The guide is broken up into chapters that include models of supervision; advanced supervisory skills; maximising middle management; managing changing environments; critical multiculturalism; getting and keeping the best staff; developing worker competence and managing performance. The book offers practical exercises, case scenarios and skills based activities. It draws on a variety of models to present a practical guide, particularly for child welfare supervisors.

## Websites/Resources

Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA) provides national leadership in building greater awareness of mental health and suicide prevention amongst Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Multicultural Mental Health Australia is funded under the National Mental Health Strategy and National Suicide Prevention Strategy by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

<http://www.dhi.gov.au/>

## Conferences

### SNAICC National Conference - 27-28 July 2010. Alice Springs

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) *Conference will be an opportunity to gather and make renewed commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.* The conference objectives are around sharing and celebrating, growing our knowledge, challenging others to acknowledge history and respect culture, and to foster leadership.

<http://www.snaicc.asn.au/policy/>

### ACWA Conference 2-4 August

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies Conference (ACWA ) 2010 on 2-4 August 2010 will be centred around the theme of Building a Child Friendly Australia: Responding to Vulnerable families. There will be international keynote presentations and interactive breakout sessions. The Honourable Minister Linda Burney will open the Conference. "Australian of the Year" Prof Patrick McGorry will launch the report on mental health needs of Children and Young People in OOHC. Further details on the Conference program can be found on the website.

<http://www.acwa2010.com>

### National Foster Carers' Conference 2010 - August 28th-29th 2010 Hobart Tasmania

The National Foster Carers Conference is sponsored and supported by Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) Tasmania and the Australian Foster & Kinship Carers Partnership (QLD).

<http://www.fcata.org.au/>

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