

# 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.*

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**Family &  
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### Early Intervention

#### **Aboriginal children and their caregivers living with low income: outcomes from a two-generation preschool program**

Benzies, K., Tough, S., Edwards, N., Mychasiuk, R., Donnelly, C. (2011). *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 20(3), 311-318

The development of preschool children of Aboriginal heritage in Canadian societies is jeopardised by the inter-generational transmission of risk that has created, and continues to create, social disadvantage. Early intervention programs are intended to mitigate the impact of social disadvantage. Yet, evidence of the effectiveness of these programs for children of Aboriginal heritage is limited. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a two-generation, multi-cultural preschool program on 45 children of Aboriginal heritage and their caregivers. Results of this study suggest that children of Aboriginal heritage can benefit from participation in a two-generation, multi-cultural preschool program. Their caregivers may have received greater benefit if issues of intergenerational transmission of the negative influences of residential schools were addressed as part of programming.

### Child Protection

#### **Prevalence, trajectories, and risk factors for depression among caregivers of young children involved in child maltreatment investigations**

Casanueva, C., Theodore, P., Ringeisen, H. & Christ, S. (2011). *Journal of Emotional & Behavioural Disorders*, 19(2), 98-116

This study examines depression among caregivers of young children involved in investigations of child maltreatment, in terms of 12-month prevalence of depression across 5 to 6 years. Data was collected from the U.S. National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a national probability study of 5,501 children investigated for maltreatment. The study sample comprised 1,244 female caregivers (95.5% biological mothers) of children not placed out of home and younger than 5 years old. About a quarter of caregivers had, at any given point, a score indicating major depression in the previous 12 months; across all follow-ups, 46% of caregivers had a score indicating major depression at some point. Depression was associated with caregivers' report of intimate-partner violence and fair or poor health status. Caregivers of maltreated children are at substantial risk for depression that does not diminish over the course of 5 years. Assessing and providing assistance for intimate-partner violence and health problems may help decrease depression prevalence.

#### **Links between traumatic experiences and expectations about the future in high risk youth**

Thompson, R., Wiley, T., Lewis, T., English, D., Dubowitz, H., Litrownik, A., Isbell, P. & Block, S. (2011). *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, Advance online publication

The article describes a study examining the role of past traumatic experiences in predicting expectations about social, academic, and occupational outcomes. The sample included 843, 14 year old youth, involved in the

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U.S. Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN). The analyses took into account socioeconomic indicators. Three classes of expectations emerged from factor analyses: academic/employment success, employment instability, and social instability. Predictors of future expectations included maltreatment, witnessed family and community violence, and caregiver and residential instability. Maltreatment predicted low expected academic/employment success and high expected employment instability. Caregiver instability predicted employment instability and social instability. Witnessed community violence predicted social instability. Witnessed family violence and residential instability did not predict any dimension of future expectations in these analyses. It discusses the need to better understand links between types of trauma and expectations about the future in at-risk youth, and how these expectations may in turn influence their futures.

## **Children placed in out-of-home care: risk factors for involvement with the juvenile justice system.**

Yampolskaya, S., Armstrong, M. & McNeish, R. (2011). *Violence & Victims*, 26(2), 231-245

In previous research, child maltreatment has been associated with several negative outcomes, including delinquency. This study uses administrative data to examine risk factors, including the severity and chronicity of maltreatment, for juvenile justice involvement among children, ages 7 to 17, who were placed in out-of-home care in Florida U.S.A (N = 13,212). The results of multivariate Cox regression

analysis indicated that among specific types of maltreatment, sexual abuse was associated with the risk of faster placement only in a detention centre. Additionally, findings from this study suggest that maltreatment chronicity but not maltreatment severity increases the chances of earlier involvement with the juvenile justice system among children who were placed in an out-of-home care. Implications of these findings are discussed.

## Out-Of-Home Care

### **Managing loss and a threatened identity: experiences of parents of children growing up in foster care, the perspectives of their social workers and implications for practice**

Schofield, G., Moldestad, B., Höjer, I., Ward, E., Skilbred, D., Young, J. & Havik, T. (2011). *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(1), 74-92

Parents of children growing up in foster-care have been a largely neglected group in policy, practice and research, in spite of the fact that these parents are often vulnerable adults who experience a profound loss and a threat to their identity. Parents' involvement through contact is also likely to have an impact on children's stability and security in the foster family. This article draws on data from parallel qualitative studies at the University of East Anglia, England, the University of Bergen, Norway, and the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Interviews and focus groups with parents showed a great deal of similarity in the situation experienced by parents in the three countries. But all three studies found great diversity in how parents managed their loss and their threatened identity over time, including varied strategies for managing cognitive dissonance. What parents shared was the need to be treated by social workers with respect and empathy; to receive information about the children; and

to be involved, where possible, in the children's lives. Focus groups with social workers, who had to balance the needs of children and parents, found there was a need for guidance in this difficult work.

### **Foster carer perceptions of support and training in the context of high burden of care**

Murray, L., Tarren-Sweeney, M. & France, K. (2011). *Child & Family Social Work*, 16(2), 149-158

The challenges of providing sensitive and structured care for children in foster care go well beyond normative experiences of parenting. The present paper describes a mixed-methods study of foster carers' perceived need for support and training, referenced to estimates of their burden of care. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 foster carers in the Canterbury region of New Zealand. Carers' perceived need for support and training were identified through qualitative analysis of interviews using domain analysis method. Carers' burden of care was estimated from the Parenting Stress Index; and from a measure of carers' encounters with children's emotional, behavioural and relationship difficulties that was designed for the present study (the Caregiver Behavioural Encounters Index). Foster carers reported substantive, unmet needs for support and training. Foster carers also reported high parenting stress and encounters with a wide range of children's mental health difficulties, including both uncommon and severe difficulties, which together represent an exceptional burden of care. Carers' highest priority need was for training and support on managing and responding to children's mental health difficulties, while their greatest existing support came from Caregiver Liaison Social Workers and other carers. The findings suggest a number of critical implications for practice.

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## **Predictors of foster care exits to permanency: A competing risks analysis of reunification, guardianship, and adoption**

Akin, B. (2011). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(6), 999-1011

Although foster care is intended to be temporary, and policy explicitly requires permanency outcomes, many children experience lengthy stays and exit foster care without a permanent family. This study sought to identify which child and placement characteristics were important predictors of exit to three types of permanency outcomes: reunification, guardianship, and adoption. A sample of 3351 children who entered foster care in 2006 was observed for 30 to 42 months. Permanency outcomes were analysed using competing risks survival analysis. The research highlighted children exited foster care to different types of permanency that occurred at different rates and frequencies. Reunification occurred most quickly and frequently. Guardianship was second in terms of median duration but third in frequency. Adoption was the second most common exit but had the longest median duration. One in four children remained in foster care or exited without permanency. While patterns varied by type of permanency, three major categories of important predictors were identified: 1) demographic characteristics of age at entry and race, 2) clinical needs related to children's disabilities and mental health problems, and 3) continuity and connections represented by kin placements, sibling placements, early stability, and absence of runaway events. Implications for practice, policy, and research are discussed.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com>

## Other

### **All mothers are not created equal: neural and psychobiological perspectives on mothering and the importance of individual differences**

Barrett, J. & Fleming, A. (2011). *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 52(4), 368-397

Quality of mothering relies on the integrity of multiple physiological and behavioural systems and on two maternal factors, one proximal and one distal, that have a great impact on how a mother mothers: postpartum depression and early experiences. To mother appropriately requires the action of systems that regulate sensation, perception, affect, reward, executive function, motor output and learning. When a mother is at risk to engage in less than optimal mothering, such as when she is depressed or has experienced adversity in childhood, the function of many or all of maternal and related systems may be affected. This paper uses a systems approach to review and critique what is currently known about the biological basis of mothering, with a particular focus on recent advances in the field of functional neuroimaging. It combines information from the animal world with the human. It briefly reviews what has informed knowledge of the neurobiology of mothering up until this point (hormones). Finally it tries to put these basic mechanisms into the context of important individual differences related to maternal psychopathology (depression) and early adversity.

### **Parenting and children's brain development: the end of the beginning**

Belsky, J. & de Haan, M. (2011). *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 52(4), 409-428

This paper reviews evidence suggesting that brain structure and function are 'chiselled' by parenting. Although the generalisability of most findings is limited due to a disproportionate, but understandable focus on clinical samples (e.g., maltreated children with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)) and causal inferences are difficult to draw because of the observational nature of most of the evidence, it is noteworthy that some work with community samples and very new experimental work (e.g., parent training) suggests that tentative conclusions regarding effects of parenting on the developing brain may well be substantiated in future research. Such efforts should focus on parenting in the normal range, experimental manipulations of parenting, differential susceptibility to parenting effects and pathway models linking parenting to brain development and, thereby, to behavioural development. Research on parenting and children's brain development may be regarded as at 'the end of the beginning'.

### **A systems approach to evaluating organisational change in children's social care**

Munro, E. & Hubbard, A. (2011). *The British Journal of Social Work*, 41(4), 726-74

This paper describes an innovative systems methodology for evaluating child protection social work practice and improving organisational learning. It draws on learning in other high-risk areas where the importance of understanding performance in context has been recognised. Using a case study for illustration, the methodology is presented. This evaluative approach

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engages management, staff, service users and other stakeholders in assessing the factors that influence practice and outcomes. The data collection tools developed included surveys to reach staff, multi-agency professionals and service users, together with in-depth interviews to get a deep understanding of causal factors and their interactions. Data included organisational cultural factors that influence the effectiveness of decision making, improve patterns of interaction with families and other professionals, remove constraints on practice, help prioritisation and improve consistency of care. The paper discusses some of the practical implications of applying the instruments, such as avoiding bias and dealing with unresponsiveness. It also supports the gathering of feedback from vulnerable service users.

## Reports

### Keeping the child in mind: child protection practice and parental mental health

Jeffreys, H., Rogers, N. & Hirte, C. (2011). *Research Unit, Business Affairs, Department for Families and Communities*, South Australia

This report explores the association between adult mental health disorders and child abuse and neglect. To date, few studies have examined the prevalence of parental mental health difficulties in child protection matters, including the types of mental health difficulties associated with protective concerns for children. Similarly, little is known about how child protection workers identify parental mental health disorders, what they classify as

such, and how this impacts upon their decision making. This study aimed to increase knowledge and understanding of the prevalence and nature of parental mental health difficulties associated with protective concerns for children and young people and the service responses required by these families.

<http://www.dfc.sa.gov.au/pub/>

### Early Childhood Development Workforce

Productivity Commission, (2011). *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, Draft Report, Melbourne

Agreed government reforms to early childhood education and care will require a substantially larger and more highly qualified workforce, according to this report. The draft report - *Early Childhood Development Workforce*, has a national focus covering all states in Australia. It finds that more workers will be required in most types of early childhood education and care services, including preschool, long day care and family day care, to meet the targets specified in the reforms. On average, the level of workers' qualifications will also need to increase. The wages of workers in most early childhood education and care employment categories are expected to rise as a result.

The Commission considered that Government timelines for reform appear optimistic. The supply of suitably qualified workers is likely to take some time to respond, and exemptions from the new standards (waivers) will be required in the transition.

The report indicates that early childhood development services for children with additional needs, and for Indigenous children, are not meeting the standards commonly available to other children. The report is the second in a series of three Commission studies covering the workforces of Vocational Education and Training, Early

Childhood Development and Schools. The Commission is seeking feedback on its draft findings and recommendations before finalising its report in October 2011.

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

### Children's exposure to domestic violence in Australia

Richards, K. (2011). *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice*, No. 419, Institute of Criminology, Canberra

Children's 'witnessing' or exposure to domestic violence has been increasingly recognised as a form of child abuse, both in Australia and internationally. Although it is difficult to accurately assess the scope of the problem, research has demonstrated that a substantial amount of domestic violence is witnessed by children. As this paper outlines, witnessing domestic violence can involve a range of incidents, ranging from the child 'only' hearing the violence, to the child being forced to participate in the violence or being used as part of a violent incident. In this paper, current knowledge about the extent of children's exposure to domestic violence in Australia is described, along with the documented impacts that this exposure can have on children. This includes psychological and behavioural impacts, health and socioeconomic impacts, and its link to the intergenerational transmission of violence and re-victimisation. Current legislative and policy initiatives are then described and some community-based programs that have been introduced in Australia to address the problem of children's exposure to domestic violence are highlighted. The paper concludes that initiatives focused on early intervention and holistic approaches to preventing and responding to children's exposure to domestic violence should be considered as part of strategies developed to address this problem.

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

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## Resources

### 'Your Room'

'Your Room' is a joint initiative of NSW Health and the Alcohol and Drug Information Service. It contains useful information on the effects of drugs and alcohol; how to get help and how to get involved in the local community to reduce the harms caused by drugs and alcohol. The website is easy to navigate and can be used by young people, parents, service providers and professionals. Play the spinner game to test your knowledge about drugs and alcohol.

<http://yourroom.com.au/>

## Books

### The dad factor: how father baby-bonding helps a child for life

Fletcher, R. (2011). Finch Publishing Sydney, 211pp

This book explores new understandings of the importance of a father in a child's development. Richard Fletcher, a senior lecturer at the University of Newcastle, Australia and researcher in the area of men's health and family issues, examines how a father's close bond with his baby is vital for the development of the child's healthy brain structure and their cognitive and emotional development.

"The dad factor" explains why a father's involvement with his child, right from birth, is vitally important to the development of a child's brain and emotional stability. This book considers the following new findings:

- in the first hours after birth a baby is primed to react to the father's voice he or she heard when in the womb
- father-baby bonding matters for the child's emotional, physical and cognitive development
- the way that a father interacts with his baby can shape the structure of the baby's brain the effect of a dad simply 'playing around' with his child can alter the pathways formed by the neurons in the brain of that growing infant.

Additionally, the book addresses some contentious issues of child development, examines the evolution of a father's role, and uses feedback from men in parenting classes to answer many questions a new father-to-be might have. It aims to offer new insights to young fathers which will lead to closer and happier families.

### Improving outcomes for children and families: finding and using international evidence

Maluccio, A., Canali, A., Vecchiato, T., Lightburn, A., Aldgate, J. & Rose, W. (eds). (2011). Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 240 pp

This book is published in the 'Child Welfare Outcomes' series, which is tasked with producing publications that 'draw from original research and current policy debates to help social work managers, policy makers and researchers to understand and improve the outcomes of services for children and young people in need'. The book is an edited volume on the work of a number of research academics and practitioners from a variety of countries who are associated with organisations such as the International Association for Outcome-Based Evaluation on Family and Children's Services ([www.outcome-evaluation.org](http://www.outcome-evaluation.org)) and the European Scientific Association on Residential and Foster Care for children and adolescents (EUSARF). Both these organisations are concerned with improving the quality of research undertaken with children and families and, in particular, 'promoting cross-national collaboration on outcome evaluation in the area of health and social services'. Under this umbrella, researchers are developing expertise in knowing what works within their own countries and across international borders, whilst also being cognisant of the difficulties in applying the results of robust research to 'real world' practice.

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## Conferences

### Growing up in Australia and Footprints in time:

The LSAC and LSIC Research  
Conference: Findings from the  
Longitudinal study of Australian  
children (LSAC) and the  
Longitudinal study of  
Indigenous children (LSIC)

*Australian Institute of Family  
Studies*

15-16 November 2011  
Melbourne, Victoria

One of the great challenges for Australia is to identify and understand the myriad of factors that influence children's development and to put into place measures that can improve outcomes for future generations. The conference will be an opportunity for researchers and policy makers to discuss research using data from *Growing up in Australia*: the Longitudinal study of Australian children (LSAC) and *Footprints in time*: the Longitudinal study of Indigenous children (LSIC) and to share knowledge to improve the research potential of these datasets

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/conf/2011/>

### 'Children: A resource most precious' conference *Edith Cowan University*

29 November -1 December 2011  
Perth, Western Australia

The theme for the conference is "Children, young people and families across Western Australian communities: focusing on collaborative prevention strategies, initiatives and programs for minimising harm".

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

### Australia's welfare 2011 conference and report launch

Welfare in a growing economy

*Australian Institute of Family  
Studies*

Thursday 24 November 2011,  
National Convention Centre,  
Canberra

[http://www.aihw.gov.au/  
access/201108/aihw-speaks/au-  
welfare-2011.cfm](http://www.aihw.gov.au/access/201108/aihw-speaks/au-welfare-2011.cfm)

## Disclaimer

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