

Tomison, A M; Stanley, J (2001). Strategic Directions in Child Protection: Informing Policy and Practice. Unpublished report for the South Australian Department of Human Services

Brief No. 1

Social welfare framework: Current trends in child protection

Child protection – the shift to a ‘family support’ approach

In the late 1990s, statutory child protection services within Australian States/Territories, like those of other western countries, struggled to cope with ever-increasing numbers of reports of suspected child maltreatment and fewer resources (Tomison, 1996e). These pressures, some caused or exacerbated by an over-emphasis on cost effectiveness and bureaucratic structures at the expense of professional practice (Corby 1987; Liberman 1994; Parton 1996; Tomison 1999, Tomison & Poole 2000), led governments and child protection services to seek alternative solutions. It can be argued that it was the recognition that traditional child protection services could not, in isolation, prevent child maltreatment that provided a climate favourable to the prevention initiatives described above.

It was apparent that a substantial proportion of the child maltreatment reports (notifications) were inappropriately labelled as allegations of child maltreatment by those who referred cases to child protection services (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995; Tomison 1996e; DHS 1997). Many of the notifications involved families who had not maltreated their child but who had more generic problems, such as financial or housing difficulties, an incapacitated caregiver, or serious stress problems. Although such ‘at risk’ cases may require assistance, they do not require child protection intervention. Their labelling as cases of child abuse or neglect further taxed the generally limited child protection resources (Little 1995; Tomison 1996).

Despite the fact that legal action was not taken for the majority of families with whom child protection services were involved, it was argued that the style of intervention for all families had become ‘forensically driven’, (Little 1995; Tomison 1996; Armytage, Boffa & Armitage 1998). One consequence of this ‘forensic’ or legalistic approach was to ‘cast child protection services as the ‘expert’ and to alienate essential community professionals from a partnership approach to the prevention, support and protection of children’ (Armytage et al. 1998:2).

Such an approach had also led to the shifting of scarce child protection resources away from substantiated child maltreatment cases, and raised general questions in relation to both child protection services’ screening or ‘gatekeeping practices’ and the nature and availability of broader primary and secondary prevention services in the community. Within this, the dilemma was described as one of distinguishing protection problems from broader welfare concerns, and, in all instances, delivering an appropriate response matched to client need. The media coverage of child maltreatment, child deaths and child protection ‘mistakes’, also played a significant part in the instigation of changes to the child protection system (Goddard & Liddell, 1993; Goddard & Liddell, 1995; Scott, 1995; Goddard, 1996b;

Loane, 1997). Media reports resulted in 'a "moral panic" about child protection and resulted in greater channelling of resources into investigation and detection at the expense of supportive and preventative services (Scott, 1995)' Markiewicz (1996:30).

In developing alternative service models as a response to these critiques, attention has therefore focused on both the operations of child protection services *and* the broader child and family welfare system that the statutory protective service operates within (Little 1995; Dartington Social Research Unit 1995). Most Australian State and Territory governments are currently trialing or operating 'new' models of child protection and family support¹ (Tomison 1996e; Mackieson 1997), based on the recommendations proposed in *Messages from Research* (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995).

Messages from Research

In the United Kingdom, *Messages from Research* (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995), had been proven to be a watershed in the development of policy and practice in child protection and child welfare (Parton, 1996). It was the rationale for work to be re-focused from "children at risk" to "children in need" (Dale 1998:5). The recommendations from *Messages from Research* were translated into two major areas for action: enhancing the investigation and screening of child maltreatment reports (including re-balancing in favour of a family support, rather than a forensic approach); and the assessment and treatment of families' 'needs', rather than 'harms' (Tomison 1999a). Good practice and adequate protection thus both emerge from adopting a wider perspective on child protection by means of which underlying problems in the family that may put a child 'at risk' or have a detrimental effect on the child's long-term welfare are addressed (Little 1995; Tomison 1996e).

Australian approaches

Three major changes have subsequently been implemented, to varying degrees, in most Australian child protection systems, typically supported by the enactment of new child protection legislation. First, informed predominantly by a research program implemented by the United Kingdom's Department of Health (DoH) and coordinated by the Dartington Social Research Unit, University of Bristol (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995)², there has been a shift in practice away from restrictive, narrowly defined investigative approaches to include an assessment of the broader context of the child and family, their wider needs, strengths and resources, and their relationships with both formal and informal support services and networks. The overall intention of the new approach is to prevent maltreatment and protect children by addressing family problems holistically. This is to be done in a way which promotes cooperation between workers and families, achieving greater levels of parental cooperation and, subsequently, a better outcome for children and families.

¹ Armytage et al. (1998) notes that such approaches are not new, but are a re-visiting or recapitulation of solutions previously tried and tested.

² Western Australia's child protection services also used research they commissioned assessing their child protection system (Thorpe 1994).

Second, influenced somewhat by U.S. child protection services' widespread development and adoption of structured risk assessment measures to more effectively screen child protection reports (for example, Dalglish 1997; Department of Family and Community Services 1997), most services have adopted some form of risk assessment guide or system of structured risk assessment tools/checklists.

Third, concomitant with the adoption of risk assessment aids, attempts have been made to more efficiently tailor the child protection response to child maltreatment reports, either by the introduction of some form of differentiated response system (e.g. Enhanced Client Outcomes, Department of Human Services Victoria), or the streaming of reports based on an initial assessment of the extent to which the reported concerns require/do not require a child protection assessment (e.g. Western Australian Family and Children's Services).

The benefits of such a system are that, ideally, families are not unduly stigmatised or traumatised by inappropriate or unnecessary protective investigations, and are therefore more likely to accept assistance. In addition, family problems can be comprehensively assessed and appropriate services put in place to address them, thus preventing the development of maltreating behaviour, or reducing conditions detrimental to a child's long-term development. Equally importantly, the models recognise the need for effective collaboration between child protection services and other family support agencies in order to more effectively assess family needs and to provide a response that can positively affect family wellbeing and ensure the protection of children from abuse and neglect.

Such models, if appropriately resourced, enable agencies to regain prominence in child abuse prevention and the early detection of 'at risk' children, a role which many services have been unable to perform substantially in the 1990s because of a lack of resources, exacerbated by the high demands for services that accompanied the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Tomison 1996e; 1999; Armytage et al. 1998).

Assessing needs and strengths-based (solution focussed) practice

A focus on needs

Identified in the recommendations of the U.K. Department of Health's *Messages from Research* series of research studies (as part of the shift to a family support model) was the adoption of a general focus on harms and needs in child protection work, rather than a narrow focus on forensic labelling and assessment (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995; Elliott, 1998). This issue has been picked up by Australian child protection departments. In Queensland, for example, child protection services have begun to adopt a focus on the identification of the *harms* suffered by the child and the *needs* of the child and family that require action (Elliott, 1998). Concomitantly,

there is less emphasis on recording and planning cases according to the type(s) of maltreatment identified, and on determining precisely who is to blame in cases, particularly where the issue is one of providing support, rather than adopting statutory action.

In contrast, research investigating the careers of children investigated by a social services department in England (Thorpe & Bilson 1998) identified an attempt to utilise the West Australian style of case 'streaming'. The result was a strong focus on the labelling process, bureaucratisation and 'routinised' worker decision making, rather than a reliance on sound clinical judgement. Workers were identified as maintaining a focus on 'child abuse' investigations and were failing to focus on child and family welfare and an assessment of 'need' issues. Consequently, access and provision of supports for the child and family was less than adequate. The study therefore highlights one of the problems that may arise when a streaming model is adopted and an adequate focus on providing support is not maintained (or is under-resourced).

A focus on strengths

The new models of service delivery promote the importance of service professionals developing a strengths based partnership with client families (Tomison, Burgell & Burgell, 1998). Pioneered in the early 1960s by Otto (eg. 1963, as cited in DePanfilis & Wilson, 1997), the underlying tenet of a strengths perspective is that all families have strengths and capabilities (De Jong & Miller 1995). If practitioners take the time to identify and build on these qualities, rather than focusing on the correction of skills deficits or weaknesses, families are more likely to respond favourably to interventions. Thus, the likelihood of making a positive impact on the family unit is considerably enhanced (Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1988).

The practice philosophy of a strength-based approach, particularly as it is applied to 'at risk' and abusive populations (Saleebey, 1992, as cited in De Jong & Miller, 1995), can be summarised as:

- all people and environments possess strengths that can be marshalled to improve the quality of clients' lives; these strengths and the ways in which clients choose to apply them should be respected by workers;
- client motivation is fostered by a continued emphasis on client-defined strengths;
- discovering strengths requires a cooperative exploration between clients and workers;
- a focus on strengths reduces the worker temptation to 'blame the victim' and enables the discovery of the means by which clients have survived in even the most inhospitable of circumstances; and,
- all environments, even the most bleak, contain resources.

The objective of a strengths-based practice is to develop a true partnership between family members and workers, involving the family as much as possible in case management decision-making and encouraging families both to set their own goals and to take responsibility for achieving them. Such competency-based, family-centred practice is not a denial of a family's problems or shortcomings but a focus on client strengths is perceived to be a more fruitful means to address issues and achieve positive change (Tomison 1998).

Giving more credence to clients as participants in the helping process increases the likelihood of a worker facilitating positive change in the lives of family members, and helps to ensure the safety of the child through better engagement with the family. The approach is not a cure-all, rather, it is designed to assist families to achieve a level of functioning above the threshold for protective intervention.

Some researchers and practitioners however, have raised concerns that child centred family focused, and solution focused work may not adequately protect children, because they focus too much on the family as a whole rather than being primarily concerned with the protection of the child (Tomison 1998). The fear is that the primary role of the assessment and intervention process, ensuring a children's safety, may not remain the priority in a system focused on family support as a whole. It is feared that with generic family support cases in particular, family needs will be addressed at the expense of child protection.

The shift to family support is thus perceived by some professionals as representing a shift towards family preservation, even in cases where this may be detrimental to the child. It is therefore vital that, for families entering the child welfare system as a result of child maltreatment allegations, care is taken to ensure that the best interests of the child are not sacrificed when they conflict with the best interests of the family (Tomison 1998). This fear has been recently confirmed in the UK where the first major analysis of the Children's Act 1989 (and the family support approach) has now been published (Department of Health (DoH) 2001).

DoH (2001) provides a summary of 24 UK studies funded by the Department of Health investigating the impact of the Children's Act 1989. Some of the findings included:

- absence of a common assessment framework was a key issue identified.
- identification of an urgent need for the development of common, interagency language with regard to providing a broad definition of what 'safeguarding children' means (the research identified a lack of clear understanding regarding the definitions of 'significant harm' and key terminology);
- a failure to adequately assess risk of harm in a proportion of cases, resulting in the minimisation of abusive concerns and a failure to adequately protect; and,

- a failure to provide adequate access to family support services by those in need (relates to both resource and threshold issues; similar concerns have been identified for the WA child protection system).

Parton too, has noted that:

...in effect the central philosophy and principles of the Children Act have not been fully developed in day-to-day policy and practice. Not only are the family support aspirations and sections of the Act being implemented partially and not prioritised, but the child protection system is overloaded and not coping with the increased demands made of it (1997:3).

Risk Assessment

The primary response to *Messages From Research* has been the restructuring of case intake procedures; specifically, risk assessment methods and gate-keeping or screening. One of the 'messages' was that there was a need to develop stricter thresholds for child protection intervention and service provision. Thus, only those families judged to be truly in need (i.e. where there is evidence of 'significant harm') enter the system, are fully investigated and receive services (Tomison 1998). Such screening processes rely heavily on predictive risk assessment techniques. A family support approach to child protection is therefore seen as being achieved via the better case management of those families deemed to be in need of investigation, case management and service provision (Tomison 1999a).

Risk assessment has several objectives: to help protective workers identify situations where children are at risk of maltreatment; to improve consistency in service delivery; and to help protective services determine the appropriate priorities within protective services caseloads (Browne & Saqi, 1988; English & Pecora, 1994). However, there is insufficient information currently available to determine the efficacy of risk assessment tools for identifying children at risk of serious maltreatment (Camasso & Jagannathan, 1995; Lyons et al., 1996; Dalgleish, 1997).

A variety of risk assessment measures have been adopted by the different Australian State/Territory child protection services (Tomison 1998). The most radical, such as the system adopted in South Australia, involve a series of brief checklists to not only determine levels of risk, but also to determine service allocation. Some researchers question the benefits of risk assessment instruments (see for example, Goddard et al. 1999). It was reported at a recent conference that the New Zealand Children, Young Persons and their Families Service (CYPFS), who adopted a risk assessment tool in 1996-97 that actually overrode worker judgement, had subsequently modified their position such that workers' clinical judgements had regained primacy in case management decisions (Tomison 1998). A variety of checklists are now being used, described as 'guides' to inform workers' decision making, rather than superseding it (Smith 1998).

Gatekeeping, case streaming and differentiated responses

In 1995, Western Australia set up a new model of case intake, where cases were classified into either a generic 'child concern report' or 'child maltreatment allegation' stream. Regardless of the stream into which a case fell, all cases were to undergo a full assessment and receive supports where necessary. However, it appears that inadequate resources were put in place to enable agencies to cope with the demand for services. Families, particularly families labelled as having a generic welfare concern, appear to be no more likely to receive support or amelioration of their problems than they would under the 'forensic investigation' models of child protection. Thus, there has been a substantial decrease in the number of official child maltreatment cases, due to definitional changes (Tomison 1999a).

In South Australia, there has been the development of a comprehensive system of screening and resource targeting, using a series of structured risk assessment checklists. Victoria, in contrast, has adopted a differentiated response to notifications (screening) via the Enhanced Client Outcomes (ECO) system. This approach has been combined a risk assessment guide (Victorian Risk Framework) and a state-wide implementation of the Strengthening Families program, designed to provide support and treatment to those 'at risk' families who do not require a protective response (Tomison 1999a).

ECO reaffirms the importance of risk assessment as the basis of decision making in child protection and the key to discriminating between different client needs, including high risk and urgency issues. ECO provides workers with an opportunity to use a graded scale of assessment and investigation, tailoring responses to identified concerns. Thus, families where it appears that there is a generalised family dysfunction, rather than a child protection issue, are provided with a less intrusive response, possibly involving family support agency workers making an assessment, rather than having two child protection workers conduct an unannounced home visit.

In many ways ECO is a formalisation of practice as it was undertaken in the 1980s, recognising the expertise of other professionals and involving them collaboratively in case assessments and case-planning, where appropriate (Tomison 1999a). The evaluation of the pilot ECO approach indicated that the system produced positive changes to gate-keeping for protective workers, non-government agencies and the families (Tomison 1999a).

As indicated in Waldfogel (2000), the US child protective services are also moving to adopt forms of family support, differentiated response systems, interagency partnerships (and to promote the involvement of 'natural helpers') in child protection.

Recent concerns in relation to the family support model

(see also Brief no. 2)

Lack of evaluation

It would appear that there has been no evaluation on the impact of family support services on preventing maltreatment. Tracy (2000) notes that there is little information on the best way to match particular services with particular types of families, how to engage fathers in the programs and how to link these family support services with other community services.

'At risk' families are still missing out

Although the adoption of a family support model of child protection can be beneficial for many children and families, a number of concerns have been raised (Colclough, Parton & Anslow 1999). The first concern relates to the fact that the model relies on the provision of support services. Referring the situation in the UK, Colclough and colleagues (1999) report that services are not always available, being prioritised towards families involved in child protection and children in the Looking After Children (alternative care) program. If inadequate resources are put in place to enable agencies to cope with the demand for services which results from such an approach, then families, particularly families labelled as being 'at risk', or as having a generic welfare or family support concern, are no more likely to receive support than they would under the forensic investigation models of child protection (Tomison, 1996). It is therefore of paramount importance that adequate means are put in place to ensure adequate resourcing of the family support system and the development of a structure to enhance comprehensive inter-professional involvement in case-plan discussions. If not, it is likely that history will repeat itself, with cases slipping through cracks in the system or families being inadequately serviced (Tomison, 1996).

Additional issues

There is an assumption that needs of 'the family' are consistent with the needs of all the family members, a factor which is not necessarily so.

Not only must the views, experiences and actions of mothers, children and young people be disaggregated, it is children and young people who should be central. Unfortunately, the perspectives of children and young people are virtually absent from the recent research and current debates on family support and child protection (Colclough et al. 1999, p.171).

In addition, protective services are still dominated by a forensic approach, necessary because of the criminal nature of child maltreatment (Colclough et al. 1999). This fact may make it difficult to work in partnership with the offending parent, as the family support model requires. Indeed, particularly in relation to child sexual abuse, there may be a conflict with assessment of the mother's ability

to care for the child, and the provision of a support model of services (Colclough et al. 1999).

Finally, intervention in relation to child maltreatment may require services that are more complex and comprehensive than 'support'. Colclough and colleagues (1999), talking about sexual abuse, say that there is clearly a need for more services, such as therapeutic, counselling and advice services.

Conclusions

For changes to identification and assessment to have meaning for children and their families, there must be changes in the conceptualisation of the roles of child protection and the wider child welfare and family support systems. Focusing on minor adjustments to the 'intervention pendulum' without adequate resourcing of the system will significantly reduce any possible benefits for children and families identified by the system, particularly those with generic welfare concerns. The 'system' needs to be conceptualised as a prevention-protection 'continuum of action', where, regardless of the level of protective concerns, children and families receive some form of support to alleviate their concerns. The threshold is then less important than ensuring the protection of children within a process of family support, of true child centred family focused work (Tomison 1998).

Such a framework will only result if governments and senior departmental managements adequately recognise the importance of preventing social ills, particularly child maltreatment and the social and economic costs which can be saved. Under such an approach, identification and assessment, while important, truly no longer drive the child protection system, but maintain an important position in a model where remedying dysfunction is given primacy. Although it is unlikely that this framework will be adopted in the short-term, it is proposed that the 'continuum of action' be retained as a benchmark against which future restructuring and innovation in practice are measured (Tomison 1998).

Literature

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An overview of protective services or aspects of protective services

Atkin (2000)

Child abuse may always be a problem with no perfect solutions. This chapter deals with the issue of child abuse in New Zealand and outlines the overall statutory framework and the process for dealing with child abuse. Questions are raised such as How is the safety of children assured when abuse becomes apparent? What are the resources available for dealing with abuse in families? How are false allegations of abuse handled? These questions suggest that major responsibility rests on the state and the community. The author asks where the balance is between an intrusive and culturally insensitive governmental agency and one which appears to be backing away either through lack of resources or for ideological reasons. In New Zealand the balance is tilted in favour of minimal intervention, with concerns being raised that economics are given priority over care of children, that unless a case is one of the most compelling kind of abuse, it will not be investigated and that social workers are inadequately trained and resourced.

Fisher, Thomson & McHugh (2000)

The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) Office of Childcare commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre in 1999 to examine the relationship between children's services for children under school age and the DoCS child protection function. The project also investigated the effectiveness of children's services as a protection and prevention strategy for abuse and neglect. The study comprised three components: a literature review, a survey of directors of children's services and focus groups with workers in child protection's services. The survey with directors of children's services included questions on details of children at risk of abuse and neglect placed in a service as well as the effectiveness of communication with DoCS from initial placement through to case closure. The survey contained a number of open-ended questions in relation to children at risk including: whether the care differed from care given to other children; record keeping in the service; adequacy of meeting needs of children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-English speaking backgrounds and children with a disability; demands on primary contact carers; training in child protection; prevention programs; abuse in care; and, the effectiveness of a placement as both a prevention and protection strategy. This paper reviews the findings from the survey of directors of children's services highlighting some of the strengths and weaknesses of the present system from the perceptions of workers in the field. (Author abstract)

Hetherington (1999)

This paper identifies the common themes which emerge from recent analyses of child protection systems in the 1980s and 1990s, and presents the case for an integrated approach to the provision of statutory services with a focus on safety and risk issues as well as children's needs, and the incorporation of formal assessment instruments. It then provides an overview of the new South Australian integrated child protection model, which was implemented between April 1997 and February 1998. Initial evaluation of the new model indicates improvements in consistency of initial screening and responses to children in danger.

South Australia. Department for Family and Community Services (1997)

This publication outlines the new child protection model in South Australia. It builds on best practice in South Australia, safety, risk and needs and/or strengths assessment systems developed recently in the US and inter agency cooperation and quality improvement measures from the UK. The new approach aims to ensure the greatest possible safety for children reported for abuse and neglect. The main reforms to the child protection system are: a central intake system; differential response depending on whether intervention or a non intrusive response is appropriate; safety, risk and needs and/or strengths assessment; structured decision making system; inter agency cooperation measures; and continuous quality improvement. Appendices to the publication present the instruments and assessment forms relevant to the new model.

Tomison (1999a)

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of some of the trends and issues in the identification and assessment of children by child protection services where there have been allegations or a suspicion of child abuse and neglect. Issues discussed include: the role of child protection; new models of child protection and family support; gatekeeping in child protection services; streaming cases, Western Australia; the differentiated response model, Enhanced Client Outcomes Victoria; risk assessment; implementation of risk assessment tools; risk factors in risk assessment measures; ecological effects of applying risk assessment in situ; worker effects; and child centred family focused practice.

Tomison (1999b)

This thesis comprises a comprehensive investigation of professional decision making in the management of actual or suspected child maltreatment cases via a six-month, in situ case tracking study. Specifically, it was an attempt to highlight the realities of case management decision making, its complexity and the issues facing professionals through an in-depth analysis of the factors affecting the decision making of professionals within one complete child protection network. Overall, 260 children residing in 190 families suspected or confirmed as being physically, sexually, emotionally abused or neglected were tracked through the targeted network. The influence of child, family and socio-environmental effects (case-related factors) and aspects of the child protection system (systemic and professional factors) on the various professionals' decision to substantiate child abuse and neglect, and the decision of child protection workers and police members to take statutory action were examined.

The results provided evidence of the effect of a variety of in situ effects not traditionally identified in models of the decision making process and highlighted the important role played by non-statutory professionals in the management of actual or suspected cases of child maltreatment. The decisions made by these workers determined the subsequent involvement of statutory services and could either enhance or diminish the likelihood of a positive case outcome. Workers involved in the case tracking were utilising the informal relationships they had developed with other workers in the region to circumvent formal methods of communication and coordination (referral protocols and case conferences). Although this could enhance professional decision making, it was also responsible for the exclusion of some workers from the case management and professional decision making process, poor information exchange, interprofessional disputes and less than optimal case management. The results of the case tracking were subsequently used to develop an Ecological Framework of Decision Making able to encompass current knowledge of the factors that influence professional decision making in the child maltreatment field.

Tucci et al. (1998)

The April 1998 Kids First - Agenda for Change Conference was an initiative of Australians Against Child Abuse and drew together health, legal and welfare professionals to collaborate in developing possible solutions to improve current approaches to protecting children and preventing child abuse and neglect. Delegates were asked to complete a questionnaire about the changes required to improve child protection systems and resolutions from delegates throughout the conference were noted. The information from these sources has been collated in this document and forms the basis for the identification of the solutions and problems in Australian child protection systems. The problems are discussed and presented in order of priority allocated by delegates. They include: Australia lacks a national agenda on child abuse and child protection; child protection systems are failing children in each state of Australia; lack of counselling and support options for children who have been abused; failure to emphasise children's rights; inadequate inter-professional and inter-agency collaboration and communication; poor working conditions of state child protection workers; lack of recognition of the link between child abuse and family violence; insensitivity to Aboriginal and other cultural issues; and lack of consistency and direction in current child abuse prevention policies. Key recommendations to improve child protection systems across Australia articulated at the conference are presented.

Family strengths approach

Elliott, Mulroney & O'Neil (2000)

This book addresses issues of family work as they confront practitioners working outside formal therapy contexts with marginalised families who are often demoralised by poverty and violence. While focusing on four approaches: solution focused, narrative, cognitive and community building, its foundation rests not on therapeutic techniques but on core principles of family practice. The need for practice that is respectful and inclusive of families' cultures is recognised and specific challenges for family workers in this area are outlined. Numerous family stories are included to illustrate different interventions.

Heinrichs et al. (1999)

Olmstead County (Minnesota) Community Services operates two Family Group Decision Making projects: Family Partners, for families at low-risk of child abuse and Family Works, a more intensive approach for high-risk families. Both projects emphasise a strengths perspective and are based on the principles of family involvement in decision-making, the impact of problems on the entire family system, the responsibility of professionals to provide resources and assessments and the capacity of family members to offer the best solutions. The Family Partners Project is designed as a non-punitive approach to the investigation and assessment of child abuse allegations among low-risk families. Target families have no history of child abuse and are not in immediate danger of losing their children or being arrested. Service components include an ecological family assessment, the identification of family supports, in-home counselling, mediation, and family group decision-making. The Family Works Project is a family-centred program that focuses on empowering families that are at high risk of maltreatment and building their relationship skills. Components include in-home family based counselling; multi-family group therapy; family conferencing; transition services; and family mentoring. Families are empowered to take control and participate equally in case planning and identifying a vision for their lives. An evaluation of the Family Works program found that child safety increased and risk decreased among participants. The Family Partners program was also successful in reducing the number of child maltreatment reports and improving the quality of assessments. Although family group conferences were not used often, families who participated in conferences were able to develop a realistic plan. (Abstract from NISC and BiblioLine)

Turnell (1998)

There is a world wide trend in the child protection field away from aggressive and intrusive practice toward working in partnership with the family suspected of abuse and neglect. This trend has been popularised by policy makers and academics but workers in the field are often left wondering how they should go about building partnerships without increasing the risks to children. Over the past five years a group of over 80 Western Australian child protection workers, the presenter and his colleague Steve Edwards have developed an innovative and practice oriented approach to child protection called the 'Signs of Safety'. The approach utilises practice elements which enable assessment of existing and possible safety that balances traditional risk assessment at the intake and investigation stages and also elicits the family's own assessment of the situation. This process fosters collaboration between family and worker at the early stages and creates the context for partnership in the subsequent casework. The approach also assists the statutory agency to clarify its own safety goals and purposefully seeks to maximise the involvement of the family in defining and achieving these. This paper summarises the Signs of Safety model, demonstrates it with several case examples and also reflect on the lessons learned in designing and implementing an approach which aspires to partnership between the statutory agency and the family. (Author abstract)

Turnell & Edwards (1999)

A West Australian text describing the application of strengths-based approaches to child protection practice.

Woods (1997)

Families where children have been placed in the care of the State are frequently involuntary participants in programs aimed at achieving the safe return of their children to their care. Workers are often perceived as agents of the government, and their agency as an organisation highlighting the family's failures and deficiencies. This article outlines the Mofflyn Reunification program which works with high risk families and moving them from an involuntary position to participating positively in the return home of their children. Strategies used by staff include the following: joint goal setting and contracting with a clear explanation of what reunification is; identifying non negotiable and negotiable aspects of the work and being clear and honest about the agency's role; focusing on family strengths; using responsibility rather than risk assessment; and developing an alternative story for the family. Emphasis is placed on workers developing a sense of congruency in their work with families, peers and other agencies. In this way the organisation seeks to maintain the workers' sense of personal integrity and openness in the hope that their own morale remains high.

Family support model

Armytage et al. (1998)

Current initiatives in Victoria, Australia, attempt to rebalance the relationship between protective and support services. Distinguishing a category, however, for people's problems is no easy matter. New language is generated to describe long held tensions between voluntary and non-voluntary services and differing philosophies of intervention. In the UK, legislation has compartmentalised these as children 'in need' and children 'at risk'; in the US distinction is drawn between 'forensic investigations' and 'service responses', internationally, partnership takes participation further; while actuarial assessment instruments compete with clinical judgement to discriminate between risk levels and required resource allocations. Interpretation of these international trends has helped consolidate an emerging practice position within Victorian child protection services. This evolving framework includes the protection- welfare-developmental needs of the child; a strengths based partnership approach to families; integration and collaboration with other services; and consistent regard for the professionalism of the child protection workforce. (Author abstract)

Colclough, Parton & Anslow (1999) 'Family support', in Nigel Parton and Corinne Wattam (eds), *Child sexual abuse*, New York : Wiley.

Fleming (1998)

In the area of child protection, there is often a struggle for a balance between safety of the child with privacy of the family. At even greater odds is the inclusion of some family members and other professionals in child protection investigations, and the exclusion of others. Some family based practice models available in work with statutory child protection cases are problematic when it comes to assessing risk and safety. This paper aims to describe a current practice model that the author has found to be relevant for statutory family based practice. It focuses on fostering a cooperative relationship between workers and families, particularly where the families perceive a threat to remove the child from the home.

Hearn (1995)

Drawing on recent research, this report outlines the risk of polarising family support and child protection work by treating them as alternatives rather than mutually supportive and complementary activities. It offers a definition of family support and outlines some practical ways in which local authorities can work towards achieving a balance between family support and child protection.

Littlechild (1998)

The history of child protection is, in many ways, a catalogue of changes arising from the political/professional interface tensions relating to a highly contentious area of public and professional policy. The latest contribution to this process is the Department of Health's 1995 publication *Child Protection. Messages from Research*. The overview of the studies recommends that there be a shift in resources and attitudes from an investigative approach family support perspective. Many local authorities have subsequently produced policies which will lead to referrals being recorded as 'children in need' rather than child protection. The ramifications of this change in approach are examined from the dual perspectives of policy and practice. The article suggests that while much of the change in emphasis is to be welcomed, the needs of the most severely abused children may be compromised by the new orthodoxy, as it is not based on the reality of the many problems encountered by children and professionals in child protection work. It is argued that a focus on practice issues needs to permeate all such documents.

Parton (1997)

Child protection and family support : tensions, contradictions, and possibilities

Shemmings (1999)

Involving children in family support and child protection

Tomison (1996)

This article examines child protection services and the increasing numbers of reports of suspected child maltreatment, focusing on the adoption by some Australian State and Territory governments of a new model of child protection. A research program implemented in the United Kingdom by the Department of Health and coordinated by Dartington Social Research Unit, University of Bristol, is described and implications for policy makers to consider shifting the balance between child protection and other services for children in need, are discussed. An

Australian pilot in Western Australia is analysed, highlighting family support rather than forensic investigation.

Tomison (1998)

In a previous paper by the author (1996), it was contended that Australian state and territory child protection systems had begun to follow the international trend of shifting the balance between the 'forensic' investigation of suspected child maltreatment to one where a greater emphasis was placed on family support and the promotion of a 'needs' approach to the management of suspected child maltreatment cases. In this paper the author discusses some of the significant changes to child protection case management and child abuse prevention that have eventuated since 1996, partly as a consequence of the adoption of the 'family support' approach to child protection work. First, 'solution focused' and 'child centred, family focused' strategies have become popular methods of enhancing treatment outcomes for children and their families. There has also been acknowledgment of the need for child protection services to engage family support and other non-government services in meaningful case management partnerships. Three variants of child protection / family wellbeing strategies currently being piloted in various regions of Victoria by the Department of Human Services, are used to highlight these trends. The projects are: the Family and Neighbourhood Links (FANL) projects, the Enhanced Client Outcomes (ECO) projects and the Brimbank Pilot Family Outreach Service. Second, there has been growing recognition that child protection departments, in isolation, cannot adequately protect children and a subsequent re-emphasis on the value of child abuse prevention. Specifically, it has been recognised that the effective prevention of social ills like child maltreatment requires a truly cross-sectoral approach, and the development of a 'whole of community' strategy, such that prevention of child abuse is a shared responsibility between various professional sectors and the community at large. A number of innovative child abuse prevention approaches, such as the Inter-Agency School Community Centres Pilot Project, which is currently operating in New South Wales, are highlighted. (Author abstract)

Wilding & Thoburn (1997)

This article reports on the first phase of one of several research projects commissioned by the Department of Health to study post Children Act policy and practice. Its purpose was specifically to look at the relationship between children 'in need' and children 'in need of protection' because of concerns about neglect or emotional abuse. The research focuses on the families of 349 children under 8 years of age who were referred to three social services departments because of child protection concerns and 363 who were referred for a service but who did not, at least initially, arrive with a 'child protection' label. The study found that the initial assessment of the families of children referral because of concerns about emotional abuse and neglect tended to be low key and to concentrate on 'risks' rather than on the needs of the children. An opportunity was thus missed to differentiate between those families who would be able to meet the needs of children without the provision of services and those in which the health and welfare of the children would be likely to deteriorate without further assessment and help. The early decisions by team leaders in respect of this group of families most often resulted in a low level of service provision.

WA Model

Family and Children's Services, Western Australia (1996)

New directions in child protection and family support: interim guidelines, standards and implementation package.

Parton (1999)

New Directions is the term used in Western Australia to summarise the various significant changes in the way the Department of Family and Children's Services has approached child protection and family support referrals since 1995. This paper describes, analyses and, in part, evaluates New Directions.

Parton & Mathews (2001)

There is a great deal of evidence that statutory child welfare agencies are being overwhelmed by a large increase in child protection referrals which require formal investigation and that there has been an increasing failure to develop more preventive family support services. In this paper the changes introduced in Western Australia to address this situation are described. New Directions is the term used in Western Australia to summarise the various significant changes in the way the Department of Family and Children's Services has approached child protection and family support referrals since 1995. Results demonstrate that the changes have led to a restructuring in the way the Department responds to concerns expressed about children, which in turn have impacted on the proportion of substantiated child maltreatment cases and the way responses are prioritised and allocated. This in turn has provided the Department with a more explicit and clearer focus for its work in a period of increasing demand and rapid change.

Tomison 1996

Risk assessment

McPherson, Macnamara & Hemsworth (1997)

Working from a background in child protective intervention and staff training and development, the authors sought to address two commonly reported deficits in child protection - the lack of a risk management framework and failures in interagency collaboration. This paper reports their approach to locating a risk and safety factor matrix and their evaluation of its use in a series of interagency workshops designed to improve collaboration. (Journal abstract)

'At-risk' children missing out

Mackieson (1997)

The research described in this document investigates the child protective notifications from the City of Brimbank in Victoria, with particular reference to unsubstantiated notifications and those investigated but where no further action was taken and includes a detailed profile of these children and their family circumstances. The model, The Family Outreach Service, which resulted from this research and aims to divert the children and their families from the statutory child protection system by developing community-based primary and secondary services responses specifically targeted to meet their needs, is discussed. The report is divided into the following areas: the context; the research phase of the project, the research findings, findings and relevant models of service; the proposal for the pilot phase of the project; and evaluation of the project.

The active involvement of children

Kiely (2000)

Burnside, in partnership with the NSW Department of Community Services (Cumberland and Prospect area) has been offering, since 1995, Family Decision Making Conferences to families where plans are needed for the future care and protection of children. This paper describes Burnside's experience with Family Decision Making, addressing issues of the family decision making model and how children's voices are currently being heard in family decision making.

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