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Children should be seen and heard

IN RECENT years, many investigators in Australia have expressed concern about an unreliable, inadequate and careless approach to collecting data about child abuse, family violence involving children, crimes against children, bullying and other key indicators. They believe it is clear children are the most vulnerable group to violence in Australia.

These investigators include academics and researchers, journalists, child welfare advocates and government agencies.

In particular, their concerns centre on the common approach to return children to situations where they are under threat of further violence and abuse. They are also concerned about how children's voices are not part of the dialogue of care.

Recently, a young girl was subjected to cross examination by her stepfather who had been allowed to represent himself in court. She testified at a number of stages, including her statement to health care workers, police officers and to a judge and jury. She was then expected to be led graphically through the acts of rape again by the person who had been convicted for abusing her.

In October this year, in one of many cases of child abuse before the courts around Australia, a man was sentenced to seven years jail for sexual abuse dating back 35 years; from 1973 to 2003; with seven children under 12 years old.

The scale of reports of child abuse in Australia continues to increase. In 2006-2007, 309,517 reports were received by statutory child protection services. Of those, 20% or 58,563 reports were found to involve children in need of protection. A year ago, 28,441 children were in out-of-home care. In the same 2006-2007 year period, \$1.7 billion was spent in Australia on child protection and supported placement services.

It does not seem to be enough, according to reports on ABC radio in October. According to information distributed by Australian Childhood Foundation, one in four children are concerned they will be hurt by an adult and one in

five children are worried about their peers not being protected from abuse. Three in 10 children think adults do not believe children who report being abused. About 46% of children report they have been exposed to material on the internet which has worried them.

In the 'Ways Forward' report, based on what is commonly referred to as the Northern Territory intervention, government authors admit "significant problems facing children and young people in the general Australian community" with services in child and adolescent health "poorly resourced generally and an area of major need for the Australian community generally".

The Australian Institute of Family Studies encourages effective prevention and early intervention to combat child abuse and protect children. AIFS recommends strategies as diverse as post natal home visiting services, quality child care, targeted family support and parenting education programs. Organisations should include screening of existing and potential employees and volunteers, clear policies and procedures that enable reporting and investigations to occur, a framework for responding appropriately and a physical environment which is child-safe in order to reduce opportunities for maltreatment.

Many advocates point out it is necessary to ensure Australia fosters a society that is supportive of children and families. Social connectedness in creating child- and family-friendly communities enables the development of positive impacts on child development, parenting and welfare. Flexible work practices and availability of high quality child care enable parents to balance their roles within the family, home and work – a balance which should be positive for children.

Children see and children do ... it is up to all governments, organisations, communities and adults to put the wellbeing of all children first in Australia.

By Jeanette Severs
The third article in a series.



Gippsland volunteers receive awards

FOUR volunteers from Gippsland were recognised for their contribution to the welfare of children and families. At an award ceremony at St John's Anglican Church in Camberwell, Tim and Shelley Roberts and Annamarie and Keith Hayles, were among a number of volunteers who received Chairman's Awards from Anglicare Victoria.

Timothy and Shelley Roberts (pictured above) have been accredited foster carers since 1994 and were accredited as permanent carers in 1995. They have four children of their own and have two children who have been in their care since 2005.

In presenting the award, Anglicare Victoria's Chairman said both Timothy and Shelley have demonstrated a special ability to provide a secure, stable and nurturing environment for the children who have come into their care. They are passionate advocates for the children and work hard to ensure they are viewed as members of their family.

They are a family focused couple, making sure the voices of the children are heard through family meetings, and encouraging the children's strengths and abilities. Tim and Shelley create a home where children are highly regarded as individuals and encouraged to be independent and responsible people.

As parents and carers, Timothy and Shelley have recognised the uniqueness of each child's personality, specific needs and individuality. Tim and Shelley make a concerted effort to engage in a wide range of family and community activities, actively promoting happy, healthy, enjoyable family times in order to build and maintain relationships.

The two children currently in their care are going through the process of changing from foster to permanent care. The whole family is eager and excited about the prospect and is looking forward to many

exciting times together.

While raising their own son (he is now 21), Annamarie and Keith Hayles have dedicated a large part of their life to caring for other children. They spent some time caring for children in foster care and then in 1994 cared for a 16 month old boy, Steven, who they adopted in 1997. Steven is now 15 years old.

Soon after, Annamarie and Keith chose to further expand their family and in 2001 started caring for two siblings (now 9 and 11 years old) through permanent care. Again in 2007, Annamarie and Keith volunteered to care for two more siblings who are now 5 and 8 years old.

As well as accepting these children into their family, Annamarie and Keith have the two older siblings of the two older children stay with them each school holidays for a week. The older siblings think of Annamarie and Keith's home as their own and Annamarie and Keith go out of their way to ensure all seven children have a fun-filled time together. All the children participate in special family celebrations such as birthday and Christmas gatherings. The Hayles' work hard to ensure the children are able to maintain family connections and links.

As all the children have their own special needs Annamarie and Keith have worked in a committed and cooperative way with professional services such as speech therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists over many years. They are still actively working with these professionals in respect of the youngest two children.

The Hayles are a welcoming and loving couple who provide strong and consistent parenting as well as an acceptance and understanding of the children's journey.