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## FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

# BEYOND POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE— ACHIEVING WELLBEING FOR ALL AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE

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This is the second of two Special Issues on kinship care. In the Editorial to the first Special Issue I described the 2018 ACWA project *Kinship Care: Making it a National Issue* and its various elements. I also mentioned some things we know and don't know about kinship care, myths about kinship care that have sprung up in place of knowledge, and the depth of unmet support needs of kin children and their carers. Here I explore ways forward to address kin children's wellbeing from a human rights perspective. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) outlines the responsibilities of nation states to provide for children's wellbeing and to assist parents and carers to provide children with a standard of living adequate for their healthy development. The Convention also articulates the child's right to a good education, and to assistance to recover from neglect or abuse. Australia has signed on to the Convention, thus providing benchmarks for policy and programs to support children in kinship care.

A recent national tour by kinship care expert Dr Lucy Peake, CEO of

Grandparents Plus UK, was an offshoot of the 2018 ACWA project, providing an opportunity to take stock of developments in Australia and compare aspirations. In particular, it generated a heightened awareness of the need to advocate for all children in kin care whether placed informally or formally and the need to organise nationally.

Advocacy would certainly be assisted by knowing the actual number of Australian children living in informal and formal (statutory) kinship care and their living arrangements. Who are these children living with, and under what circumstances? How many kin families are under financial and housing stress? What support do they need? ACWA was one of many respondents to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018 Census Review that appealed for access to more precise data about household family relationships, and it is pleasing to see that this issue has been prioritised for the 2021 census<sup>1</sup>. It will thus become possible to see how the Australian picture compares with the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/2007.0.55.001Media%20Release100002021>

United Kingdom where around half of all children in kinship care are in the care of grandparents, one-quarter with older siblings, and one quarter with other relatives, and where 90-95% of all kinship care is informal (Selwyn & Nandy, 2014). We already know from early Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data that grandparents probably constitute around half of all Australian statutory kinship carers, and the other half include many different relationships (AIHW, 2019). While statutory kinship care is a small part of kinship care in Australia, these figures do suggest that kinship care needs to be understood as a diverse phenomenon including informal and formal care arrangements by a range of relatives and family friends.

The gaps in our data have, however, contributed to a fragmented view of kinship care in Australia. Three recent national inquiries have made recommendations for specific cohorts of kin families. Each has identified outstanding issues and needed responses, yet none have looked at the whole picture.

The *Senate Inquiry into Grandparents Who Take Primary Responsibility For Raising Their Grandchildren* ('the Grandparents Inquiry') explored both formal and informal grandparent care (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2014). This Inquiry advocated for recognition of the role and contribution of grandparent carers through an ongoing national forum, augmentation of the Centrelink Grandparent Advisers program, and improved financial support from both the Commonwealth and the States/Territories. Parliamentary momentum has been renewed this year by the establishment of the *Parliamentary*

*Friends of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*. This is heartening news...yet still overlooks the large number of kinship care households headed by relatives other than grandparents.

The *Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care* (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2015) and the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) both paid attention to emergent issues in statutory kinship care, but their remits did not provide for attention to informal kinship care. Both recommended greater attention to statutory kinship carer assessment. Recommendations from the *Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care* similar to the Grandparents Inquiry included establishing a national peak body for kinship carers and increasing kinship care allowances. The Royal Commission also recommended financial support equal to foster care.

Each inquiry thus explored a piece of the whole picture. Greater recognition of grandparent carers by the Commonwealth will do nothing for other kin families; and recommendations for a much-needed increase in kinship care allowances will not assist the majority of children in informal kinship care. Support for all kin children based on need rather than statutory order or the particular carer-child relationship will depend on a shift in mindset towards the whole rather than various of its component parts.

Fortunately, kin children in all circumstances have some strong advocates on their side. The National Children's Commissioner Megan Mitchell has been an active supporter of the rights of children in kinship care,

and each of the State and Territory Children's Commissioners also has the outstanding needs of kin children in their sight. A vehicle for awareness-raising and advocacy is right in front of us. The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020* expires next year, and a program of national consultation regarding a new *National Child and Family Wellbeing Plan* has commenced and will extend into early 2020. The consultations provide an opportunity to push for a strong focus on the wellbeing of kin children in both informal and statutory kinship care, and for a research program to address the gaps in knowledge. An invitation to participate in a consultation can be obtained by registering with Families Australia [admin@familiesaustralia.org.au](mailto:admin@familiesaustralia.org.au)

Even with such a focus, however, the *National Child and Family Wellbeing Plan* on its own would be insufficient to maintain momentum for improved kinship care policy given its broad remit. There is increasing awareness among community services that a dedicated national kinship care alliance will be needed. Given the limitations of adding participation in such a network to existing workloads, I also believe that a long term goal needs to be a funded national kinship care association to work in collaboration with *SNAICC—National Voice for our Children* to advocate for all Australian children in kinship care.

All three Inquiries described above drew attention to the central issue of financial stress in kinship families, an issue fundamental to children's right to an adequate standard of living. Internationally, research has also shown that many families caring for kin children have limited incomes and are

actually plunged further into poverty by this very act of generosity (reviewed in Kiraly, 2015). Advocacy must start here: the Commonwealth Government needs to recognise all children in kinship care as a vulnerable group warranting particular attention and support. A model of support that would reduce poverty in kinship care is actually right on our doorstep. In 2009 New Zealand established the *Unsupported Child's Benefit* alongside their *Orphan's Benefit*. The new benefit was set at the national foster care rate, thus providing financial support on the basis of need rather than statutory order for all children in kinship care in New Zealand. The Australian Government *Double Orphan Allowance* could provide the platform for a similar needs-based benefit that would make a huge difference to the wellbeing of Australia's most vulnerable children, and open up the possibility of fewer children needing to be in out-of-home care.

Equitable financial support for all children in kinship care is central, but not the whole answer. Kinship carers grapple with complex intrafamilial issues as well as the day-to-day challenges of responding to children with legacies of trauma. Some carers are also looking after elderly or unwell adult family members. New community-based kinship care support programs will also be needed if we are to support as many children as possible outside of out-of-home care.

Australia led the world in closing children's institutions, and whether or not by design, kinship care both informal and statutory now constitutes the bulk of alternative options. While enabling children to experience stability and enduring relationships with loved ones, kinship care may only accord the

right to healthy development if the inevitable suffering that accrues to poverty and disadvantage is obviated.

A number of papers in this Issue relate to matters raised by the three recent Inquiries, and point to ways forward. A major element of the 2018 ACWA project *Kinship Care: Making it a National Issue* was a policy survey that explored existing support for children in kinship care from the Commonwealth, States and Territories of Australia. Results of this survey and its recommendations are reported in this Issue.

Each of the three Inquiries also registered particular concern about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are so overrepresented in out-of-home care (AIHW, 2019). *SNAICC–National Voice for Our Children* and other Indigenous organisations have been active in policy development with regard to statutory kinship care, asserting the imperative of Aboriginal families and communities determining who is kin to a child, and who may provide care that allows genuine connection to family, community and culture. An article by Glenda Kickett, Shaun Chandran and Janise Mitchell describes a culturally strong, therapeutic kinship care for Aboriginal children and their families run by the Australian Childhood Foundation in Western Australia. We have much to learn about warm, child-centred practice from such programs. Details of the new *SNAICC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle: A Guide to Support Implementation* are also presented in the Sector Resources section of this Issue. In all efforts to achieve equity and wellbeing for all Australian children in kinship care, it will

be critical for non Indigenous organisations to strengthen collaborations with Indigenous colleagues such that both universal issues and issues particular to Indigenous children are properly addressed.

The concern with carer assessment expressed in the two inquiries that explored statutory kinship care is shared by many practitioners, and indeed by many kin carers themselves. It has also been a concern of Joan Hunt, Honorary Professor at the University of Cardiff and a British kinship care researcher of note, and we are privileged to publish her article on this complex subject. Joan is also the author of *Assessing and Supporting Family and Friends Care* recently updated and published online in the UK Research in Practice series. A description of the practice tool appears in the Sector Resources section.

While the remit of the *Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care* excluded children in informal kinship care, one group of such children did come to notice thanks to the determination of researcher advocates David Rose and Klaus Serr of the University of Melbourne. Fortunately for children involved in international kinship care, the Inquiry didn't notice that this group were technically outside their remit. Many of these children arrive in Australia alone from war-torn countries, to live with relatives whom they may have never met. If ever there was a hidden group of vulnerable children this is it, and the Inquiry recommended the development of particular support for these children. We have managed to inveigle David and Klaus to report their research here despite their hectic academic schedules. Also included is a

review by Geraldine Ellis-Maguire of their 2016 book, *New Beginnings: Issues & Needs in International Kinship Care*, that provides useful information for practitioners working with immigrant children.

In the Practitioner's Perspective Anne McLeish AOM writes about the inception and operations of Kinship Carers Victoria (KCV), the only Australian state-based peak body to represent kinship carers separately from foster care. More such organisations across the country are surely needed. KCV's most recent achievement has been to establish the first Victorian Kinship Care Week, 8-14 September 2019, with the assistance of a grant from the Victorian Government. Kinship Care Week is now operating in both Victoria and New South Wales, and will hopefully appear in more States and Territories in 2020.

Small, local grass roots kin carer groups are also emerging across the country, providing mutual support and advocating for better recognition. The Carer/Advocate's Perspective includes an article by Sue Erben, a grandparent carer and tireless peer supporter and advocate, in which she describes a large Australia-wide Facebook group for kinship carers for which she is the driving force. Sue's experiences and those of the many carers with whom she is in contact have led to a view of governments and services that may be viewed by some readers as somewhat jaundiced, yet from the perspective of many carers her sentiments are quite understandable. We admire her boundless energy and determination to see better conditions for children and carers, while reminding readers that her views are her own and do not

necessarily reflect those of all kinship carers, or of the Editors or ACWA.

The Sector Resources section presents an article by Elizabeth McCrea about the Mirabel Foundation which operates in Victoria and New South Wales to provide support to children in kinship care who have been orphaned or abandoned due to parental illicit drug use. Many young people and carers in contact with Mirabel have participated in my various research projects and advocacy initiatives over the last 10 years, and have sung words of great praise for this wonderful service.

One topic notably missing from these Special Issues has been attention to the education of children in kinship care. In the United Kingdom, Sebba et al. (2015) have demonstrated the educational advantage that accrues to children in kinship care over other forms of alternative care, an advantage associated with stability of care, continuity and close relationships. Efforts to ensure that Australian kinship families have the wherewithal to maintain their secure and loving care will be critical to ensuring children's rights to achieve their academic potential.

The opportunity to be Guest Editor of these two Special Kinship Care Issues of *developing practice* has been a real pleasure, despite the eye-watering amount of work entailed. I thank all those who contributed articles on top of often punishing workloads, and hope that together we have contributed to the push for a better deal for all Australian children in kinship care. I also wish to thank the Editor Jen Doyle who has been a joy to work with given her accommodating nature and deep knowledge of the publishing process.

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