

**CRECHE & KINDERGARTEN NATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD  
CONFERENCE**

“Footsteps to the Future:  
Equity and Excellence in Early Childhood.”

**“CHILDREN THE HEART OF THINGS”**

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## CHILDREN, THE HEART OF THINGS

I have titled my paper "Children, The Heart Of Things", because children are the heart of things. They open our hearts, they prompt us to profound levels of feeling.

As a society we have developed much in the areas of intellect, scientific thought, rationalisation and technology. We seem to have gotten away from, and lost the ability to trust our inner knowing, our heart feelings. Heart feelings in fact seem to have become something that we don't own, that we are too sophisticated, rational, or in control, to express or exhibit. Yet it is our heart feelings that represent joy and love, compassion and understanding, acceptance and openness. Children are heart. They function from the heart and have the capacity to open our hearts.

In some ways their impact can be overwhelming or somewhat threatening:

- They reopen us to our own experience as children.
- They remind us of our vulnerability.
- They respond to us, the real person, not our image.
- They need something real from us, not our image, or intellect, or performance.

Children are a different ballgame to the one many of us have learned to play as a way of coping in the outside world.

Children need and respond to realness. What we teach our children is what they teach their children. What we are, they become. We are their models. Their life patterns they learn from us. In their early years the patterning is not an intellectual transfer. What we experience, they experience, and they take on. Life patterns form at this age in this way, primarily in the early years, just by children being with us. I have noted as an extreme example of this process, and with some degree of amazement initially, how many parents who sit in my office, have repeated with quite devastating impact for them, their children and their partners, what was a profoundly disturbing event of their childhood. Intrapsychically, part of them is still fixed at the point of this early experience.

During latency or primary schooling, children learn by modeling or copying us. Because of the cognitive development at this stage there is a greater degree of objectification in this process, and for this reason patterns learned can be more readily unlearned, unless the learning was associated with the accommodation of profound trauma that has gone untreated.

*Children are the core of society. Children need heart.*

It is a precious gift that children give to us and it is our responsibility to understand their needs, respond, protect and nurture that preciousness in the best way that is available to us, remembering, a phrase I first heard last year that, "**A Childhood Lasts A Lifetime**".

## **THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF FAMILIES**

We live in interesting and challenging times and there are a number of specific factors influencing both the structure of and thinking about families. There is a current focus on the 'Rights of the Child'. The International Year of the Child caused a refocussing on the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and this has put children on the agenda internationally, with the result there has been some major legislative change throughout many countries, much of it positive and much of it attending to areas of deprivation and risk to children. This focus is positive and I believe heralds an era "of the child".

During the past 30 years there has been greater focus on the experience and rights of women. Previous to that as we know, the world was interpreted and understood primarily through the experience of men. I would like to see us as a society however, move away from the terminology of rights and refocus on need and experience. For example in the debate about women's rights, I believe there was a loss of focus on child need. However, in the disclosing of women's experience, the darker side of family life has been named and scrutinised. This has been to the benefit of children. Issues of child physical abuse, child sexual abuse and family violence are now out of the closet. I would like to add, though, that the systems in our society have yet to develop appropriate responsiveness to the many children who are at risk in families.

There is much talk currently about men's rights and their lobby is shaping and influencing thinking and legislative change, particularly in the arena that I work, the area of Family Law. Again, it is my experience that true focus on child need is lost to competing lobbies about adult rights.

Families. Eva in her Boyer Lecturers refers to the darker sides of families and as we shed more honest light on family life, the darker side of family experience comes into sharp relief. This dysfunction in families in essence reflects the dark side of human nature. It is not, I feel, a problem of families as such, but one of individual's dysfunction within a family. Our families provide a necessary environment for the nurturing, growth and the socialisation of children. They are important forums for us to learn about relationships. Our greatest lessons are learned in the family. Our deepest bonds are formed with our parents and siblings, and the strength, health and depth of these early relationships set the standard for the quality of relationships we develop in later life. If the family is abusive, the standards are set for the repeat of abuse. Despite the popular rejection of the nuclear family as a desirable structure, it is interesting to me that we continue to congregate and form into family groupings, whether they be blood ties, emotional ties, or common interest groupings.

I would like to look at some of the factors influencing change in family structure and functioning over the past two decades. The women's movement is at the core of these changes.

The women's movement has encouraged men to be more involved in home life and to be more involved as parents. It has argued that women should have more options outside the home. Its impact has provided options for women who are no longer staying in unhappy marriages (70% initiate separation). The resulting marriage breakdown has afforded greater scrutiny of family life with recognition and identification of the destructive and damaging elements of family life.

This social change has resulted in a range of family structures evolving in addition to the nuclear family: single parent families, blended families, homosexual parents with children, children living with unrelated adults and or sharing a house with friends, not infrequently underage. These developments (some in reality quite disturbing) have profoundly challenged our values around family life and have implications for child experience and child rearing. I would stress though, that family construct is not the issue, but that the capacity of the parent figures and the health of the family environment determine the health of the child experience.

My experience is in Family Law and to a large extent the Family Court has been at the forefront of managing these changes and setting standards for parenting in separation. My particular interest is in the impact of separation on children, the child casualties, and defining the ingredients needed for the breakdown of their family to be a constructively adaptive experience for children. And separation can be a positive and growthful experience for children.

In attempting to give meaning to child experience, I have found trauma theory provides a useful theoretical basis for understanding children's intrapsychic experience and provides an excellent framework for recognising symptoms, responses and coping in children. We all experience trauma as children, and as adults. Most of us if we delved deeply enough, would find that we are fixated at a number of points of our childhood experience. These "stuck" points shape our neurotic personality coping and contribute to the childlike behaviour that we are all capable of exhibiting.

For children, family separation can be a traumatic experience. Having a primary parent leave is a major loss. With separation, children experience their own grief, loss, anger and associated overwhelming feelings. Their distress can be compounded by the ensuing conflict, hostility, grief, overwhelming emotions and feelings that characterise the separation process for their parents. For the clientele who present to the Family Court, the children can be exposed to some extreme behaviour indeed.

The following slide reflects the experience of a number of the children whose parents make application to our system. Presenting to the Family Court are children who have witnessed or are witnessing intense unremitting conflict, spouse violence, homicide or attempted or threatened homicide, suicide or attempted or threatened suicide, assault and sexual abuse of their mother.

Presenting also are children who are victims of child abuse; physical, sexual, emotional; emotional abuse through prolonged intense conflict; are secondary recipients of domestic violence; are victims of abduction/kidnapping and the resultant separation from often, the primary parent; of loss of a parent through access refusal caused by unresolved parental conflict.

While these are extreme examples of traumatic child experience, the process of accommodation/psychic adaptation is similar for all children where there has been disruption of the nurturing, attachment and developmental process. Young children cannot and do not talk about their experience. They internalise their hurts and fears, we can seriously underestimate their experience. For example, it is not uncommon for me to have a parent say, in the context of abduction or non-return of a child, "she never talks about her mother", and for that parent to believe that the child is experiencing no stress. In reality that child would be overwhelmed by feelings of abandonment and loss. Or in the context of a highly conflictual separation where the father may be having no contact, "I don't think he misses him because he never talks about him."

The following slide describes the intrapsychic process for children who have experienced trauma and the resultant impact on their external functioning. This can refer to children who have experienced significant abuse or witnessed violent situations. It is also relevant to children who have been traumatised by inappropriate separation from their primary carer or what may be in truth abusive interruptions to the natural evolution of the developmental process.

A child has specific attachment needs which if met provides him with the confidence to proceed to the next level of development and exploration of life. If forced through stages or expected to be able to function at a level more advanced than his developmental stage this will cause stress to the child and can result in dysfunctional accommodation.

What I would like to stress today is the need for us to remember that children are children, that they have special needs and that these needs are age related, and if these needs are not appropriately met children can be quietly, but profoundly damaged. For example a baby or toddler's future self esteem, self confidence and social competence is dependent on individualised, responsive and consistent care from her primary carers. She will experience a sense of abandonment if separated inappropriately, and anxiety if her needs are not met. This will result in a feeling of helplessness, which if unalleviated, has damaging impact with real implications for her functioning in childhood, impacting on learning and social competency, and places her long term development at risk.

Every baby needs at least one person to attach herself to. If there are several adults available to her she will usually select one for her primary attachment, generally her mother if she is available and adequate as a carer. It is through that first love relationship that she will learn about herself, other people and the world, experience emotions and learn to cope with them, move through egocentric baby love into trust and confidence.

A safe secure transition through this primary attachment phase, will provide a basis for that child in adulthood to form attachments, to give to another person in adult relationships, and to provide the depth and constancy of relationship and care for his or her children.

The carers of infants need to have “permanence, continuity, passion and parent-like commitment”. This cannot be adequately replaced by professionals or by a range of caregivers who do not have an integral and consistent role in the child’s life. In her first 12 months a baby has no way of knowing that the parent who leaves will come back, no way of holding the parents image in her mind so as to anticipate her or his return. Only another closely attached adult can forestall the profound sense of isolation, despair and helplessness that can be experienced in her mother’s prolonged absence.

Toddlers’ need to become separate and autonomous constantly conflicts with the need for the safe dependency of infancy. Toddlers are still adult centered, but need new activities. They will enjoy playing alongside other children, but they are not ready to socially engage with them. A toddler’s enjoyment and learning depend on adult support and commentary. Group activity is not even a partial replacement for individual adult attention. A group of other toddlers, each as needful of the adult as himself, introduces competition and social stresses that he is not yet capable of dealing with. He needs to do this social learning with the trusted control of his own particular adult.

Penelope Leach refers to research in the UK which shows that under-threes are talked to far less in a group than in domestic situations, even where the pre-school teacher was well trained and the is mother not especially child-centered or communicative. She refers to Gamble and Zigler who, summarising a number of studies, found that rather than learning to be sociable, outgoing and independent, early daycare may foster those characteristics to excess. Children who have experienced early group care tended to assertiveness, aggressiveness and peer rather than adult orientation. A North American longitudinal study on men who were rated as dependent in childhood emerge in adulthood, as calm, warm, giving, sympathetic, insightful, undefensive, incisive, consistent across roles, comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, and socially poised.

Professionally staffed daycare centres, socialisation programs involving group activities are for children who are well into their third year or more. At this age children are able to cope with inevitable discontinuities of care and to benefit from group life and the educational input that is premature for younger age groups. With this developmental pathway in mind, it is interesting to note the trends in childcare and child rearing. A recent unpublished survey in a Brisbane childcare found that children spent twice as much time in care outside the home, pre-school, compared to when they started school. In my experience in the context of separation, this tendency to deny the particular needs of little children is reflected in orders made by the Court and in child arrangements negotiated by parents.

Orders and consent arrangements are frequently made allowing for greater and longer periods of separation from the primary carer with younger children,

with the amount of contact reducing when the child starts school. In the broader social context, one often hears of a mother who felt the necessity to continue to work full time after her child was born, but will reduce to part-time work when the child starts school, so that she can be there for him. There are a number of factors influencing this tendency. Underlying is an ignorance of, but more disturbing, a denial of the needs of children at their most vulnerable stages.

I question why, at the most vulnerable and dependent time of a child's life we as individuals, parents, systems and society, seem to be in deep denial about these special needs of small children.

As a society we are increasingly intellectual. Intuitively and by social structure in the past we focused on the child's need for the consistent presence of a primary carer, largely because women were at home. This child need was not articulated. We seem to only give credence to what is articulated. If it is intellectually articulated it has some value. For example, when working with women, who present to our system and who have been the primary carer, when asked why they feel their children need to be with them often all they can say is "I'm their mother".

If a mother could articulate what that means for the child she would talk about the child's attachment, the sense of security the child derives from her being there, the child's distress at inappropriate separation. This lack of articulation does not detract from the reality of their nurturing role for the child, but because they can't say it, they are often not heard in a legal system which judges through concrete evidence and legal argument. As a society we have acted and lived many aspects of emotional bonding and care without articulation or consciousness, but increasingly it is denied and devalued when the moment suits.

Because of this intellectual process, we as a society, currently focus much on performance, achievement, externalised educational aspects of child development, rather than the nurturing, caring, just being there for children. To some degree this relates to the valuing of the rational rather than intuitive, or the masculine rather than the feminine. In part it is the fact that our society is based on individualistic values of competitiveness, achievement and performance. We seem to be shying away from, for a range of pragmatic, expedient and economic reasons, rather than embracing the essence of child need. However, it is our sense of self that determines our true effectiveness in life. A child's developing sense of self is closely bound up with her relationship with her primary carer/s and the opportunity afforded her to develop at her own pace with the presence and support of those carers.

I am stressing this issue of bonding, attachment and appropriate separation, because it is crucial. Our nurturing at these early stages shapes how we feel about ourselves. How we feel on the inside determines how we function in the external world.

This essential "development of self" process would seem somehow to be thought to be left to chance. There is little recognition or support for the many

dedicated hours of parenting that is required over several years. The emphasis is directed on external functioning, on learning, providing educational opportunities and opportunities for socialisation. Your program emphasises curriculum content, appropriately, as you are early childhood educators, and there are clearly some exciting developments in the area of early childhood education. In the area of childcare and early childhood services the focus tends toward expediency and economics rather than child-centered. Within the legal system there is pressure to respond to demand around parental rights, resulting in at times, concerning decisions around children, despite the framing of new legislation around child rights.

It is a confident, secure, inner sense of ourselves that allows us the personal confidence to embrace the external world. A belief in oneself, trust, expectation of positive response are the ingredients of healthy functioning. It is the relationship with and role of the primary carers that we are assuming, but denying. What value is placed on parenting? How much support is given families with children and in particular women who are mothering or parents parenting, whether they be working full time in the home or combining paid work with parenting.

I strongly urge us to use child need as the starting point in our thinking and planning in any child service.

We know that childcare for young children is an essential fact of modern life. We know that some parents, economically have no choice but to work. We know that the pressures of career and the workplace little accommodate the needs of children. We know that not all parents are good parents and that appropriate childcare is a constructive option for their children. We know, as Penelope Leach states that "lack of people with whom to share childcare is a major problem in Western maternity". Until recent times, as Eva points out, we have always brought children up in group situations, involving multiple adults and many children, but those multiple adults had significant and formalised relationships with the children.

In the early 70's I lived for a number of years in Central Australia. As well as working in a formalised social work context with Aboriginal communities, I had, what I feel was the privilege, to live in a pastoral context, side by side with an Aboriginal tribal group who were unaffected by alcohol and less dispossessed than the peoples who had been missionised or moved on to settlements. In effect I had exposure to relatively intact tribal life. Their child focus was salutary, based on clearly proscribed relationships and responsibilities of relevant adults to children in their kinship groups. Children had strong unambiguous relationships with their parents for primary nurturing and emotional bonding, and with a range of carers, based on relationship, from within the group. Teaching roles were assigned to specific adults, for girls the father's sister and boys the mother's brother. Secure attachment was a key ingredient: attachment to the parents and caring adults of the group who could be relied upon to be there; attachment to the culture learned and experienced through the sharing of daily living; and attachment to country. Each child was assigned custodianships to their particular country, which in

that region was determined when the mother felt the child's first kick in-utero. A sense of meaning and purpose was engendered through these rich relationships with parents, significant others, culture and their relationship with their country.

I caution, that as a society we have a tendency to trade children off for expediency. One because they do not have a voice. Two because people would seem to truly lack understanding about their needs. Three because there is something about their essential vulnerability which, while it evokes profound feelings of protectiveness in us, it also exposes us to our own vulnerability, about which we tend to be in denial.

Let us forget for a moment that some parents have to work, that some parents are not good parents and that as a society we isolate and undervalue mothers of young children. What if we just looked at child need as our starting point. We need to inform ourselves as parents, carers, professionals, employers and as a society about the needs of children and start our planning from that point.

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