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Parents, Children and Family Relationship Centres: What's Working?

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This article reports on a study of parents' and children's responses to the service they received at two Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) in Perth, Western Australia. Family members who had attended either the Mandurah or Joondalup FRCs sponsored by AnglicareWA between 2010 and 2012 were invited to complete a survey that asked them for their views on the services they had received. A total of 74 parents, representing 139 children, completed the survey. Findings indicated significant satisfaction with the two-hour group session that introduces the work of the FRCs, with parents reporting they could remember the main messages from the session. A surprising finding, and one that has not been reported elsewhere, is that parents expressed an unwillingness to invite their own children to participate in the work of the Centres, although the majority of the respondents agreed in principle that children should take part. The implications of this finding are briefly discussed.

■ **Keywords:** Family Relationship Centres, parents, children, participation, services

Introduction

In the past two decades, family law practitioners (dispute resolution professionals, lawyers, and the judiciary) have explored a number of approaches to including children in discussions about their futures following their parents' separation. These approaches have included the concept of 'less adversarial' approaches within the Family Courts (Bryant, 2008; Chisholm, 2007) and for children to engage in group and individual work aimed at hearing their views on their current and future situation.

One approach has been the development of child inclusive practices (McIntosh & Long, 2006). Aligned with family dispute resolution, these practices typically invite children to talk with a 'child consultant' who then feeds the content of their discussions back to their parents (Campbell, 2002; Shea Hart, 2009). While these approaches have now been in place for some time, very little research has considered parents' and children's views of the services they are receiving, especially in the network of Family Relationship Centres across Australia.

In this article, we report on a study of parents' and children's responses to the services they received at two Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) in Western Australia, one in Mandurah (south of Perth) and the other in Joondalup (a northern suburb). Our findings indicate that parents may be both confused about the services they received at these Centres and concerned about the possibility of their children's participation in the Centres' work. These findings suggest that the embedding of child inclusive practices into the ordinary work of the FRCs may require diverse approaches to informing parents about their usefulness.

Background

The position of children in Australian family law has, for the most part, been rather marginal. While their best interests are considered the paramount consideration in decisions made about them following their parents' separation, children themselves have not been significant participants in these decisions (Brown, Batagol, & Sourdin, 2012). Additionally, while family dispute resolution (FDR) practitioners and other family law professionals are required to advise parents that their decisions must be made in the best interests of the child (Brown et al., 2012), the definition of children's 'best interests' is vague and indeterminate, relying heavily on subjective judgment made out of context (thus somewhat unrelated to children's own experiences of their families and of separation) (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009; Kelly,

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1997; Shea Hart, 2011). As a consequence, recent literature has suggested other alternatives to the concept of children's 'best interests', including replacing it with a measure of 'the least detrimental alternative' (Hansen & Ainsworth, 2009) or assessing children's needs (rather than their best interests) as the basis for decision-making (National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020, 2009).

Of further concern is the question of whether a child's 'best interests' can be determined in isolation from the child herself. Over the past decade, researchers have raised questions about the participation of children, in both court processes and family dispute resolution, in determining their best interests (Bagshaw, 2007; Campbell, 2008a; Cashmore, 2011; Chisholm, 2009; Shea Hart, 2009, 2011).

Other confounding issues relate to the level of independence afforded to children as they grow. Young children are highly dependent on adults and the family unit, creating difficulties for determining their best interests outside the context of family and parents (Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2011). Additionally, because children are dependent on adults for a large part of their young lives, those who work with families are usually obliged to gain adult (parental) consent to see children as part of their work (Campbell, 2008b).

Child focused and child inclusive processes and practices in family law

A review of Australian family law services in 2001 identified as a priority the need to include children and young people in decision-making and to provide them with appropriate support services (Family Law Pathways Advisory Group, 2001). Following this review, three approaches were proposed, two of which were studied by Moloney and McIntosh (2004). These researchers distinguished between child-focused and child-inclusive family dispute resolution. In child-focused work, practitioners will maintain a strong focus on the children's needs during their conversations with parents, ensuring that they consider children's concerns rather than the parents' agenda. Children do not participate in any way in child-focused approaches. In contrast, child inclusive approaches involve a specific process (Campbell, 2002), where children are interviewed separately by a child consultant who then feeds back to the parents the content of the interviews. The third approach, described as child-centred, engages children in a variety of ways (including counselling, conversations, and activities), rather than using one specific approach (Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2011).

These approaches reflect developmental theories in terms of the ages of children who may be invited to participate, and how they participate. Children may experience a level of independence but with clear boundaries on their involvement. In child inclusive practices, their views may be given to parents in various forms, including being couched in developmental terms. Thus, in some cases, parents may hear a different message from that intended by the children themselves.

Family violence and child inclusive models of service

There is some debate about whether children should participate in decision-making where there has been a history of family and domestic violence (Kaspiew, De Maio, Deblaquiere, & Horsfall, 2012). In the Family Courts, the Magellan and Columbus programs centralise the child's needs through the appointment of an independent children's lawyer (Family Law Act, 1975, S60CD(2)(b)) who interviews the child and the parents, gathers information about the child from schools, doctors, psychologists and other children's services, and represents the child's best interests during court proceedings. This approach contrasts with a recent national trial of a family dispute resolution model (the coordinated family dispute resolution [CFDR] approach) which is described as child centred but rarely invites children's active participation (Kaspiew et al., 2012). The approach works specifically with families that have experienced violence, helping protective parents to prepare a safety plan and inviting parents to work in family dispute resolution alongside an advocate for each of them. Children rarely participate, with a child inclusive approach being used in only 14% of all cases nationally (Kaspiew et al., 2012). Kaspiew et al. report that the development of the CFDR approach was undertaken within a concern for children's safety and the potential for them to be influenced by one or both parents should they participate.

Family Relationship Centres

Changes to the legislation in 2006 led to the establishment of a network of Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) across Australia (Moloney, 2013). The intention was for these centres to act as service hubs, providing a number of different services, either in-house or by referral, for families experiencing relationship breakdown. New services were also established, including the Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCaSP), which provides support for children in their own right. FRCs also provide family dispute resolution, and may include other services to support both parents and children. They are sponsored by a variety of NGOs across the nation, including Relationships Australia, Catholicare and Anglicare.

Research on the outcomes and effectiveness of these FRCs has, to date, been limited. Previous studies have explored the effectiveness of family dispute resolution and child inclusive practice (Bell, Cashmore, Parkinson, & Single, 2013; Moloney & McIntosh, 2004; Shea Hart, 2009), the outcomes for families that attended FRCs (Moloney, Qu, Weston, & Hand, 2013), and FRC staff perceptions of the work and children's participation (Henry & Hamilton, 2011).

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Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) explored the views of various stakeholders in one New South Wales-based FRC, and highlighted the 'central importance of the recognition and respect of children' (p. 60) in the work of the centre. Bell et al. (2013) looked at outcomes from three FRCs in New South Wales, and suggested, while there were benefits for all family members of children's participation, that participation did not significantly contribute to the overall outcomes of the work, especially in the formulation of effective parenting plans. Little is known, however, about parents' and children's experiences of the FRC approaches to which they are exposed. The current study explored these experiences in more depth.

The Study[1]

The research was undertaken at two Family Relationship Centres sponsored by Anglicare WA in Perth: one at Mandurah, to the south of the city, and the other to the north, in Joondalup. Demographically, these two locations are very different: Mandurah is a former coastal fishing town surrounded by a semi-rural environment, while Joondalup is the centre of many new and affluent suburbs. There is a distinct difference between the two centres in terms of levels of employment and income, with Mandurah seeming less affluent than Joondalup (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Practitioners in Mandurah report the presence of significantly higher levels of family violence and abuse than do the practitioners in Joondalup.

Both FRCs follow the same process, which begins with separate face-to-face intake and assessment sessions. Parents then attend a two-hour group session, called the Parental Alliance Group (PAG), which orients them to the work of the FRC and to the central focus on children's needs and concerns. They then attend a pre-FDR meeting, which strengthens the focus on the children and introduces the concept of child inclusive practice. Following both parents' separate attendance at this meeting, they are then invited to engage in the dispute resolution process, which may include interviews with the children and feedback to the parents about their views and concerns. Family members may also be referred to a raft of other services, including the co-located parenting orders program (an 8-week group called Mums and Dads Forever), counselling, men's services and children's support programs such as SCaSP.

In this study we were interested in how parents and children perceived the services they received through the two FRCs under the banner of Anglicare WA.

Method

Following the receipt of ethical approval, all parents and children who had attended either FRC in the years 2010 to 2012, and who had agreed to be contacted for research, were invited to complete an online survey about their experiences at the FRC. Later, they were telephoned and reminded of the survey. During the phone discussion, they were asked if they would like to complete the survey then and there, and if they agreed, the researchers engaged them in the questions. This resulted in a final sample of 74 parents (43 mothers, 31 fathers) and just 8 children who completed the survey. Overall, the parents represented a total of 139 children ranging in age from 2 months to 18 years of age.

The survey instrument included questions about the services received by the respondents and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these services in helping their families to make appropriate arrangements for their children. It included questions that required simple 'yes/no responses', the use of Likert-type rating scales and qualitative responses to open-ended questions.

Once the data from the survey had been analysed, the researchers conducted focus groups with the FDR practitioners at each FRC. Their comments and insights were particularly valuable in assisting the interpretation of the data.

Findings

The findings indicate the significant difficulties of engaging parents and their children in services post-separation. As in other research (e.g., Campbell, 2008b), we found that parents act as strong gatekeepers when asked to consent to their children's participation. When each parent's interests differ from those of the other, their children and the professionals with whom they interact, it becomes more difficult to give children any assistance. While gaining parental consent to invite their children to participate is a moral, rather than a legal issue (Campbell, 2008b), FRC staff are usually obliged to seek that consent before they invite children to participate. It is therefore important for FRC staff to effectively engage parents if they wish to involve children in the work.

The respondents in this study were asked how they responded to the Parental Alliance Group (PAG), the two-hour group to which all parents are invited prior to receiving further service. During this group parents are asked to develop a strong focus on their children's needs and concerns about the separation. Respondents were extremely positive about their experiences of the PAG. They reported having remembered the key messages from the session and expressed significant satisfaction with their experiences during the group program. Positive reports included an appreciation of the focus on improving the situation for their children and of the opportunities the group provided for sharing their experiences with other parents.

This finding is similar to those of another study recently undertaken in a New South Wales FRC (Williams & Anderson, 2012). Consistent with this research, parents reported feeling supported by the group facilitator and other members of the group. They appreciated the strong focus on the children and the comprehensive nature of the information received during the session. Responses from the FRC

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staff in our study indicated their belief that the group session engages parents on both emotional and intellectual levels, ensuring that they retain the central messages from the program.

Nevertheless, the responses of some of the parents in the sample indicated that their understandings about their children's experiences were limited. The children represented in this sample included a large proportion (17.5% of the total number of children) under the age of 6. The majority of their parents expressed the view that they were not affected by the separation because they were 'too young' at the time. This finding is worrying, given the body of research that indicates that even very young children can be significantly affected by their parents' separation for some years following the actual event (e.g., Wallerstein, 2008).

When questioned about the services they received, the respondents in this study expressed some confusion about what they had done and which services they had attended. Both the FRCs involved in this study provide an 8-week, group-based parenting orders program (Mums and Dads Forever, MDF) and various services for children (child inclusive family dispute resolution; SCaSP). Responses from the parents in this study indicated some confusion between the PAG group and the longer MDF program. They also confused children's counselling programs (such as SCaSP and school-based counselling) with the child inclusive approach, which does not involve a counselling process. Nevertheless, they were clear about the family dispute resolution process and its goals. Initially, the researchers were concerned about this confusion, interpreting it as a difficulty for parents if they are not clear on what they are doing. It may be, though, that parents are not as concerned with understanding the distinction between service types if they feel that the service they are receiving is meeting their needs and those of their children.

When asked about their children's participation in the work of the FRCs, parents whose children had participated expressed significant satisfaction with the outcomes. Parents reported that the children appreciated the opportunity to express themselves to a neutral and informed professional. Parents said: they know they've got someone to talk to; they felt they could express themselves; they found they could speak up; they gained re-assurance; and they learned about themselves. In addition, parents whose children had participated reported having greater understanding about the children's views. For example, one mother stated:

> *I learned that they thought their father, while not as good as I would like, or as good as they would like, was acceptable to them, despite all his problems, and that I should leave it at that.*

A recent article (Bell et al., 2013) found that child inclusive approaches 'did not prove to be more beneficial in terms of improving the parental relationship or the likelihood of resolving the dispute'. The authors argued that while parents reported positive benefits similar to those reported in the current study, the approach may not add much value to the outcomes of a family dispute resolution process. In our study, it was clear that FRC practitioners do not focus on outcomes as the central motivation for inviting children's participation. In the focus groups, practitioners pointed out that their intent is to give voice to the children who are central to the work they do. While Henry and Hamilton (2011) reported that FRC staff in their study argued that child inclusive practices can shape changes to parenting plans that better suit children's and young people's needs, this benefit appears to be secondary to the need to help children voice their own views. Parents and practitioners in the current study reported that children appeared happier and more relaxed following their conversation with the child consultant. These findings reflect those of McIntosh and Long (2006) in their nationwide research.

A surprising finding, however, was parents' overall responses to questions about children's participation. The survey asked whether they considered that children (in general) should be included in discussions about their future care. An overwhelming number of responses agreed that children should be included, although 14 of 26 respondents qualified their response with a concern for the child's situation and age. All but four of the parents then added a further (unprompted) qualification to their responses. They stated that, while they agreed with the principle of children's participation, their own children should not be involved at all.

No other study has reported this finding. Previous studies have reported parents' views about their children's participation in FDR after they had agreed to that participation, rather than exploring the views of parents whose children might not have been involved (McIntosh & Long, 2006). The finding of the current study perhaps explains why only 8 of over 100 children completed the survey instrument, and indicates that agreeing to the participation of one's own children in the work of FRCs is controversial, whereas the principle of involving children is not. This has significant implications for FRCs that wish to invite children to participate, as it suggests that alternative approaches may be required. When parents are asked to consent to their children's participation, it seems possible that they may block further discussion through refusing consent. An alternative may be to simply advise parents that children are seen as a matter of course in the service, thus building an expectation that the practice is 'normal'. Petridis and Hannan (2011) report that this approach is used in Anglicare WA's FRCs when concerns are raised about children's safety. They report that children participate as a matter of course in order to develop a comprehensive and positive safety plan with their protective parent.

Conclusions

This study raises important questions about the processes used in Family Relationship Centres and the role of children

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in the work. The process of inviting parents to attend a group session in preparation for their involvement in the work of the FRC appears extremely positive in building a strong focus on children's needs following their parents' separation. This finding confirms the power of providing information in a group format where parents can gain understandings about the importance of focusing on their children in a supportive and welcoming atmosphere. Attendance at the group appears to shape positive expectations of the FRC staff and the work that will occur.

While this study found a level of confusion in parents about the services they receive, this may not be a negative finding at all. Like other programs around the country, Anglicare WA is developing an integrated service model, where the provision of appropriate service occurs in a seamless manner. It would seem that the important aspect of such service is not that parents can identify specific services received, but that they feel satisfied that the situation has improved for them as a result of working with the FRCs.

Of specific interest is the finding that, while parents appear to agree with the principle of children's participation in conversations about the separation and their own futures, they may not necessarily support the participation of their own children. This finding suggests that those services that support the participation of children may need to consider a variety of ways to engage parents in thinking about the benefits of their children's participation prior to inviting their consent. This may also involve a consideration of the concept of seeing children as a normal part of working with all families that seek assistance.

Finally, the focus in recent literature on the direct contribution of child inclusive practice to favourable outcomes in family dispute resolution indicates a potential need for practitioners and services to be extremely clear about the reasons for inviting children to participate. Such clarity can only help to build greater confidence in hearing from children during the separation process and beyond.

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