



Responding to information about children in adversity: Ten years of a differential response model in Western Australia



Maria Harries^{a,*}, Rosemary L. Cant^a, Andy Bilson^a, David Thorpe^b

^a School of Population Health, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, M431, The University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia 6009, Australia

^b Emeritus Professor of Social Work, Department of Sociology and Criminologists, University of Lancaster, Lancaster LA1 4YD, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a comprehensive database about children in adversity collected over the 16-year period from 1990 to 2005 in the state of Western Australia. The focus of this interrogation is the effect of major changes in responses to information about children brought to the attention of the Western Australian statutory authority in a 10-year period during this 16 years. The initiative for these changes was termed *New Directions*, and its associated policy and practice changes were aimed at differentiating information expressing concerns about children and families from allegations of child maltreatment. They emphasized the provision of *supportive* and *empowering* services to families experiencing difficulties – a form of differential response to children in adversity. The article covers the period leading up to the policy and practice change and the 10 years during which these changes were implemented. It examines some effects of the new policy and comments on whether the changes resulted in missed opportunities to protect children from harm, which in turn, might have led to higher rates of re-reporting. The authors present an overall picture of the nature of the information accepted by the statutory authority and how the interpretation of that information might have affected subsequent outcomes for children. In doing so, it shows that the policy and consequential practice changes associated with a differential response mechanism had long lasting positive effects that, despite dire warnings, did not compromise the protection of the small group of children identified as requiring protective interventions.

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Introduction

This study uses data from an information system to consider the impact of the implementation in Western Australia of a policy aimed at reducing intrusive investigations in response to information about children in adversity. The policy was developed in the early 1990s and implemented fully from 1996, two years before the publication of [Waldfoegel's \(1998\)](#) call for a paradigm change and the coining of the term *differential response*. The study focuses on the impact of this policy on the results of investigations, the harms to which children were subject, and some indicators of the support that they subsequently received.

Between the end of the Second World War and the mid/late-1980s, statutory child welfare agencies in the English-speaking developed world generally described their activities as those of providing a range of professional social work

* Corresponding author.

services to poor, vulnerable, and *problem* families (Lamont & Bromfield, 2010). A small proportion of this work entailed the exercise of legal powers to remove children from harmful environments, and place them in residential or foster care. This particular activity was usually referred to as *protection*. During the 1980s and in subsequent decades, however, these same agencies began to record the information they received about children and families as reports or notifications of *child abuse* or *child maltreatment* rather than *child care social work referrals* (Waldfogel, 1998). Those professional activities, hitherto referred to as social casework or family casework, were renamed *child protection* – a term previously confined to that very small number of children compulsorily removed from their homes and taken into care. This move to a child protection orientation marked a further shift away from the welfare paradigm seen in countries such as Finland, Germany, and Sweden (Gilbert, 1997; Khoo, Hyvonen, & Nygren, 2002). These countries have a family-oriented child welfare service characterized by a focus on the provision of therapeutic and supportive services to families in order to reduce the difficulties they face rather than a focus on identifying responsibility for abuse through an investigatory process (Hayes & Spratt, 2012).

In the following sections we provide a very brief overview of some key elements of the critiques of these changes and describe an emerging response that aimed to narrow the scope of reports in order to differentiate response types.

Early Criticisms of Child Protection Programmes

This new child protection vocabulary, with its increasing forensic approach to social work with children and families, was initially developed in the United States. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, researchers had begun to notice that dramatic increases were being recorded in child abuse or child maltreatment reports (hereafter, reports). It was also becoming clear that only a small proportion of these reports, suggestive of actual or potential harm to children, had substance (Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009). Although the problems were initially viewed as a consequence of mandatory reporting, by the mid-1980s researchers in the United States were beginning to focus on the operational definitions of child abuse, as exemplified in Besharov's 1985 article on "...The need to narrow the grounds for state intervention. ..." Shortly afterward, Dingwall, in the United Kingdom, observed that the definition of child abuse had become subject to diagnostic inflation (Dingwall, 1989).

Along with other English-speaking developed countries (notably the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand), Australian states had adopted wholesale and apparently uncritically the United States' vocabularies, definitions, policies, and practices of child protection during the mid/late 1980s (Thorpe, 1994). They then experienced similar unintended consequences to those identified by Besharov (1985) and other researchers in the United States (Thorpe, 1994). Governments were besieged by claim and counter-claim about the meaning of these unexpected and startling recorded increases in reports. Many claimed there was vastly more child abuse than had hitherto been recognized, while others remained more skeptical and were uncertain about some of the emerging discourses and practices in their child welfare agencies (Freeman, 1996).

During the following decade, researchers in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand demonstrated the impact of this ever-widening definition on the scale and nature of the work of state child welfare agencies (Cant & Downie, 1994; Department of Health, 1995; Gibbons, Conroy, & Bell, 1995; Gilbert, 1997; Waldfogel, 2008).

The Development of More Precise Criteria to Guide Practice and Limit the Scale of Unnecessary, Intrusive Investigative Interventions

In the years to follow, measures came to be introduced into some child welfare agencies in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand to deal with the problems that had been identified in the 1990s.

In the United States, two differing approaches were proposed to respond to this increasing rate of reports (Waldfogel, 1998). The first was a tightening of criteria for involvement in the child protection system (CPS) aimed to limit the scale of unnecessary, intrusive investigative interventions (Daro, Budde, Baker, Nesmith, & Harden, 2005). The second approach, which became known as differential response, was articulated by Waldfogel who called for a new paradigm to deal with the concerns about CPS (Waldfogel, 1998, p. 108). The concerns which were seen to have driven this approach include: the adversarial orientation of the CPS, with its focus on investigation and evidence gathering; the low rates of service offered to children who are brought to the attention of the CPS; and the scale of family problems that remained unaddressed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008, pp. 5–6). This differential response approach aimed to develop a partnership in which CPS shared responsibility with a range of parties in the community (public and private agencies, community groups) who would, it was proposed, offer a less adversarial and more helpful response to children and families. It also aimed to tighten criteria for investigative approaches, but for those screened out, there remained the possibility of a less intrusive assessment.

In the United States, both these approaches are operating. All states first screen reports to determine whether they "concern actions that meet the statutory definition of child abuse or neglect in that State" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013, pp. 3–4). Reports that do not meet this criterion are screened out. In 19 states and the District of Columbia, however, a differential response system operates (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013, p. 4).

Implementing Practice Changes

In the United Kingdom, desired practice changes came to be known as *refocusing*. One of the earliest U.K. practice change programmes took place in 1990–91 in Strathclyde Social Work Department (Freeman, 1996). The application of more precise

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