



## Children's Issues Centre: 12 Years of Research and Advocacy

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### THE CHILDREN'S ISSUES CENTRE (CIC)

#### INTRODUCTION

The Children's Issues Centre (CIC) is based in the University of Otago's College of Education. The Centre is primarily a research centre whose role is to provide a forum for addressing national issues that affect children, and to give a higher profile and identity to issues faced by children. Using an interdisciplinary approach the Centre's primary roles focus on:

- Research
- Education & professional development
- Publication
- Community education
- Policy and advocacy

The Centre has strong international links and is a Key Institution of the Childwatch International Research Network ([www.childwatch.uio.no](http://www.childwatch.uio.no)). *Childwatch* is a network of institutions, across the globe, engaged in interdisciplinary research on issues relating to children's rights, development, and well-being.

The Centre is relatively unique in New Zealand in carrying out an interdisciplinary research programme focusing on children and young people, and taking responsibility for disseminating the findings of that research. CIC staff see the role of the Centre in producing applied research as its most salient and important one. All of our other roles (education, publication, advocacy) arise out of, and mesh well with, our research expertise.

The four main research themes of the CIC are:

- Children's experiences of family transitions
- Children and the law
- Young people's participation in schools and communities
- Children and the quality of early childhood education

The CIC has developed a national and international profile and established itself as a body accessible to the professional community, which stimulates thinking and debate, and seeks and disseminates knowledge to support children's well-being and rights. It offers educational opportunities, provides resources and support, and carries out research. The Centre focuses on supporting people and organisations that work directly with children in

various settings and roles, and facilitates alliances between them. The Centre is also an independent advocate for children and encourages children's participation in society.

### **The Children's Issues Centre Mission Statement**

The Children's Issues Centre will monitor, coordinate, produce and disseminate information about children and young people's participation, well-being and healthy development, and facilitate programmes and policies, which enhance their well-being and healthy development.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Children's Issues Centre (CIC) was established in 1995 as a joint project between a community trust – the Children's Issues Centre Trust – and the University of Otago. The Centre was established to address national issues that affect children, in view of the perceived need within New Zealand society to give a higher profile and identity to the issues faced by children in the various contexts of their development. A Memorandum of Agreement between the University of Otago and the Children's Issues Centre Trust was signed in 1994. The Trust, a group of four philanthropic individuals, wanted to give a high priority nationally to issues that affected the well-being of children, and to provide resources and ongoing training to professionals working with children. They believed that this could be accomplished through setting up an interdisciplinary centre based within a university. Professor Anne Smith was appointed as the Director in May 1995 with a Project and Research Manager and a secretary. The Centre was supported by an Advisory Board between 1995 and 2001.

A change in governance and administrative support took place for the Centre in 2001. It was proposed that the CIC become an independent body outside the university with the university being a major investor with a controlling interest in it. The Deed of Trust was modified so that the Children's Issues Centre Trust became responsible for managing the operation of the Centre, and fulfilling the aims and objects of the Centre. The independent status of the CIC changed again in 2003 when the CIC became an integral part of the School of Social Science and Humanities Division of the University of Otago. In 2007 the CIC became part of the University of Otago's College of Education.

Professor Anne Smith retired from her position as Director of CIC in August 2006 but continues her involvement at the Centre on a contract basis. Professor Mark Henaghan, the Dean of the Law Faculty, is currently the CIC's Acting Director until such time as a new Director is appointed.

## Current Staff

Prof Mark Henaghan	Acting Director
Emeritus Professor Anne B Smith	
Michael Gaffney	Deputy Director/Lecturer
Jocelyn Diedrichs	Administrator
Dr Nicola Taylor	Senior Research Fellow
Dr Judith Duncan	Senior Lecturer
Dr Julie Lawrence	Research Fellow
Megan Gollop	Research Fellow
Jessica Tuhega	Research Assistant
Pene Morris	Fundraising/Communications Manager
Mary Blair	Administrative Support

## Statement of Goals

The goals of the Children's Issues Centre are:

- To assemble, and produce information that is relevant to children's well-being and optimal development.
- To offer seminars, conferences, workshops and courses as a resource for professionals working with children/young people.
- To carry out primary research on issues relevant to children's well-being and health development.
- To communicate research information relevant to children, to all of those individuals who can use that information, including professionals working with children, academics, tertiary students, policy makers, the media, parents and other members of the public.
- To encourage and support interdisciplinary collaboration among university staff and postgraduate students in developing programmes, policy or research relevant to children's issues.
- To encourage and support collaboration between university staff and professionals in various roles and other members of the community in developing programmes, policy or research relevant to children's issues.
- To assist community, professional or government agencies working with children/young people in developing policies which concern children, to establish and monitor them, and to develop evaluation procedures and systems.
- To support research, practice and policies which respect and empower children and young people and encourage opportunities for their participation.

- To be vigilant about the well-being, development and rights of children and to be an independent voice for children and young people.
- To encourage the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child through research, educational, policy work and networking activities.

## **CURRENT AND RECENT RESEARCH PROJECTS**

The well-being and rights of children and young people are the focus of our research. We are concerned with how children and young people participate in and contribute to society and how their growing competence is supported or placed at risk, in this process. Our research recognises and celebrates the diversity of childhoods in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The emergence of children's identity out of their engagement in everyday experiences of rural and urban childhoods, culture and community, disability and gender are part of our research interests. Central to this is children's voice and the extent to which it is heard and acted upon in families and communities, the legal, health, social welfare and education systems. Theoretical frameworks include ecological, sociology of childhood, poststructuralist and sociocultural perspectives.

We have five researchers who are working collaboratively with researchers in other departments, and other Universities both nationally and internationally. Our current research projects include:

- Citizenship & Nation Building
- Rural Childhoods
- International Family Law Survey
- Relocation after Parental Separation
- Kindergarten Philosophy and Practice
- Home-based Early Childhood Education
- Disciplinary Practices in Family Settings
- Early Childhood Centres of Innovation
- Dispositions to Learn in Social Contexts
- Disabled Children's Experiences of Their Classrooms

Another aspect of our research profile is co-ordinating a University-wide research cluster entitled: *Children as social actors in families, schools, communities and public systems: Enhancing their quality of life*. This is a group of research-active academics from across the University who all share this topic as their research focus: for example, current staff involved in the cluster come from Education, Law, Psychology, Geography, Physical Education, Social Work and Community Development, Preventive and Social Medicine, Youth Wellness and the Donald Beasley Institute.

## CURRENT ACTIVITIES

The Centre's community activities include offering seminars, conferences, resources, information and support for professionals working with children and for other members of the public, with the general aim of improving policies and practices to enhance children/young people's chances in life. We generally hold a National Seminar on specific themes every second year, and a Child and Family Policy conference inviting keynote national and international speakers every alternative year. We also take advantage of visits from international and national visitors to offer one-off seminars. Staff are also involved in responding to requests to offer seminars or talks to many community organisations.

Publications are also an important part of the resources that the CIC produces. The journal *Childrenz Issues* has been produced since 1997. This journal is research-based but not primarily an academic publication but is however, 'quality assured' according to PBRF criteria. It is intended mainly to disseminate applied research in various fields of practice and policy relating to young people. Each issue is devoted to a particular theme. The themes covered have included Children's Perspectives, Family Support, Transition to School, Legal and Ethical Issues, the First Transition, the Media, Agency and Dependency, Children and their Environments, Youth Issues and Early Experience. The journal is produced twice a year and is subscribed to by around 350 people. We also publish articles, papers and reports from our research, which are available for purchase via our web site.

An important part of the CIC's role is to act as an advocate for children and influence government policies and professional practice in ways which are supportive of children's well-being and rights. There are a number of ways in which the CIC impacts on policy and practice:

- By responding to government requests for research, evaluation and input into policy development.
- Through making its publications widely available and by publicising our activities through mail-outs and our web site.
- Through our networks of contacts with practitioners and policy-makers in distance courses, seminars, and conferences.
- Through responding to invitations to offer keynote addresses, workshops, and seminars in different parts of the country.

The CIC has developed postgraduate interdisciplinary distance-taught qualifications which meet the educational needs of postgraduate students, and professionals working with children. The courses focus on research and theory concerning children and young people's well-being and rights. Our distance learning courses reach a diverse range of people spread from Kaitaia to Invercargill, most of whom study for our qualifications part-time. Professionals studying for the Postgraduate Certificate in Children's Issues, Postgraduate Diploma in Child Advocacy, and Masters of Arts in Childhood and Youth Studies include a range of students and professionals: for example, social workers, teachers, lawyers, psychologists, health professionals, youth justice

staff, early childhood teacher education providers, and early intervention staff (for children with special needs). We also supervise doctoral students on related thesis topics. These courses provide research-based knowledge to professionals working with children so that they can more effectively cater for children's rights, support their well-being and development, and develop appropriate practices and policies for children. The CIC has developed methods of teaching suitable for this group which utilise distance methods such as audio conferencing and Web-based teaching in combination with a face-to-face meeting for each course once a year. We utilise the University's distance teaching resources in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. Students have been highly positive about the opportunities offered by the courses and the staff are delighted that the students are implementing many of the ideas taught within their own practice.

For further information see our website: [www.otago.ac.nz/cic/](http://www.otago.ac.nz/cic/) or, email us at: [cic@otago.ac.nz](mailto:cic@otago.ac.nz)



From left to right:

Dr Nicola Taylor, Ms Pene Morris, Ms Megan Gollop

Dr Julie Lawrence, Dr Judith Duncan, Mr Michael Gaffney