

# ADVANCING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH - IMPACT CASE STUDY

KAREN HEALY

Title of Case Study:

## FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION

### Researcher and Institution

Professor Karen Healy, School of Nursing, Midwifery  
and Social Work, University of Queensland.

### Other members of research team

Dr Yvonne Darlington, Dr Jo Yellowlees, Dr Jemma  
Venables, and Dr Gai Harrison.

## 1. CONTEXT

Developing meaningful family participation in decision-making is a long-standing principle of effective child protection work. In 2005 the Queensland Government mandated that family group meetings must occur prior to child protection authorities making an application to take a child into the care of the state. However, at the same time the implementation of structured decision-making models in child protection practice prompted a focus on accuracy of decisions and forensic risk-focused decision-making frameworks, rather than the process of decision-making and assessment. The questions foremost in the minds of Prof Healy and colleagues were: how much do families really have a say?; and how can families' be supported to have a fair say in child protection decision-making?

## 2. SUMMARY OF IMPACT

The research exposed deficiencies in the family group meeting (FGM) mechanism for parents/carers with children in statutory care in the child protection system in Queensland. It gave impetus to advocacy and action for new participatory models with parents/carers to be adopted and for new training programs and practice guidelines to be developed. According to Prof Healy recent reforms to the FGMs have led to a more legalistic style of mediation —providing more parental participation — yet whilst improved, this model has not achieved the desired participatory model that Prof Healy's research recommended.

## 3. RESEARCH UNDERPINNING IMPACT

The program of research incorporated a number of projects that aimed to enhance parental input into the statutory child protection decision-making process, including via FGMs and Assessment of Intervention with Parents' Agreement (IPA), both introduced in Queensland in 2005. The two main projects were:

**1. Participatory Decision Making and Policy Production in Child Welfare. 2006–2009.** This project investigated participatory decision making and policy production in key contexts of child welfare service to create an evidence base for participatory practice. The research involved interviews with parents and child protection officers. It also involved a critical analysis of family group meetings as a mode for involving parents, children and significant others in child protection decision-making. The industry partners were two NGOs offering family support and domestic violence intervention services, and the Department of Child Safety. The research findings revealed that as subjects of investigation, as well as clients in need of assistance to protect their children, parents were not participating fully in meetings in which child protection workers bear the dual responsibilities of being investigators and providers of support. The findings showed that there is an inherent conflict in the statutory authorities' dual responsibilities to convene (and control) Family Group Meetings leaving parents with limited capacity to participate meaningfully.

**2. A Study of Best Practice in Intervention with Parental Agreement: Creating Change with Families in Statutory Child Protection Services: 2012–2015.** Conducted with industry partners, Dept Child Safety and Micah Projects. The researchers identified important factors for securing parental participation after an initial child protection investigation has occurred. It was reported that the notion of turning 'involuntary clients into voluntary clients' is complicated by the fact that the gateway to intervention by parents' agreement is via an investigative pathway in Queensland. Families asked to enter into IPAs will have already been subject to an investigation and have been determined to be at risk of abuse and neglect. Rather than creating a collaborative working relationship

many families remained reluctant participants in the process due to a fear of losing their children. Outcomes included enhanced understanding of how parenting agreements can be best used in practice with vulnerable families to enhance child protection and family well-being.

*Related projects:*

**3. Citizen Engagement in Decision-Making and Policy Development in Child and Family Welfare. 2005.** This project investigated ways to improve stakeholder participation in child and family welfare statutory services.

**4. Review of the Child Protection Operating Model (Victorian Government).** Research in collaboration with KPMG.

**5. A Comparative Study of the Effectiveness of Planned Family Support and Crisis Intervention with Homeless Families. 2010–2012.** Research in collaboration with Micah Projects.

**6. Intensive Family Support Outcomes Evaluation.** Research in collaboration with the Parenting Research Centre, Victoria. 2017–2018.

**7. Evaluation of a young parents community support initiative: Young Mothers for Young Women at Caboolture. 2018–2019.** Research in collaboration with Micah Projects and Queensland Government.

## 4. DETAILS OF IMPACT

*Approach to impact:* Professor Healy stated that she seeks to achieve impact on practice, policy, and the rights and well-being of families through her research. She aims to report back findings to participants and decision-makers in order to raise awareness of the lack of meaningful parent inclusion in child protection decisions and to prompt action on solutions. She believes it is challenging to research on policy and practice issues, especially if the research is seen to be challenging existing practices, and when qualitative practice-orientated research seems to be less valued by government than large quantitative studies, or when local research is less valued than programs from other countries.

*Impact on policy:* Prof Healy has been a strong advocate for the rights of parents and children in the statutory care systems and for improvements in family support to prevent families from entering the system or being able to reunify as soon as possible. A policy development phase was specifically incorporated into the research, which influenced the reform of FGMs. Her research findings about ways to maximize parental participation have been timely given the recent legislative provisions for FGMs. Prof Healy advocated for legal protections for parents to be embedded in the FGC model and sought to inform departmental officers of the deficiencies of the FGC model. According to Prof Healy, while the Dept. made some positive changes, it did not resource and support the FGM as a democratic, mediation process; it remained a department-controlled model.

*Submissions on policy and law reform: Prof Healy makes submissions on her research to public inquiry processes in order to inform public debate:*

- Gave evidence on behalf of AASW to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry 2012. Her research on FGMs was cited in the report of the Inquiry. The Australian Association of Social Work submission to the Inquiry, which was prepared largely by Prof Healy, was also cited in the final report (pp.216–217) with recommendations to implement a more independent process for FGMs.
- [http://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/161548/Healy\\_Karen.pdf](http://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/161548/Healy_Karen.pdf) [http://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/160727/AASWQLD-Healy,-Karen.pdf](http://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/160727/AASWQLD-Healy,-Karen.pdf)

- Submission on the Public Guardian Bill 2014
- Submission on the Family and Child Commission Bill 2014
- Submission on Child Protection Reform Amendment Bill 2014 and witness at public hearing 29 April 2014

Impact on service delivery: The report on the Family Participation in Child Protection Policy and Practice Project featured a statement for action for practitioners, policy makers, and families, which became the foundation for advocacy and further skills development. Prof Healy was invited as a speaker at Child Safety Officer training on convening family group meetings, which she says prompted improved practices.

The prominent standing of Prof Healy has provided a platform for her to raise the research findings and prompt action. Micah Projects has used the research for advocacy and engaged Prof Healy in ongoing research, advocacy and training to improve parental decision-making in child protection processes. The research partnership with Micah as a major, reputable NGO is indicative of the significant impact of the research. Based on the research, Micah Projects commissioned Prof Healy to conduct training for Micah Projects Family Inclusion Network (FIN). She became an ally to FIN members in their advocacy to government and in their skills development. Prof Healy has recently collaborated with the Parenting Research Centre in conducting a statewide evaluation of Intensive Family Support outcomes in Queensland.

The research was cited in a US practice resource Family Engagement: Partnering with Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes, Sept 2016. [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f\\_fam\\_engagement.pdf#page=13&view=References](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_fam_engagement.pdf#page=13&view=References)

Impact on parents and carers: The research team has involved parents directly in the research to obtain their experiences and views of the statutory system and FGMs in particular. It could be argued that the capacity of participating parents to better understand and contribute to FGMs was enhanced by the insights and learnings gained from participation in the research, although there is no direct evidence of the extent to which changes benefitted parents.

## 5. ENGAGEMENT

Significant industry appointments, memberships, and awards: Appointments to reference and advisory groups recognise Prof Healy's expertise in child protection research and provide opportunities to use research findings to influence policy and practice.

In 2016 Prof Healy was appointed a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her contribution to social work particularly in child protection, higher education and research. Through her leadership she has been a strong advocate for the rights of parents and children in the statutory care systems and for improvements in family support to prevent families from entering the system or being able to reunify as soon as possible.

Prof Healy engages with policy and practice through advisory positions in industry and in the social work professional community, including:

- National President of the Australian Association of Social Workers (the national accrediting body for professional social work in Australia) from 2011- 2017.
- Past National President, Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Education (2005-2009).
- National Director for The Benevolent Society, a position she was invited to accept based largely on her research into parental rights.
- Member, Australian Research Network for Children and Young people (ARACY).
- Research Advisor to Micah Projects.
- Recently involved in the evaluation of the child protection operating model in Victoria - an innovative model of workforce support for frontline child protection workers.

### *Professional development and training.*

To improve child protection practice and apply her research findings, Prof Healy and her colleagues have responded to numerous invitations from the Department of Child Safety to train FGM convenors, other practitioners, and statutory officers. She has also conducted many seminars for practitioners on IPAs, which created awareness of the confusion and conflict around Interventions with Parental Agreement.

### *Significant industry partnerships:*

Prof Healy has longstanding research partnerships and repeat business with a nongovernment agency, Micah Projects, and the Queensland Department of Child Safety.

### *Reports for industry*

Industry reports enhance access to research for policy makers, practitioners, and community members. Examples are:

- Healy, K., Venables, J. and Harrison, G. (2016). Intervention with Parent Agreement: An Investigation of collaboration in child safety practice. University of Queensland.
- Parent Leadership Training evaluation (2016). Parent Leadership Training Institute Program Evaluation Report. Family Inclusion Network, Micah Projects
- Healy, K., Darlington, Y., Wiseman, M., and Smith, T. (2010). The Family Participation in Child Protection Policy and Practice Project. University of Queensland.

### *Media and public awareness.*

The majority of media comment from Prof Healy has been in her role as the President of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW), and many of these incorporated her research findings. For example:

- SBS News 10 June 2017 Extra \$200m for Qld. Child Safety. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/extra-200-million-for-qld-child-safety>
- News.Com August 29 Madigan, M. (2012) Qld's Child Protection Department 'Gutted' <https://www.news.com.au/national/queensland/child-protection-department-gutted/news-story/06dd628f70ec64b6c18e009d77337028>

### *Research supervision and teaching*

Prof Healy has made a significant impact on student learning through her coursework teaching as well as supervision of HDR students. Dr Jemma Venables, Dr Mary Bird and Dr Jo Yellowlees have all been involved in the research and have significant industry links. Prof Healy reported that her research is used extensively in her teaching in child and family welfare to influence the understanding students have of parental participation and it is infused in her published text books.

## 6. RESEARCH INCOME

The program of research attracted over \$1.0 million in funding.

### *Category 1 (international and national competitive)*

1. Healy, K. et al. A Study of Best Practice in Intervention with Parental Agreement: Creating Change with Families in Statutory Child Protection Services, 2012–2015. ARC Linkage Project (including industry contribution) \$300,000.
2. Healy, K. et al. Participatory Decision Making and Policy Production in Child Welfare, 2006–2009. ARC Linkage Project (including industry contribution) \$330,000.

### *Category 2 (government)*

3. Healy, K. in collaboration with the Parenting Research Centre, Victoria. Intensive Family Support Outcomes Evaluation, 2017–2018. Queensland Government, approximately \$200,000.
4. Healy, K. et al. in collaboration with KPMG. Review of the Child Protection Operating Model, 2011. Victorian Government \$70,000.
5. Healy, K. in collaboration with Micah Projects. A Comparative Study of the Effectiveness of Planned Family Support and Crisis Intervention with Homeless Families, 2010–2012. FACSIA \$99,000.

### *Category 3 (Other industry)*

6. Healy, K. Research and Evaluation of a young parents community support initiative: Young Mothers for Young Women at Caboolture, 2018–2019. Micah Projects and Queensland Government \$43,000.

### *Other funding*

7. Healy, K. Citizen Engagement in Decision-Making and Policy Development in Child and Family Welfare, 2005. UQ First Link Scheme \$4000.

## 7. RESEARCH OUTPUTS

### Selected academic publications

1. Venables, J. and Healy, K. (2018). Collaborating with parents during intervention with parental agreement: practitioner perspectives on procedural justice. *Child & Family Social Work*. doi:10.1111/cfs.12578
2. Gillingham, P., Harnett, P., Healy, K., Lynch, D. and Tower, M. (2017). Decision making in child and family welfare: the role of tools and practice frameworks. *Children Australia*, 42, 1, 49-56. doi:10.1017/cha.2016.51
3. Venables, J., Healy, K., and Harrison, G. (2015) From investigation to collaboration: Practitioner perspectives on the transition phase of parental agreements. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 52, 9-16. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2015.02.007
4. Healy, K., Harrison, G., Venables, J., and Bosly, F. (2014). Collaborating with families in differential responses: practitioners' views. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21, 3, 1-11. doi:10.1111/cfs.12149
5. Healy, K., Darlington, Y., and Yellowlees, J. (2012). Family participation in child protection practice: an observational study of family group meetings. *Child and Family Social Work*, 17, 1, 1-12. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00767.x
6. Darlington, Y., Healy, K., Yellowlees, J., and Bosly, F. (2012). Parents' perceptions of their participation in mandated family group meetings. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 34, 2, 331-337. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.10.030
7. Healy, K., Darlington, Y., and Feeney, J. A. (2011). Parents' participation in child protection practice: toward respect and inclusion. *Families in Society*, 92, 3, 282-288. doi:10.1606/1044-3894.4126
8. Darlington, Y., Healy, K., and Feeney, J. A. (2010). Challenges in implementing participatory practice in child protection: A contingency approach. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 32, 7, 1020-1027. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2010.03.030
9. Healy, K., and Darlington, Y. (2009). Service user participation in diverse child protection contexts: principles for practice. *Child and Family Social Work*, 14, 4, 420-430. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2009.00613.x

