

When parents love and don't love their children: some children's stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a small pilot study with Anglo-Australian children aged 6 to 8 years. The children expressed through stories of what it meant for them when parents love and care for their children, and when they do not. Themes from stories of parental love and care included: relationships, shared special times, being safe and protected, and physical affection. Stories about parents who did not love or care for their children covered themes of abandonment, isolation and sadness. The study contributes an approach that can improve professional practice with children and early outcomes showing the importance of seeking children's perspectives in decision-making about their welfare.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a small pilot study with Anglo-Australian children aged between 6 and 8 years. Through stories, the children expressed what it means when parents love and care for their children, and when they do not. The focus on parental love and care from the child's point of view is specifically intended because these are concepts that inform and influence child welfare and child protection policy and practice. It is rare that children's views about being parented are sought, and if they are, they are subjected to professionally derived definitions, not those that represent their own experience within their own family (Wattam & Parton 1999; Willow *et al.* 2004). The appropriateness of parenting is usually defined by professionals and includes normative assumptions about 'love' and 'care' of the child and how these are expressed as parenting practices. Those parents who are assessed as not meeting these norms may be subjected to various professional interventions including parental education and training, and possibly the removal of their child into temporary or permanent alternative care.

In this paper, it is argued that by understanding children's perspectives, we may develop a more

nuanced approach towards children's well-being, which takes account of children's views. The outcomes discussed here are part of a larger study involving children, parents and professionals that aims to investigate participatory and child-centred professional practice by critically evaluating and developing for professional practice the practical meanings of the concepts of 'participation' and 'child-centredness' (D'Cruz & Stagnitti 2008), and the contextual conditions under which such concepts are meaningful.

PARTICIPATORY AND CHILD-CENTRED PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The 'child' in child welfare/protection is often seen as a dependent waif on whose behalf professionals representing 'the state' intervene (Wattam & Parton 1999; Scott & Swain 2002). Professional intervention is primarily conceptualised as paternalism and rescue of the child as an object of interest, on whose behalf various adults (professionals, parents/caregivers) speak, act and give meaning to the child's lived experiences (Wattam & Parton 1999). An alternative perspective has argued for child-centredness, which includes concepts of children's rights and liberation

(Freeman 1983; Franklin 1986) and where the child is an active subject with the ability to speak and act on his/her own interests (Wattam & Parton 1999).

This latter approach would allow a reconceptualisation of child protection as part of child welfare, as a broader understanding of children's experiences in relationships with their families/carers and with the wider community. A broader focus on child welfare would address children's need for protection and their general well-being within their family. The latter tends to be disregarded when the focus is on discrete incidents of maltreatment with family characteristics seen as 'risk factors' (D'Cruz 2004, pp. 66–70), rather than descriptors of disadvantage and inequality, for example, physical disabilities and mental illness (Hugman & Phillips 1992/1993), or poverty (Thorpe 1996).

The issues surrounding child-centredness, when working with children and their parents in practice, are more complex than the principles as abstractions would suggest. For example, in cases involving concerns about children's well-being, especially reports of harm, are all children able to make decisions about their immediate and future safety that professionals must act on? Or does the professional weigh up a variety of considerations in which the child's views are included but do not carry special weight? What are the ethical implications for professionals who act on children's wishes and there is subsequent harm to the child? What are legal implications in terms of professional liability and duty of care towards the child and other interested parties? To give some practical assistance to answer such vexed questions, this paper presents the first pilot study in a series of studies to present the child's view in respect of parental love and care.

The research question addressed in this paper is 'How do children aged 6 to 8 years perceive parental love and care?' We asked the children to tell us stories about parents who loved and did not love their children. For children aged 6–8 years, their understanding of 'love' and 'care' was of interest to us and their answers to this question offer insights into how the children in our sample interpreted these ideas. The concepts of 'love' and 'care' were deliberately used in this study as these concepts are common within child protection, and we wished to understand how children perceived these concepts.

In the pilot study, we designed questions that we hoped would be less stressful to the children, as the topics related to their daily lives and interests. However, for children from lower socio-economic

groups or from different cultural, ethnic and language groups, we may need to design appropriate questions that parallel those we have asked in this study so that we can compare whether such questions are even meaningful for children and parents who do not fit images of the so-called 'normal family'.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Our research methodology has aimed to model participatory and child-centred practice (D'Cruz & Stagnitti 2008). It is influenced by an interpretive paradigm (Riessman 1996) where each child's personal meanings of parenting, expressed as 'love' and 'care', are sought through children's stories about parental love and care. We have assumed that professionally derived, 'adult-centred' or 'common sense' taken-for-granted cultural meanings are not necessarily shared by children in the age range of 6 to 8 years. The children's insights are relevant to the broader professional policy and practice concerns in regard to child welfare and child protection because they give us a child-centred view of being loved and cared for, rather than necessarily relying solely on professional/adult-centred judgements of what is 'in a child's best interests' (Wattam & Parton 1999).

Participants

There were five children from four families who consented to participate in the study. The children were aged between 6 and 8 years. We chose the age group of 6–8 years because children in this age group tend to be excluded from most research that has involved children as informants. There is a tendency to seek the perspectives of children older than 8 years. For example, school-age children were involved in a study on citizenship education (Lister *et al.* 2001), and 'childhood poverty and social exclusion' (Ridge 2002) – the youngest being 10 years, in Ridge's study – pre-adolescent children, adolescents, and young adults (up to age 25 years in Lister *et al.* 2001). In a study on poverty (Middleton *et al.* 1994), the age range was 8–16 years. There is also emerging research with children younger than 6 years as research participants through the pioneering work in specialised methodologies by early childhood researchers (e.g. McClam & Smith 2006). For these reasons, we have chosen to focus on 6 to 8-year olds.

There were two boys (Evan and Terry) and three girls (Delia, Elaine and Amelia; names given are pseudonyms). Evan and Amelia were siblings. The

children all attended primary school and were all 'white Anglo-Australians'. These children would be considered middle class and their parents were heterosexually partnered. Two children lived in a large metropolitan city and three children lived in a large regional town. There was no known history of domestic violence in any of the families and no developmental delay recorded in the children's histories.

Access to and recruitment of participants

The children were purposively sampled through personal and professional contacts of the second author. Information about the study in the form of a Plain Language Statement and consent form for both the parent and the child were passed to the personal and professional contacts who in turn handed on the information to potential participants, who were usually the children's mothers. If the parents wished to volunteer themselves and their child as participants, they contacted the second author who arranged a mutually convenient time to meet. The authors then travelled to each family home for the interview with the child.

Before we began, we explained the study to the child, as we were interested in knowing about what they thought about important things in their lives as children, such as going to school, what they ate and wore, and what they watched on TV. We also checked that each child had signed their own consent form. We did not assume that just because the child's parent had consented to their participation that the child had also consented (France *et al.* 2000). The children were given the opportunity to refuse, without penalty to them. If the parent had consented but the child declined to be in the study, the children's views would have been respected. However, we are aware of the implicit inequalities of this approach given that we as researchers are also adults, and children may not be comfortable about refusing to participate (Ridge 2002). If the parent had refused to be in the study, then we would have had no legal access to the child and therefore we could not ascertain the child's views. These ethical concerns were central to our application for ethics approval for this research (D'Cruz & Stagnitti 2008, pp. 162–163).

We ensured that the children were not pressured into answering any questions and allowed them to participate or stop when it suited them. We also offered a range of materials and approaches to engage the children in ways that were most comfortable for their communication styles and age and stage. When children told their stories of parental love and care,

they were reminded that they could use any combination of the toys, drawing materials or just talk to us. At the end of the session the children were thanked for their time and asked if they wanted to add anything further.

Methods

The authors and child sat on the floor and the child was presented with the range of materials that were age-appropriate; these were toys (truck, trailer, dolls, box, tea set and cloth) and drawing materials (paper and marker pens of various colours). The second author facilitated the interactions with each child, because of her expertise in play (Stagnitti & Cooper 2009). The children were asked to tell us two stories: one of a child being loved and cared for by parents, and one of not being loved and cared for. The children were not asked to tell a story of what it means for them personally to be loved and cared for (or not), as such direct questioning may be unnecessarily confronting to the child (Wilson & Ryan 2005). The first author took notes and also asked questions to clarify the child's responses. For two of the children who participated, the siblings and mother were present in the same room, and often responded to questions put to the child. We have accepted these different modes of interaction as specific and important to each child, rather than attempting to standardise these interactions as if under laboratory conditions. We are aware that the presence of parents and siblings in our engagement with the children may be construed as a form of coercion. However, we are equally aware that to have asked the parents and siblings to leave the room may have also posed stresses on the children who would then be left to engage with us as relative strangers. These questions of presence or absence of parents or carers are clearly of importance depending on the topics being discussed with the children. For example, if we were asking about child protection matters that implicated parents, we would have made very clear at the outset to parents that they could not be present while we worked with their children.

Data organisation and analysis

Each child's stories were transcribed from handwritten notes of both authors and were then read in their entirety to understand themes of importance to the child (Riessman 1996) in regard to parental love and care, and its absence. The overall analysis takes a sociological perspective in how participants in a

society (in this case, children) understand parenting as love and care within everyday life, that also puts into practice 'child-centred' decision making. Stories about the 'presence' of 'love' or 'care' offer descriptions of what is important for children and how they know that their parents (or 'someone else's' parents) love and care for them. Stories about the 'absence' of parental 'love' and 'care' are relevant, as they often feature in professional definitions of child maltreatment by 'neglect' and/or 'emotional abuse', or in public (media) controversies about parental competence and children's welfare (Rose 1989, pp. 156–157).

Four of the five children (Elaine, Evan, Amelia and Terry) were verbally brief and preferred telling their stories through drawing, which they then explained to us. One child, Delia, played with the toys as she told imaginative stories that included extensive vocabulary. She picked up each toy, and used that toy within the narrative.

The analysis is set out in two sections. The first section compares each child's stories of a parent who loves and cares for their child, with one who does not. This approach is intended to understand each child's experience within his or her personal context and circumstances as the similarities and differences between the paired stories would offer these insights. The second section compares the stories across all the children – the first set of stories compared are those that tell of parental love and care of a child; the second set of stories compared are those that tell of parents that do not love or care for their child.

In the analysis that follows, we have included extracts from the children's stories. The approach we have taken is as consistent as possible with the espoused participatory and child-centred principles that give voice to the children who were our participants, rather than solely relying on us as researchers (and adults) to interpret children's views.

1. COMPARISON OF EACH CHILD'S STORIES OF PARENTS WHO CARE AND DO NOT CARE FOR A CHILD

The children's stories are presented in the following order: Delia, Elaine, Evan, Amelia and Terry with the stories discussed as a pair of related, sometimes oppositional, narratives from each child. We have also included pictures drawn by Elaine and Evan (Figs. 1–3), as they began their stories by drawing which they then explained to us. Thus, the pictures are integral to the verbal stories.

Delia's stories

A central theme of both Delia's stories is that of relationship (its presence by connectedness and its opposite by abandonment). The most remarkable feature of Delia's stories is that there are no identifiable adults in them. She assumes responsibility and is the central actor and narrator. This is supported by consistent use of 'I' in her story.

For example:

I found a door and put it on [the box].

I put rug on top of bed. I was freezing. I went back inside and closed door and went to sleep . . .

In the first story, Delia tells a story which involves two other children, Sam and Will, as well as a selection of animals, with herself as the narrator and as the person responsible for the care of the people and the animals. In the second story, Delia is the sole character – not just as a narrative device, but also representing her sudden and unexpected abandonment: 'I woke up in the morning one day. No one was around me.'

Sub-themes flowing from the central theme of relationship in both stories are a set of tasks associated with relationship (as present or absent). In Delia's story about parental love and care, the following sub-themes flow from the central theme of relationship. Caring acts include attention to warmth (sheepskin, fire), rest (bed) and safety (putting out the fire):

At night Sam went to bed really tired on the day. They went to bed. I put the sheepskin on them. I found fire still on. I found the kettle still on and I found a cup full with water and spooned water on fire.

Everyone into the box, even the kettle as we might need a cup of tea and got everything in boat.

Delia imaginatively provided food (biscuits, tea, water) and shelter (putting the vulnerable indoors, in the house, in the car), often engaging in self-denial: all the nurturing acts are for others' welfare, to the extent that Delia herself 'eats crumbs' left from biscuits eaten by Sam and Will.

Sam and Will need cup of tea and biscuit. And put it in their bed and when they woke up and found it they ate them. I ate crumbs. Baby animals I got some water and biscuits for them too.

Delia offered protection to others (from a lava flow from an imaginary volcano):

Big crack in the ground. All the baby ones left behind and I got them and put them in the house, put car inside the house, water for them, woke up Will and Sam, opened door. They put train, wood and attached keeping animals warm. [. . .]

Ground hot it was lava coming. . . . Sam and Will don't want to get burnt. Steep and high waves of lava. Ron got waved away in the lava. I jumped into the plane (?) Then I said everyone hop in now, I'm going to drive it. Drove it.

Being uncared for involved a powerful image that there was 'no one in the world except in Africa' – even there, Delia makes a connection with small animals and protects them.

Living by myself. I woke up in the morning one day. No one was around me. I saw the train left behind. I looked around the world but no one was there except in Africa. Africa was hot [. . .] I'll bring the mouses so they don't live by themselves and I don't have to be alone. (I can live with someone now.) The end.

She makes a relationship with other vulnerable creatures 'so I don't have to be alone. I can live with someone now.' In this story, the central theme of relationship is dominant, as rescuing the act of abandonment itself, as of even greater importance than the other tasks of survival that are in Delia's first story. Both stories offer the image of an autonomous, independent individual – the child herself – capable and competent to attend to even the most distressing events that she could imagine.

Elaine's stories

Elaine's stories are organised around a theme of dependency, constituted as a parent-child relationship, where the 'parent's' tasks are nurturance and care (or not). Elaine told her story of parental care through a picture (Fig. 1) which she explained.

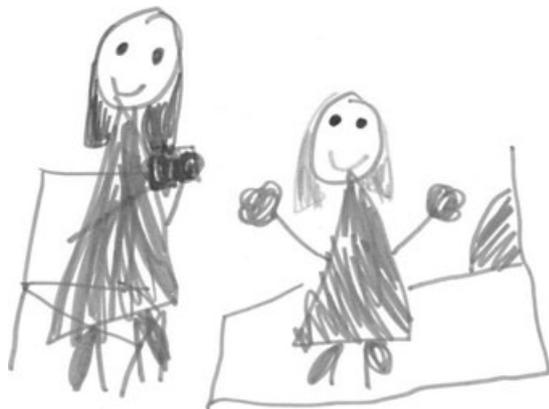


Figure 1 Elaine's picture of a child who is loved and cared for.

Elaine's story was:

Mum reading a story book to her little girl. People are happy. Night time and she's sitting on the bed. After story goes to sleep and mum kisses her good night. Reads a special story.

Elaine identifies and names the 'mum' as the carer who performs these tasks. For example, mum reading a special story to her little girl. The mum also kisses the child good night. There is other evidence of touch and physical closeness as the picture shows an adult hugging a child. Furthermore, the place and time indicate both vulnerability and safety: it is night time and the child is in bed.

The parent-child relationship of dependency is also suggested by the story where the child is not cared for by the parents. In this story, Elaine again used a picture (Fig. 2) which she explained:

Parents not cooking the daughter's dinner. She can't eat her dinner because the parents won't cook the dinner. The picture is of the child. Child in picture is sad. Table and empty bowl with no food. She gets really hungry and tries to eat and cook her own dinner. She would eat cold veges.



Figure 2 Elaine's picture of a child who is not cared for.

She used a generalised term of 'parents', compared with her first story where she specifically identifies a mother as the carer. For Elaine, an uncaring parent does not cook for the child. Elaine appears to differentiate between the need for food for survival which a child could manage, and the symbolic meaning of care and nurturance by parents where food is cooked and served hot to the child. The contrasting example given by Elaine where a 'really hungry' child does try to cook her own dinner, suggests that only 'cold veges' would be manageable for survival, but at the same time, are unappetising and representative of being uncared for. The 'sad' child in the picture, and the table and empty bowl support this conclusion.

Evan's stories

Evan's stories seemed to be organised around his personal experiences of love and care. A caring relationship involved a mother, as well as 'lots of people' and family friends. Physical expression of affection is also important. His drawing (Fig. 3) captures this.

Lots of people. Mum. And friend of family. [Drew a picture].



Figure 3 Evan's picture of a child who is loved and cared for.

However, while Evan said he was unable to tell a story about a parent who does not care for their child because he 'did not know anyone like this', his apparent lack of lived experience of an uncaring parent did not preclude his imagination and empathy in telling a brief story about the emotions of three (imaginary) children who may be uncared for by parents.

I don't know anyone like this. [He said he was unable to draw this one.] [He said,] "Sad". Kid would be sad. Baby wouldn't know and so would be happy. Or if did worried. Be sad for brother and sister. [When asked what he would draw to show this story, he drew a single person as a circle joined to square with triangle arms and legs (robotic is our interpretation).

He was also able to differentiate between the consciousness of a baby and its emotions, and older children's consciousness and their emotions. Furthermore, for Evan, a default emotional state for a cared-for child is happiness, as it is for a child who is unaware of its circumstances that may otherwise cause it sadness or worry.

Amelia's stories

On a surface reading, Amelia's two stories appear to have no clear connecting themes. Her story of a child whose parent cares for them was given verbally and is structured around a parent-child relationship with tasks differentiated between mum and dad.

Child and mum. Child loves the mum. Mum likes to pick up child all the time. And mum puts in bed and they give lots of hugs and kisses on the way. Father likes child and child loves parents. Only child they have and they love her. Dad always gives piggy backs all the way to the room and back. The end.

Her story shows physical closeness and sharing of fun activities (e.g. the piggyback ride). Amelia generalises as 'parents' to express her love for them, and perhaps more tellingly, in her imaginary story, the child is the only one that the parents have and they love her, perhaps in contrast to her actual experience of not being an only child and the necessity of 'sharing' parental love.

In the story of care, the child has fun with the parents and is given affection. In her second story, Amelia emphasised that it was 'a true story' to show it was not a fantasy on her part, and that she could only tell us about an actual child whose life was so unlike hers as to represent an uncared-for child.

Boy called [Cain] (this is a true story). Parents work and live in a fish and chip shop. This is a true story. Every night the parents work in the fish and chip shop. Cain has fish and chips all the time, lunch and dinner. That's why he's so silly and naughty. But he doesn't have fish and chips for breakfast. Fatty food. Cain works in the fish and chip shop - helps with the drinks. Parents work and Cain goes to school and then helps in the shop.

The differences between Amelia and Cain in 'the true story' suggest how different children's lives may be constituted as 'better' or 'worse' even by children themselves, depending on their own lived experiences of what is 'normal care'. Apart from Cain's parents 'working and living in a fish and chip shop', Cain himself has to work in the shop, after he returns from school each day. Furthermore, Amelia's own experiences of what is 'normal food' (type and when it should be eaten) is so different from Cain's - who eats fish and chips 'all the time, lunch and dinner'. Fish and chips are not 'normal' food for normal meals (lunch and dinner) and are also 'fatty'. The moralising associated with food is expressed in the apparently observed consequences in Cain's behaviour, described by Amelia as 'silly and naughty'.

When Amelia's two stories are compared in this way, it is suggested that a connecting theme is the

extreme contrasts between her own, well-cared for life which influenced her first story, and (to her) the shocking story of Cain whose life differed considerably from hers, and therefore represented an uncared-for child.

Terry's stories

Terry's central theme for both stories is relationship with significant others symbolised by his parents and siblings, represented in his picture as 'family'.

My mum, dad and my sister. All of us go walking to the park. We all go out for dinner. We go out anywhere. Terry then did a drawing of the family on a sunny day. In the drawing, all the family is walking together on a red pathway. Family crosses the road and goes to the playground. In the playground are monkey bars, swings, and climbing equipment.

While the story of Terry himself as a cared-for child includes activities that involve Terry and his family, these appear to be symbolic of how these relationships are practised. The story of a child who is uncared for is outside Terry's personal experience and he is therefore unable to describe what such a parent may do or not do.

Don't know who one is. Where has happy start and sad ending. Middle of the story . . . in the book they be happy and in the end, sad. Because someone's run away or died.

However, he is able to capture the importance of relationship because the reason for the uncared-for child's sadness at the end of the story is that 'someone's run away or died', rather than any loss of activities that are part of Terry's normal experience as a cared-for child.

In this section, we have looked at each child's stories as contextually meaningful for that child, as representative of his or her own experiences of being parented. The common themes that connect each child's two stories cover the importance of relationship as the existence of significant others in a child's life. If a story about a caring parent has included activities and tasks performed by a parent, these are symbolic of care and nurturance in the relationship which is primary. The loss of relationship is therefore represented by abandonment (death or desertion) or failure to provide for basic needs such as food. For some children, they were unable to name what a parent would do or not do as examples of a lack of care. However, these children were still able to express the emotions that would be associated with a lack of parental care.

In the next section the five children's stories are compared.

2A: COMPARING FIVE CHILDREN'S STORIES ABOUT PARENTS WHO LOVE AND CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN

In this section, there are two dimensions across all five children's stories of parental love and care: that of self-perception and relationship to parents (and siblings), and themes expressing parental love and care.

Self-perception and relationship to parents (and siblings)

The children's stories of parental love and care offered some insights into the differences in their self-perception and in relation to those identified as 'adults' or 'parents'. The children's use of pronouns suggests these perceptions of the self (as 'child') and the quality of the relationship to 'others'.

Three children, Elaine, Evan and Amelia used the third person singular and plural – 'he', 'she' and 'they' – that articulated a clear relationship where each 'child' is a dependent of a carer/nurturer identified usually as 'mum' (Elaine and Evan) and in one case, as 'dad' as well as 'mum' (Amelia). The active agents are the parents, although in Amelia's story, there is some reciprocity of 'love' and 'liking'. Terry was the only child to use the first person plural – 'us' and 'we' – as a perhaps more egalitarian relationship in which he, his parents and sister were involved. Compared with the other children, Delia was the only one who used 'I' as the main pronoun, thus signifying her centrality as the caring actor for others who were dependent upon her.

Themes expressing parental love and care

In four children's stories, there were examples describing a parent-child relationship where the parent is identified specifically and is engaged in a task or an emotionally expressive activity with the child. These examples covered three themes of physical affection, shared special times with special activities and a special relationship.

1. physical affection:

- '. . . mum kisses [her little girl] good night.' (Elaine)
- drawing of an adult hugging a child (Evan)
- 'Mum likes to pick up child all the time.' (Amelia)
- '[Mum] giving hugs and kisses all the way [to bed].' (Amelia)
- 'Dad always gives piggy backs all the way to the room and back.' (Amelia)

2. shared special times with special activities:
 - 'Mum reading a story book to her little girl. [. . .] Reads a special story.' (Elaine)
 - 'And mum puts in bed and they give lots of hugs and kisses on the way.' (Amelia)
 - 'Dad always gives piggy backs all the way to the room and back.' (Amelia)
 - '[. . .] All of us go walking to the park. We all go out for dinner. We go out anywhere.' (Terry)
3. special relationships:
 - 'Lots of people. Mum. And friend of family. [. . .]' (Evan)
 - 'Child and mum. Child loves the mum. [. . .]' (Amelia)
 - 'Father likes child and child loves parents. Only child they have and they love her. [. . .]' (Amelia)

Compared with the other four children's stories, Delia's stories did not identify an 'adult' or a 'parent' with Delia herself adopting the role of the 'nurturer'. Also, while the themes in the other four stories (above) cover physical affection, shared special times with special activities and special relationships, Delia's themes are about nurturance for basic survival of more vulnerable characters.

The most extreme scenario that confronted more vulnerable characters (other children and small animals) involved Delia as their saviour and nurturer:

Ground hot it was lava coming. . . . Sam and Will don't want to get burnt. Steep and high waves of lava. I jumped into the plane. Then I said everyone hop in now, I'm going to drive it. Drove it.

In other examples, Delia created secure shelter and warmth:

Animals running away = giraffe, zebra, lion, tiger. Big crack in the ground. All the Baby ones left behind and I got them and put them in the house.

. . . Grabbed something warm like sheepskin. [. . .] I put the sheepskin on them.

Basic safety:

[. . .] I found fire still on. I found the kettle still on and I found a cup full with water and spooned water on fire. [. . .]

Provided food:

[. . .] Sam and Will need cup of tea and biscuit. And put it in their bed and when they woke up and found it they ate them. I ate crumbs. Baby animals I got some water and biscuits for them too [. . .].

In summary, this comparison of all five children's stories of parents who care for their children offers insights into the differences in how a small group of white, Anglo-Australian, middle-class children under-

stand parental care and love. While most of the children's experiences of parental love and care are represented through stories with a focus on the 'specialness' of such a relationship, Delia's story was a thrilling scenario of extreme danger in which the 'nurturer' was able to attend to the basic survival of more vulnerable characters. Whether these differences in the stories are related to how the children described their relationships with parents/carers: as dependency (pronouns 'he', 'she' and 'they'), as a collective (pronouns 'we' and 'us') or as personal autonomy (pronoun 'I') is worth exploring in future research.

In the next section, we compare all five children's stories of parents who do not love or care for their children.

2B: COMPARING FIVE CHILDREN'S STORIES OF PARENTS WHO DO NOT LOVE OR CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN

Four out of the five children had trouble thinking about a story of a child who was uncared for because this was outside of their experience. They often faltered in starting their stories about parents who did not care for their child.

- 'I don't know anyone like this.' (Evan)
- 'Don't know who one is.' (Terry)

When encouraged to tell their stories in whatever way they felt comfortable, the stories that they could think of were either (1) based on known children whose experiences were different from their own; or (2) a child that they imagined was uncared for.

For example, Amelia's story was about a boy she knew whose life was different from hers. Cain's parents lived and worked in a fish and chip shop and Cain, who ate fish and chips all the time, was helping in the shop as well. This story was so shocking to Amelia that she emphasised several times that this was a 'true story'. The story is a complete contrast to Amelia's own life where she was only 'allowed to have fish and chips ["fat food"] but not very often', unless there was a particular occasion or reason, for example, 'Once we had fat food three times in a row for dinner – Friday, Saturday, Sunday.' Further, 'if mum doesn't like to cook, dad does a barbecue. If dad does not do a barbecue, we have fish and chips.'

Elaine, Evan and Terry imagined a child who was uncared for.

Elaine drew a picture, explaining it as:

Parents not cooking the daughter's dinner. She can't eat her dinner because the parents won't cook the dinner. . . . Child

in picture is sad. Table and empty bowl with no food. She gets really hungry and tries to eat and cook her own dinner. She would eat cold vegies.

Elaine's story represents a basic and concrete example of being uncared for which associates an emotion (sadness) with an act of parental omission. In comparison, while Evan and Terry are unable to give concrete examples of a lack of care, both are able to articulate the emotion of sadness for being uncared for. Terry is able to relate this to a sad story with a beginning where everyone is happy, and a sad ending because of abandonment or loss.

Finally, while Delia's stories take up the theme of abandonment similar to Evan and Terry, they also differ. Her story has the imaginative construction of an extreme scenario where she suddenly and unexpectedly finds herself alone, 'left behind' and 'in Africa'. However, Delia describes a scenario where she expresses her autonomy and imaginatively populates her space with other vulnerable creatures ('mouses'), so that there is mutual care and relationships for shared living.

In summary, comparing the five children's stories has shown that experience is influential in how such understanding is translated into stories (for example, Amelia's story). Children with pretend play ability can use their imagination to understand, in their view, the emotions associated with being uncared for, even if no concrete example could be given (for example, Delia, Evan and Terry's stories). The ability to pretend in play has been associated with emotional understanding of others in other studies with typically developing children (Lindsey & Colwell 2003).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have re-presented five children's stories about parents who cared for and did not care for their children. While the sample is small and relatively homogeneous, the analysis offers insights into children's understanding of 'parental' love and care. Overall, the stories give an insight into how children whose lives are relatively stable and secure may understand parental love and care both as presence and absence. Their own experiences of being cared for were sufficient to allow them to generate stories about hypothetical, 'other' children. The corollary is also true, because the children's lack of experience of being uncared for or unloved meant that most of them were unable to easily tell a story about a hypothetical 'uncared for' child. The children's abilities to imagine how other, less cared-for children may feel, even if they

could not comment on an actual, concrete action by a parent is notable. The insights gained from the children in this study emphasise the importance for professionals working with families and children to seek the views of children about their perspectives of being loved and cared for. This is especially important because professional judgements of parental love and care often inform decisions to intervene on the grounds of child welfare and protection, without understanding the child's views.

In conclusion, this small study has offered insights into how children aged between 6 to 8 years from white, Anglo-Australian, middle-class, heterosexually-parented/partnered families understand parental love and care. The insights are important for child and family welfare practice if we are to fully appreciate children's understandings of caring parenting, rather than that which is solely defined by professionals and that may not always be responsive to the child's meanings of events in their lives. Future research will explore how children from more diverse circumstances and life experiences tell stories about parental love and care, for example, those from different cultural and socio-economic contexts, or those with different experiences of safety, security and relationships with adults/caregivers.

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