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?

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.

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 of abuse and neglect. Rather than creating a collaborative working relationship 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...
• 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=1&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 benefited 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.
• 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:


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:


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)

Category 2 (government)

Category 3 (Other industry)

Other funding
7. RESEARCH OUTPUTS

Selected academic publications


