



risking our kids

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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FIONA STANLEY SWIMS WITH CHILDREN AT JIGALONG POOL

Pathways into child health are very complex. You've got families, you've got genes, you've got environment, you've got community, you've got big global factors ... it's hard to get across sometimes to a community that wants the simple answer ... because there isn't one simple answer that can improve child health.

– Professor Fiona Stanley

Introduction

RISKING OUR KIDS (Judy Rymer, 2008) is a documentary about how children are raised in Australia and how this affects their physical and mental health. Despite good intentions and increasing affluence, we are nowhere near getting it right. In fact, many health problems more often associated with adults are now being seen in alarming numbers in young children. This film looks at why this is happening and what needs to be done to change things.

Increasing childhood rates of diabetes, respiratory disease, behavioural disorders, obesity and mental health problems lead former Australian of the Year, Fiona Stanley, to predict that the next generation of Australians could

have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

But this is 2008. Australia is awash with cash. Shouldn't our children be the healthiest kids in history? Child health expert Professor Stanley believes they are not.



Following Fiona and her team of scientists from their laboratories to remote Aboriginal communities and into increasingly wealthy but unhealthy homes around Australia, this film builds the case for what scientists call 'the modernity paradox'. Can it be that our contemporary western lifestyle is delivering a toxic physical and social environment in which children are growing up sick?

After a lifetime of cutting edge scientific study into the condition of the nation's children, Fiona passionately and eloquently explores the alarming measurable health effects of the way we now bring up children. These are problems with solutions, but, says Fiona, effective action needs political and community will right now.



TWINS AT JIGALONG

Curriculum relevance

Risking Our Kids offers an overview of child health in Australia in 2008. Much of the research and findings illustrated in the film are quite surprising and the work of Fiona and her team is inspirational. It would be an excellent film to show to middle and senior secondary students of:

- Health and Personal Development
- Science and Biology
- Physical Education
- Society and Environment
- Early Childhood Development.

Equally, tertiary students studying health sciences and childhood development would find many valuable insights to challenge and extend their thinking. While the research and statistical information underpins the program, the material is presented in a very accessible, non-jargonistic way and Fiona's warmth and commitment as a storyteller shines through.

While most scientific terms are clearly explained there is a glossary of key terms used in the program on page 5 of this guide.

Fiona Stanley and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

Fiona Stanley is a Perth scientist with a passion for improving the health and well-being of our children. In 2003, she was named Australian of the Year in recognition of her pioneering work in leading a team of scientists committed to bringing children's health issues on to the national agenda. She continues to be a vocal advocate for the needs of children and their families.

When she returned from study overseas in Britain and America in the late 1980s, she decided she needed an institute. So she set about funding one through public contribution. The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research is her mission control and the story starts here. Radical and independent in its funding, cutting edge in its science, unorthodox in its methodology, human in its construction, it reflects Fiona's personality accurately. Collaboration, excellence and results are its demanding guiding stars for its team of over four hundred.

Fiona's vision in establishing such a strong foundation was to deliver the hard evidence she knew was needed to capture the nation's attention about

✦ The Filmmakers ✦

Risking Our Kids is a **Rymer Children's** production in association with **Thunderbox**.

Director/producer/writer **Judy Rymer** has been writing, directing and producing drama and documentary films for twenty-five years. Her work covers a wide range of subjects, concentrating on science, and social and political history. Since 2002, when she formed a new company with co-producer **Bevan Childs**, they have made: *Message from Moree* (Judy Rymer, 2003), *All Points of the Compass* (Judy Rymer, 2005), *Being Chen Kaige* and *Frank and Daz Take on the World* (Judy Rymer, 2007).

Co-production partners, **Thunderbox**, produced an award-winning *Inside Australia* with Antony Gromley.

A complete crew list is on page 10.

the state of child health. A lifetime of experience has led her to assert that approaches to children's health are often wrong or at best careless. Her research points to an alarming future.

We're entering the next phase in human evolution. It's a social evolution – we have to respond and adapt to this toxic society, nurturing parents, children and the community.



LEFT: ASSEMBLY, CHALLIS SCHOOL
 ABOVE: DAD AND SON, CHALLIS SCHOOL
 BELOW: A PORT HEDLAND GIRL

The urgent issue is the phenomenon called modernity's paradox – while standards of living continue to rise in Australia, statistics show health and well-being of all our children are declining or static. The new generation is likely to have a lower life expectancy than their parents. As a researcher in this area I'll continue to provide more data and more evidence. But the principles and strategies for effective action are known and the evidence for what will work is available. In the current rhetoric it is the absence of responsibility, not the absence of evidence, that impedes us now.

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research was founded in Perth, Western Australia in 1990 with the mission to improve and promote the health and well-being of all children.

Under the leadership of founding director Professor Fiona Stanley AC, the Institute has pioneered a multidisciplinary approach in child health research that brings together scientists with a wide range of expertise to examine the most costly, common or debilitating diseases and issues affecting young people today.

The institute's key research themes include:

- aboriginal child health
- asthma, allergies and respiratory disease

- cancer
- genetics
- healthy development
- infectious disease
- mental health, social and emotional wellbeing
- the early years

The Institute now has more than 450 dedicated staff and students. Researchers at the Institute publish more than 100 scientific papers each year.

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research has a proven track record of translating research findings into actions that make a real difference to the lives of children everywhere.

Their achievements include identifying the important role of folate in reducing neural tube defects such as spina bifida. The Institute's advocacy also saw Western Australia become the first state to offer free vaccinations to prevent Hib meningitis.

The Institute's asthma and allergy researchers have made important discoveries about the development of the immune system and have begun trials of the world's first asthma vaccine. Their researchers have contributed to international research that has dramatically improved survival rates for children with leukemia to nearly eighty per cent.

The Institute has established powerful databases of de-identified information that tracks births and later



health outcomes. It also has disability databases, a twins register, a cerebral palsy register and is home to the international Rett Syndrome database. These sources of information allow epidemiologists to track patterns and trends and seek causes.

The institute has instigated effective models for suicide prevention and early intervention programs to reduce behaviour problems in high-risk populations, and shown that swimming pools reduce diseases for remote Aboriginal children

The Institute is a non-government, not-for-profit organization. The majority of its research programs are funded through the awarding of competitive research grants from federal bodies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council. Much needed additional support is provided by their valued corporate partners, through bequests and personal donations. They also fundraise to fill the gap between grant funding and research costs.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 1

Pre-viewing Questions

- How do we find out about the state of children's health in Australia – through the media, personal experience, school, etc.?
- Are there any issues with children's health that you are particularly aware of?
- How many students in your class suffer from asthma?
- How many of your classmates have allergies to things like peanuts, eggs, seafood or pollens?
- Does your school offer a breakfast program to students?
- Are foods offered for purchase for lunches and snacks at your school designed to be healthy, low-fat, low-sugar and generally nutritious?
- What do you know about the causes and incidence of Type 2 diabetes?
- How might modern lifestyle factors such as plentiful food, food advertising on television, being driven to school and spending a lot of leisure time online or watching television indoors make it more difficult for parents to give their kids the best start in life?
- What is your view about controls being imposed on junk food advertising during children's television programming?
- Being overweight and being anorexic are two of the more common eating-related problems in western society. Why do you think it seems to be so difficult to achieve a balanced view about eating?
- Are controls imposed by governments appropriate and successful ways to improve child and adolescent health?
- If you were in charge of your school for a day, what programs would you put in place to ensure that the general physical and mental health of the students improved over time?
- What do you think is the major health issue facing families and children in Australia in 2008?

FACT SHEET

- Forty per cent of Australian children are affected by asthma.
- One in four young Australians are overweight or obese.
- One in four Australian five year olds are not ready for school.
- One in seven young Australians have mental health problems.
- One in four twelve to fifteen year olds consume alcohol weekly.
- Forty per cent of Australian teenagers are supplied alcohol by their parents.
- Sixty per cent of Aboriginal children live in cities.
- Fifty per cent of the Aboriginal population is under nineteen.
- One in two children are hospitalized before they are two years old, mostly with respiratory and ear infections, followed by gastroenteritis.
- By 2020 it is predicted that sixty-five per cent of young Australians will be overweight or obese.
- One in three young male Australian deaths is due to suicide.
- The rate of Type 2 diabetes in Australian society is rocketing up in children.

Glossary

A.E.D.I. Australian Early Development Index is a community measure of young children's development. It is based on the scores from a teacher-completed checklist consisting of over 100 questions. See <<http://www.australianedi.org.au>>.

Epidemiology The branch of medicine dealing with the study of the causes, distribution and control of diseases in populations.

Genetics The study of heredity, focusing on how particular qualities or traits are transmitted from parents to children.

Preventive medicine The branch of medicine concerned with preventing diseases from developing through early intervention and lifestyle changes.

Otitis Media Middle ear infections. Eight out of ten children will have a middle ear infection by the age of three. See <<http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au>>

Raine Study One of the largest successful prospective cohort studies of pregnancy, childhood and now adolescence in the world. See <<http://www.rainestudy.org.au>>

Type 2 diabetes – used to be called 'adult onset diabetes'. A metabolic disorder primarily characterized by insulin resistance and hyperglycaemia. Often managed by increasing physical activity and dietary modification. Rapidly increasing in the developed world and increasing in children and adolescents.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 2

Suggested ways to use this guide



AS THERE ARE A NUMBER of research programs and projects explored in this documentary, it may be useful for teachers to allocate different areas of the program to groups of students to focus their attention on as they watch the film – e.g.

- Set 1 – asthma and allergies
- Set 2 – aboriginal health
- Set 3 – diet and exercise,
- Set 4 – infectious diseases
- Set 5 – social and emotional well-being of primary school kids
- Set 6 – social and emotional well-being of adolescents.

Each of these topics is explored throughout the film as there are overlaps and connections between all of them. Because there are such strong connections between these issues, students could share their findings later and try to make those connections and explain them.

While most students will be familiar with the basic scientific principles of research, surveys, sampling, monitoring, controls, pre-testing and re-testing, it may be useful to discuss the importance of all these processes to validate research.



As Fiona Stanley points out, we need to properly understand the problems we're facing to successfully address them.

After watching the program all students could share their responses to the following general questions about Fiona Stanley and the issues explored in the film.

- As you watch this documentary, make brief notes on any of the findings and/or programs discussed that you found surprising.
- What is your impression of Professor Fiona Stanley as a person from what we see and hear of her in the film?
- What does she do to wind down

and relax from her demanding job?

- What were the major influences on her decision to work as an advocate for child health?
- How did her father's work influence her interest in medical research?
- What was the experience she had working as a young doctor that really galvanized her desire to make a difference in the lives of children?
- What have economics and globalization got to do with any of the problems identified?
- Why is sound research a prerequisite to understanding and making changes to the way we live?
- What does the term 'quarantining children's immune systems from the microbial environment' mean? What are the problems created by doing this?
- How does what research is showing us in Australia have implications for children in other parts of the world, particularly in China and India?

The Fact Sheet and Glossary on page 5 provide some basic information which should be useful in filling out your chart for your chosen topic.

See Sets 1 to 6 on following pages.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 3

Looking at the style and approach



PHOTOS OF THE CREW

CREW OF *RISKING OUR KIDS*

PRODUCERS

Bevan Childs, Judy Rymer, Jody Nunn

DIRECTOR

Judy Rymer

WRITERS

Judy Rymer, Jennifer Lee Lewes

CINEMATOGRAPHER

Ian Batt

EDITORS

Paul Hamilton, Michael Horton

COMPOSER

Jan Preston

NARRATOR

Augusta Miller

RESEARCHERS

Jennifer Lee Lewes, Rene Bransby

Apart from Professor Fiona Stanley and many of her co-workers – children, families, teachers and whole communities gave their time to be part of this film.

Internationally acclaimed scientist, political advocate and engaging commentator with a fearless passion to protect the nation's children...and then there is her serious commitment to use science as a powerful tool for social justice.

– Judy Rymer, writer and director of *Risking Our Kids*, talking about Fiona Stanley

FIONA STANLEY is the central figure in this documentary. How effectively does she provide a human face to the material and issues discussed?

- How are important statistics emphasized throughout the film?
- Describe the style of music used in the film to stress the importance of the statistical information.
- 'Stanley's predictions are alarming. But she is not a doomsday soothsayer. She has spent her

whole life identifying problems and finding solutions to them.'

– Judy Rymer, writer and director of the documentary

What do you think was the motivation of the filmmakers in making this film?

- Who do you think is the intended audience for this documentary?

Why aren't we all listening to her? [Stanley] She and her scientific team have pathways forward. They have identified strategies that need to be

put in place to either buffer against environmental dangers or correct social failures within communities.

– Judy Rymer, writer and director of the documentary

- What is the main message you derived from this documentary?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 4

Setting up your own mini research project



LEFT: JIGALONG KIDS
TOP RIGHT: PORT HEDLAND YOUTH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL
RIGHT: FIONA STANLEY & TED WILKES

EARLIER IN THIS GUIDE the basic principles of carrying out a survey to provide reliable information about any of the issues explored in this film were outlined.

The more planning that goes into conducting a survey, the more reliable the data you collect will be. So, here are the stages to follow:

1. What do I want to find out?

This can be something as simple as:

- how many students in my class eat breakfast at home before coming to school, and what do they eat?
- how many kilometres do students in my class cover on foot in an average week? (You may need access to pedometers to get accurate data for this one.)
- how many hours a week are students in my class involved

in outdoor and indoor leisure activities?

- You may also like to survey another group of students from a different age group using the same questions, either younger or older, or compare the different results of males and females in your survey.
- ### 2. Devise a simple and clearly expressed set of statements for people to respond to which will give you some reliable data. It is always better to offer specific options so you are comparing like with like, e.g. which question is better worded?
- a) Do you eat breakfast at home?
or
 - b) Tick the boxes for each day you eat breakfast at home:
Mon Tue Wed
Thu Fri
- Option b) excludes the weekend and focuses respondents' attention on thinking about which days

they eat breakfast at home.

3. Decide on the size of your sample to be surveyed e.g. twenty-five people, 100 people, more or less?
4. If you are able to invite students from another school to involve themselves in your survey, using the same set of questions, you will end up with a larger, more diverse sample which will probably give you more useful and reliable data about your question.
5. Are you going to poll people one-on-one and face-to-face, or give them a survey to fill out? What are the pros and cons of each approach?
6. Will you use a software program to design, print and collate your material, or do it manually?
7. Where will you publish your results once you have collated the results of the survey?
8. Who would find this data both interesting and useful?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 5

Bringing it all together

Questions for discussion, research and writing

1. While it only takes two people to make a baby, 'it takes a village to bring up a child'. What relevance might this statement have to what we see in this program and how does our society need to change for this to happen?
2. *So all of the things that are happening right out in a global world ... an advertisement in America decides what a child in Perth might eat or play with or watch or be exposed to ... all that's important in terms of how genes and environment interact to cause you to develop in one way or another.*
Give some examples of how mass communication and globalization may be having adverse effects on children's development. Are there positive aspects to globalization in the area of children's health?
3. Professor Stanley is very clear that the evidence for many of the health issues affecting children, particularly in the area of aboriginal health, has been available for some time. If the recommendations are clearly set out, what needs to be done to affect significant changes in social attitudes and health outcomes? Why do so many of these problems seem to be becoming worse in a country like Australia?
4. One of the real difficulties for parents choosing food that will be good for their families is wading through the information about fats and sugars on packaging and being able to make sense of it to make informed choices. Couple this with pervasive food advertising on television of so-called healthy and nutritious snack foods and the problem becomes larger. Some nutritionists believe that the real solution to



ABOVE: FIONA IN HER OFFICE

decoding this information is for people to eat mostly real, fresh foods, unprocessed, unpackaged and locally grown. For more information about this subject read 'An Indigestible Truth' by Nick Galvin that appeared in *The Age* 'Epicure' (15 July 2008) at <http://www.theage.com.au/news/epicure/an-indigestible-truth/2008/07/14/1215887493782.html>.

- Give some examples of food products advertised as nutritious where we might reasonably dispute such claims.
- What are some of the perceived problems with adopting a 'wholefood, fresh food' approach to eating, which may seem to offer a simple solution to changing eating habits?
Consider factors such as cost, convenience, time factors and the undeniable power of fast food advertising.
- How can kitchen garden programs now operating in many Australian primary schools help educate young people and their parents about healthy eating?

5. *The statistics for asthma, mental*



illness, alcohol abuse, suicide and obesity were so confronting I was sceptical. Then I began to understand the reliability of the statistics ... and I became convinced that there was a really big and important story here that seemed to explain a lot about that bubbling disquiet one feels about the whole of our contemporary community.

- Judy Rymer, writer and director of the documentary
- What do you believe are the most important truths revealed in this documentary about 'our contemporary community'?
- What is the single most important thing we need to do now to improve the situation?

References and other related films and documentaries

Honey, We're Killing the Kids (2005) This six-part series follows six families and their kids as they are encouraged to make important changes to their diet and lifestyle.

Life at 1 (2006). Starting with the question 'How do you give a child the best start in life?', this two-part Australian program follows eleven children and their families in their first year of life.

Life at 3 (2008). This is the second part of this long term study following the lives of a diverse group of children and their families as they grow up.

ATOM study guides are available for all these programs.

Marguerite O'Hara is a Melbourne writer.



ABOVE: FIONA STANLEY



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editor@atom.org.au

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