

**Child Witnesses in Twentieth Century Australian Courtrooms by Robyn Blewer
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In her book “Child Witnesses in Twentieth Century Australian Courtrooms” Dr. Robyn Blewer describes and problematizes the practice around child witnesses in court. The author states that the book aims to further explore the impact of law and legal reforms on cases where children had to testify. The book draws on 250 empirical cases where children provided evidence in criminal trials during the twentieth century. The main thesis of the book reflects the challenge the criminal justice system posits when calling child witnesses to testify, as well as how the reforms to evidence law facilitate child testimonies yet also create unattainable high standards for child witnesses. These high standards are specifically problematic due to the assumptions they make about children and their childhood and their grounding in rules of evidence, which creates barriers concerning legitimacy and reliability.

The book consists of four parts. The first includes the Introduction and Chapter Two “Child Witnesses and the Common Law”, which provides a robust foundation for the reader by describing child witnesses in the context of English common law. The author describes both psychological and cultural perspectives of understanding children and childhood to contextualize the existing understanding of child witnesses in court and how scholarship and legal professionals traditionally have perceived child witnesses. Furthermore, the Introduction describes the legal system which is further discussed and problematized throughout the rest of the book.

The second part of the book “Getting into Court” reflects Chapters Three, Four, and Five. In this section, the three major topics are discussed. The first is police officers' roles and interaction with child witnesses through their investigation. Specifically how essential the police officers are in preparing the child witnesses leading up to court. The second topic is the assessment and determination of child competency. The author describes how prior to 1980-1990, children were presumed incompetent according to the law, thus, exhibiting challenges for child witnesses in courts. However, after a legislative reform in the late 1990s, this was removed and children were not presumed as incompetent. The third topic is related to the court environment and the experience they gain when partaking in court proceedings. Specifically, the author describes how a child witness fits into the space in court by describing and discussing the interactions between children and the criminal justice professional in the courtroom. Overall, these three topics have a clear relation to the interactions between the criminal justice system’s professionals and child witnesses. Blewer provides a compelling description of how the mechanics and dynamics of the process leading up to the child making their testimony in trial and how these have changed over time further the process of engaging child witnesses and their testimonies in trials.

“Giving Evidence” is the name of the third part of the book, which contains Chapters Six and Seven. As the title of the section alludes, these two chapters specifically focus on discussing child witnesses in relation to their role as providing evidence for a case in trial. The two major notions discussed in this section are the reform that enabled children to testify through video and

defendants being precluded from cross examining children. Despite these changes, Blewer argues that there still are major issues with how child testimonies are conducted by using the example of cross-examination. Although cross-examination has been raised as potentially highly damaging to children, this is still the preferred process of testimony to which child witnesses are exposed. The second notion discussed is the specific context in which child witnesses need corroboration to overcome the potential unreliability of the testimonies provided by child witnesses. In sum, in the third section of the book, delves into discussions of the legitimacy of child witnesses and the procedures which make child witnesses less or more reliable. A gripping discussion of the challenges children have experienced in the past develops into a critical dialog on the current state of child testimonies post reforms and highlights the many barriers child witnesses still face.

The fourth and final part of the book: "Reflections and Conclusions" consists of Chapters Eight and Nine. In this section, Blewer specifically highlights the experiences of indigenous children who participate as witnesses. Although she states that there are no major differences in how non-indigenous and indigenous child witnesses are treated by the criminal justice system in their role as witnesses, Blewer also asserts a compelling description of the exploitation of indigenous child witnesses through using their cultural practices against them when testifying. The final chapter of the fourth and final section of the book offers a summary of the major notions discussed in the book as well as offers a critical reflection of the changes that have been brought through reforms aiming to protect and legitimize child testimonies.

Through a robust and critical contextualization of Blewer succeeds in both explaining the past and current challenges that are related to child testimonies; specifically addressing the barriers that have been present in the past which have been attempted to be addressed through a wide range of reforms, however, resulting in creating new challenges or not effectively addressing all the existing challenges.

One of the key contributions of Blewer's book is the critical discussion and analysis of the practices and reforms that were implemented as a response to the various challenges child witnesses presented to courts. Specifically, Blewer effectively discusses the challenges of placing children in a space where they have the role of providing evidence and are forced to take part in a dynamic set of interactions with criminal justice professionals as well as adhering to legal standards that are produced to not enhance their evidentiary value and the legitimacy of their testimony. In addition to describing the past and current practices and procedures pertaining to child witnesses and their testimonies, Blewer uses real criminal cases to exemplify her states throughout the book. By providing real examples woven together with explanations and critical discussion of reforms and implications, Blewer offers continuity in not only the compelling argument and issues discussed but also provides clarity for readers who may not have extensive experiences with the application of the legal procedures and reforms in practicality. "Child Witnesses in Twentieth Century Australian Courtrooms" is a book that can entice a wide interdisciplinary audience. Scholars and students from criminology, sociology, legal studies, forensic studies, and psychology can all benefit from the critical reflection this book offers.