



AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

STUDY GUIDE

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BARBARA HOLBOROW

(1930 -) Children's Court Magistrate

SERIES **8**

INTRODUCTION

This programme is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 8) produced by the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Barbara Holborow served for 12 years as a magistrate in the children's court, where her compassion and outspokenness were legendary—perhaps because of her own beginnings.

Although she describes her childhood as happy, it was also lonely. An only child, her parents were fiercely protective. As Barbara tells it, that's the reason why she has 'enough love to hand out to other kids forever'.

When she was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of thirteen, her overwhelming feel-

ing was one of guilt—a fear that she had let her parents down. It was a feeling she conquered, and since then she has never allowed the condition to hold her back.

That does not mean it hasn't left a mark. Doctors at the time did not fully understand the complications that diabetes could bring to a pregnancy and Barbara's first child (a boy) died soon after he was born. Although she later gave birth to a healthy girl, the death of her first child reverberated through her life. Not long after Louise's birth, Barbara split with her husband and moved back with her parents, found a job as a legal secretary and resumed her studies—first high school then

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law. She was thirty nine when she graduated as a solicitor.

Barbara specialised in children's cases and it was through her work at a women's refuge that she met Jacob, a young Aboriginal boy she adopted. Since then, many foster children have come under Barbara's care, but it is as a magistrate that Barbara has had an

impact on the lives of thousands of kids. Fiercely committed to reforming the judicial system for children, she was involved in setting up free legal aid for children in NSW, a care court that deals with cases of neglect, and a special jail for first-time offenders aged eighteen to twenty five. It's a commitment that has continued since her retirement from the bench in 1994 and one she talks about with passion in this interview.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Australian Biography: Barbara Holborow will have interest and relevance for students in the middle and upper secondary years of schooling and in a range of tertiary courses. Curriculum links include English, SOSE/HSIE, Legal Studies, Religious Education, Health, Human Development, Sociology, Women's Studies, Psychology, Careers Education and Media Studies.

BEFORE WATCHING

Born in Sydney in 1930, Barbara Holborow was clearly a liberated and progressive woman long before the first stirrings of the modern women's movement in the late 1960s. Barbara's story is not, however, merely that of a successful woman making her mark in a traditionally male world. The viewer is engaged with Barbara from the opening scene in which she directs a powerful tirade against a parent in her court.

As you view the programme for the first time, consider some of the following issues:

- To what extent did Barbara's child-

hood impact on the woman that she became?

- How differently are issues such as childhood diabetes, the death of a baby and treatment of neglected children dealt with today?
- Had her early experiences of marriage been different, do you think that Barbara would have remained an anonymous suburban wife and mother?
- Do you think that Barbara was a good choice as a subject for the *Australian Biography* series?

CHILDHOOD

Barbara was an only child and describes herself as having a very happy, but lonely childhood. It 'moulded me to what I am now...so much love poured on me...all this coddling.'

- Explain what Barbara meant when she said she was coddled. What could her parents have done differently? What does it mean for a child to say he/she was loved too much? Is it necessarily bad for the child?
- Type 1 diabetes is often diagnosed during childhood or young adulthood but can occur at any age. In Australia, approximately one in 700 children under the age of fifteen has diabetes. Barbara was thirteen when her diagnosis was made. How did she react to this? Why was going to hospital, 'the greatest guilt trip you can imagine'?
- Barbara said, 'at thirteen you don't want to be different.' Think of other points of difference that could lead a child to have feelings of isolation or exclusion.
- When Barbara was crying about being diabetic, her grandmother said to her, '...you can sit down there and cry for the rest of your life, or get up and live your life.' How effective was Nan's 'pearl of wisdom'? How would you have reacted? Suggest ways in which the situation could have been handled differently.
- Barbara's parents obviously believed they were raising their daughter well. If you were to become a parent, how would you know whether you were doing a 'good job'? What are the indicators of good parenting?
- What would be the ideal model of a

parent? What qualities would they have? What would they do well? Compare your thoughts with others.

- Using the information you have gained about Barbara's early life and your own thoughts, compile an article for a newspaper titled 'Tips for Parents'.

MARRIAGE

Barbara's marriage to John Holborow was a significant shaping force in her life, even though it was short lived.

- What did Barbara love about John Holborow?
- When Barbara and John came back from their honeymoon, Barbara found that her mother-in-law had moved in. 'She made our life hell...we were trapped.' Identify ways in which Barbara's mother-in-law made her life difficult.
- Think about the expression, 'what doesn't destroy us only makes us stronger'. How could this apply to Barbara's experience with her mother-in-law?
- How significant is it that John's mum describes her son as a 'prince'? Explain what sorts of pressures this would have placed on Barbara.
- Why did Barbara's marriage fail? What was her husband's role in this? Does her explanation make sense to you? Why/why not?
- Write a short reflection or poem which captures some of the thoughts and feelings that you imagine Barbara may have experienced in the early years of her marriage.

MOTHERHOOD AND PARENTING

Barbara's first experience of motherhood ended in the death of her son, Kim Anthony, soon after his birth. Her diabetes was possibly a factor in her difficult pregnancy and the death of the baby. In the 1950s when Barbara's son was born, there was little counselling or support offered to bereaved mothers.

(Teachers may find it helpful to provide students with some information on these subjects before they ask students to tackle the questions that follow).

- When the baby died the first thing

Barbara said was 'poor Mum and Dad.' What might this reaction say about her?

- Why do you think that the issue of Barbara's diabetes was not addressed during her pregnancy? What are the particular concerns for a mother-to-be with diabetes? How does diabetes affect pregnancy? How is the health of pregnant women with diabetes managed today?
- How was the death of the baby handled by the hospital? How have attitudes and practices changed since the 1950s? Find out about the sort of care and support that is given to today's parents when an infant dies.
- Barbara's mother-in-law reacted to the loss of the baby by playing Chopin's funeral march for a whole day. Imagine that many years later, Barbara decided to confront her mother-in-law about that reaction. Write a dialogue between the two.
- As a result of dealing with cases of child neglect and abuse, Barbara fostered eight children and adopted two. What is the difference between fostering and adopting? How did Barbara explain the difference?
- The first child Barbara adopted was Jacob. Outline his story.
- The second child she adopted was Mary. Why do you think that Barbara reacted the way she did over the incident with the Royal Doulton china?
- Mary left home following a visit to the pictures against Barbara's wishes. Instead of not speaking to Mary, how could Barbara have handled the situation? Create a dialogue between Barbara and Mary that may have led to a better result.

THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Barbara said about the fostering system:

I would not allow parents to come back every six months, every year, and make application to take their child back. Let the child get on with its life. But when foster parents love and care for a child, look after a child for three, four years, to then have that child taken away and returned to maybe something that is going to work out with a mum whose prior drug history is frightening. What are you doing to that child? What are you doing?

- Who are the stakeholders when considering children's rights? Research the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted as an international human rights treaty in 1989.
- Use the above quotation and your research material to prepare a class debate on the topic: 'The rights of the child outweigh all other rights.'

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Recall the incident Barbara recounts about the young girl who told Jacob, her adopted Aboriginal son, that he was not welcome in her house 'because you're black'.

- What did Jacob say in response to her? What did he mean? What is the significance of his comments to you?

CAREER

- Explain the circumstances that led Barbara into a career in law.
- In 1982 Barbara successfully applied for a position as Magistrate in the Children's Court of New South Wales. Outline her views of the court and the way that it operated at that time.
- Barbara summed up her decision to become a magistrate in the Children's Court by saying: 'To be a magistrate in the Children's Court, I could bring about change...I knew I could do it, I knew I could make a difference.'
- Identify ways in which Barbara did make a difference through her work as a magistrate. Make a list of other professions in which you think it is possible for one person to make a real difference to the lives of children and young people.
- What systems were in place through the court, to monitor the development of the children and the care given by foster parents?
- How did Barbara's personal experiences with Mary help her in her work?

When Barbara retired from the Bench in 1994, she began a new career as patron of 'Hope for the Children'.

- What were Barbara's frustrations about being 'on the bench'?
- How could she achieve more off the bench than on it? How much did her personality have to do with her use of opportunities?
- Why was Barbara's media profile an issue with the Chief Magistrate? Do you think that it should have been a problem?
- Explaining why she works so hard for the foundation, Barbara says 'because I believe in it.' Barbara's belief in the value of what she is doing is clearly the main influence that drives her to work hard. What other factors can be strong motivators?
- 'There was so much love poured on me that I've had enough to hand out to other kids forever. That's where it comes from.' This is how Barbara explains her choice of a career related to helping children. Suggest some different childhood experiences that could also have resulted in such a career.

HOPE FOR THE CHILDREN

- The 'Hope for the Children' foundation aims to 'mother the mothers'. What is meant by this expression?
 - Write a letter to a politician expressing the view that 'Children are now'. Use evidence to support your argument.
- Barbara finishes with some powerful



BARBARA WITH HER DAUGHTER LOUISE

words about the importance of strong families:

If you don't have strong families, you don't have strong communities—if you don't have strong communities, you don't have a strong Australia...politicians say children are our future. Children are now!

- What is a strong family and what does a strong family offer a child?
- How important is it for a champion of children's causes such as Barbara to emphasise the need for strong families? Suggest five other public figures who have equal credibility.
- Barbara says 'by God it's hard to be a kid these days.' Do you think her observation is because her work has tended to expose her to the things that go wrong? As a young Australian, do you agree with Barbara's view? Write a letter to her saying whether you agree or disagree with her and why.

MEDIA STUDIES

- Consider the opening sequence of the programme. Why do you think that the film-makers chose this scene and how does it set the scene for what follows?
- What is the role of the interviewer and how effectively is the interview technique used to help Barbara's story to unfold? Give several specific examples.
- How does Barbara communicate:
 - her sadness about the death of her son?
 - her love for her husband?
 - her delight in Jacob's insightful comments?
 - her optimism for reforming the Children's Court?
 - her commitment to children?
- Suggest five adjectives that the interviewer may have used to describe Barbara.
- Think of four or five other questions that you would like to have asked Barbara if you had been the interviewer.
- Are there any questions that you think should not have been asked? Explain why.
- Suggest six other people who would be suitable subjects for the *Australian Biography* series. Write a couple of sentences about why each should be chosen.

ESSAY TOPICS AND FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- 'Everything about Barbara Holborow is real!' Discuss.
- 'Barbara Holborow is a shining example of the notion that one person can move mountains.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?
- The aim of eradicating cruelty to children is one of Barbara Holborow's driving passions. What do you understand by the term 'cruelty to children'? Use examples from news stories or from literature that support your interpretation.
- Imagine that a new 'Australian Heroes' award is to be presented each year on Australia Day. Prepare a submission to the award committee explaining why Barbara Holborow should be the first recipient.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

DIABETES INFORMATION

- Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing - National Health Priority Areas: www.health.gov.au/pq/diabetes/
- Diabetes Australia: www.diabetesaustralia.com.au/

GRIEF AND LOSS

- Bereaved Families Online - Bereavement Self-Help Resources Guide: www.bereavedfamilies.net

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

- Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission: www.hreoc.gov.au/
- Child Rights Information Network: www.crin.org/
- Human Rights Watch: www.hrw.org/children/
- UNICEF - Child rights: [unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/)

YOUTH CRIME

Sue Cornwall (director) 1988 *Real Life: Kids in Trouble*, videorecording. Film Australia, Sydney, 65 mins.

Inside the juvenile remand centre and children's court we follow the state's attempt to take on the role of parenting.

FAMILY SUPPORT

- Australian Institute of Family Studies: www.aifs.org.au/
- Commonwealth Department of

Family and Community Services: www.facs.gov.au/

- Family Support Services Association of New South Wales: www.fssansw.asn.au/

BOOKS BY BARBARA HOLBOROW

- Barbara Holborow with Cliff Neville 1999, *Barbara Holborow's Kids: loving for life*. Random House Australia, Sydney.
- Barbara Holborow with Cliff Neville and Janet Fife-Yeomans 1997, *Those Tracks on My Face*. William Heinemann, Kew, Victoria.

BARBARA HOLBOROW'S PUBLIC LIFE

Barbara is associated with many organisations in Australia, including the following:

- Hope for the Children (a Rotary project): www.rotanet.com.au/users/H/HFTCF
- Patron, The Mirabel Foundation: www.mirabelfoundation.com

Australian Biography: Barbara Holborow
A Film Australia National Interest Program
Director/Producer/Interviewer: Robin Hughes
Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn
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