

Putting children's services in their place

A call for universal children's services to prevent child abuse and neglect in Australia

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This paper discusses the need for a national early childhood intervention policy in Australia, including a universal approach to children's services as a platform for the prevention of child abuse and neglect, supporting families and enriching the lives of all children.

It considers the literature on early intervention, including the theoretical and research base of successful programs and the link between early intervention and the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It examines the way the child welfare and children's services sectors have grown and the imperative at the beginning of the 21st century for a closer alignment of services.

The United Kingdom's 'Sure Start' early intervention strategy is considered in so far as it attempts to develop a more comprehensive approach to child welfare by developing programs which are based on the research. Finally the paper asserts that recent strategies introduced by Federal and State Governments to promote childhood health and wellbeing are positive first steps, but need to go further to seriously address increasing numbers of children reported as suffering harm through abuse and/or neglect.

Between 1995 and 2001 the number of child protection notifications in Australia increased by 25.8% to reach 115,471 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2002). In response to these alarming figures most Australian states have introduced a range of local policies and plans to reduce child abuse and neglect in their communities. While these approaches vary considerably from state to state, they all focus to some degree on parent education, family support and other efforts to alleviate pressures on families during the early years of childhood.

In responding to the substantial body of evidence and research indicating that the early years are a window of opportunity, the states are nevertheless hampered in their efforts by the lack of a comprehensive national policy. A national early intervention policy, accompanied by a well funded strategy to make children's services universally available in targeted areas, would provide the states with a strong platform for a raft of services to reduce child abuse and neglect.

This paper seeks to establish the unique opportunities that comprehensive and universal early childhood and family support programs offer in changing the life courses of children at risk. It explores historical issues in relation to the intersection of the child welfare and children's services sectors in Australia and examines a way forward adopted by the United Kingdom in its 'Sure Start' Initiative. Finally, it proposes a new policy direction of children's services universally offered in targeted areas as the basis for a national early intervention policy to prevent child abuse and neglect in Australia.

BACKGROUND

CHILD WELFARE AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Formal child care programs in the form of creches and kindergartens run by charitable institutions were introduced early in the 20th century as enrichment programs for poor children (Sweeney & Jamrozik, 1984; Jamrozik, 1994). In the early 1970s child care was endorsed by the Commonwealth Government as an important public policy initiative to meet the developmental and care needs of children (Jamrozik, 1994: 115).

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In the years that followed, however, child care policy became an arm of economic policy, a device primarily to assist women who wanted to work full time. In practice, it has been used since that time predominantly by affluent, two income families (Sweeney & Jamrozik, 1984; Jamrozik, 1994).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that in 1999 the proportion of children who used formal child care generally rose with family income, from 44% in families with weekly incomes less than \$400, to 52% in families with weekly incomes of \$2000 or more (ABS, 2000). The lowest level of usage (approximately 12%) of formal child care was by children in couple families where one parent was unemployed and the other not in the labour force, compared with approximately 35% by children whose parents were both in full time employment (ABS, 2000).

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During the 1980s two major drivers influenced the policy and practices of state child welfare departments in Australia. The first was shocking new information about the extent of physical and sexual abuse of children, precipitating as it did an era of 'moral panic' and outrage (Scott, 1995; Jeffreys & Stevenson, 1997) in the community about the responsibility of the state to save children from sexual and physical harm and great concern on the part of policy makers to find ways to keep children safe. The second was the drive for fiscal austerity that characterised all government departments in the grip of changing economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s (Edwards, 2002).

In response to these two major influences, child welfare departments increasingly narrowed their core business to the investigation of child abuse and responding to children who have suffered serious harm through abuse. While some prominence was given to prevention strategies in the mid to late 1990s, researchers assert that in some states there has been a diversion of resources from support and prevention services to narrow statutory investigation services, rather than addressing the structural factors which contribute to child abuse and neglect (Mendes, 2001).

At the beginning of the 21st century there is little policy and practice synergy between child welfare programs and children's services programs despite the reality that most child deaths through abuse and neglect are children under 3-years-old (NSW Commissioner for Children, 1999; Health and Community Services Victoria, 1994) and the close administrative alignment of these divisions in the majority of state Community Services Departments.

THE PROBLEM STATED

A FAILURE TO REDUCE CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

The 2001 census counted 4,936,828 families in Australia, an increase of 6% since the 1996 census. Almost half were couples with children, and sole parent families made up 15.4% of this group. This is a slight increase on the 1996 census figures, but a significant increase on the figure of 5.7% in 1971. The indigenous population represents 2.2% of the total population (ABS, 2002). The 2001 census indicated that there were around 3.9 million children aged 0-14 years in the Australian population; of these, around 1.26 million were aged 0-4 years (ABS, 2002).

Since the introduction of mandatory reporting in all Australian states except Western Australia, reports of child abuse and neglect have steadily risen, with rates of children affected ranging from 0.9 per thousand in Tasmania to 7.4 per thousand in Queensland (AIHW, 2002). In NSW almost half of children reported to the statutory welfare authorities were under the age of 5 years. In all states and territories there is an over-representation of children in female, sole parent families – between 34% and 43%, despite the fact that at the time of the 2001 census, these families only constituted around 15% of the total number of families (ABS, 2002). In all states and territories there is a continuing upward trend in the number of children on care and protection orders and in out-of-home care. Indigenous children are greatly over-represented Australia wide in all parts of the system. They are six times more likely to be the subject of substantiated reports and to be placed in out-of-home care than non-indigenous children (AIHW, 2002).

This steady rise in reports is deeply disturbing for child welfare departments across the country, all of which in one form or another have invested in strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect.

THE LINK BETWEEN EARLY INTERVENTION, UNIVERSAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES AND THE PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

WHAT IS EARLY INTERVENTION?

Karoly et al (1998) define early intervention and prevention as formal attempts by agents outside the family to maintain or improve the quality of life of young children, starting with

the prenatal period and continuing through entry to school. The concept is often extended to refer to 'early' as early in the life of the child and/or early in the pathways of the problem (Cashmore, 2001; National Crime Prevention, 1999).

The literature on early intervention and prevention recognises that the majority of support most children receive in the early years will come from their families, relatives or friends. The intent of early intervention is generally to work with the family to enhance or supplement this support and thus lay the best possible foundations for future health and for future educational and social functioning.

There is convincing evidence that the most successful initiatives to reach children in need are programs which are non-stigmatising, are universally provided within 'high risk' neighbourhoods, and are offered through natural environments such as schools, child care centres and preschools (Scott, 2001; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Cashmore, 2001; Dunst, 2000).

THE LITERATURE ON EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION: WHAT CAN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS ACHIEVE?

This paper argues that social policy needs to be more responsive to the contemporary evidence regarding the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It specifically asserts that high quality children's services, provided regardless of income or parental employment status, would provide a universal platform for the delivery of services to promote positive childhood outcomes and reduce child abuse and neglect.

There is currently a resurgence of international interest in determining the cost benefits of children's strategies, including early intervention and prevention programs. The absence of good experimental design in many programs has meant some results are inconclusive. However, there are sufficient high quality longitudinal evaluations to draw conclusions about which interventions reduce the likelihood of harm to children and lead to improved levels of educational and social functioning (Karoly et al, 1998; Currie, 2000).

There are several important messages from the research that reinforce the need for a national early intervention and prevention policy. These messages are:

- the importance of heavily investing in the early years of life;
- effective programs must transcend the traditional 'silos' of health, welfare and education;
- the effectiveness of linking children's services with family support and home visiting;
- the effectiveness of universal programs in targeted areas.

The theoretical and research base of each of these main messages is explored here in more detail.

The importance of the early years

The best possible foundation for the promotion of positive childhood outcomes commences before children are born and in the early months and years after birth. Numerous studies of pre-natal/early infancy projects confirm that universal home visiting by maternal and child health nurses and/or child care specialists results in very favourable short and long term outcomes for both parents and children (Karoly et al, 1998; Olds, 1988). The recent proliferation of research into neurobiological elements of early brain development has led to major advances in understanding the importance of nurturing environments and security of relationships. Research focuses attention on the powerful capabilities, complex emotions and essential social skills that develop during the earliest years of life and the capacity to increase the odds of favourable developmental outcomes through planned interventions (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

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Programs in local neighbourhoods which are 'normal' and transcend traditional boundaries

Successful programs are those which transcend the traditional 'silos' of health, education, community services and housing. They tend to be located within non-stigmatising, natural, everyday settings such as schools, preschools and child care settings, and they have the building of strong communities as a goal (Scott, 2001). An ecological view of child abuse and neglect recognises that causes are complex and solutions must therefore involve all sectors in both micro and macro approaches (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980).

The effectiveness of early childhood programs which actively reach out to families

There are conclusions which can be drawn from studies of the US 'Head Start' programs of the 1960s and 1970s, and the proliferation of similar prevention programs which have emerged in the 1990s. These are that particular combinations

of intensive child care programs *together with* home visitation to reinforce parents' understanding of child development and to connect families with helpful services, result in lasting benefits to both children and their parents (Karoly et al, 1998; Cashmore, 2001; Scott, 2001; Currie, 2000).

It is reasonable to assert that child care has largely been appropriated by the middle classes as an employment/gender equity strategy. The parents of many young children at risk today simply cannot access it.

The effectiveness of universal programs in targeted areas

One of the most complicated and controversial social policy considerations for governments attempting to maximise the impact of programs and resources concerns how families are 'enrolled' for services. This is often framed in terms of whether to 'target' family support services to specific high risk families or to offer services 'universally' to all eligible participants. A meta-analysis of 19 controlled outcome studies conducted through Columbia University in 1999 found that in relation to early home visitation family support programs, *population based* studies appear favourable to *screening based* ones. The majority of programs analysed in this study reported that programs with the most robust outcomes used demographically based criteria for enrolment, or delivered services within high risk community niches. The studies recommended an aggregated targeting approach, that is, neighbourhood based services which are available to all, as the most effective way to deliver outreach services (Guterman, 1999). In this way scarce resources can be used to strengthen low income neighbourhoods and offer services within those neighbourhoods in a non-stigmatising way.

The significance of these 'messages' from the research, for the purpose of this paper, is that *none* of them are systematically pursued by Australian child welfare systems.

Against the backdrop of compelling evidence of the importance of the early years, the success of early childhood programs linked with universal home visiting and cross sectoral programs delivered from normal, non-stigmatising environments, most state and territory responses to prevention of child abuse and neglect tend to:

- miss the early years;
- provide family support services separately from traditional health and welfare silos;

- stigmatise by targeting.

This paper asserts that the states and territories fall short of an effective strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect because their efforts miss critical opportunities to provide services to parents before their children go to school.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES – EARLY, NORMAL, NON-STIGMATISING – NOT AVAILABLE

The area of family service provision known as children's services today usually applies to a range of formal services such as long day care, preschools, family day care schemes, outside school hours care and occasional care.

While Australia invests highly in services to provide all children with access to good health care at the beginning of their lives, most Australian children do not access formal education and care programs until they reach the age of four. The states have differing policies in relation to the universality and the amount of preschool offered to children and, because of comparability problems, no consistent national data is collected on these arrangements (AIHW, 1999).

Although 'development' is a tag frequently used to describe the function of children's services, the primary objective of the Commonwealth in funding services is to assist parents to work, look for work, or to study or retrain (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 2002). Policy development in this area continues to revolve around workforce participation rather than enhancing the developmental potential of children, supporting families and generally benefiting society (Fraser, 2000:2).

In the Federal arena, the recent withdrawal of operational funding from community based child care services and limitations placed on availability of financial assistance for families using child care has resulted in a greater number of mainstream and low income families choosing not to avail themselves of these services. In addition the data clearly shows that indigenous children and children of sole parent families are under-represented in all formal children's services. It is reasonable to assert that child care has largely been appropriated by the middle classes as an employment/gender equity strategy. The parents of many young children at risk today simply cannot access it.

It is not surprising that a recent study in NSW examining factors influencing child care policy decision making concluded that the children's services sector has 'some distance to travel before it is seen as part of the public space or an integral part of family support structures within the community' (Fraser, 1997, cited in Fraser, 2000).

REFLECTIONS ON THE UK SURE START INITIATIVE

Let us now consider what the United Kingdom is doing to address the problem of child abuse and neglect by specifically working through early childhood services to reach vulnerable families.

The Labour Government took office in Britain in 1997 promising policy changes across a number of areas. One of the ten pledges in its manifesto was the promise to 'help build strong families and strong communities'. The Sure Start program, introduced in 1999, is a cornerstone of this pledge in that it aims to support families and to improve the health and wellbeing of children so they are ready to thrive when they start school.

Sure Start was deliberately designed to be responsive to the evidence on improving outcomes for children, including preventing child abuse and neglect.

- It is well funded, with an annual expenditure of around £500 million (\$A1400m).
- It combines child focused educational activities with explicit attention to child parent interactions and relationship building.
- It provides services to all families in a particular locality (thus it addresses the resourcing constraints but at the same time does not stigmatise services by confining eligibility to welfare recipients only). The aim is to provide services in 500 localities by 2004. (Statham & Eisenstadt: 40)

The British Government's approach to family policy since it came into office indicates an acknowledgment that the state has a major role to play in promoting the wellbeing of all children. In addition to the network of programs which come under the Sure Start umbrella, it is also endeavouring to improve direct financial support to families through tax credits and child care credits, and by a range of initiatives to help families balance work and home. The main strategy here is to improve parental leave provisions.

Another significant feature of this program is that it emerged from a year long review led by Treasury and involving national departments of education, employment and health. The cross portfolio approach and the role of Treasury lend weight to the significance of this strategy as a serious attempt to combat social exclusion, child poverty and its accompanying miseries.

COST-BENEFITS

Whatever the nature of the welfare states which emerge in different countries, all are fundamentally interested in the long term cost benefits of social policies. The UK Sure Start strategy, for example, was influenced strongly by a number of comprehensive analyses (Karoly et al, 1998) which demonstrate that well designed early childhood strategies

produce tangible short and long term benefits for children (Glass, 1999). The domains affected by well-constructed early childhood programs include children's cognitive development, educational outcomes, economic self sufficiency and health. In a comprehensive study commissioned by the North American Government, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) concluded that 'the overarching question of whether we can intervene successfully in young children's lives has been answered affirmatively and should be put to rest'.

The American studies have concluded that there are at least four types of significant savings to government from well-designed early intervention programs:

- increased tax revenues resulting from increased earnings of adults who took part in comprehensive early intervention programs (early childhood education complemented by intensive home visitation) compared to those who did not;
- decreased outlays on welfare payments in relation to children through to the age of 27;
- reduced expenditure for education, health and other services (including special education, emergency hospital visits, and stays in homeless shelters);
- lower criminal justice system costs, covering the lifetime of the child. (Karoly et al, 1998: 85)

A national policy which makes children's services universally available in targeted areas would clearly state the government's commitment to children before school age and their families.

The most often quoted successful longitudinal studies are the Early Training Project (Tennessee 1970-1982), The Perry Preschool Project (1978-1993), and Project Head Start (1965 onwards). The consistent findings of these programs are that they produce early improvements in cognitive development, better educational achievement throughout school, higher school retention rates and less time spent in special education programs. Other favourable and lasting differences were in higher employment rates, higher earnings, less dependency on social security, substantially lower rates of child abuse and neglect, and lower crime rates. In all domains the gains for socially and economically disadvantaged children in the experimental programs were statistically greater, compared to control groups, than for other children in the programs.

TIME TO PUT CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN THEIR PLACE IN AUSTRALIA

This paper argues that it is time to consider universal, evidence based approaches to primary prevention in child welfare. Australia's approach to child welfare is coming seriously unstuck at the beginning of the 21st century.

The State and Commonwealth Governments have become aware of the evidence in recent years, and have endeavoured, separately, to introduce specific prevention strategies aimed at families and communities such as the Commonwealth's Stronger Families & Communities Strategy, *Families First* and *Schools as Community Centres* in NSW and *Best Start* in Victoria. While these have yet to be formally evaluated, it is reasonable to assert that the effectiveness of these strategies would be significantly enhanced by an overarching policy which increases the availability of high quality child care, preschool and other early educational programs.

A national policy which makes children's services universally available in targeted areas would clearly state the government's commitment to children before school age and their families. It would provide a basis for a continuum of services with a strong evidence base, which could significantly reduce child abuse and neglect in Australia. □

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