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A shared vision for all Australian children and young people

Deb Tsorbaris¹ *

Affiliations

¹ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne, Vic. 3000, Australia

Correspondence

* Deb Tsorbaris deb.tsorbaris@cfecfw.asn.au

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Children and young people have so much potential. I witness their brilliance often in my work. They are living, growing, learning and becoming adults in a world vastly different and more complex than that experienced by previous generations. They are reshaping the world and approaching life and its challenges in new and novel ways.

Multiple part-time jobs, gig work and an online side hustle or two are part of the fabric of Generation Z. This modern evolution of working life might feel like a universal rejection of traditional views of career success, but it's just one of the ways that children and young people are making their lives better.

Children and young people can do, and have done, amazing things. They mobilise globally in movements like #FridaysForFuture, converging on the steps of governments around the world in protest of the lack of action on climate change. Here in Australia, that movement has seen legal action against the Minister for the Environment and a subsequent Duty of Care Bill and Senate Inquiry (Pocock, n.d.).

This is inspiring.

They are natives in a digital world that many adults struggle to understand. Where we might see danger, they see opportunity and new ways of doing things. They will use technology to solve some of humanity's greatest challenges, but only if we create the right conditions for them.

Those conditions must be equal for all children and young people, and this generation is confounded by our resistance to just make it so.

Like previous generations across the globe, they continue to advance social justice agendas of the past and show a willingness to tackle new and emerging issues. I often meet young people with a firm grasp of right and wrong, of fairness and equality, social justice and inclusion, who give me confidence that the future really is in good hands.

So, while adults still have the reigns, it's our responsibility to try to close the economic and social gaps that see some children and young people thrive and others left behind. And if we can't, or won't, then we must give children and young people a seat at the table to show us the way.

Duty of care is not an unreasonable ask

Some governments around the world are engaging with children and young people and implementing aspirational policies for now and for future generations.

In Wales, a Future Generations Commissioner holds their government to task, inspiring long-term thinking about decisions for today and the impact these will have in the future. A vision for Wales and its children and young people is set out in the *Well-being of Future Generation Act (Wales) 2015* and defines goals to improve lives 'now, next year, in 25, 50, 100 years into the future and more' (Derek Walker, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2024).

Scotland has The Promise to children and young people in out-of-home care that they will grow up loved, safe and respected, which it means to keep by 2030. Already, The Promise has achieved increases in the number of care-experienced students in higher education and a drop in school exclusions (The Promise Scotland, n.d.).

In 2023, the Children's Commissioner for England launched The Big Ambition, which brings together the voices, views and experiences of children about their lives and aspirations to set an agenda of ambitions (de Souza, 2024).

These 33 ambitions were developed with input from almost a million children, who shared their experiences of growing up in England and what they think their government should do to improve the lives of children.

Some of these goals seem so simple, so obvious and it's because they're built on the insights of children. They cut straight to the core of the problem and challenge us to do better.

In New Zealand, during the time of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, we saw how tiny but fundamental shifts in language can have a significant impact.

She shared her aspiration to make New Zealand the best place in the world to be a child (Ardern, 2019):

The way we treat children, the way we look after their wellbeing, and the way we ensure the lives they lead are full of opportunity say so much about what kind of country we are.

Ardern's vision created a subtle shift from New Zealand as the best place to *raise a child*, which focused policy on parents, to the experience of *being a child* and what that should be for every child.

New challenges for children and young people

When we dive into the data, we can see many of our children and young people are struggling. There are new complexities in all aspects of their lives: in education, with rising levels of school refusal; eSafety and online harm; navigating harmful gender norms and disrespectful relationships; and lack of access to health and mental health services. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) painted a sobering picture of the childhood experiences of many Australians. It revealed that child maltreatment is endemic in this country and has been for some time (Mathews, 2023).

Our members in child, youth and family services respond to the most extreme cases of maltreatment and harm daily. The ACMS showed us the extent of the iceberg beneath the visible cases. According to the ACMS, 62.2% of all Australians reported experiencing maltreatment in their childhood, and the associated impact of this maltreatment is broad and long-lasting. Almost half (48%) of Australians who experienced maltreatment in childhood have experienced symptoms that meet the criteria for a mental disorder (ACMS, 2023).

These vulnerabilities for children are amplified when we consider the impact of poverty on families and communities. The final report from the Senate Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty, tabled in March, offers little hope for change for struggling families, with no clear vision or agenda or agreement from the inquiry committee on how to tackle poverty in Australia (the Centre, 2024a).

Ongoing research from Australian National University (ANU) Children's Policy Centre Director, Professor Sharon Bessell, demonstrates how poverty affects choices for children in the present and future. She has shown how well children understand the issues, how they can identify solutions and the power of child-inclusive and child-centred policies and practices (the Centre, 2023).

Children and young people experiencing poverty know what their families need (10-year-old ANU research participant, from Bessell (2023)):

[Toys are] not important, but if you give the parents money, they can get water, food and a little bit of toys; but mainly the important things like food, water and a bed and a toilet.

We have mountains to climb.

Poverty is a policy choice

During COVID, a remarkable thing happened. The government stepped in and provided what was essentially a Universal Basic Income for all Australians. A fortnightly Coronavirus Supplement was introduced to supplement unemployment ('JobSeeker') benefits for Australians, which almost doubled the benefit received.

People already living on JobSeeker suddenly had enough for the very first time. ANU research showed poverty for people on JobSeeker (or the Newstart Allowance as it was called then) fell from 76% in 2019 to 15% in June 2020. In sole-parent families with dependent children, poverty was almost halved (from 34% to 19%; Phillips et al., 2020).

Australia Institute data show this \$550 fortnightly addition lifted 425,000 people out of poverty, including 65,000 children aged 0 to 14 years (Grudnoff, 2020).

Then, in March 2021, that lifeline for so many people was taken away.

The Coronavirus Supplement is just one example of how children's lives are directly and indirectly impacted by legislative decisions. However, legislation is rarely written or reviewed through the lens

of the rights of children and young people or with consideration of the impact on future generations, even when directly related to children and young people.

There is immense work being done nationally and within state and territory governments to make children's lives better.

Safe and Supported, a national framework outlining collective efforts across governments and sectors to reduce child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts, was introduced in 2021 (Department of Social Services, 2021). A new partnership agreement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and Community Services Ministers around the country to implement Safe and Supported shows there is a genuine commitment to shared decision-making and different ways of working.

The National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse is a nationally coordinated framework for preventing and responding to child sexual abuse that is leading the national agenda to eradicate child sexual abuse (National Office for Child Safety, 2021). There is incredible progress being made for children in their early years, with the Early Years Learning Framework driving national and local initiatives to support and improve access to kindergarten (Department of Education, 2022).

The child and family services sector eagerly awaits the upcoming appointment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families, announced in February this year (Albanese, 2024), with the legislated power to investigate and make recommendations on issues impacting children, young people and their families. This role will advance the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks and Australian Governments, 2020) and improve the lives, wellbeing and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap March 2024 data release includes little to celebrate for children and young people. We're going backwards in key measures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thriving in early education and in reducing overrepresentation in out-of-home care, and barely shifting the needle in other wellbeing measures for children (Productivity Commission, 2024).

The Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures report shows children from culturally diverse backgrounds are much less likely to attend early childhood education and care, or early intervention programs, making them almost 1.8 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable compared with those who do. Culturally and linguistically diverse children made up almost 26% of children enrolled in their first year of full-time schooling in 2021 (Lam et al., 2024).

Wellbeing measured by harm reduction

The National Wellbeing Framework tries to align the nation's economic and social objectives. But the Framework is missing a critical aspect – it does not focus on the experiences of children and young people (Tsorbaris, 2023). Sadly, these measures that 'matter' were quietly updated in 2024 through the Australian Bureau of Statistics website, with little fanfare or analysis of progress (the Centre, 2024b).

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) had hoped to see the inclusion of better measures and data relating to the experiences of children and young people. When we have really good data about children and young people, we can build accountability and ask for commitments to improvement to drive long-term change.

Wellbeing is a tough measure to get right. Economic measures like gross domestic product have continuous growth as a measure of success – more is always better – but Measuring What Matters (The Treasury, 2024) measures harms – children's experiences of abuse, homelessness and exposure to violence. We want to these harms reduced but, really, there's little to celebrate until we get to zero and there's nothing to measure.

Our national wellbeing framework fails to create a vision or set national wellbeing goals that might inspire us.

We need a vision for wellbeing for our children that sets our expectations for good health, prosperity, happiness and life satisfaction, and strives to achieve nothing less. This is what our children deserve.

What's good for our children and young people?

If we focus on children and young people and make them the heart of policy and interventions to improve national wellbeing, we will see improvements in wellbeing outcomes across the population.

It's time for the government to play the long game here.

The Centre and its members are eager to see a National Strategy for Children and Young People that inspires and unites us in agreement on what a good childhood should be. It must recognise that children and young people are neurologically and physically diverse and have a range of experiences, abilities, cultures, genders and sexualities.

An initial 5-year strategy should be built on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets standards across health, education and living to allow all children to thrive. It should be supported by a dedicated children's portfolio at a national level, and in all states and territories, and accept nothing less than success.

Children and young people have to be part of the process of defining these standards; they know what is unacceptable, what is fair and what they need for success.

Parents have to be at the table too, helping to design the services and supports they need to create an ideal world for their children – and their children's children.

We must come together as a nation to create this vision for children in Australia and set a goal for thriving.

Then, we must make it happen.

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