

Policies, Obstacles and Opportunities for the Children of New South Wales in the 1990's

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It has become somewhat trite to refer to children as 'the future' or as 'our best investment', but the underlying truth of this way of thinking about children is not devalued by repetition.

A society builds for itself not only structures and institutions but patterns of relationships which will shape the directions of the next generation's social environment. We are all victims or beneficiaries of the previous generation's failings or achievements and with a greater ability than before to understand the past and anticipate the future we should be able to give tomorrow's children the best start ever.

Unfortunately, along with the benefits of the 1990s go the drawbacks. Drawbacks which will make it even harder than ever before to get it right — as a parent, as a citizen, as a child. Economic change, environmental damage, social dislocation, natural disasters. These all affect our lives and seem to do so at a rate and with an impact which has not hitherto been the case. In some ways it can be attributed to the shrinking of the world through communication media to the 'global village' in others it is more than a perception it is a reality and often one of our own making.

The obstacles to our getting it right for the children of the 1990s are many and varied — often outside the sphere of influence of a single minister or even a single government. Pollution, climatic change, international commodity prices, political change in Eastern Europe and Asia, international drug cartels — the list is long and does not always make for cheerful reading. However, the power of human beings to influence their future comes not from a feeling of helplessness and fatalism but from a feeling of potency and self-determination. We need to set moral and behavioural standards for young people to uphold not to abandon as hypocritical and irrelevant. We must provide them with a safe, caring and protective social environment in which to grow and find their own level without repression but not without restriction. Alienation is bred in environments without parameters and without guidance.

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We must get it right and we must provide young people with the personal resources to steer themselves through the decade. The principles of self help applies just as much at the level of families and children as it does at the level of societies and sovereign states.

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Economic hardship, relationship breakdown, pernicious influences of drugs and sexual exploitation and changing values of family life all combine to put obstacles in the path of parents and children trying to secure a happy and safe future.

To combat these obstacles and to enable families to raise their children in a supportive and safe environment sound, sensible and above all practical policies are required. It is the key element of 'enabling' which will ensure that families can provide a safe and caring environment for their children. Even if economic conditions allowed a cradle to the grave, government funded and highly interventionist welfare system, social conditions do not. Just as we have learned that in helping third world countries it is best to provide the wherewithal for them to become self-sufficient rather than to dole out food meal by meal, so in helping families in trouble we must assist them to solve their own problems.

This is not the same as abandoning families in trouble to their lot. Nor is it tantamount to a sink or swim policy. It is targeting resources to not only deal with today's problem but also to leave behind a functioning family unit which will be much

more likely to be able to deal with tomorrow's problem.

To achieve this end community funding has to be targeted at supportive programmes of the kind typified by but not necessarily exclusively, family support services, parenting skills and parent and adolescent counselling. Other programmes which relate to these problems and which play an important role in the matrix of services, include at the primary end child care and at the residual end, supported accommodation for women, young people and families.

Direct Departmental services have to be directed at three core areas. Protection of abused children, the support of families in crisis and the provision of care for those children who cannot remain with their families. This is in addition to the statutory services for young offenders who will often come from the very families in crisis if things do not improve.

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To maximise the effectiveness of intervention it must be based on clearly developed and understood goals. Understood not only by the worker but by the client. Benevolent interference leads to client dependency and to long term ill-directed commitment of resources. It is also insulting and devaluing to the client for them not to be part of and to fully understand why they are being visited.

Intervention must always be time limited, and decisions made, hard decisions of course, about whether continued services are warranted or whether the family can manage. If they cannot it is often better for the child to recognise that early in the process so as to commence the selection and development of an alternative and perhaps permanent plan for their future care.

Opportunities exist and will grow for children in all three categories which flow from the service models outlined above. Children in families managing their own

lives. Children in families being supported through crises by services and professionals. Children in care being cared for by agencies — State or otherwise.

Education is now a complex and dynamic process with a rich array of opportunities to learn skills and technologies and to develop ideas. Mastery of technology revolutionises the role of the individual and gives them opportunities to shape their own life in a way not previously contemplated. While these are available to most students we must ensure access to the most disadvantaged and this often includes children from dislocated families. Disadvantages through gender and ethnicity can also be reduced by accessing these skills on an equal footing and the growing acceptance in society that such discrimination cannot be tolerated helps to provide a more level launching point for the children of the 1990s.

Social skills and life education provide opportunities which sit alongside formal education to help equip the children and young people to face the challenges of the future. Thus the processes of emotional development, social relationships and decision making in life-choices are seen as part of the total approach to preparing them for adulthood. An adulthood which will more often than not lead to parenthood and the responsibilities for the next generation which we are considering here. Further reason to get it right!

Other opportunities include the increased recognition of the value of the contribution children and young people can make to society. Their concern for the environment, for the disadvantaged here and overseas, is unaffected by the vested interests and cynicism which can so often influence or discourage adults. Young people can lead the way in such fields and projects produced by some schools and youth groups are an inspiration to others. This valuing of their voice is recognised in such things as youth forums, debates and student councils.

With a present and future generation of children showing this undoubted potential, even in a changing political and economic world, it falls to us to ensure that social policies meet the criteria which will best help them into the next century. That is, the policies must be enabling rather than restricting; the policies must ensure equity of access; the policies must support those in difficulty; and the policies must protect society and its standards without unnecessarily intruding on the independence and potential richness of individuality and self-determination of which people are capable.

Contacting the ACCFT



The Australian Council for Children's Films and Television is a national community organisation which aims to stimulate and maintain public interest in the provision of suitable entertainment film, television and video programs for children.

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