

# Policies, Obstacles and Opportunities for the Children of Western Australia in the 1990's

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**T**he 1990's will be a period when we will see the resolution of many of the policy issues that have placed obstacles in the way of the fulfilment of our highest aspirations for the children of Western Australia. It will also be an exciting and rewarding decade as we see the consolidation of a range of new policy directions and services in the area of Community Services.

As the Minister for Community Services I have been impressed by the willingness of the community and parents in particular, to become involved in the development of policies and services that provide opportunities not only for their own children but the children of the wider community. There is a very strong sense in the community that our children need to be assured of a bright and hopeful future full of opportunity and that the best way to ensure this, is to give them and their parents the support they need at every stage of their development.

Early intervention and preventative services are the direction in which policies of the Department for Community Services need to be directed.

Across its broad range of responsibilities the Department aims to address needs in families and communities which, if unmet, would otherwise limit the ability for some children to enjoy the kinds of opportunities that should be equally available to all.

To be effective, Children's Services need to concurrently offer a positive strategy for addressing the developmental needs of children of pre-school and school age, the social and economic needs of families and broader national economic needs.

Provision of high quality universal Children's Services has been a priority for the Western Australian State Government and a cornerstone of many of our policies.

The Western Australian Government has taken a holistic approach to the development of Western Australia and to the wellbeing of its families and children.

Three areas which are useful to illustrate this approach are Child Care, Early Education and Home Support, and Juvenile Justice.

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## CHILD CARE

The wellbeing of a family depends largely on the needs of each of its members being met both inside and outside of the family. Parents are entitled to the opportunity to participate fully in society. For many this is not a possibility without access to child care. The wellbeing of children, in turn, is largely dependent upon the healthy functioning of their family unit.

Child Care policy in this State is integrated with family, training, employment, recreation and business policies.

Opportunities for children and families over the next decade will be enhanced by a massive expansion in the number of child care places. In Western Australia, this expansion will be achieved through:

- Commonwealth State Child Care Agreements which will provide an additional 10,000 child care places by 1995/96, and
- The Family Centre programme which will provide approximately 2,500 four year old children with developmentally appropriate programmes by early 1991 and also playgroups and family and personal development opportunities.

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After School and Vacation Care programmes are also critical in ensuring that parents can continue to work when their children finish school or are on school holidays.

The Western Australian State Government is committed to ensuring the expansion of these programmes and to promote equality of access to care irrespective of family income, disability, cultural background or geographical location.

The State Government is working with the Commonwealth to develop a further 59 out of school centres by 1992. This translates to almost 3,000 places for after school care in this State.

I would prefer to think in terms of the challenges, rather than the obstacles, Western Australia faces in meeting the needs of our children in the 1990's.

There are three broad challenges in this area:-

- the creation of a network of employer provided child care services, and
- the matching of the quantity of child care with the creation of mechanisms to support and maintain quality in Family and Children's Services.
- the development of service models in remote and rural areas that are appropriate to their populations and isolation.

*The State Government has begun to identify ways of implementing a quality assurance programme which will encourage services to pursue standards which are higher than the existing statutory minimum.*

Recent research has shown that employers benefit in a number of ways through the provision of child care and that these benefits outweigh the expenses. The benefits include lower staff absenteeism, increased recruitment opportunities, greater staff retention and more flexibility with work scheduling.

The recent Federal Government funding initiatives in relation to employer provided and commercial child care will assist the Western Australian Government in making the ideal of employer provided child care a reality in this State.

Without quantity, it is not possible to achieve quality child care. The rapid growth and development in children's services inevitably brings with it changes in community expectations about the quality of care.

The State Government has begun to identify ways of implementing a quality assurance programme which will encourage services to pursue standards which are higher than the existing statutory minimum. The major emphasis in this development is on the less tangible aspects in service delivery such as the quality of relationships, parent participation and programmes.

## EARLY EDUCATION AND HOME SUPPORT

Two highly successful programmes run by

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the Department for Community Services, the Early Education Programme and the Home school Support Programme, emphasise the growing trend of early intervention and support to caregivers.

The Early Education Programme is concerned with the functioning of young children in education settings. The programme is about empowering caregivers to develop skills that will have a positive impact on their children's educational opportunities. Parents are assisted to develop personal skills necessary for effective communication with, management and care of their young children, by focusing on caregivers as supporters and contributors to their children's development, a strong basis for a positive ongoing relationship between the parent and their child's education is established.

The unique aspect of the programme is that families are invited to participate in the service which takes place in the home, or at local centres such as playgroups or community centres. This reflects a general trend toward addressing the individual needs of families within a comfortable and relevant context.

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By targeting low income and single parent families, this programme contributes to the wider need to ensure that our children have equal opportunities and access in starting their formal education.

The Home School Support Programme is aimed at children who have extreme difficulties with their school at either a micro level, that is difficulty with a particular subject or at a macro level, where, for example, they have just been released from a maximum security institution or have difficulty in attending school for any reason.

The underlying principle is to support the right of every child, particularly those faced with adversity, to receive appropriate and regular schooling. It is only available to clients of the Department and provides an important link between social work and education.

#### JUVENILE JUSTICE

One of the most controversial issues facing Governments this decade is the increasingly visible incidence of young people offending. This is often an indicator of a child having difficulty fitting into their family or community.

The very fact that Juvenile Justice is a responsibility of the Department for Community Services provides opportunities for young people to have access to social

services and opportunities that provide them with a means to restructure their lives more productively.

The Department for Community Services provides services for young people who are at risk of moving into offending as well as providing educational, skilling and family supports to those who end up in the justice system.

With increasing public concern about the incidence of juvenile offending, particularly car theft, vandalism and theft, the Government is faced with a persistent challenge to come up with new, long term ways of reducing the incidence of youth crime.

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Perhaps the greatest challenge we face is the reality that the majority of young people who end up in our detention centres are Aboriginal. The development of culturally appropriate programmes and strategies for assisting young people, who, in particular, become repeat offenders, has been long and difficult.

Aboriginal children in our community generally face the greatest number of obstacles in gaining equal access to educational and training opportunities. The obstacles are mostly social and economic and are deeply engraved in the communities they are growing up in. It is critical that any policies developed for children this decade take into account the cultural and social distinctions that work against equal opportunity for all children.

In its Juvenile Justice programmes the Department for Community Services aims to connect children with experiences that will lead them into productive pursuits in the community. Alternatives to strict custody provides enormous scope in this area. Policies which make realistic links between serving sentences and a child's future employment prospects will dominate the Western Australian Government's approach to Juvenile Justice in the nineties.

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One recently developed programme epitomises this approach. The Pastoral Stations Programme provides vocational activities and training for repeat offenders. Selected young people are placed on an isolated pastoral station and given experience

in activities which will provide some vocational opportunities.

This programme is only available to children over fourteen years and has met with some very positive results in some of the young people becoming employed on the Stations.

However, in Western Australia the 1990's must be a period when we seek to keep out of our Children's Court, those children whose behaviour is more of the good order and victimless category so we can reduce the load on our Courts and Departmental staff so that resources can be directed to more meaningful and preventative policies.

#### CONCLUSION

The Western Australian State Government is confident that the 1990's will be a time for us to meet the needs of our children to enable them to share in the optimistic future that is W.A.'s. Providing visionary services within a Department which must balance its statutory responsibilities with community and family development services is also challenging. Policies for children's services and support for families will have to continue to adjust to the complex changes taking place in both the family and wider social structures. However the emphasis will be to reinforce the family and see intervention that removes children from their parents or parental influence as the least desirable option.

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The major policy directions for children in the Department for Community Services in the 90's can be summarised as follows:

- to provide a wide range of child care and development services throughout the community and at the workplace of parents;
- to expand early intervention and support for children moving into formal education; and
- to continue to develop juvenile justice programmes that link children into positive options for their futures and enable us to identify and remedy a behavioural problem before it brings family division and community victims.

**We look forward to the opportunities for families and children which will unfold during the 1990's and we are prepared to meet the challenges which will confront us in ensuring that the optimum environment exists for the growth and development of our children.**