

Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Speech

Opening of the Families Australia Symposium

16/10/2008

Canberra

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I would like to first acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Ngambri and Ngunawal people.

It's great to be here today with you all in what has been a very big week for Australia and the Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio.

A week that has seen the Australian Government deliver much-needed help to millions of Australians under financial pressure.

It's been a week where the importance of delivering responsible social policy in the interests of the nation's economic security has been crystal clear.

Families and pensioners have been at the centre of the Government's early and decisive response to the global financial crisis.

Around two million low and middle income families and four million pensioners - the elderly, those with disability, veterans and carers - all of them receiving substantial lump sum payments to help make ends meet while boosting the economy during global financial uncertainty.

The Government's \$10.4 billion dollar Economic Security Strategy will go some way to helping Australians through difficult times.

Like you, my job means I meet many people who are struggling:

- single age pensioners trying to stay afloat as their food and rent rises
- tired carers on duty around the clock looking after the people they love
- people with disability often lonely and excluded from mainstream life
- and so many families where mums and dads are running themselves ragged working long hours, raising their kids and worrying, always worrying, about how they'll pay the bills.

These are the people the Government's Economic Security Strategy is supporting:

- three quarters of all Australian families with dependent children who will receive \$1,000 for each eligible child in their care - that's about \$3.9 billion for around 2 million families.
- four million age pensioners, veterans, carers and people with disability who are receiving payments of \$1400 for singles and \$2100 for couples as a down payment on long-term and long overdue reform of the whole pension system.
- And the 470,000 people receiving the Carer Allowance who are receiving \$1,000 for each eligible person they look after.

But of course this is only part of the story.

There are many, many Australians who are slipping between the cracks.

Among them the thousands of children who miss out on their childhood through neglect and abuse.

Whose experience of home and family is bound up in fear and despair and who are thrust too early into adult conflict and violence.

Where their right to be safe and nurtured counts for nothing.

Last year there were around 60,000 occasions where authorities found that a child was or was likely to be harmed, abused and neglected. Most of the children were under the age of ten.

That's over 160 cases every day.

Disturbingly the rate of abuse has doubled in the last decade.

And just today, more shocking numbers; 156 children who died in New South Wales last year came from families known to the Department of Community Services up from 114 the previous year. More than half lived in households where incidents of domestic violence had been reported; 55 per cent of them where there was suspected parental substance abuse.

These alarming figures re-inforce the importance of Justice James Wood's Special Commission of Inquiry into child protection due to report by the end of the year. His recommendations will be critical to the development of the National Child Protection Framework.

But, as your own submission to the National Child Protection Framework discussion paper points out, there are many complex reasons for the increase in notifications and substantiations.

Growing public awareness and increased willingness for people to come forward with evidence are certainly factors but so too are homelessness, unemployment, mental illness, alcohol and drug dependence.

In its submission, Families Australia goes on to argue that what's stopping us reversing these disturbing trends is the 'lack of a coordinated and effective national system to combat child abuse and neglect'.

It argues that Commonwealth and State government efforts have not been well coordinated, targeted and resourced and most State child protections systems are critically overloaded.

Above all, it says, government and non-government organisations haven't been able to agree on an action plan to make sure everyone's efforts – from early intervention to on the ground crisis response – are joined up.'

It's a sentiment repeated again and again in the 200 submissions we have received and the ongoing discussions we are having with stakeholder groups.

It is a view which I strongly endorse.

For the sake of the thousands of Australian children who are victims of abuse and neglect we must all urgently 'join up'.

To put the safety and wellbeing of all children at the centre of our efforts and all Government policy development and implementation.

Pivotal to this concerted approach is efficient, effective information sharing across Australia because a national problem demands a national response.

Working through the Council of Australian Governments, all States and Territories are on board with support for improved information sharing about children and families at risk,

This includes the development of new Commonwealth-State measures to help locate children at serious risk of abuse or neglect whose whereabouts are unknown.

Recognising the need to improve Australia's child protection system at a national level, the Commonwealth is taking the first of many steps.

It has agreed to develop a new protocol for information sharing between Centrelink and child protection

agencies. This will allow State and Territory authorities to contact Centrelink to request information on families and children at risk, including obtaining a current address.

This protocol for the exchange of information acknowledges that there we all have information that should be made available across and between jurisdictions and agencies to raise awareness of relevant child protection issues.

As well, Centrelink will be included in the national child protection alert system.

These new measures, which will be operational next year, are a clear indication of our determination to implement new practices essential to protect our children.

Information sharing will be an integral part of our National Child Protection Framework.

As I mentioned, we've received around 200 submissions in response to the release of our discussion paper, *Australia's children: safe and well* and we've consulted widely with the community sector.

This has included talking to many non-government organisations and academics brought together by Families Australia - the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children.

It comprises over 60 member organisations including the Australian Centre for Child Protection, one of our hosts today, with Families Australia as the Secretariat.

All the submissions we received and the views we've heard are now being carefully considered as we develop the National Child Protection Framework.

What I can tell you though is that there will be a strong focus on prevention and early intervention measures to protect children and ease the burden on state and territory authorities, struggling under the increasing load of abuse notifications.

It will be a practical, action-oriented strategy, using the capacity and knowledge of state and territory governments, experts in the field and community organisations.

Organisations like Families Australia - and all its 400 member organisations that do so much great work on the ground.

Who see first hand the crippling social exclusion brought about by inter-related problems such as unemployment, low incomes, sub-standard housing, substance abuse, poor health, disability and family breakdown.

And the devastating impact this can have on children. Just take the issue of homelessness - each year 69,000 children are drawn into homelessness services with their parents.

Problems like these can tip families over the edge and that's when government and community services must be ready to step in with services geared not just to adults but to children at risk.

I can't let this chance go by without highlighting the need for parental leave. To me, paid parental leave is a very simple proposition. It is fundamentally about what's in the best interests of children.

If we want to give children the best possible start in life we know the early months and years are absolutely vital for social, cognitive and physical development.

Women who continue to work after having a baby mostly do so because they need the income.

We need to give new mothers some breathing space to bond with their baby, to give them a nurturing environment, to establish breast-feeding if they can and to learn how to care for their babies. All so that little babies will get a better start to life.

Working families *want* to have more children. They just don't think they can cope.

That's why the Productivity Commission Inquiry into paid maternity leave is important. Support systems need to address the realities of modern Australian life.

I want to end where I began - with a good news story. The sort of story that keeps us all going.

It's about a remarkable woman I met during National Child Protection Week. Anne-Marie is a mother of a toddler and 11 month old twins; she'd had a traumatic childhood filled with far too much abuse and in her words she was 'tired, sad, mad, isolated, overwhelmed and very much in need of some help.'

Then she signed up to Uniting Care Burnside's NEWPIN program and took control of her life for the first time ever.

She told me those NEWPIN people were so 'bloody persistent, supportive, non-judgemental, compassionate and caring I didn't stand a chance. As she said, I'm only human.'

In those two years with NEWPIN she got her licence back, went to parenting classes, and started studying at TAFE. Most importantly she learnt for the first time to care about herself and that meant she could care for her children - ending the inter-generational cycle of abuse and neglect.

It's a story about Anne-Marie's determination and courage but it also shows how when we work together, when we 'join up', we can make such a difference.

I wish you all well in your discussions.