

**Meeting the needs of vulnerable children and families:
dreaming the extraordinary, doing the extraordinary**

16 and 17 October 2008
University House
Australian National University
Canberra

Symposium opening address by Brian Babington
Chief Executive Officer
Families Australia

On behalf of Families Australia and the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, welcome to the Symposium.

We are very glad that you are all here today – our aim was to invite 70 guests working in a wide range of sectors – an aim we have reached.

I would like, first, to acknowledge that we meet on the lands of the traditional owners and I pay respects to them and their ancestors. I would like to invite our good friend, Matilda House, to provide the welcome to country.

Before inviting the Minister, Jenny Macklin, formally to open the Symposium, the organisers intend that the next two days are about trying to identify how stronger bridges between and within different service sectors can be built if we are to meet the interrelated and often complex needs of disadvantaged families and children.

As you will know, the Federal Government has placed a strong emphasis on developing a National Child Protection Framework in the coming months. Much of the impetus for developing this national approach was a realisation that we need to find ways to better integrate and join-up our services for families and children - we need, in other words, a better song-sheet with each of us playing our parts in harmony.

Not just in the field of child protection, but beyond that to the wider fields of family and children's services, there is much to be done at the policy and service delivery level in creating effective partnerships, especially between traditionally child-oriented and adult-oriented services. We see, for example, the UK taking an innovative approach in this direction through their 'Think Family' initiative, which may find a resonance for us in Australia.

We want to focus on some key questions. What can we learn from each other about protecting and enhancing the wellbeing of vulnerable children and families in Australia? How can we work together to inspire a shift in momentum, give us hope and help us to implement extraordinary activities in collaboration? How can

we cause conversations that will ripple out in a way that promotes significant positive change for vulnerable children and families?

Above all, we would like to leave this gathering with a strong sense of the forward agenda, of “what next” and “how is this going to happen?” I suggest we need to keep thinking what practical things can we, as leaders in the field, do to promote and sustain change in the direction of greater cross-sectoral collaboration.

We have named this gathering “dreaming the extraordinary, doing the extraordinary”, in recognition of the magnitude of the changes required. Yet, we are approaching this with great optimism and have invited people of such evident goodwill, knowledge and experience to join colleagues who have a real commitment to improving the future for vulnerable Australian children and families. Collectively, we can do the extraordinary.

As to process, we have deliberately planned the Symposium to avoid too many set piece presentations. It has been designed – with the expertise of our facilitator Ann Porcino from RPR Consulting whom I will introduce in a moment – to be highly interactive and participatory.

Jenny Macklin, as Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, over the past 11 months has taken a committed and vigorous leadership role in helping families and children, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Her leadership, for example, in advancing the National Child Protection Framework has been greatly appreciated, as well as her wish to see the non-government sector integrally involved in its development. We are looking forward to the early announcement of the Framework, and to a continued government and NGO partnership in its implementation.

Minister, we know you have a strong commitment to early intervention efforts and a better joining-up of efforts between all levels of government and between government and the non-government sector in the interests of better serving families and children. We are looking forward to your remarks in opening the Symposium. Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome Jenny Macklin.