

Finally, a national child protection roadmap

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On 30 April 2009, the Council of Australian Governments signed off on an historic document which starts with the words: "All children have a right to be safe and receive loving care and support." It is the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children and it goes on to set out a twelve year national roadmap to 2020 to combat child abuse and neglect and promote the wellbeing of Australia's children.

The Framework is ground-breaking for three main reasons. It is the first time that Federal, State and Territory Governments have agreed to priority actions for children's wellbeing and safety. Seventy-five actions are planned under the first three year action plan to 2011, encompassing areas such as children's health and education and adult substance abuse, moving beyond a narrow statutory child protection focus. For example: more support will be provided to grandparents and kinship carers; more housing will be available for families at risk; trials will be conducted on new 'integrated' family support programs; national standards will be put in place for the 31,000 children and young people in care as a result of child abuse and neglect; and new community awareness programs will be established.

Secondly, it contains additional Commonwealth funding of \$61.6 million which will target key priorities over the next four years. This enables a good start to be made.

Thirdly, the not-for-profit service delivery sector will be involved in high level planning and monitoring of Framework performance; this continues the innovative NGO-Government partnership which developed the Framework in the past year.

The Framework has been years in the making and is very welcome. For well over a decade, there have been mounting calls by concerned individuals, survivors of child abuse, NGOs, practitioners and academics for Australia to have a national plan to combat child abuse and neglect.

Pressure for change has arisen from consternation at the official figures, which tell us that overall child abuse and neglect notification and substantiation rates continue to increase; from the harrowing human stories of family violence and child abuse; and from the deep frustration felt by professionals working in overloaded child protection systems.

According to the latest official figures, in 2007-08, there were 55,210 substantiated child abuse and neglect cases – that's an astonishing average of over 1,000 cases per week across Australia. The rates of suspected child abuse and neglect or potential harm, so-called "notifications", are many times higher and have continued to grow for well over a decade. The number of children on care and protection orders has more than doubled from 16,449 in June 1998 to 34,279 in June 2008. The numbers of children in out-of-home care rose by almost 115% from 14,470 at 30 June 1998 to 31,166 at 30 June 2008. Tragically, the rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care is now almost nine times the rate of other children.

The main reason why child abuse and neglect has been so stubbornly resistant to improvement is that the driving factors are complex, and solutions lie mainly in tackling co-occurring adult issues, such as mental ill-health, substance abuse and domestic violence.

Breaking the cycle is difficult, but not impossible. We can do better, for example, in tackling one of the most important causes, alcohol and other substance abuse. We know that 13% of children live in households in which an adult is regularly drunk. We also know that two-thirds of children in out-of-home care in one State alone come from families where alcohol or substance abuse was the driving factor in creating that situation. Governments need to be bold in taking action on this front, irrespective of the powerful lobby interests and outdated cultural norms surrounding it.

Another reason why these trends have been stubbornly resistant to reversal has been the lack of a coordinated and effective national system. Under current arrangements, State and Territory Governments have responsibility for the day-to-day handling of child abuse cases, and the Commonwealth plays a role in early intervention and awareness raising programs. The dilemma is, however, that Commonwealth and State efforts have not always been well coordinated, targeted and resourced, and most State child protection systems have become critically overloaded.

The result is that Australia has not, for example, had common standards on who is responsible for reporting suspected child abuse cases, and different jurisdictions collect different data. There has been no national research agenda which could help to inform practice. Above all, the various tiers of Government and the NGO sector have not been able to agree on an action plan to ensure that everyone's efforts – from early intervention programs to on-ground crisis responses – are 'joined up', maximise investments and work from a common shared framework.

The welcome news is that the new National Framework signals an overhaul in the way we do things in this country, putting more emphasis on early intervention and prevention efforts in order to ease the overload being experienced on the ground as the various statutory systems try to cope with cases. It tries to take both long and short term approaches.

It speaks about the need to increase services targeted on vulnerable or "at risk" families and to undertake important associated activities such as better data collection and more support for child protection and welfare workforce development. It attempts to go beyond the current siloed approaches and move toward nationally consistent approaches through better planning and consultation.

What are the prospects for the Framework? As a plan, it is good. Even though it comes decades late, we should give full marks to Governments and their officials for finally getting a national child protection roadmap in place.

Full marks should also be given to the non-government community sector. A Coalition of sixty-four NGOs – the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children – was formed in late 2007 to work

intensively with Governments on the Framework. It has been a remarkable success and is perhaps a model of how the NGO sector can come together to raise political awareness and work collaboratively on pressing issues.

There are two preconditions for success of the Framework. To truly stem child abuse and neglect, we need, firstly, to change fundamentally the way we value children and young people in society. Secondly, we need to invest substantial and additional resources in the job of better supporting families and individuals who are heading down a path which may result in child abuse.

The first point is about our politicians and our community doing all they can to put child protection and wellbeing at the centre of policy making. Australia is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its vision of ensuring that every child receives “such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being”. Yet the prevalence of child abuse speaks of another Australian reality. Boldness of vision is needed from our leaders to make wellbeing a reality: we need to hear them talk more about children and young people in their rhetoric and policy decisions.

The second point is that, without adequate resourcing, even the most perfect plan will not succeed. It will require significant funding over many years to tackle this serious problem effectively.

The real test for the Framework will lie in how well and how soon words are converted into action. The sustained voices of our political and community leaders, the application of substantial funds targeting families in need or at risk, and acceptance that we all share responsibility for protecting and nurturing children will be vital.

COAG’s announcement yesterday of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children is a landmark for Australia. We must not arrive at 2020 with the same situation in terms of children being abused and neglected and taken from their families. Joining together as a nation for the first time is a welcome step. The task is to keep the needs of children foremost. Our children deserve no less.

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