

Child Protection

Families Australia's policy

Vision

All children are safe, loved and cared for and fulfil their potential as fully participating citizens experiencing economic and social wellbeing

Introduction

Families Australia is Australia's national peak, independent, not-for-profit organisation which promotes the interests of families. Families Australia undertakes research and consults families and family and community service organisations on current family-related issues. The outcomes are disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. This policy statement concerns child protection.

Why a policy on child protection?

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's "Child Protection Australia 2005-06" reveals some serious trends:

- Over the last five years, the number of child protection notifications in Australia has almost doubled from 137,938 in 2001-02 to 266,745 in 2005-06. From 2004-05 to 2005-06, the number of notifications increased in most jurisdictions¹.
- The number of substantiations of child abuse in most jurisdictions have also increased over the last five years. In most jurisdictions, substantiation rates were between five and eleven per 1,000 children.
- There were more children on care and protection orders in 2005-06 than in 2004-05 in every jurisdiction.
- Nationally, the number of children in out-of-home care rose each year from 1996 to 2006. The numbers in care increased by 35% from 18,880 at 30 June 2002 to 25,454 at 30 June 2006.
- At 30 June 2006, there were 25,454 children in out-of-home care in Australia. This compares with 23,695 children who were in out-of-home care at 30 June 2005, an increase of 7%.
- Although the quality of the data on Indigenous status varies between States and Territories, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were clearly over-represented in the child protection system. Indigenous children were almost five times more likely to be the subject of a substantiation than other children.
- Across Australia, the rates of Indigenous children on care and protection orders were more than six times higher than for other children.
- The rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care was over seven times the rate of other children.

Families Australia's policies

- Children are our most precious resource. The future of Australia depends on how we treat our children. All children have the right to be protected from physical or psychological harm and to grow and develop in a safe and caring environment.

¹ Some of this increase reflects changes in child protection policies and practices in the jurisdictions and could also reflect increased public awareness of child abuse.

- Positive child development depends on healthy early experiences. Safety works in tandem with good education and health to promote self assurance/confidence and allow natural capacities to develop fully.
- Support for children must continue through transition to school, schooling and adolescence.
- Child protection is a shared responsibility. All levels of government, communities, families and individuals bear some responsibility for ensuring that children are safe from physical or psychological harm.
- The over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system is of great concern. We uphold the rights of children and young people to be raised in contact with their own cultures through observation of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.
- Australia needs a consistent national data set to measure child protection indicators, prevalence and incidence. We are currently unable to measure the effectiveness of the investments made to solve and address the problem. Without this data set, it is unclear whether our understanding of child protection issues, the abuse and neglect of children in Australia, is improving or not.
- Poverty is not a determinant of child abuse and neglect, but it is a strong predictor. While there is no excuse for child abuse or neglect, policies that address poverty will assist in protecting children.
- The best prevention of all is promotion: promotion of community support for families, family friendly work practices, role modelling for children and parents, respectful parenting practices and respect and involvement of children and youth.
- Universal and targeted prevention measures would assist in heading off much of the violence or neglect that harms children. These might include:
 - health promotion campaigns;
 - early childhood and other family centred services;
 - home visiting for vulnerable families;
 - addressing poverty and disadvantage;
 - dealing more effectively with mental illness issues; and
 - working productively with vulnerable families and communities to address alcohol and other substance abuse issues.
- This prevention work is vital to stem the increasing numbers of notifications. Statutory child protection services could then focus on those children who need statutory protection and those who are already in care.
- With the continuing increases in the number of Australian children who have been the subject of a notification or report, child protection and placement services are severely stretched. The number of foster families is rapidly decreasing. Preventative measures would improve this, but there also needs to be adequate resourcing for child protection workers and improved recognition and support for foster carers. At the same time, the out-of-home care system needs to be able to provide adequate and timely responses to the trauma and harm experienced by children who have suffered abuse or neglect.
- Greater diversification of care options, including extending family based options and shared care arrangements, need to be supported as well.
- There is growing evidence and support for stronger attention to be given to building stronger policy and operational links between services for adults, particularly in areas like mental health and substance abuse rehabilitation, and services for families and children.
- Within the statutory child protection system, States and Territories operate under very different rules. Families Australia supports legislation, policies and standardised procedures that ensure that those seeking to work with children are appropriately screened and are excluded where unacceptable risks exist. We support uniform legislation across States and Territories, to reduce the risk of

offenders slipping through the net. We recognise the importance of fair and transparent processes for exclusion, which will stand up to judicial challenge.

Priorities for Action

Families Australia believes that the most important policy steps in child protection are the following:

To ensure a consistent national approach:

- Developing a National Child Protection Strategy that guides policy, practice and research.
- Appointing an Australian Government Minister for Children and Young People and an independent Federal Commissioner for Children.

To ensure that universal services are available and accessible to all children and families:

- Promoting child and family wellbeing and resilience at a population level.
- Providing equitable access to quality universal services for families and children.
- Supporting community-based primary prevention of child abuse and promoting resilience, attachment, caring and empowerment within families.

To ensure that effective early intervention can prevent child abuse and neglect:

- Building organisational capacity for prevention, through services targeting individuals and families who need additional support or are working to overcome significant problems.
- Developing criteria or indicators – national where possible – to identify children, families and communities at risk.
- Analysing best practice and identifying ‘lighthouse’ examples of good practice, for example, nurse home visiting services.

In order to respond effectively to children who have been harmed or are at risk of harm:

- Enhancing effective relationships between child protection services and broader legal systems, including by making clear their respective roles and responsibilities.
- Improving the capacity of the workforce to meet the needs of children, young people and families involved in the child protection system.
- Developing a comprehensive and consistent approach for those who are in transition from out-of-home care.

In order to address the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system:

- Adopting principles to underpin actions to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect in Indigenous children.
- Expanding the scope and number of Indigenous child and family welfare agencies.
- Expanding the scope and number of Indigenous early childhood services.
- Enhancing the capacity and responsiveness of mainstream family and children’s services to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

To develop consistent national operations:

- Developing standards - minimum standards and some inspirational targets or benchmarks - for implementing national approaches.
- Devising minimum standards and targets for child wellbeing.

- Devising standards for service delivery in child and family welfare.
- Devising workforce development standards.

To ensure appropriate research, evaluation, dissemination of information and collection of service data occur:

- Developing a national research agenda.
- Developing a national data set.
- Developing national evaluation resources and tools.
- Disseminating and utilising research findings.
- Obtaining agreement on national outcome measures.

Families Australia's activities to date on child protection

Families Australia's 'Our Children: Our concern, our responsibility' campaign was launched in September 2003 with the aim of encouraging greater national leadership and investment in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Following the campaign launch, Families Australia raised public awareness of the issues through presentations and press releases.

In February 2004, Families Australia was involved in the Australian Medical Association's Summit on Child Abuse which examined ways of bringing the many disciplines involving child abuse victims and survivors together in order to develop a cohesive national agenda for child protection and recovery.

Families Australia held a National Summit on Child Abuse and Neglect in Canberra on 18 June 2004. The Summit was attended by over 80 participants including Federal and State Government politicians and bureaucrats, businesses, the unions, academics and representatives from non-government organisations ranging from the Australian Medical Association and large national peak welfare organisations to local community organisations. The Summit agreed that child abuse was at "epidemic" levels and resolved to write to the Hon. Larry Anthony MP, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and his State and Territory ministerial counterparts to request that the 'establishment of a national strategy to combat child abuse and neglect' be placed on the agenda of the Ministerial Council Meeting to be held in July 2004.

In June 2006, at the request of the Australian Government's Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Families Australia's CEO chaired the National Child Protection Forum in Melbourne. Families Australia chaired the subsequent working group which prepared a draft of a National Child Protection Strategy, emphasising the importance of a national and cooperative approach by governments, practitioners and researchers.

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