

Family wellbeing

Families Australia's policy

Vision

All Australian families enjoy the greatest possible state of 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 family wellbeing.

Why a policy on family wellbeing?

Australian families have experienced rapid changes and new pressures over the past 30 years. However, we do not have ways to assess how well they are faring, on a truly national scale. Many families are better off financially, but many suffer significant strain, are struggling or have dissolved. Indigenous families are still significantly disadvantaged in terms of health and wellbeing.

Australians are finding that the pace of life is increasing; for some, it seems it is at the expense of family and community relationships. Current research is showing that stress at work does impact significantly on family wellbeing.

Different and additional pressures are going to be placed on families. There will, for example, be relatively fewer young people, at least in the short term. Those young people will need to fill the economic gap left by the mass retirement of the baby boomers. To support this, workforce participation and productivity will need to be maximised. And there is another, major change families will face – a more volatile, warming climate.

What will these and other changes mean for working life, work time and the quality of jobs? What will family life be like, and are there opportunities as well as increased pressures for families? How can we think about wellbeing, of all family members and in all family types, of children, of parents, male or female, of older people and the frail aged? How can policy makers better assist and support families? How can they know when families are flourishing, and know when they are not?

One of the biggest problems is defining 'family wellbeing', and without some sort of measure, there is no way to track how well families are doing. Australia does not have a comprehensive national picture of how families are doing overall. To do that we need to fill important knowledge gaps. For example, we should, but do not, have systematic monitoring processes to analyse parental characteristics of children entering the child protection system. We should, but do not, have more insight into the lives and needs of

children being raised in grandparent-headed households. The challenge, and responsibility, to support families and ensure they do well, rests not just with governments but all sectors.

Families Australia's policies

- Families are society's most enduring basis for raising children, caring for family members, providing and receiving love, meaning and support, and for transmitting values, culture, language and traditions between generations.
- Family wellbeing is a concept that goes beyond economic prosperity to include things such as physical and emotional health and safety, social connectedness and quality relationships.
- Family wellbeing contains an assumption that families work best and contribute optimally to society when there is a reasonable balance of economic and non-economic factors, including health and safety, the quality of relationships and community connectedness.
- The task of deciding on that balance is a matter for each family within the parameters of society's laws and expectations.
- Australia requires a family wellbeing framework which will show how families are travelling and where future policy and program interventions are best directed.

Priorities for Action

Families Australia calls for:

- **A National Family Wellbeing Framework** to set high-level national targets. It should highlight the most important things that foster family wellbeing, such as quality relationships, health and safety, community connection and economic wellbeing. It should contain high-level, measurable, national targets to guide policy makers and researchers in the public, private and community sectors. It should be prepared by a taskforce from the government, research, business and the community sectors and families themselves.
- **A 5-10 year National Family Wellbeing Action Strategy** should be agreed between Federal and State/Territory governments based on the Framework and clearly elaborate roles, aims and targets. An independent body such as an Australian Families Commission comprising Federal/State/Territory government, community, business and family representatives should advise on priority matters in the Framework and the National Family Wellbeing Action Strategy. A 'National State of the Family Report' should be prepared triennially to report on progress in meeting Framework and Strategy goals.
- **Top priorities for a National Family Wellbeing Action Strategy** should include:
 - Major additional investment in early childhood and in supporting families that face severe or multiple disadvantages.
 - Coordinated whole-of-nation approaches which focus substantial increased funding on early childhood programs, such as in pre-primary education and parent education, should be put in place.
 - Increased funding to improve outcomes for children and young people over their life course.

- Expansion of promising, practical initiatives such as the Australian Early Development Index.
- Further substantial investment in programs that respond early to the needs of high-risk families, providing family support programs that treat families in an holistic and integrated manner in areas such as mental health and substance abuse.
- Implementing a coherent national approach to child protection to overcome duplication in investment and effort, facilitate the sharing of resources and innovation, and ensure that learnings are applied across all jurisdictions.
- Focusing on addressing the differences in experiences and outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and children, through actions that: have relevance for Indigenous people themselves; deliver change; and are based on a genuine commitment across all levels of government, Indigenous families and communities, the business, philanthropic, non-government and voluntary sectors.
- Recognition of the importance of achieving a balance in work and family responsibilities to enhance family wellbeing and the promotion of employment practices which support this balance.

Families Australia's activities to date on family wellbeing

Families Australia's most important priority is to enhance family wellbeing. We do this is by promoting discussion and examination of the nature, importance and measurement of family wellbeing. We prepared a National Family Wellbeing Framework position statement in 2006 and hosted the first National Family Wellbeing Symposium in June 2007 at The Australian National University, Canberra.

Families Australia has developed a range of policies in areas such as child protection, work and family, grandparenting, child care support broadbanding, changes to welfare payments and the effects of substance abuse on families in order to advance its family wellbeing agenda.

Families Australia has also run National Families Week in mid-May each year since 2003. More than 500,000 people have participated in National Families Week activities over the past five years. National Families Week coincides with the UN International Day of the Family on 15 May. More information is available at www.familiesaustralia.org.au

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