

# **Family Wellbeing in Australia: a Families Australia Vision**

## **Our wish for families**

- Families are Australia's most important resource. They 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.
- Families Australia has a vision that all Australian families enjoy the greatest possible state of wellbeing.
- 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 balance of economic and non-economic factors. While the task of deciding on that balance is a matter for each family to some extent and is ongoing as circumstances change, it also reflects the influence of the social environment.

## **Why wellbeing? The effects of change**

- In the past 30 years in particular, Australian families have undergone enormous change. Many are better off financially, but many struggle or have collapsed.
- Australians are, for example, more troubled than ever by the pace and pressure of life at the expense of family relationships. One study of 'middle Australia' between 1996 and 2000 found that 90% of people thought that family life was changing: two-thirds of these people said that negative aspects were most noticeable, including breakdown of family values, too much consumerism, no or poor communication between family members, and increased isolation of families from wider family and community networks.
- Families Australia's recent public consultations revealed that the majority of people think that time spent together and good communication are key strengths of functional families but this is being increasingly harmed by work pressures. Many families want to spend more time together but find that increased consumerism and the demands on time and money to make ends meet and to support lifestyles to which they aspire prevent this from becoming a reality.

## **What's ahead? Future directions**

- New and additional pressures will be placed on families in several areas. There will be relatively fewer young people to provide family and informal support and care for an increasing number of older people, grandparents will be called upon in proportionally larger numbers to provide child care, and an increase in the number of lone person households will make it more difficult to maintain community connectedness.
- The increase in the proportion of smaller families and the prevalence of families in which both parents work will increase household incomes but will also put pressure on time spent together, complicating the tasks of transferring values, traditions, language, and ideas to children.

## **What can be done**

- We know a great deal about family life, in particular, economic status, but we do not have a comprehensive picture of how families are travelling - beyond economics to include social factors such as the quality of our relationships.
- Families Australia encourages:
  - *Every Australian family* to take stock of its overall wellbeing. Families might consider questions such as: Are we spending enough time together? Do we have good enough connection with family members not living with us? Have we given enough encouragement to our children or grandchildren?
  - *Government* at all levels (Federal, State/Territory and local) to develop a family wellbeing framework in consultation with families, giving emphasis to ways of measuring wellbeing. Governments might ask: How can we measure and report on all aspects of family wellbeing? How can we collaborate better across tiers of government to enhance family wellbeing?
  - *Employers, unions and the business community* to review employment practices to enhance work-family balance. These groups might ask: Can we find ways to give employees more choice and flexibility in their working arrangements?
  - *Community organisations* to encourage greater discussion and sharing information about the dimensions of family wellbeing in their respective areas. They might ask: Can holistic approaches to service delivery be increased?
  - *Political parties* to adopt specific family wellbeing policies and objectives.
  - *Academics and researchers* to intensify work on the nature and measurement of family wellbeing.
  - *Media organisations and journalists* to increase the amount and depth of coverage of family wellbeing issues.

## **Toward a family wellbeing framework**

In Australian and overseas, there is growing public, government and academic interest in the concept and measurement of national and personal wellbeing, but there is at yet no widely accepted framework which focuses specifically on family and takes a comprehensive approach which can guide research, policy development, resource allocation and evaluation.

The main problem in devising a framework is deciding what elements to include. As with the academic and popular literature dealing with personal, family and community resilience, for example, no single research initiative has provided a widely accepted evidence-based model, nor one which presents a balance of qualitative and quantitative data. The current situation is that there are often well informed, but nonetheless largely subjective hypotheses about key ingredients. Better defining the elements of wellbeing is a fruitful area for further evidence-based research.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare publishes a report, *Australia's Welfare*, every two years using a conceptual framework which considers welfare as a function of healthy living, autonomy and participation, and social cohesion – factors relevant to but not focussed specifically on families. Indicator topics are assigned under the three lead components, such as air, water and food (under healthy living), education and knowledge (under autonomy and participation), and trust (under social cohesion).

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index is based on randomised telephone surveys of 2,000 people aged 18 and over, and aims to measure personal and national wellbeing perspectives, in areas such as health, personal relationships, safety, standard of living, achievements, community belonging, the economy, the environment, how Australia is governed, and national security. Since 2001, 13 surveys have been completed. While there are no questions specifically relating to family life, many questions are germane to it (for example, in relation to community connectedness and personal relations).

In 2005, The Australia Institute published 'A manifesto for wellbeing', opening with the words: "Australians are three times richer than their parents and grandparents were in the 1950s, but they are no happier", and containing a series of recommendations for government action to improve national wellbeing, including in the areas of providing fulfilling work, investing in early childhood, and discouraging materialism and promoting responsible advertising.

The UK has adopted a children's wellbeing outcomes framework under the heading of 'Every Child Matters', specifying desired outcomes in the areas of health, safety, enjoyment/achievement, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic wellbeing.

The framework identifies specific indicators and targets such as extent of harm caused by bullying, fear of crime, and the percentage of 16-18 year olds not in employment, education and training.

In the US, the 'Redefining Progress' consortium has developed the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) to measure the performance of the US economy as it affects people's lives. The GPI assigns value to the functions of households, communities, and the natural environment, and adds a cost side to the growth ledger, for example, by including the costs of long-term environmental damage, loss of leisure time, and family breakdown.

The Redefining Progress team asserts that, whereas an increase in working hours leads to an increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it also means a loss (often intangible) in terms of time for children and families and less time for community involvement. Such losses are never factored into usual national accounting, with the result that important social capital on which society rests is undervalued. They conclude that the US economy "appears to have expanded almost three times over on a per capita basis....By contrast, the GPI increased until the mid-1970s, but has followed a downward path ever since...the implications for human health and well-being have become increasingly problematic".

### Beyond economics

The best starting point for devising a family wellbeing framework is with definitions. Wellbeing may be defined as a state of health, happiness and prosperity. It is a term which goes beyond the notion of standard of living based on financial or material wealth; it includes subjective judgements about the extent of happiness or satisfaction about life as a whole, including its social, cultural, spiritual and emotional aspects.

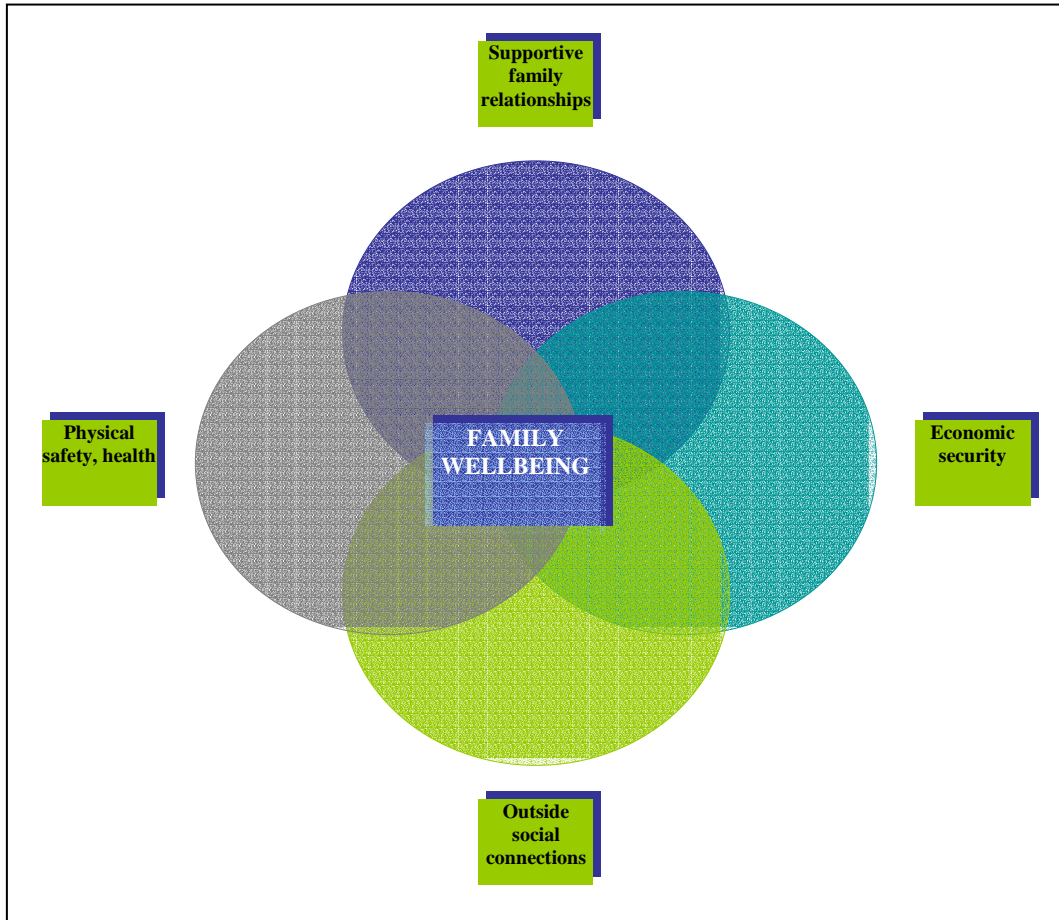
Family wellbeing refers to the health, happiness and prosperity of the family unit as a whole as well as its individual members. In this case, the family unit is most appropriately defined by the family and family members themselves, and may not be necessarily based on the notion that a family is a group of people living in the same household. Family wellbeing differs from individual wellbeing in that it also refers to the overall wellbeing of a social form or structure which is different to the sum of the wellbeing its individual members.

After examining models of national and individual wellbeing and welfare, Families Australia suggests, for discussion purposes, that four main elements of family wellbeing are:

1. physical safety and physical and mental health,
2. supportive intra-family relationships, including possession of effective conflict resolution skills, opportunities to learn values, traditions, languages, ideas important to their family, and receipt of support and encouragement for achievement/attainment from within the family,
3. social connections outside the family, including in the local community, and
4. economic security and independence.

These elements are dynamic and interconnected, and appear to be necessary conditions for overall family wellbeing (see Figure 1, below). Each appears to be required at least to some extent for optimal family wellbeing. The very act of discussing and deciding on the

relative balance between each element (areas of relative weakness and strength) might assist families to grow in wellbeing.



**Figure 1: Family wellbeing component measures – a conceptual model**

Families Australia suggests that any family wellbeing framework contain principles, key components of family wellbeing, factors influencing wellbeing, targets and indicators, and recommendations for action by key stakeholders, including government at all levels, and the community, research and private sectors. Table 1, below, contains a working draft of the conceptual and practice framework.

<u>Principles</u>	<u>Four components of family wellbeing</u>	<u>Indicators</u>	<u>Influencing factors</u>
<p>Family wellbeing reflects the wellbeing of society at large and is based on the principles that families:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are Australia's most important social unit and vital to the sustainability of society</li> <li>• are diverse, often carry enormous burdens, and deserve respect from all sectors of society</li> <li>• are best defined by the nature of their relationships and processes rather than with regard to so-called traditional forms</li> <li>• provide emotional and physical support for their members</li> <li>• are the ground for nurturing and developing children and young people</li> <li>• are instrumental in handing on values, cultures, histories, languages and traditions to subsequent generations</li> <li>• provide incalculable financial and non-financial benefits to the Australian nation which cannot be provided by any other type of social unit or institution</li> <li>• deserve external support (eg from</li> </ul>	<p>Family wellbeing is enhanced when all members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are physically safe and enjoy optimal physical and mental health</li> <li>• have supportive intra-family relationships; possess ability to effectively resolve conflict; have opportunities to learn values, traditions, languages, ideas important to their family; receive support and encouragement for achievement/attainment from within the family</li> <li>• have social connections outside the family, including in the local community</li> </ul>	<p>Under each of the five components, wellbeing is evaluated in relation to 36 indicators concerning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• child abuse and neglect</li> <li>• domestic violence</li> <li>• safety from crime and anti-social behaviours</li> <li>• substance abuse</li> <li>• suicide</li> <li>• homelessness</li> <li>• life expectancy</li> <li>• expected years of life lived without disability</li> <li>• infant mortality</li> <li>• mental health</li> <li>• physical activity</li> <li>• injury</li> <li>• relationship breakdown</li> <li>• levels of trust</li> <li>• conflict resolution skills</li> <li>• work/family life balance</li> <li>• access to public transport</li> <li>• access to child care</li> <li>• recreation patterns</li> <li>• resilience</li> <li>• acts of love and acceptance</li> <li>• recognition of individual and family achievements</li> <li>• family participation in learning</li> <li>• social isolation</li> <li>• social skills</li> <li>• contact with family and friends</li> <li>• community engagement</li> </ul>	<p>Factors that influence family wellbeing are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>cultural and social</u>: values and beliefs of society, Indigenous cultural values and beliefs</li> <li>• <u>access to life's essentials</u>: income, housing, education and training, access to children's services including child care and early childhood services, and family support networks both formal and informal</li> <li>• <u>family</u>: processes including conflict resolution, parenting styles, roles of fathers and mothers in caring; family breakdown impact on contact with parents, continuing conflict between parents; family structure – marriage, family breakdown, single parenthood</li> <li>• <u>environment</u>: built and natural</li> <li>• <u>government social policies</u>: employment, work and family, industrial relations, health and welfare, Indigenous, education, health and welfare</li> <li>• <u>individual</u>: early childhood development, childhood temperament, relationships, and parenting</li> </ul>

government) at particular stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>live in economic security and independence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>telephone and internet access</li> <li>employment and labour force differentials</li> <li>literacy</li> <li>education participation and outcomes</li> <li>workforce participation</li> <li>wealth and wealth distribution</li> <li>income/income distribution</li> <li>debt/debt distribution</li> </ul>	
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**Table 1: Australian family wellbeing - a conceptual and practice framework**

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