

**People with disability and their carers need greater
recognition and assistance**

Address at the opening of National Disability Services-
Families Australia Conference: 'Every Child Matters'

Brian Babington, Chief Executive, Families Australia
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It is very fitting that this important gathering is occurring during National Families Week. This week, around Australia, over 120,000 people are participating in community events to celebrate the importance of families.

Over 800 events will take place around Australia, from Hobart to Bamaga in Cape York, from the Blue Mountains to Broome. People are getting involved in an amazing range of things – from morning teas, film nights, art competitions, sausage sizzles, to seminars, book launches, and work/family balance surveys.

On average, there is a National Families Week gathering happening somewhere in Australia every 10 minutes this week.

The central aim of National Families Week 2008 is to encourage all Australians to do practical things to more effectively balance work and family responsibilities.

Under the slogan of *“Work and Family - Getting the balance right”*, the main messages of National Families Week 2008 are that effectively balancing work and family responsibilities makes for stronger families, workplaces and communities, and all Australians, particularly working parents and employers, are encouraged to find ways to generate ideas and take actions which will improve work-family balance for themselves and others.

The release this week of Australian Bureau of Statistics figures which show that mothers who work full-time continue to do double the number of hours of housework of their male partners engaged in full-time employment highlights continuing imbalances in the work and family equation and, indeed, within families themselves. Clearly, we still have a long way to go and some fundamental changes are required.

Both Families Australia and National Disability Services (NDS) wanted to ensure that disability issues were given particularly strong public recognition in National Families Week. This conference is important in making that wish a reality.

The close Families Australia-NDS partnership spans not only this gathering but a shared interest and concern to see issues affecting children, young people and adults with disability and their families and carers receive priority attention by governments and the community.

Just to say a few words about Families Australia, we have been going since 2001 as the national, independent, non-government peak body which promotes the interests of families at the national level.

In a nutshell, we are an independent policy think-tank and advocacy organisation. We have around 400 member organisations across Australia, representing in turn some 150,000 workers in the family and community NGO sector.

Our members include many of the largest NGOs, as well as hundreds of local community bodies, such as child care centres and youth and counselling services.

Not only do we listen to our members about the needs of families, but we also go out to the public directly through focus groups. In the past year or two, we have heard from hundreds of Australians in this way. These views form an essential part of our policy thinking.

To give you an idea of what we do, in the past year, we have been playing a leading role in the NGO push for a National Child Protection Framework. I am pleased to say that that work is starting to bear fruit under the new Government. The announcement in last night's Budget of the allocation of \$2.6 million for the National Child Protection Framework is especially welcome.

In the disability field, in the run-up to last year's Federal Election, Families Australia worked hard to highlight to politicians ways that they could help improve the situation for carers of people with a disability who were also trying to stay engaged in the workforce.

We also took part in the independent taskforce appointed by the Australian Government last year to review the Carer Payment (Child) benefit for carers of children with a profound or severe disability. It might be known to you that the taskforce recommended a fundamental change in the assessment criteria for this payment. It is pleasing that last night's Budget opened the way for a greater number of families to access this payment.

Fundamentally, Families Australia – like NDS – believes that it is vital for people with a disability to be provided with every opportunity to participate to their fullest in everyday life, and for the families and individuals who act as carers to be given the highest possible levels of recognition and assistance to undertake their vital work.

Particularly in the new Federal political landscape, with a Federal-State political alignment and a Federal government priding itself on reaching least advantaged people and families, my organisation expects these issues to receive additional attention and even greater financial support.

We are also now expecting to see greater coherence and coordination in Federal and State government efforts in many areas of family support and to see far better planned and targeted responses, for example, in the area of tackling child abuse and neglect.

I see gatherings such as this as playing an important role in keeping government and community attention focused on areas of great importance and need, not leaving it up to governments to decide policy in a vacuum without evidence-informed expert advice.

And so, I'd like to encourage you all, over the next two days, to keep generating ideas about what more we, in our respective organisations, and as individuals, can do to take full advantage of the fluidity, the potential and the excitement of the new political climate.

Thank you.