

## **Toward a national understanding of family wellbeing**

Opening address to the Families Australia-National Centre for  
Epidemiology and Population Health  
'National Family Wellbeing Symposium'

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I wish, first, to acknowledge that we meet on country for which the Ngunnawal people have been custodians for many centuries and on which they have performed age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal. We acknowledge their living culture and unique role in the life of this region and offer deep appreciation for their contribution and support.

I would like especially to acknowledge the presence this morning of the Australian Government Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon. Mal Brough MP, and Sandie de Wolf, the Chair of Families Australia, as well as several members of the Families Australia Board.

I wish to introduce the hard-working Symposium team: Dr Lyndall Strazdins, Lyla Rogan, Jennifer Horsfield, Eris Harrison, Ros Hales and Carsten Holle.

Families Australia has organised this Symposium, in close collaboration, and with sincere thanks to, the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) at The Australian National University. Our aim is to encourage greater discussion about what family wellbeing means and how further to enhance the wellbeing of all Australian families.

Families Australia exists to promote the wellbeing of families, a job we do in part by working through almost 400 member family and community organisations across Australia ranging from large national entities to small child care centres in remote outback places.

We also do our job by connecting strongly with people who are not aligned to any particular organisation – the members of real families – to get their understandings about what matters to them. In the lead-up to this Symposium, for example, we held a number of focus groups where people told us about family wellbeing; in the audience today are people who have been invited in their important role as members of families.

This Symposium is at the cutting edge - it may well be the first of its type to examine the concept and meaning of family wellbeing in such a comprehensive way in Australia. It springs from a recognition that there is widespread interest in all things to do with “wellbeing”, but no widely accepted focus specifically on family which could, in an ideal world perhaps, guide research, policy, program delivery and evaluation. We hope that this gathering will build understandings and even perhaps platforms of agreement on the main elements of a family wellbeing framework.

So, let’s begin with the end in mind. Our ambition is the development of a comprehensive, flexible family wellbeing framework to guide research and policy. Families Australia and NCEPH would like to end these two days with the Symposium having looked at latest Australian and international policy and research on family wellbeing, identified current and emerging influences on family wellbeing in Australia, critically discussed family wellbeing definitions, models and frameworks, with an emphasis on ways of measuring, and identified areas for further policy development or research. We expect that the published findings will go to governments, business, the media, the community sector and many other stakeholders.

Above all, because the ground is relatively new, we hope that the gathering will be provocative, lively and interactive. The program is ambitious, but then so is any ground-breaking venture. It has been shaped, and then reshaped, to try to ensure that everyone can actively participate.

The speakers have been asked to deliver probing talks, particularly addressing the relationship between the wellbeing of families as entities in contrast to the wellbeing of individuals as sometimes aggregated in families. They have been encouraged to examine the

question of what family wellbeing means in terms of the trade-offs within families. Issues here include the benefits and costs to individual family members in the context of enhancing overall family wellbeing. We also feel that it is vitally important to ensure that there is discussion of the meaning of Indigenous family wellbeing.

Family wellbeing has become part of broad public, media and political parlance but what it really means remains elusive. Part of the problem has to do with definitions: there are varying notions of families and varying definitions of wellbeing. There is even no consensus about the hyphenising of the word “wellbeing”. There are also varying comprehensions about the role and significance of family: to what extent does it need to be supported in its own right in contrast to support given to individuals? How should that support differ from that provided to individuals? Is it a resource, like the environment, upon which we thought we could draw without too much regard for conservation and renewal?

Some would argue that family wellbeing is an aggregation of the wellbeing of individuals. Others would say that, to understand and assess family wellbeing properly, we need to examine the dynamics within families, including the division of roles and responsibilities and the balance of contributions that are made by respective family members.

If we start from the ground up, this Symposium is fundamentally about seeking a coherent way to know whether, and to what extent, families and all their members are travelling well and what more we can do to help them travel better. If getting the answers to those fundamental questions is important, then it is very hard to do. Indicators of the un-wellness of some families are plentiful. Here are some that on first glance relate more often to individuals or parts of families but on deeper reflection clearly relate to what’s going on within a larger family and community setting.

- Child abuse substantiation rates have doubled since 2000, and the rate of Indigenous children on care and protection orders is more than six times higher than for other children.
- Parental alcohol and other drugs problems are found in about half of all substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect.

- The number of children in out-of-home care has risen by 35% since 2002, with much higher rates for Indigenous children.
- The number of grandparent-headed households appears to be growing often because of parental drug problems, which frequently co-occur with mental illness and problem gambling.
- Around 180,000 children witness domestic violence each year; and over 400,000 women are abused each year.
- More than a third of respondents in a 2006 national Relationships Australia survey felt that 'lack of time spent together' had a negative effect on their relationship.
- Seventeen years is the gap between the life expectancy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
- Housing affordability appears to have fallen substantially over the past 20 years.
- In 2001, 100,000 people were homeless, of which 23% were in homeless families (22,944 people or 6,745 families).
- An estimated 1.6 million Australians and 10% of children still live in poverty.

We can go on, and there are statistics in the other direction that indicate welcome advances. Yet, looking beyond the sea of indices for a moment, two things are noticeable.

First, there is a tendency to not examine indices of individual wellbeing in terms of their aggregate or downstream and diffused effects on family wellbeing more broadly.

Second, we do not have a comprehensive national picture of how families are doing overall based on an integrated set of common-sense indicators. To do that we need to fill important data gaps in our knowledge. For example, we should, but don't, have systematic monitoring processes in the public domain that allow for an analysis of parental characteristics of children entering the child protection system.

We should, but don't, have more insight into the experiences and needs of children being raised in grandparent-headed households. And, we should, but don't, have a more comprehensive picture of the needs of people who have elder care responsibilities not least

because it affects their ability to reconcile work and other aspects of life.

In short, our understanding of many important dimensions of family wellbeing is far from complete: we have dots and lines, even highways, of evidence, inquiry and speculation, but they are not joined up to form a larger map.

This raises a question: How can we have the best possible national policies aimed at improving family life if we do not first measure it comprehensively? Here I am not talking about governments as the only agents. The research, business and the community sectors also have important reasons for knowing more so they can, for example, make better targeted decisions about work and family practices, avoid expensive overlapping in research efforts, or in the case of community organisations, deliver assistance in a more integrated manner targeting particularly vulnerable groups. It is important to say that agreeing to measure family wellbeing guides policy, enables us to see whether or not we are on track in achieving objectives, keeps us focused, gives warning of successes and failures and helps get resource allocated in the right places.

Beside the challenge of setting national goals based on comprehensive data sets, there is another challenge of overcoming fragmentation and “silo-ing” in policy and program delivery across the government, community and private sectors in the quest to improve family wellbeing. Child protection efforts, for example, are uneasily divided between the Federal and State/Territory governments with the result that there is neither a national vision nor a coherent framework which guides action. Nor are prevention and statutory protection efforts well coordinated. The same is true for many grandparents providing primary care who find navigation between differing jurisdictions confusing, stressful and time-consuming. Furthermore, there is a need for holistic and supportive approaches to overcome the many disadvantages experienced by Indigenous families.

The challenge to improve this situation rests not just with governments but all sectors. Imaginative, new and collaborative

approaches are needed. Today, Families Australia suggests three things under the banner of a **National Family Wellbeing Agenda**.

The first element is a ***National Family Wellbeing Framework*** to set high-level national targets. The Framework 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, business and the community sectors and families themselves.

Second, a new Federal, State/Territory compact is needed to tackle major family and community challenges. 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 could examine and advise on priority matters identified in the Framework and the National Family Wellbeing Action Strategy on an ongoing basis. And, a 'National State of the Family Report' could be prepared by such a body triennially to report publicly on progress in meeting Framework and Strategy goals.

Finally, amongst many ***priorities for a National Family Wellbeing Action Strategy***, the following areas deserve particular attention:

- First, major additional investment in the areas of *early childhood* and in *supporting families which face severe or multiple disadvantage* is urgently needed. 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. Promising, practical initiatives such as the Australian Early Development Index, which support child wellbeing, are worthy of additional support. Further substantial investment should also be directed to programs which 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.

- Second, a coherent *national approach to child protection* is crucial to overcome duplication in investment and effort, facilitate the sharing of resources and innovation, and ensure that learnings are applied across all jurisdictions.
- Third, there needs to be continued and intensified focus on *closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and children* through actions that have relevance for Indigenous people themselves, which deliver change and which are based on a genuine commitment across all levels of government, Indigenous families and communities, the business, philanthropic, non-government and voluntary sectors.

Especially in this important year, we look to these proposals being carefully considered, or at the least to some stimulating debate about collaborative multi-sector national approaches to further the interests of families. Families Australia looks forward to continuing to play a constructive role with all parties in such a debate and contributing to a strong policy environment which furthers the interests of families.

Thank you.