



POLICY PAPER

A National Family Support System

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Child & Family Welfare Association of Australia Inc.

ABN 65 962 251 319

ADMINISTRATION & CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Locked Bag 13
Haymarket
NSW 1240

Ph (02) 9281 8822
Fax (02) 9281 8827
cafwa@acwa.asn.au
www.cafwa.org.au

STATE MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

- Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies (NSW)
- Child & Family Welfare Association of South Australia
- Child & Family Welfare Association of Tasmania
- Child, Youth & Family Agencies of the ACT
- Centre for Excellence in Children & Family Welfare, Victoria
- Children's Youth & Family Agencies Association (WA)
- PeakCare (Qld)

Incorporated in Victoria
No A0032610M
Registered office
Level 5, 50 Market Street
Melbourne
VIC 3000

Foreword

The Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWAA) is the national peak body representing community service organisations working with vulnerable children, young people and families, including those experiencing neglect and abuse and those living in an out-of-home care environment.

Since incorporation in 1995, CAFWAA has taken a leadership role in advocating for improved public policy at a national level. In particular, CAFWAA has sought policy responses that strengthen the capacity of families and communities to care, nurture and protect children and young people and to ensure assistance is afforded to children and young people when adequate care is not provided.

On the 30th of April 2009 The Council of Australian Governments endorsed the Governments "Protecting Children is Everyone's Business" A National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

This was a historic occasion for Australia. The first time that a National Framework for Child Protection has existed and been developed in a tri-partisan manner. The development of the Framework not only included the State and Territory Governments but for the first time the Non-Government Sector had a key role in the development of the Framework.

CAFWAA has continued to play a central role in the development of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's children with representation on the National Implementation Working Group. Many gains have been made in our nation working together, state, commonwealth and the non-government sector combining our efforts to design and develop more effective strategies to improve outcomes for children and young people.

However still is much to be achieved. In 2005, 23,695 children and young people were in out of home care in 2010 this figure has grown to 34,069. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the rate of substantiation of abuse more than doubled over this period. Indigenous children are more than seven times as likely as non-Indigenous children to be the subject of a substantiation or abuse in 2010.

CAFWAA is committed to continuing to ensure that we lobby for the change that is needed to ensure that our children and families are afforded the best possible future.

We must remain committed to strengthening families and ensuring that children and young people's optimal well being continues to be central to our communities and our nations greatest achievement.

These 3 policy papers, Closing the Gap, Workforce Development – addressing crisis in the family support and child welfare sector and A National Family Support System provide evidence based recommendations for the next phases of meeting this goal.

Lisa Hillan
Chair

CRISIS IN SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Notifications to child protection continue to rise at an alarming level indicating that all is not well with children within Australia. The number of child protection notifications for 2008-09 noted more than 200,000 child protection notifications, 33,000 with one or more substantiations and over 35,000 children were on care and protection orders and around 34,000 children were living in out of home care. AIHWS, 2010.

Families today are raising children in highly complex social settings often with difficult economic challenges and the family support and child welfare services that support them are struggling to provide the help parents need at the time they need it. Further, families that are exposed to catastrophic natural disasters such as the recent Victorian bushfires or Queensland floods are likely to be adversely affected by the crisis and will need assistance to move from catastrophe to recovery. *Caruana, Family Matters no 84, 2010.*

There is increasing evidence that many of Australia's children have poor physical, mental health and educational outcomes which may lead to pathways to unemployment and increased risk taking behaviour leading to contact with the youth justice system. Australia needs a national early intervention and family support system that is comprehensive and innovative, able to respond to a complex range of needs in an accessible and de-stigmatising manner.

The Commonwealth Government has some platforms of family support that can be developed and built on such as Communities for Children and state, territory and local government work e.g. Children's Hubs (VIC), Child and Family Centres and Schools as Communities (ACT) and Brighter Futures (NSW).

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FAMILIES

Outcome 5 in the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, 2010-2020* aspires to an outcome that '*Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities*'.

The rate of Indigenous children at risk continues to grow at an alarming and profoundly concerning rate with the number of Indigenous children on child protection orders 8 times the non-Indigenous rate, the number in out of home care 9 times greater and 7.5 more times as many Indigenous children are likely to be cases of substantiated abuse. AIHW, 2011.

SNAICC has identified 8 priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children:

- Support for services to care for children
- Value and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.
- Healing and reparations for the Stolen Generations.
- Self determination in child protection.
- Thrive by five with culture alive.
- Real results take planning.
- Building capacity builds community support.
- Hope, wealth and prosperity for our children.

COMPONENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEM

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, 2010-2020 aims to ensure that 'children live in safe and supportive families and communities; can access adequate support to promote safety and intervene early; risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed, children who have been abused or neglected receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing, Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities; child sexual abuse exploitation is prevented and survivors receive adequate support'.

The key components of the comprehensive family support system Australia needs are:

- *A universal community platform of family support* that provides community services that serve diverse 'mainstream', Indigenous, migrant and refugee families in family friendly communities with adequate housing, schools, health centres, transport, meeting places for fun, craft, sport, picnics, barbecues and support groups. This local community will include accessible-
 - *Adequate housing, employment and income support.*
 - *A supportive health and mental health system.*
 - *A supportive local educational system* from preschool through to technical or tertiary education.
 - *Community development programs* that increase social capital.
 - *Maternal and Paternal child health programs* for mothers, babies and fathers; maternity and paternity leave.
 - *Early intervention support:* childcare, playgroups, preschool, kindergarten.
 - *Child development courses and courses* that assist parents at transition points with their children, teenagers and young adults.

Building on a universal community platform of support for families', services then need to be able to provide a secondary layer of support for families experiencing crisis, challenge or special needs. These services will often need to be offered on-site in areas where transport and cost are an issue such as low economic areas, housing estates, refugee housing areas and caravan parks. Some services will need to be widely available and others will be specifically targeted to groups of families and will include:

- Targeted early childhood, health and education programs that provide early family support to struggling parents and that promote early childhood development and school readiness.

- Family preservation and family reunification programs offering support groups, in-home support, and centre based groups lead by professionals.
- A range of support programs, parenting groups, family skills groups, behavioural management courses.
- Courses for families facing challenges in their marriages and parenting post separation, support groups, in-home support, centre groups lead by professionals on relationship and parenting issues, guidance and counselling.
- Family Group Conferencing, dispute resolution and mediation that offers a range of programs for adolescents, family reunification and parenting after separating matters.
- Services that offer parents independent legal advice, advocacy and support.
- Programs that provide congenial and educational spaces for child access and supervised access for separated parents, out of home care parents and reunifying parents.
- Financial services, financial budgeting, gambling assistance

To complete a comprehensive family support system, accessible and affordable tertiary programs are required, for families and carers with complex, urgent and continuing need. This would include the following programs.

- Material aid
- Pre and post birth intensive support.
- Intensive Family Support
- Child protection programs
- Out of home care, respite care, leaving care
- Intensive counselling, mediation and family group conferencing.
- Range of therapeutic programs, trauma, grief and loss.
- Living with parents with mental and other illness.
- Court assistance
- A comprehensive range of intensive family support following natural disasters.
- Domestic violence, sexual assault and incest programs.
- Drug and alcohol, gambling, financial assistance and other addiction programs.

RESEARCH, EVIDENCE AND REVIEW

Practitioners of family support argue that providing support to families early is a prevention strategy and that assisting parents will help keep families out of the child protection system and will reduce the number of teenagers entering out of home care, prostitution, mental health facilities and the criminal justice system. Studies are needed to judge the impact of family support policies in a standard manner that promotes comparability, the assessment of relative priorities, and consistent decision making. Systematically comparing the social costs and benefits of family support policies, with the emphasis on valuing them (to the extent possible) in monetary terms, will provide decision-makers with quantitative information about the policy's likely effects and the linkages between various programs in a family support system.

The intended evaluation and accountability of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, 2010-2020* and the development of a National Research Agenda should inform the development of a national family support system. There is excellent evidence available from a range of sources such as ABS, AIHW, AIFS, Productivity Commission and Universities and Peak Bodies, including the research team working on children and youth issues on behalf of ARACY and the AIFS *Promising Practice Profiles and Communities and Families Clearinghouse, Australia* to draw from. The evaluations of the Communities for Children and Stronger Families programs and state based initiatives provide further valuable information.

A recent review of promising practice by AIFS informs us that key effective interventions are: Parenting and Family Support, Parenting Support for Young Parents, Early Learning and Care, Supporting First Time Mothers, School Readiness, Supporting children with Additional Needs, Supporting 'At Risk' Youth, Capacity Building for Service Providers and Enhancement of Service Provision, Community Hubs and Social Inclusion. (AIFS, Sorano, Clark & Wise, 2008).

As has often been said "*The gap between what we know and what we do is greater than the gap between what we know and what we don't know!*"

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Commonwealth Government to develop and fund a National Family Support System within the implementation plan of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, 2010-2020*, that will build on existing national, state and territory, local government and community services, including the Communities for Children collaborative planning model.
- Commonwealth Government to use the tri-lateral model of Coalition of Community Service Organisations, Commonwealth Government and State and Territory Governments working with local governments the model for collaborative planning, monitoring, reporting and review of the National Family Support System.
- Commonwealth Government to undertake cross departmental liaison with FaHCSIA, DoHA, DEEWR, DHS (Centrelink), DIAC and State, Territory and local governments in the key areas of: children and family services, housing, health, substance abuse, mental health, education and community services. Commonwealth Government to align significant government commitments such as 'Closing the Gap', Social Inclusion and other Children at Risk and Early Childhood Education and care agendas with the comprehensive national family support system.
- Commonwealth Government to undertake needs based planning across Australia to identify the broad range of existing local family support services and gaps, including adult secondary services and services particularly focussed on intensive early intervention that must be accessible for families.
- Commonwealth Government to fund, implement and utilise a comprehensive data and research strategy to inform, evaluate, monitor and review the roll out of the National Family Support System and the component parts.
- Commonwealth Government to ensure that the development of the National Family Support System, including the research and evaluation agenda, is fully informed by the participation of a diverse and representative number of consumers, carers, families and peak bodies who represent the families, children and young people that the system will serve.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Support

- Commonwealth Government to ensure that the National Family Support System includes a strong focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, with the full participation of SNAICC and the AICCAs, building on their local knowledge and experience.
- Commonwealth Government to ensure that SNAICC is well resourced to support the development of the National Family Support System.
- Commonwealth Government to ensure that the AICCAs are well resourced, with a presence in every state and territory, able to deliver a coordinated set of family support and early intervention initiatives.
- Commonwealth Government to ensure that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community service organisations are fully resourced to meet local needs for family support.

Community Service Organisations

- Commonwealth Government should ensure that community service organisations are fully funded across Australia for the range of accessible service delivery, training, supervision and support they need to deliver.
- Commonwealth Government to ensure that all services are funded and resourced to be culturally competent in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Government as a signatory to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC)* is committed to ensure that each child receives 'such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being'. The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, 2010-2020* commits all governments and the community sector to increasing emphasis on early intervention and prevention efforts to help families. The development of a **National Family Support System** will help ensure this help is available to parents and contribute to stopping the increasing numbers of notifications of Australian children for child abuse and neglect.

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Moore, Tim, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital
Email: mooret@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au;
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