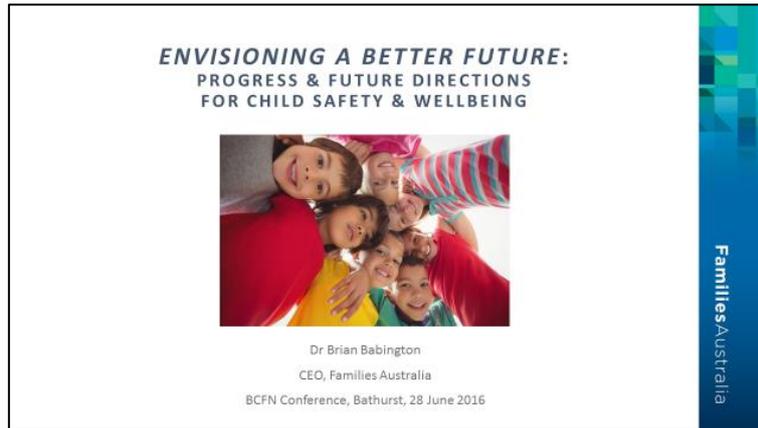


## **ENVISIONING A BETTER FUTURE: PROGRESS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR CHILD SAFETY AND WELLBEING**

Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia  
Address to the Child-Safe, Child-Friendly Conference  
Bathurst NSW, 28 June 2016



Thank you very much for the invitation to speak this morning. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and paying respect to their elders, past and present.

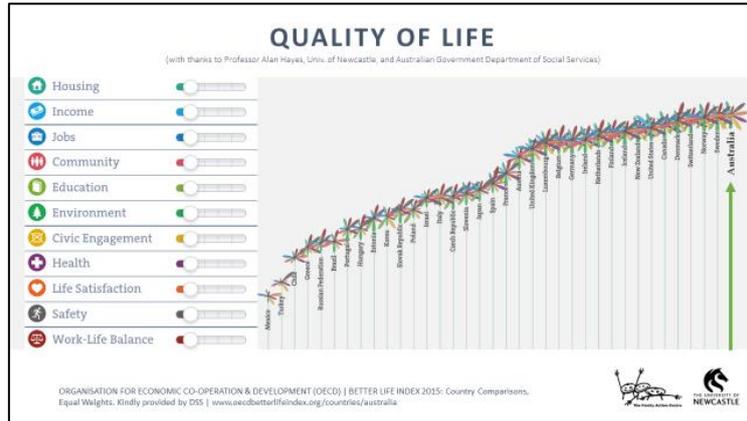
At the most general level, I'd like to provide some context about what's been happening at the national level with regard to child safety and wellbeing.

I'll be talking about three things: first, some of the key aspects of the national crisis we face; second, the main national policy responses, especially the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children; and finally, I'd like to leave you with some thoughts for discussion about what we need to do to get real and sustained improvements for children and families.

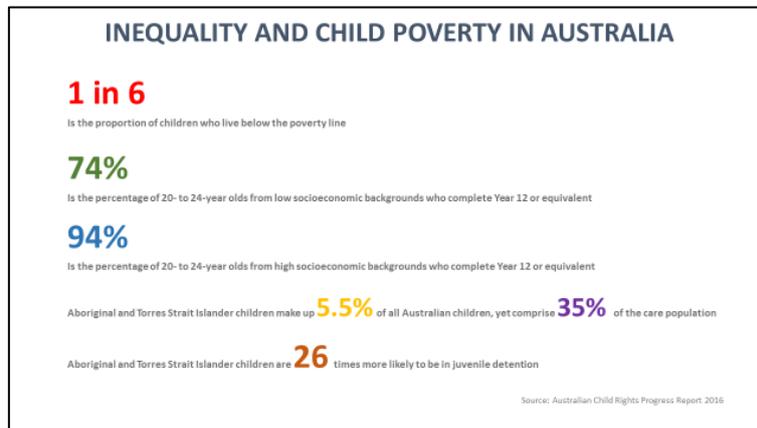


I'd like to acknowledge the many people who assisted in preparing this presentation.

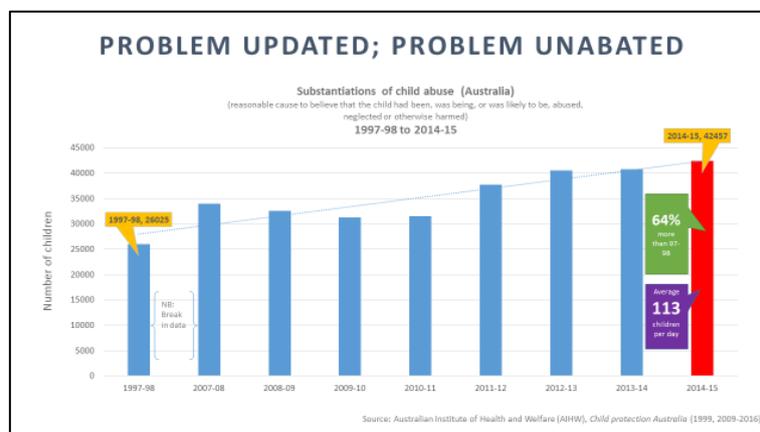
# FamiliesAustralia



Let me start with some good news! I thank Professor Alan Hayes and the Department of Social Services for this slide which, using OECD 2015 data, shows that Australia is travelling very well overall on a wide range of wellbeing indicators compared with all other OECD countries.

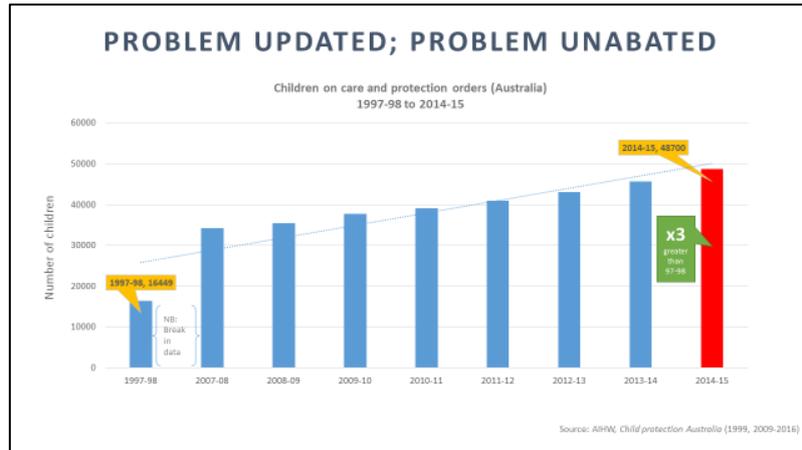


But, such an aggregate picture obscures many major issues facing us. This slide contains some of the headline indicators from the Australian Child Rights Progress report which was released earlier this month. It tells a sobering story indeed. 1 in 6 children in Australia live below the poverty line. The gap between secondary school completion rates for young people from lower and higher socio economic backgrounds is around 20%. And, we see that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 26 times more likely to be in juvenile detention compared with the non-Indigenous cohort. I'd like now to turn to a few slides about what's happening with particular reference to child safety.

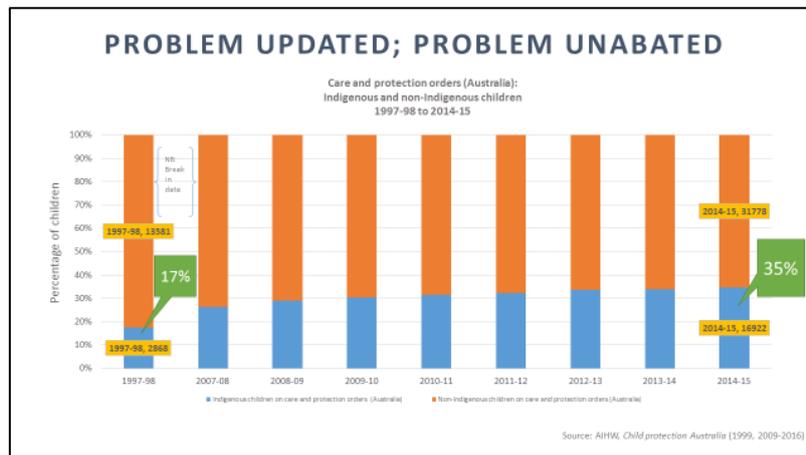


This graph uses data published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) over the past 17 years, the latest tranche of which was released earlier this year (highlighted in red).

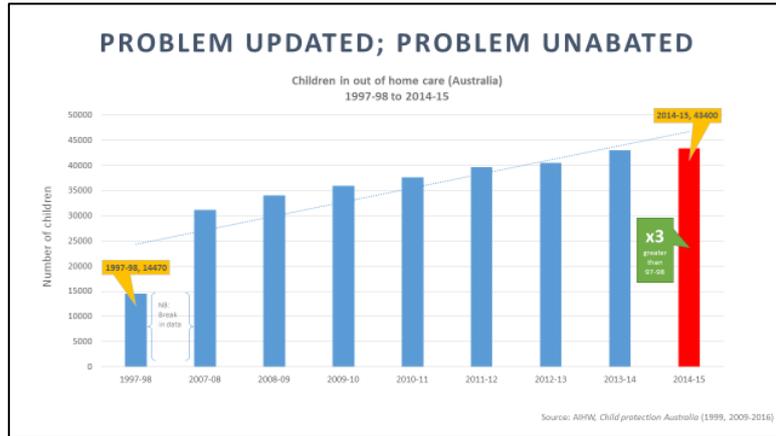
I'd like to draw your attention to a few things: first, the number of substantiated child abuse cases rose from around 26,000 children in 1998 to over 42,000 in 2015. Using 2015 data, on average, an abuse substantiation was recorded for 113 children every single day of the year; second, these figures show a 64 per cent increase in numbers of child abuse substantiations in 17 years; and third, and very obviously, the trend-line is ever-steadily upwards.



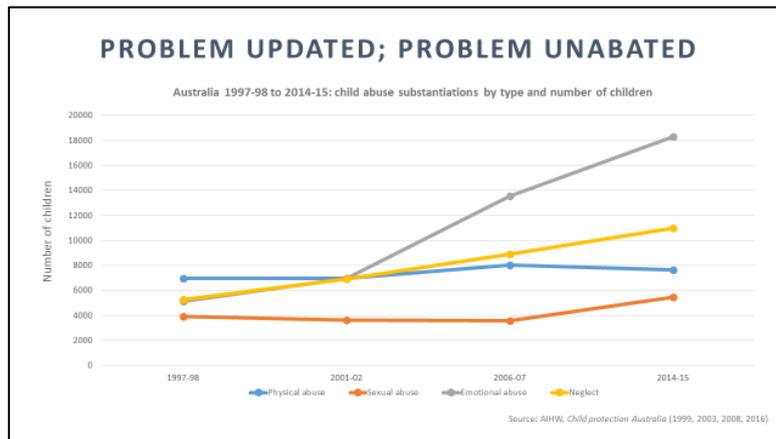
This graph tells a similar story in terms of the number of children who were the subject of care and protection orders between 1998 and 2015. The 48,700 children on orders in 2015 is three times greater than in 1998. Again, you will notice the steady upward inflection in numbers, year-on-year.



Analysing the care order data further, we can see that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (shown in blue) increased from around 3,000 in 1998 to around 17,000 in 2015...or from 17% of all children in this category in 1998 to double that figure to reach at 35% last year.



In terms of out-of-home care, we see around 15,000 children in this category in 1998 which rises to over 43,000 in 2015. That means there has been a trebling in the number of children in out-of-home care across Australia in less than two decades.



Finally, I want to give you a sense of the trends on different types of substantiated child abuse. As you can see in the almost two decades since the late 1990s, there has been a sharp increase in rates of emotional abuse and neglect.

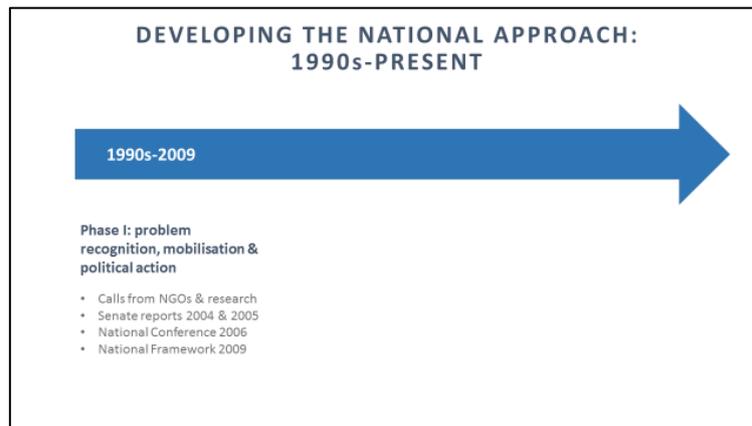
**WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?**

- Three phases
- We've been in Phases 1 and 2 technical fixes of old system
- Need to move to Phase 3 – 'adaptive change' – asap

So, what have we done to tackle these problems, and what should we do? I'd like to talk, first, about the journey we've been taking over the last two decades. In the broadest of terms, I see three phases in our efforts to improve child safety. As I'll argue in a moment, I believe that we've been in what I term 'Phase 1' since the 1990s, and a bit of 'Phase 2' since the late 2000s.

Because, as clearly demonstrated by the slides I've just shown, we are not turning the problem around, new solutions are required. I will therefore suggest the need to get to 'Phase 3' – *a period of transformation and adaptive change as distinct from technical fixes* – as soon as possible, but that will be very hard to do and challenging to community attitudes and some stakeholder interests.

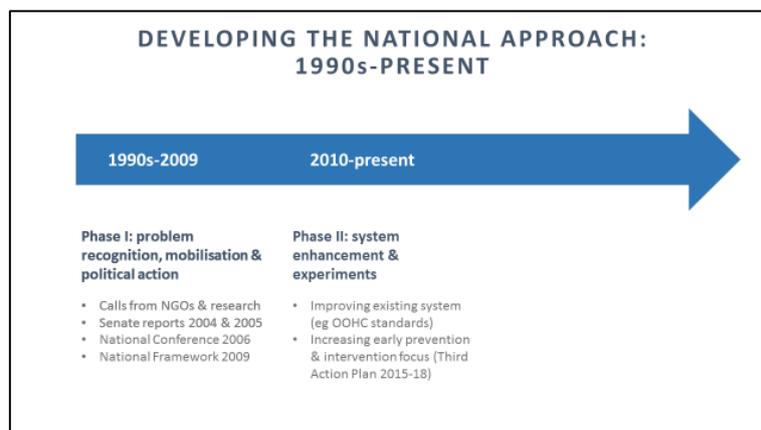
Let me explain...



In Phase 1, there was an initial 'problem recognition and political action' period which commenced in the 1990s and lasted until around 2011. I won't go into history. Suffice to say, however, that a main driver for a national approach was year-on-year worsening of rates of child abuse at least since the early 1990s when consolidated national record keeping began.

Adopting the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 was a major achievement, as it represented a coming-together for the first time of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the NGO and research sectors.

It is Australia's first-ever national plan of action that has the endorsement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to reduce child abuse and neglect and to improve child wellbeing. Nothing like this existed before 2009.



I'd put us currently in Phase 2 of the journey in which we are searching for ways to improve existing child protection systems and exploring how we might innovate in terms of prevention and early intervention.

Collectively, we've developed national standards for out-of-home care. We've improved cross-jurisdictional data sharing, and we're developing national child protection data on a unit record basis. We've created a national research agenda; we've established the office of the National Children's Commissioner; and we've developed a tool for a common approach to assessment, referral and support.

We now see the National Framework being increasingly used as the authority source in policies and documentation at all levels of government, in Ministerial statements, at Ministerial and senior officials meetings at Commonwealth, State and Territory Government levels, in reports to Parliament, in the policy manifestos of all major political parties, as well as in the work of the Royal Commission. Through the Building Capacity, Building Bridges project, we've better connected workers in adult and child related services.

Through the Child Aware National Initiative – which I'll talk more about later today – we've developed principles and practices, brought practitioners and policymakers together through annual conferences, and conducted promising trials on community-led child aware programs through the Child Aware Local Initiative.

It is important to note that a welcome degree of consensus has been built amongst the major political parties in support of the National Framework. We shouldn't underestimate what we've achieved. Perhaps, after all, we've done reasonably well after six years in setting-up the scaffolding needed for greater long-term gains to be made. I'll return in a moment to what we need to do differently.



All of this work has been done through an innovative 'tripartite' partnership between the NGO/research sectors and Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments. This arrangement is not seen in any other similar national plan or framework.

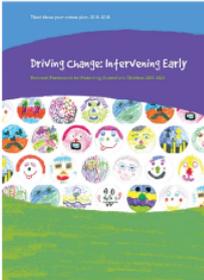
The NGO Coalition, which is convened by Families Australia, comprises around 200 organisations. The Coalition works with Federal, State and Territory Governments to co-design, implement and monitor the National Framework

The Coalition Steering Group participates in quarterly meetings of the National Forum for Protecting Australia's Children with governments. Together we monitor progress with the National Framework and report up to COAG annually on progress.

The Coalition meets regularly to discuss National Framework progress. The next meeting will be held in Sydney on 17 August, that is, on Day 3 of the ACWA conference. You are most welcome to attend this free event. Speakers will include Professor Bridget Daniel, who will talk about Scotland's experience with its initiative called 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GERFEC).

### THIRD ACTION PLAN 2015-18

- Three new National Strategies:
  1. Early intervention with focus on the early years, especially first thousand days for a child
  2. Helping young people in OOHC to thrive in adulthood
  3. Organisations responding better to children to keep them safe
- Cross-cutting focus areas:
  1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
  2. Research



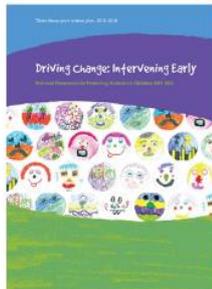
Zooming to the present and looking slightly ahead, the National Framework's Third Action Plan (2015-18) was announced by the Commonwealth Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Christian Porter MP, late last year.

It places stronger emphasis than previous plans on prevention and intervening early. There was also to be a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

It contains 17 high-level actions under three new 'National Strategies', namely, 'early intervention with a focus on the early years, particularly the first thousand days for a child', 'helping young people in out-of-home care to thrive in adulthood', and 'organisations responding better to children and young people to keep them safe'.

### SOME SPECIFICS

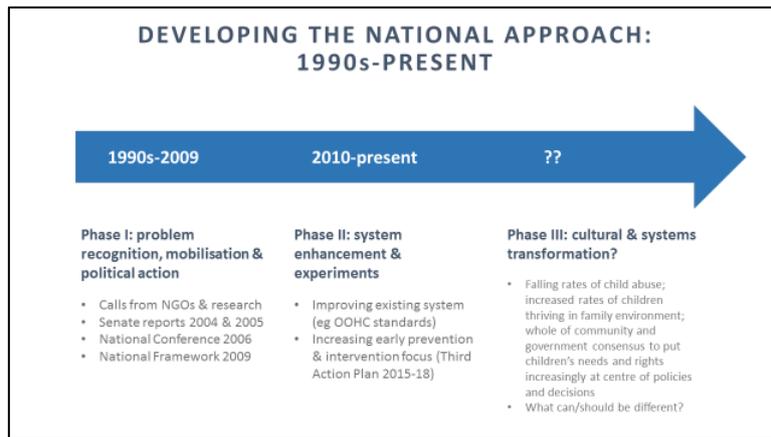
- 17 areas, including:
  - Full application ATSI CPP
  - Community awareness raising
  - Trial ways to improve support for young people leaving care
  - Implement OOHC standards
  - Build child safe organisations



I draw your attention to five areas which I think represent important new directions. All governments agreed that the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle' would be fully applied across all Third Action Plan strategies and actions. There will be new community awareness-raising activities focused on effective parenting practices and strategies to enhance safe and supportive

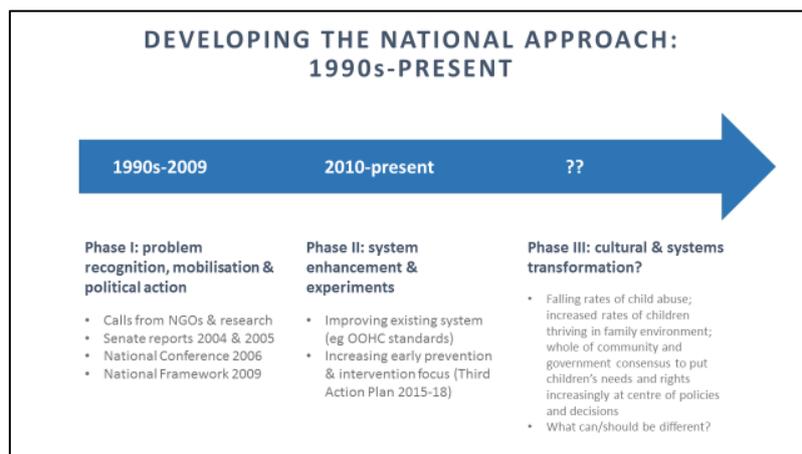
environments in the early years of life, at both national and local levels – this was announced in the May 2016 Federal Budget.

More support will be provided to young people exiting the out-of-home care system so they do well in adulthood – this pilot was announced in the May Budget. All parties have agreed to the full implementation of the National Standards for Out of Home Care. Finally, the new Action Plan will work to strengthen the capacities of organisations that work with children by identifying resources to support best practice on child safe standards.



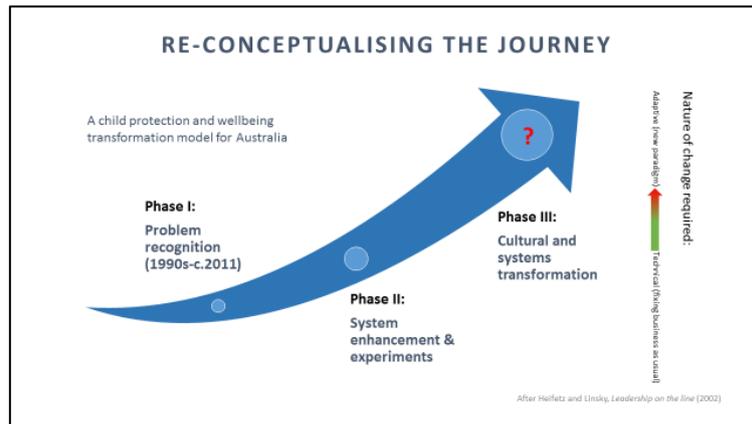
These things are clearly welcome. Yet, if we step back a moment, we need to keep asking what more we should do. With justification, you'd have to conclude that we aren't making fast enough progress in reducing rates of abuse.

I contend that we need to shift gear – to get a paradigm shift in attitudes and policies. I call this a move to Phase 3 of a national approach in which we achieve lasting systems and cultural transformation by moving to prevention investment rather than focusing on tertiary end child protection activities. This would see rapidly declining rates of child abuse, and greater evidence of children being placed more at the centre of community and political decision making.



These things are clearly welcome. Yet, if we step back a moment, I think it's important to ask what more we should do. With justification, you'd have to say that we aren't making fast enough progress in reducing rates of abuse. I contend that we need to shift gear – to get a paradigm shift in attitudes and policies.

I call this a move to Phase 3 of a national approach in which we achieve lasting systems and cultural transformation. This would see rapidly declining rates of child abuse, and greater evidence of children being placed more at the centre of community and political decision making.

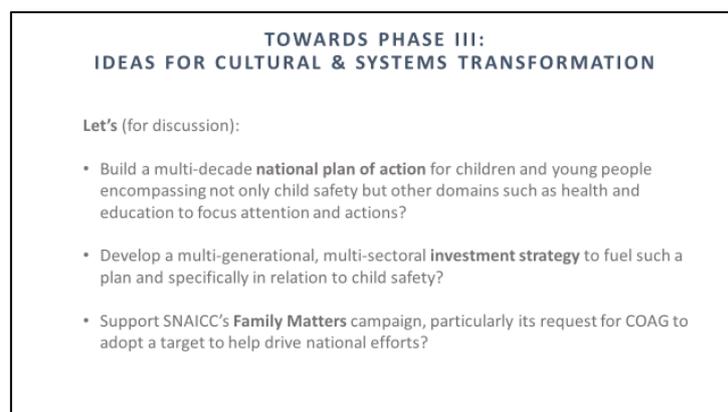


To present this idea, I think it's best to use this non-linear graphic.

This is based on the transformative leadership concepts developed by Heifetz and Linsky at Harvard over the past 15-20 years. They argue that there are a whole host of problems that we try to tackle by so-called 'technical' fixes, that is, by tinkering with established systems and ways of doing business.

But some problems are simply too complex and large. They call these 'adaptive challenges' because 'they require experiments, new discoveries and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community' (Heifetz and Linsky 2002, 13). They say that 'the single most common source of leadership failure...is that people, especially in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems' (ibid.,14).

They make the point that adaptive, paradigm-shifting transformations are inherently risky because they require people to move from their comfort zone, to risk hostility and loss of previous positions even if those positions were untenable in the long term.



How can we get there? I'd argue that there is a strong case for building a multi-decade national plan of action for children and young people that encompasses not only child safety but other domains such as mental health. That would help to concentrate the nation's attention on the importance of the early years, both generically and across a wide range of domains.

Within that we should develop a multi-generational, multi-sectoral investment strategy to fuel such an overarching plan, and specifically in relation to child safety.

Finally, in the near term, one of the most important things we can do more immediately is to coalesce around SNAICC's Family Matters campaign to end the over-representation, and the representation, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, particularly its request for COAG to adopt a target to help drive national efforts.

“Unless we **re-envision** and **multiply our efforts** to tackle the **drivers** of child maltreatment – domestic violence, substance misuse, mental illness – we’ll just keep adding metaphorical and actual bandages as child safety worsens.

**In human and financial terms that’s not only unsustainable, it’s inhumane.**  
Future generations will not thank us”

In closing, I think we’ve come a significant distance in the past two decades to set the scene and make improvements. But, we have an unabated ‘adaptive’ problem that is unlikely to be solved by improving old approaches.

Unless we re-envision and multiply our efforts to tackle the drivers of child maltreatment – mainly domestic violence, but also substance misuse and mental illness – we’ll just keep adding metaphorical and actual bandages as child safety worsens. In human and financial terms that’s not only unsustainable but inhumane. Future generations will not thank us; indeed they will probably condemn us, just as we our predecessors are being judged for exposing children to abuse inside institutions.

Without being senselessly optimistic, I think that we have the makings for change. Developments such as the Royal Commission, the National Framework and the National Plan of Action represent important leadership initiatives.

### NEXT STEPS

1. Annual Coalition meeting 17 August, Sydney at ACWA
2. Join the Coalition: [brian.babington@familiesaustralia.org.au](mailto:brian.babington@familiesaustralia.org.au)
3. Join Families Australia: [www.familiesaustralia.org.au](http://www.familiesaustralia.org.au)
4. Take action wherever you are.

Photos sourced from Getty Images  
© Families Australia 2016

FamiliesAustralia

Your help in talking about the issues and building connections between people and organisations is now more vital than ever. Please keep agitating for attention to be given to this problem and on possible

# FamiliesAustralia

solutions in whatever part of the system you work in. Please consider attending the annual NGO Coalition meeting in Sydney on 17 August and please join the Coalition – let us know – here's the email. Please add to the discourse and narrative about the need for change.

Check against delivery