

MAKING CHILD SAFETY AND WELLBEING 'EVERYONE'S BUSINESS': PROGRESS AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia
Address to the Child Aware Approaches Conference
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Welcome everyone. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and paying respect to their elders, past and present.

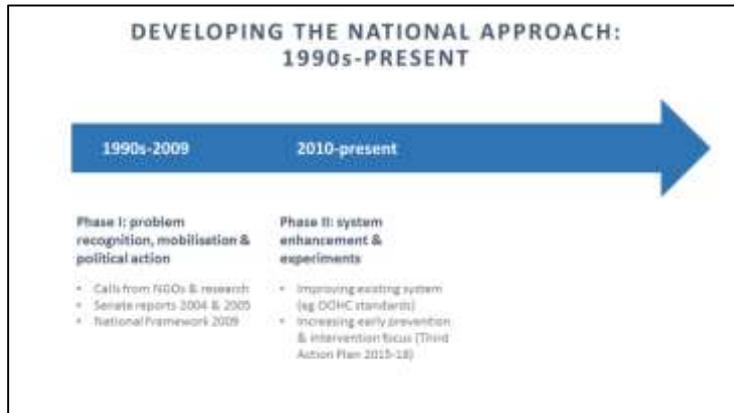
I'd like to discuss three things: first, what the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 is trying to do; second, the key achievements to date and plans for the immediate future; and, finally, pose a question, and make some suggestions, about how we can achieve greater child safety and wellbeing.



The National Framework is Australia's first-ever national plan of action endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to reduce child abuse and neglect and to improve child wellbeing. To date, I see two phases in developing a national approach on child safety and wellbeing.

There was an initial 'problem recognition and political action' phase from the 1990s until around 2011. I won't go into history. Suffice to say, however, that a main driver for a national approach was the year on year worsening rates of child abuse at least since the 1990s.

Adopting the National Framework in 2009 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. Nothing like this existed before.



I'd put us currently in Phase 2 of the journey which is about searching for ways to improve existing child protection systems and explore how we might innovate.

Collectively, we've developed national standards for out of home care. We've improved cross-jurisdictional data sharing, 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.

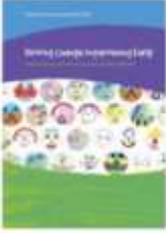
Through the Child Aware national initiative we've developed principles and practices, brought practitioners and policymakers together through these annual conferences, and conducted promising trials on community-led child aware programs through the Child Aware Local Initiative.

All of this work has been done through an innovative 'tripartite' partnership between the NGO/research sectors and Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments. Also, it is important to note that a great 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 have done reasonably well after six years in setting-up the scaffolding that is needed for greater long-term gains to be made.

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: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, & research



Zooming to the present and looking slightly ahead, the National Framework's Third Action Plan (2015-18) was announced by the Federal Minister for Social Service, the Hon. Christian Porter MP, late last year. It places stronger emphasis on preventing and intervening early than in previous plans. 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, identifying locations of high incidence family violence and better service coordination, trial ways to improve support for young people leaving care, implement OOHC standards
- Expect to hear more – Coalition meeting 17 August and by jurisdiction

I draw your attention to four areas. First, 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.

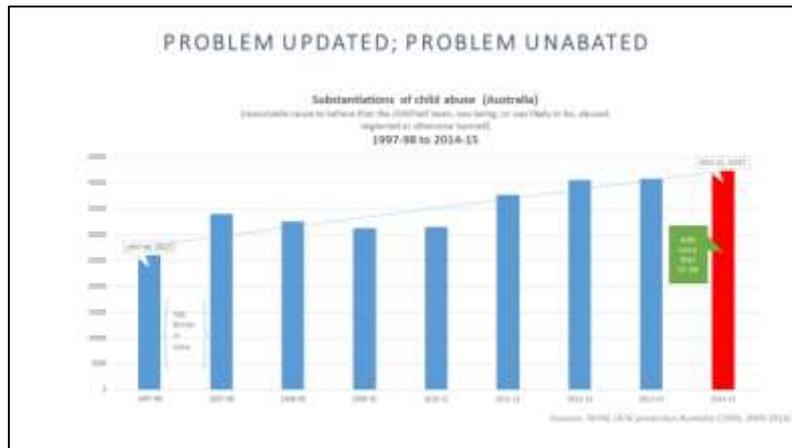
Second, there will be new community awareness raising activities focused on effective parenting practices and strategies to enhance safe and supportive environments in the early years of life, at both national and local levels.

More support will be provided to young people exiting the out-of-home care system so they do well in adulthood.

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 undoubtedly welcome. Yet, if we take a step back, it's important to ask whether what more we should do. Many would say, with justification, that we aren't making fast enough progress in reducing rates of abuse.

Here I'd like to remind you that the problem remains stubbornly with us. I'll use just one slide drawn from the recently-released Australian Institute of Health and Welfare *Child protection Australia* data.



It shows that over the past 17 years the number of substantiated child abuse cases has risen from around 26,000 children in 1998 to over 42,000 in 2015. These numbers represent a 64 per cent increase in just 17 years. The 2014-15 data is shown in red; clearly not-abating.

So, a critical question remains for discussion today: building on the National Framework and other initiatives such as the Royal Commission and the National Plan of Action to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, what more should we do to achieve greater child safety and wellbeing as soon as possible?

I leave you with a suggestion that we should be moving to a third and transformative phase of work in which we need to see real reductions in rates of abuse, and children's and young people concerns being placed more at the centre of community, NGO and governmental thinking and activity.



So, for example, isn't there a compelling case for 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?

Isn't there a case for developing a multi-generational, multi-sectoral investment strategy to fuel such a plan and specifically in relation to child safety?

Finally, isn't 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?

In closing, I believe that we've come a significant distance in under 20 years to set the scene and make some improvements.

Faced with an unabated problem, however, I believe that we have an opportunity like almost no other time in the past few decades to keep building the movement for real and lasting change. Thank you.

