

GOING FURTHER BY TRAVELLING TOGETHER

Address by Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia
to the 7th SNAICC National Conference, Canberra, 13 September 2017

'If you want to travel *fast*, go by *yourself*,
If you want to travel *far*, go *together*'
— African saying

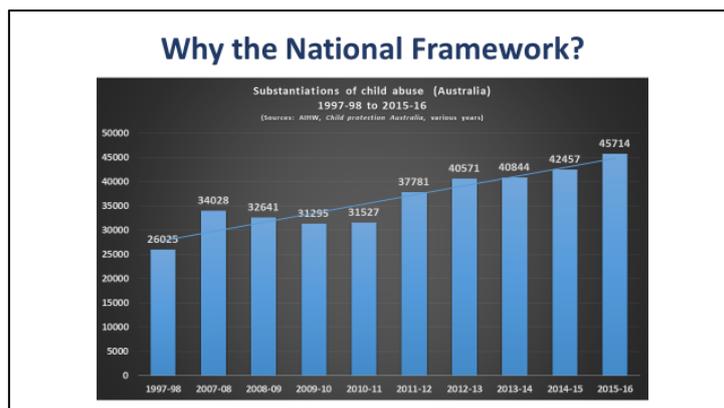
Welcome. With my co-presenters—Dr Ros Baxter and Susanne Le Boutillier—I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngambri/Ngunnawal people. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are attending today's gathering.

Our presentation

1. The National Framework: origins and progress (Brian)
2. Commonwealth perspectives and the Third Action Plan (Ros)
3. Queensland perspectives (Susanne)
4. Q & A: ***How can we together make Australia a nation where every child grows up safe and well?***

We would like to talk about the national picture on protecting children with a special emphasis on the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. We will offer some background about the National Framework and where it is heading. And, we will give you some perspectives from the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments and the NGO sector. We will argue that the National Framework represents an important step forward, but that much more needs to be done. We want to spend most time discussing with you how to achieve deep and lasting improvements in child safety and wellbeing at the earliest possible time. We encourage you to be bold and visionary in answering the question: *How can we together make Australia a nation where every child grows up safe and well?*

What is the National Framework?

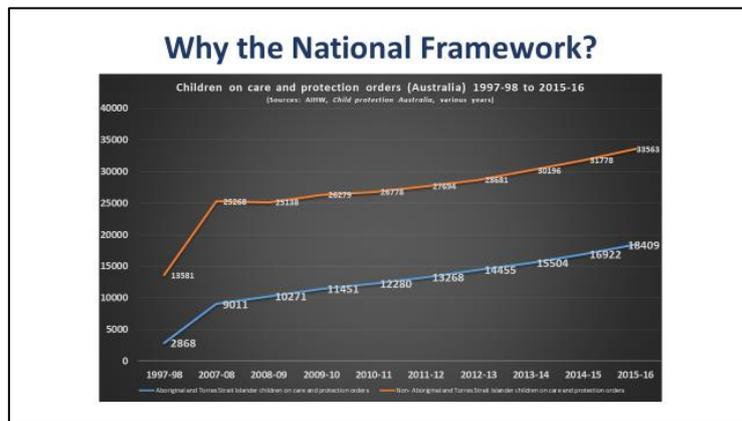


The National Framework is Australia's first-ever plan of action to address child safety and wellbeing. It was adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009 and aims to make a substantial and sustained reduction in child abuse and neglect over time. It is an important response by government, non-government and research sectors to Australia's alarming rates of child abuse and neglect.

As you will know, since the 1990s we have seen significant, and deeply concerning, increases in the numbers of children substantiated as having been abused, as well as those entering out-of-home care.

In the last six years alone there has been a 36% increase in the number of children known to have been abused or neglected. Total national expenditure on child protection, out-of-home care, family support services and intensive family support reached a record level of \$4.8 billion in 2015/16 – a 20% increase in last five years.

You are well aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are very disproportionately represented in these numbers.



In response, the National Framework is founded on four key assumptions and strategies.

Key assumptions & strategies

- Truly national joined-up
- Public health model emphasising prevention and early intervention
- Long-term
- Prioritising relatively high need areas

Driving Change: Intervening Early
Annual Report to Parliament 2015-16

First, it is designed to be a truly national approach, that is, a coming together of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the community and research sectors. Collaboration has been at the heart of the National Framework from the beginning. It recognises the need to join-up and concentrate the efforts of all major players to effectively tackle complex problems.

There is an African saying that 'if you want to travel fast, travel alone, but if you want to travel far, travel together'. That saying captures the spirit of the parties to the National Framework. We wanted

to travel together to achieve the major transformations we desired for children. In doing so, we recognised that we might have to travel more slowly than we would like.

Second, it is based on a public health model under which all parties agreed to emphasise prevention and early intervention approaches – in other words, to stop abuse and neglect before it happens. Some have called this ‘inverting the pyramid’, or putting more effort and investment into early intervention without compromising the welfare of children in out-of-home care or at risk of harm.

It aims to contribute to a ‘paradigm shift’ in protecting children, and is based on principles that include recognition that all children have a right to grow up in an environment free from neglect and abuse, and that children and their families have a right to participate in decisions affecting them.

Third, it is a long-term plan that spans 12 years. This was important because it was recognised that major change needs time to become deeply embedded in governmental and NGO thinking and systems, as well as reflected in changed community attitudes.

It has enabled layers of trust to be built up between and amongst the parties to the National Framework. Trust is the main currency on which the National Framework is based.

The 12 year timeframe has also enabled the National Framework to achieve support across all major political parties at Commonwealth as well as State and Territory levels.

Finally, we set out to focus attention on areas of greatest need. Hence, we’ve had a strong focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. Indeed, under the current 3rd action plan, which runs to 2018, this is a cross-cutting focus area, and SNAICC leads the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group which informs all National Framework activities. Furthermore, a key agreement has been to implement the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle across all 3rd action plan activities.

What has the National Framework achieved to date?

What progress?

- National OOHC Standards
- National Children’s Commissioner
- National child protection minimum data set
- National research agenda
- Cross-jurisdictional data sharing
- Child Aware initiatives

The National Framework is divided into four three-year action plans. We are in the middle of the third plan which runs to the end of 2018.

Since 2009, we have made some important progress. Under its remit, we have adopted the first-ever National Standards for Out-of-Home Care, appointed Australia’s first National Children’s Commissioner, and created the National Child Protection Minimum Dataset.

We have established a national research agenda, increased cross-jurisdictional data sharing, and implemented a wide range of ‘Child Aware’ initiatives, such as the Child Aware Approaches Conferences, which help to strengthen workforce capabilities.

Having been involved with the National Framework from the start, I think it is important also to recognise that we have helped to build a robust dialogue between and across governments and NGO sectors that did not exist before.

And, the National Framework provides a strong authority source for policymakers: it is certainly being used, for example, as the vehicle to advance COAG's work on child-safe organisations.

There is no doubt, however, that the task remains enormous and we need to make greater efforts. This year I convened ten workshops around Australia, involving over 400 people from government, non-government and academia.

Moving ahead: forum outcomes

Consensus: much more to be done

1. Improving current systems
2. New areas to emphasise
3. Tackling causes and valuing children

The key message from the forums was that the National Framework was valued and that far more work was needed to achieve meaningful change on the ground, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Participants stressed that we must improve existing systems as well as focus more attention and resources in key areas.

Very frequent recommendations were greater support for effective parenting, for improved media coverage, and for more attention on the needs of children with disability and children within culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Many people urged more effort to address factors such as homelessness and poverty. And, many spoke about the need for major cultural change: to put children more squarely 'at the centre' of society, to more truly recognise their importance, hear their voices and respond more fully to their needs.

In national terms, we have made a good start in recognising and responding to child safety and wellbeing issues through the National Framework, yet the changes we all want need far more effort. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on steps we can take to realise this goal.