

Never doubting the impact of the few

Paper delivered at Families Australia Annual General Meeting, Canberra, 30 October 2017
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The great cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead once remarked ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.’

The relationship between scale and impact has been very much on my mind this past week with the release of Families Australia’s *Annual Report 2016-17*. Though not a large-scale organisation compared with many others, I am very proud of Families Australia’s catalytic work at the national policy level to help advance the wellbeing of families and children, especially those experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

Three ideas, one approach

Over the past year, our work has been organised around three important ideas, namely, that Australia will be a fairer and more equitable and compassionate nation if we better protect and value children, if all families irrespective of their form are strengthened, and if there are genuine and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is not enough for us just to ‘stand witness’; our guiding approach is to build bridges of collaboration across government, community and research sectors to cultivate a public policymaking environment that responds more effectively to the needs of families experiencing vulnerability and marginalisation.

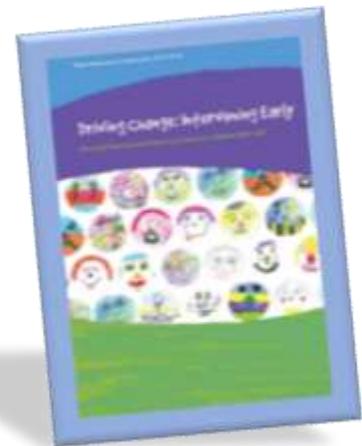
Protecting and valuing children

In the field of child safety and wellbeing, the past year saw us continue to deepen a sense of collective responsibility and genuine partnership between and across governmental, community and research sectors through the National Forum for Protecting Australia’s Children, through the successful Child Aware Approaches Conference, and by facilitating the Strategy Working Group under the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020 (the ‘National Framework’) on prevention and early intervention.

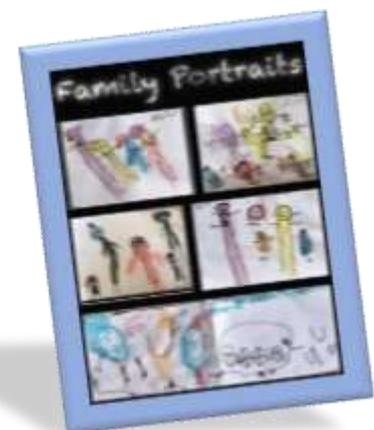
In the context of the Third Action Plan (2015-18) of the National Framework, it was a great privilege to facilitate 10 forums around Australia to hear from over 400 people on how we can make Australia a country in which *every* child grows up safe and well

Supporting and strengthening families

National Families Week, which was held between 15 and 21 May, represented another important time of coming together as over 125,000 people across Australia joined in local events to celebrate families in all their diversity.



Above: Third Action Plan (2015-18) of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020



Above: National Families Week artwork

Once again, the theme of building collaboration shone through as National Families Week events brought together a wonderful array of people, cultures and organisations, all sharing a common purpose.

Our Building Stronger Australian Families forums brought together Commonwealth officials and non-government representatives to hear from, and engage with, experts on key issues facing families in Australia today.

In these forums we tackled important contemporary socio-economic issues such as work-hours, gender and health inequalities. We also explored challenges that confront many young parents. In these ways we helped to inform, and hopefully inspire, those who provide policy advice to government.

Promoting Reconciliation

Under our Reconciliation Action Plan, we actively supported engagement in, and participation by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Member and stakeholder organisations in all our national policy development processes. We invited key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders to continue to participate in, and contribute to, major events such as National Families Week, National Framework conferences, policy forums and events.

We supported the contributions of key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and their organisations to the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing, in particular, the National Framework, and its Three Year Action Plan and Working Groups.

Our efforts to build knowledge of cultural resources included inviting Aboriginal and Torres Strait thought-leaders to deliver keynote addresses. These included the inspiring 8th Families Australia National Oration, which was delivered by Professor Ngiare Brown. We also promoted national days of significance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples such as NAIDOC Week, National Sorry Day, Closing the Gap, and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day through our communication platforms and speeches.

Outreach

Over the past year we also devoted considerable attention to strengthening links with our Members and communicating our views through speeches, policy commentaries, social media, policy forums and publications. We spoke and wrote on topics ranging from family and domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, young parents, welfare reform, Forgotten Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, and lifelong learning.

Looking ahead

Families Australia will continue to take strong leadership on the National Framework and will be active in exploring, with others, options to expand the national agenda in this critically important policy and program arena. Similarly, we have embarked on a journey to identify other issues of importance to families facing disadvantage to add to our policy repertoire. We take a long term view: we want to see protecting and valuing children, building stronger, more resilient families, and promoting genuine Reconciliation deeply embedded within the national policymaking mindset.

With thanks

None of our achievements would have been possible without our Members and other supporters, especially the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services. I continue to value greatly the support provided by the Chair and Board. I wish, especially, to thank the members of the Steering Group of the National Coalition for Child Safety and Wellbeing. Finally, and not least, it continues to be a great privilege to work alongside an extraordinarily talented, energetic and dedicated secretariat team, and I thank them all most sincerely.



Above: Professor Ngiare Brown delivers the 2017 Families Australia Oration