

## **At last, an acknowledgement of child-abuse crisis**

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Australia's appalling child abuse record has begged a concerted national response for decades. Yet, such a response has been fettered by the failure of all levels of government to work together to find comprehensive, cooperative and practical solutions.

What makes this week's launch of the Rudd Government's discussion paper on a national child protection plan so significant is that it makes a long-overdue acknowledgement of the crisis Australia faces in protecting its children from abuse and neglect, as well as proposing a course for the coming decade which aims to join together government and non-government efforts in an overarching plan.

A public consultation process will now commence and should lead to the adoption of a National Child Protection Framework later this year. This will be a first for Australia.

The success of the plan will, however, depend crucially on governments agreeing to work together and also to work in partnership with community service agencies and advocacy bodies.

Calls for a comprehensive, national child protection plan have been mounting, especially on the back of depressing annual figures which show that the problem is worsening. Last year (to 30 June 2007), the number of children in out-of-home care as a result of child abuse or neglect (28,441) was double the number of 10 years ago. The number of times when authorities found that a child either was, or was likely to be, harmed, abused or neglected increased by 45% from 40,416 in 2003 to 58,563 in 2007. Indigenous children are the subject of child abuse substantiations at a rate more than five times higher than other children. As well as the vast human toll of child abuse, the financial costs to society are immense.

These trends have been hard to reverse, in part because Commonwealth and State/Territory efforts have been poorly coordinated, targeted and resourced, and also because most State child protection systems have become critically overloaded. At present, States handle the front line response to child abuse cases, while the Commonwealth has contributed mainly to early intervention programs.

Currently, there is no agreement on an action plan or national research agenda. Nor are there common standards on who is responsible for reporting suspected child abuse cases. Different jurisdictions collect different data. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which collates the figures annually, notes in its latest report (*Child protection Australia 2006–07*) that there are “significant links and overlaps between some of the data collections” from State to State, there are “very limited national data on the movement of children through the child protection system”, and there are also “significant gaps in the current national data on child protection.”

Many leading non-government organisations and academics are looking to the Framework to be the nation’s blueprint for overall improvements in children’s wellbeing, which joins-up Commonwealth, State, non-government and research efforts.

It is widely hoped that the final Framework will include national targets and indicators for child wellbeing, a long-term commitment to major prevention programs to help tackle the underlying causes of abuse, practical ways to address the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection systems and a Federal Commissioner and an Office for Australian children and young people. It should also set the scene for a greater sense of shared community responsibility for lowering the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Whether or not we get a workable national child protection plan ultimately will depend on the willingness of governments to cooperate closely, suspend differences and work in innovative ways. As well as the Commonwealth and the States working in closer partnership, this

is an ideal moment for States to find ways to bring their systems into closer alignment.

Achieving nationally consistent legislation, policies and data collection at State levels will take time and will be sensitive. However, efforts to overcome jurisdictional boundaries and to devise a well-resourced plan are bound to be rewarded by the improved protection and wellbeing of our children. Australia's children deserve no less.

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