

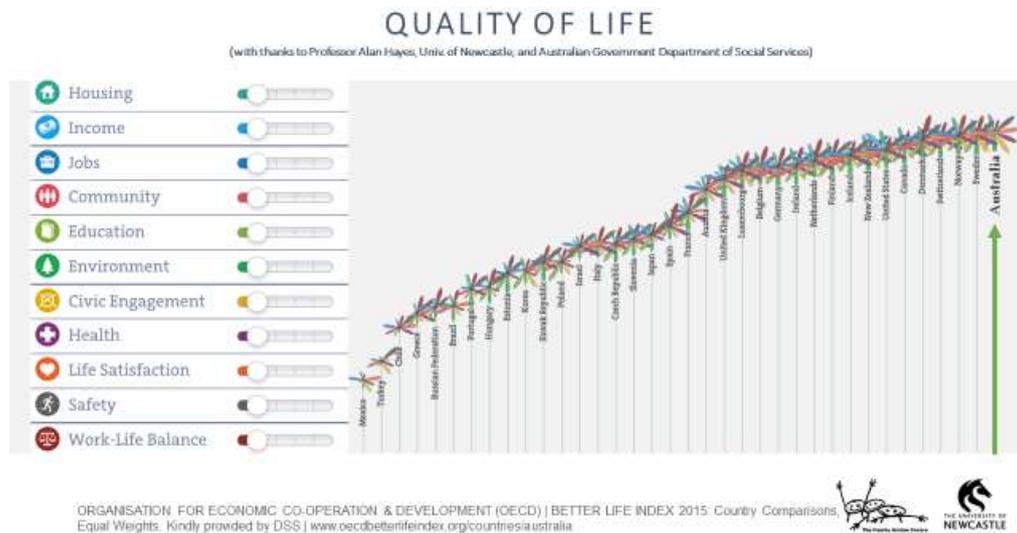
## TOWARDS A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR CHILD SAFETY & WELLBEING: HOW? WHEN?

Dr Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia  
Address to the Building Stronger Australian Families Forum  
Sydney, 2 May 2016

I wish to begin by acknowledging the Cadigal People of the Eora Nation as the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and wish to pay respect to their elders, past and present. Also, I wish to acknowledge the Chair and Board of Families Australia. Welcome everyone.

I'd like to spend 15-20 minutes talking about the national picture on child wellbeing, with a particular focus on child safety.

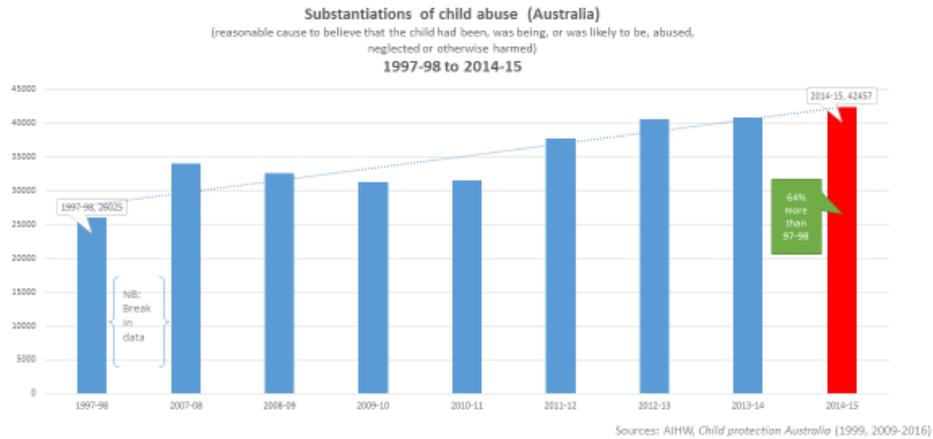
First, I'd like to present some data that suggests how we've been going on child protection over the past two decades. Then, I'd like to suggest a way of understanding the change journey on protecting children that we've all been on. Finally, I'd like to leave you with some ideas for discussion about what we ought to do differently to achieve greater child safety and wellbeing in Australia.



First, 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.

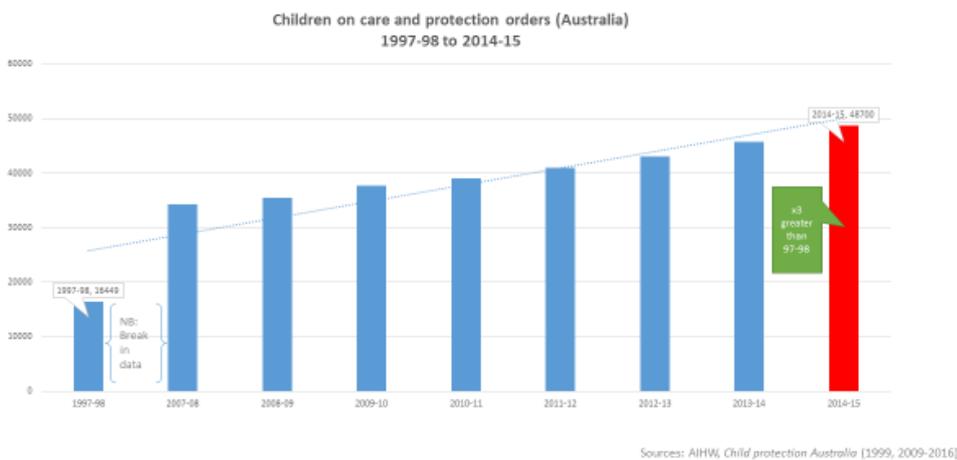
But, of course, such an aggregate picture obscures many major issues facing us as a nation. I'd like specifically to turn to a few slides about what's happening in terms of child safety, obviously a key component of overall child wellbeing.

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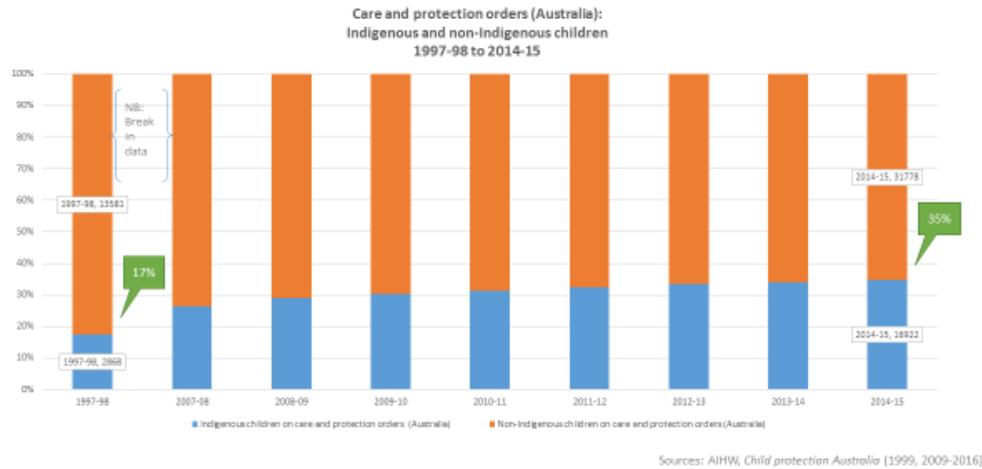
This graph uses data published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) over the past 17 years, the latest tranche of which was released a fortnight ago (which is highlighted in red). Although there are some caveats about data reporting methods, three main things can be observed here: first, the number of substantiated child abuse cases has risen from around 26,000 children in 1998 to over 42,000 in 2015; second, those numbers represent a 64 per cent increase in numbers in 17 years; and third, the trend-line is steadily upwards.

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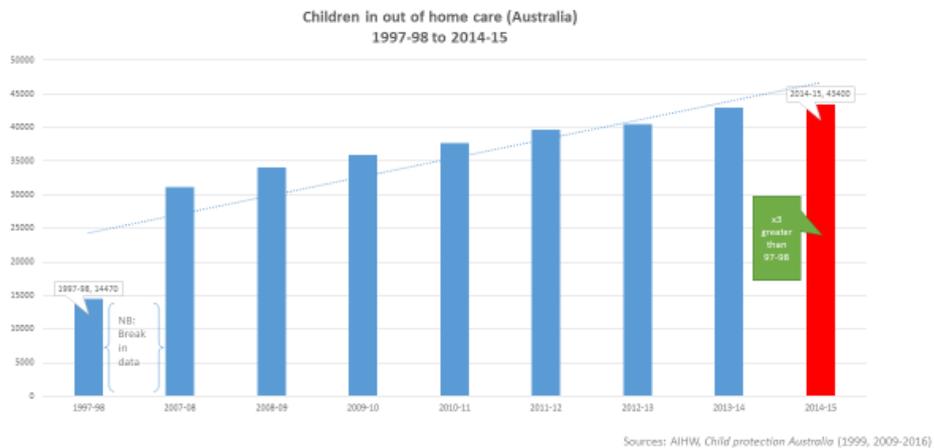
This graph tells a similar story in terms of the numbers of children who were the subject of care and protection orders between 1998 and 2015. The 48,700 children on orders in 2015 is three times greater than in 1998. Again you will notice the steady upward inflection in numbers, year on year.

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Analysing the care order data further, we can see how the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in this category (shown in blue) rose 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 stand at 35% last year.

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Finally, 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 of the number of children in out of home care across Australia in less than two decades.

## 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

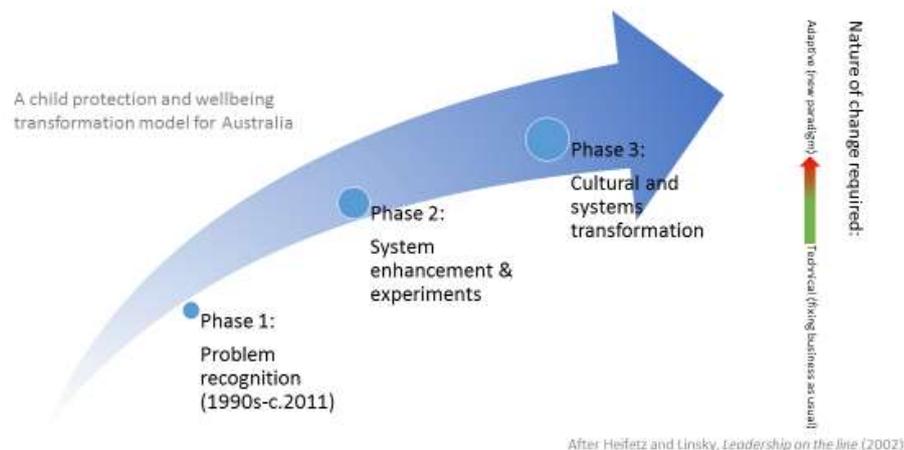


So, what have we done to tackle these problems, and what should we do?

I'd like to talk, first, about the journey we've been on over the last 20 plus years. 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 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 it will be very hard to do and challenging to community attitudes and some stakeholder interests.

## RE-CONCEPTUALISING THE JOURNEY



To present these ideas, I'll be using this graphic which is based on the transformative leadership concepts developed by Heifetz and Linsky at the Harvard Business School over the past 15-20 years.

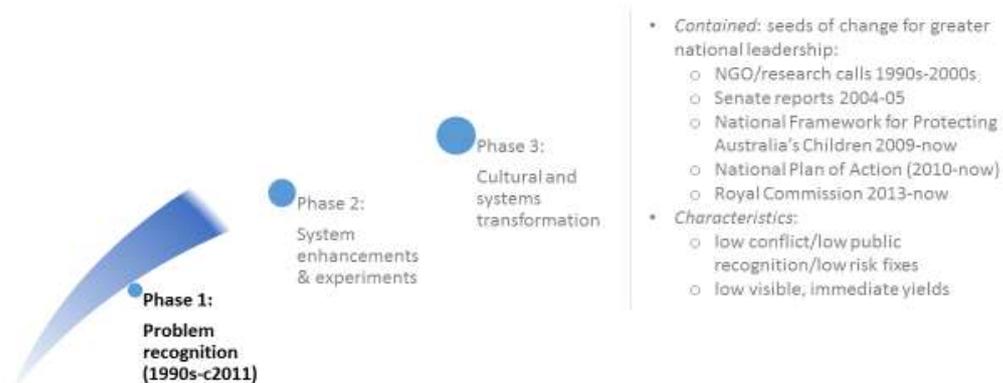
They argue that there are a whole host of problems that we try to tackle by technical fixes – tinkering with established systems and ways of doing business. But some problems are simply too complex and large. They call these ‘adaptive challenges’ because ‘they require experiments, new discoveries and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community’ (Heifitz and Linsky 2002, p.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. p.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.

Terrorism is an example of an adaptive challenge. The initial response was to treat it as a technical matter by increasing protective responses but in reality it requires both technical responses and adaptive transformation to understand and engage more deeply with non-Western and non-Christian cultures.

Though a different subject I see child safety as no different in terms of needing both technical and wide-ranging adaptive changes.

## PHASE 1: PROBLEM RECOGNITION



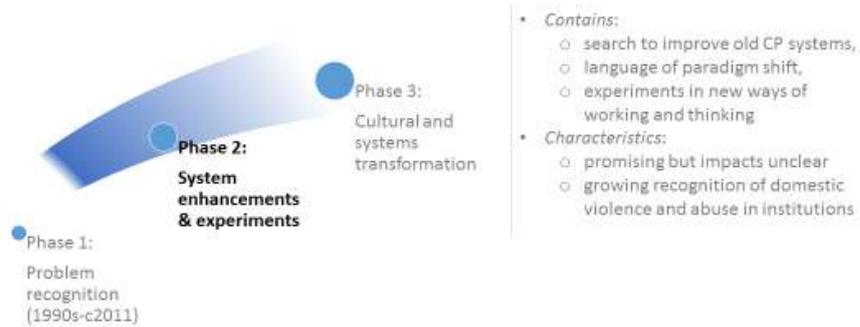
In the first phase of our response to child abuse at a national level, the 1990s were especially important as we started to gather data to map the extent of the problem and develop ideas for greater national leadership.

To the mid-2000s, there were a series of calls from NGOs and researchers and Senate reports. In 2009 the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children was adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – this was a major achievement as it was the nation's first-ever COAG endorsed plan aimed at a sustained and substantial reduction in child abuse over time. Nothing like this existed before and it continues today.

But that was not the only indicator of growing concern. The National Plan of Action to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children was adopted by COAG in 2010 and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse commenced in 2013.

I'd argue that these three pieces of national action represent something ground-breaking in Australian history, capturing a growing political and community mood to get in front of these interconnected problems.

## PHASE 2: SYSTEM ENHANCEMENTS & EXPERIMENTS



I'd put us currently at around Phase 2 in the journey which is about searching for ways to improve existing child protection systems.

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 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 annual conferences, and conducted promising trials in how to develop community-led child aware programs through the Child Aware Local Initiative.

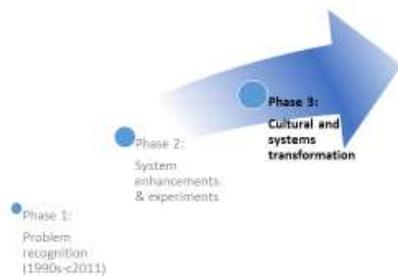
All of this work has been done through an innovative 'tripartite' partnership between the NGO/research sectors and Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments.

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.

I tend to see these first two phases largely as endeavours which have tried to improve existing approaches to child protection in innovative ways. We should not underestimate what we've achieved to date.

Please remember: nothing like this existed six years ago. We should all feel proud of this work and 'talk it up' within our respective jurisdictions.

## PHASE 3: CULTURAL & SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION



### Promising developments

- National Framework Third Action Plan (2015-18); focus on early intervention and the early years (first '000 days) and child safe organisations (see hand-out)
- Royal Commission to report 2017 – not just on historical abuse
- Increased focus on domestic and family violence

But, are these things enough?

There are two parts to my answer: first, I see signs of real promise in what we have more recently decided to do, and, second, we can and should do still far more to turbo-boost our efforts.

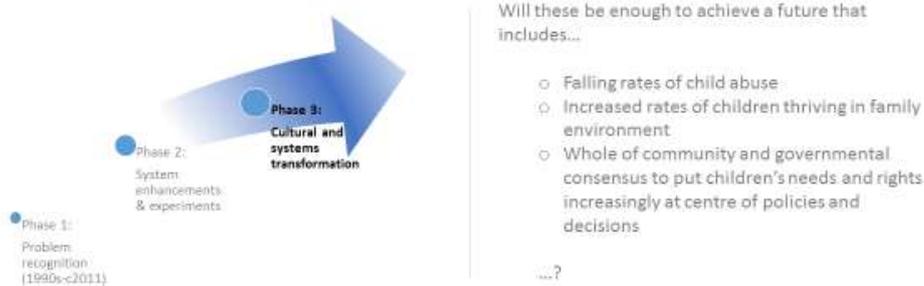
First, I see some promising developments and possibilities for real change. The new Third Action Plan (2015-18) under the National Framework puts great emphasis on the early years for a child. This work is picking up a growing international body of work including in developing countries to put renewed focus on the first thousand days for a child.

As the Royal Commission will report in late 2017, there is a real possibility that the nation's attention will be concentrated on these matters – maybe that's a window of opportunity for greater community and policy engagement?

And, of course, there is the recent upsurge of media, community and government attention on tackling family and domestic violence, which focuses on one of the three main drivers of child abuse. That initiative is massively important and needs to continue.

That's why, incidentally, it is one of Families Australia's four main policy goals, along with building stronger Australian families, valuing and protecting children, and advancing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

## PHASE 3: CULTURAL & SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION



I think many would say, with justification, that we aren't making fast enough progress in reducing rates of abuse, in fulfilling the UNCRC's call for all children to grow up in their family environment, except when no other alternatives are possible, and in attaining whole of community agreement about the centrality of children in actions, policies and practices. I am one of them, and I think we can and should go beyond these to achieve major cultural and political transformation.

## PHASE 3: CULTURAL & SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

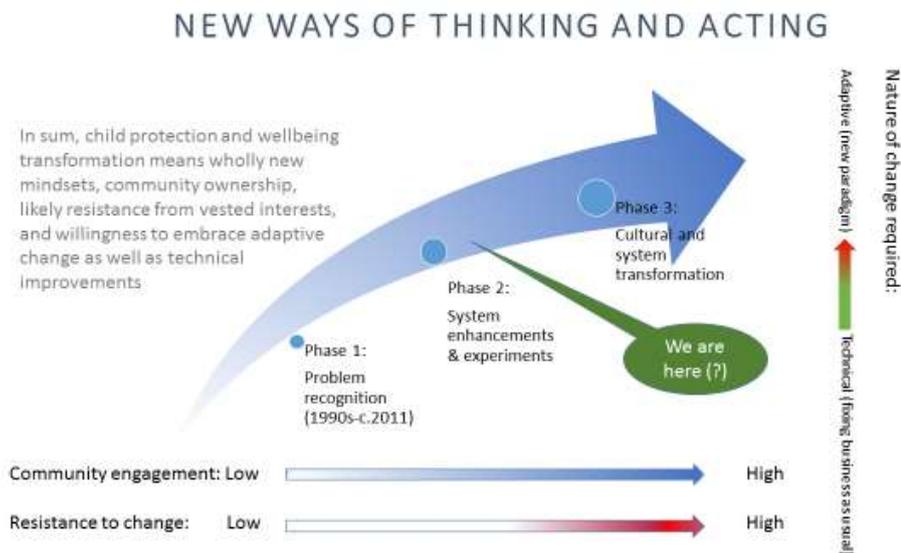


Here are three ideas, not (I stress) from one head but from many heads. They are not set in stone – they are high-level propositions for discussion. Let's at least decide to keep exploring imaginative ways ahead, whether or not these make the grade. In August this year, the annual National NGO Coalition meeting will be one such opportunity for debate.

First, to galvanise policymakers and community, is there a case for a 20 year national plan of action for children and young people which encompasses child safety and a wide range of other domains such as mental health?

Second, is there a case to be made for a multi-generational, multi-sectoral investment strategy to fuel such a plan and specifically in relation to child safety?

Finally, if we had to pick one specific matter of huge national importance, isn't one of the most important things to do is 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?



To finish, I wanted to sound notes of reality and hope. If the past two decades have been hard in getting gains such as the National Framework, getting cultural and systems transformation is going to be a lot, lot harder to do. That's because we need to get the broader community and our own sectors on side to drive political responses.

And, as this final chart suggests, there'll undoubtedly be resistance to transformation even from within our own cohorts as we change ways of doing business to embrace adaptive transformational approaches. I am optimistic.

We've come a significant distance in under 20 years to set the scene for change. I believe that we have an opportunity like almost no other time in the past few decades to keep building the movement for real change. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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