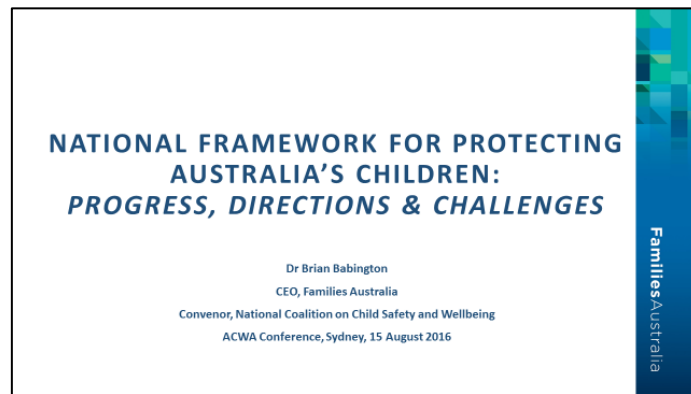


NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN: PROGRESS, DIRECTIONS & CHALLENGES

Dr Brian Babington
CEO, Families Australia
ACWA Conference, Sydney, 15 August 2016



I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and by paying respect to their elders, past and present.

I wish to talk about three things:

1. key aspects of the national problem we face with regard to child protection;
2. the current national policy responses, particularly the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children; and
3. ideas for sustained improvements in child safety and wellbeing.

I hope what I will say this morning about the situation in Australia paints a picture not only of the enormity of the challenge but leaves you with questions and ideas about how to improve the situation.

“ ‘As a nation we have a fundamental responsibility to protect our children,’ Mr Turnbull said while announcing the inquiry [into youth detention in the NT]. A failure to do so ‘diminishes all of us’, he added. ”

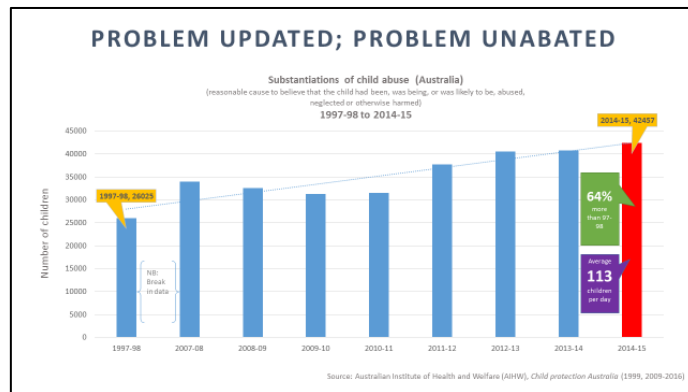
The Age, 28 July 2016

Let me start with a couple of scene-setting quotes. First, there are the words of Prime Minister Turnbull just three weeks ago in announcing the establishment of the Royal Commission into Detention in the Northern Territory. He said that “As a nation we have a fundamental responsibility to protect our children...failure to do so diminishes all of us.”

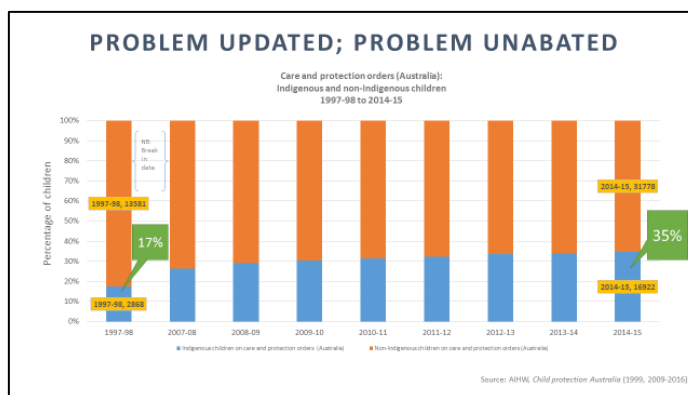
“Many children in the care of the state [SA] have been abused and neglected, not only by their families but by the system that was supposed to protect them. It is time for that to change. It is time for all of us to work together to give all our children the life they deserve.”

SA Royal Commissioner, the Hon. Margaret Nyland AM, 5 August 2016 (p. xiv).

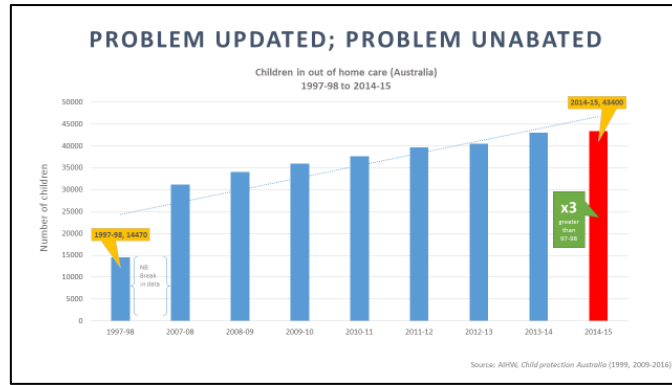
Last week, Royal Commissioner Margaret Nyland delivered her report with 260 recommendations for far-reaching reform of South Australia’s child protection system. She stated that: “Many children in the care of the state [SA] have been abused and neglected, not only by their families but by the system that was supposed to protect them. It is time for that to change. It is time for all of us to work together to give all our children the life they deserve.”



These statements are obviously important and welcome. Yet, they are only the latest iterations of deep concern over a situation we know has festered for many decades. A quick data review tells us that the child abuse trend-line is not heading in the direction we want. This graph uses data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare over the past 17 years, the latest tranche of which was released earlier this year (highlighted in red). It tells us that the number of substantiated child abuse cases rose by 64% in 17 years, or from around 26,000 in 1998 to over 42,000 in 2015. And, there has been a 31% increase in rates of substantiated child abuse in the past six years alone. On average, in 2015, an abuse substantiation was recorded for 113 children every day of the year.



And, analysing the care order data, we can see that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (shown in blue) increased 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 reach 35% last year.



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 in 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 taking over the last two decades. 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 what I term 'Phase 1' since the 1990s, and a bit of 'Phase 2' since the late 2000s. Because, as I hope to have demonstrated already, we do not appear to be turning the problem around, we need urgently to find new and additional solutions.

I will therefore suggest the need to get to a 'Phase 3' – *a period of transformation and adaptive change in addition to technical fixes of old systems* – as soon as possible, but that will be very hard to do and challenging to community attitudes and some stakeholder interests. Let me explain...

DEVELOPING THE NATIONAL APPROACH: 1990s-PRESENT

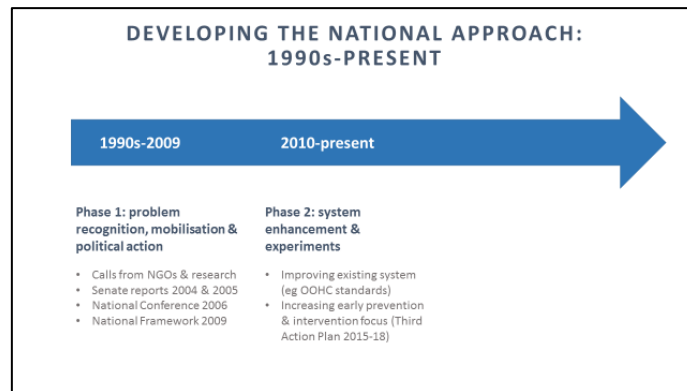
1990s-2009

Phase 1: problem recognition, mobilisation & political action

- Calls from NGOs & research
- Senate reports 2004 & 2005
- National Conference 2006
- National Framework 2009

Phase 1 involved initial problem recognition and political action which commenced in the 1990s and lasted until around 2011. I won't go into history. Suffice to say, however, that a main driver for a national approach was year-on-year worsening of rates of child abuse at least since the early 1990s when more consolidated national record keeping began.

Adopting the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020 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. It is Australia’s first-ever national plan of action to be endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments to reduce child abuse and neglect and to improve child wellbeing. Nothing like this existed before 2009.



I’d put us currently in Phase 2 of the journey in which we are searching for ways to improve existing child protection systems and exploring how we might innovate in terms of prevention and early intervention.

Collectively, we’ve done a lot to date. We have developed national standards for out-of-home care. We have improved cross-jurisdictional data sharing. We have created a national research agenda. And, we have established the office of the National Children’s Commissioner.

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 into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

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

So, perhaps we shouldn’t underestimate what we’ve achieved and, arguably, we’ve done reasonably well after six years in setting-up the scaffolding needed for greater long-term gains to be made. I’ll return in a moment to what we need to do differently.



I want to detour for a moment to mention that all of this work has been done through an innovative ‘tripartite’ partnership between the NGO and research sectors and Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments.

The NGO Coalition, which is convened by Families Australia, comprises around 170 organisations and researchers. It works with Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to co-design, implement and monitor the National Framework. The Coalition Steering Group participates in quarterly meetings of the National Forum for Protecting Australia’s Children with governments. And together we monitor progress with the National Framework and report to COAG annually on progress. The Coalition meets regularly to discuss National Framework progress. The next meeting will be held here (Sydney) on 17 August.

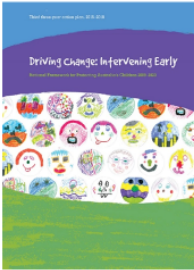
THIRD ACTION PLAN 2015-18

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:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
2. Research



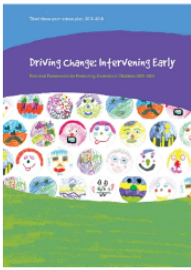
Zooming to the present and looking slightly ahead, the National Framework’s Third Action Plan (2015-18) was announced by the Commonwealth Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Christian Porter MP, late last year.

It places stronger emphasis than previous plans on prevention and intervening early. There was also a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. It contains 17 high-level actions arranged 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:

- Application ATSCIPP
- Trial ways to improve support for young people leaving care
- Implement OOHC standards
- Build child safe organisations



I draw your attention to some of the areas which I think represent important new directions. 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. More support will be provided to young people exiting the out-of-home care system so they do well in adulthood – this pilot was announced in the May 2016 Commonwealth Budget. All parties have agreed to the full implementation of the National Standards for Out of Home Care. 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.

THE FIRST THOUSAND DAYS FOR A CHILD

Under early intervention with a focus on the early years, especially the first thousand days for a child

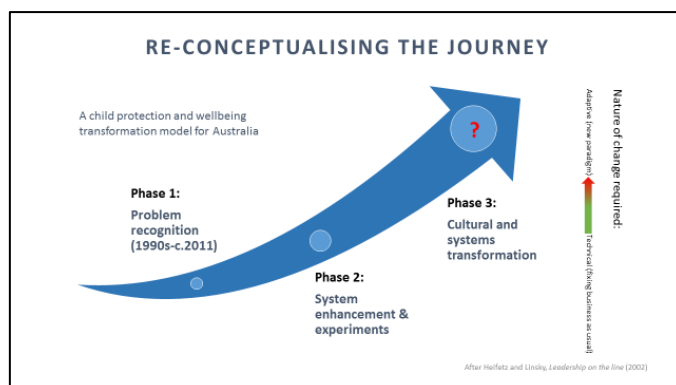
- Increase community awareness of importance of child development
- Improve access to evidence based family support services, especially new/expectant/vulnerable parents where substance misuse, mental ill-health & domestic/family violence combine
- Implement joined up responses for families with young children across agencies and sectors, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

A major new direction is early intervention with a focus on the early years, especially the first thousand days for a child.

Three main initiatives are planned. Some work is already underway. First, the Commonwealth will initiate community awareness raising activities focussed on effective parenting practices and strategies to enhance safe and supportive environments in the early years of life, at both national and local levels – this was announced in the May 2016 Budget.

Second, there will be work around improving access to evidence-based family support services, especially for new and expectant and vulnerable parents where substance misuse, mental ill-health and domestic/family violence combine.

Third, more work will be done to join up responses for families with young children across agencies and sectors, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A project has commenced to identify critical success factors for place-based models, and the Commonwealth will support the integration of child care, maternal and child health, and family support services in a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the Community Child Care Fund.



These things are clearly welcome. Yet, if we step back a moment, we clearly need to keep asking what more must we do. I think any reasonable person would conclude that we are far from where we want to be in terms of child safety. I contend that we need urgently to shift gear – to get a paradigm shift in attitudes and policies.

I call this a move to Phase 3 of a national approach in which we achieve lasting systems and cultural transformation by moving much more strongly to prevention investment which should underpin rapid reductions in rates of child abuse and greater evidence of children being placed more at the centre of community and political thinking and decision making.

**TOWARDS PHASE 3:
IDEAS FOR CULTURAL & SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION**

1. Build a multi-decade **national plan of action** for children and young people encompassing not only child safety but other domains such as health and education to focus attention and actions
 - Make a great **'First Thousand Days for a Child'** a community/political norm
 - Develop a multi-generational, multi-sectoral **investment strategy** to fuel the plan and specifically in relation to child safety
2. Re-run the 2005 Senate Inquiry entitled 'Protecting vulnerable children; a national challenge'
3. Support SNAICC's **Family Matters** campaign, particularly its request for COAG to adopt a target to help drive national efforts

Here are three ideas to that end. Please critique and improve on them!

First, perhaps now the time is right to build an overarching multi-decade national plan of action for children and young people that encompasses not only child safety but a comprehensive range of other domains such as mental health, disability and early learning.

That would be a great place to prioritise the First Thousand Days for a Child work already underway. It would help to concentrate the nation's attention on the importance of the early years across a wide range of domains.

To help drive that national plan, it would be important to carefully work out a multi-generational, multi-sectoral investment strategy, or if you like a business case telling us what is needed from all players to achieve far-reaching reform.

Second, the latest spate of alarming news—from the SA Royal Commission, to revelations about abuse in NT detention settings, and to yet more alarming reports from Nauru—strongly suggests that more concerted, coherent and comprehensive national political action is required. I'd argue that we should now be calling for a re-run of the 2005 Senate Inquiry entitled 'Protecting vulnerable children; a national challenge' to take stock of where we are and to chart new ways of responding.

Third, we should be getting behind SNAICC's Family Matters campaign to end the over-representation, and the representation at all, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. In particular, we need to request that COAG adopt a meaningful target to help drive national efforts.

“Unless we **re-envision** and **multiply our efforts** to tackle key **drivers** of child maltreatment – domestic violence, substance misuse, mental illness – we'll just keep adding metaphorical and actual bandages as child safety worsens.

In **human and financial terms that's not only unsustainable, it's inhumane.**

Future generations will not thank us”

In closing, I think we've come a significant distance in under 20 years to help set the scene and make improvements. But, faced with a clearly unabated problem, it seems to me that we are arriving at another potentially pivotal moment when bold thinking needs to occur with the aim of transforming rather than just tinkering with old systems.

Unless we re-envision and multiply our efforts to tackle the drivers of child maltreatment—mainly domestic violence, but also substance misuse and mental illness—we'll just keep adding metaphorical

and actual bandages as child safety worsens. In human and financial terms that's not only unsustainable but it's clearly inhumane.

Future generations will not thank us; indeed, they will probably condemn us, just as our predecessors are being judged by us for exposing children to abuse inside institutions and other settings. Without being senselessly optimistic, I think that we do have the makings for change. But, it does require our collective action and agitation to make the paradigm shift we so desperately need. Thank you.

References

Australian Child Rights Taskforce 2016, *CRC25: Australian Child Rights Progress Report. A report on 25 years of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia*. Retrieved from <<http://www.childrights.org.au/crc25/>>.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child protection Australia*, AIHW, Canberra (annual reports 1999-2016).

Babington, B 2016, 'National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020: progress, directions and challenges', *Developing Practice*.

Babington, B 2011, 'National framework for protecting Australia's children: perspectives on progress and challenges', *Family Matters*, 89. Retrieved from <<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2011/fm89/fm89b.html>>.

Commonwealth of Australia 2015, *Driving change: intervening early. National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020. Third three-year action plan, 2015-2018*. Canberra, ACT. Council of Australian Governments 2009, *Protecting children is everyone's business: national framework for protecting Australia's children 2009-2020*. Retrieved from <www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/pubs/framework_protecting_children/Documents/default.htm>.

Heifetz, R & Linsky, M 2002, *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass.

Kenny, M & Koziol, M 2016, 'Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull broadens Northern Territory abuse inquiry', *The Age* (28 July). Retrieved from <<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/prime-minister-malcolm-turnbull-broadens-northern-territory-abuse-inquiry-20160728-ggg10s.html>>.

Nyland, M 2016, *South Australian Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, The life they deserve: Child Protection Systems Royal Commission Report, Volume 1: Summary and Report*, Government of South Australia.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015, *Better life index 2015: country comparisons, equal weights*. Retrieved from <www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/Australia>.