

OUR COLLECTIVE NATIONAL CHALLENGE

Speech to the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing

Canberra 29 March 2018

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Minister, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and paying respects to their elders, past, present and emerging, as well as to the many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with us today.

I welcome the Commonwealth Assistant Minister for Children and Families, the Hon. Dr David Gillespie MP. I would also like to acknowledge Prue Warrilow, the Chair of Families Australia, and the other Board members, National Children's Commissioner Megan Mitchell, as well as members of the National Coalition Steering Group.

A number of Commonwealth, State and Territory officials are also present today and I welcome you all. National Coalition representatives from right across Australia are in attendance today. They represent a wide diversity of professional areas, including health, education, family services, child protection and out-of-home care.

The National Coalition

The National Coalition was established a decade ago to bring the views of the NGO and research sectors to the national policymaking 'table' as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) developed the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, the first-ever COAG endorsed national plan of action to improve child safety and wellbeing.

The National Coalition now numbers over 200 organisations and researchers from a wide range of sectors. It continues to grow. I would like to thank the hundreds of National Coalition members who have unflinchingly given their time and expertise to support this work over the past decade.

It is Families Australia's great privilege to facilitate the National Coalition in keeping with our goal of supporting national public policy that strengthens families and advances child wellbeing.

An alarming reality

We are about to conclude the 3rd three-year action plan (2016-2018) under the National Framework and chart directions for the final plan to take us to 2020.

The importance and urgency of our task has far from dissipated; if anything the challenges have grown.

Four months ago the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse called us to recognise that ‘Protecting children and promoting their safety is everyone’s business. It is a national priority that requires a national response.’

Commenting on the Royal Commission, last month in Federal Parliament Prime Minister Turnbull stated that ‘There is no more important obligation for every Australian than keeping our children safe from harm’.

Late last year also saw the report of The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory with its call for far-reaching systems reform, including the development of a ten-year generational strategy for families and children.

Official figures tell an alarming story. We see, for example, that the total national annual spend on child protection and related family support efforts has now reached \$5.2 billion, and is growing at a real annual rate of 8.5 per cent. 60 per cent of that total spend goes toward running out-of-home care.

We see a near doubling in the number of substantiations of abuse or neglect over the past two decades, from 26,000 to almost 50,000 last year. And, we continue to see huge disparities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are significantly over-represented across substantiation and out-of-home care compared with the non-Indigenous cohort.

Important start

The National Framework is a ground-breaking national policy response characterised by three important things: strong leadership by the Commonwealth Government and COAG; a desire to shift investments more toward early intervention and prevention under a public health model; and, a belief that good policy outcomes will result from bringing together governments, NGOs and researchers in a meaningful tripartite collaboration and dialogue.

No-one would say that the National Framework is perfect. But, from a national public policy standpoint it represents a major advance and has built important scaffolding needed for change.

We see this, for example, in the work currently being undertaken to devise National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. We see it in the appointment of Australia’s first National Children’s Commissioner, in increased cross-jurisdictional data sharing, and the support that the National Framework has across all jurisdictions irrespective of political persuasion.

It has enshrined the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle across all action plan activities. It is in the agreement to have the first-ever national standards for out-of-home care. And, we see it working when it brings together policymakers to discuss new initiatives such as SNAICC’s Family Matters campaign.

Our collective challenge

We still need to do far better...and with great urgency. Today we invite your ideas on two matters: this morning, on priorities for the 4th and final action plan under the National Framework, and, this afternoon, on what should follow when the National Framework finishes in 2020.

In short, what more *must* we do in national policy terms to make Australia a nation where all children grow up safe and well?

Arguably we've been through a couple of phases in the development of the national policy on child safety and wellbeing: from the 1990s when the problem received national level recognition, to the 2000s when political action was taken by COAG, through to the National Framework's early action plans.

It is clear to me that the next few years will see growing demands for systems transformation, demonstrated impact, and new 'disruptive' approaches. Contextual factors include calls by the two recent Royal Commissions for fundamental reform, the expected trebling of the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care in the next 20 years unless significant change occurs, and the inability of foster and kinship carers to meet demand as more children enter out-of-home care.

The National Framework has provided an effective foundation for stepping up national efforts after 2020. One vision is that the National Framework is the foundation of a bolder national initiative on child wellbeing and family strengthening that might, for example, give even stronger emphasis to early prevention and family support, with top priority accorded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. I wish you well in your discussions today on the possible shape of future national policy in this vitally important area.

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