

National policy on child safety and wellbeing: Latest developments & future directions

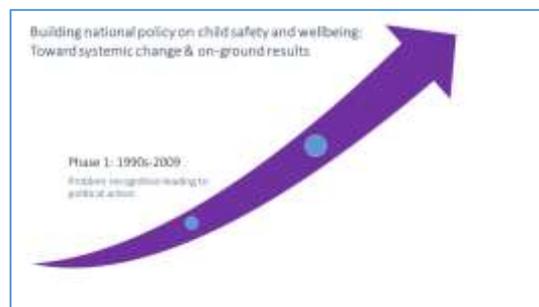
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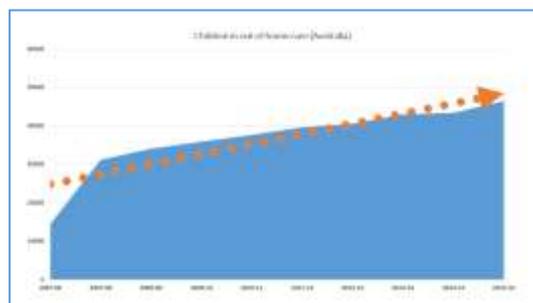
I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, and pay respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

I want to talk about the journey in developing national policy on child safety and wellbeing over the past decade, where we are going with it, and where I think we should be going in the longer term. I want to talk about how one big idea about better protecting children has been given life in national policy.

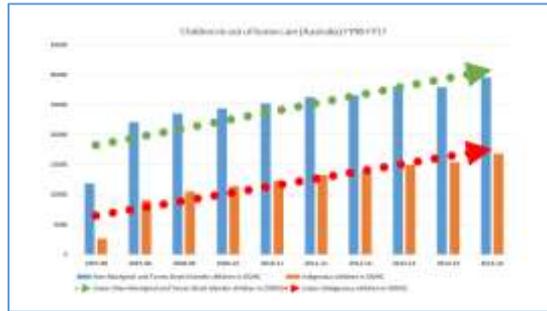
First, to situate myself, my organisation, Families Australia, is a national, peak, not-for-profit organisation with over 800 member organisations around Australia. We work for stronger policies on family and child wellbeing at the national level. We convene the *National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing*, a grouping of over 200 NGOs and researchers, who work with governments to design and implement national policy on child safety and wellbeing.



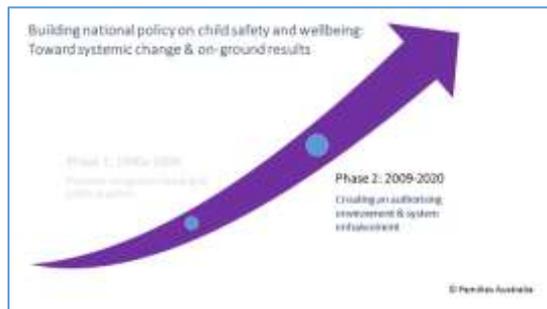
I use this slide to talk about the direction of travel in developing national policy, by which I mean a shared position across all Australian governments, supported by the NGO and research sectors. It's possible to see a couple of phases since the 1990s. In the first phase, from the 1990s and 2000s, we saw child abuse beginning to receive greater recognition as a national problem.



Here we can see official figures showing that the number of children in out-of-home care increased rapidly in the decade before 2008 and has continued to grow ever since.



We saw a similar significant increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out-of-home care system...and a continued upward trajectory.



This situation resulted in a second phase in which a political and policy authorising environment was created when COAG adopted the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020 in 2009. This was the first time that all Australian governments had come together on child protection in this way. It was an important shift because, while the Commonwealth had always provided support through systems such as education and health, it was previously engaged on child protection matters in only limited ways.

The National Framework is based on a public health model that aims to emphasise early intervention and prevention. The goal is to achieve a sustained and substantial reduction in child abuse over time. It is divided into four three year action plans. We are about to commence the fourth and final action plan.



The National Framework is characterised by: leadership by the Commonwealth Government and COAG; a desire to shift investments more toward early intervention and prevention; and, a belief that better policy outcomes will result by bringing together governments, NGOs and researchers in a meaningful tripartite collaboration and dialogue.

I want to emphasise the role of the NGO and research sectors here. Not only did they strongly advocate the case for change throughout the 1990s, but they have contributed massively ever since through the National

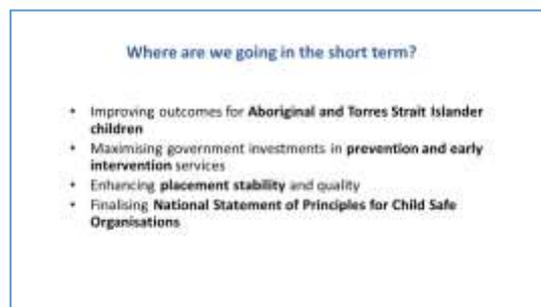
Framework and its various working groups and forums to build the model. Millions of dollars in time have been contributed, mostly on a *pro bono* basis, to advancing this agenda. I also express gratitude to governments for supporting the National Framework despite many changes of government over the past decade.

Much encouraging work has been done under the National Framework. The stand-out achievements include:

- Adopting Australia's first-ever National Standards for Out-of-Home Care
- Establishing the office of the National Children's Commissioner and appointing Megan Mitchell as the inaugural Commissioner
- Creating the National Child Protection Minimum Dataset
- Increasing cross-jurisdictional data sharing
- Holding five Child Aware Approaches Conferences
- Being the enabling policy for work on national principles for child safe organisations.

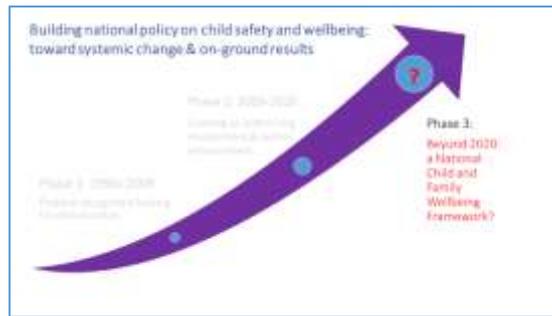


We are about to complete the Third Action Plan which has placed stronger emphasis than previous plans on prevention and intervening early. It has 17 high-level actions arranged under three National Strategies around early intervention with particular focus on the first thousand days for a child, helping young people in out-of-home care to thrive in adulthood, and building child safe organisations.



In coming months, Community Services Ministers under the COAG umbrella are expected to announce the 4th action plan to take us to 2020. Families Australia ran nationwide consultations last year to inform directions for the 4th action plan. While the details are yet to be announced, already Community Services Ministers are on record as wanting the action plan to work for improvements in:

1. outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at risk of entering, or in child protection systems
2. prevention and early intervention responses through joint service planning to improve access for children and families, and provide more targeted, coordinated investment by governments
3. outcomes for children in out-of-home care by enhancing placement stability through reunification and other permanent care options
4. organisational and governmental ability to keep children and young people safe from abuse in recognition of the recommendations of the Royal Commission.



I want to talk, finally, about where we should be going in the longer term on national policy after 2020. There appears to be a broad consensus across governments and the NGO/research sectors that there needs to be a successor national policy after 2020, moving us to what I'd describe as the third phase in building a national approach. The question is: What should that plan contain? Many people argue that we need to substantially step-up national efforts after 2020. I certainly agree. I view the National Framework as the foundation of a broader national initiative on child wellbeing and family strengthening that should give even stronger emphasis to early prevention and family support, with top priority accorded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Such a plan ought to give strong priority to tackling key child abuse drivers of substance abuse, mental ill-health and family/domestic violence.

One vision is that such a plan could bring together a developmental and wellbeing domains in a way similar to Scotland's ground-breaking 'Getting it Right for Every Child initiative'. Perhaps it's also time to consider establishing a multi-decade Futures Fund for Australian Children and Families under which substantial funds could support innovative early intervention programs. Families Australia will continue with national consultations about this broader post-2020 question over the next year to help find answers. We hope to get your views on these matters.

So, to conclude, we are on a long journey. We are trying to do a very difficult thing – build a collaborating national intergovernmental and cross-sectoral policy approach, change adult behaviours and undertake system reform. From a national public policy standpoint, the National Framework is a major advance and has built important scaffolding and the political consensus needed for change. It is, in its own way, the first draft of important social change and one we need to keep building for the longer term. I know that by exerting leadership and prodding systems we have already had impact. But more is needed. The role of the NGO sector is to keep up pressure not only on governments but also within its own ranks to keep relaying what works in the field with families and children to the policy level. More than ever we need your ideas about how to do these things.

Thank you.