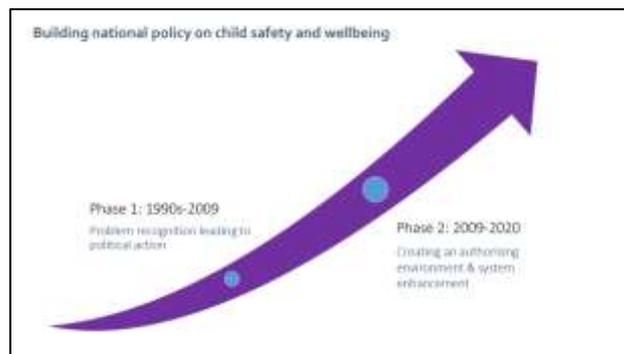


CHILD SAFETY AND WELLBEING IN AUSTRALIA: TOWARD A BOLDER PLAN

Dr Brian Babington
Chief Executive Officer Families Australia
Convenor, National Coalition on Child Safety & Wellbeing
Presentation to the National Forum on Protecting Australia's Children
Sydney, 30 August 2018



I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the Country on which we gather, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and by paying respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging, as well as to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with us today.

I wish to discuss the overall strategic 'direction of travel' on national policy about child safety and wellbeing and about some ideas for the future.

It is possible to identify a couple of phases in the development of a national approach over the past two decades. In the first phase, from the 1990s to the late 2000s, we saw child abuse beginning to receive greater recognition as a growing national problem.



This situation resulted in the Council of Australian Governments adopting the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 (the 'National Framework') in 2009 with its aim of producing a sustained and substantial reduction in child abuse over time.

The National Framework is characterised by COAG and Commonwealth Government leadership, a desire to shift investments more toward early intervention and prevention under a public health model, and a belief that good

outcomes will result from bringing together governments, NGOs and researchers in a tripartite collaboration and dialogue.

Non-government organisations have made a significant contribution by devoting millions of dollars, mostly on a *pro bono* basis, to support the National Framework and by delivering services to children and families directly in the field.

Some encouraging work has been done under the National Framework to date. These include:

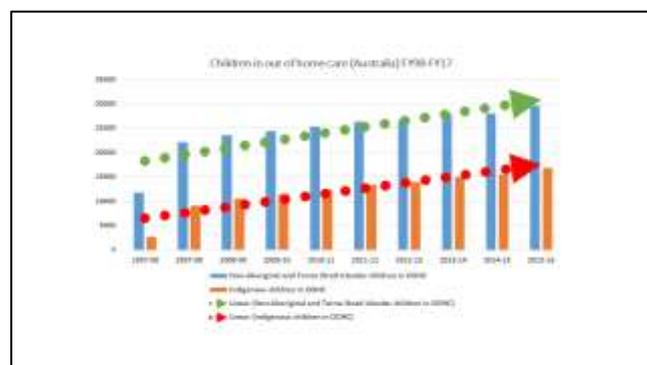
- Adopting Australia’s first-ever National Standards for Out of Home Care,
- Establishing the office of the National Children’s Commissioner and appointing Megan Mitchell
- Creating the National Child Protection Minimum Dataset
- Agreeing a Priorities Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Increasing cross-jurisdictional data sharing
- Holding five Child Aware Approaches Conferences
- Being the policy setting for work to devise national principles for child safe organisations.



But, official figures continue to tell a deeply disturbing story. We see, for example, that the total national annual spend on child protection and related family support efforts has reached \$5.2 billion, and is growing at an real annual rate of 8.5%. Sixty per cent of that total spend goes to running out of home care systems.

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.

There has been a trebling in the numbers of children in out of home care in the past two decades. 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.



There has been a six-fold increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out of home care system.

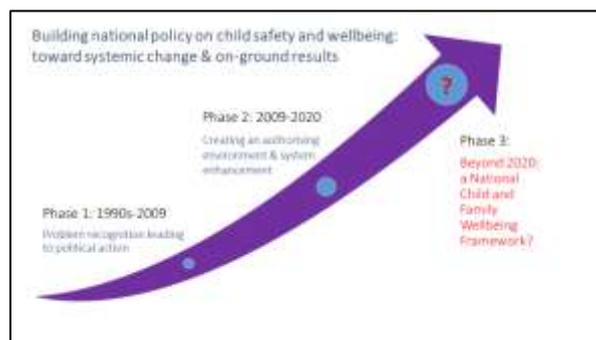
Where to?

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Focus on causes and family strengthening
- Effective parenting and more soft entry points
- Valuing children
- More joint service planning and delivery
- Stronger links within & across governments/portfolios
- National consistency, for example, WWCC and workforce

In planning the National Framework's fourth action plan 2018-2020, Families Australia convened nationwide workshops for non-government representatives and researchers. In all, over 400 people participated.

Some common themes emerged from these consultations. The top four areas of suggested improvement were: tackling causes of child abuse, improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, valuing children more, and enhancing parenting skills and help-seeking behaviours.

Participants felt that more needed to be done in terms of joint planning between and across governments and the NGO sectors and in building greater national consistency in areas such as working with children checks.



So, what should we do next? There seems to be a strong consensus that we must do far more – to obtain results on the ground where it matters at the earliest possible time. Hence one idea is to build an even bolder national plan after the National Framework ends in 2020.

This might be called a national plan for child wellbeing and family strengthening, a necessary third phase in a coordinated and effective national approach to tackle child abuse and neglect that takes a holistic view about children's development across a range of domains.

The National Forum has a vitally important role to play in advancing thinking in this most critical of areas.