

# **Advancing social policy through collaborative practice**

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**Address to the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia AGM  
14 September 2018, Sydney**

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging and to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with us today.

It is an honour to talk with you today. I wish to acknowledge the role the Council plays in bringing a significant national voice on early learning and care. Families Australia is also a national peak body. Our role is to contribute to Commonwealth policymaking in ways that improve family and child wellbeing, especially for the most vulnerable.

Given our peak roles, I want to share some of Families Australia's experience on connecting ideas to government policymaking. For almost 40 years, I've worked in government and non-government sectors, as well as in business and academia. My special interest is in what makes national policymaking occur.

To cut to the chase, I believe that policy change is more likely to occur when three things happen: you need good ideas, you need to advance these ideas when there are windows of opportunity, and you need to involve and nurture people of goodwill to push the policy change agenda forward.

These three things aren't weighted equally. There is usually an abundance of good ideas arising from research, practice and lived experience. Less common are moments when policymakers are able to make change – most often in the lead up to an election or in response to a crisis.

The ingredient that is less known but essential is people of goodwill – it is the ingredient we need to work on most. I want to illustrate my point in terms of developing the national approach to child safety and wellbeing over the past two decades. I am talking about the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020, Australia's first-ever national plan to tackle child abuse and neglect to be endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments.

The National Framework aims to substantially reduce child abuse and neglect in Australia. It takes a public health approach under which we want to see governments increase their expenditures on early intervention and prevention efforts especially around substance abuse, domestic and family violence and mental illness that drive most child abuse cases. It aims to move resourcing away from the costly tertiary or emergency end of the spectrum, in particular, to reduce the numbers of child abuse cases and children in the out of home care system.

In the past decade there have been some important achievements under this national approach. These include the development of Australia's first-ever national standards for out-of-home care and establishing the office of the National Children's Commissioner.

To return to my theory of policy change, the National Framework had all three elements. It was grounded in an evidence and ideas base that had developed over decades and it emerged from the 2007 Federal election process – the right window of opportunity.

But, it was collaboration amongst people of goodwill that really made it happen. From the beginning a lot of effort went into building consensus across the NGO and research sectors in the form of the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing. The National Coalition now has over 200 organisations as members and is convened by Families Australia.

Second, the National Framework has been designed on the basis of a tight collaboration between Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the non-government and research sectors through the National Forum for Protecting Australia's Children – we call it the tripartite approach and we nurture it very carefully. Third, as a peak Families Australia has been careful not to 'run' or dominate the National Coalition – rather, we facilitate and enable the experts to have an ongoing dialogue with policymakers.

These factors have enabled participants' sense of trust, common purpose and goodwill to emerge strongly and to reduce the extent to which vested interests intrude in a matter of overarching national importance.

I cannot say that the trajectory of collaboration is always evenly upward, but over a decade I can see a deepened sense of shared purpose and public value. Although it is labour-intensive, building coalitions of support is critical to best policy design and outcomes. What we are building is an approach for the long term and one that embeds a way of thinking and operating.

I wish to conclude with a few words about future directions for national policy on child wellbeing. We need to go beyond the National Framework in 2020 to create a bolder national plan for child wellbeing that includes safety and stronger support for families experiencing difficulties. It could mirror what we already see in Scotland under the Getting It Right for Every Child initiative which takes a holistic view of child development. And, it needs financial grunt. One idea is to establish a Future Fund for Australian Families and Children that can invest in preventive programs.

While there is obviously far more to be done, we can point to some encouraging signs. The various governmental responses to the Royal Commission, the work on child safe organisations, and the bipartisan and cross-jurisdictional support for the National Framework are important. We now need to build on these to achieve real and lasting improvements for children and families. Thank you.

(extract of address)