



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 1

The health and social inclusion of young children

Every child has the right to a good start in life. A healthy and safe childhood starts with a loving family and a connected community, where children and their families have opportunities to learn and grow. Children and their families also need access to adequate incomes, secure housing and support services. The wellbeing and social inclusion of children is a national priority and the responsibility of us all.

Why this is important

Children are citizens in their own right. Children bring joy, curiosity and fun to the world and they make valuable contributions to community life. Children are also highly dependent on adults and communities for care, safety and wellbeing.

There are about four million children in Australia, making up 20% of our population¹. Improved living conditions, prosperity, education, medical care and vaccination have had positive impacts on children's health and wellbeing. However there are concerns about increasing levels of behavioural, developmental, mental health and social problems confronting children².

The early years of a child's life are a critical window for positively influencing children's long term physical and emotional health and wellbeing. As much as 85% of our brain develops in the first three years of life. Healthy early childhood development can have a positive impact on educational attainment, adult employment and self-esteem, and the economic cost benefit of investing in early childhood development has been well established³.

However, these early years of child development can be compromised. For instance, child abuse and neglect has short and long-term impacts on children's social, intellectual, and emotional development. Child maltreatment also has economic, physical and psychological consequences, and in 2003 the total cost of child abuse and neglect in Australia was estimated at \$4.9 billion⁴.

Child poverty is also a pressing concern. According to a 2007 report by UNICEF, between 12 and 15% of Australian children live in poverty⁵. A separate study in 2006 found that 28% of Australian children experienced a period of poverty over the preceding three year period⁶. This material disadvantage is often compounded by a lack of access to basic services and community networks leading to social exclusion, a state which is especially detrimental to the development of young children.

Social exclusion is creating conditions where new generations of children will find it harder to learn, be physically and mentally healthy, live in secure housing, and get jobs or training opportunities once they

leave school. For instance, children born in struggling communities are at risk of higher infant mortality rates, lower birth weights, lower immunisation rates, are more likely to experience mental health problems and are less likely to attend pre-school. Children in low income families have nearly five times less spent on their education each week than those in high income households⁷, which can have long-term implications for their future employment opportunities. Children feel the effects of poverty on their social relationships and their ability to participate in social activities. They describe the difficulties of 'keeping up' appearances, being unable to have friends over to visit, being excluded by their peers, feelings of shame and being bullied⁸.

Social exclusion compromises children's wellbeing, impacting most on children who are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, have a disability, are affected by parental mental illness or drug and alcohol abuse, have a history of abuse or neglect, or are affected by domestic violence⁹.

What must be done

All children have the right to a good start in life. This is important for their happiness and wellbeing as children, for their future as productive and fulfilled adults, and it is the responsibility of parents and families, communities and governments.

We know that prevention is better than a cure. We know what works when it comes to supporting children to grow up healthy and safe. Now we need

Indigenous children

Harsh injustices since colonisation and successive government policies have resulted in deep social and economic exclusion among Indigenous Australians¹⁰. This is reflected in stark disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children when it comes to health, safety, educational attainment and economic disadvantage.

Indigenous children die at three times the rate of non-Indigenous children. Indigenous children are subject to eight times more child protection notifications than other Australian children. Fewer Indigenous children meet the literacy and numeracy requirements for being primary school-ready. Average Indigenous household income is 62% of the average income for non-Indigenous households¹¹.

to work together to make this a reality for all children. Governments, non profit organisations, business and academia all have a role to play in keeping children safe and healthy. When all sectors work in partnership with the genuine participation of children, their families and communities, we can ensure that strong evidence and best practice inform programs and policies for children and families.

The Benevolent Society has identified five key areas that support a healthy and resilient childhood. These focus on children's rights and needs and how best to support individuals, families and communities to be active participants in creating a healthy, sustainable nation and a just society.

1) Ensuring children are safe and healthy

Child protection: Child wellbeing and protection is the responsibility of families, communities and government. The best way to improve the safety of children is through a public health approach to child protection. This means that every child and parent must have access to universal services and support such as quality health and education systems and parenting support. Families that require extra support should have easy access to more targeted or secondary services before problems escalate. Tertiary or specialised services are then used as a last resort for children and families that are at greatest risk.

Children who have been abused or neglected are vulnerable members of our community. They need high-quality, evidence based child protection services which make them feel safe, supported and nurtured. If children are removed from their parents and placed in out-of-home care, they need stable, secure placements, within their own extended family or community wherever possible.

Encouragingly, Australia has committed to a National Framework on Child Protection. The Framework has identified national outcomes to work towards and governments will be held accountable through regular reporting on children's wellbeing.

Ending domestic and family violence: Domestic and family violence impacts on children's physical and mental health, self-esteem and social competence¹². Domestic violence policies must recognise that children are also primary victims of domestic and family violence and be genuinely integrated into the child protection framework. Women and children who have left violence need long-term therapeutic interventions to heal from the trauma they have experienced.

Services for all children: Government policies and programs can support parents and communities to support children. The first step is to have services for all children, or universal services, like child and maternal health centres, playgroups and preschools. These sorts of services can promote the good health and early learning of all children, as well as supporting parents. Services accessed by all children can help to pick up any developmental issues early and refer children to specialist services if necessary. Universal services also tend to not have stigma attached to them because they are viewed as a community resource.

Universal child and family services are a key platform of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy- Investing in the Early Years which was recently endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments.

Supporting breast feeding: The World Health Organization¹³ recommends that babies should be breast fed exclusively for the first six months of life. Breastfed babies are likely to have better health outcomes throughout their lives, like lower blood pressure and cholesterol and being less prone to type two diabetes and being overweight or obese¹⁴. Australian women have low rates of breast feeding compared to other developed countries¹⁵. Women experiencing social disadvantage including those in low paid and casual employment are least likely to breastfeed, have access to paid parental leave or the support needed to breastfeed successfully¹⁶.

Government policies and services need to support mothers to breast feed for longer and remove the barriers that stop women from breastfeeding. This includes having access to adequate paid parental leave, and universal services for new mothers and their babies¹⁷.

2) Supporting families to be resilient

Integrated child and family services: The most disadvantaged children and their families have the least access to quality early childhood services including health, education and parenting support. There is growing evidence¹⁸ showing that integrated programs and services are more likely to support children and families, including those who are disadvantaged, by providing an accessible entry point which links in with all the services families need. Ideally, an integrated approach would mean that a community would have a convenient one-stop-shop where parents and children could access government services such as income support and

family payments as well as early learning and care and health services.

Effective policies that support integration on the ground and between government departments and non profit organisations can support families to negotiate complex systems and networks of care. Australian states, such as Queensland through its Early Years Strategy, are recognising the importance of integrated child and family services. In NSW, the Wood Report into Child Protection Services recommended that services should be integrated, multi disciplinary and co-located in areas of the greatest need and that NGOs should be key players in delivering these services. The Federal Government has also committed to establishing Integrated Child and Family Centres across Australia.

However, there are significant policy gaps regarding how integrated child and family services can best work for the most disadvantaged communities. These gaps need to be filled by evidence of best practice, and through meaningful consultation with families, communities and the not for profit organisations which will deliver these services.

Supporting parents: Parenting behaviour has a significant impact on the health and physical development, social and emotional functioning, and learning and academic competency of all children. We need to engage early with children and families before problems start and assist children and families in times of transition and crisis. These findings support the need for universal programs to help all parents with parenting skills¹⁹.

Nurse home visiting: Universal nurse home visiting programs where every new mother has an option of a trained nurse or other qualified early childhood professional visiting them can provide much needed support and guidance for parents. Research²⁰ indicates that home visiting can result in fewer incidents of child maltreatment, enhanced parental knowledge and parenting skills; improvements in children's cognitive and social development; and increased linking of parents to health care and other services. We support the NSW Government's commitment²¹ to introduce universal nurse home visiting for every parent with a newborn child by 2010 and sustained home visiting for families most in need.

Paid parental leave: Paid parental leave recognises not only the rights of children and parents but also the valuable contribution that women make to Australian society. The Federal Government has

committed²² to introduce 18 weeks paid parental leave in 2011. This will have significant benefits for families, easing the financial burden for parents on lower incomes and enabling children to have continuous loving care in the critical early part of life. It is also a long-awaited move that will bring Australia up to recognised international standards. Whilst this commitment is a good start there is strong evidence showing that at least one year's paid parental leave leads to better long term child health and development.

3) Quality early learning and care

Access to quality early learning and care: Working with children during their early years is essential, as neurological damage and deficits experienced between birth and five years of age will be felt throughout a child's life. Quality early learning and care can play a vital role in these early years.

However, Australia has one of the lowest rates of early childhood spending when compared to other wealthy countries. This is reflected in uneven provision of early childhood education for children under three, a lack of comprehensive early childhood education for children over three and lower rates of participation of the most disadvantaged children. There are also significant problems within the early childhood sector. Early childhood workers tend to

have low pay, skill levels and status, and the sector is characterised by fragmented policy development, funding and regulation which prevents coherence and consistency. These factors have led to a situation where disadvantaged children and families, those who need and could benefit from early childhood education the most, are least likely to access quality services.

The Benevolent Society supports the Federal Government's commitment to two days a week universal preschool for 4 year olds. The Benevolent Society is also calling for **free preschool for disadvantaged three year olds** as the evidence shows that the first three years of a child's life are when vital emotional and language skills develop²³ We also look forward to the full implementation of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy including the initiatives to develop and grow the early childhood workforce.

4) Developing child friendly communities

Communities caring for kids: Research shows that connected, cohesive communities can protect their citizens from many of the impacts of disadvantage and are healthier, safer places for children to develop. For instance, research has shown that in two equally disadvantaged communities, the community with strong, supportive



networks is less likely to have reports of child mistreatment, domestic violence and low birth weights²⁴.

Not for profit organisations like The Benevolent Society can play a vital role in coordinating local services and community development activities to make neighbourhoods more child friendly²⁵.

A healthy environment: A healthy environment for children is safe, clean and supports children to learn, develop and play. The adequacy and location of housing and transport infrastructure significantly impacts on children's health, development, social networks and family relationships. Degraded urban environments affect children's ability to play outside safely. Children are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of environmental damage caused by climate change²⁶.

Research has shown that children are the heaviest users of outdoor space²⁷. The planning and development of public space should not only consider the needs of children, but involve children in the planning process. Children's participation in community activities can positively impact on their own social development including improved self-esteem, efficacy and decision-making²⁸, as well as benefiting the entire community.

5) Reducing child poverty

Addressing the root causes of child poverty: Children have the right to an adequate standard of living. They also have the right to develop to their fullest potential. If all children are to enjoy these rights, we must address the root causes of child poverty. This means addressing poverty in households through income security and skills development, and addressing poverty in communities through investment in infrastructure, a strong economy and addressing the entrenched marginalisation of certain social groups.

Promoting income security and economic participation is essential if we are to reduce child poverty. This must begin with secure, reasonably paid jobs and investment in education and training²⁹. Children growing up in jobless families are more likely to grow up jobless themselves, so our long-term prospects of employment and security are shaped during childhood. Governments must provide additional support to those who face barriers entering the workforce, such as newly arrived refugees and people with disabilities.

Supporting Indigenous children: Governments have the responsibility to ensure that all Australian children have access to and benefit from policies and services which seek to give children the best possible start in life. This means working in partnership with Indigenous communities to ensure services are appropriate and accessible.

The Federal Government's commitment to close the 17-year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is positive, as is the \$1.6 billion investment in Indigenous health by the Council of Australian Governments. What is needed now is the development of a comprehensive National Action Plan in partnership with Indigenous Australians, which addresses Indigenous health holistically and across the lifespan. The health and wellbeing of Indigenous children begins before birth. Policies which promote maternal health and economic participation are as important as access to free, quality early childhood education and care.

Non profit organisations like The Benevolent Society have an important role to play in advocating for policy and practice changes that will enhance the social inclusion and wellbeing of all children and make our communities more child-friendly. We can support this advocacy with research and evaluation, contributing to the Australian evidence base for effective children's interventions and policies and ensuring that our programs have positive, measurable outcomes.

Endnotes

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Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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