

For Kids' Sake

Repairing the Social Environment
for Australian Children
and Young People



Professor Patrick Parkinson AM



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



Copyright: Vos Foundation 2011
ISBN: 978-1-74210-241-2
Report design: Mezzanine-media



For Kids' Sake

Repairing the Social Environment
for Australian Children
and Young People

Professor Patrick Parkinson AM

With Antoine Kazzi

Faculty of Law
University of Sydney

July 2011



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That to further implement the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, and promote the emotional wellbeing of children and young people, the Federal Government should provide funding for a major new initiative to help strengthen relationships between couples and to support parent-child relationships. The funding, initially for a four year period, should be used:

- a. To assist in the development of education materials and the training of educators to offer relationship education programs in each local area, in workplaces and in universities.
- b. To encourage the development of materials, and the provision of programs, for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, that are offered in their languages and appropriate to their cultures.
- c. To encourage Parents and Citizens' Associations, community organisations such as Rotary or Lions Clubs, churches, other faith-based communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse organisations, gay and lesbian organisations and any other interested group to offer relationship education programs free of charge in their local community or in workplaces, or in universities, utilising trained volunteer educators, or educators paid on a sessional basis.

Recommendation 2

Programs on couple relationships should be offered both when people begin living together and when they are preparing for marriage. They should explore the benefits to the relationship of making the commitment of marriage, and address issues that arise for blended families and stepfamilies. They should also include material about domestic violence.

Recommendation 3

A screening questionnaire should be administered at the commencement of the program to identify relationships that are already affected by violence, and allow referral to appropriate sources of help.

Recommendation 4

Programs on parent-child relationships should address the importance of a healthy relationship between the parents for the wellbeing of children.

Recommendation 5

Programs on parent-child relationships should be developed for the following stages of parenthood, and should aim at involving both mothers and fathers:

- Preparing for childbirth.
- Starting primary school.
- Starting high school.

Programs on parent-child relationships should also be developed specifically for parents without partners who have the primary care of children, for stepfamilies, and for non-resident parents.

Recommendation 6

Programs should be accessible to people who have varying levels of formal education. They ought to involve group discussion and participation, and use DVDs and other means of communication that do not involve too heavy a reliance on the written word. They ought to be capable of delivery by volunteer leaders or instructors who are paid on a sessional basis.

Recommendation 7

The Federal Government should support the establishment, in each local government area, of community trusts and give tax-deductible status to donations to such trusts in order to support children and families. The goals of each community trust should be:

- To raise funds for local area organisations that support children and families.
- To distribute funds to local community organisations that support children and families.
- Where needed, to co-ordinate and provide strategic leadership to local initiatives that seek to improve the wellbeing of children.
- To identify gaps in services and to develop priorities for filling those gaps over time.
- To monitor the effectiveness of strategies to improve children's wellbeing in the local area.

Recommendation 8

Each Community Trust should be set up as an independent non-profit company that acts as a trustee. It should be managed by unpaid directors who live in the Local Government Area and are respected members of the local community. It should be supervised by, and accountable to the new Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission. The trustees should be required, at least once per year, to distribute funds to charities and other non-profit organisations that have active programs (as opposed to just administrative offices) in the Local Government Area, and which provide:

- Relationship education or counselling.
- Parenting education or counselling.
- Family support programs.
- Support for children and young people.

Preference should be given to organisations that can demonstrate the involvement of volunteers in the work of the organisation.

Recommendation 9

The new Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission should develop a model of terms for each Community Trust that could in principle be varied subject to approval by the Commission.

Recommendation 10

The Federal Government should establish a Families Commission to co-ordinate the work of the Government in strengthening family relationships and in reducing conflict between parents who have separated. The roles of the Families Commission should be to:

- a. Have responsibility for the implementation of the education programs on strengthening family relationships and supporting parent-child relationships.
- b. Provide insurance coverage for local education programs.
- c. Monitor success of programs and deal with complaints.
- d. Provide coordination and support for the national network of Family Relationship Centres.
- e. Provide policy advice to the state, territory and federal governments, in relation to initiatives which will have a positive or negative impact on families with children, reporting through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to the Federal Government, and through the secretariat of the Council of Australian Governments in relation to matters that affect the work of the States and Territories.
- f. Promote targeted messages, through community education campaigns, that will improve the health of family relationships.
- g. Promote lecture tours and conferences involving leading experts on aspects of family life.

Recommendation 11

The Federal Government should establish an easily remembered, national phone number such as 333 for people in difficulties to be able to access government or community services that will most readily meet their needs, and which should be modelled on the 211 number in the USA. The number would be answered by staff in call centres based in major population centres who can listen empathetically to callers and direct them to services that are most likely to assist them. These call centres should be established by the States and Territories.

Recommendation 12

The Australian Institute of Family Studies should be asked to examine the gap between the aspirations of young adults to marry, their preference that children should be raised in the context of a marriage, and the reality of declining marriage rates and increased ex-nuptial births.

Recommendation 13

The Australian Institute of Family Studies should be asked to conduct a large scale study of the attitudes of people in cohabiting relationships at different life stages, to laws that treat them as if they were married, and to discern their views on the circumstances when it is, and is not, appropriate that a de facto relationship should have the same legal effects and consequences as marriage.

Recommendation 14

State, Territory and Federal Governments should review the direction of family policy in their jurisdictions, with a view to answering the following questions:

1. Does government policy, as far as possible, encourage the maintenance of safe, stable and committed relationships between parents?
2. Does government policy, as far as possible, encourage the procreation of children in a context that maximises their chances of experiencing a safe, stable and nurturing home environment?



Executive Summary

FOR KIDS' SAKE: REPAIRING THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

For very good reasons, Australians of all ages, backgrounds and political persuasions are concerned about the environment. What we do now in terms of looking after the environment will affect the nation not only in the present, but for generations to come. Rightly, we are thinking about what legacy we are going to leave our children, and their children, in terms of the natural world on which we all depend.

However little attention has been paid to the social environment in which our children are growing up, and the dangers that the deterioration of this environment presents for the future. Indeed, many of us may not even be aware of how bad things are becoming.

One of the reasons is that any report card on the wellbeing of the nation's children is likely to be mixed. Australia remains the Lucky Country in many respects. The wellbeing of Australian children has improved on a number of measures in the last decade or so, in particular in terms of physical and economic wellbeing. Yet overall levels of wellbeing, and even upward trends for the majority of the population, can disguise increasingly serious problems for many children. When the position of the nation's most troubled children and young people is considered, there are indications that all is not well, and that on numerous measures, the situation is deteriorating at an extraordinarily rapid pace. There has also been a decline, more generally, in the psychological wellbeing of young people. As a society, we may be healthier and wealthier than a generation ago, but contentment has proved much more elusive.

Chapter 1: The Canary in the Coal Mine

There is a canary in the coal mine that provides early warning about the extent of social problems we are facing, and this is in the child protection system. There has been a dramatic increase in the last 15 years in the numbers of children who are reported as being victims of, or at risk of, child abuse or neglect, the numbers of children where that abuse or neglect has been substantiated after investigation, and the total numbers of children in state care. That increase has been seen in every State and Territory in the country, indicating that it is not just the consequence of changes to legislation, policy or practice within one State or by one child welfare department, even if those changes are contributing factors.

Although there has been a numerical decline in substantiations since 2007, there is no reason to believe this reflects any real decrease in the incidence of abuse or neglect, because of the variations in ways complaints of abuse are investigated in different states and territories.

Perhaps the most worrying statistics are those about the numbers of children who have to live in out-of-home care because it is not safe for them to be cared for by their parents. A substantial proportion of these are Indigenous children. In just twelve years, from 1997 to 2009, the total number of children in out-of-home care has more than doubled, and in some states and territories, the rate of increase has been much higher. Foster care programs are now stretched to the limit – and beyond. The main reason for the dramatic increase in the number of children in out-of-home care is that fewer children are leaving care than entering it, and this has been the case for a decade or more. It seems that there has been a significant increase in the proportion of families in which the problems are so serious that restoration is not possible. This is consistent with other data that suggests that an increasing number of families are struggling with very complex problems.

The number of children in need threatens to overwhelm state and territory child protection departments. The Council of Australian Governments estimated in 2009 that State and Territory governments currently spend in excess of \$2 billion annually on child protection services, with average annual increases of more than 12 per cent. The crisis in child protection is just part of a broader pattern of serious deterioration in the wellbeing of many children and young people. It is a warning sign that all is not well with society as a whole.

Chapter 2: Adolescent Mental Health and Risky Behaviours

The dramatic increase in reported child abuse and neglect, and the increase in the numbers of children in care, is only a part of the story of deterioration in the wellbeing of Australia's children and young people. On many measures, although not all, the situation for adolescent girls in particular is deteriorating rapidly.

More than a quarter of young people aged 16-24 years have a mental disorder, compared with one in five (20%) in the general population. A further 24% of young people who have never experienced a mental disorder are experiencing moderate to severe psychological distress. Evidence around the country indicates the problems are getting worse. In New South Wales, public school data indicates that there has been an 8% per year increase in diagnosed mental health disorders other than autism. More than half the calls to Kids Helpline in Western Australia now involve a mental health issue, almost double the number just five years earlier. Nationally, in the last three years, there has been a large increase in the numbers of children being prescribed anti-depressants.

This psychological distress is reflected in the data on self-harming behaviour. There was a 66% increase in the numbers of 12-14 year old children having to be hospitalised as a result of intentional self-harm between 1996 and 2006. The level of self-harm by young teenage girls in this age group leading to hospitalisation is about six times the rate for boys. In the same period, there has been a 90% rise in hospitalisation of 15-17 year old girls due to self-harm incidents.

Psychological distress can also manifest itself in risky and damaging behaviour. An example of this is binge drinking. Although alcohol consumption by children and young people has declined a little in recent years, and significant progress has been made in reducing the levels of risky drinking by those under 18, children are having their first alcoholic drink at a younger and younger age, and dangerous binge drinking by adolescent girls – that is five or more drinks on one day – seems to have increased. This dangerous level of drinking is reflected in an increase in levels of hospitalisation due to alcohol intoxication. For young women aged 15–24, the rate of hospitalisations due to alcohol intoxication more than doubled between 1998 and 2006. There was also a substantial increase in hospitalisations due to alcohol for young men.

Another adverse trend is in terms of risky sexual behaviour among younger teenagers. Teenagers are engaging in sexual acts at a younger age and with more people today that they did in previous generations. That carries with it many risks, including sexually transmitted infections. There has also been a substantial increase in the number of teenage girls reporting unwanted sex. The most common reasons for unwanted sex were being drunk or because of pressure from a partner.

These are not just Australian problems. Numerous studies both in North America and Europe point to a very substantial increase in adolescent psychopathology in the last thirty years, and this cannot be explained away merely by changes in awareness, or in diagnostic tests. This ought to be a grave concern, because many mental disorders burdening adults begin in childhood or adolescence.

It would be tempting to see these problems as affecting just a minority of Australian young people. Governments, perhaps the community at large, tend to see social problems as being like spot fires, one here, one there, another in the distance. If the spot fire is threatening enough, action may be taken to deal with it. Too rarely do we recognise the possibility that behind the visible spot fires, a major bush fire is burning.

Chapter 3: Family Stability and Children's Wellbeing

If one examines only the individual statistics on issues such as the rise in reported abuse and neglect, or the increase in hospitalisation of adolescents for self-harm or alcohol intoxication, then there are a myriad different explanations that might be offered – including attempts to explain away the adverse trends. While different explanations may help understand the statistics on some issues, it is vital also to look at the cumulative picture, and to examine population-wide changes that may explain the deterioration in children's wellbeing overall.

While it would be simplistic to posit just one or two explanations, if there is one major demographic change in western societies that can be linked to a large range of adverse consequences for many children and young people, it is the growth in the numbers of children who experience life in a family other than living with their two biological parents, at some point before the age of 15. Family conflict and parental separation have a range of adverse impacts on children and young people.

Children are particularly badly affected by exposure to destructive conflict between parents. Sometimes that is alleviated when parents separate, but parental conflict and violence does not necessarily end on separation. Separation creates different sources of conflict between parents from the kind of conflict that occurs when parents live together. These ongoing conflicts take their toll on children. Children whose parents live apart are also exposed to more conflict in the post-separation family. Young people report significantly higher levels of conflict in stepfamilies and lone-parent families than in intact families. Stepfamilies in particular create new sources of tension.

Children whose parents live apart are also exposed to a greater number of risks and difficulties than children in intact families. They are significantly more likely to be subject to reports of abuse and neglect than intact families. Two of the most significant reasons for this are the presence of new partners who are not biologically related to the children, and the financial and other stresses of lone parenthood. Girls in particular are at much greater risk of sexual abuse from the mother's new partner than from their own father. Single parents, and especially those who are working to support the family, also have less time to monitor and supervise their children.

Chapter 4: Australia's Fragile Families

In Australia, the number of children who do not reach the age of 15 in an intact family with both of their biological parents has almost doubled within a generation. While the chances of a marriage ending in divorce have been increasing in the last 25 years, the increase in children experiencing parental separation is largely a consequence of the rapid rise in the numbers of children born into de facto relationships, which subsequently break down. There has also been an increase in the number of women giving birth to a child without having a cohabiting partner. In 2009, 35% of all births were outside marriage.

Cohabiting relationships are typically quite short-term, if they do not result in marriage. They break down at a very much faster rate than do marriages. People who are cohabiting but intend to marry (either as a first or subsequent marriage) are significantly less likely to separate compared to those who cohabit without having marriage plans. Even couples with children who live in de facto relationships have much higher rates of breakdown than married couples.

As more and more children grow up in fragile families, it ought to be expected that more and more children will experience adverse outcomes.

Chapter 5: A Focus on Prevention

There is now a consensus in Australia, as well as other western countries, that in order to make a lasting difference to the levels of child maltreatment, as well as other problems that children face, there has to be a focus on prevention. This emphasis has been endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in its strategic plan for child protection (2009). Achieving a shift towards prevention is, however, easier said than done. This is because of the enormous and increasing demands for services targeted at children who have already been identified as having suffered harm.

Efforts at preventing child abuse and neglect need to be seen as part of a broader goal of reversing the deterioration in the social environment in which children grow up. While not all problems faced by Australia's children today, by any means, can be attributed to the consequences of unstable and conflictual family relationships, the fragility of Australian families over recent generations has been a major contributing factor.

There are two key strategies in promoting the wellbeing of children and preventing maltreatment. The first is to aim to ensure that children have safe, stable and nurturing relationships. The second is to promote the protective factors in families that will help parents to manage when they are experiencing significant challenges, hardships and difficulties, and which help children in these circumstances.

In Australia, various programs either delivered by, or funded by state, territory and federal governments support these two strategies. While government must play its part, either by direct services or by funding professional non-government organisations to do so, an expansion of government-funded services is not on its own sufficient to reverse the serious deterioration in the social environment in which children are growing up. There are limitations on the extent to which the work of rebuilding strong families in Australia can depend on professionals, given the costs involved. As long as programs rely essentially on government funding, and are delivered through paid professionals, the level of need is likely to far outstrip the resources available. It is important therefore, to invest in building community capacity to strengthen family relationships and to support vulnerable families without overly relying on paid professionals.

Chapter 6: Strengthening Family Relationships

One great need is to provide education programs about family life which will help address the knowledge deficits across the community through lack of healthy modelling in people's families of origin. Such programs need to address the realities of modern family life in Australia. The normal sequence of events a couple of generations ago, involving courtship, engagement, a wedding, living together and then having children, is less and less common as a life course. Even among those who are preparing for a first marriage, the sequence of events may well be quite different. Couple relationship programs also need to meet the needs of people who live together without plans to marry, and those who have repartnered following the breakdown of a marriage or cohabiting relationship. They should also include material about domestic violence.

It is proposed that there should be a major new initiative in providing community-based education programs for couple relationships and parent-child relationships, run mostly by trained volunteers, although some programs may be better suited to delivery by paid sessional instructors. These are not intended to replace the courses already offered by professional organisations, but rather to expand greatly their availability. These programs need to be accessible to people who have varying levels of formal education. They ought to involve group discussion and participation, and use DVDs and other means of communication that do not involve too heavy a reliance on the written word. These courses should be developed in partnership with established relationship counselling and educational organisations, and these organisations should be funded to provide training programs and other background support.

The goal needs to be to mainstream relationship education programs so that they are readily available to people throughout the community and seen as something that anyone and everyone should do, engaging in different courses at different stages of the life journey. In particular, educational programs for adults should be targeted at times of transition:

- Beginning to live together.
- Preparing for marriage.
- Preparing for childbirth.
- When children start primary school.
- When children start high school.

In addition to these general programs, it is important also that there be targeted programs available to reach particular groups – in particular parents without partners who have the primary care of children, stepfamilies, and non-resident parents.

State and federal governments need only play a very limited role in facilitating these educational programs. Two main roles are envisaged for governments to fulfil:

- a. Grants to relationship counselling organisations and similar groups, to enable the development of programs.
- b. Help in advertising the availability of programs to the general community.

The main costs to government will be in the first four years as the program is developed and rolled-out.

Chapter 7: A Community of Neighbours

There is also a need for programs that will support parents through tough times, and help build parental resilience. Australia already has some family support programs, but there is a great need for more of them. Family support programs are relatively low-cost services that help reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. They also fulfil an important role in reducing social isolation and advancing social inclusion.

While a family support service needs professional staff to manage and coordinate the different aspects of the work of the service, much can also be done using volunteers, with benefits not only for recipients of services, but in building cohesive and supportive communities. There are already many examples in Australia of the successful use of volunteers to make a difference with vulnerable children and families. They do not require huge financial resources.

In order to support families and children and empower local communities, it is recommended that Community Trusts be established, if possible, in each Local Government Area, to help fund relationship education, counselling, family support programs and other forms of community support to improve the wellbeing of children in local communities. They will provide a focal point for local fundraising and volunteering efforts. Community Trusts ought to be independent of local Councils, but should work in close co-operation with them. They should also endeavour to provide co-ordination and vision for the non-profit sector within the area, so that over time there can be an increasingly planned approach to the provision of services, and action taken to try to fill gaps.

Each Community Trust should be managed by unpaid directors who live in the Local Government Area. The Community Trusts should be accountable to the new Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission. The Commission should be responsible for trying to ensure, over time, that a community trust is established in every Local Government Area. Each state government should be asked to provide the small amount of money required to run each Community Trust. As far as possible, administrative support and financial management services should be provided by volunteers or on a pro bono basis.

The trustees should be required, at least once per year, to distribute funds to charities and other non-profit organisations that have active programs in the Local Government Area, and which provide:

- Relationship education or counselling.
- Parenting education or counselling.
- Family support programs.
- Support for children and young people.
- Programs and services to build community engagement and to reduce the social isolation of parents.

Gifts to the Community Trusts should be tax-deductible. The organisations to which it could provide support should be defined by statute. It is envisaged that this would be a broader range of purposes than currently attract tax-deductible status.

Donors could nominate specific charities or non-profit organisations to which they would like their money to be directed provided that the organisation is one that fits the criteria for distribution by the Trustees, and subject to certain conditions. Local Councils may be able to support community trusts by inviting ratepayers to round-up their quarterly or annual rate payments to the nearest dollar, with all such excess payments going into the Trust.

In the distribution of untied funds, preference should be given to organisations that can demonstrate that they involve volunteers in their work. The purpose of this provision is to help encourage community participation in the delivery of services to families and children, and to encourage a greater sense of ‘ownership’ by the local community of services that are intended to benefit the area.

In order to provide support for disadvantaged communities, it is proposed that each Community Trust be permitted to donate up to 15% of its funds which have not been earmarked for specific organisations, to a Community Trust in a disadvantaged area designated as such by the Federal Government. The Federal Government ought to consider encouraging donations to Community Trusts in disadvantaged areas, by offering to match funds.

Chapter 8: What Does Government Need to Do?

The proposals in this report need very little support from government, but they do need some legislative, financial and administrative facilitation, and some regulation and oversight. A fundamental principle in determining the level of regulation and oversight ought to be that the regulatory burden should be kept to the absolute minimum necessary to ensure that funds are expended for the purposes for which they have been given, and that there is adequate screening of volunteer participants who work with children.

In order to provide support for the massive expansion in relationship education programs that is envisaged, and to provide national leadership, it is proposed that there be a Families Commission, established by the Federal Government, that will have a strategic role in seeking to improve the wellbeing of families across the country. The Commission should have a full-time President who is a person with a national reputation in the field of family relationships and who has an extensive knowledge about relationship counselling, education and parenting after separation. There should be four other members consisting of representatives working in the field of relationship counselling and mediation, child psychology, child protection or family law. The Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies should be an ex-officio member of the Commission.

The roles of the Commission would be as follows:

1. Provide oversight of the relationship education program.
2. Have responsibility for the Family Relationship Centres.
3. Provide policy advice to state, territory and federal Governments.
4. Run community education campaigns.

It is also proposed that the Federal Government should establish a nationwide phone number, to help people access appropriate community services, similar to the 211 number in the United States. One of the biggest problems faced by people who are struggling with multiple problems and difficulties is knowing how to get help, and from where. An easily-remembered number of this kind, going through to an area-based call centre, could well make a great difference to people who might struggle otherwise to connect with local services. These call centres ought to be funded by state and territory governments.

A final role for governments is to review the direction of their family policy. In the last twenty years or so, the dominant policy direction has been to treat all families alike without reference to family structure. Yet the overwhelming evidence from research is that children do best in two-parent married families, and this is not just the result of selection effects. The difference marriage seems to make is in the commitment that it involves, providing a greater degree of stability and resilience, especially when times are difficult. In reviewing family policy, the fundamental questions that ought to be asked are:

1. Does government policy, as far as possible, encourage the maintenance of stable, safe and committed relationships between parents?
2. Does government policy, as far as possible, encourage the procreation of children in a context that maximises their chances of experiencing a stable, safe and nurturing home environment?

Conclusion

Australia's increasingly fragile families are a major reason for the rise in child abuse and neglect, and the deterioration in the psychological wellbeing of so many children and young people.

There are ways that governments and the community could respond to repair the social environment of the nation. The question is now whether governments and concerned members of the community will have the vision and commitment to do so. The task of repairing the social environment begins with us, and will continue with us. Governments can assist in certain ways, and need to do so; but local communities must take responsibility, and as individuals, as families and as voters we need to consider what kinds of family life we should aim to foster and support.

The deterioration in the social environment has been rapid. The recovery will be much harder; but it is important to make a start, for kids' sake.

