



*Ultimately, it is about ensuring that our children have the best possible start. There couldn't be a better motivator than that.*

## *Paying Attention to our Children*

**Larry Anthony**

*Federal Minister for Community Services*



### **Contact services**

In August this year the Attorney General and I were pleased to announce the names of the successful organisations that will provide twenty-four new children's contact services at locations around Australia. Funded for \$15.6 million over four years, the contact services aim to provide a neutral location for changeovers between resident and non-resident parents and for supervised contact visits. These new contact services, together with those already existing, constitute just part of the government's activities in this area and are much needed.

This need is highlighted by children's words quoted in the evaluation report for the existing services. One nine-year-old child said "It's so much better than the police station – that was a bit scary". An eleven-year-old said "This place is so Mums and Dads don't fight and if they do then people here can stop it". From a seven-year-old: "I come here because they had a fight and they are still mad with each other. My Dad thinks it's stupid coming here, but I wouldn't be able to see him at all if we didn't come here because my Mum wouldn't take me anywhere else". Or from another child: "When we used to have visits at Grandma's, Mum would run out and hit Dad's car, sometimes with us in it." These heartbreaking words make you want to go home and give your own children a big hug. Contact services provide a safe environment where the relationships between parents and children can be rebuilt and where separated parents can start the process of dealing reasonably with each other for the good of their children.

Giving people the skills and support they need to prevent these situations or at least deal with them better is a major theme of the government's work. We are focusing actively on early intervention and prevention of problems, working with the community to provide better services and support for parents, holistic responses to problems and using existing activities to build better approaches. Such strategies are necessary to ensure we are paying our children the attention they deserve.

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The National Child Protection Clearinghouse serves as an interchange point for information, research and initiatives supporting work in the field of child abuse/neglect prevention.

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## Parenting Support in Early Childhood

Research on the brain development of infants suggests that in the first three years of a child's life, the brain is uniquely responsive to the environment. Failure to meet developmental needs at this critical time results in changes to brain physiology and leads to more extreme reactions to stress.

Of course children need good nutrition and physical care, but they also need warm, responsive and structured parenting. In providing this, parents benefit from good connections with their extended family and community networks of support. Together, these factors provide protection against a myriad of problems later in life, and most importantly, against abuse and neglect. A major policy question for the Government is 'How can we provide support for parents to make those years count?'

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that provided plenty of affection and caring. My wife and I work hard to provide the same good start for our own children. Unfortunately not all children are so lucky.

For this reason, the Commonwealth Government is supporting home visiting programs such as Good Beginnings. This volunteer scheme connects experienced parents in each community with new parents, offering friendship, a role model and emotional and practical support. Their mission is to help new parents build the self confidence they need to give their children a physically and emotionally healthy start in life. The ultimate objective is to ensure that children experience a happy, healthy and loving childhood - from the very beginning. Importantly, Good Beginnings means that the communities themselves provide the solutions, with some funding assistance from the government.

Culturally specific parenting support is also provided through various initiatives. For example, the Department funds a number of Indigenous parenting and family programs. This includes the Aboriginal Child-rearing Strategy which is a series of complementary and innovative children's and family projects developed

*We want to make sure that men remain well connected to their children because fathers have much to offer.*



for Aboriginal communities in the desert region of Central Australia. It will incorporate the unique culture, parenting and learning styles of Aboriginal people. In the first stage of this project, Aboriginal women from more than thirty remote communities will attend a conference in April/May to discuss issues which impact on the care of their children.

Other Commonwealth programs are providing support in the early years. Playgroups have been shown to deliver better outcomes for children and greater community involvement for parents, and the Family Skills Training program teaches parenting skills to particularly disadvantaged parents. Again, the focus is on prevention and early intervention.



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### **Parenting Support in later childhood**

Good care extends beyond the early years, and the Government is making progress in this area too. The Reconnect program has proved to be very successful in preventing homelessness among adolescents, by working closely with families who are experiencing high levels of parent-child conflict.

Then there is the Youth Activities Services scheme, for 11-16 year-olds living in disadvantaged areas. These services provide innovative activities during out of school hours, providing an early intervention program for young people at risk of developing

patterns of destructive behaviour which may have long term effects on their schooling and labour force participation.

### **Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

The Government has made a commitment to help Australian families build resilience and strength. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy reflects this commitment, with the allocation of \$240m for early childhood research, more parenting and family relationship support initiatives, and a number of community building initiatives.

Designed to strengthen families and communities, especially families at risk and disadvantaged communities, the Strategy reinforces the Government's prevention and early intervention policy directions and its belief that it is communities that are often best at finding local solutions to local problems.

For communities, the money from the Strategy will go on things like training for potential community leaders, developing and promoting volunteering and building community capacity so they are able to do more to help themselves.

For families, the focus is on three important issues - the needs of families with young children; strengthening marriages and relationships; and balancing work and family.

The Strategy complements measures such as the new tax system and business tax reform, and the current welfare reform process, which are designed to reduce unemployment and welfare dependency, both key risk factors in poor outcomes for children.

Recognising that new pressures are having an impact on parents' ability to manage their work and family responsibilities, the Strategy is introducing a range of more flexible child care initiatives which will improve families' ability to access and choose child care that meets their needs. The new measures are designed to provide greater flexibility, equity and choice. They will particularly benefit shift workers, families working outside standard business

hours, those who have a sick child and those who live in rural and regional areas.

### **Relationship support**

Strong families benefit from strong couple relationships. With high levels of relationship breakdown adding to the pressures on our children, and costing the country billions of dollars a year, it is important to do everything we can to better prepare couples for married life. As a result, the Strategy includes an expanded relationship education initiative designed to make relationships education, including pre-marriage education, more available and more effective.

A full range of counselling and related services continues to be supported so that families and couples have every chance to get help with relationship problems before they escalate.

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## Fathers

Fathers play an important role in parenting, but some may not feel confident that they are the best parent they can be. The Men and Family Relationships initiative is reaching out for the first time to men and fathers to provide assistance to those in relationships, and if necessary, following relationship breakdown. We want to make sure that men remain well connected to their children because fathers have much to offer.

I recently launched a Commonwealth-funded, first-time fathers' project run by Burnside at Coffs Harbour. This targets expectant fathers with information on child birth and early development.

Any new father will tell you, and it's been my own experience, that it can be pretty daunting for both parents when their first child is born. And while the focus is usually on the mother and baby, I think that fathers welcome that extra bit of help to face the challenges at this exciting time.

What's special about the Burnside project is the support they have received from AMP for 'I'm a Dad' kits, which each new father gets straight after his child is born. Because of the extra costs of raising children and with AMP's involvement, the Burnside service also offers first-time fathers financial planning advice.

Recently the Government also announced a package of measures directed at achieving better relationships between separated parents and encouraging parents to maintain contact with their children after separation. The package will align the benchmarks used to set child support liabilities, as well as providing a fairer basis for determining Government assistance to children of subsequent families and enhancing a parent's ability to improve the financial position of his or her new family.

## Child abuse and neglect

I am profoundly concerned about children who are experiencing abuse or neglect.

Child abuse and neglect are usually entrenched in broader social problems and are not able to have a 'quick fix' applied. Remedies require the development of long term strategies. Most service delivery related to child abuse and neglect rests with States and Territory Governments. However, the Commonwealth plays a leadership role in this area through initiatives such as the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse, and information sharing through the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies and by supporting a wide range of early intervention and parenting programs such as Good Beginnings.

Another initiative, "Tomorrow's Children", is Australia's national plan of action against the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Family breakdown, prior experiences of sexual abuse, poverty, drug use, youth unemployment and social isolation are all factors that place children and young people at risk. The plan identifies what Australia is doing and will need to do in future to tackle these issues further.

These initiatives provide for improvements in our knowledge and contribute towards improved service responses to child abuse and neglect.

## The Future

I am committed to help support and strengthen families through services to enhance family relationships and lower the incidence of family breakdown, including parent education to prevent child abuse.

The Government's policy focus is on prevention and early intervention strategies. I see this as most important to help break the generational cycle of breakdown and abuse. Government does not have all the answers and we recognised that communities are often best placed to solve their own problems.

Ultimately, it is about ensuring that our children have the best possible start. There couldn't be a better motivator than that.