Why do families matter for our future?

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It was recently put to me as the new Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) that a key policy question for Australia right now is: “Why are families important?” This surprising comment highlighted that an understanding of the important role of families in our national life may not necessarily be a given, requiring fresh consideration by a new generation of policy makers. At the beginning of 2016—coincidentally the 40th anniversary of the Family Court of Australia—it’s a good moment to pause and reflect on some of our recent learnings about families to inform investment in future policy directions.

What did we learn in 2015?

In Australia we saw a remarkable shift in public discussion about families, with a growing understanding of the interconnections between violence against women and increasing rates of homelessness and mental health problems, and negative later life outcomes for children. This resulted in domestic and family violence becoming centre stage in policy reform across Australian jurisdictions.

Some of the voices in the national discussion on domestic and family violence included the National Children’s Commissioner’s Children’s Rights Report 2015, which had a special focus on children experiencing domestic violence in their home. The AIFS report, Children’s Exposure to Domestic and Family Violence (Campo, 2015), further recognised children’s experiences by highlighting that domestic violence and child abuse are often seen as separate problems, obscuring the multi-victimisation experienced by children that is often poorly understood. The AIFS report noted the importance of prevention and early intervention in addressing family violence and its effects on children, and argued for improved coordination to enable us to act much earlier.

Reporting from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse also has drawn attention to the lack of preventative action and inadequacy of responses by major institutional systems, which serves to exacerbate the tragedy of the abuse of vulnerable children in their care.

Importantly, it seems the priority of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments is to shift attention from just “policing” to the “prevention” of complex social problems—such as domestic and family violence, substance abuse issues (including “ice” addiction)—and to the systems and supports needed to keep children safe. This new thinking builds on evidence of the social and economic benefits of investment in prevention and early intervention, and the higher costs of reacting too late.

This past year has also seen a focus on the plight of refugees fleeing war and persecution in several parts of the world, including Syria. Building a New life in Australia (BNLA) is a groundbreaking longitudinal study on humanitarian migrants being conducted by AIFS for the Australian Government. The results from the first two waves of this five-year study highlight high levels of trauma, disadvantage and vulnerability, with potential intergenerational effects. An innovative and integrated families policy framework will be important to ensure these families are able to make a great contribution to our society, as earlier waves of migrants have done previously (Hugo, 2014).

At the end of 2015 some noted a quiet but significant shift of emphasis onto investment in human capital, from comments by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull: “Our greatest assets are not under the ground, they are all of us—the men and women of Australia walking around on top of the ground”, and “We are in a world where the most valuable capital is human capital”.

So where do families fit into this picture?

Families play a critical role in the human capital investment story. Families are where the most important prevention and early intervention occurs. There are a plethora of research reports re-examining and re-reporting extensive evidence on the importance of the
early years of life on later life outcomes. We also know that while quality early childhood education is important in boosting the developmental outcomes of kids growing up with disadvantage, early childhood education alone is insufficient. The home environment matters even more.

Even some of the strongest advocates of early childhood education, such as Oxford University Professor Ted Melhuish (2015), acknowledge that “the effects of parenting are about double that of early childhood education and care”. He concluded that the evidence from large-scale studies shows we need to pay attention to a combination of the home environment, good quality preschool, and a good primary school. Clearly no single policy silo, department, agency or jurisdiction can achieve this alone. Child wellbeing is an interdisciplinary job.

Emerging evidence from work by AIFS points to parental investment and parenting style as key factors influencing child development outcomes (Warren, forthcoming). In March 2015 the OECD also reported that “early interventions in social and emotional skills can play an important role in … reducing educational, labour market, and social disparities” over the life cycle (p. 14). These non-cognitive skills, which form the basis of later cognitive development, are not just measurable, but malleable, and the primary place where these social and emotional skills are formed is in the home.

Adverse experiences and disrupted family relationships can diminish our capacity for resilience and compromise the development of children, contributing to poorer outcomes in later life. Failure to invest early in life, or before problems escalate, will mean as a community we pay more later on. Late reaction measures such as child protection systems cannot be expected to do all the heavy lifting. Time and again the evidence is telling us that it’s better to act earlier than to react later.

We know that young parents all need support at times to be the best mum or dad they can be, and some of them need additional support because of the extra challenges they face. Currently services are fragmented and the landscape is patchy across Australia. We have no coherent service system for the provision of evidence-based family support.

Supporting families into the future

The OECD’s 2011 report Future of Families to 2030 noted that the challenges for all countries “will be to design and introduce a robust, sustainable framework of policies capable of withstanding the pressures, and adapting to the changes, that lie ahead” (p. 34). They argue that “value for money through more effective spending” can be achieved through “the ‘cascading’ of universal services, integrated service delivery or co-location of service delivery on physical sites such as clinics, schools and childcare centres” (pp. 47–48).

In Australia we need a system of support for families that can provide a little or a lot—depending on need—using evidence of what works to scale up effective programs. This kind of universal proportionate system needs to be interdisciplinary (across health, education and social services) and innovative (using flexible modes of delivery including new technologies), and designed according to the needs of kids and families, not the requirements of professionals or funders. This is not necessarily about spending more money, but rather shaping existing investments to achieve better results.

As a community we sometimes fear interfering in the “privacy” of family life or being perceived to be “blaming” parents. However, support for effective parenting is about empowering parents, not blaming them. And this is likely to be the best investment in future human capital that we can make.

Building an evidence-based service system on innovative design principles is not simple, but neither are the needs of families. Precision in methods to support effective parenting continues to be elusive. There are few evaluations, and results have been mixed. More research and development is needed to build a stronger evidence base and effective implementation of programs, such as recent work from the USA applying behavioural insights to increase parental engagement (Mayer, Kalil, Oreopolis, & Gallegos, 2015).

But effective programs need to be accessible and delivered in a systematic way, on scaffolding that connects the critical interdependencies across policy domains and jurisdictions. We need system reform to enable smart investment in human capability development, drawing on knowledge from across the disciplines.

By shaping existing investments to build an evidence-based service system, we have an opportunity to empower parents to be the best mum or dad they can be. The research indicates that these earlier investments are more economically efficient and more effective. Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) described the “concept of a two-generation approach to
children and families experiencing significant adversity” and “creative rethinking that moves beyond a simple call for enhanced coordination among the ‘silos’ that separate child-focused and adult-focused services” (p. 1636). They proposed using interdisciplinary research evidence and a “unified model for practice that is grounded in a common science that extends from conception to adulthood” (p. 1653). It is arguable that we need some breakthrough thinking that facilitates systemic transformation and innovation, given the disappointing results to date.

The good news is that the recently launched Third Action Plan of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020 has as one its three strategies: “early intervention with a focus on the early years, particularly the first 1000 days for a child” (Department of Social Services, 2015, p. 8). This provides an opportunity to catalyse systemic change by building on emerging knowledge across disciplines, including a two-generation approach focused on the wellbeing of parents as well as their children.

It turns out that families policy is not a “soft” area of policy, but is central to solutions for hardcore social and economic problems that we have faced for decades, such as mental health problems, and for emerging concerns, such as violent extremism and childhood obesity. Taking a life-course perspective, we can see that our early experiences are predictive of later life outcomes. Because humans have complex needs that don’t fit neatly into a box, existing fragmented policy and service initiatives will be unable to prevent the preventable. Informed investment in research and innovation, backed by data linkage and integrated policy development, is needed to achieve results.

Join the conversation

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has been creating and communicating knowledge about families and society for 35 years. In collaboration with you, we are keen to accelerate positive outcomes for kids and families by building stronger bridges between research, policy and practice. Our 2016 conference—to be held on 6–8 July in Melbourne—will focus on interdisciplinary research, data linkage, and action to support system reform. We hope you can join us in this exciting conversation.

Endnotes

1 See the BNLA website for more information: <www3.aifs.gov.au/bnla>.
2 Speaking about mental health system reforms. As quoted in The Australian, 27 November 2015.

References


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