In this viewpoint Professor Fiona Stanley AC writes about valuing children, and putting their wellbeing at the forefront of our activities in a “civilised society.”

VIEWPOINT
FIONA STANLEY

The importance of caring for children in Australian society

I am really pleased that we seem to be at tipping point in relation to climate change and environmental concerns about the effects of excessive energy consumption on the future of the planet. It is of course vital to everyone’s futures. In our need to tackle this huge problem it is important that other activities in which we need to continue to invest are not “put on the back burner”.

I refer to the recent worrying reports on child and youth health and wellbeing which demonstrate increases in child and youth problems, including child abuse (ABS, 2007; AIHW, 2006) or rank Australia well down in measures of child wellbeing compared with other OECD countries (UNICEF, 2007). And of course there are interesting parallels, as the very things that have driven environmental damage and climate change, such as excessive consumption and the downsides of some economic policies, are also important for what is happening to our children and young people.

I hesitate to say “I told you so” but during my stint as Australian of the Year in 2003, I was harangued by the media about the data I was presenting: “Haven’t you got anything good to say about Australia?”; and “This information is all so gloomy”. In 2003, I was presenting the best Australian data on the state of our children and young people (published later in a book with Prior and Richardson, Children of the lucky country? – subtitled How Australian society has turned its back on children and why children matter). In the book we described the increasing rates of many child and youth problems in health, education, behaviour, risk taking and crime. It also seemed (although the data were not so clear) that there were increases in inequalities in many of these outcomes, that is that the disparities between the “haves and the have nots” were increasing. These increases in inequalities have since been better described by others and they are quite concerning (see ABS, 2007; AIHW, 2006; Harding, 2005).

We referred to the Canadian description of this pattern, seen there as well, and described by them as Modernity’s Paradox – that in spite of dramatic increases in economic prosperity, the rates of child and youth problems and their social gradients are not improving (Hertzman & Keating, 1999). The earlier promises from economists who focussed so obsessively on wealth creation was that it would benefit everyone. Hence we need to explain the data from the UNICEF report which shows such disparate rankings of child wellbeing across a range of rich countries within the OECD.

All three of these recent reports should drive us into action. The UNICEF (2007) report attempts to measure “child well being” across all OECD countries; it was limited by what data were available and was guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are six dimensions on which the authors (including Australia’s Sue Richardson and co-author of our book!) assessed child wellbeing – material wellbeing (poverty), health and safety, educational wellbeing, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective wellbeing.
The main messages are clear and the news is not good for many children in these wealthy countries. Economists please note - the amount of GDP alone does not predict good outcomes for children and young people. In fact the wealthiest countries performed relatively poorly compared with those with lower GDPs but whose policies focus more on family support, valuing parenthood (e.g., very good parental leave provisions), early childhood services and on reducing inequalities. Australia ranked well in educational wellbeing but was low or middle to low on all other dimensions for which data were available. The fact that we had to be excluded from the overall ranking due to missing data has important implications for us in terms of making sure that the relevant data are made available so that we can measure our children's well being and benchmark ourselves with other countries. Collecting good data on children and young people is another way we can care for them. Not providing data could be interpreted that we have something to hide. The UK and USA (and on the whole, most English-speaking countries) performed least well on almost all dimensions.

Moving on from the “gloomy”, the good news is that such comparisons demonstrate that given levels of child wellbeing are not inevitable but are policy susceptible. As the report says:

“the wide differences in child wellbeing in this report card can be interpreted as a broad and realistic guide to the potential for improvement in all OECD countries.”

This refutes those who say that these worrying trends and inequalities in child and youth outcomes are what we have to wear for the benefit of global economic changes, something that we just cannot and must not accept.

The second report is a snapshot on child health (including mental health and risky behaviours) from ABS national surveys and routine data collections. It paints a most concerning picture similar to the one we described and predicted in Children of the lucky country? The challenge we set ourselves then was – could we explain the trends we observed that were so worrying to us? Rises in societal risk factors (such as unemployment, less parental time, work-related stress, divorce and family breakdown, social isolation and marked increases in parental mental health problems and substance abuse) and falls in protective factors (universal and effective maternal and child health nursing services, high quality and affordable child care, extended family and social support, cheap good housing and places to play, etc.) can start to explain the rising rates of problems. These patterns of factors also help to explain why our Aboriginal children have higher rates than non-Aboriginal children and of course they have the added burden of a history poorly appreciated by many.

The ABS reported that diabetes, asthma, infections, accidents, mental health problems and obesity are all increasing. The AIHW reported the most concerning levels of substantiated child abuse late last year which are chilling and unacceptable in a society as ostensibly as well off as ours. The future is looking bleak when you add in the risk factors which are known antecedents on pathways to psychosocial problems, aggressive behaviour, depression, self harm and criminal behaviour.

Al Aynsley-Green, the children’s commissioner for England commented on the UNICEF report (UK was at the bottom of the league table on all measures of child well being, trailing USA which comes second to last):

“There is a crisis at the heart of our society and we must not continue to ignore the impact of our attitudes towards children and young people and the effect that this has on their wellbeing” (Bosely, 2007).

Mary MacLeod, CEO of the Family and Parenting Institute described UK as a:

“high-stress society which was hostile to children. Children do not seem to be as loved and cherished by society as a whole as they are in other countries. We bombard them with negative messages and the tyranny of ‘cool’. We take away their playgrounds and playing fields, blame them for so many of the problems of our society and then wonder why they are unhappy and have such poverty of wellbeing and ambition” (Carvel & Woodward, 2007).

Given the low ranking of UK and USA and of ourselves (although we were not as lowly ranked as these two), we need to get back to this question of Modernity’s Paradox; how successful can the ‘anglo-saxon’ model of economic strategy ever be in tackling inequalities and the problems which arise from them? Why do we fail to deliver effective services for disadvantaged children and families, particularly for those who are Indigenous? How do countries like Sweden and Holland manage to rank so highly on all of the measures of child wellbeing? Well, their approach to children is firmly based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Every aspect of emerging legislation is assessed for its impact on children. Rather than debating by how much we should reduce taxes in times of economic prosperity and individual wealth, maybe we should be suggesting increasing taxes to enable us to provide better public services for children and young people. We should be rewarding those who put children in the middle of their planning. We should educate those in charge of policy at all levels of government about the complex pathways which lead children and young people into failing at school, unsafe sex, alcohol abuse, violence and crime. They would then realise that many of these pathways start early, in disadvantage, in poor neighbourhoods, in
isolated or ignorant parenting – few of which are the fault of the child. They may then, instead of locking young people up or overloading our crisis services, appreciate that preventing the problems are not only more cost-effective but also more humane.

The pathway to many young Aboriginal people ending up in jail commenced with their ancestors being deprived of their rights, alcohol being consumed in excess, their brains being damaged from this during their development in utero, with resulting inability to interact with peers or control behaviour – much of the ADHD we see in these children is related to fetal alcohol exposure. Is the only response from a prosperous and knowledgeable society in 2007 that we lock these damaged children away? Why don’t we try to identify these children early, diagnose their problems and work hard to treat/remediate/support them which will give them the best chance to avoid later disaster? And let us try to understand the most effective ways to reduce excessive alcohol exposure in a country that seems obsessed by it.

Involving Aboriginal people in the policy, delivery and governance of services has been shown, particularly in Canada and the US, to make those services more effective. It also means increased Aboriginal employment, career paths and self-esteem. There was an outstanding Indigenous Family Program run in metropolitan Perth some years ago. Run by Aboriginal leaders, it serviced the most dysfunctional and multi-service using families. An economic evaluation showed it to be the most cost-effective investment. It has now been mainstreamed and those families are now less well served (Crowe & Pohl, 1994).

The children and youth of today will play a pivotal role in our future environment – not only that related to climate change but our intellectual, social and economic capability as well. The nation’s future prosperity and capacity to be clever about how it adapts to environmental degradation and climate change, as well as other challenges, depends to a large degree on the quality of the childhoods we provide today. Detailed discussions take place about the costs of programs for families and children, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities; comparisons appear daily in the press about the relative costs of interventions to reduce carbon emissions. As if we had a choice! Of course we must make the best decisions about policies but surely these decisions need to be made more on evidence that they are effective rather than on how much they cost. Not to invest in activities to improve outcomes and prevent problems is short-sighted in the extreme.

I am reminded of Anne Manne’s lovely story in The Age newspaper last year written in response to Naomi Wolf’s visit during which she raised concerns about the costs of motherhood. Anne describes her friend, who after weighing up a cost-benefit analysis of motherhood, decided that her career, income and freedom were more important. In the supermarket

---

**Figure 1**

**CIVIL SOCIETY**

Focus on:
- Equality/diversity
- Trust, care
- Collective good
- Valuing parents
- Valuing childhoods
- Prevention more than cures
- Protected environments
- Safe places for all
- Effective use of helpful technologies
- Child needs as well as adults

**UNCIVIL SOCIETY**

Accepting of:
- Inequalities
- Fear, violence
- Priority for material wealth
- Parents not valued
- Fast tracking childhoods
- Cures more than prevention
- Environmental degradation
- Safe places for the few
- Excessive use of damaging technologies
- Adults needs more than children’s

*Source: Stanley et al., 2005.*
queue that evening a small child mistook her leg for that of her mother’s and “slipped her little hand around my friend’s leg and nestled into her”. Her friend immediately decided to have a baby! Anne beautifully makes the point that we should reflect more on these emotional aspects of what children provide for us individually and communally and how we should value them as children not just because they are our future “human capital”. But of course they are and this is an important argument to use with those who decide on our economy and how it should be used.

This issue of the Australian Institute of Family Studies’ Family Matters is about caring. The most civilised of societies are those who care for their most vulnerable. Can we legislate to be a caring and civil society? Figure 1 (from Stanley, Richardson, & Prior, 2005) lists the characteristics which we, the civilised of societies are those who care for their children and youth have a say in what happens and what their futures might be” (p.170).

Having a very serious and intensive commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child is one way forward. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has prepared a Commitment to Young Australians which was launched nationally in May this year. The principles have been written as a unifying statement by ARACY members as a document to which organisations can commit to improve the lives of children and young people. Based on a review of frameworks and principles that champion children and young people such as the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the UK’s ‘Every Child Matters’, it could start Australia along a path like the Swedes and the other top-ranked countries in how children and youth are valued. Further information is posted on the ARACY website (www.aracy.org.au).

So, where can we go from here? The good news is that the patterns of these problems varied between countries, which would suggest that doing things differently may improve outcomes for children, youth and Australia’s future. Indeed, the same enthusiasm, investment and commitment to the behaviour changes and policies for ameliorating climate change are needed to tackle child and youth problems. And we have greater potential for prevention than we do with climate change where much of our approach now will have to be adaptation rather than prevention.

These statistics represent not only preventable suffering for the children concerned, but a threat to Australia’s future prosperity. All of society’s institutions have a role in reversing these trends, they need to focus on prevention, reducing the risks and promoting the protective factors. And this is as urgent as our climate change responses.

References


Professor Fiona Stanley AC is Director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and Executive Director: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.