

Everybody Counts

 Samaritans
your local **ANGLICARE**
election 2010

Time to Put Children First in Australia

During this election campaign, I wonder at the small amount of time given to the plight of Australian children who are deemed to be in need of care and protection.

Over the past five years, the numbers of children in contact with their state's child protection authority has risen from 24,075 to 35,049 in 2010. Similarly, the numbers of children needing to live away from home increased by 10,000 to 34,000 (approximately 50% of these are in NSW).

Professor Dorothy Scott, an Australian academic with particular expertise in child welfare, has stated recently that our child protection figures are the worst in the developed world; for example 35,049 notifications in Australia compared with 300 in Singapore.

This is a situation which needs to be urgently addressed at the national level. It is no longer just a problem for the state child protection authorities. It is a problem for all of us if we really believe that our children are our future.



Raising a family today is obviously quite a challenge. Children are growing up in quite complex social settings with significant change to the shape of family and community life. The nature of paid employment is changing with increased casualisation and children are exposed to many influences through media and new technology.

So what should be done when families struggle? Well, we have learned what not to do.

The long awaited apology to Australia's' First Nations people and the Stolen Generation was delivered by Prime Minister Rudd in 2008. This was followed by apologies to child migrants from Britain and children who grew up in large children's homes and institutions, "The Forgotten Australians". The next apology is set to be for mothers and children separated by past adoption policies and practises.

However, as we apologise for the past, we must give significant attention to the present and future. Do nothing and apologise later is not the right way to go.

So what can be done?

-  Firstly Child Protection Authorities should deal with only the most serious cases of abuse and neglect. The community must take more responsibility to support families with young children who experience difficulties from time to time. This could be through local agencies, churches, sporting groups, service clubs, schools and child care centres.
-  We must also reduce the numbers of children in Out of Home Care. Most of the children who lived in former children's' homes went home to their parents when the homes closed. This was because the bond between parent and

child is most significant even when parenting is flawed, even when the parent-child relationship is erratic and complicated. Removing a child from the family home involves not just loss of the parent but can also involve other losses such as siblings, friends, school, pet dog, favourite tree, your local river bank.

- ✚ Where removal of the child is unavoidable, kinship care and grandparents care is often a good option but these families need more support, both practical and financial. They are in a different situation to foster parents who are subjected to vigorous assessment and training and rightly so. There is a role for the federal government in supporting grandparents and kinship carers, and it is not currently recognised.
- ✚ The most effective way to reduce child protection numbers is through more resources for early intervention such as Brighter Futures, with intensive support to young parents through home visiting, parenting programs and respite care in child care centres.
- ✚ We need more resources to Indigenous organisations to expand their work in community development and early intervention for families with young children
- ✚ We need universal free education for two to five year olds. More affluent families already access early education but early learning and support should be available to all children. Our child care centres and preschools are often the first contact point for parents and children who are experiencing difficulties
- ✚ We need increased support for adolescents and young people who are at risk through expansion of successful programs such as Reconnect and Headspace where young people are supported at a time of vulnerability and continue with their education, career, families; ultimately much more effective than doing nothing until it's too late.

These days we hear a lot about mutual obligation and the need to reduce taxes. But our children should have a right to nurture, safety, education and wellbeing....no strings attached.

The welfare of children in Australia is at a critical stage. It is time for action, for leadership at the federal level, for responsibility at the local level.

Yes, this is about the rights and justice for children. We should also remember that scrimping on child welfare will cost significantly more in later years through homelessness, mental health illness, family breakdown and crime.