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30 June 2008

Hon Jenny Macklin MP
Minister for Families, Housing,
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: child.protection@fahcsia.gov.au

Re: Australia's children: Safe and well Discussion Paper

Dear Minister

Please find attached a submission from Mission Australia on the *Australia's children: Safe and well Discussion Paper*.

This is a challenging area but one of vital significance and Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input. We would also be able to expand on the material provided should that be required.

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Yours sincerely

Toby Hall
Chief Executive Officer



Response to the Australia's children: Safe and well Discussion Paper June 2008

1. Background

Mission Australia is a national community services organisation. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life. We work across five broad areas – children and families; young people; homelessness; employment; and training, all of which have relevance to the *Australia's children: Safe and well* discussion paper. Each year Mission Australia supports over 300,000 Australians.

2. Overarching framework

Mission Australia welcomes the clear and early commitment from the Commonwealth Government to work with the State/Territory governments, the non-government sector and other stakeholders, on a National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. We support the naming of the framework as 'Protecting Australia's Children' rather than the more limited 'Child Protection Framework' and the nuances that this broader naming suggests. We would also urge that the final framework include explicit acknowledgement of the diversity of sectors and organisations actively involved in contributing to the wellbeing of Australia's children.

As part of the options in section 6 of the Discussion Paper (*Improving child protection systems*) it is suggested that indicators of child wellbeing could be identified and notes work being done by ARACY, AIHW and others in this area. Whilst acknowledging the need for urgent action in the 'protection of children' area, Mission Australia would argue that there is a clear and critical need in the Australian context, for an overarching framework for the **wellbeing** of Australia's children (and young people). Such a framework would encompass, but go well beyond the 'protection of children' and cover the broad range of areas which impact on the development and wellbeing of children, as well as include broad principles, targets and indicators across a range of areas. It could draw on, but not be limited by, work already agreed to by COAG, through for example the Productivity Agenda and Indigenous Reform Working Groups.

Such a framework would indicate a clear national commitment (supported by all levels of government) to the wellbeing and development of Australia's children (and young people). It would ensure our aspirations and efforts on behalf of children went well beyond their safety and included a much broader and more ambitious set of outcomes. It would also ensure that there were clearly articulated principles to guide the

development and implementation of policies and programs that promote the wellbeing of children. The United Kingdom's *Every child matters* approach and that of other nations such as New Zealand could inform such an Australian framework. Both New Zealand's *Care and Protection Blueprint* and the recently released *New directions for child protection in Tasmania*, as well as a range of other documents, provide some guidance on the types of principles which could be included. These principles should acknowledge the diversity of children and family backgrounds (eg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, grandparent headed etc) and the need for policies and programs that respond to that diversity.

Whilst noting that the discussion paper includes reference to the 'goal...(of) the wellbeing of Australia's children...' (in Section 1, *Stronger prevention focus*), Mission Australia would argue that such a goal needs to be an overarching one, rather than one that is just situated in one of the areas covered by a 'Protecting children' framework.

Mission Australia also notes that different states/territories use different ages for defining 'children'. One consequence is that whilst there is some reference to 'young people' in the discussion paper, these references tend to be very limited. Mission Australia's experience working with young people in the teenage years shows that for some this is a time of significant vulnerability and this is an age where there should be a greater national role for ensuring their 'protection'. This is especially the case for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and those exiting care. A national 'protection' framework should cover both children and young people.

Mission Australia would argue that core components of an overarching framework and model for protecting Australia's children would focus on:

- Promoting – at relevant life transition points
- Preventing – universal programs through to targeted programs aimed at children and families with high needs
- Intervening – current tertiary programs (which over time would decrease based on the success of the promoting and preventing initiatives)
- Supporting – recognizing the need for long term support for some families who need permanent case worker allocation/support throughout a child's life.

3. Stronger prevention focus

Mission Australia strongly supports a major emphasis on prevention and early intervention in any national framework on protecting Australia's children (or a broader framework on the wellbeing of Australia's children). Critical to an early intervention focus is significant efforts being put into education for parents, and the diversity of people who work with children and young people, around the key life transition points, such as pre pregnancy, at birth, in the years before school, starting school and starting high school. A comprehensive suite of universal and targeted services which include: maternal nurse home and centre based visits at 3, 6 and 18 months; support services for families experiencing mental health, drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence; and case

management support for families with a complex range of high needs; should all be seen as part of an effective strategy for protecting Australia's children.

Mission Australia provides a diverse range of early intervention and prevention services, and in particular our evidence based *Pathways to prevention* initiative in Inala, the most disadvantaged urban community in Queensland, highlights the impact effective interventions can have on the wellbeing of children and families. *Pathways* has had a research partnership with Griffith University since the project commenced in 1999 and this has provided significant learnings about effective interventions in this area. Some of the critical success factors identified by this research for initiatives working with children and families in high need/disadvantaged communities include:

- Work early in life and 'early in the pathway'
- Focus at least on the 0 to 12 years age range
- Take an ecological approach (ie work with children-family-institutions of care (eg schools) and the community)
- Combine universal, intensive and targeted approaches
- Link program elements together as part of a comprehensive system of family support
- Include a focus on transition points (eg starting school)
- Provide 'soft entry' and more 'formal' programs
- Use strengths-based (not problem focused) practice
- Empower families to deal effectively with their circumstances
- Build engagement and trust (before programs)
- Work holistically and with the whole family if possible
- Increase parents'/families' engagement with institutions of care (such as schools)
- Be flexible and responsive
- Invest in research from the beginning and measure small changes
- Commit/be there for the long haul

These learnings confirm the need for example for the *Protecting Children Framework* to be able to link together supports across ages and systems, including the various components (eg maternal and child health services, early childhood education services, schools, family support services, early intervention services etc) which impact on the wellbeing of children. Mission Australia notes for example the critical role of schools in the wellbeing of children but the limited reference made to them in the discussion paper. A seamless continuum of support across the years is required if Australia is able to achieve high level outcomes across a range of areas for all children. This continuum has implications not only for the prevention area but all areas working with children. Some of the implications for this continuum will be raised in subsequent sections of this submission.

Long term investment both by Commonwealth and State/Territory governments is required in prevention/early intervention initiatives. Whilst there has recently been increased funding in this area, such investment still tends to be relatively short-term

and/or of a pilot nature. Initiatives that work with individuals and high need communities require significant time to build the trust which is fundamental to any real and sustainable change. This should be an underlying principle for Commonwealth and State/territory efforts in this area.

Promotion of good parenting option (page 17)

Mission Australia acknowledges that the *promotion of good parenting* has an important role to play in national efforts to protect the wellbeing of Australia's children. Such promotion however needs to be responsive to the diversity of family circumstances and the messages must be developed in such a way that they do not alienate those parents most in need, through a narrow definition of 'good parenting'. Terms such as 'good parenting' can become associated with what parents are able to materially provide, with parents from low income families not able to meet such 'standards'. Some researchers and practitioners have argued instead, that the concept of 'good enough parenting' might be more useful. Similarly, a broader strategy which targets the promotion of 'child-friendly communities' and which highlights the broader responsibility of the wider community in supporting parents and children (without in any way denying the central role and responsibility of parents) could be more effective, particularly as the population of Australia ages. Mission Australia would argue that we must shift the focus of 'child protection' beyond that of it being seen just as a family issue to one that is considered as a whole of community-societal issue.

Enhancing Centrelink's role to identify and refer vulnerable families (page 16)

Centrelink is increasingly being seen in a range of policy areas as having the capacity to expand its current range of responsibilities. While Centrelink might be well placed to *identify* children and families in need, they might not be well placed to *respond* to the needs of these children and families, and certainly not without significant additional resources and a greater level of flexibility being given to social workers and other similar positions operating within Centrelink. The current role and method of operation of Centrelink, including in some areas their absence from local networks and inter-agencies, means that other organizations may well be better placed to make use of the valuable data Centrelink has on children and families in need.

Non-government agencies are very well placed (if appropriately resourced) and experienced in working with disadvantaged, high need and at risk children and families. They are often able to build levels of trust with families which it is hard (or close to impossible) for government agencies to build. Data from Centrelink, including for example multiple applications for emergency finance, should flag the need to link children and families with other organizations, particularly non-government organizations, to meet their particular needs.

Similarly, consideration needs to be given within a national framework of the specific role of state/territory child-protection authorities. Cashmore *et al* and others have argued for example that in the NSW context, early intervention programs should be transferred from the Department of Community Services (DOCS) to the health,

education and non-government sectors, with the major focus of DOCS then being the tertiary end of service delivery.

Parenting and alcohol misuse option (page 17), Mission Australia would argue that whilst action is required on *parenting and alcohol misuse*, given the complex and often multi-layered issues parents with children are facing (including drug misuse, mental health, poverty, social isolation, unemployment etc) a much more comprehensive and integrated response is required. Recent research undertaken through a partnership involving the University of NSW, Mission Australia, ANGLICARE (Sydney) and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, confirms that many of our clients with children are struggling to provide their families with the ‘essentials of life’¹ (see Table 1). Such research confirms the broad range of issues families are facing and the need for much more integrated responses that go beyond just that of alcohol misuse.

Table 1: Proportion of clients² with children who did not have some of the ‘essentials of life’

A substantial meal at least once a day	16.2%
Safe outdoor space for children to play at or near home	18.9%
Children can participate in school activities and outings	27.0%
Yearly dental check up for children	55.0%
A local park or play area for children	17.7%
A hobby or leisure activity for children	37.4%
Up to date school books and new school clothes	35.9%

Source: *Left out and missing out* (2007)

A failure to integrate strategies such as those aimed at addressing alcohol misuse within a broader suite of responses for parents, (including education, health, employment, financial security etc) is likely to both limit the impact of the strategy and exacerbate issues in other areas of families’ lives.

4. Better collaboration between services

Mission Australia strongly supports a focus on *better collaboration between services* in a national framework for protecting Australia’s children. It particularly notes the need for a *national mechanism to plan future work and investments* (page 20). As it is currently described however, this option appears to miss the importance of stronger coordination at the local/family level where much of the better collaboration is required if it is to impact on the wellbeing of children. Mission Australia’s experience is that in some states policies for collaboration may be clearly articulated but it is often in their implementation that the system fails children and families in need. In some high need communities in which Mission Australia is working there could be five to six government agencies and a similar number of NGOs working with the same families but

¹ The ‘essentials of life’ as defined by a survey completed by a representative sample of the Australian community.

² Clients of ANGLICARE, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Mission Australia

in a disjointed and uncoordinated way with the result being confusion and disengagement by families.

The UK's *Every child matters* has identified four areas which need to be integrated in order to promote the wellbeing of children. Whilst noting the UK has different responsibilities for national and local governments than in Australia, the areas are worth noting in the context of an Australian framework:

- Inter-agency governance: the delivery of integrated frontline services to improve outcomes for children and young people will require robust governance arrangements for inter-agency cooperation which set the framework of accountability for the improvement and delivery of effective services
- Integrated strategy: including joint assessment of local needs involving children and parents; single plan shared between all children's services reflecting national and local priorities for improved outcomes; and pooling of budgets.
- Integrated processes: including common initial assessment; better information sharing between professionals; and local processes and procedures re-engineered to support integration around the needs of children
- Integrated frontline delivery: including more integrated, accessible and personalized services built around the needs of children, not around professional/service boundaries; co-located services; and multi-disciplinary teams and lead professionals.

Mission Australia would urge that Australia's national framework consider these four areas as a bare minimum for collaboration efforts.

Income management approaches options (page 19)

Mission Australia understands the rationale behind current and proposed income management policies to protect children at risk. Its experience however working with disadvantaged and high need families suggests that addressing the underlying causes of behaviours over a sustained period of time, rather than merely treating symptoms, is much more likely to bring sustained change in the lives of families. Increasing the financial stress and vulnerability of families which some income management approaches can cause is potentially likely to add to the risk factors already present within families.

It also notes ACOSS's latest survey of community organisations indicates that around 5% of people eligible for family relationship services, and 7% of people eligible for child welfare services, are turned away because community organisations do not have the resources to offer them services they need. Such services are critical if Australia's children are to be 'protected' and their families provided with the best chance of supporting their children's development.

A solution driven national research program option (page 21)

Mission Australia strongly supports the framework explicitly including a research focus, ranging across areas such as national sharing and promotion of good practice, collating and disseminating research findings targeting researchers, policy makers and

practitioners, and national research priorities. The broader community should also be seen as a stakeholder of information gathered through a national research program. The need to undertake cross sectoral and inter-disciplinary research should be specifically highlighted within this option. Mission Australia notes and commends ARACY on its current round of seed-funding for research aimed at promoting multi-disciplinary and multi-sector collaborations. 'Homelessness in children' has been identified as one of four priority areas given the limited research in this area and the need for such research to cross disciplines and sectors.

5. Improving responses for children in care and young people leaving care

There is strong and sustained evidence of the poor outcomes experienced by children in care and young people leaving care. Current systems are not geared to children/young people exiting care successfully and it is a highly under-resourced area. This group must be a major focus for governments at all levels, given their high level of vulnerability.

The recent *National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness* highlighted some of the major difficulties with current arrangements. Whilst legislation relating to the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) (the major Commonwealth/State/Territory response to homelessness) implies homeless young people below school leaving age are *not* the responsibility of SAAP funded organisations, a significant number of SAAP clients are young people who are or should be under the protection of the relevant state/territory authority. The Inquiry also noted that funding for SAAP is less than funding for out-of-home care residential services, despite the fact that they might be servicing the same client group. Further this is an area where the age of the child/young person becomes a critical determinant in the level and type of support received, with the Inquiry being told that child protection systems across the country prioritise young children over adolescents to the point where they won't accept adolescents over the age of around 12 years (depending on the jurisdiction) (National Youth Commission, 2008). Whilst any service system will have to prioritise clients, the current intersection between child protection and policies and programs for homeless young people is resulting in very vulnerable young people either failing to receive any or appropriate/sufficient services. In some program areas it appears there is an understated expectation that children/young people in the age ranges of around 13 to 16 years will live and function as adults without them having the range of resources, both personal and material to do so.

Some young people are leaving care and becoming homeless because of their lack of living skills, education and hence poor employment opportunities and pre-existing mental health issues (National Youth Commission, 2008). Any framework aiming to 'protect' children must be able to address not only the policy and program dimensions of child protection systems but also those related to youth (and indeed child/family) homelessness. Mission Australia draws attention to the range of recommendations regarding young people leaving care articulated in Chapter nine of the *Australia's*

homeless youth (2008) report and urges that these be considered simultaneously with the development of a national framework for protecting Australia's children.

Support for foster carers and informal carers option (page 23)

Mission Australia supports the need for a greater national focus on supporting foster carers and informal carers. In this context however, it would particularly urge that attention also be given to the significant needs of grandparents who have become primary carers of their grandchildren, usually because of the drug and alcohol and mental health issues experienced by the parents of these grandchildren. Very conservative estimates indicate that over 22,500 families in Australia are headed by a grandparent and whilst their situation is in some way similar to that of other carers they have particular needs which need to be accounted for in policy and program development and implementation. For example:

- Almost half these families are lone grandparent families
- Around one in ten of them have three or more children in their care
- These families are disproportionately living in regional areas.

(Mission Australia, 2007)

This is an example where a national framework needs to be flexible enough to cover the circumstances of a diverse range of family circumstances. Whilst the broad needs of this group have been well documented this is still a relatively new area of research, policy and program development in Australia. Mission Australia in partnership with the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, the Commonwealth, NSW, South Australian and Northern Territory governments is currently undertaking a three year Australian Research Council Linkage grant project to explore in more depth some of the issues relating to this group.

6. Improving responses to Indigenous children

Mission Australia strongly supports the Commonwealth Government's major focus on the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, and in particular COAG's setting of initial and time-specific targets in the key areas of life-expectancy; child mortality; literacy and numeracy; year 12 completion; pre-school provision; and employment.

Mission Australia also notes the priority given to the wellbeing of Indigenous children in the *Protecting Australia's Children* framework. However, Mission Australia's position is that without a holistic and integrated framework across **all** areas of social and economic wellbeing, investments in any area, including protecting children, are likely to have a limited or non-sustainable impact.

The areas currently identified in the framework provide only a part of an integrated framework for considering the type(s) of responses which will be required in many Indigenous communities given the inter-dependence of many social, economic and health factors. It is only through a comprehensive, integrated and sustained response to the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities that enhanced child wellbeing will occur.

Mission Australia would argue that critical issues such as 'child protection' also need to be seen in the context of a comprehensive asset-based community development framework. This approach rests on the principle that the recognition of the strengths, resources and assets of individuals, families and communities is more likely to inspire positive action for change than an exclusive focus on needs and problems. It does not deny the real problems many Indigenous communities face but focuses on and harnesses the energy of how all community members can contribute in meaningful ways to community development (Mathie, 2002). This approach takes the premise that communities can take a key role in driving the development process by identifying and mobilising existing but often unrecognized assets, and respond to and create local community wellbeing.

There is now international evidence that an asset based community development approach pioneered by Kretzmann, McKnight and many others has the capacity to bring about significant community change on key issues such as child wellbeing in highly disadvantaged communities, if sufficient and appropriate resources and the required timeframes are provided. One of the key components of this approach is to provide a 'new lens' for looking at the community – a lens that focuses on opportunities and strengths, rather than deficits and a pre-determined and negative future.

Flexibility will be critical to ensure responsiveness to the particular situation of communities. As the 2006 review of the COAG trials noted 'flexible approaches need to be applied which reflect the individual circumstances of communities, the nature of the issues facing communities, and the developmental status of intergovernmental and cross sectoral relationships. There cannot be a one size fits all approach' (Morgan Disney et al, 2006).

Accountability mechanisms, funding levels, timeframes and outcome measures will also need to reflect this flexibility. Whole of government(s) community funding responses will be critical in this response as will long term and sustained funding. The complex intersection of issues facing many communities (including child protection) will not be 'solved' in the short term nor by one agency or level of government. In more recent years a regularly shifting policy and programmatic environment has only added to the challenges communities face.

Mission Australia is able to provide further information on an effective community development approach if required. National and international evidence shows that this approach is not a 'feel-good' but ineffective response; rather evidence confirms that without such a comprehensive and relationally-based response, no matter what the quantum of investment, sustainable change will not be achieved. Only an integrated, comprehensive and transformational approach will bring about the significant change in social and economic outcomes for Indigenous children which COAG has set out to achieve and which have been welcomed by many individuals and organisations across Australia.

7. Attracting and retaining the right workforce

Attracting and retaining an appropriate workforce has become one of the critical issues for human services across Australia and given the challenges and public attention 'child protection' often attracts, this is an area of particular priority. An integrated approach by both the Commonwealth and the States/territories, in partnership with employers, unions and other stakeholders is required. Such efforts should at least include addressing financial and other barriers to tertiary study, remuneration, training and development needs (Cashmore et al, 2008).

The UK's *Every child matters* notes that 'improving outcomes for children and young people involves changing the behaviour of those working with (them) so that (they) experience more integrated and responsive services, with specialist support embedded in and accessed through universal services'. The Australian Institute for Family Studies (2008) has noted that 'The delivery of child protection services in Australia has become a specialisation. An unintended consequence of this is the privileging of expert knowledge and action over other types of knowledge and action...lead(ing) to other professionals and community members feel(ing) disempowered ...to intervene to assist a family and feel(ing) that they have discharged their responsibility for a child and family's welfare by notifying child protection authorities of their concerns'. This is a highly problematic situation. Therefore, in addition to attracting and retaining staff there is a need to develop a new range of practice skills, including common core skills and knowledge, and increased understanding and trust between different professionals. Breaking down some of the 'professional silos' between groups working in this area is critical if children and their families are to receive the most effective service. Various professionals have their own 'language' and approach and whilst all might be working towards enhancing the wellbeing of children, their efforts might be counter-productive, if they do not have the skills to work in an integrated way. The 'right workforce' requires the capacity for personnel to work in multi-disciplinary teams and with staff across multiple agencies. This approach is still relatively embryonic in the Australian context and needs significant training, support and resources to be achieved.

8. Improving child protection systems

As indicated above, Mission Australia supports the development of indicators of child wellbeing but believes these should be part of a higher order framework for children and young people rather than merely being embedded in a 'child protection' framework.

Also critical to the broader framework is the need for nationally consistent and compatible information that is used and reported on and consistent legislative and operational definitions to ensure that the level of 'protection' a child receives does not vary based on where they reside.

Clearly the need for national consistent data collection, standards and performance reporting will be a critical component if there is to be any capacity for changes and improvements in this area to be monitored with any level of confidence. Having compatible IT systems to record and track data will be an important component of this

work. The capacity to link data across systems and jurisdictions is also critical. Relevant data will need to be available at a range of levels, including at the level of suburb in order that appropriate and targeted strategies can be developed. The protection of children should be the primary focus with privacy requirements being given secondary weighting when a child is identified as being at risk. The sharing of data between agencies and across jurisdictions to protect children will be essential in some cases. This has been particularly apparent recently where children who have been identified as at risk in one state have moved interstate with their family – data on at risk children should be available across state/territory borders.

Similarly, part of this work should include the exploration of a Common Assessment Framework, as developed in the United Kingdom and recommended by Cashmore *et al* and others. Such work needs to be piloted in a diversity of settings (urban, regional and remote, as well as with a variety of family types). Mission Australia's work in remote Australia suggests that current assessment tools are very narrow and prescriptive and because of issues such as health and hygiene, a strict application of some of the currently available assessment tools could result in all children from certain communities being removed. This highlights too the interaction of many factors which are particularly impacting on disadvantaged children, families and communities and the need for more integrated responses.

Further, Mission Australia's experience shows that a 'blunt' administration of tools aimed to assess the need for example for foster care disregards the experience of living in remote communities. In some cases such assessment includes the 'ability to attend relevant meetings with authorities within an hour of being requested to do so'. Such criteria are meaningless in the context of remote communities. Mission Australia is also aware that in some states foster care training that all carers have to complete does not necessarily include any cultural considerations, despite how significant an issue this will be in many cases and such training is not always practical in format and design for remote areas. Mission Australia would urge a complete review of all tools and processes relating to child protection assessment. Such processes should explore options which ensure that it is not the child/young person who is removed from a community but rather the perpetrator of abuse. To do otherwise is contrary to all principles of justice and is resulting in untold grief and loss for the children and young people involved.

Efforts should also be taken to ensuring similar standards apply in areas which are complementary to 'child protection' (such as SAAP) in order to ensure consistency.

Consideration should also be given to ways of freeing up current resources in state/territory child protection systems, some of which are clearly unable to cope with the number of reports they are receiving. Cashmore *et al* (2008) have suggested (for the NSW system) that Child Protection Consultants be appointed within the major groups of mandated notifiers (eg health, education, NGOs, police etc). They've argued that except where there is evidence of significant harm to a child or immediate safety concerns there should be the option of reporting concerns to a Child Protection Consultant to satisfy mandatory reporting requirements.

The Consultant would determine if the case was one that required a child protection investigation and if it should be referred to the relevant child protection agencies. If the matter is not reported an appropriate case plan would be developed by the agency/Consultant using a Common Assessment Framework. Child Protection Consultants would be registered and have appropriate qualifications and experience. Consultations would be recorded and accessed with appropriate privacy restrictions, by child protection authorities and other Child Protection Consultants. This approach would provide an internal referral point for staff working across a range of areas who might have 'child protection' concerns but have limited specific knowledge and experience in this area. It would ensure more speedy and appropriate action can be taken both at the 'local' (organisational) level and at the systemic child protection level. Consideration should be given by the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments to the funding of these positions.

Related to this is the need to ensure that children and families who require tertiary level interventions are not being placed inappropriately in secondary interventions because of systemic pressures and limited resources. Critical to improving child protection systems is children and families getting the right type of supports/services they need at the right time. AIFS (2008) has suggested that 'the critical issue driving demand for child protection services is actually the need for appropriate responses for those families who fall below the threshold for statutory intervention, but would benefit from targeted services to address current problems and to prevent escalation'. This is confirmed by Mission Australia's experience in some states which suggests that those families most likely to miss out are those who fall in the middle between early intervention and tertiary services. Ensuring the right mix and allocation of resources to universal, secondary and tertiary services is critical if the overall system is to work effectively. The diagram below (AIFS, 2008) highlights the current imbalance in service provision and resource allocation.

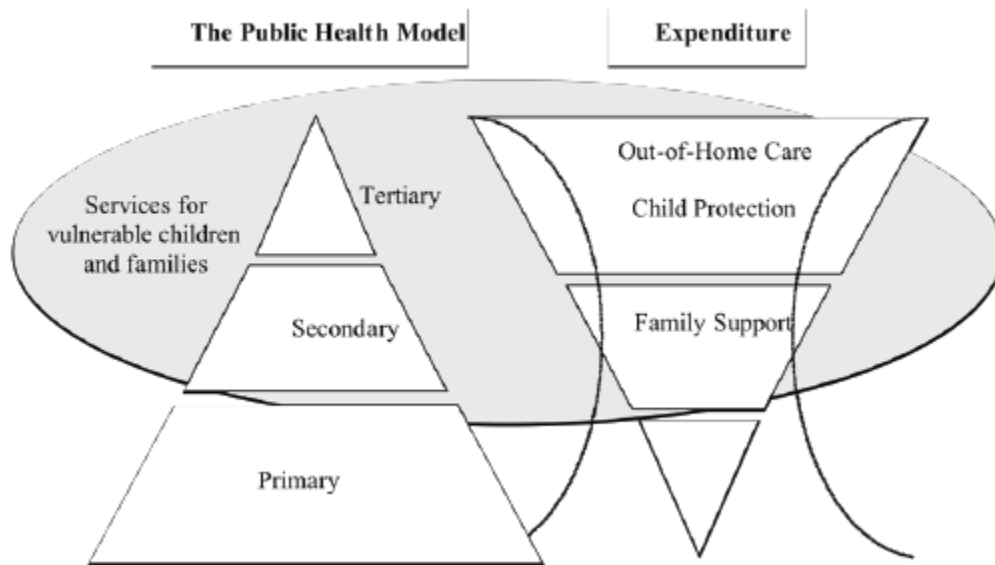


Figure 1: Services for vulnerable children: The Public Health model compared to government expenditure. Source: AIFS (2008)

A significant part of an effective child protection system is that all agencies and their staff who are involved with children are trained in and alert to potential child abuse and neglect. The latter in particular is more difficult to identify but training and support of health professionals, childcare workers, schools etc to provide a key frontline resource as identifiers of issues of child protection, is critical.

Conclusion

A national framework for the wellbeing of Australia's children and young people is critical if the interests of our youngest Australians are to be safeguarded and their wellbeing promoted. This framework is a matter of urgency and should include a comprehensive range of targets and outcomes, including that of 'protecting' children. The Commonwealth has a lead role in partnership with the states/territories and in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, including the NGO sector, to develop such a framework. Some of the options raised in the current discussion paper would fit within such a framework but it also needs to go well beyond them to ensure children and young people are not only 'safe' but that they thrive in all areas of life.

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