

Mission Australia position statement: families and children

Families play a crucial role in providing a safe and nurturing environment for children to grow and thrive. They act as a network of support when people suffer tragedy or are in need - whether physical, emotional or economic. Our relationships and lives are enriched and deepened by being part of a supportive family. Strong families support happy, healthy children; a priority of Mission Australia.

Early childhood is a particularly crucial time a child's mental, emotional and educational development and is influenced by the strength of family relationships, access to education and care, and the community and society in which they live. When families suffer, communities suffer.

Parenting is also one of the toughest jobs around and can be made even harder when parents are suffering economic hardship, unemployment, mental illness, housing instability or violence.

By supporting families, in all their many forms, to raise strong, healthy, and resilient children we are also creating the economic and social fabric of the future.

Supporting families has been at the core of Mission Australia's work in meeting human need during our 155 year history.

Mission Australia's integrated service model not only aims to draw together services in a client centred approach, but integrate and meet the needs of individuals reflective of their family circumstances and needs.

Mission Australia and families

In 2012-13 Mission Australia operated 169 services for families and children that assisted 9,425 families and a further 67,808 individuals. These services included:

- Prevention and early intervention programs for young children and their families in disadvantaged communities;
- Counselling and case management services to parents and children;
- Residential programs for families experiencing homelessness;
- High-quality early learning and family day-care services;
- Pre-school services for children with disabilities; and
- Support programs for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

Mission Australia is also one of the founding partners of Goodstart Early Learning, a not-for-profit consortium that is Australia's largest provider of early learning services with more than 600 centres.

Prevention and early intervention

Prevention and early intervention programs can help avoid problems from escalating to the point they have a serious or debilitating impact on families and children. Prevention is better for families and it's also proven to be cost effective.

Many of the vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families that Mission Australia supports experience multiple risk factors that if left unaddressed, can result in contact with the child protection system and lead to poor outcomes into adulthood. Services need to respond to the complex needs of clients who often have compounded problems and comorbidities.

The growing focus on prevention and early intervention is reflected in the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020 (the National Framework) which promotes child protection as everyone's responsibility and highlights the need to shift

perceptions from being a response to abuse and neglect to one that promotes the safety and wellbeing of all children.¹

Yet the weighting of investment in the Australian context remains towards tertiary intervention, particularly in the provision of out-of-home care which is the most expensive component. In 2010-11, approximately \$2.8 billion was spent nationally on tertiary child protection, with out-of-home care services accounting for the majority of this expenditure at \$1.8 billion.² The long-term costs to the community of child abuse and neglect are also significant with an estimated total burden of disease at \$7.7 billion.³

Improved prevention and early intervention responses are needed to reduce demand on tertiary services over time, and enable longer term savings.

There are a number of good examples of existing programs that could be expanded or enhanced including the Commonwealth funded Family Support Program encompassing Communities for Children, which Mission Australia operates at six sites around the country.

Communities for Children is a local capacity building program in disadvantaged communities to support children aged 0 – 12 and their families. A facilitating partner funds and assists local community groups to develop and extend services that help children to grow and develop as well as avoid school difficulties, welfare dependency and poor health. Part of the strength of the program is that it can be accessed by anyone with children in the target age group avoiding the stigma associated with 'remedial' programs.

Early intervention services offering multiple interventions have shown greater success than single focal interventions, particularly when a program with soft entry points is accompanied by more intensive programs for families at high risk.

The NSW Government funded Brighter Futures program supports families where there is heightened risk to children under the age of nine because their parents have at least one of; a mental illness, an intellectual disability, substance abuse problem or where there is low level exposure to domestic violence.

¹ Council of Australian Governments (2009) *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020*, Commonwealth of Australia

² Scott, D (2012) *The economic cost of child abuse and neglect*, Child Family Community Australia, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/factsheets/a142118/index.html>

³ Taylor, P., Moore, P., Pezzullo, L., Tucci, J., Goddard, C. & De Bortoli, L. (2008). *The Cost of Child Abuse in Australia*, Australian Childhood Foundation and Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia: Melbourne

Other similar programs operated by Mission Australia around the country include Referral for Active Intervention funded by the Queensland Government, which is an intensive family support program for vulnerable children and their families who are at risk of entering or re-entering the Statutory Child Protection System and need support to address multiple challenges and issues.

Early intervention programs should not be viewed purely through the child protection system, with mounting evidence that children with disabilities including Autism Spectrum Disorder benefit substantially from early diagnosis and support.

The State Government funded Parent Connect program in Brisbane provides guidance to families when they first discover their baby or child (aged up to six years) has been diagnosed with a disability or developmental delay. The Parent Connect facilitator assists parents to navigate the support system, helping them determine an appropriate response for their family.

Mission Australia adopts a case management approach in its children and families services. This ensures that the child and family is at the centre of the decision making and planning process and individualised interventions tailored to the needs and strength of the individual and family are offered.

Early childhood education and care

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has a critical role to play in supporting families, to optimise children's learning and development, in reducing social inequality and providing opportunities for women to participate in the workforce.

ECEC policy is underpinned by the National Quality Framework which was established in 2012 and which applies to most long day care, family day care, pre-school, kindergarten and out of hours school care.

ECEC has even more significant benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds as it acts as a prevention and early intervention strategy and is one of the most powerful and cost-effective ways of addressing long-term disadvantage.

Various studies have estimated that for every \$1 invested in high-quality ECEC services there is a return on that investment of between \$8 and \$14.⁴

⁴ Brotherhood of St Laurence (2011) *Statement of Reform Priorities to the Tax Forum*, BSL, Melbourne

In 2012, 22% of Australian children were vulnerable on one developmental domain at school age (Australian Early Development Index (AEDI): 2012).⁵

Mission Australia's ECEC policy advocates for children in disadvantaged areas to be given access to free, or near free ECEC from up to three years prior to school with targeted early intervention services linked to ECEC providers in the most disadvantaged communities.

ECEC services have the capacity for the early identification of children and families at risk and can provide referral and linkages with additional services and supports. Additionally, high-quality ECEC plays a significant role in providing a stable and therapeutic environment for children who have experienced, or are at risk of, child abuse and neglect, providing them with the best start in life and also providing vulnerable parents with some respite.

ECEC also has the capacity to narrow social inequality and improve range of outcomes for children including health, education and economic outcomes over the course of their lifetime. For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, longitudinal studies have shown the benefits of early childhood programs include higher levels of school performance and education attainment, reduced levels of welfare dependency and greater levels of income and employment.

And yet in 2009, Australia ranked 32nd of 34 OECD and partner countries in terms of its expenditure on early childhood educational institutions as a percentage of GDP.⁶

Building the capacity of ECEC providers to respond to children and families at risk is also critical. Integrating quality education with services to support vulnerable families can have the added benefit of a soft entry point for families at risk and an opportunity to work with the entire family, not just children, to develop positive family and community relationships.

Programs which support families from marginalised groups, particularly Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, to participate in early education are essential to ensure the children that will benefit the most are receiving the value of these services. Pre-kindergarten Participation Programs designed to lift enrolments of target groups are already in place in some locations, with Mission Australia providing this service in three sites in south east Queensland.

Parents also rely on quality and affordable childcare to participate in the workforce, with 50.8 per cent of respondents to Mission Australia's 2014 childcare survey saying that if government supports were cut they would reduce their use of paid childcare, 37.4% would

⁵ AEDI (2012) National Report, available at <http://maps.aedi.org.au/>

⁶ OECD (2012): Country Note: Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012: Australia

reduce their work hours and 23.0% would stop working altogether. Those in the most disadvantaged quintile were the most likely to say they would stop working if the childcare subsidy was reduced (with 33.3% saying they would do so).

Childcare has also played a key role in addressing the ongoing inequality faced by women in the workforce by helping to increase participation by 10 per cent from 55 per cent to 65 per cent between 1991 and 2011.⁷

Increasing investment in ECEC over time will be essential to the future of Australia's economic and social prosperity.

Out of home care

While Mission Australia has a strong preference for working with families before problems become acute, when children's safety is at risk, out of home care is necessary.

Out of home care should ideally be provided through kinship arrangements, which are increasingly the preference of State Governments, but in some cases children do need to be placed with foster families or with a community services organisations. These should be seen as last, not first resort.

More emphasis is also needed on 'permanency planning' for children and young people and reducing the instability from having multiple placements with different families which has been a persistent feature of the foster care system over the last decade.

Mission Australia currently provides emergency placements for children who are in the care of child protection services on Mornington Island (The Safe House) as well as a longer term program in Cairns for young people aged 12-17 (Out of Community Care Residential Services) who have extreme support needs, have been removed from their families and communities and are subject to statutory child protection intervention. Priority is given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

The service aims to provide the young clients with the closest thing possible to a family environment, ensuring their safety, promoting healthy development and stability, with the ultimate aim of transitioning young people into a less intensive care arrangement or return to their community.

⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies (2013) Parents working out work

Reconnecting young people

As young people make the transition from being a child to an adult, strong family connections can provide the freedom to seek out independence and be critical to helping young people to get back on their feet when they fall.

When young people are estranged from family networks or are exposed to abusive relationships, they risk falling further into crisis.

Domestic violence and family breakdown are cited by 30 per cent of young people who are homeless as the reason they sought help from a specialist homeless service provider.⁸ 42% of people who were homeless on the night of the 2011 Census were under the age of 24.

There is also significant overlap between young people who are homeless, those who have been exposed to the child protection system including out-of-home care and in those involved in the justice system.⁹

Becoming homeless as a teenager is also a signal event which indicates a much higher risk of becoming homeless in the future just as incarceration is considered a trigger for an increased rate of reoffending behaviour and deterioration in health and wellbeing.

While it is not possible for all young people to reunite with family, programs that draw on extended family networks to support people post-crisis have shown great progress in reducing rates of repeat homelessness and have been key to reducing rates of recidivism amongst young people in the justice system.

Mission Australia's philanthropically funded Youth Crime Prevention Program in South Western Sydney has shown significant reductions in rates of re-offending amongst the young people participating in the program.

Programs like the Commonwealth funded Reconnect, which uses community-based early intervention services to assist young people aged 12 to 18 years who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, and their families has also been shown to be particularly successful.

⁸ AIHW (2013) *Specialist Homeless Services: 2012-13*, Cat. no. HOU 27. Canberra: AIHW, p vii Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129545638>

⁹ AIHW (2012) *Children and Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion: links between homelessness, child protection and juvenile justice*, Canberra. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129542237>

Reconnect assists young people stabilise their living situation and improve their level of engagement with family, work, education, training and their local community.

Family homelessness

Around a third (28%) of people who accessed homeless services in 2012-13 presented as families.

Thirty-two per cent of all clients receiving assistance from homelessness agencies in 2012-13 were escaping domestic or family violence. The majority of these were adult females (63%) and 19% were children under 10 years of age.¹⁰

Just as prevention and early intervention are the best solutions to family violence and children being exposed to the child protection system, prevention strategies are also essential in reducing family homelessness. This includes provision of affordable housing.

There is a severe shortage of affordable housing for families and very limited safe and secure exit options for families leaving domestic violence.

Waiting periods for social and community housing in many suburbs of major cities are over a decade and there are currently more than 220,000 people nationally who have been assessed as eligible for social and community but are on the waiting list. Yet social and community housing is declining as a proportion of the overall stock down from 4.7 to 4.5 per cent.¹¹

There is also evidence that families are moving to the periphery of major cities to find more affordable housing but in the process become socially isolated and lack access to transport, employment and community support services.¹² This points to a failure within the housing market as well as a lack of services on fringes of urban growth areas.

More troubling is that the rise in homelessness between 2006 and 2011 was largely due to a significant increase in severe-overcrowding, which is more prominent in communities with high proportions of recent migrants and in Aboriginal communities.¹³ In many cases

¹⁰ AIHW (2013) *Specialist Homeless Services: 2012-13*, Cat. no. HOU 27. Canberra: AIHW, p vii Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129545638>

¹¹ AIHW (2013) *Australia's Welfare 2013*, Canberra

¹² Healy, K et al (2009) *Families on the Fringe*, University of Queensland, Brisbane

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness 2011*, Canberra.

extended families are sharing accommodation inappropriate for the number of people living there. Significantly improving the supply of affordable housing in areas of population growth in close proximity to transport and growing job markets is essential to both stem the numbers of families forced to live in overcrowded dwellings and provide a solution for those already there.

In 2012 Mission Australia opened a new family hub in Kingswood in western Sydney to provide an integrated model of family support from services including family day care, early intervention and transitional and community housing for families who are homeless.

The combination of easy entry points for families at risk as well as a young parents programs, specialised play groups and case management and clinical services linked to supported accommodation provides a useful model that can tailor support to families' needs.

Jobless families

Intergenerational unemployment is a pernicious problem facing Australia today with significant long term consequences for parents and children. Joblessness is the major cause of child poverty, with concurrent problems persisting into adulthood such as poor educational, health and economic outcomes that may be significant.¹⁴ Nationally, one in every seven dependent children lives in a household where neither parent has a job.¹⁵

Mission Australia's 2013 Youth Survey of young people has shown that those growing up in jobless families are less likely to be studying than their counterparts. They are twice as likely as other groups to feel dissatisfied with their studies and half as likely to be participating in work.¹⁶

Nearly a third of young people in jobless families considered that family conflict was an issue of major concern for them, compared with 23.6% of those families where one member was working part-time and 18.0% in full-time working families.

¹⁴ Whiteford, P. (2009). *Family Joblessness in Australia*. Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

¹⁵ OECD. (2011). *Children in families by employment status* (No. LMF1.1). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/els/family/LMF1_1_Children_in_families_by_employment%20status_July2013.pdf

¹⁶ Mission Australia. (2014) *The impact of family joblessness on school to work transition: young people's insights and concerns*.

Children in jobless families also have poorer cognitive and behavioural scores for a range of outcomes and are more likely to be unemployed themselves once they reach working age.¹⁷

As Australia's population ages and the level of workforce participation declines, it will be critical that all young people have the best chance of participating in employment. This will require a national policy to support young people in their transition from school to work including dedicated intensive support services for the most vulnerable young people.

Employment services for job seekers who come from families where no one is employed, need the capacity to take a 'whole of family' approach, particularly where there is evidence of intergenerational unemployment.

This could include allowing parents, spouses, and their working age children to choose to register with the same Jobs Services Australia (JSA) provider to enable the adoption of approaches that address needs across all family members.

Grandparents raising grandchildren

Grandparents are increasingly taking on a role as provider of informal childcare, with 38% of respondents to Mission Australia's childcare survey saying that their children were regularly cared for by grandparents.

Grandparents are also playing a critical role in kinship care for families that are under stress, both formally through out-of-home care, foster care and adoption as well as providing informally through holiday and respite care.

In 2012, almost 41,000 children and young people across Australia were the subject of care and protection orders issued by child protection authorities and more than half of those placed in home-based care are with relatives or kin—mainly grandparents—rather than with non-related foster carers.¹⁸

¹⁷ Baxter, J., Gray, M., Hand, K., & Hayes, A. (2012). Occasional Paper No. 48 Parental joblessness, financial disadvantage and the wellbeing of parents and children. Retrieved from https://www.idpwd.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2013/accessible_word_document.docx, Gray, M., & Baxter, J. (2011). Family joblessness and child wellbeing in Australia. In *Advancing Child and Family Policy Through Research Conference* (Vol. 31). Retrieved from http://rse-dev.anu.edu.au/news_events/ACFPR/papers/Gray_Baxter.pdf, Gray, M., Taylor, M., & Edwards, B. (2011). Unemployment and the Wellbeing of children aged 5-10 years. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 14(2), 153–172

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare quoted in Brennan, D et al (2013) *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Towards Recognition Respect and Reward*, SPRC, UNSW

While most policies are targeted at parents, it is critical that grandparents aren't ignored as their needs and experiences of raising children are often very different.

Research both domestically and internationally suggests grandparent-led families are financially disadvantaged in comparison to other families and often find it difficult to access government supports for which parents are eligible. This is particularly acute where Grandparents are providing almost permanent but informal care (i.e. there is no child protection determination, family court ruling or adoption).

The additional responsibility often requires changes to housing and employment which can have a significant impact on the family's income and expenses, at a time when the grandparent is likely to be in poorer health than other parents simply because they are relatively older.

Although many grandparents experience stress and hardship as a result of their care responsibilities, research has also provided powerful evidence of the joy and pride that many grandparents take in caring for their grandchildren and their contribution should be celebrated.¹⁹

Government policies aimed at supporting vulnerable families need to take account of the increasing role of grandparents and ensure that they have access to the same financial supports and services as other parents or primary carers.

Mission Australia has been operating a service to support grandparents raising their grandchildren in Nowra for nearly a decade. It is currently funded through the Commonwealth Family Support Program.

¹⁹ Ibid

Recommendations

Mission Australia recommends a number of policy approaches to support Australian families, with a focus on those in greatest need.

They include:

- Ensuring support services are integrated and funded to support the needs of entire families, as central to meeting the needs of individuals;
- Improving the funding to provide case-management for employment and youth transition services that are working with families experiencing intergenerational unemployment to ensure they can take a ‘whole of a family’ approach;
- Greater investment in early intervention and prevention programs for families at risk including children living in families that are significantly disadvantaged, those experiencing domestic violence, living in a family where a parent has a mental illness as well as children with a disability;
- Free or near free access to high quality early education and care for children in disadvantaged areas for up to three years prior to school in order to address long-term disadvantage;
- Retaining the National Quality Framework for ECEC to ensure all children have access to high-quality learning in the most important years of their development;
- Incorporating family support programs within youth reconnection services for those at risk of homelessness, and in contact the justice or child protection systems;
- Improving the supply of social and affordable housing to help prevent future homelessness;
- Changing rules around eligibility for family support payments and services to ensure that grandparents raising their grandchildren can access the same levels of support as other parents; and
- An integrated service delivery model that brings together a range of services to meet multiple needs of children and parents within families.