



BoysTown

Fresh start.
New hope.

Response to 'Australia's children: safe and well'

30 June 2008

Tracy Adams
Chief Executive Officer

☎ 07 3867 1230
tadams@boystown.com.au
www.boystown.com.au



Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Recommendations.....	6
Stronger Prevention Focus	6
Family support services	6
Enhancing Centrelink's role to identify and refer vulnerable families. .	7
Promotion of Good Parenting.....	7
Support for Families to Protect Children Online	8
National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children.....	9
Providing Support for additional Child Focus in Adult Specialist Services	9
Out-of-Home Care System, Foster Carers.....	10
Identifying Indicators of Child Well Being	10
Improved Data Collection and Attracting and Retaining the Right Workforce.....	10
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS – Child Protection Legislation	11

Executive Summary

BoysTown submits this response to the Discussion Paper: *A National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* with 47 years of experience in the delivery of services to young Australians.

The response highlights recommendations for consideration in taking proactive steps to ensure the safety and well-being of Australian children. BoysTown would welcome the opportunity to provide examples drawn from our experience in working with families, young people and children to substantiate the need for these actions.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Funding for a range of family support and prevention strategies be concurrent with increased intervention levels.

Recommendation 2: Local in-home family support programmes be culturally appropriate and resourced as early intervention responses and transition to home strategies.

Recommendation 3: In regional and remote communities where Centrelink services are often outsourced, the issue of referral in child protection instances should be undertaken only by qualified and trained staff.

Recommendation 4: Parenting programmes be developed and resourced to meet the needs of diverse and multi-faceted issues in parenting families.

Recommendation 5: Measures to increase the safety of children and young people be promoted with consistent messages across statutory and community agencies.

Recommendation 6: A national plan to reduce violence against women and children be developed, which includes tailored local responses and the consistent application of Ouster orders, and that supports consistent procedures, training and responses by authorities.

Recommendation 7: Current adult specialist services and agencies offering more complex parenting programmes receive increased resourcing to enable the identification of concerns regarding children.

Recommendation 8: Development of well resourced kinship and foster care placements meet the needs of individual children and young people.

Recommendation 9 Indicators of the well-being of children include data from a variety of related sources including Child Death reviews.

Recommendation 10: The evaluation of data collection be conducted effectively including a minimum standard of investigative response time to enable a focus on resolution for the children.

Recommendation 11: A national database inclusive of details of where children are at risk to enable continuity of care as people move across jurisdictions be a major priority.

Recommendation 12: Legislative reforms reinforce child-centred models keeping with the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Introduction

BoysTown welcomes the Federal Government's initiative in consulting on the issue of protecting Australia's children.

This response to the Discussion Paper is offered from a service perspective and is reflective of experiences, views and suggestions of direct service workers.

BoysTown is predominantly a youth specialist agency, and our mission is ***'to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life'***.

BoysTown has delivered services to disadvantaged and 'at risk' young people, children and families for 47 years. We work with people who have been excluded from full participation in family life, community activity and the labour market due to family conflict, trauma, mental health and substance misuse issues, intergenerational unemployment and disrupted education.

BoysTown currently provides a range of services to young people and families seeking one-off and more intensive support including:

- Accommodation responses to homeless families and women and children seeking refuge from Domestic/Family Violence;
- Parenting Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young mothers and their children;
- Paid employment to more than 200 young people each year in supported enterprises as they transition to the mainstream workforce;
- Training and employment programs that skill young people allowing them to re-engage with education and/or employment;
- Kids Helpline which provides a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling service for five to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues;
- Parentline, a telephone and on-line counselling service for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory; and
- Response to the needs of the peoples of the remote Indigenous communities of the Tjurabalan in Western Australia.

Recommendations

Stronger Prevention Focus

Recommendation 1: Funding for a range of family support and prevention strategies be concurrent with increased intervention levels.

As the causal factors contributing to child abuse are complex, prevention strategies need to be multi-faceted within a wholistic and systemic framework. The necessary changes to address poverty, standard of housing, homelessness, financial disadvantage, racism, and analysis of power, all involve ongoing and intergenerational change. With the current level of child abuse and neglect in Australia, and widespread recognition that child protection statutory agencies are unable to deliver timely and comprehensive responses, it is vital that funding is not diverted at the expense of abused and neglected children.

All children deserve quality and attentive child protection responses that meet their multiple needs and address their trauma. Therefore protection is determined by need and not by resource levels. Arguably statutory departments are over-burdened, which means not all Child Protection Notifications to the Department of Child Safety can be investigated.

Family support services

Recommendation 2: Local in-home family support programs be culturally appropriate and resourced as early intervention responses and transition to home strategies.

In-home family support services are valuable because they are a:

1. Practical and non-judgemental support to parents/carers, at times including the modelling of structure, execution of household tasks, and appropriate discipline strategies to parents/carers who may not have experienced these aspects of home and family in their family of origin.
2. Monitoring function, to avoid solely relying on the capacity of parents/carers to identify their own needs in coping with children, and to encourage help-seeking or support. Without this support, extended family and neighbours are at times left with the responsibility of reporting what has later become child abuse or neglect.

Enhancing Centrelink's role to identify and refer vulnerable families

Recommendation 3: In regional and remote communities where Centrelink services are often outsourced, the issue of referral in child protection instances should be undertaken only by qualified and trained staff.

Although Centrelink may be seen as an obvious referral link to child protection departments, direct family intervention would require Centrelink staff to undertake extensive training in assessment and family interventions.

Social Workers in Centrelink would also need to know the community referral pathways to enable early intervention at a local level. The development of local protocols with the State child protection authorities as well as the non government sector can assist timely responses, where local services exist.

In remote Indigenous communities the scenario varies, as the administration of Centrelink payments is often the jurisdiction of non-Centrelink employees e.g. the local store owner or a member of the community's corporation. The potential abuse of power or inaccurate assessment when this is the jurisdiction of someone in a non-professional role is of concern. In addition, members of Indigenous communities have family allegiances to work within. In all instances, the role of the non government sector in supporting families needs to be enhanced.

Promotion of Good Parenting

Recommendation 4: Parenting programmes be developed and resourced to meet the needs of diverse and multi-faceted issues in parenting families.

BoysTown recommends parenting programmes are developed and resourced to meet the needs of diverse and multi faceted issues in parenting families, with flexible approaches. Parenting programmes need to be in context and address more than isolated disciplinary techniques. Examples exist which include family residential block therapy, in home observation, support and modelling, as well as child-centred programmes (e.g. F.A.S.T. (Families and Schools Together), and neighbourhood centre approaches and activities.

'Parentline' a telephone counselling service is provided by BoysTown for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory, funded by the respective departments of communities. Parentline Counsellors are accredited with the Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme) designed by The University of Queensland.

The statutory child protection departments in Queensland and the Northern Territory recommend to parents with children in care, that they access a Triple P programme at their local community health centre or via Parentline.

Whilst the telephone counsellors are all qualified professionals with a significant level of counselling expertise, they often report that the needs of the abusive parent are so significant that the structured content of Triple P programmes is insufficient for this group. Counsellors need to work through parental attitudes and power issues, educating callers on age appropriate responses to their children, and safe parenting techniques. In other words, parenting programs in the home cannot be automatically transferred to work with parents needing significant support, parental structure and counselling.

Promotion of good parenting needs to coincide with self care of parents, reasonable income support, and housing and neighbourhood programs that are supportive and non punitive.

Parents and carers who abuse and neglect their children, sometimes in overcrowded and inadequate home environments, are set up for failure when trying to implement parenting techniques within chaotic lives and environments. Parenting programmes do not address the primary lack of attachment often found in abusive families. Attachment must be assessed and nurtured and a commitment to resolve historic or current issues be made for any improvement in parenting so that children can be safe, and parents achieve success.

Therapeutic and supportive work with parents as individuals and/or a couple needs to be resourced, with an emphasis on the client's own experience of being parented. This recognises an important and necessary first step so that behavioural and emotional change is addressed with the adult/s.

After the therapy sessions, an assessment by the therapist as to both the willingness and capacity for the individual parent to relate appropriately to their children needs to be included in decision-making within child protection departments. The Family Court of Australia processes also need to consider this when formulating Court Orders that protect children.

Support for Families to Protect Children Online

<i>Recommendation 5:</i>	Measures to increase the safety of children and young people online be promoted with consistent messages across statutory and community agencies.
--------------------------	---

Kids Helpline was the first agency internationally to offer web and email counselling to children and young people. The exponential growth in the use of these modalities correlates with a decrease in contacts over the telephone to Kids Helpline, testament to the level of attraction and confidence young people have with these media.

As a national service with a child/young person client base, children and young people from across Australia and from all walks of life discuss with Counsellors their experimentation, use, and abuses experienced through engagement with online media. As a result, Kids Helpline has an informed

and significant level of concern about the exploitation of children and young people by adults posing themselves as peers to young people. The naivety and blind confidence of many of the young people, believing in the genuineness of these adults, can be undermined by inconsistent and confusing messages.

National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children

Recommendation 6: A national plan to reduce violence against women and children be developed, which includes tailored local responses and the consistent application of Ouster orders, and that supports consistent procedures, training and responses by authorities.

BoysTown supports a national plan to reduce violence against women and children, which includes tailored local responses and the consistent application of Ouster orders. This ensures the non violent partner, usually the mother, can maintain support, school and neighbourhood networks for herself and her children. Consistent procedures, training and responses to family violence would provide for safer outcomes for many families

Funding options for medium-term, supported accommodation for women and children who initially opt for refuge accommodation need to be provided. This creates exit options for families when they leave the refuge, seeking long term housing through public, private or community housing and prevents an economically forced return to the violent partner.

Police responses to domestic violence, where children are present, need to consistently refer to child protection departments. This link on behalf of children provides some measure of response in relation to impacts of potential trauma and family disruption.

Providing Support for additional Child Focus in Adult Specialist Services

Recommendation 7: Current adult specialist services and agencies offering more complex parenting programmes receive increased resourcing to enable the identification of concerns regarding children.

Adult specialist services to include formal assessments identifying information about children and a requirement to immediately report a minimum or higher level of risk to child protection authorities.

Out-of-Home Care System, Foster Carers

Recommendation 8: Development of well resourced kinship and foster care placements that meet the needs of individual children and young people.

BoysTown has provided Out of Home Care responses historically, and is concerned at the limited transition from care arrangements that exist for unsupported young people. Young people who successfully transition to independence report that their success is linked to a consistent and supportive adult throughout and after their placements.

Kinship care is utilised as a preferred option for many children removed from the care of their parents. As an option of care, it is regularly unresourced and inconsistently supported.

Identifying Indicators of Child Well Being

Recommendation 9: Indicators of the well-being of children include data from a variety of related sources including Child Death reviews.

Measures of child well-being need to include correlates from a variety of related data sources e.g. the elevated level of SIDS in families with child protection histories, the existence of a mental illness or substance abuse in families known to authorities for neglect or abuse.

Improved Data Collection and Attracting and Retaining the Right Workforce

Recommendation 10: The evaluation of data collection be conducted effectively including a minimum standard of investigative response time to enable a focus on resolution for the children.

Recommendation 11: A national database inclusive of details of where children are at risk to enable continuity of care as people move across jurisdictions be a major priority.

Procedural and documentation compliance for workers within the child protection departments has become one of the most prominent aspects of their role. This has been at the expense of meeting with families and children, and workers no longer have a role of counselling with clients. Arguably this has affected both the quality of the client-worker relationship and job satisfaction.

It is the experience of counsellors in Kids Helpline that they are often the only option for children and young people after standard business hours.

Unfortunately when enacting Duty of Care responses with police assistance, State child protection departments are not always quick to respond, and often do not respond. Few options can then be offered to the child or young person.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS – Child Protection Legislation

<i>Recommendation 12:</i>	Legislative reforms reinforce child-centred models keeping with the Convention of the Rights of the Child.
---------------------------	--

- BoysTown supports the early removal of children who are at risk.

Change to child protection systems that increase effectiveness requires reform to legislation. Australian state laws pertaining to the protection of children appear to be moving from child-centred models to parental rights models. This may result in a lack of support for families and a reluctance to remove children and young people in known abuse situations..

While many parents raise their children non-abusively with some external support, there is a growing number of parents who neglect and abuse their children, refuse to acknowledge there is a problem or take self-responsibility for their behaviour. Parents may also refuse to attend programmes and accept assistance. Regardless, their rights are often still upheld over the rights of the child.

Parents need support to demonstrate that they are:

- actively engaged in counselling and programmes of behavioural change, and
- able to demonstrate a significant change to a level that authorities can comfortably assess ensures safety for their children.