

*Opening Address
by*

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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you here today and to open your annual Conference. It is an honour and a pleasure to be here.

I'm sure you would agree that the title of your conference, *'Times they are a Changing'* is something we can all relate to strongly.

Enormous changes in all aspects of our lives impact on each of us on a daily basis. This morning, I will be reflecting in particular on how these changes impact on children and their families. I will then present some ideas about how our responses to these issues of change can promote the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and families.

In general, human beings don't like change. Change requires adjustment. It requires us to think about and do things differently.

But this is what we are continually being asked to do - to manage and cope with change - often at all levels in our life; personally, in our work, and within our broader society.

Hugh Mackay, an Australian social researcher, suggests that as a country we are facing a 'turning point' where we are *"being called on to think of Australia in a new way"*¹.

Australian society has changed considerably in the past 30 years – including social, cultural, technological and economic changes. In many ways we seem 'better off'. The United Nations' Human Development Report has ranked Australia as the fifth most livable country in the world². However, there are many who would argue that the fabric of our society is becoming threadbare and fragile³. Sarah Wise, an Australian Family researcher, states that

*"broad social and economic change is deteriorating quality of life within neighbourhoods and communities, with negative flow on effects to families and their children"*⁴.

Life has certainly become more complex. If we think about the amount of information we are exposed to every day and how this would be different to someone's experience 50 years ago, it is quite astounding.

During this time, telephone, television, radio, photocopiers, faxes, computers, modems, internet, email, mobile phones, satellite phones, videos, DVDs, MP3s, cable TV, and video teleconferencing have come into our lives and increased the number of ideas and number of people whose thoughts we come in contact with each day.

This has required us to "accelerate our ability to process new thoughts and ideas"⁵.

The rules have also changed in many areas of our lives. What we do in life, when we do it, and how we do it has changed. If we look at the key areas of social change which relate to families and children we can see examples of this.

Family Demographics

For example, in relation to the demographics of families in Australia, in 2000 we know that:

- families are now smaller with the average family having 1.75 children⁶
- increasing numbers of families have one child⁷
- more people are postponing marriage with the average age for men at marriage being 28.5 years and for women 26.7 years⁸, and

- women are having children later in life with many first births now occurring after women are 27 years old⁹.

Families have become more diverse in their formation¹⁰.

- more couples are choosing to live in defacto relationships and to have children in these relationships¹¹
- divorce rates have risen with 49,600 children under 18 affected by divorce in 2000, compared to 44,900 in 1990¹², and
- single-parent families have increased, with lone-mother families with children now accounting for 19.3% and lone-father families with children for 2.3% of family arrangements¹³.

Therefore, children today, in comparison to the past, are more likely to have fewer or no siblings, experience the divorce of their parents and live in a single-parent family.

However, most children continue to live in two-parent families (78.3%)¹⁴ and have at least one sibling¹⁵.

Fathering

Within families there have also been many changes in expectations and gender roles. Fathers are now expected to be more involved in their children's lives.

However, research tells us that men in many cases continue to be less involved in children's care than women¹⁶.

Additionally, men may experience a lack of confidence in their parenting skills¹⁷. As a society I believe we need to encourage positive attitudes towards fathers being involved with their children. One way to do this is to encourage work places to be more family friendly.

Employment

A major change in the last two decades has occurred in the relationship between families and paid work.

Of most significance is the increase in women, and also in men, with dependent care responsibilities for children, who are in the workforce.

In 2000,

- 89% of males and 61% of females in couple families with dependent children were employed¹⁸
- this involved more part-time work for women than men¹⁹, and
- in single-parent families with dependent children, 51% of parents were employed²⁰.

Other features of current employment trends that impact on families and young people include that:

- some people are working very long hours, while others are experiencing unemployment²¹
- many families are moving regularly for work reasons²², and
- job prospects for young people are changing, with most work now requiring a high level of training.

Cultural Diversity

Australian society has developed into a nation of diverse cultures with people from most countries in the world making up who we are as Australians.

Recent census data ²³ tells us there are approximately 4.6 million children (birth to 17 years) in Australia.

Of these,

- 178, 000 (2.3%) are Indigenous, and
- 321, 000 (7%) were born overseas²⁴.

To give a sense of our cultural diversity, we can look at the languages that are spoken by children at home.

Eighty-four percent of all children speak English²⁵.

Of the 16% of Australian children who speak other languages,

- 19,000 speak Indigenous languages
- 64,000 speak Arabic
- 44,000 speak Greek
- 41,000 speak Italian
- 48,000 speak Cantonese, and
- 45,000 speak Vietnamese²⁶.

Therefore, within families varying cultural beliefs and practices will occur. This may be evident to you as carers of children when some families' child-rearing beliefs and practices differ from your own.

What do we know about Queensland Children?

Some of the information included tells us that:

- there were 47 078 births in Queensland in 2000
- the majority of mothers were aged 20 - 29 years
- Indigenous mothers were more likely to be under 19 years old, and non-indigenous mothers were more likely to be 30 – 39 years of age
- The top five causes of illness or disease in children under 18 were
 - respiratory diseases
 - injuries and poisoning
 - abnormal clinical lab findings
 - digestive diseases, and
 - infectious diseases

Further information:

- Developmental delays were the primary disability in children aged 0 – 4 years, followed by physical disabilities.
- Autism was the most common disability for children aged 5 – 9 years, followed by intellectual disability.
- Young males were much more likely to have a disability than young females.
- Child protection notifications were highest for children under 1 year of age;

- Children from birth to 4 years of age were most at risk of 'neglect' and 'emotional' abuse
- As children got older, if they were abused, they were more likely to experience 'physical' and 'sexual abuse'. Police victim data showed the highest rates of sexual abuse for young people aged between 13 – 15 years, and
- Young males were more likely to be physically abused, while young females were more likely to be sexually abused.

Socio Economic Diversity

Economic conditions associated with capitalism have been described as creating competitiveness and individualism that promotes economic inequality²⁷.

This inequality can be seen in Australian society, and is evidenced in the numbers of children (approximately half a million) who live in poverty²⁸.

Within this most economically disadvantaged group, single-parent families and indigenous families continue to be disproportionately represented²⁹.

While some families don't fall below the poverty line, there appear to be increasing numbers of families who are experiencing financial stress. This relates to the growing gap that is occurring between the highest and lowest income households³⁰.

The Current Situation

Technological change has meant that we live in a world where we are increasingly connected as a 'global community' but we are less likely to know the people who live next door to us.

We are able to communicate more immediately with a vast range of people but we may have little time to talk with the people who are most important to us. We have increasing knowledge about how to support children's health and development; however, many of the most disadvantaged children and families continue to receive little support.

Children in our 'post-modern' society could be seen to be more sophisticated.

Certainly we know that children are physically maturing earlier³¹. Recent research has pointed to the effects of our current diet in promoting this early physical development.

This doesn't mean though that children are more advanced intellectually, emotionally or socially.

However, children may be exposed to more information and a broader range of experiences than perhaps we were as children, which can make them seem more mature.

The ideas that children are exposed to now may also be more advanced.

And we know that children are very enthusiastic about taking on the new ideas and activities in our society. I'm sure you will all have witnessed the keenness with which children adopt the cultural symbols of Barney, Power Rangers, Pogs, skateboards, Nintendo, Beavis and Butt-head, to name a few.

As adults we may not be able to understand the appeal of some of these trends. For example, we may be challenged when we see young people's craze for body-piercing. It's been suggested that this trend is a sign of people trying to gain a sense of control.

"If you could no longer define yourself by your job, home, garden or suburb, you define yourself by your body. Pierce it, paint it, tuck it up, suck it out and sculpt it"³².

Other trends may also challenge us – due to the money that they cost! The statement has been made that this is "the generation that beeps and hums"³³.

Young people spend all day together at school, get on the bus and send text messages to each other and when they arrive home link up again via email or chat rooms.

"They are the generation who, having grown up in an era of unprecedentedly rapid change, have intuitively understood that they are each other's most precious resource for coping with the inherent uncertainty of life. Their desire to connect, and to stay connected, will reshape this society."³⁴

These issues allude to the challenges that children face in our changing society. However, it's been suggested that it is children who are most able to adjust to these changes³⁵. Rushkoff states that,

"our kids may be younger than us, but they are also newer. They are the latest model of human being, and are equipped with a whole lot of new features. Looking at the world of children is not looking backwards at our pasts – it's looking ahead. They are our evolutionary future"³⁶.

These ideas encourage us to recognise children's strengths, competence and ability to adjust.

I will now discuss how some of the changes in society may impact on children.

Changes in the way families are structured, and how they function, have implications for children's experiences.

For example, the need to balance work and family needs is a major shift that has occurred in the last two decades. As carers of the children of parents who work, and for some of you as parents yourselves, you would be confronted with this balancing act each day.

Families' success in creating this balance depends on factors such as: workplace support; the hours that parents are employed; how responsibilities for household duties are managed; and the physical and psychological time that parents have available to their children³⁷.

This balance is also supported by the quality of the child care that families are able to arrange for their children. This is where you come in.

The experiences that children have in Outside School Hours Care programs can be very enriching in their lives – providing opportunities for learning and socialising.

It is easy for many of us to think “When I was a child I went home to a parent after school and played”, and consider this to be the best arrangement. However, this experience may or may not be enriching.

This was well expressed in a story told to me of an Outside School Hours Care Coordinator who relayed a parent’s appreciation of the experience her child had at After School Care.

When this parent came to collect her child she saw him playing a ball game with a group of children. She thanked the Coordinator profusely, saying that if her child was at home with her he would be sitting in front of the television.

Outside School Hours Care programs provide important opportunities for children to connect with and become involved in their own small community – somewhat like an extended family.

While it is suggested that contemporary society promotes ‘competitive individualism’ in children³⁸, experiences in school age care can teach children about being part of a community – about cooperating with and relating to others.

Children’s contact with other people also helps them to develop their thoughts and feelings about themselves.

The importance of self-esteem and locus of control (“an individual’s sense of control of their own destiny”³⁹), as well as their ability to relate well to peers, were identified in recent British research as critical for children to develop while they are young as these attributes determine future employment and economic success⁴⁰.

Another way that you can support the balance of work and family responsibilities, is through promoting the connections, and helping with the transition between the different aspects of children’s lives.

For example, being a good communicator and sharing information, listening, and helping children to share information with their family about their experiences in Outside School Hours Care, are very important in supporting the links between home, Outside School Hours Care and school.

Ideally your role in children’s lives is complementary to that of their parents. I’m sure there may be times when you feel you are compensating for parents in your contact with children.

However, it is important not to be judgemental of families for choosing to be employed or for using school age care, as such judgements don’t help parents or children.

Changes in family demographics also raise questions about the possible effects on children.

If parents are older when they have children, how might this influence their parenting style? If parents have fewer children, how does this impact on children's experiences?

An Australian family researcher suggests that,

*"we might hypothesis that for those children of older parents, or who are only children, parents may have more 'investment' in their children's achievements, academically and socially. Parents may place higher expectations on their children to be successful than were placed on children a generation ago"*⁴¹.

Wendy Harmer identifies this issue when she writes from the point of view of the baby:

"In between baby gym, swimming lessons and educational toys, my schedule is hell at the moment. I realise that Mum and Dad want to spend quality time with me and I do try to have something going to entertain them...a new sound, a tooth maybe or some new facial expression.

But the pressure of it gets to me and I just end up cranky and I vomit and ruin everything. I'm seven months old and I feel like a failure. All I want is a bit of down time to stare at the shadows on the wall and suck my toes. Am I being selfish?"⁴²

Another example of this issue is relayed by Hugh Mackay who tells the story of a primary school student who is receiving tutoring for his school work and is appointed a second tutor to help with the homework set by the first tutor⁴³.

These issues and anecdotes encourage us to think about what is important in the lives of children.

I would suggest that children need:

- security and love
- opportunities for contact with other children and valued adults
- support and guidance
- stimulation and challenge
- respect
- to be listened to
- mentoring of their moral and spiritual development, and
- time to discover, explore, imagine and 'muck about'.

Sarah Wise adds that,

*"hope for healthier, happier children in the new millennium lies in sustaining the quality of the social environments that immediately surround families and children. Building local communities and communities of interest that support parents and promote child development is suggested as the strategy that can offset some of the wider economic and social forces"*⁴⁴.

These social relationships that help people to feel connected to one another help create what is called social capital.

It is this social capital, which is characterised by trust and expressions of reciprocity between people, that is now being recognised as essential for quality of life and in particular for the wellbeing of children and families⁴⁵.

Key Australian researchers in this area state that,

“When social capital in a community is high, there are many potential benefits for children.

Parents and children are supported by relationships with people outside the immediate family.

When problems arise, these people are a resource for families to turn to for help and advice.

Access to information about health issues, children’s development and community services also provide considerable support for families, especially when the people who hold the information are seen as helpful, and families know where to go for information relevant to their needs”⁴⁶.

An Australian study by Vinson, Baldry and Hargreaves⁴⁷ reinforces the benefits of social capital. This research found significant differences in child abuse rates in two socio-economically similar adjoining suburbs in Western Sydney. The area associated with a higher rate of abuse lacked familial and community networks and social connectedness – or what we call social capital.

The connections and social networks of families benefit children both directly and indirectly. Direct benefits include the friendships children form with other children and the support and learning resulting from this. Indirect benefits include the flow-on effect to children from parents who have the opportunity to gain parenting knowledge and skills through their contact with other parents.

We have established that life has become more complex. It could be suggested that people have more options, in particular those people in society with more resources.

However, along with these opportunities are increased pressures. Many people are suffering from what we call being ‘time poor’ – that constant difficulty in getting everything done and never having any time left over.

The pressures of 21st century living are resulting in an increased incidence of mental illness and in particular depression in both young people and adults⁴⁸.

These concerns have prompted us to recognise that we must strengthen our communities and promote the connections and relationships between people as this acts as a resource and support in life.

Conclusion

You are key people in the communities of interest that support parents and children.

Through your care, listening, and sharing of ideas with families and children, communities are made stronger.

On behalf of the Commission for Children and Young People I would like to commend you for the very important work you do for children, families and the community, now and in the future.

Best wishes for a successful conference that I am sure will assist you to adapt⁴⁹ positively to the changes we are facing.

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