



*Address
by*

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*At the
AGM of M.U. Australia, Brisbane Diocese*

*At
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Cr Logan Road & Mountain Street, Mt. Gravatt*

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Acknowledgements

- Chairman - Diocesan M.U. Chaplain Archdeacon John Thompson
- Diocesan President – Eve Knott
- Diocesan Secretary – Mrs Margaret Dixon

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today at your annual general meeting.

It is an honour and a pleasure to be here.

This morning I would like to provide you with a brief overview of the role and work of the Commission for Children and Young People. I will then touch on some of the challenges facing children and young people in contemporary society – highlighting the important role that families have in building children’s resilience to cope with life stressors, and to be well-adjusted and happy.

Firstly, I would like to set the scene by identifying the strong interest at this point in time, by researchers, policy makers and the church, in the importance of early childhood. The Anglican Church of Australia has nominated 2003 as the Year of the Child. This highlights the commitment of the church to valuing children and youth and promoting their needs. The leadership shown by the church in this area is commendable.

There is currently much interest nationally and internationally in the importance of children’s early experiences as these set the foundation for health, emotional, social and intellectual outcomes for the life course. Mounting research evidence supports greater investment in early childhood and early intervention and prevention programs for the immediate benefits for children but also for the enhancement of wellbeing that is produced for adults and society over the long-term. Studies show that each dollar spent in the early years saves \$7 in remedial services for individuals over 15 in relation to such issues as health, criminality and unemployment¹.

State and Federal governments are increasingly putting early childhood on the social policy agenda. The Federal Government’s focus on young children and their early development is evidenced in the consultation process that commenced on 20th February this year, to work towards a National Agenda for Early Childhood. The broad action areas selected for national attention are:

- early child and maternal health
- early learning and care and
- supporting child-friendly communities.²

You can be part of this consultation process and can access information about this on the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services website at www.facs.gov.au .

Other policy initiatives that focus on the importance of early childhood development and the needs of families with young children, include:

¹ Presentation by the Principal Policy Officer, Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs at the Australian Research in Early Childhood Education Conference in Canberra on Friday 25th January 2002. Schweinhart & Weikart. (1997). *Lasting Differences: The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study Through Age 23*.

² Commonwealth of Australia. (2003). *Consultation Paper, Towards the Development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood*. Canberra: Author.

- the Commonwealth *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (FaCS) which aims to build family and community relationships to prevent social problems
- in Queensland *Putting Families First* is a whole of government policy similarly aimed at the early years, supporting the nurturing role of families and creating safe and supportive communities
- the Department of Families *Queensland Families: Future Directions* policy³ aims to assist families before they reach crisis point and children are put at risk, and
- the Department of Education has initiated a trial of a full-time preparatory year of schooling for 4 ½ to 5 ½ year old children, with these children commencing year one, six months older than children currently do.

It is recognised that still more needs to be known about factors that influence developmental pathways for Australian children. In recent years, several Australian groups with an advocacy and research focus in relation to the early years have been established. These include:

- the National Investment for the Early Years (NIFTeY)
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), and
- the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc. (AAIMHI).

A key research initiative currently occurring in Australia is the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC) – or Growing Up in Australia, as it will now be referred to publicly. This study will occur over nine years, and seeks to examine the impact of Australia’s social and cultural environment on the next generation. Evidence from this research will be used to inform policies, including identifying opportunities for early intervention and prevention strategies concerning children, parenting, family relationships and functioning, early childhood education and schooling, child care and health. The Commission for Children and Young People coordinates whole of government responses in relation to LSAC.

The Role of the Commission for Children and Young People

The Commission seeks to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of Queensland’s children and young people, now and in the future⁴. These objectives are in alignment with your own group, M.U. Australia, which seeks to promote conditions in society that enhance the protection and wellbeing of children.

The original Children’s Commission was established in 1996, and Queensland was the first state in Australia to establish such a Commission.

In February 2001, the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000* was proclaimed. This legislation re-established the Queensland Children’s Commission as the Commission for Children and Young People, with broadened scope, functions and powers. The *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000* has allowed the establishment of one of the most multi-functional and empowered Children’s Commissions in the world.

The Act acknowledges the rights of children and young people and embodies the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This legislation empowers the Commission to make a real difference in the lives of

³ The State of Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet. (2002). *Queensland families: Future directions*. Brisbane: Author.

⁴ CCYP Strategic Plan 2001-2005. p. 3.

Queensland children and young people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

[Slide/s - Role of Commission]

Under the Act, the Commission for Children and Young People is an independent statutory body attached to the Premier's portfolio. Its functions include:

- advocating for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18
- receiving and investigating complaints about government services to children
- providing state-wide Community Visitors to support children living in out-of-home care
- establishing youth and other expert advisory committees to advise the Commission on specific issues
- monitoring and reviewing laws, policies and practices affecting children and young people
- researching issues affecting children and young people, and disseminating information about these understandings, and
- administering the 'Working with Children Check' which screens people working with children and young people to ensure they are suitable.

The Commission for Children and Young People is committed to advancing the notion of a 'child friendly community' - one which values and respects children and caters for diverse cultural backgrounds. We are dedicated to protecting children and young people in their daily lives.

One of the keys to achieving this, as I'm sure you would all agree, lies in ensuring children are exposed to experiences which promote their interests and support their families as the most important people in children's lives. One of the principles underlying the *Commission for Children and Young People Act* is that "the family has the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of its children, and should be supported in [this] role"⁵.

Children and Social Change

Let us now consider some of the challenges facing children and young people today, and the critical role families play in assisting children with these challenges.

We live in complex times. In recent decades Australian society has undergone enormous changes – socially, culturally, technologically and economically.

In many ways we seem 'better off'. Bob Birrell, a prominent Monash University demographer, was recently quoted in *The Bulletin* magazine as saying that "you'd have to say [children's] prospects are pretty good, and for the younger generations that follow over the next 20 to 30 years, it could well be the golden age"⁶.

However, there are many who would argue that the changes occurring within society are creating risk factors that impact negatively on children. Sarah Wise, a researcher with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, 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"*⁷.

⁵ *Commission for Children and Young People 2000* p. 13.

⁶ Beale, B. & Sweet, M. (2002, November 19). Super kids: How the next generation will measure up. *The Bulletin*, p. 24.

⁷ Wise, S. (1999). *Creating a 'child-friendly' social environment: A strategy to reclaim our children from risk?* Paper presented at the Making it Happen for Australia's Children Conference, September 1999, Canberra. [Web document]. Available: <http://www.aifs.org.au/> [2001, June 6].

Wise discusses

“the prevalence of mental health problems, substance use, delinquency, violence, school-drop-out, youth unemployment, and, in particular, youth suicide [as evidence of] shortfalls in the way our society ... protects children from contemporary social, economic, political and technological forces that affect them”⁸.

Key areas of social change which relate to families and children include changes in:

1. Family demographics – with many families now being smaller⁹, and people marrying¹⁰ and having children later in life¹¹.
2. Family formation – with more couples choosing to live in defacto relationships and to have children in these relationships¹²; divorce rates rising^{13,14}; and single-parent families now accounting for approximately 21% of family arrangements¹⁵.
3. Gender roles - with fathers now being expected to be more involved in their children’s lives.
4. Employment patterns – with an increase in women, and also in men, with dependent care responsibilities for children in the workforce; some parents working very long hours, while others are experiencing unemployment¹⁶; and many families moving regularly for work reasons¹⁷, and
5. Technological advances – including the increase in information that people are exposed to from across the world.

While these changes provide opportunities and choices for children and families, they may also make life more complex. 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. Increasing pressures are allowing less time for relationships. Research has identified that people are showing signs of trusting each other less¹⁸ and are less involved in supporting others through voluntary work¹⁹. It is suggested that families are finding it “increasingly difficult to establish or maintain social links, even in the same local community”²⁰.

James Garbarino²¹, an American family researcher and author, states that:

“Families are on their own. Family privacy, economic prosperity, and mobility patterns all separate parents and children from traditional sources of support and feedback, e.g., the church, elders, kin and neighbors. Isolation is

⁸ Wise, S. (1999). *Creating a ‘child-friendly’ social environment: A strategy to reclaim our children from risk?* Paper presented at the Making it Happen for Australia’s Children Conference, September 1999, Canberra. [Web document]. Available: <http://www.aifs.org.au/> [2001, June 6], p.1.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). *Australian social trends 2002* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra, ACT: Author.

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). *Australian social trends 2002* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra, ACT: Author.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). *Australian social trends 2002* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra, ACT: Author.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (1999). *Children, Australia: A social report* (Cat. No. 4119). Canberra, ACT: Author.

¹³ 49,600 children under 18 were affected by divorce in 2000, compared to 44,900 in 1990¹³

¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). *Australian social trends 2002* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra, ACT: Author.

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). *Australian social trends 2002* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra, ACT: Author.

¹⁶ Fegan, M., & Bowes, J. (1999). Isolation in rural, remote and urban communities. In Bowes, J.B., & Hayes, A (Eds.), *Children, families and communities* (pp. 115-132). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Fegan, M., & Bowes, J. (1999). Isolation in rural, remote and urban communities. In Bowes, J.B., & Hayes, A (Eds.), *Children, families and communities* (pp. 115-132). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Hughes, P., Bellamy, J., & Black, A. (2000). Building social trust through education. In Winter, I (Ed.), *Social capital and public policy in Australia* (pp. 225-249). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹⁹ Lyons, M. (2000). Non-profit organisations, social capital and social policy in Australia. In Winter, I (Ed.), *Social capital and public policy in Australia* (pp. 165-191). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

²⁰ Fegan, M., & Bowes, J. (1999). Isolation in rural, remote and urban communities. In Bowes, J.B., & Hayes, A (Eds.), *Children, families, and communities* (pp. 115-132). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

²¹ Garbarino, J. (1995). *Raising children in a socially toxic environment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

contagious; we become estranged from each other and all families lose the social support of close and caring loved ones”.

These factors can lead to individuals and families experiencing isolation and a lack of connection with others. It is now believed that our connections and relationships with people that are based on trust and expressions of reciprocity²² are essential for quality of life, and in particular for the wellbeing of children and families²³. These personal connections are often called ‘social capital’.

Declining community connectedness and a lack of social participation among children and young people has been identified by Ian Hickie, CEO of the national anti-depression initiative, ‘Beyondblue’, as critical factors in the causation of the key health problems being experienced by children today²⁴. Hickie makes a link between the reduction in social capital and the increasing incidence of mental health problems and overweight and obesity²⁵ in Australian children.

Risk and Resiliency

Currently, there is much research interest in understanding the factors that make some children more vulnerable to negative physical and mental health outcomes, and those factors which support children’s resiliency to resist risks. These understandings can help to inform policies and practices to reduce risks and promote resiliency in individuals, families and communities.

Resiliency can be defined as an individual’s, family’s or community’s capacity to positively meet the challenges of life, to rise above adversity and continue to function in a healthy way. It therefore involves the capacity to resist risks and foster adaptation and competence.

Risk factors are defined as “individual and environmental hazards that increase youngsters’ vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes”²⁶.

Family traits commonly identified in research as enhancing resiliency in children include²⁷:

- Commitment = including a dedication to maintain and improve relationships
- Cohesion = emphasising the balance between individuality and togetherness
- Adaptability = supported by response styles which balance stability and changeability
- Communication = the capacity for openness, clarity, accuracy, and mutuality in speaking and listening
- Spirituality = the capacity to transcend self-interest and live with a positive purpose
- Connectedness = the capacity to contribute to and receive from extended family, friends and community
- Time together = refers to the quantity and quality of member interactions
- Optimism and efficacy = the capacity to act with optimism and self-confidence

²² Stone, W., & Hughes, J. (2000). What role for social capital in family policy? *Family Matters*, 56, 20-27, p. 20.

²³ Cox, E. (1995). *A truly civil society: 1995 Boyer lectures*. Sydney: ABC Books.

Melton, G.B., Limber, S.P., & Teague, T.L. (1999). Changing schools for changing families. In R.C. Pianta & M.J. Cox (Eds.), *The transition to kindergarten* (pp. 179-213). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

²⁴ Beale, B. & Sweet, M. (2002, November 19). Super kids: How the next generation will measure up. *The Bulletin*, p. 24-28.

²⁵ 19 - 23 percent of Australian children and adolescents today are overweight or obese

²⁶ 1994 Resiliency Research Review. [Web document]. Available: <http://www.cyfernet.org/research/resilreview.html> [2002, October 15], p. 2.

²⁷ 1994 Resiliency Research Review. [Web document]. Available: <http://www.cyfernet.org/research/resilreview.html> [2002, October 15].

Individual psychosocial and biological protective factors are also significant to an individual's resiliency. These include such things as easy temperament, intelligence and feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem²⁸.

Andrew Fuller, a renowned Australian psychologist, states that children - and adults for that matter - all need a sense of belonging; something meaningful to do; and something to hope for in life²⁹. At a recent forum he quipped that people would "rather be wanted for murder than not wanted at all"³⁰. A key way that these protective factors are promoted is through children's personal connections with others.

The critical need for this is highlighted through

*"research conducted in Victoria which found that of 2600 year 8 students, aged 12 to 14, 40% of the students could not name a single adult, a single person whom they felt knew them well – knew their deepest fears, knew their aspirations and their dreams, the name of their favourite pet. ... [A] quarter could not name a single adult, not a parent, not a teacher, no one, whom they felt that they could trust"*³¹.

At this point in history we seem to be experiencing a

*"failure of modern Western culture to do well what cultures are supposed to do: provide webs of meaning that shape the way people see the world, locate themselves within it, and behave in it"*³².

Families have a critical role in supporting children and young people to develop their sense of meaning and their sense of place in the world. Where children have a positive relationship with at least one caring, supportive adult, their sense of security and ability to cope with stressful events has been shown to be increased³³. Such relationships can assist children to develop values, attitudes and behaviours which enhance their capacity to positively respond and adapt to the challenges of contemporary society.

Important ways that adults can help children to have a sense of belonging, meaning and hope are by:

- Actively listening to children
- Respecting children's individuality and differences
- Valuing children for who they are
- Providing children with support and guidance
- Allowing children time to learn, discover, play and relax
- Promoting children's sense of personal connection with their family, school and community
- Encouraging children's sense of optimism and control over their environment, and
- Having fun together.

²⁸ Fraser, M. (Ed.). (1997). *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective*.

²⁹ Fuller, A. (2002). *Building resilience in children and young people: From surviving to thriving*. Guest speaker at the Health Promoting Schools Association – Queensland Inc and Community Child Health Service, Monday 30th September, 2002.

³⁰ Fuller, A. (2002). *Building resilience in children and young people: From surviving to thriving*. Guest speaker at the Health Promoting Schools Association – Queensland Inc and Community Child Health Service, Monday 30th September, 2002.

³¹ Victorian Centre for Adolescent Health, the Gatehouse Study cited in Nelson, B. (2002). Quality teaching – A national priority. *Unicorn*, 28(2), 23-29.

³² Eckersley, R. (2002). Taking the prize or paying the price? Young people and progress. In L. Rowling, G. Martin & L. Walker. (Eds.), *Mental Health Promotion and Young People: Concepts and Practice*. Sydney: McGraw-Hill, 70-83, p78.

³³ Fraser, M. (Ed.). (1997). *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective*.

These things are easier said than done! Parenting as most of you would know, is a very difficult job which requires support. Sarah Wise suggests that:

“the 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”³⁴.

We can all be involved, even in small ways, in building communities of interest which support and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and their families.

³⁴ Wise, S. (1999). *Creating a ‘child-friendly’ social environment: A strategy to reclaim our children from risk?* Paper presented at the Making it Happen for Australia’s Children Conference, September 1999, Canberra. [Web document]. Available: <http://www.aifs.org.au/> [2001, June 6]. p. 1.