

People's Policy on Children's Wellbeing 2018

*"It takes a village ... supporting families
and children to thrive"*



THE PROBLEM

Around 3,500 young South Australians are separated from their parents, living in out-of-home-care and too often unable to reach their full potential.

The number of children entering the statutory children protection system is growing every year. For children born in 1999, by age 3, 9% had been notified to child protection. For children born in 2011, this had increased to 15% of children notified by age 3.¹ This growth reflects a sad reality that more and more children are experiencing harm, growing up in damaging environments and/or are suffering the effects of neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse and poor mental health.

There is a significant human cost to families and our whole community when children are unable to reach their full potential. This social and emotional cost lasts a lifetime and often translates to future generations.

Governments typically intervene when families are not able to provide the care that the child needs, often because of other pressures on the primary caregivers and the family unit.

Some groups in South Australian society feel the consequences of our current approaches to child protection and hence are more likely to be involved in the statutory child protection system disproportionately. For example, most at risk are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, increasingly, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, those who have had children removed previously and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The economic costs of children not thriving are layered. In 2016-17, the net costs for the Department of Child Protection were \$488 million², with the costs for a child in out-of-home care having grown to around \$325,000 per child per year³. Similar total Departmental net expenditure is expected in 2017-18⁴. In addition, there are significant opportunity costs of people growing up with a diminished ability to contribute positively throughout their adult lives. This can be as diverse as foregone tax revenue through to the costs of lifelong social exclusion, ongoing reliance on social and health services and increased interaction with the justice system. Beyond the economic costs, there is lost opportunity for young people to contribute to South Australia's bright future on the global stage.

A QUARTER OF THE KIDS IN YOUR SUBURB?

Did you know that 1 in 4 children under the age of 10 are the subject of at least one notification of child abuse or neglect?

Nine out of 10 Aboriginal kids under the age of 10 are the subject of at least one notification.

Research shows that children associated with any notifications tend to have poorer health and education outcomes than other young people.

The systems, programs and services that are meant to support children at risk all too often fail to address the harm felt by children. Service gaps, fragmentation, and a lack of long term funding undermine a long term shared vision for our children. Evidence does not consistently inform approaches, and successful approaches are rarely scaled up or funded beyond the electoral cycle.

At the core, we know that we are not creating communities where children thrive because our funding model is heavily weighted towards crisis management rather than prevention.

Reversing this situation and investing in preventative, whole-of-community approaches to build a Child Friendly South Australia requires a shift of focus and a sharing of responsibility across all sectors of society.

To do this, we will build on reforms that have recently commenced in this State, investing in measures that keep children thriving in their family environments in addition to adequately supporting children who need to participate in the statutory care system.

OUR APPROACH

We will achieve better outcomes for our children if all sectors of South Australian society step up and play a bigger role in helping children to flourish.

This is because the best solutions sit with children, the families and households and the community, with support, information and coordination from governments as required.

This is a 'womb to tomb' approach that recognises that children's wellbeing depends upon the broader societal context in which children grow up.

The starting point for this is a respect for children, who are South Australians as equally valid as our adult population. They are also our future. We will adopt a 'Children in all policies' approach that embeds the voices of children across all sectors of society.

We will provide opportunities to empower children to exercise choice and autonomy over decisions in their lives. We will actively seek to hear the many different voices of our children, including recognising the rights of the newborn and infant by listening to them and to others who cannot speak for themselves.

Our approach also extends to elevating the critical role of families, and celebrating their diverse forms. We know that family units come in differing shapes and sizes, and all members, including grandparents and men, play critical roles in children's lives. We will work with families to enhance their strengths and capacities at every stage.

Moving outwards, we know that the ideal outcome for many children and their families comes when they are safe, supported and empowered in their community context. We will empower community based organisations to implement solutions which complement more intensive government support. The sharing of experiences and knowledge between families, generations and organisations will form a critical part of these community level solutions.

THE OUTCOMES WE'RE SEEKING

Children experience physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, which enables them to pursue their dreams within a safe, secure and connected community. This results in a clarity of identity, purpose and voice, affording them the capacity to feel safe and free to be themselves.

Families are the foundation of our society. Families provide a supportive safe haven and with the support of the entire community they feel empowered to make choices for their future. Families are resilient, dynamic and adaptable and we as a community celebrate their many forms.

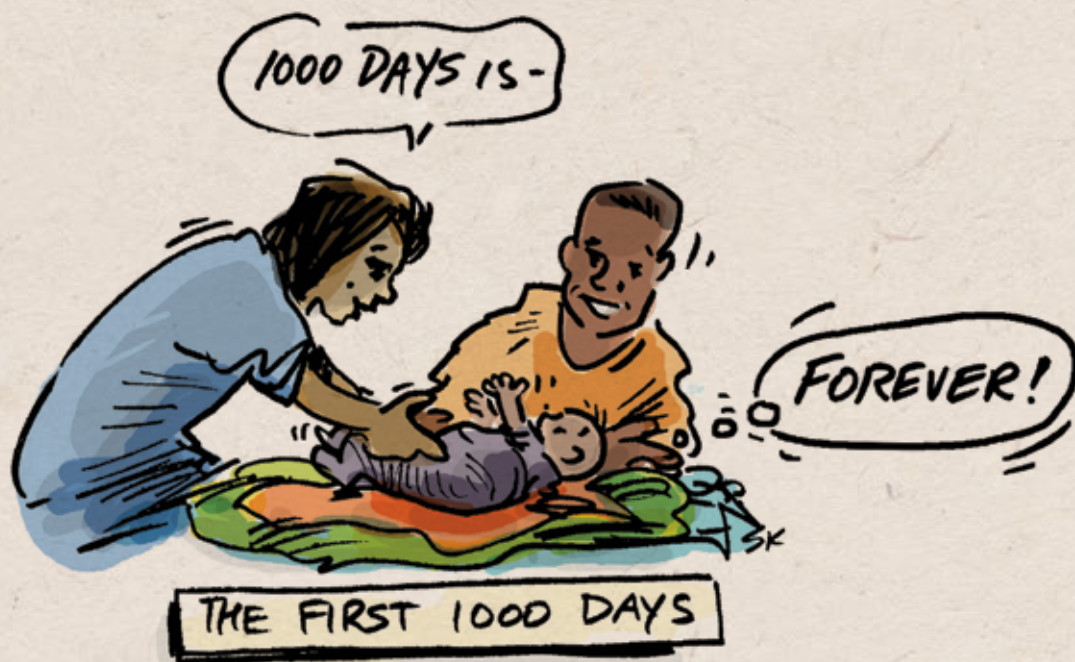
Our policy outlines the opportunities to support our children to thrive through:

- Community awareness and education to grow understanding of what a Child Friendly South Australia looks like, including empowering notifiers to play a bigger role in preventative approaches
- A focus on supporting children to thrive in their first 1000 days
- Greater coordination of services and support for children and families
- New opportunities for community based peer to peer supports for families
- Exploring a number of additional specific initiatives to build stronger, safe and healthy Aboriginal families



Key Initiatives

1. FOCUSING ON THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS



We know that an infant's reality is very different to that of an adult or even a toddler. This initial phase of life is one where the continuity of the bond formed pre-birth with their mother enables the infant to thrive and form attachments with others from a safe and secure base.

It is a time of profound change and learning. This is the time when the foundation is laid for the future adult, both physically, and, more importantly, psychologically - what they experience is how they map their world at large and becomes their blueprint for all future interactions.

By listening to infants about what they most want and need at that stage in their life and ensuring that we are responsive to them, we are supporting them and letting them know that they are safe, connected and respected. This will enhance their resilience, optimum development, and reduce future dysfunction. Such dysfunction comes with untenable resource, human, and financial costs to the community, with regard to the management of issues including

mental health, social equity, anti-social behaviour, and the ongoing effects of the cycle of inter-generational trauma.

An infant's first 1,000 days (starting at conception) is therefore a primary concern for the wellbeing of the whole community and we will fine tune suitably-focussed wellbeing opportunities across this time.

We will expand antenatal education and services to further improve awareness of child wellbeing needs before birth through the highest-quality education of the community and prospective parents and caregivers. This support will be directly related to the family's individual circumstances and will include developing antenatal education and services to be more amenable for those who would have difficulty accessing them in their current form.

We will prioritise the care of the infant and their mother and family by implementing and supporting postnatal education and services which are responsive to the infant voice, by recognising and valuing the unique mother-child relationship that continues post birth.

We will provide a *compulsory at-home visit* (by a CaFHS nurse or a culturally appropriate alternative if desired) immediately after returning home after child birth. Parents will be provided with initial information about the visit and its goals during antenatal program contact. The visit will enable the infant's environment to be assessed for possible impediments to its wellbeing. Any concerns will be addressed early and respectfully. This process will increase confidence for those parents or carers having difficulties, and encourage parental buy-in with those who can assist them.

We will introduce a *formal opt out process for ongoing postnatal programs* for those who wish to do so, providing another opportunity for assessment of any possible risk factors for the child's wellbeing.

We support the *continued, ongoing use of the South Australian Pregnancy Record and the Blue Book* programs. These work well to maintain a solid history, both broad-based and individual, to identify and assist in developing measures to address arising risks to the wellbeing of infants.

As part of our support for the infant, we will provide *additional and targeted support services* that promote wellness in the whole family, in a timely and accessible framework supported by local area coordinators and groups as set out in section 3 and including community support as set out in section 4.

In exploring expansion and further development of targeted services, research and evaluation will be undertaken of current programs serving

specialised groups such as Aboriginal, multicultural, young parents and single fathers to inform further services development, noting:

- peer-to-peer programs can be successful at increasing parental investment in the care of their infant, in families experiencing isolation or hardship. A number of promising peer to peer programs, specifically targeted to support infants' wellbeing and development, are being run currently and will be independently evaluated and expanded as appropriate.
- Kangaroo Mother Care is a program which supports the continuation of the child's bond with their mother after birth, emphasising the deeply beneficial and regulatory effect, for both mother and child, of ongoing 'skin to skin' contact, and extended breastfeeding. It also assists in mutual attachment between the infant and their other parent. The practice of Kangaroo Mother Care has been shown to improve wellbeing across a broad range of short and long-term developmental indicators in the infant, and in the flow on effect in outcomes for the family as a whole.

Shifting further attention to this profoundly important period of a person's development - the first 1000 days from conception - will result in a marked reduction in pain and suffering and result in better adjusted children. Better adjusted children, used to genuine community support, will develop into higher functioning adults with enhanced potential to lead productive, satisfying lives, resulting in ongoing social wellbeing and financial gain for the community as a whole.





2. COORDINATION OF SERVICES

Parenting of children of any age can be both a deeply rewarding and difficult role. Many families will struggle sometimes and would benefit from the opportunity to readily seek the early assistance they need.

Some families have multiple challenges in providing safe and secure environments for their children, most commonly domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse or financial issues.

For children and families to have the best opportunity to overcome challenges and flourish, they need to be able to obtain both formal and community support for the varying difficulties they face in a manner that is accessible and offers understanding.

We will further build and expand upon the current networks that coordinate government, non government and community based organisations to connect and support communities to meet the needs of families without the intervention of Child Protection Services and its related stigma.

We will ensure that all key local service providers work together to identify individuals and families at most risk in local areas, from family planning onwards, as well as offering coordinated early supports as needed by any family. Organisations to be involved are the departments for education and child development, health (including family planning services), justice and communities and social inclusion together with the policy, drugs and alcohol services, local non-government organisations and Aboriginal support organisations (including the Aboriginal Community Leadership Reference Group).

Coordinators will be appointed for each local area and located in appropriate local facilities, potentially Children's Centres (currently around 48 centres across the State). Suitable options will also be developed for regional towns not directly serviced by a Children's Centre or similar.

Building on current efforts, the local area coordinators will -

- bring together all the organisations involved to:
 - identify local families most at risk in liaison with each other (involving potential triaging of services for those at risk)
 - work in a coordinated way through the sharing of data
 - facilitate understanding of multiple challenges and implications, and
 - provide wraparound services to meet the needs of those families
- oversee progress and reporting for support of identified families
- be a direct liaison point for any families looking for service support, whether formal or through community support options
- facilitate or coordinate community building activities (for example, community barbecues, parenting groups, social activities, family-friendly fairs or festivals, awareness of men's sheds, maker-spaces, etc) to create connection points for families.

Local area coordinators will provide a welcoming initial contact for any person wanting advice to support families and children. Individuals will be welcome to seek support services at any time and, with information in the community awareness campaign, people will be encouraged to self-identify. Families at risk may also be identified by any 'support worker' to help children be assisted in a constructive manner early.

These networking and coordination efforts will be built and expanded having regard to other successful child-support efforts, such as Collective Impact Networks, the developing Child & Family Assessment and Referral Networks and the methods being used in Leeds, United Kingdom.

For local coordination efforts to be sustained and successful over time, they need both a *very strong mandate and oversight* from multiple agencies. To achieve this, we will embed key performance objectives relating to group coordination, leadership and respective agency role in each relevant Chief Executive's performance agreement.

We will build confidence and optimise outcomes by *requiring service evaluations* from independent bodies (such as academia) and client satisfaction studies to assess whether Chief Executives and groups are meeting planned objectives and measures. This will be further supported by ensuring transparency of data, with data about the performance and results of the system to be made public.

We will also require multi-year funding to be committed from each relevant agency to enable sound coordinated services implementation. The pool of funding obtained will be fairly assigned to local area groups and be able to be spent flexibly by the groups as necessary to enable strong localised responses to individual families' needs. Evaluation of service will be against the key objectives rather than numbers.

To secure and embed the program, we will seek 'champions' for coordinated services from across politics and both inside and outside of government aiding all to embrace effectively building families' resilience. This will include seeking strong leadership from all relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers.

Fully coordinated local networks will enable services to build more effective rapport within communities so that families feel comfortable to seek support early. It enables networks that are flexible, adaptive and comprehensive to prevent duplication and service gaps.

Service providers will benefit from the ability to strengthen networks, the development of further skills and understanding through greater knowledge and information sharing and the ability to offer united advocacy.

Parents and carers will more easily have awareness of services available to help maintain or build the capacity to be the providers they need to be for their children. They will be able to receive earlier and more targeted and trustworthy services that better meet their needs. The model prevents the re-traumatisation and time wastage arising from the current repetition of explaining circumstances to all service providers. Importantly, a coordinated local approach supports building connections in their community and shows that anyone may need a hand sometimes.

Children will more readily be able to have their voice heard and be supported by having easier access to outreach services and greater ability to be connected into their wider community, including access to positive role models. Through earlier support for families, children will have improved opportunities to grow in families better able to support their safety and needs.

This coordinated services model could also allow the viability of new methods to be explored and piloted with individual families' actual circumstances. For example, where a child's main carer is not the cause of risk factors in the home, some have suggested that the person responsible for using violence or other dysfunctions could be removed rather than the child. If able to be safely and realistically achieved, keeping the main carer and children together in their house or living locally could better ensure protection and stability for the children. This would require careful understanding of individual circumstances and represent a change of focus and culture from the present system.

For all, local relationships arising by choice from both community building activities and direct services will see children and families better connect and thrive.

3. THE POWER OF EXTENDING FAMILY INTO COMMUNITY



Expanding upon coordinated services provision, we will also focus on implementing more community based mentoring and peer-to-peer programs to flexibly meet the specific needs of participating families.

For many who are vulnerable, intrusion by formal agencies can create adverse stress and self protective responses. Independent evaluation has shown community-based-programs are cost effective, and anecdotally, peer-to-peer models are more readily taken up by families who may already feel alienation toward 'official' agencies. Community program involvement can better empower such families to exercise self-determination, of both the problem and in the choice of solutions.

We will have local area coordinators aid families in need to be matched with either or both:

- 1) *peer-to-peer support* through spending time with families or individuals who have experienced similar situations for peer to peer programs, or
- 2) a *community mentor* to aid the family to identify and tackle any challenges faced in nurturing a child, with such support to be ongoing and consistent with regard to any support worker involved.

Working with community peers and mentors can allow the families to make their own choices for their future and to develop resilience. In short, they are empowered rather than directed - their 'wins' are their own.

We will ensure that these programs are made available to all families (including grandparents, extended family, carers) with children that

are in need of support. Support will be available from conception through to 18 years - with the possibility of ongoing support for the transition into adulthood.

Families will access these programs either by self-identifying as wanting assistance or via the local coordinating group as outlined in section 3 of this policy.

Each family's experience is unique with unique assistance needs. Therefore, all responses will be focused on, and tailored to, those individual needs. We will offer multiple support options to each family in need, in order to best achieve support for the child and family.

Our change of focus, to greater community involvement in the support of vulnerable children, gives more flexibility in timing and manner of early intervention.

We will maintain timely, high quality independent evaluation of all programs in order to improve current programs and develop new programs that support at-risk children and their families. Family by Family and Mid Murray Family Connections are two examples (among others) of these community based programs that deserve further consideration.

Children and their families, who are supported by the community, will be better placed to have their own voice, develop resilience and greater wellbeing to become a constructive part of that community.

As vulnerable families and children re-enter their communities, participating community members will develop a greater understanding of the needs of their more vulnerable members, and how to support them. In this way communities will grow in their ability to support all of their members, reducing the need for costly government intervention.

We are focussed on supporting children in need, and will do what works to achieve our goal of providing them with a better life.

4. ABORIGINAL CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

All the initiatives outlined in this policy are universal, while seeking to address the individual needs and circumstances of children.

For Aboriginal children, this means all initiatives we pursue will be implemented in a culturally safe way **with** Aboriginal people, empowering them to build on vital community knowledge and relationships.

Specific initiatives we will **explore and develop** in more detail with Aboriginal leadership organisations and individuals are as follows:

1. Establishing an Aboriginal Children's Commissioner to work alongside the current Children's Commissioner, representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
2. Re-establishing previously successful services and programs, such as Family Care Committees, clustered family dwellings and the Aboriginal Youth Advisory Service.

3. Expand compulsory training for social workers and service providers so they are culturally competent to work in partnership with respected community members such as Family Care Committees when making decisions that will affect children and families from those communities.⁵

The focus on 1,000 days initiative will support Aboriginal children in a way that works for them. The peer-to-peer initiatives and mentoring support will allow Aboriginal people and families to help other Aboriginal families. The coordination of services will involve the Aboriginal Community Leadership Reference Group (ACLRG), amongst other key Aboriginal support organisations, ensuring that Aboriginal families at risk are identified early and supports provided in a way that meet their individual needs. It is vital that Aboriginal people are included, heard and hence policies developed in accordance with their needs.

5. BUILDING OUR KNOWLEDGE FOR A CHILD FRIENDLY SOUTH AUSTRALIA

-CHILD FRIENDLY SA!



Public awareness is very low regarding the numbers of South Australian children interacting with child protection services and the high associated human and financial costs of this across time. Also, people may be aware of children at risk yet not have a clear sense of what early support services may be available to assist families and children.

For children in our State to have the best opportunity to thrive, we need our community to appreciate what a 'Child Friendly South Australia' looks like and how to safely offer or seek help. Also, to understand that many families will struggle sometimes.

Children showing early signs of being at risk are less likely to fall through the cracks if people who see these signs feel supported to speak up early and take action. This will increase the safety nets available for children and allow more rapid early support responses relative to continuing heavy reliance solely on child protection notifications.

We will implement a cohesive community awareness and education campaign with three key elements:

1) a broad awareness program highlighting that many children are currently at risk, what a 'Child Friendly South Australia' looks like, the importance of being ready to be a safe parent and initial contacts for further information or help,

2) clear and readily available consolidated information on all support services existing in regions for parenting, family planning, family violence & trauma, mental health and substance abuse, and

3) targeted and role-based information for various community members (eg teachers, neighbours) interacting with children, particularly those who make child protection notifications, on how they may be able to help a child at risk.

The *broad awareness program* will be designed and available to reach people at all stages of their lives. It will seek to build awareness and acknowledgment of issues and needs as precursors to action, including encouraging individuals to consider the importance of being able to provide a safe and secure environment before choosing to have children. It will be comparable with other broad public health initiatives such as those for breast cancer, smoking, slip slop slap, mental health and domestic violence by raising awareness and providing advice on key preventative measures.



Consolidated information on all relevant local support services (free or paid) will be made visible in multiple places (for example, children's centres, doctors' offices, support service centres, schools) as well as online.

Through sharing *targeted and role-based information*, notifiers, both mandatory and non-mandatory, will be given information about practical actions they may take to help protect children using their existing resources and building on existing training about child safe environments. Notifiers in professional settings will be given adequate resources and support to do this, while community notifiers will be directed to local resources and supports.

Notifiers may be encouraged on how they may safely act, such as:

- keeping an eye out for the child
- asking the child if they are OK
- offering practical support to the child / family
- advising of the local coordination centre (as proposed by this policy) as a first port of call for preventative care

Notifiers will also be given advice when their report has been acted upon and we will explore whether people working with children could be alerted when a child moving into their regular care may be at risk. Any information sharing would need to occur under set guidelines relating to substantiated information balanced with fresh start opportunities where lifestyle changes have been made.

We will use a coordinated, strategic approach to maximise the success of the full campaign, including seeking enthusiastic and committed input from community representatives, service providers, government agencies and non-government organisations.

Early testing and research, including analysis of efforts in places such as Leeds, United Kingdom, will be undertaken to provide evidence about the most effective methods to reach all families and to increase awareness across the whole community. Messaging will be inclusive and avoid alienating community members who may benefit from seeking early assistance.

Investment in this campaign will empower our broad community to be more alert and prevention-ready, including awareness of the initial steps available to help support children. When individuals or families recognise that they need some support and are ready to take action, it will help them to know where to go for the assistance that best suits them.

In particular:

- the *broad awareness program* will help people recognise and learn about safe families and help individuals to identify dysfunction within their own families. It will raise awareness about the scale of current child protection needs, the importance of safe and secure environments for children and the positive implications of building our collective ability to support individuals, children and families in times of need,
- providing *consolidated information* on all relevant local support services (free or paid) is a simple measure that will empower families, children and other community members to readily identify the assistance options available in a local area. It will help normalise the concept of seeking early assistance when needed, recognising that individuals have varied support needs and entry points, and
- sharing *targeted and role-based information*, will provide notifiers with advice on the opportunity (but not obligation) to be more actively involved in early intervention to contribute to children's safety. By providing feedback regarding notifications, it will also strengthen the notion of shared responsibility for protecting children across the community.

Preventative information and awareness of early options for help will better provide for the wellbeing and resilience of our children and families as well as being financially responsible. Over time, by encouraging early support services to be used by families to help respond effectively to various challenges, the campaign should reduce the need for serious interventions by government agencies for children's wellbeing.

END NOTES

- ¹ Pilkington R, Grant J, Chittleborough C, Gialamas A, Montgomerie A, Lynch J, 2017, Child Protection in South Australia. BetterStart Child Health and Development Research Group, School of Public Health, The University of Adelaide.
- ² Auditor-General's Reports 2017, Annual Report by Agency – Department of Child Protection.
- ³ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Expenditure – Child Protection Services Chapter 16.
- ⁴ SA Government, Budget 2017-18 – Budget Paper 4 Agency Statements, Volume 1 pp83ff.
- ⁵ These areas for further exploration have been developed based on advice from the Aboriginal Community Leadership Reference Group.

REFERENCES

- Leeds, UK- <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/childfriendlyleeds/Pages/default.aspx>
- Family by Family - <http://taksi.org.au/project/family-by-family/>
- Mid-Murray Family Connections - <https://www.mid-murray.sa.gov.au/page.aspx?u=988>

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