

©Lee Emerson, Robyn McKay. A copy of this paper may be made for the purposes of personal, non-commercial use or for research and study in educational institutions, provided the paper is used in full, with proper attribution to the author(s).

**THE STRONGER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES  
STRATEGY: PREVENTION AND EARLY  
INTERVENTION STRATEGIES  
IN FAMILY POLICY**

**By  
Robyn McKay  
Lee Emerson  
Rosemary Delahunt  
Jean Gifford**

**Paper presented at 'Family Futures: Issues in Research and Policy' 7th  
Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Sydney, 24-26 July 2000**

**Department of Family and Community Services**

**This paper represents the views of the authors, and has been informed by discussion with many people, not least the members of the Stronger Families and Communities Implementation Team in the Department of Family and Community Services. The authors particularly wish to acknowledge the work and vision of our colleagues Helen Hambling, Kerry Elizabeth, Tricia Rushton and Angela Braniff in shaping the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

# **THE STRONGER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES STRATEGY: PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN FAMILY POLICY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper discusses prevention and early intervention as a major shift in social policy in recent years, with particular reference to the recently announced Stronger Families and Communities Strategy as an example, and an integral part of this approach to family policy. We discuss the challenges of this model of tackling social issues more generally; and highlight the partnership approach this entails.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a package of nine interrelated initiatives, amounting to \$240 million over four years, aimed at supporting more effective early intervention and prevention responses within local communities. While the package contains five initiatives targeting families and four targeting community capacity building, it is a combined families and communities intervention, with complementary and interacting measures. In this respect alone, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a fundamental departure from more traditional government programs. To understand what the Strategy is meant to achieve, and how we think it will be realised on the ground, it is necessary to take a step back and consider the broader policy changes that have led to the Strategy having the shape it has.

This is a very interesting time to be working in a government department with responsibility for family policy - ‘interesting’ in the common language sense of the word ‘interesting’, as we blaze new trails in public administration, but equally in the sense intended in the well known ancient Chinese curse, ‘may you live in interesting times’. There is a lot at stake.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is engaging great interest and debate in places where its intent is understood. Let us turn now to that intent.

## **FAMILIES IN CONTEXT**

Fundamental to the government’s current approach to family policy is the need to view families in context. This context includes the functions that families perform; the health and sufficiency of social networks surrounding and involving the family; as well as their economic circumstances, opportunities for participating in the economy and community life, and choices about many aspects of family life. These choices include family formation, family size, patterns of work, family and community commitments, parenting styles and choices of services to support choices in these other areas.

Families provide for a committed relationship and mutually sustaining partnership between adults, and are the context in which children are born, nurtured, educated, loved, protected, supported financially and in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries remain well into their 20s, leaving and returning perhaps several times, until they form new households of their own. Families can perform these functions well or badly – either way, there is public interest in the private role of families because both

individuals and social institutions are affected by how well or poorly these functions are carried out.

Viewing families in this way requires a more integrated approach to the way government interacts with families, sets the policy framework, develops specific policy initiatives and constructs specific processes and mechanisms to implement “programs” or measures.

## **KEY THEMES FOR SOCIAL POLICY**

At the heart of social policy over the last 4-5 years has been the recognition that “programs” or measures implemented as separate processes are not enough. To be effective in achieving outcomes in family policy requires a “strategic” approach. “Strategy” is of course a much misused word in government policy and public discourse. But it is important to see the development of a series of “strategy” initiatives as linked and serving a larger common end, coherent in their interaction and connected in the style of delivery. So the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, National Illicit Drugs Strategy, National Homelessness Strategy, Rural and Regional Strategy, to name a few, are coherently linked through common or consistent purposes, take account of interlinkages in particular places and are shaped in their implementation through social coalition processes that do more than pay lip service to the need to bring in other partners.

Underlying this approach and hence the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is a basic belief that governments alone cannot build capacity or trust ie they cannot create social capital. There are limits to what government can do for good and fewer limits to what government can do for ill. At best, governments can help contribute to the supports and policy settings needed to strengthen the social fabric we all recognise as the Australian way of life. At worst, governments may actually erode community capacity and diminish trust through policies and programs that lead to dependency.

In between, and acting within the traditional compartmentalised program model, we can, through a range of disparate, tightly structured, centrally conceived programs, support a large number of services and help to do some important work; but equally we can waste opportunities through lack of co-ordination, duplication, senseless rigidities, and so on, often leaving intractable problems untouched and ‘hard to reach’ families outside the magic circle.

Recognising the limitations of government acting alone, the present government is basing social policy firmly in the framework of the Social Coalition. Real gains in social capital require genuine collaboration and partnership between all tiers of government, community leaders, individual members of the community, and the business community. If you want to build family and community strength, you must presume that families and communities will be equal partners in the enterprise with government, service providers and so on, and may even want to take control of the implementation of measures designed to strengthen their capacity.

A further element underpinning government policy is a conviction that pre-packaged program responses are often inappropriate to meet the diverse range of family and community needs. Effective initiatives need a strong element of community

engagement and require ‘bottom up’ community led development and delivery. This also allows for a ‘strength’ perspective in the tailoring of solutions to fit the resources and needs of local communities, instead of the frequently employed deficit model; and acknowledges that a body of ideas can develop outside government, leaving room for fresh ideas and energy to grow.

A second theme, closely related to strengthening capacity, is prevention and early intervention. In relation to families this doesn’t just mean prevention and early intervention services like access to relationship education and counselling, access to men’s services, or family support when young people face the risk of homelessness. It means creating or reshaping existing systems like income support, family payments, schools, child care, health systems, into a pattern that encourages prevention or at worst early intervention, and linking these systems to pathways which lead to productive outcomes.

This paper focuses primarily on the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy as the late-model version and exemplar of these themes, but sets it in context of other policies and processes which seek to contribute to the same outcomes.

## **A NEW ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT**

This characterisation of the preconditions for effective action leads to a role for government which is quite different from the role governments have traditionally played. It is perhaps fair to say that past Australian governments have not been used to partnership roles; at least not when those partnerships extend all the way from the devising of policy settings down to the expression of programs on the ground, including the disbursement of funds; and especially when the nature of the partnerships involved are as complex as those required to achieve effective social outcomes. They are not alone in this. Governments in Western countries are turning increasingly to the “third way”, the way of engagement in partnership.

In implementing the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy we will have the privilege (and the challenge) of modelling at every level the partnerships that lie at the heart of the new social policy directions. At a practical level we may be able to make the greatest difference to the experience and opportunities of Australian families and communities by enabling and encouraging partnerships which need not depend on government at all.

A logical consequence of a different role for government is that we bureaucrats must change how we think and behave, and what we ask of others. Current government policy for families requires doing the government’s business differently. We will have to break new ground on a number of fronts at once.

The Strategy requires us to become facilitators - rather than national “experts”- who support families and communities to bring forward initiatives which will best meet their local needs. However, we still have the traditional obligations to Parliament for ensuring appropriations are used for their legislated purposes, and for sound financial and performance management. Bringing all these objectives into alignment is the uncharted territory we are exploring. It is not going too far to say we don’t know yet

how to work in all the new ways the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is asking us to.

However, we have made a strong beginning.

The structuring of the Department of Family and Community Services a bit under two years ago has been an important enabler. The department brings into a single portfolio key policy areas affecting families at Commonwealth level: child care, families and children, family relationships, youth and students, the Child Support Agency, income support, disabilities, housing and communities.

Our strategic plan gives the department three major outcomes areas:

- Stronger families
- Stronger communities; and
- Economic and social participation

Because these outcome areas are highly interrelated, they operate within a 'cluster' management structure designed to help create and maintain the policy links between the work we are undertaking in the various areas within the department. Child care, for example, has recently been moved from the Economic and Social Participation Cluster to the Family Capabilities Cluster. This does not diminish our recognition of the importance of child care to workforce participation, but strengthens and supports the government's interest to situate child care within a broader family policy, and on a pathway to productive economic and social outcomes for children and families.

## **A PREVENTION/EARLY INTERVENTION POLICY ENVIRONMENT**

The policy environment for families is of course that for Australia – strong economic growth, low inflation, robust employment, regional security, a broader tax base. It is supported by family payments which recognise the costs of children, and policies which enable access to quality services, like child care, schools and so on. It is supported by institutions such as Centrelink, the Child Support Agency, the Family Court. Further down the policy chain, the Government is funder or purchaser of family support services like relationship services, youth services, crisis accommodation, disability support etc. The pattern is a multi-layered structure of regulatory environment, prevention, early intervention, and in the last resort crisis services. Until recently, though, prevention and early intervention was much less visible in the policy menu.

Let's look again at the example of child care. The alignment of child care to the Stronger Families outcome recognises its traditional importance in supporting the labour force participation of families, but also acknowledges the role which good quality child care has always played in supporting the development of children and offering parenting information and other support to families. Indeed the flexible child care initiatives which form part of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy have been strongly influenced by the learning about the prevention/early intervention capabilities of child care from discussions with experienced stakeholders over many years, including more recently with the Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council; from our developing understanding of the strengths and limits of the existing policy

framework and from new ways of doing things such as the Child Care Family Crisis pilots.

Under these models access to mainstream child care creates a safe and stimulating environment for children of families under extreme stress from such factors as drug and alcohol dependence, terminal illness, relationship breakdown or parenting problems. It in turn provides a gateway for parents to access a range of appropriate family support and other services to address the stresses contributing to the family crisis.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategies has a high profile as a model of interlocking prevention and early intervention initiatives on a number of family and community functioning fronts. But it would be a mistake to assume that the Government and FaCS “discovered” prevention and early intervention with the formulation of the Strategy.

Many of the family support programs purchased by FaCS have been quietly putting these principles into practice for some years in areas such as the family relationships skills training services, child abuse prevention and parenting support initiatives; but in a low key way, not necessarily linked to larger processes.

Shifts in emphasis in Youth Allowance payments to stronger incentives for young people to continue with education and training are an investment in the skills acquisition and development which will minimise the risk of long term unemployment and welfare dependency in adult life.

Newer programs such as Reconnect (which assists young people at risk of homelessness) contribute still more explicitly to our practice knowledge of prevention and early intervention strategies around key life transitions. Reconnect also offers one model of innovative program planning from which we can learn in developing the new processes required to implement the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. As Reconnect moves further into community development models for new projects, we will add to our understanding of the importance of ‘process’, as well as content, to prevention and early intervention.

## **PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION**

The importance of the pathways approach to social policy has emerged from our practice knowledge in delivering programs within a prevention/early intervention framework, and a deeper understanding of several decades of experimental work, mainly in the progressive States in the US. The language stems from the published report of National Crime Prevention *Pathways to Prevention*, which canvassed the field of research and practice internationally, in a way which has broad applicability to a range of social policy approaches.

If you think of social policy as influencing outcomes for individuals, who move through a series of life stages, you begin to see how laughable it is to look at social policy as a series of ‘programs’ with rules about access, eligibility, and so on, often for ‘disadvantaged’ individuals or groups. People, all people, including ‘highly functional’ people, move through life events, from one stage of life to another,

encountering ‘systems’ created by Government on the way. Social policy first needs to link those systems, and only secondly needs to provide services to make the pathways smoother. If the pathway is rough, it just might be because the systems are disconnected.

The need to make sure systems are well-linked has been the rationale for two recent approaches to social policy – Youth Pathways and Family Law Pathways.

The Youth Pathways Task Force was set up in October 1999, as part of the Government’s response to the recommendations of the Prime Minister’s Youth Homelessness Task Force. Through a series of consultations and analysis, the Task Force is developing a Youth Pathways Action Plan, which treats all young people and their families as needing some assistance in navigating a complex system, with many choices at particular stages of the road from school to active economic independence and interdependence in the community; but with certain vulnerable groups as needing more active support. The process has given us the opportunity to explore the importance of the interdependence of systems to improved outcomes for families and their individual members, and the many challenges in achieving integrated and coordinated service delivery around natural, unavoidable key life transitions.

The Family Law Pathways Advisory Group was set up in May 2000 to map the pathways of people who may face family breakdown. In this case, the life event we are addressing is not one that the majority of families will face, although we are taking the approach that if the system is working well, there will be fewer families who need to navigate this particular system. We are only a month or two into this process, which we expect to provide insights into how to get a series of disparate services and legal structures to function as a joined up, coherent system for the support of families dealing with the risk of breakdown and/or new roles post separation. We will also learn much about how to manage consistent service experience and information giving to families entering the “system” from a variety of gateways and at different stages in a complex life event.

The concept of pathways has also been useful in helping to make decisions about where best to target relatively scarce resources. If you think of pathways as varied, with a series of passages to new stages in a life course, you begin to see points on the pathway where decisions and choices about directions to take need to be made. We tend to think of the transition points as the points of high risk, and therefore where we might get the best investment; for example, when a relationship becomes a marriage; when a child is born, or goes to child care, preschool, school or high school; when relationships break down irretrievably and new family forms emerge; when a parent re-partners. It is at these points we might concentrate resources to ensure families and individuals have access to information, education and forms of support. Some transition points might be riskier than others, but we don’t yet know which. The learnings from the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy will help us target the riskier transitions over time.

These pathways approaches are also about developing new partnerships and engaging the Social Coalition, a theme to which we will return later.

## **CROSS-PORTFOLIO COLLABORATION - GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The collection of responsibilities within the FaCS portfolio is not comprehensive enough to preclude the need to work across departmental boundaries. Wherever a boundary is drawn, it creates boundary issues. We have a lot to learn about working together beyond our normal departmental silos in the way the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy will require.

The newly created Family Assistance Office is a good example of new forms of collaboration at government level, resulting in improved integration of government responses to the needs of families. The Family Assistance Office is designed to give families a single entry point to a range of family related payments: Family Tax Benefit, Child Care Benefit, Maternity Allowance, and the Maternity Immunisation Allowance.

This form of integration, while logical from the community's perspective, is actually quite hard to deliver from the government end. The hard part comes down to governance and accountability requirements. The FAO, for instance, involves three separate partners in three separate portfolios, the Australian Taxation Office, Centrelink and the Health Insurance Commission. Yet the Executive Director, Family Capabilities in FaCS is accountable for its performance to the portfolio Secretary, who is in turn accountable to the Minister for Family and Community Services.

The governance and accountability issues surrounding the disbursement of funds associated with the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy are among the thornier threshold issues in implementation. At least with the Family Assistance Office, we operate at one level of government, with an explicit government mandate. In the case of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy standard approaches to governance and accountability involving a single Minister and Departmental Secretary at a single level of Government are likely to be inadequate where we are expecting multiple players to come together to act on the initiatives, and to act in flexible, responsive ways as identified in particular localities; where the Commonwealth may be only one of several contributors of funding, along with states, local governments, the corporate sector and potentially a range of other partners.

Some new models of coordination, including governance and accountability, are under consideration within government, for this Strategy and for related work dealing with youth issues, and, to varying degrees, for government programs more generally. There is within government as a whole, as within business, recognition of the value of client-focussed service delivery. Whereas many corporations have begun to restructure themselves around customer segments, government structures are still largely oriented to industry sectors: health, housing, employment, etc., rather than the people who relate to them. New models to allow us to work in new ways within these structures are very important. We are not alone in this. The New Zealand government, for instance, has recently made the commitment that 'No family will be disadvantaged by Government Departments' inability to work together' (Argus, 1999).

Some governance models under consideration include the involvement of the network of partners in planning and project development and selection, and different ways of reporting on funds employed. The models broadly divide into those creating common entry points for access to government grants, to ones that allow greater flexibility in the uses and sources of funding, through pooling, budget holding or similar mechanisms.

## **ENGAGING THE SOCIAL COALITION**

Engaging other partners or stakeholders in the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is another threshold issue. We already have some experience with this, from the work of the Youth Pathways Taskforce, which is made up of representatives of several Commonwealth departments, and state governments, along with community, academic and business members, and is chaired by Captain David Eldridge, of the Salvation Army. Because the issues inevitably cross jurisdictions and systems (especially families, schools, further education and work), the solutions lie with a network of partners.

Similarly the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group, with membership drawn from academia, legal aid, family relationships and other community service providers, the Family Court of Australia and magistrates courts and the community, along with key government departments, is working to improve families' experiences with systems and services associated with family law, which reach beyond Government into the community and the legal profession, to name only a few.

So far, though, these collaborative approaches, and others such as the Welfare Reform Reference Group, have involved the Social Coalition in developing policy advice to Government. In developing the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, government is considering how the Social Coalition might be engaged in taking the initiatives within the Strategy off the drawing board and into implementation.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING THE STRONGER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES STRATEGY**

Meshing a 'top down' framework with a 'bottom up' program response is part of the larger challenge of how to manage a coherent, integrated, evidence-based approach with genuine 'bottom up' problem identification, solution design and implementation.

To explain this issue, it might help to outline the common set of principles that we hope to underpin each of the nine initiatives within the Strategy, some of which should already be apparent:

- Working together in partnership
- Prevention and early intervention
- Life transitions
- More integrated and coordinated services
- Local solutions to local problems
- Capacity building
- Using the evidence and looking to the future
- Making the investment count

These are key ‘top down’ requirements we are imposing on problem identification and proposed solutions towards which the funds within the Strategy may be applied.

Of particular importance is the requirement to use the available evidence of what works, and to make the investment count. While we are interested in trying to work ‘outside the box’ of standard government programs where this is called for and perhaps contributing to new models of public administration, our primary objective is to achieve results.

## **CONCEPTS INTO PRACTICE**

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is still on the drawing board. If we were now to turn to the Strategy itself and outline in detail each of the initiatives, how they will look on the ground, and what you have to do to apply for funding, you would know that all we have said to this point was posturing and so much ‘hot air’. At this stage we have more questions than answers and, many of the questions look like having more than one answer.

We have attached outlines of the Strategy components to this paper. Although we are working to flesh out the parameters of each of the initiatives, the final direction and shape of these measures will only emerge as partners join with us and as we gain more experience working in this new way.

The Commonwealth recognises that state governments have strong interest and significant investment in most of the areas covered in the Strategy. The Strategy is intended to provide additional funds to permit enhanced outcomes on the ground, not duplication and competition. We have already embarked on a process of consultation with state governments which has yielded some promising areas for possible collaboration. The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is also part of the social policy agenda for the Community Services Ministers’ Council meeting later this week.

The Strategy needs to allow for both flexible application of the funds allocated within the Strategy’s initiatives and for partnerships, where particular projects may involve multiple sources of funding, for example from other Commonwealth sources, from other tiers of government, as well as from corporate and charitable sources. Careful attention to identifying ‘outcome’, rather than placing sole reliance on ‘output’ performance measures alone will assist. Given that most of our programs hitherto have specified inputs, we are breaking new ground here. For some of these initiatives, the process is in fact more important than the products. We have much yet to discover about achieving accountability and measuring performance in this environment.

We have a lot of ‘nuts and bolts’ issues to work through – what form do legal agreements take when we are talking the language of partnership and not purchaser-provider relationships; what does partnership mean on the ground? How do we ensure we learn and share the learning about this way of working with communities and others? How do we know whether we are achieving our objectives? and whether these projects are good value for money?

The Strategy also needs to provide for governance mechanisms that include the Social Coalition in various roles; at a very high level, for example to agree frameworks, overall policy direction and national goals for the Strategy; at intermediate levels, close enough to the ground to understand the relative merits of different proposals and areas of need; and at the grass root level to guide the project itself.

Projects may emerge from a variety of different places; some will emerge from work already happening on the ground or may have been started within other processes; some may need to be seeded and intensively supported to develop. The project itself will need to develop and demonstrate its partnership character. It will need to demonstrate inclusiveness and community support. An auspicing body will have to be identified.

We are mindful that working collaboratively and in partnership is new and necessary for others too. Many of the issues associated with working this way will be exercising most of the other partners who will eventually involve themselves in aspects of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. We will inevitably invent together some of the mechanisms we need to make this work as we proceed.

#### **THE EVIDENCE BASE**

As this is a research conference, we will finish by saying a bit more about the evidence base for the Strategy. The Strategy is designed around our understanding of what existing evidence suggests is required to strengthen families and strengthen community capacity. We believe prevention and early intervention is preferable to crisis responses, both in terms of a focus on early childhood and early attention to relationship formation, and in more general terms in the sense of early attention to problems before they become bigger and harder to turn around. But the evidence points to the need for follow up support at key transition points throughout life. The case for this was made convincingly in the Pathways to Prevention Report (National Crime Prevention, 1999). Families must be understood in context, and many interventions will depend on local community strength and infrastructure.

An important element of the Strategy is its commitment to add to the evidence base. The funds associated with the Strategy have been deliberately phased so that we can start small and build on early learnings, and so that new projects can be 'mentored' or otherwise draw on the experience of others. Effective family interventions within the Australian context will be identified through action research involving all funded projects within the Stronger Families Fund, to be directed by a specially funded research and support agency. In addition, recent and valuable experience already gained will be gathered in a clearinghouse to inform project designs and to spark innovative thinking about responses appropriate for particular communities. For example, we propose to link our project-based knowledge with what we already know from the evaluation of the youth homeless pilots and other evaluations, and with population data derived from a number of sources.

Another key addition to the evidence base is the longitudinal study of Australian children, announced as part of the Strategy. The Study has been funded for about an eight year collection, but with the possibility of extension. We also hope to link the systems of data collection already within government, so that we do not need to wait

for years of data collection to occur before we can draw conclusions for policy. This investment aspect of the Strategy is as significant as what we may be able to achieve for families and communities on the ground in the next few years.

**References:**

Argus, John (1999), *Getting the best outcomes from interdepartmental partnerships: reflections on experience*, paper presented to a conference on Stakeholder Management, Partnership and Consultation within the Public Sector, 1 November.

National Crime Prevention (1999), *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*. National Crime Prevention, Attorney-General's Department: Canberra.