



The New Zealand Psychological Society

*Te Rōpu Matai Hinengaro o Aotearoa*

## Submission

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# On the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

**Prepared**

**by the**

**New Zealand Psychological Society**

**27 February, 2012**

The Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

Dear Rt Hon John Key, Prime Minister and Hon Paula Bennett, Minister for Social Development and Employment

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the most important issue facing our nation to date, which is the welfare of children and young people. Our taonga.

### **About the New Zealand Psychological Society**

The New Zealand Psychological Society is the premier association for professional psychologists in New Zealand. It is the largest professional association for psychologists in Aotearoa/New Zealand with over one thousand practitioner, academic and student member. Our vision is

“To improve individual and community wellbeing by representing, promoting, and advancing psychology and psychological practice.”

## Introduction

The New Zealand Psychological Society welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children. The Society has been active in advocating on behalf of children and is pleased to see the Government seeking views on the best ways to support children and their whanau so that that all children can develop and thrive. As well as considering the broader social, policy and structural issues which need to be addressed in relation to children, this submission will also comment on the ways in which psychologists can contribute to reducing the physical, emotional, and social hardships faced by our vulnerable children. We support the Government's vision for children under the age of 18 that "Every Child, Thrives, Belongs, Achieves Ka whai oranga, ka whai wahi, ka whai tuamata ia tamaiti." Finally, we wish to formally endorse the recommendations made by Dr Russell Wills, the Children's Commissioner on the Green Paper on Vulnerable Children.

Our position paper is divided into four main areas in which the Government can improve in

- ***The Sharing of Responsibility***
- ***Demonstrating Leadership in the interests of children***
- ***Making Child-centred Policy Changes***
- ***Making Child-centred Practice Changes***

### ***Share Responsibility***

1. Has Government got the balance right between supporting parents and families/whanau and protecting children?

We believe that we all have a part to play to ensure the health and wellbeing of children. We agree with the comments outlined in the Green Paper on the importance of supporting parents, whanau, and the community as a whole to ensure that children's basic needs are met. Government is responsible for providing leadership and to intervene when there is significant risk of harm such as abuse and neglect. The Children's Commissioner recommends that an "inter-agency focus on neglect including development of shared definitions, practice manuals, guidelines and information collation is needed," (Wills, 2011, p.2). We see child poverty and an increasing disparity in income which is the primary cause of this as one of the most pressing issues to address from the outset. We believe that addressing income disparity and thereby alleviating child poverty should be one of the Government's highest priorities.

2. How can Government encourage communities to take more responsibility for the wellbeing of their children?

Community based approaches which are culturally specific and “home grown” will provide the support and education that parents and caregivers need to protect children. Whanau Ora and the UNICEF Child-Friendly Cities highlight the importance of child-centred initiatives. Child centered initiatives must be driven by community leadership and local professional leadership so that there is a strong buy in and uptake of programmes, which will help foster the well-being of children. We note that whilst there is merit in encouraging community responsibility for the welfare of children the Government needs to ensure that there are sufficient resources and services to underpin community involvement. We do not support community involvement or the privatization of care for vulnerable children as reasons for the Government to abdicate its responsibility for ensuring the care and welfare of children.

### **Show Leadership**

3. Should there be an action plan for vulnerable children that focuses the activities of Government and non-Government agencies?

We strongly support the Government’s proposal for a “Vulnerable Children’s Action Plan”, as this will allow for better coordination and inter-sectorial activities and partnerships that are child-focused. Moreover, we endorse the seven core goals identified by the Children’s Commissioner, which are central to the “Vulnerable Children’s Action Plan” as these goals are in line with the Government’s responsibilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) and tamariki and rangatahi under the Treaty of Waitangi. These seven goals will ensure that Government Ministries/ Departments are accountable for monitoring and achieving their goals.

### **Legislation Changes**

We acknowledge the Government’s recommendations on devising legislation, which will enact the “Vulnerable Children’s Action Plan”. Once again this will ensure that all relevant parties are accountable and will provide checks and balances to ensure that the needs of the child are met. Indeed, we support the development of a Children’s Act as per the Children’s Commissioner’s recommendations in his position paper (October 2011) on the importance of specific legislation and the need for an Independent Crown Entity to monitor progress objectively.

### **Working with whanau, hapu, iwi, and Māori Leaders**

Research indicates that Māori tamariki improve when they are connected to their identity, language and culture through whanau, hapu, and iwi. Māori designed, developed and

administered initiatives such as Whanau Ora provide the opportunity for Government agencies, iwi, hapu, and urban Māori organizations to work together in partnership. The Children's Commissioner emphasizes the importance of addressing the needs of Pasifika children and their families in the Children's Action Plan and in the White Paper.

### ***Make Child-centred Policy Changes***

4. Should the Government focus its spending on programmes and services that have a sound evidential basis?

Psychologists are social scientists and scientist-practitioners and we support the implementation of evidence based programmes and services. We also recognize the need to “include funding for evaluation in all contracts for pilot and demonstration projects, funding research aimed at evaluating locally developed programmes and local implementation of overseas based models, and growing the evaluation and resource workforce,” (Wills, 2011, p.9).

Services and programmes must have good ecological validity and applicability to the New Zealand context. Targets and outcomes of services and programmes that will benefit issues faced by children must be measured on a regular basis. We support the principles for prioritising resource allocation identified by the Children's Commissioner. (Wills, 2011).

### **Watching out for vulnerable children**

5. Should we regularly monitor vulnerable children and their families/whanau to see how they are going? Who should do this and under what circumstances?

Regular monitoring is integral to ensure children stay safe and healthy. There are already existing systems which can also be used routinely to monitor progress and outcomes of vulnerable children and their families/whanau such as the National Immunisation Register (NIR), National Health Index (NHI), the District Truancy Service (DTS), Child, Youth and Family's national database CYRAS, the Child Protection System and an enhanced education sector between-school records of attendance. These systems do need to be better integrated and we strongly support the implementation of a national database which can be accessed by agencies to ensure a joined up approach to child services. One of the key issues in the vulnerability of children is the lack of sharing of information amongst the wide range of services assisting children. We believe that this issue needs to be urgently addressed.

## Information sharing

6. How much personal information should be shared between the professionals and others who are working with a particular child or family/whanau?

Ensuring children's safety is paramount and the Society supports transparent and effective communication amongst professionals and agencies working with children and their families. The Green Paper reiterates the significant issue that many health professionals face with information sharing. At present, very strict criteria must be met in order to disclose information about a child and their family/whanau between different professionals and agencies. We support mandatory reporting by professionals who work with children and families where child abuse is suspected. Our Code of Ethics (s 1.5.1) for psychologists states that "In any work where children / young persons are involved, psychologists recognise that the interests and welfare of children / young persons are paramount, and therefore given precedence over other considerations". Some practitioners express concern at the loss of trust and disclosure which may occur as a result of mandatory reporting. It is important to recognise however that mandatory reporting as envisaged only applies to professionals and that the reporting is to the appropriate statutory authority i.e. Police, Child Youth and Family.

Government must review the current provisions in legislation to ensure frontline professionals such as teachers, psychologists, social workers, GPs, nurses, police officers, and therapists are able to freely share information to enable accurate assessment and treatment planning for the child and the family/whanau.

Psychologists see firsthand the need for effective communication between relevant parties to provide the best level of care and service for the child and their families/whanau. Unfortunately, this does not always occur in day to day practice. Many Government agencies and non-Government agencies do not have executive powers to communicate openly to each other due to the statutes outlined in the Privacy Act. Therefore, we wholly support the need to adopt legislation similar to the New South Wales' Chapter 16A Children Legislation Amendment (Wood Inquiry Recommendations) Act 2009.

We also commend the recommendations posed by the Children's Commissioner on the importance of "connectivity between systems for children" and "the automatic enrollment of infants on the NIR and with a GP and Well-Child/Tamariki Ora (WCTO) provider be an opt-off system," (Wills, 2011, p. 9).

7. Should some people get priority over others when allocated support and services because they are caring for vulnerable children?

The Social Services Providers' Association submission on the Green Paper (2012) notes that "Government is also considering requiring its agencies and contracted providers to give priority for services to families and whanau where children are at high risk for poor outcomes. For example, once an adult is in a queue for a state house, families with vulnerable children would be made a higher priority than other families," (SSPA, 2012 p. 3).

The Society supports priority being given to vulnerable families in situations of limited resources. We also support the Government undertaking ongoing audits of resources required to support vulnerable families and to take actions to address shortfalls.

There needs to be early detection of mental health needs in our children and adolescents via both the health and education system and the parents/caregivers. At the same time, parents/caregivers who are experiencing physical, emotional, occupational, and social difficulties could also benefit from early intervention, to alleviate the level of vulnerability their children face.

### ***Make Child-centred Practice Changes***

#### **Improving the workforce for children**

Psychologists play an important role in assisting children and their families/whanau. We agree with the proposal outlined in the Green Paper of the need to improve collaboration to mitigate failures in communication and poor coordination of services. While collaboration across services is generally recommended, it is particularly important in the area of child services, which often span across health, education, social welfare and justice sectors. In the past, poor communication has resulted in adverse outcomes for children and their families/whanau. Developing minimum standards across disciplines for professionals working with children is an important priority. Also, the Green Paper highlights the "importance of workforce improvement via developing common principles, standards including cultural competencies and quality standards to guide those who work with children," (Green Paper, 2011, p. 27). We also support the Children's Commissioner's viewpoints on this issue.

There are currently too few psychologists able to work effectively with children. In order to address this deficit it is important to address workforce development issues and to make

resources available for training. This could take a variety of forms, but increasing the number of funded internships in the area of child mental health should be a high priority.

It is also our view that the role of educational psychologists within the Ministry of Education has in recent years become too restricted. The Society is concerned that the current Special Education Policy restricts psychologists who are employed by the Ministry of Education to work only with 1) high special education needs pupils (e.g. 'verified' for ongoing resource funding support) and 2) with 'externalised' challenging behaviours. Referrals are not accepted for pupils with 'internalised' behaviours, whether these are mental health (e.g. withdrawal, anxiety or depression) or social or learning (e.g. socially unskilled and academic underachievement) in origin. Many of the children who are described in these terms are vulnerable, have many risk and few resilience factors in their family and community environment and are over-represented in our acknowledged '20% tail of underachievement'. Properly utilising the full range of skills of educational psychologists in the interests of vulnerable children is we believe an important issue which Government needs to address.

### **Better connecting vulnerable children to services**

8. How can vulnerable families and children be better connected to all the services that they need?

Finally, we commend the Government's willingness to improve services for hard-to-reach families. Vulnerable families and children ought to have access via their local communities, schools, marae, churches, Whanau Ora, and integrated family health centres for their health and social needs. We are in agreement with the Green Paper that the Government commitment to investigating "ways to improve the response of its frontline services in connecting vulnerable children to the services they need," (Green Paper, 2011, p. 28). In addition, we would like to see the role of psychologists who work for the Ministry of Education expand to providing services to the "20% tail of underachievement" referred to above.

### **Summary of comments**

We are concerned that some of the initiatives outlined in the Green Paper are framed within what appears to be a context of cutting back on existing services and privatising others. We believe that the Government needs to find funding to assist children without depriving others.



The Government has the discretion to implement revenue gathering approaches through taxation (e.g. higher progressive tax rates, reducing the scope for personal, family and corporate tax avoidance schemes) which will assist poor and vulnerable families.

We believe that all Government policies need to be assessed for their potential impact on children and their “child-centredness”. The current welfare reforms are an example of policies which may seriously impact on children. The Society also believes that Government needs to be courageous in its review of legislation around the availability of alcohol to assist in managing the social outcomes of alcohol abuse which impact on children and their families. We note also that the policies related to children need to be based on sound evidence.

As noted the Government needs to consider ways to prevent situations in which children and their families become vulnerable and impoverished rather than just focussing on the results of this situation. We are also concerned that the paper focusses on physical abuse when emotional abuse of children and neglect are also areas of concern. We also think that attention needs to focus on the abuse of children in State care as well as looking at ways of preventing the need for children to go into care in the first place.

We have suggested in our comments the importance of an integrated, joined up approach to caring for vulnerable children. The Society believes that the Government needs to take this approach itself in assisting vulnerable children. It needs to implement workforce planning to ensure that there are adequate professionals to assist children and families, provide enhanced services in schools to support children, fund parenting programmes, amend taxation and alcohol legislation and other measures to ensure that the shameful level of poverty confronting many of our children is alleviated.

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