

The Hon Jenny Macklin - Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs address to the International Forum for Child Welfare

Thank you, Tony [Charlton, Master of Ceremonies].

Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure to welcome you to Australia, and to my home town of Melbourne, for this year's World Forum.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge with us tonight:

- Baroness Susan Greenfield;
- Professor David de Kretser;
- Ted Egan, former administrator of the Northern Territory
- Mr Andrew Pearce (Chair of the World Forum Organising Committee) and
- Ray Cleary.

I would also like to acknowledge Leonie Sheedy from the Care Leavers Australia Network. She is a passionate advocate for a group of people who we call Forgotten Australians – who grew up in institutional care and were truly forgotten.

We had a very significant event here in Australia two years ago, when the then Prime Minister apologised to the Forgotten Australians – for the terrible experiences they had as children, and through their lives. This is be a reminder to all of us of the importance of protecting vulnerable children.

The Forum provides an extraordinary opportunity to bring together people from around the world, from government and non-government, from business and academia.

Brought together by our commitment to the world's children.

By our belief that each child should grow up safe, healthy and happy.

That each child should have the best start in life.

Over the course of the coming days, you will be participants in an important discussion.

But the work you are undertaking recognises, as we in the Australian Government do, that it is not enough to be participants – we must also be leaders and act.

We must act to nurture, enrich and empower children.

We must act to make sure that families provide safe and healthy environments for children to grow up in.

We must act to make sure that children who are particularly vulnerable receive the support and the care they need to meet their own potential.

As the Australian Government, we are committed to lead and play our part.

But like you, we're also committed to action.

Action to keep children safe requires national leadership and national responsibility.

It's our commitment to giving children right across the country, wherever they live, the best start in life that has driven our work through the first ever National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

The National Framework has enabled us, for the first time, to develop National Standards for out of home care which started on 1 July this year. These National Standards aim to safeguard the health, safety and wellbeing of children living in foster homes and other formal out-of-home care across Australia.

Developed with our colleagues in the states and territories, the Standards focus on improving access to health, education and training; on increasing support for carers; and on improving transitions for young people in out-of-home care.

The National Framework has also enabled the Commonwealth and the states to work better together in the interests of children and their welfare. We are now sharing information –from Medicare, Centrelink and the Child Support Agency – with child protection agencies in each of the states and territories.

This is a very practical change.

It helps child protection agencies find families who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

And it can help child protection authorities investigate serious cases of abuse or neglect.

It's our shared commitment to children getting the best start in life that has brought all governments together to better coordinate our approach to early childhood development, including new quality standards for early education and care, and universal access to preschool.

And it's our desire to take a national approach -- to what is a national responsibility to give Australian children the best start in life -- that has led us to implement nationally the Australian Early Development Index.

This gives us a national picture of children's health and development -- pointing us to what's working well, and to where we can improve.

So into the future, our participation in important debates such as this will be informed.

So into the future, our action will be based on evidence of what works.

A platform for our work with families, right across Australia in the cities and the country, from Sydney to Broome.

We know that the best place to start supporting children is to support families – to foster supportive and nurturing environments for children to grow up in.

To make sure that children grow up healthy, with a good education and with opportunities for a good life.

The best place to start supporting families is at the very beginning.

From 1 January this year, the Australian Government introduced Australia's first national Paid Parental Leave scheme.

This allows parents to be with their babies during the vital early months.

It allows mothers to recuperate from the birth of a child, to breast feed and to bond with their new baby.

It is particularly important for the part time and casual workers who would never have had access to employer funded leave.

From 1 January 2013 we will expand Paid Parental Leave to dads and other partners to help them support new mothers in their caring role and be involved in their children's lives right from the word go.

Critically, Paid Parental Leave also allows parents to stay connected to their employer while they are spending valuable time with a new baby.

Because families not only provide the best environment to give a child the best start in life -- they can also set the best example.

The example of a parent who goes to work each day and who brings home a pay cheque each fortnight.

Because while strong systems of social support are critical to ensuring that no-one is left behind, I don't think it's acceptable or fair for children to grow up in a home where they've never seen their parents work.

That's why the Australian Government is taking a new approach, providing more intensive support to jobless parents in 10 disadvantaged locations.

Despite Australia's strong economy, we have concentrated areas of disadvantage where we have very high unemployment rates. Where a very high proportion of families in these communities are living their lives from one generation to another on income support, and with very poor rates of children finishing secondary school.

And often these locations are just a few suburbs away from places of great prosperity.

We are providing additional support for teenage parents in these locations, to help them finish school. Without this, we know they face a lifetime of poverty.

Here in Australia – a wealthy nation - a staggering 80% of teenage parents on welfare payments do not finish school.

So we are delivering new support. More employment and training services. Help with child care for parents who are studying or moving from welfare and into work. And help to make sure children are ready for school when the time comes.

We're also setting new expectations for parents -- that they'll do their part in breaking the cycle of dependency and giving their own children the chance many never had themselves -- the chance of a good education so they can get a good job.

We are also working with vulnerable families to provide the support and the stability they need to get back on track through income management – including where a child protection authority considers a child is at risk of neglect.

It's an important tool to stabilise the family budget, and to make sure that income support for children is spent in the best interests of children -- on food, clothing, and to pay the rent.

It's one tool -- but our experience in the Northern Territory, in Cape York and in Western Australia show that it's a useful one.

We each have a responsibility to bring to our actions all of the tools at our disposal to give children -- in Australia and around the world -- the best start in life.

Some of you would know that I am also Minister for Indigenous Affairs. I have just returned from the Alice Springs town camps where I celebrated with the residents the first mail delivery. A little boy – about two years old – was so happy that his mum's post would now be delivered on a motorbike.

This is real progress. Just a few years ago, children in these town camps were living on truly terrible conditions – without proper homes. Now there are houses, street signs, and a mail delivery.

I wish you a very successful World Forum, and look forward to continuing our work together to ensure that children -- in Australia and around the world -- get the best possible start in life.

Thank you.