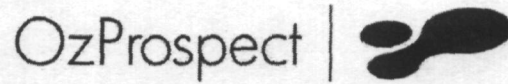


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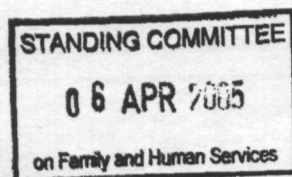
Submission to the House of Representatives Standing  
Committee on Family and Human Services Balancing Work  
and Family Inquiry

from

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OzProspect:

A non-partisan, public policy think-tank



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Daniel is a researcher and commentator whose expertise is in early childhood and family policy with specific focus on young parents and issues facing young men.

*This paper will address the first point of inquiry: 'the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families' and discuss the challenges and misconceptions of family planning that young Australians face.*

### **Summary**

- A significant majority of young Australians (20-29 years) aspire to have children. They are active participants in fertility-decision making. The perception that young people do not want lifelong relationships and children is wrong. However, it is more likely that social and cultural pressure play a greater role in influencing their decisions than government policy on tax and workforce participation.
- The promotion of parenting as an option to young people is an important role for government, especially in economic terms. A growing body of evidence indicates that the perception that starting families is a financial burden is not a correct one. Families have far better economic prospects than singles and their financial status is no different to childless couples.
- The disincentives to starting families are driven by broader social agendas. Young people are extraordinarily flexible and capable; my research indicates young parents are capable of surviving by navigating support services in a way that suits them.
- The role of government must be to engage in sophisticated discussions that promote the economic and social value of families to all of society, particularly promoting parenting as an option to young men and women.
- Young parents are actually more likely to embrace the concept of work-life balance. Consequently, government must pursue policy that provides quality work to people producing high levels of productivity within shorter time periods. Young Australia parents are creating new journeys for themselves. They work, parent and engage with politics in a different way to their parents' generation. This must be acknowledged and supported.



## **Recommendations**

- That the Federal Government supports a National Young Parents Roundtable to initiate fresh discussions between young parents who want to advocate the value of their decision to become parents. An event such as this can help provide the stimulus for research and engaging key groups such as young single mothers, and young men who are choosing not to pursue their aspirations of fatherhood.
- Further government investment into research of fertility-decision making processes of young men and women.
- Promote young parents as role models. Identify them as another vital part of youth culture and reduce the negative attitudes many young parents face when they make the decision to have children.
- That governments (local, state, federal) pursue innovative models of early childhood and family support that focus on providing services in the home. Home and community care (HACC) services are a good model to follow. Maternal and child health services and childcare services based on a similar model would better support and engage young parents.
- Support young parents to regularly access services that will benefit their children's development, and to continue to provide support in accessing housing markets and pursuing flexible work and study arrangements.

## **Introduction**

My advocacy and promotion of parenting as an option for young people has evolved from my personal experience. I did not plan to become a father. But, at 23 I became a dad-to-be and accepted the responsibility. My experience was that in accepting the responsibility of becoming a dad I immediately increased my employability, my financial situation and my sense of personal achievement.

My research indicates that people who become parents in their 20s are economically and emotionally better off. Declining birth rate and population policy aside, younger parents provide a platform that continues to support the informal community and family support services that save government billions of dollars. The greatest challenge for government in the future if the age of first time parents continues to increase will be to manage the cost of supporting older parents whose well being is deteriorating, but who still have dependant children.

## **Young Australians aspire to have children**

*"I'm 28 and got married at 21. I waited 6 years before falling pregnant...Good on you younger mums for showing people that young people do know things and we can make decisions for ourselves."*

- Popular Australian online bulletin board

*Amy is a 23-year-old builder and her boyfriend, Lucas (24) and her have been together for over 5 years. Amy is keen to start a family. Lucas, she says, is the one who needs convincing. He also wants kids, but Lucas is determined not to follow the path of his father. He wants to be a good dad, be an available dad. He told me he doesn't even know what his argument is for not having them.*

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) *It's not for lack of wanting kids* that reports on fertility decision making in Australia demonstrates that most Australian's want children. And not just one, they want two or more.

Over 80 per cent of young men aged 20-29 indicate they want children. The average for women aged 20-29 is even higher.

Yet, as the report points out, the aspirations of many Australians to have two or more children will go unfulfilled as the birth rate continues to decline.

This latest research is interesting on two levels.

First, governments don't have to convince young Australians to want children, but they do have to support people to get out there and fulfil those aspirations. It would be of great benefit to find ways to support Australians to have children earlier.

That we currently live in such prosperous times, yet a majority of people give economic reasons for not having children is problematic (especially considering research I will refer to later).

Secondly, it is a misconception to think people in their late teens and early 20s are too young or immature to have children. Young Australians do think about having children and are in control of their fertility decision-making. However, as the average age for first time parents continues to rise (30.2 for women, 32.5 for men) it is obvious young people are putting off pursuing their aspirations. It is up to government to support research and programs that looks at why this the case



which would allow us develop a clear national strategy that supports and promotes parenting in your 20s.

This is crucial because if the average age of first time parents continues to increase, as it has done for the last 20 years. The birth-rate will continue to decline and broad range of social and economic challenges that accompany it will be exacerbated.

### **Perceptions and challenges for young parents**

*"As a young person living in the Barossa Valley it became apparent to me that young pregnant and parenting people were experiencing many hardships and criticism. Teenage pregnancy and parenting is increasingly becoming an issue but instead of it being discussed, supported and dealt with, it continues to be a taboo subject."*

- Shay Nichols, North Area Young Parents Services, National Youth Roundtable presentation

*"Just wondering what ever things is the worst thing about being a young mum? I would have to say, for me, it is the way people react towards you. The way everyone gives dirty looks and make smart arsed comments."*

- Popular Australian online bulletin board

Young people who become parents are constantly faced with the criticism of whether or not they are mature enough to have children. This is a 'chicken and egg' argument that stems from our society's continued attempt to undermine the ability of people to parent. Maturity is something you grow into. There is no reason why a person who is 35 is any more prepared to raise children than someone who is 21. Life experiences like travel, tertiary education or an employment history do not help prepare anyone for the challenge of parenthood.

Parenting is a skill that we all grow into. We don't need to tell young people to wait until they are older to become parents when they supposedly have a sound financial base and a broader range of experiences. Many young parents I have interviewed as part of my work have indicated they grew with the responsibility of parenting. They became more focussed on other aspects of their life and developed more through parenting than they had in all their other experiences.

This concept is backed up by Simon Kelly's research. His work with the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling indicates that *Couples with dependant children* are substantially better off economically than *Single people* and have only slightly less wealth than *Couple only families*.

*"With the often quoted high cost of raising children, it might be expected that Couples Only would accumulate considerably more wealth than Couples with dependent children. This data appears to refute this perception. While Couples with dependent children do initially lag behind their Couples Only similarly aged peers, they catch them in their early 30s and remain ahead until retirement."*

- Kelly, S. (2001) "Trends in Australian Wealth: New estimates for the 90s"

This suggests young people would be best to start a family sooner to ensure they not only have adequate wealth during their child years, but have ample time later in life to adjust their wealth appropriately to ensure adequate superannuation. Something parents with dependant children in their late 50s and 60s must find challenging.

Changing the social attitudes and stigma of young parents has less to do with tax policy or changing social support structures. It requires investment in promotional

activity. An investment in a campaign, not unlike health and well-being campaigns, would assist in shifting community opinion. This means that young people who aspire to be parents, but parrot the 'but I'm too young' argument may be encouraged to consider the opinion seriously.

This would be an investment from government into economic growth for the future. If the wealth of couples and couples with dependant children is higher than all other categories then encouraging younger people to couple and have kids becomes strong economic policy.

I don't think I am imparting any astounding new knowledge here. It is something the parliament is already aware of. From the Treasurer, Peter Costello's comments last budget, it is obvious he is very aware of this. Though I would recommend he not be used as the public face of any campaign. 'One for your country...' might not quite do the job - despite the best intentions.

### **The needs of young parents**

*Linda(25) and Terry(26) both work part-time. By working 3 days each a week they bring in enough money to pay their mortgage, support their lifestyle and only need a family friend to care for their two-year old daughter one day a week. They, like many young families, choose not to use formal childcare and value their daughter learning through informal care. She engages with their neighbour's older children and sees the way another family operates - not every family is the same.*

*Linda and Terry stopped visiting the maternal and child health nurse at 6 months because they felt she criticised their parenting. Though they both work part-time, it took them over 18 months to get the arrangement due to a lack of support from employers. They participate in informal playgroups. But, don't make use of a wide range of services. They are a happy and capable family unit.*

Organisations working to support young parents indicate that they struggle to attract funding and anecdotal evidence suggests young parents often don't use available services because they lack confidence and feel intimidated by society's perceptions of them.

The needs of young parents differ greatly from those who are choosing to have children later in life. The challenges of employment and work, home ownership and building community relationships are still very real for young parents. Young parents have more in common with the baby boomer generation than many of their generation X and Y peers who are stalling having children until they establish an economic foundation, a stable career and strong social network who are having children in their 30s.

Many young parents like Linda and Terry are showing they are more than able to work with support services to meet their own desired lifestyle. But, younger parents do statistically stop seeing early childhood services earlier, and in the new world of older parents find engaging with kindergarten and school parent committees a lot more intimidating.

Some early childhood services could better support young people by engaging them in new ways. Models of service in Victoria where early childhood services go to the family home have proven to better engage young parents. I do not believe that young parents should be singled out and separate services created to meet



their needs. They need to be included within the universal service system, while having some of their specific needs catered for.

In terms of broader social supports, it is young parents who are better at leading the work-family debate. They do this not through engaging in discussion, but by getting on with the job and working out what type of lifestyle they desire and pursue it.

Many young families I have interviewed have a much more sound approach to their financial development. They tend to not over commit to mortgages. They are more interested in spending time with their children. They value work in its broadest sense and push (as much as possible) to remain in their chosen career.

Their work demands could be made easier by a greater focus from business on family-friendly arrangements. While, the debate is red hot, the reality of the situation for many young parents is that they feel pressured

Many young mothers are finding the early years of their child's life a great time to pursue further study. The distance learning arrangements and flexible learning theories have supported women increasing their skills and preparing for a return to the workforce once they feel their children are old enough.

In many ways, having children young allows for greater reflection on potential careers and ample time to study and prepare. Young mothers and fathers who undertake a full-time carer role are not jeopardising their career as much because they are at the start of the path.

The needs of young parents are to support them to access services that will benefit their children's development and to continue to provide support in accessing housing markets and pursuing flexible work and study arrangements. Federal government policy in this area is strong; it must continue to be so.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to add my support for the directions I have read and heard from the Chair of your committee. The return to a more person-centred approach to all early childhood and family services would be a valuable one.

Government have some responsibility to support children and families, but this committee must buck the current trend of trying to support everyone and acknowledge it is also business and communities that must care for families as well.

Young parents are valuable assets. The naivety, the enthusiasm and energy are benefits. Young parents are less demanding of services and just as capable, if not more so, of balancing the challenges of life while raising young children if the community environment is a positive one.

It is for this reason I urge the committee to consider supporting the development of a National Young Parents Roundtable as a way of consulting young parents further. A national event of this calibre would raise the profile of young parents and begin the process of changing our attitude to having children younger and celebrating the rewards of a whole life spent raising children, rather than starting half way through.

I have attached a copy of a two-page proposal that I have begun to discuss with young parents, key stakeholders and state ministers.

## **Attachment 1**

### **National Young Parents Roundtable**

#### What is it?

A national gathering of parents less than 30 years to discuss:

- The issues facing young parents and how they differ from older parents
- Their role in advocating the value of having children to other young adults
- Establish a nationwide advocacy and support network for young parents
- Ensure that young parents and their families have a voice on family, childhood and youth policy.

#### Why?

Population statistics indicate that the average age of first time parents is increasing. Most recent ABS data estimates the average age of first time mothers in Australia is 30.2 years, while first time fathers are 32.5 years.

This means that in coming years family and child policy will begin to focus more on older families and their needs. The National Young Parents Roundtable is a reaction to this development to establish a credible voice in the public policy arena for young parents and their children who are becoming a more marginalised group.

The 2004 Australian Institute of Family Studies into fertility decision-making indicated that a majority of Australians aged between 20-29 aspire to have children. The National Young Parents Roundtable will help validate those aspirations and begin the process of promoting the young parents lifestyle: challenging, fulfilling and inspiring.

#### Advocacy

Many young parents discuss the challenges and difficulties of becoming parents in a society that continues to accept that people have children later in life. Young parents face difficulties establishing their own community networks and support systems in a society where youth continues to encompass older age groups and marketers only promote the single lifestyle to anyone under 30.

The National Young Parents Roundtable will provide a validation of the decisions, experiences and needs of young parents and their families. It will focus on two key advocacy points:

1. *Advocating for the needs of young parents and their families at a local, state and federal policy level.*
2. *Advocating that the decision to have a family before you are 30 is an option that other young people can consider.*

#### The role of family in community building

Historically families are the basic building blocks of community. Where two or three families gather community exists. Children provide the stimulus for society working to improve itself, its infrastructure and services.



The declining Australian population declines and the increase in the average age of parents has some hidden impacts on our society that we have not fully considered such as:

- Impact on Inter-generational relationships. As people delay parenthood, so they delay grandparenthood.
- Differences between younger and older parents.
- Extension of youth and individualism vs. the decline of a commitment and understanding of the value of community.

#### What will be discussed?

The needs of young parents and their families:

- Family friendly employment that continues to offer career opportunities
- New family balance paradigm being led by young parents
- Young parents role in the early years
- Issues facing young single mothers and what family and community supports they need
- Maintaining strong inter-generational relationships: young parents and young grandparents
- Young parents from different cultural backgrounds: balancing the competing needs of family culture, social pressure and early years policy.
- Young fathers: building the relationships of these young rebels

#### The difference

The National Young Parents Roundtable will not impact on participants' families. All participants will be invited to bring their partners and children. The format of the Roundtable will cater for families.

- The activities will be structured around the needs of children.
- Social events will be inclusive of all family members.
- Quality childcare services will be provided during the event.
- A consultative process that allows children of young parents to have their say.
- Fully funded accommodation and facilities that meet the needs of young parents.

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