

Submission to Senate Select Committee on Mental Health

Our children and then our grandchildren will grow up alongside peers who are being raised in environments that are deprived, cruel and absent of basic cares, affection and appropriate stimulation. With an increasing social gradient and the lessening of protective factors such as social capital in our community the difficulties faced by coming generations can only be expected to worsen.

We need to explore with much more urgency, conviction and purpose, and confront the reasons why our community experiences such difficulty in thinking about the emotional life, day-to-day experiences and needs of our babies and young children. I contend that such a process would lead us to a dilemma that our communities and government at all levels and society as a whole, have yet to really embrace- do we make essential and difficult decisions about how a great many of our institutions and organisations respond to the needs of the very young and their families or do we continue to minimise and shut out their emotional impact. By addressing the resistances to understanding the emotional lives of our very young we can begin to translate a torrent of rhetoric regarding the importance of Australia's children, into action.

Infant mental health is the capacity of the child in the first 24 to 36 months of life to experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn. "Good enough" Infant mental health is critical for the development of healthy social, emotional and cognitive development, literacy and language skills and readiness for school. Healthy, nurturing and secure relationships provide the neurological foundations for all of a child's major cognitive and emotional functioning-including habitual ways of responding, language and the development of a sense of self. They are important in developing the ability to concentrate and learn, manage strong feelings and form relationships with peers, teachers and others central to the child's further positive progress. By age three almost all of the core structure of the brain is formed and the tentative connections of neurons at birth that are not further established may be quickly pruned. Many of the serious emotional and behavioural difficulties that adolescents face can be linked strongly with difficulties in their early experiences and relationships as can many mental health difficulties in adulthood. As well as affecting the degree of satisfaction many people have in their personal and family life, these difficulties present significant challenges and costs to the education, health, welfare and justice systems.

The Mental Health Promotion and Prevention National Action Plan 0-2 (1999) prioritises better needs recognition and intervention and support programs focussed on parent-infant interactions and relationship building in order to optimise the development of secure parent-infant attachment. This is supported internationally by a raft of documents relating to the needs of infants including "From Neurons to Neighbourhoods-The Science of Early Childhood Development", USA (2000) and "From Pregnancy to Early Childhood: Early Interventions to Enhance the Mental Health of Children and Families" The Mental Health Foundation, U.K (2002). Dr Fiona Stanley, Australian of the Year in 2003 advocated very strongly for this very objective but we have not seen her well researched and articulated vision wholeheartedly embraced by our country.

Recently the Australian Government, with very good reason, pledged one billion dollars to Indonesia's Tsunami relief effort. I am strongly in favour of supporting neighbouring countries,

particularly in times of crisis, as their progress has significant implications for our own future. I ask that the same sympathies be extended to providing extensive and comprehensive and coordinated services for the development of Australia's very young children and their families. The Australian Government and the departments established to act on our behalf, in light of international findings reported many times over, must pursue the priority of the health, happiness and emotional security of our people and its consequences-personal and economic prosperity. James J. Heckman Ph.D., Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences in 2000 writes "The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The evidence supports the policy description: Invest in the very young" (Heckman, 2002)

To conclude, if we begin to feel the force of our early experiences and anxieties and recognise the importance of the early years for the whole of community, we are faced with making difficult decisions about whether to respond appropriately or to minimise the difficulties our community faces. We face even greater difficulties in the longer term by avoiding such decisions. The provision of much greater mental health services for infants and their carer's should be prominent in a subsequent recognition of need. The Australian Government has begun to provide funding in recent times for programs that support families and children. I would argue that this is an important beginning but that the mental health services require very much greater and dedicated resources to promote infant and parent mental health.

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