

Children must be raised, not idolised

By Daniel Donahoo, 08-Mar-2007

In a recent UNICEF report that analysed the well-being of children in economically advanced nations there were some rather unsettling results for Australia and the United Kingdom. The governments of both countries have been putting children at top of their policy agenda. Both have invested in early childhood research and programs. A range of new bureaucratic structures has been created to support the development of children and young people. But despite 10 years of advocacy, new policy direction and increased investment the progress has not been all positive.

The UNICEF study, [Poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries](#), shows that when it comes to the overall health and well-being of children, Australia and Britain are near the middle and bottom of the list respectively. Peter Saunders from the Centre of Independent Studies argued in *The Australian* that being somewhere in the middle isn't too bad. Considering recent investment, it indicates a poor return.

Britain was ranked last in the final summary against six key indicators, including material well-being, health and educational well-being. Australia was not included on this final list due to insignificant data.

Dr. Fiona Stanley, former Australian of the Year and child advocate, pointed out in a Radio National interview that we should be concerned that Australia is not able to provide the data to be assessed against all six key indicators. She is right. It means we don't even have the data to assess some aspects of Australian children's well-being.

Though Australia is not in the final summary ranking, Britain's result is telling because the policy directions in both countries are similar. The policies being implemented are based, in part, on research by James Heckman, a Nobel Prize winning economist whose work on investment in intensive early childhood programs has shown significant results. Essentially, Heckman's argument is that for every dollar a government invests in programs for disadvantaged children, they will receive up to \$17 in future returns as that child finds employment, avoids crime and is generally a solid contributor to civil society. Heckman's research is good, but there are significant problems with the way it is being interpreted.

Heckman's research has been used to justify investments across a broad range of policy ideas, and includes universal systems that support all children, like child health nurses, and targeted programs to aid disadvantaged young children.

The basis of the policies is the principle that supporting a child's development in the early years of their lives provides a strong foundation for later life. The problem is that Heckman's research focussed on very specific groups of disadvantaged children and was funding intensive. It provided tertiary-trained workers to support the children for 40 hours a week. No government program comes close to this type of activity. Thus, government investment is not effective in the areas where it is most needed.

The evidence from UNICEF supports this thesis. It recognises that Australia rates highly on the education well-being scale, but falls away when it comes to measures of child poverty. Despite ten years of policy change and improvement, the socially democratic Scandinavian countries continue to top the rankings. Despite our desire to emulate them, we still fall short. Perhaps the problem is that we are trying too hard, and not looking at the underlying reasons for our inability to improve the well-being of young Australians.

Countries like Australia and the United Kingdom have missed the importance of changing our collective images and ideas of childhood. Our children, despite good policy, can't thrive if policy is built around a culture of idolising children.

Our idolising of childhood and youth means we treat children like demi-gods, and in so doing fail to honour their humanity. We revere childhood, rather than respect it as a stage in life's journey. This is reflected even in our policy titles — names like 'Best Start' and 'Children First' send a message that parents and the community find intimidating. Ideas about childhood and youth that are simply not true are reinforced.

Policy has over-emphasised the importance of children and understated the need for strong familial and social support for children. Childhood development and well-being does not rely solely on programs for children, but on the strengthening of a civil society that can provide adequate health and community services that empower families and communities.

Not enough attention has been given to the idea that it takes a community to raise a child (or a village, as Hillary Clinton said in her book on the subject.) Many communities do this well, through church, sports and community groups. But our governments are not giving enough to communities where children are

disadvantaged, nor are they building the infrastructure and basic services that will allow parents and adults the space to do the best they can for children.

A culture that respects, rather than reveres children and young people would not put them on a pedestal. It would not point the finger at parents and blame them for problems with their children. It would instead improve the ways to support those parents and acknowledge that the development of children into capable adults is all our responsibility. The well-being of our children relies on us honouring their resilience, but also recognising that some children are not as well off as others — and that is where government need to focus their time and money.

