



Proactive Release

Submissions on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

August 2019

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has released the following submission received during its public consultation on the child and youth wellbeing strategy.

Some of the information contained within this release is considered to not be appropriate to release and, if requested, would be withheld under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act).

- Where this is the case, the information has been withheld, and the relevant section of the Act that would apply, has been identified.
- Where information has been withheld, no public interest has been identified that would outweigh the reasons for withholding it.

Key to redaction codes and their reference to sections of the Act:

- **9(2)a** – Section 9(2)(a): to protect the privacy of natural persons, including deceased people.

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Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy – Submission Template

This document is intended for individuals or groups who wish to make a formal submission on the child and youth wellbeing strategy.

Please complete this template and email it to: childandyouthwellbeing@dpmc.govt.nz

A guide to making a submission is available on the DPMC website <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy>

Submissions will close on **Wednesday 5 December**.

Please provide details for a contact person in case we have some follow up questions.

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Organisation Name:	Brainwave Trust Aotearoa
Organisation description: (tell us about your organisation – i.e. who do you represent? How many members do you have? Are you a local or national organisation?)	<p>Brainwave Trust Aotearoa, a Charitable Trust was founded in 1998. It is a national organisation.</p> <p>The team consists of an Executive Director, who leads an operational team of ten part-time people. This team supports a network of mostly part-time educators/kaiako throughout the country, from Invercargill to Whangarei. Many of them are professionals such as police officers, teachers and doctors.</p> <p>Brainwave reviews research from a variety of academic disciplines, including neuroscience, psychology, and psychiatry. Our purpose is to increase understanding of the factors that influence the development of children and young people, with the aim of improving their outcomes.</p> <p>The Trust promotes an environment in which all children are enabled, through a particular focus on their brain development, to reach their potential. This is vitally important, both for their own wellbeing and that of the nation.</p> <p>One of the strengths of Brainwave Trust is the mixture of people involved. The Trustees (listed at the end of the document) and the contracted team include a culturally diverse mix of legal, paediatric, psychology, communications, business and education professionals,</p>

	<p>some with lived experience of childhood adversity and disadvantage.</p> <p>As this scientific evidence grows so does the need to share this important information with those who care for, or work with, children and their families within New Zealand.</p>
<p>Executive Summary: (Please provide a short summary of the key points of your Submission - 200 words)</p>	<p>The evidence is overwhelming that experiences in the very early years, in a complex interaction with genetics, play a critical role in the development of children. This early development can have lifelong consequences.</p> <p>It is essential that people across every community and decision making group in New Zealand understands the critical importance of pregnancy and the first years of life in shaping a child’s future, so that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments, communities and individuals will invest heavily and effectively in the early years. • The person or people involved in the care of any infants will know how to, and be able to, provide their babies a good start. They will have access to the resources and support that help them to do so. • Babies will form healthy attachments with at least one adult and everyone will understand the need for that. • Toxic stressors that may hinder development will be identified and ameliorated by families, communities and/or government wherever possible.

Submission Content

Right From The Start - Investing in the Early Years.

Submission to the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Whakamana i te tamaiti.

Note

For the purposes of this submission, we have not provided references or evidence. However, we can provide both if asked. We are strictly an evidence-informed organisation.

Our Submission

The most effective government strategies for tamariki will start very early. At conception, or even before. Such strategies will also be the most cost-effective. A brave and thoughtful policy strategy would prioritise these early years above all others, for all whānau.

It takes courage for governments to prioritise the very young, due to the short nature of our electoral cycle and the need to trust the evidence and wait at least one generation in order to see the full effects.

The first one thousand days of life – i.e. conception to age two – have a profound and lasting effect on adult outcomes. This has been widely agreed upon and known for some time, yet is not always reflected in our investment in, and support for, families with very young children.

Research provides compelling evidence that early experiences, during pregnancy and through the first few years, have life-long effects on our physical and emotional development and our ability to learn and thrive. It tells us that a child's experiences, both good and bad, in the early years, play a critical role in the way their brain develops, and whether or not they will become capable, contributing, well-adjusted adults.

Development during these early years profoundly influences physical and mental health, resilience, learning, and the ability to form, and maintain, positive relationships throughout the life course. It also influences many of the social issues we currently face, such as crime.

"Getting it right from the start" is by far the most effective strategy, economically as well as in terms of reducing suffering. Money and effort should be spent supporting all caregivers as early as possible.

Attachment relationships in the early years are critical in creating brain architecture, whether healthy and constructive or otherwise. Supporting healthy attachment in all whānau should be a priority for society.

Healthy development relies on at least one available and responsive adult caregiver in the early years. This is often lacking when the parent/caregiver is suffering from poverty or violence, is under the influence of alcohol or drugs,

or is depressed, stressed, unwell, or otherwise unable to be there emotionally for the child.

Extra support is needed for whānau where there are risk factors that may make them vulnerable.

In the highly-regarded ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study conducted by Kaiser-Permanente and the CDC, ten experiences considered adverse and found highly likely (especially where there are four or more present) to have lasting negative effects on people are:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Intimate partner violence
- Mother treated violently
- Substance misuse within household
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member
- (For more information on this groundbreaking study see <https://www.brainwave.org.nz/adult-health-fact-sheet/>)

The effects on babies and young children of having a poor start are not usually short-lived, they can last a lifetime. And they can affect all areas of development. For example, there is plenty of evidence a poor start can adversely affect physical health in a lifelong way, such as having a higher risk of developing heart disease, lung cancer and auto-immune disease as an adult.

As children age it becomes harder and harder to positively affect the ability to learn, and the way the body and brain respond to stress. It is much more effective to begin very early, and support a positive start for every NZ child.

There is often a cascade of effects in a whanau facing adversity. As these risk factors 'mount up', children are at increasing risk of adverse lifelong outcomes. The more risks they face, the greater the chance of poorer well-being. Conversely, each risk that is reduced, increases the chance of that child developing well.

Every effort should be made to support mothers, fathers and care-givers to become as effective as possible, right from the start, thus preventing the widespread inter-generational sequelae when families are unable to offer what babies need. This should include anything that can be shown to assist parents in a healthy pregnancy and to support early attachment.

Brainwave Trust supports compassionate, non-judgmental and effective care for individuals affected by adversity, however, here we wish to point out the increased risk to babies and young children who are in the care of someone

facing significant adversity. While the “point-of-contact” with government may be the health sector, addiction services, psychiatric services, the criminal justice system, the Family Court, child protection or any other services, the need to ensure the whole whānau is being supported is of paramount importance. The professionals in these services are well placed for identifying families in need of extra support.

Extra support for the children in affected whānau may well prevent or reduce the severity of, their own mental health, addiction, violence and other issues in the future.

The economic cost to the New Zealand economy of poor child outcomes was estimated by Infometrics in 2011 to be around 3 percent of GDP (approximately \$6 billion in 2011). [Grimmond, Infometrics, 2011]. This included increased health, welfare, remedial education, crime and justice expenditure and lower productivity.

That’s

- almost \$1300 per year for every man, woman and child in NZ
- \$500 million per month
- \$16.5 million per day

Professor James Heckman, Nobel prize winning American economist, looked at the return on investment for funding/interventions at different life stages. The results are very clear. Early investment is most effective and most cost-effective. This is exactly opposite to the way in which we invest at present.

Early intervention treats problems at their source. We currently fund the treatment of “the symptoms” through the Health, Corrections, Education, Social Welfare and Justice budgets, among others.

Hence there is a strong economic, as well as moral, argument for investing early.

“Investment” can be social, emotional and financial. Individuals need to invest time and care in the babies and children in their life. Communities need to place a high priority on the welfare of pregnant women, babies and families. Government needs to act early in children’s lives, investing heavily to get it right from the start. Employers need to be family friendly. Parenting needs to have a higher status than at present.

What would a great strategy look like?

A great strategy would be based on the evidence of what works for children. This would include:

- ensuring women have a healthy pregnancy, free from toxic stressors.
- enabling parents to be good parents, and given good choices as to how this happens.
- appropriate long term support for whānau that need it

- ensuring everyone in New Zealand who cares for, or works with, children uses knowledge to inform their decisions, practice and policy
- ensuring parenting is valued, reinforcing the simple message that parents and caregivers have the most profound effect on the development of children
- workplaces and career structures that recognise the critical value of child-rearing, meaning parents are not forced to 'juggle' or 'choose' between productive working lives and parenting well.
- addressing the large numbers of children currently experiencing adversity through exposure to poverty, by supporting their whānau out of poverty.

Some issues that need addressing:

- Parenting is widely under-valued and taken for granted
- Parents do not have realistic choices when it comes to the care of very young children. Strategies such as increasing paid parental leave, providing other financial support for parents and perhaps moving from a largely profit-driven Early Childhood Education sector back to a government and community-led model would all help improve caregivers' choices.
- The welfare of very young children needs to be at the centre of decision-making/debate about issues such as childcare, housing, careers etc. Currently other agendas and viewpoints tend to dominate.
- Policies have been put in place that can affect the parental decisions in a way that is not helpful. One example is the 20 hours subsidised care in early childhood education which, while well-intentioned, has actually reduced access to early childhood education centres on a more part-time basis i.e. less than 20 hours. Another example is the situation where a person is on Sole Parent benefit and may be forced to seek work and place their child in external care at the age of 12 months.
- The system of support for families is fractured, with many providers from different sectors including health, education and social services, with support provided in a non-systematic, variable manner. There needs to be a seamless pathway of support for parents and whānau. Money spent early saves money later.
- Poverty puts enormous stress on families and can severely inhibit their ability to raise healthy happy children. Research indicates that increasing income to families in poverty is associated with improved outcomes for their children. Other supports can also be beneficial, but children benefit when their family's income lift.

Note

Genes play a vital part in outcomes as well, but the environments children experience are where we can effect change. What we can, and should, try to maximise is the 'nurture' part of the complex interaction that is child development.

Note

Included in our thinking are factors about parents'/caregivers' lifestyle that may constitute risk factors to babies. This may lead to the perception that we are 'judgmental'.

We believe it is important to avoid making automatic 'assumptions' about parents who seek help or face adversity of any kind. They may be good parents in many ways, in some ways or in very few ways, just like all parents. They will almost all want what is best for their child. Parents/caregivers need to feel supported and assisted, so they do not feel 'judged', and can feel safe to seek help.

However, evidence and lived experience shows that often parents facing adversity are in 'survival mode' themselves and thus have a cascade of problems which make their lives chaotic and stressful. This, in turn, will often lead to chaotic and stressful lives for their children, who are more vulnerable the younger they are. As parents, many will need support. Wider whānau may or may not be providing that support. We ignore this at our peril.

This is a fine balance. And it takes courage and sensitivity. We recognise this.

Kia toa, kia kaha, kia manawa-nui.

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