

As if children mattered ... Creating pathways to wellbeing

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ESSAY

As if children mattered...

Creating pathways to wellbeing

Ross Homel

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future. These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart, 26 May 2017

SOME THIRTEEN YEARS ago I attended the funeral of three young boys. The oldest was just eleven. They were killed by a train on Saturday 11 March 2006 while walking on railway tracks in a suburb south-west of Brisbane.

I attended because the children and their families had had some association with our Pathways to Prevention Project, a ten-year research-practice partnership between Griffith University, seven state primary schools, the Queensland Department of Education and the national community organisation Mission Australia. Our work, which began in 2002, was located in a disadvantaged area not far from where the tragedy occurred, and built upon strong relationships between Vietnamese, Pacific Islander and First Nations family support workers and their respective cultural communities. Pathways aimed to promote both child and community development through running child-focused programs, empowering parents and building stronger connections between families, children, local schools and the community. The good news is the project partnership partly succeeded

with these ambitious goals, against the odds. The odds were, however, sometimes too formidable to overcome, as illustrated by the stories of these young boys.

Their funeral was, as one would expect, an emotionally draining experience. More than one thousand people, mostly from the First Nations community, shared their memories of the boys and offered their love and support to the families. The tragedy was intensified for one of the families because just eight weeks previously they had lost an older boy in a high-speed police pursuit. He had been a passenger in a stolen car that crashed when the young driver lost control.

The stories that emerged during the funeral about the lives of the children brought home to me in an exceptionally vivid way the relentless challenge of poverty and social exclusion in this country. The stories made real the statistics showing that since World War II, many aspects of health and wellbeing haven't improved for children and young people living in socially disadvantaged communities in Australia, despite the longest economic boom in our history. On the contrary, some (but by no means all) indicators reveal a worrying deterioration in health and wellbeing, especially for First Nations young people and indicators related to criminal offending and incarceration.

First Nations children and young people in Queensland are currently thirty-one times more likely to be held in custody than their non-Indigenous peers, higher than the national over-representation rate of twenty-four. Across Australia, the rate of First Nations over-representation in all forms of youth justice (detention and community supervision) rose from fifteen in 2012–13 to eighteen in 2017–18. This is because the steady decline in youth offending rates in the past ten years – a very encouraging 27 per cent nationally – has been more pronounced in the non-Indigenous population. So the youth justice gap is widening, but there is hope: we now know more than we ever have about what it will take to accelerate the downward trend in offending and related risk behaviours for children from all cultural groups.

The stories at the funeral underlined the way problems in the domains of education, health, family life, economic activity, community, work and childcare, and criminal justice are all intertwined. As the late, great Professor Tony Vinson put it when launching his *Dropping off the Edge* report twelve

years ago, 'This web-like structure of disadvantage counters attempts to break free of it.'

The three children had spent their early years in a suburb located in a Brisbane industrial area that is exceptionally poorly serviced by public transport and other utilities. A report on the transport needs of this area was completed around the time of the funeral by some of my university colleagues – a report they entitled *Still Waiting...* In fact, most people don't even know this suburb exists and get lost when they try to find it amid the complex network of roads that bestraddle a wilderness of warehouses, factories, truck depots and storage facilities. Economically, the suburb is just about the poorest in Brisbane, and families in the area are frequently clients of various government and non-government agencies.

For all that, there is a strong sense of community pride, and right in the centre of the suburb is a primary school with dedicated staff members who probably break all records in their attempts to reach out to and engage local families. Such dedication is, however, of limited benefit if families do not stay in the area for long. At least one of the boys' families moved out of the area after the first year of school, a transition that seemingly did not go well. By Year 2 in his new school, the lad was becoming a handful for teachers and staff, so much so that his parents were called in on quite a few occasions after he had been hauled into the principal's office. What unfolded over the next few years followed a distressingly familiar pattern: running away from class, being transferred to a special school for children with learning difficulties, his parents and teachers making temporarily successful attempts to provide him with meaningful activities, and the boy eventually being excluded from school at age nine followed by his parents making attempts to homeschool him.

Despite the evident challenges, it is striking how much love and affection the three children received from their parents, and indeed from so many people 'young and old'. Like many of their peers, the boys were very mobile, cruising around on their bikes exploring or visiting family members far and wide, but always returning come nightfall with tales of the day's adventures. Older brothers and their friends were a big influence, but it seems not always for the better. The boys naturally wanted to emulate their older peers, to follow them, do all the things they did – hang out in the park, South Bank or the city. One of them would always say that one day he would be there

joining in, and all his friends would tell him otherwise, to be a good boy and that it was no good doing the things they did.

Tragically, one aspect of the funeral was almost a parable illustrating this last point about the sometimes wild behaviour of older peers. As the church bells tolled and the hearses began to pull out for the cemetery, five heavily armoured vans emerged from the rear of the church, setting out for their journeys back to the prisons and detention centres from which several older siblings and cousins had been released temporarily for the service. For me, the starkness of the parable was almost more than I could bear. It was almost as if for these children there were two inevitable destinations: the prison or the cemetery.

I THANK GOD that things aren't in reality that bad. First Nations children and their families and communities are amazingly resilient, and many First Nations young people are now working their way through the education system and emerging as leaders in the trades, the professions and politics. In research I did with colleagues a few years ago, we argued that we need to rethink the concepts of so-called risk factors, which are typically a catalogue of deficits such as parental neglect, child impulsivity and lack of self-control, learning difficulties, family violence and the like. It is not that these statistical indicators don't capture some of the crucial forces that heighten the risks of crime, mental illness, substance abuse and related problems – they do indeed identify critical problems that should be the target of urgent, evidence-based attention. The rigorous measurement of child risk factors at the community level, ideally in the context of respectful partnerships with community residents, is a crucial early step in planning collective preventative action.

However, statistical risk factors identified from numerous longitudinal cohort studies fail to capture the history, culture and living reality of some First Nations and other marginalised groups. Similarly, so-called protective factors, important as they are, fail to really capture what it is about children, families and communities that make them capable of recovering from the most adverse circumstances. Critical risk factors my colleagues and I identified in our research included forced removals (the Stolen Generation and its inter-generational effects) and institutionalised racism. Strong cultural resilience and social bonds to family emerged as ongoing protective factors (the latter

vividly illustrated in the stories of the children that I heard at the funeral). Cultural resilience is evident in commonalities of exchange (a system of social relations where the emphasis of ownership is on social, not material, goods); negotiability (where social life is fluid and open to change or renegotiation); and mobility combined with a sense of place (where the groups or people are fluid, but there is a generalised sense of belonging). All these features were also clearly evident in the children's stories.

One important lesson to be learned here is that conflict at school, learning difficulties, truancy and school exclusion are all warning bells. Things might go seriously wrong, as they did for at least one of the boys mentioned above, if measures are not put into place as early as possible to change this particular negative pathway. In most cases, the problems persist despite strenuous efforts on the part of teachers, school guidance officers, behaviour management experts, principals and, of course, parents. Special schools are an institutionalised response to behaviour problems that represent a real attempt to help these troubled young people. Unfortunately, all these responses frequently fail. As a nation, we need to do better.

Another lesson is that while these children's parents loved them and tried to do their best, they were overwhelmed in their attempts by the complex web of social disadvantage in which they were enmeshed. What they needed was substantial, meaningful, long-term support in their child-rearing efforts, but what they got – at least after the funeral – was a lecture on television from the then-premier about being more responsible parents, and commentary in the press that we could help kids who wag school by cutting parents' welfare. This last idea seems to surface regularly, promoted by both sides of politics. For example, some years ago both prominent Liberal and Labor politicians argued that family welfare should be tied to the willingness of parents to undergo parent training such as the Positive Parenting Program.

It's not that the premier and others don't mean well, but they don't seem to understand the nature of the problem. It's not that parents don't care and don't do their best to keep an eye on their children – it's that they are beset by such huge daily demands and challenges (economic, emotional, social) that they sometimes can't give children the time, energy and attention they need. These are the terms in which my colleagues and I have begun to understand those risk and protective factors.

Instead of a catalogue of statistical variables that mostly refer to deficiencies in children or their families, we think in terms of the resources needed for parents and their communities to overcome the barriers or solve the problems they face on a daily basis in their child-rearing efforts, and we contrast these with the resources actually available to them to do their job. In other words, the issue is *a lack of fit between the resources needed and those available*, rather than deficits in individual people or families. The challenge is to open new doors or force open half-shut doors for families and children doing it tough, not focus exclusively on the ‘problem child’.

We understand negative developmental pathways more in terms of system responses and deficiencies than in terms of individual or family pathology. This way of thinking provides a positive and practical framework for devising effective prevention strategies, but it also allows us to draw on all the scientific research on risk and protective factors as a guide to effectively targeting resources.

Despite all the love with which the boys were surrounded, it must be recognised that on that fateful afternoon, they were in a perilous situation and were too young (or perhaps too cocky) to understand the risks. And no responsible adult was there at the time to look out for them. Family and community supports sometimes fail even in the most privileged social settings. Where poverty and social exclusion are entrenched, failure of support systems is a more common phenomenon. That’s why the state has a responsibility, and indeed why the whole community has a profound moral obligation, to ‘look out’ for children and young people who will periodically encounter challenges beyond the normal capacities of families to overcome.

LET’S TAKE A step back and look again briefly at the long-term trends in children’s wellbeing that I referred to earlier. All is not well, not just among First Nations peoples (where the magnitude of the problems serves as a judgment on our nation), but more broadly. Let’s also take a quick look at what scientific research conducted over many decades tells us we should be doing as a society to better care for all our children.

For many children and young people, life in Australia has never been better. Literacy and numeracy levels place Australian children in Years 3 and 9 highly compared with other OECD countries. General health indicators

also tell an encouraging story, with increases in life expectancy, declines in perinatal and infant death rates, lowered incidence of maternal deaths in childbirth, reductions in reported rates of infectious disease for the community as a whole, and declines in substance abuse, youth offending and violence.

However, life has also become more complicated and challenging for many children and young people in Australia over the past half-century. Increased rates of family violence and family stress are an obvious sign of societal distress, but there are other pointers that all is not well. As 2003 Australian of the Year Professor Fiona Stanley and her colleagues observed in *Children of the Lucky Country?* (Macmillan Australia, 2007), indicators of developmental health and wellbeing at the turn of the new millennium were showing adverse trends among children and adolescents. This was in spite of Australia's wealth, generally high levels of education and the kinds of positive trends noted above. Rising rates are still being observed for such problems as neurodevelopmental disorders, autism, mental health morbidities, child abuse and neglect, youth unemployment, adolescent suicide, obesity and school suspensions.

What is it about modern Australia that is causing these increases? They are not unique to Australia, with many developed countries observing similar trends. A unique aspect of the problem for Australia is that these indicators are worse among our First Nations communities – and unlike other former colonies (New Zealand, Canada), our country has made little progress in closing the gap.

There have been dramatic social changes for families and communities in many countries over the last forty years. However, social, technological, workplace and economic changes appear to have most benefited the wealthier groups in societies. They've had adverse effects on families and children living in economically deprived areas, where children continue to drop out of school, get trapped in cycles of welfare dependence and become entangled in the child safety or youth justice systems at much higher rates than their counterparts in more affluent communities.

Changes to wealth distribution, increased inequalities in health, educational and other outcomes, increasing family stress, undervaluing and neglect of children, the changing patterns of women's work and childcare, the pace of work and life generally, stress and unemployment tend to most negatively affect those with least resilience, including young

people living in economically deprived regions. The impact of these trends is exacerbated by the steady loss of faith and diminished levels of involvement in major institutions such as public schools, churches and community associations – the main institutions that in previous generations supported families and contributed significantly to child and youth development. To make matters worse, helping organisations, whether in the government or non-government sectors, are struggling to cope with the demands being placed upon them, and have a sense that the approaches they currently use are not working as well as they should.

For all these reasons, *preventive approaches* have become popular in Australia in the past twenty years or so. If it is possible to ‘get in early’ and influence for the better the direction of pathways leading to welfare dependency, crime or substance abuse, not only will our most disadvantaged citizens benefit, but Australia as a whole will be a healthier, more cohesive society.

SO HOW DO we achieve this? What are the principles upon which we should act? I can do no better here than to summarise some of the key points the famous American developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner made in a lecture I heard him give in Sydney nearly forty years ago, his ideas and research findings as applicable today as they were then. Bronfenbrenner outlined four conditions for human development. I list the first three with little comment, since it is the fourth that I wish to focus on here:

- In order to develop normally, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and *joint activity* with the child. In short, ‘somebody has to be crazy about that kid’;
- The developmental impact of emotionally involved care and joint activity with the child is enhanced *by the participation of both sexes* in this process. This need not be the biological parents, but it is helpful to have both a man and a woman involved;
- The developmental potential of a setting depends upon the extent to which third parties present in the setting support (or undermine) the activities of those actually engaged in interaction with the child. School practices, for example, that enhance parent–child joint activities around ‘fun learning’ could be very helpful;
- The involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity in support of child rearing requires public policies and practices that provide

opportunity, status, resources, encouragement, example, stability and above all *time* for parenthood, primarily by parents, but also by other adults in the child's environment, both within and outside the home.

Bronfenbrenner went on to elaborate the reasons for the statistical trends I have referred to, which in some cases have intensified in the forty years since he formulated the abovementioned conditions. He proposed an important principle (what he called a *preposterous proposition*) for public policy: that we create formal support systems that generate and strengthen informal support systems that, in turn, reduce the need for formal systems.

This principle was one of the foundations for the Pathways to Prevention Project. The Family Independence Program, part of the Pathways Project, offered culturally appropriate activities and services that operated on the principle that the goal of improving children's lives is inseparable from improving the lives of their parents, families and communities. The primary focus of the Family Independence Program was to a) promote positive parenting, b) reduce social isolation experienced by families and c) prepare young children and their families for the transition to primary school and support them through the primary years.

The primary focus of the preschool-based program components offered to four-year-old children in 2002 and 2003, the first years of full project operation, was to (a) enhance children's communication skills, (b) enhance children's social skills and (c) encourage the formation of strong and equitable homeschool relationships that empower parents to participate more actively in their children's learning. Thus, the Pathways Project was a holistic initiative that integrated action at individual, family and school levels.

We can document many successes, including measurable improvements in teacher-rated classroom behaviour among children who participated in the preschool program and whose parents participated in the family independence program over the years they were at primary school. These improvements in behaviour were particularly marked for children whose parents had recorded very low levels of efficacy and empowerment before they benefited from involvement in Pathways. These results are encouraging evidence of the short- and medium-term value of the kinds of family support services that are routinely offered in socially disadvantaged communities across Australia.

One of the original goals of Mission Australia and the John Barnes Foundation (who funded much of the early Pathways work and provided ongoing financial support) was to reduce youth crime involvement. To test whether this goal was achieved, we obtained ethics approval to track the youth justice records of the children who were involved as preschoolers in 2002 and 2003, the first two years of the project. While we have not yet published our analyses in peer-reviewed journals, it is nevertheless reasonably clear that the impact of the Pathways preschool program and of family support on serious crime involvement was somewhat 'patchy'. Not surprisingly, children whose behaviours improved steadily in the latter years of primary school generally did not get caught up in the youth justice system and, as noted above, we have strong evidence that Pathways family support contributed directly to this positive outcome. However, the project's impact on classroom behaviour and youth crime depended very much on the children's ethnic backgrounds. For some cultural groups, such as Pacific Island boys, there is clear evidence of a positive effect, especially if parental rules were rather weak and a child had a low attachment to school. But for other groups, including First Nations children, positive results are not so clear.

These mixed results are not a cause for despair. Rather, they present a very clear challenge for researchers, policy people and frontline professionals committed to finding non-punitive responses to child behaviour problems to draw much more heavily than in the past on strategies for which there is by now very strong scientific evidence of effectiveness. In addition, we continue to face significant challenges in terms of bridging the huge divide between families and schools in disadvantaged communities, and in setting up systems that will allow schools, families, helping agencies and the communities they serve to work effectively together to promote better outcomes for children.

About seven years ago, my Griffith colleagues and I boiled down many of the main lessons we had learnt from the Pathways Project to six key principles for community preventive action, encapsulated in the acronym CREATE: Collaborative; Relationships-driven; Early in the pathway; Accountable; Training-focused; Evidence-based. In 2013, we embarked on a new research program, CREATE-ing Pathways to Child Wellbeing in Disadvantaged Communities (the 'CREATE Project'), which is built around a partnership with twelve government and non-government organisations

operating through the national Communities for Children program. The aim is to implement the CREATE principles in up to twenty-two disadvantaged communities in New South Wales and Queensland, with the shared goal of developing methods and resources to measurably improve child wellbeing.

The CREATE principles are designed to guide the local partnerships of service providers and (in many cases) primary schools through a continuous cycle of *Coming Together* (measuring and improving the quality of their collaborations); *Deciding Together* (using community-level data on child risk and protective factors to set priority goals for collective action); *Planning Together* (selecting evidence-based initiatives that address priority goals, are suited to the local context and are feasible in terms of resources and community support); *Doing Together* (implementing the selected initiatives as rigorously as possible); and *Reviewing Together* (measuring whether child wellbeing has improved and evaluating the effectiveness of each stage of the cycle). There is strong evidence from public health and criminology that a collaborative population health initiative along these lines can, over time, improve community engagement and prevent child and youth behaviour problems.

An exciting aspect of the new research program is the work of my colleague, Dr Kate Freiberg, in conceiving and building, in partnership with a visionary and innovative multimedia company, an interactive computer game for primary-age children called *Rumble's Quest* that gives children the opportunity to directly discuss how they feel about their lives. The task of their avatar in the game is to work with a strange creature called Rumble to save a village in a magical land from earthquakes. Rumble knows nothing about humans or their families, so has to ask a lot of questions to fulfil his quest. The game is so popular with children that they frequently queue up to play it again.

The *Rumble's Quest* integrated software system is being steadily introduced to schools in the twenty-two Communities for Children areas throughout New South Wales and Queensland. It constitutes a powerful tool not only for capturing children's voices, but also for validly and reliably measuring their overall social-emotional wellbeing as well as their attachment to school, emotion regulation, supportive home relationships and social-emotional confidence. The software allows schools and other child-serving organisations to assess many detailed aspects of the wellbeing of the groups of children in their care and – most critically – to act in light of their data to

implement strategies designed to address the precise areas of need revealed in their reports.

One interesting finding to emerge from the analysis of *Rumble's Quest* data from 4,706 Queensland children across twenty-two schools who participated in implementation trials over the past three years is that most children feel pretty good about their lives. Moreover, there are few differences in overall wellbeing between First Nations children (23 per cent of the sample) and others. First Nations children tend to emphasise that they like school and look forward to going, and that they talk to their parents about school. Conversely, they are a little less likely to report that they try hard in school or consider following rules to be sensible. While the differences should not be exaggerated, the picture that emerges is of gregarious, good-natured First Nations children who enjoy school and the opportunities it affords to socialise with friends, while perhaps taking schoolwork and school rules a little too lightly. This surely suggests a very positive foundation for building strategies to keep First Nations children interested in school as they transition to the more challenging environment of high school.

Inspired by Professor Maggie Walter's powerful critique of how Indigenous data is currently being generated and used in this country, we hope (with the permission of participating school principals) to aggregate First Nations children's *Rumble's Quest* data for the suburbs and regions in which the CREATE Project is operating, and hand this detailed statistical data over to First Nations organisations so they can use it for community-level planning and service delivery. To have the voices of Indigenous children used by their own communities to mobilise resources that can foster their wellbeing would, if it can be accomplished, be one of the most significant outcomes of the CREATE Project. It would also be a tangible way of honouring the memories of the three boys who died in the railway yards those years ago by facilitating data-driven, evidence-based actions that fit local circumstances and have the best chance of preventing further such tragedies.

The CREATE Project is very ambitious, but is exactly in the spirit of Bronfenbrenner and his emphasis on creating formal or organised systems that generate the conditions in which informal community supports can flourish, ultimately – one would hope – making special schools and behaviour-management programs less necessary. The project builds on human development literature and addresses critical deficiencies in current systems.

We dare to believe that such powerful systems of support, implemented by communities guided by accurate and meaningful data, might strengthen the work of caring groups of people who *will* be there to look out for children when families alone can't do it.

It's about caring enough to establish new ways of seeing and acting, and moving outside established systems that seem incapable of solving the kinds of 'wicked problems' that lead to tragedy and heartache. It's about opening doors for children who can't open them for themselves.

For references, see griffithreview.com

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