



**National Council of  
Women of New Zealand**

Te Kaunihera  
Wahine O Aotearoa

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**Submission to the Ministry of Social Policy on the  
Agenda for Children Discussion Document**

**Introduction**

The National Council of Women New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organization representing 43 nationally organised societies. It has 34 branches throughout the country to which some 150 societies are affiliated.

Since 1896, when the National Council of Women New Zealand (NCWNZ) was established, there has been substantial policy concerning the well-being of children and their families, including the Council's strong endorsement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). This submission draws on that history, and has been prepared by the Family Affairs Standing Committee, in consultation with the wider membership. Furthermore, NCWNZ's priority focus for 2001 in improving outcomes for children, which reflects the deep concern members have for the position of children in our society.

The main body of this submission follows the format set out in the Response Form accompanying the Agenda for Children Discussion Document.

***Vision***

NCWNZ supports the vision set out and the descriptions of how we will know when we have achieved it. However, these indices need to be carefully defined and monitored, with adequate resources made available for this process. Furthermore, whatever programmes are recommended also need to be adequately resourced. For example, that children should have economic security defined in terms of "children no longer living in poverty" requires a generally accepted definition of poverty, careful and regular research to assess the levels of child poverty, and adequate resourcing of programmes recommended to eliminate poverty identified. Such programmes must be resourced on the basis of the child's needs, not their parent's eligibility for assistance.

*Positive things about New Zealand as a place for children now:*

- Space and clean air, a relatively safe environment for most children.
- Freedom for most children to "just be kids" without inordinate pressure to achieve or to work as with some children internationally.
- Opportunities for most to access good health and education services.
- Relatively good access to support services, legal protection etc.
- Ratification of UNCROC

*Negative things about New Zealand as a place for children now:*

- There is no universal support for parents in meeting costs of raising children –i.e. family benefit, tax credits for dependent children or their carers, etc. as there once was. The implication is that raising children is purely a private concern; there is no recognition for the





social contribution parents make in bearing the costs of raising children. Any assistance offered by the state is targeted to low-income families only, hence must be regarded as welfare rather than reflection of society's shared responsibility in raising the next generation. New Zealand is the only developed country to have completely eliminated any universal assistance to families in meeting the costs of social reproduction. This has contributed significantly to the increased marginalisation of parenting, and parent's investment of their time into that work.

- No right to separate property in the event their parents separate.
- Frequently no counselling in domestic violence situations.
- Too many fatherless families
- Under resourced foster placements
- Under resourced Family Group Conferences
- The many shortfalls pointed out in Mick Brown's Report
- Section 59 of the Crimes Act which allows physical punishment of children
- No mandatory reporting of child abuse
- No National Child Health strategy
- No National Child Tracking Register

*Over the next five years, what needs to change to make life better for children in New Zealand?*

- Increased assistance to low-income families – recent studies have shown that an increasing large percentage of children are living in poverty<sup>1</sup>.
  - A return to universal assistance e.g. a child benefit and/or a parenting allowance.
  - Free health and dental care for all dependent children under 18.
- More specific recommendations are set out in this document and the *Child Poverty Action Group, New Zealand (2001) Report*. NCWNZ takes the Report seriously and supports many aspects of it.

### **Principles**

NCWNZ fully endorse all of the principles stated, i.e. that they are consistent with UNCROC, child focused, family oriented, inclusive, culturally affirming, preventative, well-co-ordinated, collaborative, community focussed, and evidence-based. NCWNZ also support the expectation that Maori children need to be seen in the context of their whanau, although some of our members believe that all children should be seen in the context of their families, and that children's needs cannot be met in isolation of their families.

One principle that may be added is the paramountcy of the interests of the child in all matters dealing with children, including their health, welfare, education, care and general well-being. A resolution to this effect is currently before our National Executive.

### **Key goals**

*Goal 1: Change the way children are viewed – establish their place as respected citizens*

NCWNZ support this goal, and the proposal to review the Guardianship Act and the Adoption Act to develop an integrated "Care of Children Act".

However, this does not address the fact that children are largely invisible in public policy, as noted by the *Child Poverty Action Group, New Zealand (2001) Report*, as are their parents who make extraordinary sacrifices in terms of meeting costs of raising children and often foregoing an income for a considerable period of their working careers in order to provide the care their children require. Unless that unpaid work is recognised, the work of parenting will continue to be marginalised with

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<sup>1</sup> Child Poverty Action Group, New Zealand (2001) *Our Children: the Priority for Policy*



the result that our children are increasingly being “under-parented”. NCWNZ’s 1981 resolution “affirms its belief that good parenting is crucial to child health and well-being”. There is increasing concern amongst some members that increasing pressure for both parents to be fully employed in paid work, irrespective of their children’s needs, is eroding parents’ ability to provide this care. Parents are simply not able to “be there for the children”.

Other measures suggested which would improve the way children are viewed include the repeal Section 59 of the Crimes Act, so that children are accorded the same protection from harm as adults enjoy; introduction of full tax deductibility of childcare expenses, which partly reflects an attitude of the social responsibility for childcare, that it is not the parent’s cost alone; and meeting our UNCROC obligations.

*Goal 2: Ensure that all government policies and practices respond to children’s interests, rights and needs*

NCWNZ supports this goal and the proposal suggested in the Discussion Document to extend the Commissioner for Children’s functions and resources. In fact, NCWNZ support the establishment of an independent Commissioner for Children, reporting to Parliament rather than to the Minister of Social Welfare (Resolution 1998).

NCWNZ also supports the repeal of s.59 of the Crimes Act which would extend to children the same right to protection from physical harm that adults enjoy (Resolution 1996).

NCWNZ supports the mandatory reporting of child abuse (Resolution 1989), and for the establishment of a comprehensive mortality review system to investigate causal and contributory factors leading to the death of a child (Resolution 1997).

NCWNZ also supports the establishment of a national child health strategy which includes regular collection of data on child health and a national child tracking register incorporating health and education records, and an “at risk” register (Resolution 1998).

NCWNZ supports the establishment of a National Youth Council (Resolution 1998).

NCWNZ supports proposals to appoint child advocates within key decision-making bodies, and for improved cross-departmental co-ordination.

*Goal 3: ensuring adequate funding and delivery of services*

As well as a re-statement of the previous comments, NCWNZ supports the suggestion to take a broader “whole child” approach in dealing with issues concerning children. This should involve greater co-ordination and co-operation between departments involved with children. Non-governmental agencies and community organizations dealing with children could also be consulted with the intent of improving co-ordination between agencies dealing with children and their families, thereby improving outcomes for children.

*Goal 4: give priority to addressing child poverty and violence in children’s lives*

NCWNZ is very concerned about increasing levels of child poverty and violence in children’s lives, and in particular the alarming statistics of child deaths as a result of abuse and neglect. The current situation does not reflect a society that values its children and cares for them adequately.

A resolution in support of the recommendations of Judge Mick Brown’s Report on the Child, Youth and Family Service is currently before the National Executive urging their immediate implementation. Other measures to reduce domestic violence, violence in the community, and



society's tolerance of violence in the media and in the community generally are important. This may include a wide range of measures including NCWNZ Policy for improved gun control, tighter controls on violence on television and in the media generally, anger management programmes, programmes dealing with bullying in schools, state assisted positive parenting programmes, and increased state assistance for training in recognition and response to suspected abuse or neglect for all professionals who come into contact with children.

*Goal 5: give priority to maximising opportunity for all children*

NCWNZ supports the positive intent of this goal which reinforces the idea that what is needed is a shift back to universal support rather than targeted assistance to those who are in need of support and face problems in one way or another. Policy dating back to 1944 (16.3.5.5) and 1945 (16.3.5.6) call for universal child and family allowances. Subsequent policy called for increases in Family Benefit (1978). Many members still speak of their dismay that it was abolished little more than a decade later.

NCWNZ supports moves to improve the provision of quality, accessible and affordable early childhood services for all, although the levels of tax deductibility of these services is woefully inadequate. Only costs of \$940 a year are eligible for a rebate, where most childcare institutions charge approximately \$150 a week per child, and these deductions are only claimable where both parents are in paid work. If one parent chooses to be a full time parent at home, or to pursue training or study in order to prepare for return to paid work once their child no longer requires full-time care, these costs are not tax deductible. One suggestion is that the early childhood subsidies ought to be paid to directly to the primary caregiver to use in whichever childcare service s/he should choose, or to offset their own foregone income if they choose to parent their children themselves.

NCWNZ supports measures to establish standards for the provision of quality out-of-school care and recreation (OSCAR).

NCWNZ supports measures to improve services for gifted children.

NCWNZ supports measures to improve healthcare services including immunisation programmes.

NCWNZ supports the development of mechanisms to measure implementation of the goals of the Agenda for Children, once these are set, and for regular monitoring of them.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Agenda for Children. Discussion Document. The position of our children is of critical importance to our nations future and well-being, hence "improving outcomes for our children" is a priority focus for our work this year. We hope that this Document will lead to significant improvements in outcomes for our children.

Barbara Glenie  
**National President**

Christina Reymer  
**Convener, Family Affairs Standing Committee**