

Child health professionals leading action on *Achieving Equity from the Start* in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aim:

To have health professionals win 10,000 hearts and minds to push for concerted political and community action on *The Best Start to Life* and on achieving *Equity from the Start*.

The Present:

Child health professionals and many working with children and families feel deeply concerned about the continued poor state of child health in Aotearoa-New Zealand. There is concern about the seemingly low value placed on children and their carers. After many reports and calls to action there have only been small gains. The full impacts of the recession and changes in policy are still unfolding.

We have support from the highest level internationally – the World Health Organization (WHO) is clear that one of the most important actions for improving health is achieving *Equity from the Start*, starting antenatally through to age 8. This year the Public Health Advisory Committee advised the Minister of Health on the steps to take to improve child health in its report *The Best Start in Life*. See Boxes 1 and 2. Following discussions with concerned others, we have identified the need for concerted action to make public support for children so strong that any government would agree. We need to contribute a loud, strong child health voice alongside the many other organisations advocating for children.

Making a start on *The Best Start in Life*:

The Best Start in Life provides the blueprint for action. Concerted, cohesive and sustained action will require the combined efforts and leadership of many and the levers of political will and community action coming together (Figure 1). We already have existing rich networks of supporters, expertise and resources.

A key task now is to win the hearts and minds of colleagues, community leaders, opinion-makers, politicians, and the public. The challenge is to convey that child health and wellbeing, and the long-term consequences of a poor start to life, are issues that affect us all.

Parents and families have a central role, but the issues and solutions reach much further.

What should every New Zealander know about early childhood?

Help us develop some key messages:

- Living conditions and relationships in the early years affect the way the brain grows – adult health and wellbeing starts in infancy.
- As a nation, New Zealand has much more preventable disease and injury than others, and is lagging behind in how it looks after children.
- Investing in the early years works and brings positive economic returns – from lower health, education, justice and welfare costs over time and higher future earnings and tax payments.
- Population aging means it is especially important for us all to have healthy children now and a healthy workforce for the future.
- Babies and children can't wait – they need us to act on their behalf now.

References:

CSDH. 2008. *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Geneva, World Health Organization.
PHAC. 2010. *The Best Start in Life: Achieving effective action on child health and wellbeing*. Wellington, Ministry of Health.

Acknowledgements:

The Public Health Association of New Zealand for supporting this advocacy project, the Paediatric Society of New Zealand for a Travelling Trust Scholarship, and the many individuals and organisations who have informed this discussion.



Amanda D'Souza – amanda.dsouza@paradise.net.nz

Gay Keating – gay@pha.org.nz

Public Health Association

Paediatric Society Conference November 2010

Box 1: Recommendations from the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health:

Equity from the start is part of action to improve daily living conditions. WHO outlines the need to:

- Commit to and implement a comprehensive approach to early life... and extend interventions in early life to include social/emotional and language/cognitive development.
- Set up an interagency mechanism to ensure policy coherence for early child development.
- Make sure that all children, mothers, and carers are covered by a comprehensive package of quality early child development programmes and services, regardless of ability to pay.
- Expand the provision and scope of education to include the principles of early child development.

Box 2: *Best Start in Life* – key areas for action:

1. Strengthen leadership to champion child health and wellbeing.
2. Develop an effective whole-of-government approach for children.
3. Establish an integrated approach to service delivery for children.
4. Monitor child health and wellbeing using an agreed set of indicators.

We propose that the Paediatric Society and the PHA work with others to:

1. Develop a small number of crucial facts about early childhood that every New Zealander should know.
2. Prepare a “speaker’s package” of key points, slides and handouts.
3. Encourage health professionals and colleagues, including each conference attendee, to engage with 5 - 10 local groups or media over the next year to win over their hearts and minds to pressure decision-makers to prioritise children. The PHA can offer free advice, coaching and media training for those who would like additional support.
4. Plan and coordinate further advocacy activities to build action for children.



Junior Journal 37, page 20, copyright Ministry of Education 2008



Cartoon by Simon Kneebone. Reprinted with permission of the publisher, from Baum (2007)

Figure 1: Cracking the nut of health equity (from: CSDH. 2008. *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. Final Report. Geneva, WHO.)

