

SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN?

By Public Health Association Director Dr Gay Keating

In the wake of the UNICEF Innocenti report showing New Zealand's young are the least likely of children in 24 developed countries to survive to adulthood, the Public Health Association is reiterating its support for the repeal section 59 of the Crimes Act.

Section 59 allows a defence of "reasonable force" which has allowed adults to be acquitted of serious assault on a child.

While the repeal of section 59 would be only part of a package of measures needed to address New Zealand's horrifying child injury and mortality statistics, it is a vital component. It would send the message that New Zealand must become a safer and healthier place for its young.

A report from Child Youth and Family last year noted that in the five years to 2003, 38 children under 15 died as a result of maltreatment. Another UNICEF report says that during the 1990s, New Zealand was third in 27 countries for children under 15 maltreatment death rates. And a 2006 report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner says, in comparing maltreatment injury rates between New Zealand and Sweden, a New Zealand child under the age of seven, was four times more like to be hospitalised because of assault than a Swedish child.

Repealing section 59 would of course, on its own, make little impact on these figures. But there are a number of other things that we can and should be doing. For a start, members of parliament can investigate ways in which they can actively support positive parenting and education programmes in their constituencies, which would help equip parents and caregivers with positive alternatives to hitting children. These programmes should be universally available throughout the country, not just targeted at so-called "high-risk" areas.

There is a need for intensive, multi-disciplinary intervention services (such as Family Start) for when families are under pressure. That means the services reach more families than the very few that meet the criteria at present, and again this needs to be available across the country.

There needs to be financial and other support for the children of the most vulnerable parents (the young, the uneducated, the unemployed, the ill) so their children do not suffer from that vulnerability.

Government is one player that must act. Local communities, families and individuals must also consciously look at the way in which children are raised. One of the other sad things in the UNICEF Innocenti report is that kiwi kids are second to worst at having the main meal of the day with parents several times a week. New Zealand teens rate a bit better on parent talking with them - about half of our young people say that their parents spend time "just talking to them" several times a week.

It seems that there are many homes in which adults don't spend time with children really talking with them. Is there a need in for adults to actively parent their children, rather than just "react" to them? Positive parenting is about trying to understand what is happening in a child's world and what role they, the parent, is playing in creating that world.

It's about understanding why children behave badly at times and teaching children why discipline is important; about parents disciplining children in an effective way and knowing what works to bring about good behaviour. (And the evidence is clear that physical punishment is not as effective as other parenting techniques.) To build that understanding between parents and children takes time talking and listening - on both sides.

Communities need to play a part too- such as developing child-friendly sporting venues rather than booze-fests.

The Government needs to lead the way now, beginning the investment in our children by voting for the repeal of Section 59, so that we may all be rewarded a thousand-fold in the future.

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