

Family Violence and Crime: Breaking the Cycle

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Peter Boshier, Principal Family Court Judge

Introduction

Rotary is an organisation noted not only for its friendship and camaraderie, but for the fact that it has the betterment of our community as its goal. Rotarians in New Zealand actively work towards that goal and have contributed much.

As Rotarians you will acknowledge that the betterment of our community is a task that cannot be shied away from. This is never more apparent than when we are confronted by crime statistics like those released on 1 April. Recorded crime rose 4.6% in the last year, with a total of 451,405 offences recorded; and recorded violent offending increased by 9.2% driven largely by recorded family violence increasing – and this has concerned me the most – by a massive 18.6%.¹ Actual levels of offending would have been even higher. In response to those disturbing statistics we must ask the question - what can be done – indeed what can we do - to reduce crime in New Zealand, and especially violent crime? From my perspective as a judge and head of the Family Court, and from my experience in dealing with families, I firmly believe that parenting is at the core. I believe that if New Zealand children receive the parenting they need, they are much more likely to become successful, well-adjusted and contributing members of society and not add to the dismal statistics of criminal offending.

I say without hesitation that this is exactly the sort of task that Rotary can contribute to and lend its valuable support.

¹ New Zealand Police “Highest Resolution Rate on record for Police” (press release, 1 April 2010)

My experience of work in the Family Court and the Youth Court has reinforced my perception of the importance of parenting. I have often asked myself the question, why are so many of our children in need of orders for care and protection, then subsequently offend and appear in the Youth Court? Of course, successive governments are always concerned about this issue, and politicians in social and justice portfolios are constantly searching for answers.

Last year the Government announced its policy on young offenders and set out a number of proposed reforms under what is called “Fresh Start for Young Offenders”. Included in the Youth Court orders and programmes are “700 new parenting programme placements.”² The fact sheet backgrounding these reforms³ notes that parents will be required to attend a training programme to improve their skills, and that where a young offender is a parent - or is about to become one - they too may be required to attend a parenting education course.⁴ There is a clear concern in this initiative that we need to improve parenting. But are we doing enough? Perhaps we need to be more honest and realistic about our attitude to parenting in Aotearoa / New Zealand and discuss just what our strengths and weaknesses are.

I approach this question with appropriate caution. Politicians are elected to make policy and law. Judges are in the business of interpreting the law. And yet judges occupy a unique position. They see the dynamics of families in action, and observe how families function - or don't function. They do so from a position of objective involvement. As the Principal Judge of the Family Court I believe I can offer some constructive thoughts. The judges of the Family Court have the considerable advantage of seeing it all happen before us every day.

To prepare for this address to you today, I went to Dunedin and consulted the Centre for Research on Children and Families based at the University of Otago. I asked for the best possible evidence and research to be put into a briefing paper for me so that I could look objectively at the data, as well as value-test my own thinking. I am enormously grateful to the Centre and its Director, the eminent academic and researcher Professor Gordon Harold, for the assistance given me. I also acknowledge Dr Jan Pryor, the Chief Families

² Ministry of Social Development “Fact Sheet- Fresh Start for Young Offenders” (press release, 26 August 2009) at page 2, available at www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/newsroom/media-releases/2009/pr-2009-08-26.html

³ Ministry of Social Development “Fact Sheet- Fresh Start for Young Offenders” (press release, 26 August 2009)

⁴ Ministry of Social Development “Fact Sheet- Fresh Start for Young Offenders” (press release, 26 August 2009) at page 8, available at www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/newsroom/media-releases/2009/pr-2009-08-26.html

Commissioner and Dr Joan Kelly of California, one of the world's leading authorities in this area, for their willingness to help shape my thinking.

I am conscious that there are organisations and lobby groups which have a particular point of view about families. All of them are representative of part of the community, but they are not always objective. Some, for example, have a particular view-point about the role of physical discipline in child rearing. Their views, as I say, may be shared by members of our community but I would counsel against any position that is not research-based and supported by relevant evidence.

The Families Commission, which was established in 2004, is one of the state sector organisations created to respond to issues concerning families. It was given the task of researching and advising upon the place of families in our society and the appropriate goals of social policy.⁵ The Families Commission has produced some wonderful research but perhaps has yet to make its mark in shaping our attitudes towards families and parenting.

So the fundamental question to me is why is it that some children succeed, and rise to become top sports men and women, contribute to business and cultural activities, become community leaders and, as well as all that, are thoroughly nice people who care about others? By contrast, why is it that some children head in the opposite direction - perpetrating violence, behaving in anti-social ways and far from contributing to our community take from others while visiting on themselves and the world around them the destructive patterns of their lives?

The research on children and families and the influences that shape our children is absorbing and, I think, crucial. I make an analogy with the plans of a building. A functional stable building does not happen by chance. The design is well-conceived and its construction meticulous in its attention to detail. From my reading of the research, the position is exactly the same in relation to our families and our children. We have to get it right at the very outset, as to how we raise children.

So what are the factors that influence our children's development and ultimately the community and how it functions? A wealth of resources and skills go into raising a happy and healthy child. From birth, children begin to form a bond with their caregiver. This bond, the child's "attachment" to the caregiver, sets the stage for the child's cognitive, emotional

⁵ "Families Commission – About the Commission" The Families Commission
<http://www.familiescommission.govt.nz/about-the-commission>

and social development. Throughout childhood and adolescence, development is shaped by parenting style and the structure and warmth a parent provides – which influences development into adulthood. Over a child’s life, individual child and family factors are strong influences on the child’s attachment and whether the caregiver provides structured and sensitive parenting.⁶

It is a combination then of the child’s attachment, parenting style and specific child and family factors that contribute towards a child’s social and emotional development.⁷

Attachment Theory

I want to start with attachment, because early in life children seek closeness to their caregivers. It is this bond to the primary caregiver that serves as a model for future relationships, based on responses for emotional comfort from their primary caregiver.⁸ If we do not get attachment right at the very beginning, we are going to have problems.

The literature⁹ on this describes attachment as varying between secure - which is positive and responsive; insecure attachment - which results in a negative or absent bond between child and parent; and finally disorganised or disorientated states of attachment. It is this disorganised or disoriented attachment bond which leads to significant problems,¹⁰ and it is often found in situations where parents are violent and children perceive their caregiver as either fearful or dangerous.¹¹ The child does not know how to respond and, later on, children who have experienced this type of poor attachment fail to form a coherent

⁶ Gordon Harold and others “Parenting Influences on Children” (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children and Families & Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 2

⁷ Ibid

⁸ This statement forms the basis of attachment theory

⁹ See for example, MDS Ainsworth and others *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation* (Earlbaum, Hillsdale NJ, 1978); J Bowlby *Attachment and loss, Vol.1: Attachment* (Basic Books, New York, 1969); and M Main and J Solomon “Discovery of an insecure disoriented attachment pattern: procedures, findings and implications for the classification of behavior” in T Brazelton and M Youngman *Affective Development in Infancy* (Ablex, Norwood NJ, 1986)

¹⁰ Gordon Harold and others “Parenting Influences on Children” (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 3

¹¹ M Main and J Solomon “Discovery of an insecure disoriented attachment pattern: procedures, findings and implications for the classification of behavior” in T Brazelton and M Youngman *Affective Development in Infancy* (Ablex, Norwood NJ, 1986)

behavioural strategy for forming relationships and interacting with others.¹² Caregiver responsiveness to a child's needs is where it all begins.¹³

Much is said these days about the respective roles of mothers and fathers and, certainly in the Family Court, fathers have sought an increasing voice and role in caring for children. All of this is encouraging but the research is clear that positive early mothering and a positive mother/child interaction is vital in establishing child attachment.¹⁴ The role of mothers in the development of young children is unmistakable. But recent evidence also indicates that father responsiveness to child distress is an important factor in predicting a secure attachment.¹⁵ Fathers play a complementary role to mothers by providing more support in child exploration and play, as compared to the direct care provided by mothers.¹⁶ Furthermore, fathers appear to play a stronger role in helping to establish early child confidence.¹⁷

When family life is stable, the kind of attachment a child experiences appears to be consistent through infancy,¹⁸ early childhood,¹⁹ middle childhood²⁰ and adulthood,²¹ with approximately 75% of children remaining in one attachment category.²² Changes in parenting and other family factors, especially those that influence caregiver responsiveness, have the greatest impact on change in child attachment classification.²³

¹² M Main and J Solomon "Discovery of an insecure disoriented attachment pattern: procedures, findings and implications for the classification of behavior" in T Brazelton and M Youngman *Affective Development in Infancy* (Ablex, Norwood NJ, 1986)

¹³ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 4

¹⁴ E Moss and others "Stability of attachment during the preschool period" (2005) 41 *Developmental Psychology* 773-783

¹⁵ MRW George, EM Cummings and PT Davies "Positive aspects of fathering and mothering, and children's attachment in kindergarten" (2010) 180 *Early Child Development and Care* 107-119

¹⁶ H Freeman, LA Newland and DD Coyl "New directions in father attachment" (2010) 180 *Early Child Development and Care* 1-8

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ J Stevenson-Hinde and A Shouldice "Wariness to strangers: A behavior systems perspective revisited" in KH Rubin and JB Assendorpf (eds) *Social withdrawal, inhibition, and shyness in childhood* (Erlbaum, Hillsdale NJ, 1993) 101-117

¹⁹ E Moss and others "Stability of attachment during the preschool period" (2005) 41 *Developmental Psychology* 773-783

²⁰ M Main and J Cassidy "Categories of response to reunion with the parent at age 6: Predictable from infant attachment classifications and stable over a 1-month period" (1998) 24 *Developmental Psychology* 415-526

²¹ CE Hamilton "Continuity and discontinuity of attachment from infancy through adolescence" (2000) 71 *Child Development* 690-694

²² Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at

5

²³ *Ibid*

Child attachments form early in life and become a basis for later development. This early relationship has an influence on a wide range of factors later in a child's life.²⁴ Antisocial behaviour²⁵ and emotional²⁶ problems have been linked to insecure attachment. Research tells us that parenting is one of the most important influences on early development and attachment.²⁷ And it is not just attachment to parents that matters, but often a wider attachment network. An extended support system can provide a child with security and comfort in addition to that from parents.²⁸

And so we have to get it right at the outset. The more robust and secure the attachment, the higher the chance of functional development for a child. Parents who do not care enough about their children and those who allow bad attachments to form are setting their children up to fail in life.

Parenting Style

In addition to the significance of attachment is the importance of parenting style. And so I am moving on a little in a child's life. Parenting plays an increasing role in child-rearing as the child matures. Beginning at birth, parents are responsible for determining the day-to-day activities and influencing the long-term goals in which a child engages.²⁹ There are four types of parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful.³⁰ These styles vary with the amount of control and responsiveness the parent exhibits.³¹ For instance, the "authoritative" style is characterised by high control and high responsiveness; it is a child-centred approach where the parent sets high expectations for the child's behaviour

²⁴ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 5

²⁵ G Kochanska and others "Early attachment organization moderates the parent-child mutually coercive pathway to children's antisocial conduct" (2009) 80 *Child Development* 1288-1300

²⁶ DF Reinert and CE Edwards "Childhood physical and verbal mistreatment, psychological symptoms, and substance use: Sex differences and the moderating role of attachment" (2009) 24 *Journal of Family Violence* 589-596

²⁷ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 5

²⁸ *Ibid* at 6

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ See for example D Baumrind "Parenting styles and adolescent development" in J Brooks-Gunn, R Lerner and AC Peterson (eds) *The encyclopaedia of adolescence* (Garland, New York, 1991); S Lamborn and others "Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful homes" (1991) 62 *Child Development* 1049-1065 and E Maccoby and J Martin "Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction" in EM Hetherington (ed) PH Mussen (Series ed) *Handbook of child psychology: Vol 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (Wiley, New York, 1983) 1-101

³¹ E Maccoby and J Martin "Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction" in EM Hetherington (ed) PH Mussen (Series ed) *Handbook of child psychology: Vol 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (Wiley, New York, 1983) 1-101

and maturity, accompanied by high amounts of responsiveness to the child's needs.³² "Authoritarian" parenting, on the other hand, is a style characterised by strictness; it has a high level of control that is restrictive and allows for little negotiation, and is accompanied by a low level of responsiveness to the child.³³

The third type is "permissive", which is characterised by low control and high responsiveness. This is a child-indulgent approach, where there is little parental control but there is a high level of responsiveness.³⁴

Finally, there is the "neglectful" style, which exhibits low control and low responsiveness. This "hands off" approach reflects little involvement by the parent in setting boundaries for the child or in responding sensitively. Children subjected to this type of parenting exhibit the worst behavioural and life-style outcomes, such as misconduct, drug use, psychological problems and generally low self-esteem and competence.³⁵

When one combines parenting style and attachment, outcomes for children become increasingly predictable.³⁶ Secure attachment accompanied by parental warmth predicts the best outcomes. Conversely, an insecure attachment and neglectful parenting leads to poorer results.³⁷ And these factors continue through adolescence. The research indicates that those parents who practice authoritative parenting maintain high levels of positive child behaviour in all areas across adolescence, while neglectful parenting is associated with an increasing decline in all areas.³⁸ In addition, at adolescence children become the subject of heavy peer pressure. All of this requires an increased need for parental supervision and monitoring of the adolescent's activities and whereabouts. Parents who successfully balance the supervision aspects of parenting while maintaining an authoritative parenting

³² See D Baumrind "Parenting styles and adolescent development" in J Brooks-Gunn, R Lerner and AC Peterson (eds) *The encyclopaedia of adolescence* (Garland, New York, 1991); S Lamborn and others "Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful homes" (1991) 62 *Child Development* 1049-1065 and E Maccoby and J Martin "Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction" in EM Hetherington (ed) PH Mussen (Series ed) *Handbook of child psychology: Vol 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (Wiley, New York, 1983) 1-101

³³ See D Baumrind "Parenting styles and adolescent development" in J Brooks-Gunn, R Lerner and AC Peterson (eds) *The encyclopaedia of adolescence* (Garland, New York, 1991) and S Lamborn and others "Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful homes" (1991) 62 *Child Development* 1049-1065

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ See S Lamborn and others "Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful homes" (1991) 62 *Child Development* 1049-1065

³⁶ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at

7

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ *Ibid* at 8

style tend to produce adolescents with the best adjustment³⁹ and thus young adults that are more likely to perform as functioning members of society.

Do children require a two parent, heterosexual upbringing in order to thrive?

Is my message now becoming clear? Successful bonding between a child and his or her parents, accompanied with an appropriate parenting style, can play an enormous role in determining the type of adult they become. But am I suggesting that children can only have the best outcomes if they have a stable, two-parent, family upbringing? It appears not. What most matters is the presence of at least one parent with high expectations for the child's behaviour and high responsiveness that fosters positive development across adolescence.⁴⁰ In the case of a single parent or a "re-blended" family, what seems to matter is consistency and high responsiveness from that parent.⁴¹

Inter-Parental Conflict

I want now to spend a little time talking about parental conflict, because in New Zealand about one third of marriages end in divorce⁴² and during 2008 43% of divorces in New Zealand involved children;⁴³ 7600 children in total.⁴⁴ In the Family Court our most difficult cases are those where inter-parental conflict is so heightened that the parents have often completely lost sight of the welfare of the children.

I think that we have to acknowledge that conflict happens between parents. Of course it does, and indeed it is common between parents when resolving important childrearing differences and financial disputes, and some parents and ethnic groups have a family style

³⁹ KA Dodge, TJ Dishion and JE Lansford *Deviant peer influences in programs for youth* (The Guilford Press, New York, 2006)

⁴⁰ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 8

⁴¹ Ibid at 9

⁴² Geoff Bascand, Statistics New Zealand "One-third of marriages end in divorce" (press release, 5 May 2009) available at

www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/marriages_and_relationships/marriagescivilunionandsanddivorces_mryedec08.aspx

⁴³ Under 17 years old

⁴⁴ Geoff Bascand, Marriages, Civil Unions and Divorces: Year ended December 2008 (Statistics New Zealand, 2009) available at

www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/marriages_and_relationships/MarriagesCivilUnionsandDivorces_HOTPYeDec08.aspx

of vigorous and argumentative discussion.⁴⁵ Periodic conflict is a natural and normal part of family life and it is expected that most children will be exposed to conflict between their parents at some point in their lives without experiencing adverse effects.⁴⁶ But it is the conflict between parents that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved that causes the most problems.⁴⁷ Firstly, adults who are embroiled in a hostile and distressed couple relationship, whether they are still living together or separated, are typically more hostile and aggressive towards their children and less sensitive and emotionally responsive to their children's needs.⁴⁸

But it seems that if low-level conflict within a relationship is managed, children can cope with it. How a child sees its parents' conflicts, and interprets these, may explain why some children respond very negatively to parental fights and yet others show little or no adverse effects.⁴⁹ Indeed, several major longitudinal studies found that as many as half of the behavioural and academic problems of children in marriages whose parents later divorced were observed 4 to 12 years prior to the separation.⁵⁰ What we need to take from this is that marital conflict is a more important predictor of child adjustment than is divorce itself or post-divorce conflict.⁵¹ Chronic and unresolved conflict is associated with greater emotional insecurity in children. Fear, distress, and other symptoms in children, are diminished when parents resolve their significant conflicts, as opposed to no resolution, and when parents use compromise and negotiation methods rather than verbal or physical attacks.⁵²

We have a real job on our hands here to invest in our children's future by helping parents manage their conflict, for where there is unresolved conflict and violence, the adverse effects

⁴⁵ Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

⁴⁶ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 9

⁴⁷ EM Cummings and PT Davies "Effects of marital conflict on children: recent advances and emergent themes in process-oriented research" (2002) 43 *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 31-63

⁴⁸ GT Harold and RD Conger "Marital conflict and adolescent distress: The role of adolescent awareness" (1997) 68 *Child Development* 333-350

⁴⁹ Gordon Harold and others "Parenting Influences on Children" (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 10

⁵⁰ Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

⁵¹ C Buehler and others "Interparental conflict styles and youth problem behaviors: A two-sample replication study" 60 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 119-132 and M Kline, JR Johnston and J Tschann "The long shadow of marital conflict: A model of children's postdivorce adjustment" 53 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 297. Both discussed in Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

⁵² EM Cummings and PT Davies *Children and Marital Conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution* (Guilford Press, New York, 1994) in Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

on children are disturbingly palpable. I think we need to recognise that whether parents stay living together or separate, conflict between them is shown to be one of the most influential factors on parenting, hugely influencing child development.⁵³ Understanding conflict and managing it properly seems utterly crucial. When parents are in conflict and decide to separate, I think we carry an enormous responsibility to their children to help them to reduce their conflict. If we do not, it seems that we have again set the child on the path to failure in life, for continued conflict⁵⁴ is harmful to the child and linked to emotional distress and decreased child self-esteem.⁵⁵

We also need to acknowledge that step-families can introduce new challenges and benefits into parenting and child adjustment. While the reduction of conflict and the formation of a warm step-parent relationship can be beneficial,⁵⁶ we also know that conflict and strained step-parent relationships can negatively impact the child. Furthermore, where a child experiences multiple family structure changes, it is more likely the child will have psychological, social and learning problems.

The situation can be exacerbated where the conflict extends to physical violence. Research has confirmed that violence is more likely to occur in high conflict marriages,⁵⁷ and investigations involving pre-school children traumatised by the earlier battering of their mothers demonstrate long-lasting damage to their development.⁵⁸ Witnessing or experiencing particular types of violence also significantly damages child development, in that the use of or threats to use guns and knives in the home is linked to behavioural

⁵³ JE Lansford “Parental divorce and children’s adjustment” (2009) 4 *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 140-152

⁵⁴ 8-12% of parents remain in very high conflict three years after divorce. See V King and HE Heard “Nonresident father visitation, parental conflict, and mother’s satisfaction: What’s best for child well-being?” (1999) 61 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 385-396 and E Maccoby and R Mnookin *Dividing the Child* (University Press, Cambridge MA, 1992) in Joan B Kelly “Children’s Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research” (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

⁵⁵ P Amato and A Booth *A generation at risk. Growing up in an era of family upheaval* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997)

⁵⁶ Gordon Harold and others “Parenting Influences on Children” (A briefing paper prepared for His Honour Judge Peter Boshier, Centre for Research on Children & Families and Oregon Social Learning Center, 2010) at 13

⁵⁷ Joan B Kelly “Children’s Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research” (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

⁵⁸ A Lieberman and P Van Horn “Attachment, trauma, and domestic violence: Implications for child custody” (1998) 7 *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 423-443 in Joan B Kelly “Children’s Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research” (2000) 39 *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 963-973

symptoms in 8 – 12 year olds that are less evident in children where there was the experience of violence but without such threats or weapons.⁵⁹

Compounding the effects of marital violence is the fact that there are higher rates of both child abuse and sibling violence in violent compared to non-violent high conflict marriages.⁶⁰ Estimates range from between 40-60% of children in all marriages with violence are targets of violence from either (or both) of their parents.⁶¹ In a 12 year longitudinal study, marital violence was related in young adults to low life-satisfaction, poor self-esteem, less closeness to their mother, more psychological distress, and more violence in their own relationships. Indeed, marital violence increased the odds of offspring relationship violence by a huge 189%.⁶²

Government Response

I have so far tried to summarise attachment theory, talked about parenting styles and rounded with a discussion of family conflict and its relationship to violence.

I hope it is clear why I maintain strongly that good parenting is a consciously achieved and deliberate process. We are not good parents by accident – but bad parents may be. I think it is quite misconceived to believe that any adolescent, or even adult, is automatically equipped to be the kind of parent who can provide the best guidance and outcomes for their children.

The Government's parenting programmes are a useful contribution to "raising the bar" on good parenting. But I believe that in the wider community we need to take more ownership of the enormous responsibility we have as parents in getting it right, and we need to do much more than we are doing at present towards making this part of our social fabric. If we don't, we will continue to produce dysfunctional individuals and crime in our community. Poor parenting will undoubtedly produce more crime and antisocial behaviour. The challenge is before us.

⁵⁹ EN Jouriles and others "Knives, guns and interparent violence: Relations with child behavior problems" (1998) 12 Journal of Family Psychology 178-194 in Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 963-973

⁶⁰ Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 963-973

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² C McNeal and PR Amato "Parents' marital violence: Long-term consequences for children" (1998) 19 Journal of Family Issues 123-139 in Joan B Kelly "Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research" (2000) 39 Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 963-973

Last year the Minister of Social Development, The Honourable Paula Bennett, convened an “Experts Forum on Child Abuse” to look at ways in which earlier intervention could target and help at-risk families. I had the privilege of being one of the members of that forum, but it included some real heavyweights such as Dr Hone Kaa, Dr Patrick Kelly of Auckland’s Starship Hospital and Professor David Fergusson from the University of Otago.

We made some recommendations in our paper to the Minister,⁶³ some of which have been well-publicised. For instance, we have suggested that, from an overall perspective, there should be an integrated, graduated and increasingly multi-disciplinary approach to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect in New Zealand.⁶⁴ We suggested specifically that Well-Child Care, which in the old days was really the Plunket Nurse, should be provided to every single family prior to the child’s birth. We suggested that initial contact should take place between 33 and 38 weeks of pregnancy,⁶⁵ and that the value of this contact is to prepare the family for parenthood, to discuss strategies for coping with crying and distressed babies and to assess the family’s welfare, using a checklist of factors that contribute to child wellbeing.⁶⁶

For those families whose needs are identified as requiring more intensive attention, we suggested that the focus should be on providing parenting education and support.⁶⁷ We came to the sad conclusion that 15% of all families will qualify for special home-based support in order to parent properly and to give the child the best chance in their environment.⁶⁸

We also concluded that when concerns about child abuse and neglect arise and are brought to notice, we must have a better system of tracking and assisting further children who may be born into that social environment.⁶⁹ Proven abusive parents are just as likely to abuse any other children they may have, and we have to do more to break that cycle.

⁶³ “Experts’ Forum on Child Abuse 9-10 November 2010 Report” Available at www.beehive.govt.nz/release/experts+focus+child+abuse (as at 29 March 2010)

⁶⁴ Ibid at paragraph [27]

⁶⁵ Ibid at paragraph [30]

⁶⁶ Ibid at paragraphs [30] – [31]

⁶⁷ Ibid at paragraph [34]

⁶⁸ Ibid at paragraph [38]

⁶⁹ Ibid at paragraph [47]

Conclusion

The forum's recommendations are clearly quite interventionist and some people will see this as interference with basic freedoms and the "right" of parents to bring up children as they wish. But the sad truth is that an unfettered right to raise children in any way you please is a luxury that we cannot afford – it is too damaging to children and ultimately the society in which they, and we, live. Good parenting and good outcomes for children don't happen by chance. The foundation must be planned and made secure. I think we have a duty to examine what we do. Where our foundation is not well understood or secure I join with the other Forum members in saying that we as a community have to give a firm and better lead. This country does not want for its future children who are increasingly abused and neglected. The statistics are a source of shame. For us to change that we need to seriously address what we do as parents and as a community offer direction, guidance, and even intervention that some may not like. To refuse is to see the continued cost of abuse and neglect in our homes, on the streets and in the courts.

[Speech ends]