



**Submission to the
Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry
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Introduction

The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry.

ACL has a strong interest in advocating for the wellbeing of children. A key part of ACL's business is lobbying on policies which affect families and children, and ACL has a long history of lobbying for policies at both state and federal level which promote the best interests of the child.

The principle of "best interests of the child" is fundamental in family law, both in Australia and internationally. Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

*In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.*¹

The Australian *Family Law Act 1975* also emphasises this principle.² In situations involving children, the best interests of the child is considered to be "**the paramount consideration**".³

This is also enounced in the Queensland *Child Protection Act* in section 5A,⁴ following the Crime and Misconduct Commission's 2004 report, which recommended such a section be inserted.⁵

ACL believes that government has a responsibility to protect society's most vulnerable, including children. A just society will value its children, protect them, maintain a family friendly society, and encourage laws which facilitate a safe environment for children. Where adults fail and children are harmed, laws will provide support and protection for these children to the greatest possible extent.

In September 2011, an ACL-commissioned report into the wellbeing of children in Australia was published by the University of Sydney. Produced by prominent family law academic Professor Patrick Parkinson, *For Kids' Sake*⁶ examined the state of children's wellbeing and confirmed the worsening situation of Australia's children over the past 12 years in spite of increasing State and Commonwealth funding of programmes designed to address the child protection crisis. It made a number of important recommendations which, if implemented, could address the root causes of this and create communities which support healthy families, and thus healthy children.

For Kids' Sake will form a major part of this submission's discussion and recommendations, and is attached for the Committee's consideration.

A key issue raised in *For Kids' Sake*, and the focus of this submission, is the importance of healthy marriages and couple relationships. Prevention must be the focus of child protection policy, and the most important factor in preventing poor child wellbeing is the strengthening of relationships before

¹Article 3(1), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

² E.g., section 61DA requires the court to consider the best interests of the child when deciding whether to make a parenting order.

³ See sections 60CA, 65AA, 67V, 67L, *Family Law Act 1975*. Emphasis added.

⁴ Section 5A, *Child Protection Act 1999*.

⁵ CMC (2004), *Protecting Children*, Recommendation 7.45, p 221.

⁶ Professor Patrick Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake: Repairing the Social Environment for Australian Children and Young People*, University of Sydney, <http://www.acl.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/FKS-ResearchReport11.pdf>.

a couple has children. Research shows strongly that children fare best when they are raised in families headed by their biological parents who are in stable, committed marriages.

The most important aspect of protecting the best interests of the child must be focusing on encouraging healthy couple relationships, especially marriage, which creates a safe environment for children.

This submission will argue that government needs to resist political correctness which prevents a public policy focus on fostering marriage.

The worsening crisis of child wellbeing

Despite major inquiries into child wellbeing by Forde in 1999 and the Crime and Misconduct Commission in 2004, the crisis in child abuse and neglect has worsened. The increase in poor outcomes for children is discussed below. It is clear that the implementation of the recommendations of these reports have not improved the situation for children. Continuation of the *status quo* is clearly unacceptable.

It is a time a different approach is taken. This must emphasise the need for prevention, as prevention is a far preferable option. Of all the recommendations of past inquiries, not enough emphasis has been placed on fostering healthy marriages.

Issues related to the wellbeing of children are never far from the news. In August, reporting on this inquiry, *The Australian* ran a story that almost a quarter of Queensland's children "will be known to child safety authorities by the end of the year".⁷ The number of suspected child abuse notifications is a shocking 112,000 in Queensland, more than triple the number eight years ago, and 7,123 court orders were made relating to child safety last year alone.⁸ The number of children in care in the state is over 8,000. In comparison, there are about 5,000 adult prisoners in Queensland.

Another story in *The Australian* reported an increasing number of children in out-of-home care, nearly 38,000 by June in 2011 throughout the country, again much larger than an adult prisoner population of 29,000.⁹ According to the article, 65 per cent of the \$2.8 billion Australia spends on child protection services is funding for out-of-home care. These alarming figures reflect a serious problem for Australian children and families, and the problem is worsening.

While the problem is widely known and has been reported in the national media, a deeper look shows that the surface has barely been scratched. Professor Parkinson's research reveals a range of serious problems faced by children today that are largely overlooked. While Australia ranks very highly on some measures, such as education, physical and economic wellbeing, low death rates

⁷ Petrina Berry (August 13, 2012), 'One in four Qld kids 'will be reported'', *AAP*, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/child-protection-inquiry-resumes-in-qlld/story-fn3dxiwe-1226448821688>.

⁸ Michael Madigan (August 14, 2012), 'Children's residential costs revealed as inquiry opens', *The Courier-Mail*, <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/childrens-residential-costs-revealed-as-inquiry-opens/story-e6freoof-1226449552089>.

⁹ Rosanne Barrett (August 18, 2012), 'Increasing numbers of children are staying in care for longer', *The Australian*, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/increasing-numbers-of-children-are-staying-in-care-for-longer/story-e6frg6nf-1226452912499>.

among infants and children, and other similar measures of a nation's affluence or overall wellbeing, Parkinson says that these positive trends can "disguise increasingly serious problems" for many children, with "the situation... deteriorating at an extraordinarily rapid pace".¹⁰

Professor Parkinson notes the increasing rates of notifications of childhood abuse and neglect.¹¹ Changes in reporting requirements make it difficult to compare from year to year, but a steady increase over 12 years from 103,302 notifications in 1998-99 to nearly 340,000 in 2008-09 reflect the growing problem.¹² 27% of children in the state are "known to Community Services", according to a report of Community Services in NSW.¹³

The number of children in out-of-home care has also increased rapidly. In Queensland, the rate of children in out-of-home care is 6.8 per 1,000, a steady increase over the years since 1997, in which the rate was only 2.5 per 1,000. The same trend is seen in every state and territory, and is as high as 9.9 in NSW.

But the problems go beyond cases of abuse and children being removed from their homes. Chapter 2 of the *For Kids' Sake* report is titled "Adolescent Mental Health and Risky Behaviour".¹⁴ The chapter reveals a shocking rate of mental and psychological problems for young people.

For example, 26 per cent of people between 16 and 24 have a mental disorder, and 40 per cent have experienced a mental disorder at some point in their lives.¹⁵ A further 24 per cent who have never experienced a mental disorder are experiencing "moderate to severe psychological distress".¹⁶ This is a shocking 1 in 2 children who are currently suffering from some sort of mental or psychological problem.

Unsurprisingly, rates of self-harm have increased along with these mental and psychological problems. There was a 66 per cent increase in hospitalisation due to self-harm for boys and girls between 12 and 14 in the ten years from 1996 to 2006.¹⁷ The same period saw a 76 per cent increase for 15-17 year olds.¹⁸ The rate is nearly four times higher for girls than for boys.¹⁹

The Report cites data from Queensland showing an increase in suicide among 15-17 year olds in that state, from 3.7 per 100,000 in 2004 to more than double that – 8.4 per 100,000 – in 2007.²⁰

Clearly there are serious problems with mental illness and psychological problems which are rapidly increasing alongside cases of abuse and out-of-home care. There are also increasing rates of risky behaviour among children. Parkinson reports alarming rates of binge drinking among youth,²¹

¹⁰ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 16.

¹¹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, pp 17-21.

¹² Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 17.

¹³ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 18.

¹⁴ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, pp 28-44.

¹⁵ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 28.

¹⁶ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 30.

¹⁷ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 30.

¹⁸ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, pp 31-32.

¹⁹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, pp 31-32.

²⁰ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 33.

²¹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 34.

juvenile offending,²² and risky sexual behaviour.²³ Unwanted sex has increased in recent years,²⁴ as have sexually transmitted infections²⁵ and teenage pregnancy.²⁶

Submissions to this inquiry

Submissions and statements from witnesses in this inquiry have identified particular problems with the present system, beyond the high number of children affected. One of the issues with the system is its adversarial nature. Children are often removed from violent family situations for the sake of their protection. However, the threat, real or perceived, of having children removed by the authorities does not encourage families to seek assistance when they are in need.

Children may also be reluctant to seek support from authorities if they fear being removed from their parent when that is not what is required. Children suffering abuse want a relationship to be restored rather than broken.

The removal of children from their homes must be a last resort, and parents and children must be encouraged to seek help without fear of being reported or having their families torn apart.

The system also has a tendency to focus on more “visible” forms of harm such as physical or sexual abuse. Emotional abuse and neglect are more difficult to identify but may be more prevalent.

One issue that arises once children are taken into out-of-home care is the transition problems they face when they turn 18 and leave custody. Some young people, including those with intellectual or other disabilities, are discharged when they become legal adults with no transition plan in place to help them adjust to caring for themselves. Cases were cited in some of the submissions noting this widespread problem.

A report by the CREATE Foundation, Australia’s peak body representing children in out-of-home care,²⁷ emphasises this problem, focusing on the need for young people to have leaving plans. Some of the more alarming figures from the report include:

- 50 per cent of young people in care had to leave their placement on turning 18;
- 40 per cent of those young people didn’t know where they were going to live on leaving;
- 34.7 per cent overall had “experienced periods of homelessness in their first year of independence for an average of 31 days;
- Over half (53.7 per cent) were wholly depending on Centrelink payments;
- 28.5 per cent were unemployed.²⁸

Support must be given to help young people, now “adults” according to the law, to adjust to society. Training and counselling should be provided to help enable young people to become independent from state care, and assistance given until then.

²² Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 39.

²³ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, pp 35-38.

²⁴ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 36.

²⁵ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, pp 35-36.

²⁶ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, pp 37-38.

²⁷ Create Foundation, ‘About Us’, <http://www.create.org.au/about-us>.

²⁸ CREATE Foundation (May 2011), *Transitioning from Care in Australia: An Evaluation of CREATE’s What’s the Plan? Campaign*, http://www.create.org.au/files/file/CREATE_ReportCard2011webR211.pdf, p 12.

The system should also improve relationships between case workers and families. Parents and children should be given the opportunity to build trust with case workers who are dedicated to improving relationships between parents and children.

Fostering

Part of this inquiry is into the success of the CMC report into foster care abuse. One of the CMC's recommendations is that the Department of Child Safety (DCS) "evaluate research into the effect of reunification or permanency planning on children".²⁹ Their reason for this recommendation is:

*Currently there is limited Australian research on the effects of reunification or permanency planning on children. Although there now appears to be growing interest in permanency planning in Queensland, the concerns about including an adoption option in permanency planning legislation suggests that any change need to be evidence-based and to consider the specific concerns of the Indigenous community.*³⁰

They state that "any decisions about a child should be based on the best interests of the child".³¹ This is consistent with the *Child Protection Act 1999*, which, following the CMC report, now contains section 5A, which states that the "main principle for administering" the Act is "that the safety, wellbeing and best interests of a child are paramount".³²

The For Kids' Sake Report

It is clear that the current system is, in the words of UQ Law Professor Heather Douglas, an "absolutely unsustainable model".³³ Although there is no clear or easy solution, it is necessary to consider alternative approaches, especially those that focus on prevention and strengthening marriage. Although in the current social climate there is a reluctance to speak in favour of marriage as a better alternative for children, as opposed to cohabitation, single parenthood, or same-sex parenthood, healthy marriages are better for children and it is essential that this truth be acknowledged.

Protecting the wellbeing of children must involve building strong marriages and families, but it involves more than that as well. All families, regardless of how much difficulty they face, and regardless of how "intact" or "broken down" they are or of their financial wellbeing, should be able to seek support within their community. Building strong communities which foster this kind of support for struggling families is equally important in protecting the wellbeing of children as is strengthening families.

The *For Kids' Sake* report was published in September 2011. Its author, Professor Patrick Parkinson, is one of the country's leading experts on family law, and also brings years of experience as a family law practitioner. His report documents alarming figures about the state of children's wellbeing in

²⁹ CMC (2004), *Protecting Children*, Recommendation 7.44, p 219.

³⁰ CMC (2004), *Protecting Children*, p 219.

³¹ CMC (2004), *Protecting Children*, p 219.

³² Section 5A, *Child Protection Act 1999*.

³³ Rosanne Barrett (August 18, 2012), 'Increasing numbers of children are staying in care for longer', *The Australian*.

Australia, examines some of the causes, discusses the need to strengthen families and whole communities as a way of addressing the root of the problem, and makes several recommendations.

Regarding the report, this submission looks first at Parkinson's discussion of family education programmes, then at Community Trusts and the role of government, and finally at the importance of marriage for protecting children's wellbeing.

Family education programmes

Parkinson discusses at length the need for family education programs. He says:

*One great need is to provide education programs about family life which will help address the knowledge deficits across the community through lack of healthy modelling in people's families of origin...*³⁴

He proposes a "major new initiative in providing community-based education programs for couple relationships and parent-child relationships"³⁵ and recommends employing trained volunteers along with some professionals.

Governments at both state and federal level "need only play a very limited role in facilitating these programs", with its two main roles being grants to counselling organisations for their development and advertising and promoting the programmes to the community.³⁶

Although education for couples may go some way to help reduce family conflict, when family conflict does occur there is still a need for support at this later stage. In Chapter 7, titled "A Community of Neighbours",³⁷ Professor Parkinson argues that:

*There is also a need for programs that will support parents through tough times, and help parental resilience... Family support programs are relatively low-cost services that help reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. They also fulfil an important role in reducing social isolation and advancing social inclusion.*³⁸

Parkinson emphasises the importance of volunteers in these programmes, adding that there would be "benefits not only for recipients of services, but in building cohesive and supportive communities."³⁹

Parkinson stresses throughout these chapters the importance of volunteers, citing Kids Hope Australia, a World Vision programme which partners local churches and primary schools. Churches provide volunteer mentors to vulnerable primary school children who spend time weekly with the children one-on-one. Parkinson gives other examples of such programmes and stresses the importance of becoming a "community of neighbours", and offered the example of Windale, New South Wales, as a community which benefited immensely from programs including parenting classes and other programmes which work with young children and isolated mothers. Windale went from

³⁴ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 11.

³⁵ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 11.

³⁶ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 11.

³⁷ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, Chapter 7, pp 88-100.

³⁸ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 12.

³⁹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 90.

being in the worst one per cent of suburbs in New South Wales to the top 25 per cent in only four years, and “shows what can be achieved with a sustained and co-ordinated effort at community renewal”.⁴⁰

Role of government and Community Trusts

Parkinson says we need a “partnership between government, professional organisations and local communities to support families and children.” As the Council of Australian Governments has said, “Families, communities, governments, business and services all have a role. And we need to work together.”⁴¹

Part of Parkinson’s strategy involves decreasing the reliance on governments, as when funding for projects like those in Windale ceases, often the advances made are undone. He suggests that people are willing to support local charities if the right structures are in place. The role for government, then, is to install the structures which will encourage communities to rely less on government funding.⁴²

To this end, Parkinson recommends the establishment of Community Trusts in as many Local Government Areas as possible, allowing for tax-deductible donations from within the community to support non-profits and facilitate programmes such as those discussed. They would fund education, counselling and support programs to build local communities which are supportive of the wellbeing of children.⁴³ He recommends that they are independent from but work cooperatively with local Councils.

In chapter 8, Parkinson recommends that governments need to govern “with a light touch”. He argued that this is consistent with the Federal Government’s reform agenda in establishing the ACNC – reducing the regulatory burden faced by NFPs. It would be likewise important to reduce the regulatory burden of the Trusts and community programmes operating to address children’s wellbeing in local communities.⁴⁴

Although Parkinson recommends decreasing the reliance of communities and families on government, there is a vital role for government to invest in strengthening families. As Parkinson states,

*It is important therefore, that governments and in particular the Federal Government, invest in building community capacity to strengthen family relationships and to support vulnerable families.*⁴⁵

Healthy marriages and strong families

This emphasis on the importance of strong family relationships is a common thread throughout the *For Kids’ Sake* report. Strong family relationships have at their foundation strong couple

⁴⁰ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 92.

⁴¹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 75.

⁴² Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 92.

⁴³ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, pp 93-98.

⁴⁴ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 101.

⁴⁵ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 75.

relationships, and marriages are the strongest couple relationships. As discussed below, cohabitation outside of marriage does not result in the same kind of strong relationship or positive outcomes for children.

In Chapter 4 of the report,⁴⁶ Professor Parkinson links the growth in the “fragility of Australian families” – including divorce, family breakdown, children being born to unmarried couples, and single parenthood (and single motherhood in particular) – to the poor wellbeing of children. This comes after a lengthy discussion in Chapter 3⁴⁷ about the effects of parental separation on children. Family conflict, geographical distance between children and parents, new male partners of mothers, and the stresses of single parenthood all contribute to poor wellbeing outcomes.

Parkinson cites research which establishes the importance of “married, two-parent families”⁴⁸ and says that “the overwhelming evidence from research is that children do best in two-parent married families”.⁴⁹ He says further:

*children do best of all growing up with two happily married biological parents, and so the focus in terms of children’s wellbeing needs to be **not only on preventing family breakdown but on promoting healthier, safer and less conflicted relationships among parents.***⁵⁰

He cites evidence from Professor Susan Brown, who states that

*Children residing in **two-biological-parent married families** tend to enjoy better outcomes than do their counterparts raised in other family forms... Children living with two biological married parents experience better educational, social, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes than do other children, on average.*⁵¹

Further, he cites Professor Paul Amato, who said in 2010:

*Research clearly demonstrates that children growing up with **two continuously married parents** are less likely than other children to experience a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social problems, not only during childhood, but also in adulthood. Although it is not possible to demonstrate that family structure is the cause of these differences, studies that have used a variety of sophisticated statistical methods, including controls for genetic factors, suggest that this is the case.*⁵²

This is backed up by other research. Anderson Moore, Jekielek, and Emig, in a study conducted for the American research centre Child Trends, agree that “[r]esearch findings linking family structure and parents’ marital status with children’s well-being are very consistent”.⁵³ They further state:

⁴⁶ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, Ch 4: Australia’s Fragile Families, pp 62-68.

⁴⁷ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, Ch 3: Family Stability and Children’s Wellbeing, pp 45-61.

⁴⁸ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 48.

⁴⁹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 14.

⁵⁰ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 49, emphasis added.

⁵¹ Professor Susan Brown (2010), ‘Marriage and Child Well-Being: Research and policy perspectives’ 72 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 1059-1077, 1062 (references omitted), cited in Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 48. Emphasis added.

⁵² Professor Paul Amato (2010), ‘Research on Divorce: Continuing trends and new developments’ 72 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 650-666, 653, cited in Parkinson (2011), *For Kids’ Sake*, p 49. Emphasis added.

⁵³ Anderson Moore, Jekielek, and Emig (June, 2002), *Marriage from a Child’s Perspective*, p 1.

*it is not simply the presence of two parents, as some have assumed, but the presence of two biological parents that seems to support children's development.*⁵⁴

The importance of marriage is recognised by the UK think tank the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). In a 2012 article titled "It Is Time to Back Marriage" it argued that the "most significant driver of social instability and poverty" is family breakdown.⁵⁵ It said family breakdown, "fuelled by cultural and economic barriers to marriage", is a "national emergency".⁵⁶

Supporting this statement the article cited a range of studies showing that:

- those who grow up in lone parent or broken families are between three to six times more likely to suffer serious abuse;
- children who are "on the 'at-risk' register are eight times more likely to be living with a natural mother and 'father substitute'";
- Children with separated, single or stepparents are 50 per cent more likely to fail at school, have low esteem, struggle with peer relationships and have behavioural difficulties, anxieties, or depression;
- Children in households with unrelated adults were nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries than those with two biological parents;
- Parental separation is the biggest driver into child poverty by a large margin.
- Less than 10 per cent of married parents split by the time a child is five compared with more than a third of those who are not married;
- 97 per cent of all couples who are still together by the time their child is 15 are married;
- Children of married parents are more likely to achieve at school and less likely to use drink and drugs or get involved in delinquent or offending behaviour.⁵⁷

As the CSJ says:

*family policy that targets the devastating breakdown and chaos which damages children's opportunities and life chances should be the foundation on which we build a socially just society.*⁵⁸

The importance of marriage for child wellbeing, then, cannot be ignored. Social scientists agree that the evidence clearly supports the argument that children are best off living in a family headed by both their biological parents in a marriage. Of course, marriages can fail and can involve conflict, hence the importance of family support programmes discussed above. But approaching child protection policy without a strong emphasis on healthy marriage as a preventative measure will result only in more failure to reverse the trends of poor child wellbeing.

It was mentioned above that cohabitation does not provide the same security for children as marriage. As the research cited above by Professor Brown, Professor Amato, and Child Trends states, it is *married biological* parents, and not merely two parents or two cohabiting parents, who provide the most stable environment for children.

Professor Parkinson acknowledged this in his report. He states:

⁵⁴ Anderson Moore, Jekielek, and Emig (June, 2002), *Marriage from a Child's Perspective*, pp 1-2. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ The Centre for Social Justice (2012), *It Is Time to Back Marriage*, <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/media/It%20is%20time%20to%20back%20marriage%2016%2002%2012.pdf>, p 1.

⁵⁶ The Centre for Social Justice (2012), *It Is Time to Back Marriage*, p 2.

⁵⁷ The Centre for Social Justice (2012), *It Is Time to Back Marriage*, pp 3-4.

⁵⁸ The Centre for Social Justice (2012), *It Is Time to Back Marriage*, p 7.

*Cohabiting relationships are typically quite short-term. The evidence from Australia is consistent with the evidence from many other parts of the world that de facto relationships break down at a very much faster rate than do marriages.*⁵⁹

He cites research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies showing that, for couples who began cohabiting between the 1970s and the mid 1990s, most would either marry or break up. After five years the break-up rate for cohabiting couples was four times higher than for married couples.⁶⁰ Referring to an analysis of the longitudinal Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia study, Parkinson found that:

*The odds of a de facto couple with children breaking up was more than seven times as high as a married couple who had not lived together before marriage, and more than four times as high as those who had lived together but went on to marry.*⁶¹

This emphasises the importance of not only promoting healthy relationships but of encouraging the commitment of marriage. The programmes discussed above should of course be available to all couples and expectant parents who choose to benefit from them, and support and counsel should be non-discriminatory. This should go without saying. However, to the greatest extent possible couples should be encouraged, whether through education programmes or government policy, to consider the benefits of committing to a marriage, especially before making the decision to have children.

Conclusion

This submission has demonstrated that the best outcomes for children are achieved when a child's biological parents remain in committed, stable, and loving relationships. What has not been tried in the plethora of recommendations emanating from inquiry after inquiry into the crisis in child protection is a policy approach aimed at encouraging marriage and couple relationships.

Even an incremental improvement in the breakdown of relationships would deliver big improvements in child wellbeing and big cost savings for government.

Any outcome of this inquiry which does not place a strong priority on encouraging marriage and committed couple relationships will likely result in little or no improvement.

Political correctness should not prevent a new focus on the earliest of early intervention strategies – that of strengthening children's parents' relationships long before he or she is born.

Please see ACL's recommendations below.

Yours faithfully



Wendy Francis
ACL Queensland Director

⁵⁹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 65.

⁶⁰ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 65.

⁶¹ Parkinson (2011), *For Kids' Sake*, p 66.

Recommendations

ACL makes the following recommendations:

- That the Queensland Government take a new approach which promotes marriage as the most important foundation for healthy families and child wellbeing.
- That the Queensland Government seriously consider the *For Kids' Sake* report and implement its recommendations.
- That the Government consider how to facilitate and promote programmes that will provide education, counselling, and support to couples and families at various stages, including before they have children. *For Kids' Sake* makes a number of important recommendations in this regard.
- That in its review the Government consider how to improve relationships between case workers and families, and build trust between authorities and parents. Case workers should be experts in the field. The removal of children from parents must be a last resort, and an environment should be established in which both parents and children are encouraged to seek help without fear of being reported or having their families torn apart.
- That the Government address the problem of transition for young people leaving care upon turning 18. This should include leaving plans as well as assistance and training in employment, education, and other life skills.