

Strong Families: A Key to Social and Economic Success in the 21st Century¹

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This lecture discusses the importance of strong families, and in particular the importance of early intervention and the role that government can play in this area. I want to begin, however, from another place entirely.

Let me start by saying that if New Zealand is to compete globally in the future, I profoundly believe that we need to succeed socially. In the years ahead, the international labour market is going to become increasingly competitive because of population ageing and because the global workforce continues to be more mobile. A key challenge for New Zealand – and this is the case for many other OECD countries – will be to retain and attract the best skills and the best talent. We need to be thinking now about the best ways and means of ensuring that New Zealand is seen as one of the best places to work and live, and simply enjoy life.

It may seem odd to start off a discussion on the importance of strong families by talking about global competitiveness, but I really believe that all of this is closely interconnected, and I think that when we talk about competitiveness we too quickly revert simply to the economy and we ignore the social dimensions. If we are going to attract and retain skills and talent in the future, we should be thinking about creating the best possible social conditions.

This is really about creating a competitive advantage for New Zealand.

Allow me to continue along this line just for a moment and stress that social and economic development go hand in hand. The importance of economic growth for social well-being is well recognised – economic growth ensures wage growth and rising living standards and it enables government to pay for programmes to protect those who are less well off.

But social well-being is equally important for economic growth in a country like New Zealand. Creating the

right social conditions will help ensure a well-educated, well-motivated workforce that is able to deal with new challenges as they arise. A well-functioning society will also reduce the costs associated with social problems.

We need to move beyond the view that economic and social development work in a linear fashion. Rather, we should see them as a virtuous circle where social development contributes to economic development, and vice versa. Once again, if we want to prepare the future success of New Zealand, we need to work on these two fronts at the same time. I know that this is easier said than done, but I certainly feel that we need to explore further how this virtuous circle can be strengthened.

So, if we agree that we need to succeed socially to be competitive globally in the future, and we agree that social and economic development build on each other (of course, you may want to dispute this, but bear with me for the moment), then we need to identify what are some of the key ingredients of success.

What I propose is that one of these ingredients is strong families. I don't need to belabour the point that strong families are important for a well-functioning society. Strong families nurture and socialise children. They meet the material and emotional needs of their members. They provide a sense of identity and belonging and a psychological anchor. They also serve to transmit culture and knowledge and values. Children who are raised in well-functioning families are more likely to grow up to be well-adjusted adults and productive members of society.

We all have a role to play in encouraging strong families, and government is a part of this. Strong families are

¹ This is a slightly amended text of the annual lecture for the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families Te Putahi Rangahau Whanau, delivered at Victoria University of Wellington on 15 December 2005.

desirable in themselves (I think we all agree with this), but what I want to emphasise is that they also have an important strategic value for New Zealand's future. I want to stress this because we often tend to ignore the future. Of course, there are obvious reasons for this. The first reason is that we have pressing immediate needs that must be addressed on a daily basis. This must be our priority.

That said, we need to be thinking now about the challenges ahead. Strong families will go a long way to creating the right social conditions that will make New Zealand an attractive place to live and work in the future.

There are a number of ways we can support strong families as we move forward, but here I want to emphasise the strategic importance of early intervention as a central element in our efforts to do this.

The early years of childhood are crucial for laying a platform for children's later development. We know this. The early years are when children are experiencing rapid brain growth. Given appropriate stimulation, this lays the foundation for intellectual functioning, which is crucial for future learning. We know so much more about this today than we did only a few years ago.

At the same time, young children need to develop attachments that will provide a secure basis for both future relationships and their psychological health. Research around the world has shown us this.

Early intervention programmes can help establish the strong early foundations that children need to enable them to achieve the best possible start in life and to maximise their potential. Government, in partnership with many other actors, needs to work on a number of fronts to deliver and support early intervention programmes, to ensure that children and families receive the right support at the right time in an effective way. And we need to move boldly on this. We have increasing evidence here in New Zealand and around the world that the right programmes can make a significant difference to children's outcomes. I'll return to this matter shortly.

Success in this area, I think, will stem from having programmes and services that work on three different fronts. We need services that are universal; we need services that are available to everyone as they require them; and we need services that are clearly targeted at families with additional needs, whose children may be more vulnerable to poor outcomes.

In the first area, universal services are an important part of our approach to early intervention, especially in the areas of health and education. We want to engage every family in these services so that all children attend at least one form of early childhood education programme and receive such core health services as immunisations and WellChild checks. These are vital services for all children, whatever their circumstances.

A second group of services is available to all families as required. The SKIP programme is a great example in this area. SKIP, which stands for 'Strategies with Kids - Information for Parents', is a programme that offers a range of resources to parents in need of practical information on parenting techniques and non-punitive methods of discipline. Any parent may need this information at some point in their child's life.

I think we would all agree that the majority of parents are able to provide the support their children need through their own networks and by accessing the universally available information and services I've just mentioned. But there is a third set of services that needs to target those families with additional needs, who can often be difficult to engage and hold on to. These services include New Zealand's Family Start and Early Start programmes.

So, what are our key goals if we are to be successful in nurturing and supporting strong families? I think we want all families to have easy access to good information and advice about parenting. We want them to be able to access community-based formal and informal support networks and to receive services that help them raise their children. We want families with additional needs to have access to high-quality services that meet these needs, and we want families and children that continue to be vulnerable to poor outcomes to receive effective coordinated intensive services.

I want to consider a few key initiatives under way in these three areas here and overseas.

There is some very positive evidence internationally for early intervention programmes that are targeted at vulnerable families. One important mode of delivery is home-visiting programmes, which place emphasis on making the home safe for the child and modelling parent-child interactions. The Nurse Family Partnership in the United States is considered to be a landmark home-visiting programme that has achieved significant success

in changing children's long-term developmental pathways and outcomes. These include reduced rates of smoking during pregnancy, reduced rates of poisonings and injuries, child maltreatment and arrest at age 15, and reduced numbers of sexual partners at age 15.

From its early beginnings as a demonstration programme in a couple of small cities, the Nurse Family Partnership has expanded to the point where, today, over 700 nurses are delivering services to more than 13,000 families in more than 250 sites in the US.

While this is a very good example of excellent work overseas, New Zealand is right up there. The findings of an evaluation of the Early Start initiative in Christchurch (led by David Fergusson) compare well with those of the Nurse Family Partnership. Although the size is relatively modest, the effects are pervasive and can be seen across a range of outcomes. The evaluation showed that Early Start families made greater use of GPs and preschool dental services, and had fewer hospital attendances for accidents, injuries or poisonings. Participating children also showed reduced rates of behaviour problems, and increased exposure to early childhood education and to positive, non-punitive parenting practices.

This is excellent news. The results of the evaluation make a significant contribution to our knowledge about 'what works' in this area and they provide us with good information about the impacts of well-designed programmes. We need to use these results to help us move forward.

I now want to return to the SKIP programme. It's difficult to overstate the role of parents in the development of their children – we all know that – and supporting parents is a key ingredient in encouraging strong families. It's also one that is not associated with any particular socio-economic group.

Baseline research from SKIP shows that parenting is top of mind for a large majority of parents – 95% of parents think about parenting at least once a week and 60% said they were using positive parenting techniques. That being said, there is still scope for improvement – only 37% of parents are making efforts to use smacking and yelling less, and 39% are not confident they are actually applying the positive parenting techniques correctly.

SKIP itself is going quite a way in supporting parents. SKIP's goal is to support parents to raise their children in a positive way that provides them with both affection and boundaries. SKIP produces a range of resources for parents and support organisations, including a series of pamphlets that provide practical advice on topics like managing tantrums and surviving a trip to the supermarket. (That's something I would have needed when my kids were younger!)

They have had an overwhelming response – over three million of these pamphlets have been printed. The uptake has been tremendous. My understanding is that they are going like hot cakes. And I can understand why. I think most parents are longing for this kind of information and advice.

I've talked about Early Start programmes, about parenting support; now I want to add that ensuring they have access to good-quality and affordable childcare is another way of supporting all parents, especially if they are working. One area where New Zealand is doing particularly well is early childhood education. As at July 2004, 94% of new entrants had attended some form of early childhood education before starting school. A strong emphasis for these services in New Zealand has been on high quality.

That said, where we need to do more is in out-of-school care. Over the last few years government has increased its support to providers of out-of-school services, as well as the thresholds and rates for the Childcare Subsidy. We need to continue on this front to ensure that parents are provided with choices and to ensure that out-of-school care contributes to good educational, social and economic outcomes for children.

I've discussed some key areas where government can play an important role, such as delivering programmes like Family Start and SKIP and ensuring parents have access to good-quality and affordable childcare. I'll add another, of a very different nature, and that is in the development of knowledge and evidence through rigorous research and evaluation.

Fostering and undertaking research and evaluation is a key way that government can support work related to early intervention. Research and evaluation gives us a better understanding of the current situation and how we can improve it. Also, if we are serious about supporting strong families and about developing robust

and effective early intervention programmes, then we need to measure and we need to monitor progress as we move forward.

I also want to emphasise that we need to take full advantage of all the work that is being done, whether it is happening in universities, in the community and voluntary sector or in government. In fact, we need to find the means to work more closely and more collaboratively (but looking at ways to do that would be the topic for another day).

One of the major pieces of work produced in my section at the Ministry of Social Development is the annual *Social Report*. This is a report that enables us to monitor progress on a number of key indicators relating to the social health and well-being of New Zealand. It allows us to compare ourselves internationally (if we agree that we will be facing an increasingly competitive international skills and talent market in the future, we need to see how we are faring against others around the globe in terms of social outcomes) and, for the first time, this year we have data that compare regions across the country. This is a real breakthrough.

Many of the *Social Report* indicators relate specifically to children and families: levels of participation in early childhood education, the child mortality rate from intentional injuries, and young people's satisfaction with the amount of time they spend with their parents.

If we believe that the issues I have been discussing are important to our future success, we need to be able to measure if we are making progress. The *Social Report* helps us to do this. I want to add that New Zealand should be very proud of the *Social Report*, which the OECD considers the best of its kind. We also produced a more targeted report at the end of 2004 called *Children and Young People: Indicators of Wellbeing in New Zealand*. My understanding is that this report has been used extensively.

There is still much to be learned, though, and part of our strategy needs to be about continuing to find out what works and what doesn't. To be effective, research and evaluation need to happen in parallel with policy development and service delivery. On the research front, we need to continue to push the frontiers of our knowledge. On the evaluation front, we need to be

learning as we go. In other words, we need to build research and evaluation activities to allow us to improve our programmes as we move forward. At the end of the day, this is why we do it.

One initiative in development at the moment is a new longitudinal study of New Zealand children and families. The planning stage is being led by the University of Auckland and a decision to proceed with the study will be made at the end of this 18-month period. The intent is to follow the lives of a group of New Zealand children from birth through to adulthood. It would provide us with a rich and dynamic source of information over this period in areas including health, education, social adjustment and behaviour as well as factors that influence children's development - I'm thinking of family environment, schooling and community resources.

Longitudinal studies are important because they provide the best means of studying the causal origins of developmental problems. By understanding what causes the problems, we can design better policy solutions to boost children's development. The idea is for this work to build on the success of the Dunedin and Christchurch studies from the 1970s that have been acclaimed internationally.

So research is important, and particularly if it informs our actions. The research we undertake, and the activities that allow us to measure progress (such as the *Social Report*), need to lead to concrete actions that will actually improve outcomes. The government's social strategy, *Opportunity for All New Zealanders*, is an example of using knowledge and evidence to make choices and set priorities. *Opportunity for All New Zealanders* was clearly informed by the social conditions reflected in the *Social Report*.

Opportunity for All identifies five critical social issues:

- improving education achievement among low socio-economic groups;
- increasing opportunities for people to participate in sustainable employment;
- promoting healthy eating and healthy activity;
- reducing tobacco, alcohol and other drug abuse; and
- preventing family violence, and abuse and neglect of children and older persons.

All of these issues are critically important to the future of our families in New Zealand. I want to stress that a key criterion for selecting these areas for future work was the recognition that substantial progress could only be made on these issues with strong collaboration across agencies and across sectors. This is absolutely relevant when we think about what is needed to support strong families and what is needed to progress our work in the area of early intervention.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to emphasise the importance of collaboration and working across sectors. The challenges that I have discussed are hugely complex and no one sector can be successful on its own. If we are to succeed socially as a country in the future, we need to be working together, across government, the community and voluntary sector and universities, and let's not forget the private sector. And, of course, we mustn't forget that families themselves are the key actors here. Interventions simply will not be successful unless we do it right and we work collaboratively.

The Early Start programme is a good example. Not only is it a partnership between government and the community and voluntary sector, but its family/whānau workers act as advocates and coordinators between the many different agencies a family may be involved with to ensure that the family's needs are met. This way of working is critical to our future undertakings.

So, to summarise, I believe that if we are to compete globally in the future, we will need to succeed socially. I also believe that a key part of achieving this will be through strong families and effective early intervention programmes and services. This should be part of our collective strategy in the years ahead and as we think about the future of New Zealand.

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Prior to his appointment, Marcel was President and CEO of the Canadian Council on Social Development, a leading social policy research organisation working in areas related to income security and poverty, children and families, persons with disabilities, cultural diversity and the voluntary sector.

He has also worked as Special Advisor to the President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the principal Canadian funding agency for social research, and was Executive Director of the Social Science Federation of Canada.

Throughout his career Marcel has promoted the importance of stronger linkages between social research, policy and practice. He has also been an advocate for better access and utilisation of social statistics to strengthen policy dialogue.

Marcel holds a Masters degree in Canadian Social History from the University of Ottawa. He lives in Wellington with his wife and three children.