Greetings. Thank you for your invitation to speak at this, your eighth gathering of early childhood researchers. I am pleased to have this opportunity as my office is absolutely committed to using quality evidence to prove the assertions we make about children. We need to have compelling information about what works for children, what the issues are, how the general health of our communities and society impacts on children’s well being, how legislative changes impact, and where we should be heading to ensure the best interests of children are well served.

My office must demonstrate that the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are based on sound reasoning and not just permissive, liberal ranting. Children’s entitlement rights are reflected in this Convention. It encapsulates the developmental needs of children, vital as we raise them to live life affirmed. Where we seek to change social attitudes, and inculcate new or different attitudes to children, some research is needed. Currently it is still sometimes insufficient.

The advocacy team in my office has a project called the Hard Facts File. Into this goes all the clear, undisputed knowledge we can find about the factors that hinder and enhance children’s progress through their first two decades. These facts become important advocacy tools as we call for recognition of the status of children and argue for their best interests.

As human beings, parents, communities and society New Zealanders have repeatedly articulated high ideals in terms of how we would like our children to grow up. In ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993, the Government made a bold declaration of an intention to provide children and young people with the very best resources and opportunities, as well as supporting parents and families to provide not only the necessities of life, but timely access to quality health and educational services.

Research is a major tool. In the opening sequence of 2001: A Space Odyssey, a primate picks up a thigh bone and uses it as a tool. This forever changes the ape’s use of technology and it’s perception of the environment, now viewed through the ability to affect that environment in new ways. Research has this same power to alter forever how
we view ourselves and our circumstances. It can determine where we are, predict the outcomes of various possibilities, measure our success and shortcomings along the way, and tell us how well we did at the end and in the years beyond.

Between the idea and the reality
Between the motion and the act
There falls the Shadow
(T.S. Elliot, “The Hollow Man”)

Research, if you will, shines a light into the shadow named by T S Elliot. In the shadow formed between our desire to nurture and protect and our ability/will to do so, we expose our children to a greater and more complex world of violence in the media, in this shadow adults abuse children and some of them trade pictures of their corruption online. It is in the shadow that children die at the hands of those who might reasonably be expected to protect them. In this shadow also, those children who lack loving, concerned, caring adults in their lives are most likely to stumble and blunt their potential.

Research will show us a path, or perhaps offer a selection of paths however it is will, commitment and passion that gives research findings substance in children’s worlds. Sir Winston Churchill noted that:

Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened (Sir Winston Churchill).

There are two recent examples of this I would like to share with you. In April of this year the Television Violence Project Working Group, chaired by the new chief Commissioner of the Families Commission Dr Rajen Prassad, published Towards Precautionary Risk Management of TV Violence in New Zealand. This report concludes that:

Early exposure to TV violence (between the age of 6 – 11 years) is assessed to be as powerful a risk factor as having a hyperactivity diagnosis, receiving harsh, lax or inconsistent discipline, or poor school performance (Working Group for TV Violence Project, 2004).

Children who watch large amounts of violence tend to be less aroused when watching violence. This ‘desensitisation’ may make them more violent and/or have reduced empathy for victims of violence.

The approach advocated in the report is that we should work now to reduce incidents of violence on television, provide greater assistance to parents in monitoring their children’s viewing, and educate for more aware and discriminating viewers. Representatives of all networks and television broadcasters participated, and have been meeting subsequently to work through the report. On the positive side, ‘promos’ (advertising of adult programmes to appear later that night) have disappeared from children’s viewing time. On the negative side, broadcasters will not act alone, and with
voluntary codes of practice for broadcasters in New Zealand, and voluntary compliance, no further action has been possible. This response (or lack of it) perhaps confirms that violence is regarded as an essential ingredient in the ratings competition, and this is alarming in itself. Additional research from Otago University in July of this year concludes that:

"Watching television is an important risk factor for poor health - we can estimate that exceeding the two hours per day limit recommended by the American Academy of Paediatrics caused 17 percent of overweight, 15 percent of poor fitness, 15 percent of raised cholesterol and 17 percent of smoking at age 26 (Hancox, Milne, & Poutlon, 2004)."

Since the BSA research (Walters & Zwaga, 2001) into children’s viewing tells us that 22 percent of parents report difficulty controlling their children’s viewing and over 33 percent do not monitor or control children’s viewing at all, it can be reasonably argued that this research has not illuminated the shadow at all. The researchers conclude:

"These findings suggest that reducing television viewing should become a health-gain priority. Parents, communities and society should work together to reduce children’s viewing hours. Adults would also benefit if they lead by example and turn off the TV (Hancox et al., 2004)."

It is a reasonable hypothesis that moves to encourage viewers to switch off their televisions will be as enthusiastically received by broadcasters as have the findings of the violence working group. This perhaps confirms an assertion that:

"As scarce as truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand (Billings, 1865)."

My office commissioned research last year on the discipline and guidance of children. Our motivation was to add current research evidence to the call for repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act, and also to offer parents, policy makers and educational practitioners additional information and expertise in effectively managing children’s behaviour in ways that are supportive of Article 5 of the Convention which states (slightly abridged) that:

"State parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents...to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of rights recognized in the present Convention."

Not only does this research implicate smacking in the anti-social behaviours that can be acquired by children, but most alternatives to smacking are desirable because they engage with the child’s cognitive functioning, and this, appropriately conducted, is an expansive experience for the child.
Physical punishment, or smacking of children, doesn’t work as a means of disciplining them or giving them moral guidance. Justice Ministry surveys show 83 percent of parents physically punish their children regularly and want the right to continue doing so (Carswell, 2001).

Repeal of Section 59 then will depend on political conviction and the courage of our convictions as parents, aunts/uncles and grandparents. I imagine Galileo had not, in his wildest imaginings, factored in democratic styles of government, opinion polls or research when he postulated that:

All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them (Galileo Galilei, 1564 – 1647).

Research can be located in many different places, including working with local communities to address issues like the health of their children and young people as evidenced by recent research titled *Te Haura O Nga Tamariki O Whaingaroa* (Kiro et al., 2004).

The early childhood movement in New Zealand has benefited perhaps more than most from our improved understanding gained through research. Emerging evidence confirms the huge importance of the early years in children’s lives. It has been, none the less, an increasing avalanche of research findings into the predictors of children’s success that has finally convinced decision makers.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child was framed in 1989 and included no reference to early childhood services. Within 10 years UNICEF CEO Carol Bellamy was emphatic in her belief that investment in quality early childhood provision was the best investment governments could make to ensure the health and wellbeing of future generations. She was able to demonstrate that every dollar spent in early childhood had an equivalent impact of seven dollars spent elsewhere in childhood.

This year on September 17, 15 years on, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child held a first ever discussion day entitled ‘Implementing child rights in early childhood’. This seminal day was divided into two strands: The first, ‘Starting sound practices early’, was concerned with guaranteeing the rights of survival and development, to health, nutrition and education, and in article 31 the rights to rest, leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities. Of Article 31 the committee…

…reiterates that these are key rights that enable every child to fully develop his/her personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Recognising that these rights are often endangered by all manner of external constraints hindering children to meet, play and recreate in stimulating environments that are child appropriate, the committee appeals to all state parties, non government organizations and private actors to identify and remove potential obstacles to the enjoyment of these rights by the youngest children, including through poverty reduction strategies (UN

The second strand was ‘Young people as full actors of their own development’. These discussions were concerned with ‘participation in the family, in the school setting and in the community’; and the ‘role of day-cares, early childhood programmes, pre-school, pre-primary and first years of primary education in promoting the child as a right holder’. Of participation, the committee states:

The Convention… principally enshrines children’s participation in all matters affecting children. Therefore state parties must take all appropriate measures to ensure that the concept of the child as rights holder is anchored in the child’s daily life from the earliest stage: at home (and including, when applicable, the extended family); in school; in day care facilities and in his or her community (ibid).

Finally, research is valued and advocated: The Committee:

…reiterates the importance of comprehensive and up to date quantitative and qualitative data on all aspects of early childhood for the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of progress achieved and impact assessment of policies (ibid).

…encourages state parties to invest in systematic training and research in the field of early childhood development from a rights based perspective (ibid).

…urges all state parties, inter-governmental organizations, NGOs, academics, professional groups and grass roots communities to foster continuous high-level policy dialogues and research on the crucial importance of quality in early childhood development, including at regional and local levels (ibid).

You may be interested in some work recently completed by Dr Jan Pryor. Interviewing a hundred step families, Dr Jan Pryor found that children, rather than parents or step parents, consistently gave the most accurate indication of how well their family was functioning. From six months to 16 years, evidence showed, children were affected by negative confrontations between parents and “could make very elaborate distinctions about conflict between parents that they find more or less threatening” (Pryor & Emery, 2003).

For me, this reinforces the child as perceptive, intuitive, and insightful. It also supports the basic tenet of the Convention regarding participation. Not only should we promote participation as a human right, and for the intelligence children can offer to situations that affect them, but failing to involve them may confuse and baffle, undermining the child’s esteem as they endeavour to rationalize what they intuitively know and understand with adult interpretations of reality.
Where a shared reality resides, part of what is created between infants and parents, and infants and others in traditional extended families and whanau is attachment. With attachment comes identity and belonging, achievement, autonomy and altruism. With these, children have a sound basis for development of their sense of self, and esteem. Attachment is demonstrated to be one of the most successful protective factors we can develop in our young to assist them with sound decision making as they develop.

Children’s ability to separate and manage on their own is anchored in the degree of security of their attachments (Maier, 1987).

Dr Daniel Siegel visited New Zealand last year. Specialising in early human development and mental well being, he suggests that some of the basic factors needed for secure attachment between children and adults are these:

- Communication with the child, encouraging communication and responding to both verbal and non verbal communications.
- The adult’s ability to put things right when the communication is disrupted.
- The adult’s ability to communicate a sense of joy and vitality to the child.
- The adult’s ability to stay positively connected to the child through ‘bad’ moments.

Additionally, we can attach children to wider social concepts, with a view to strengthening their esteem, by ensuring they are included in the Human family and one of the principle ways we can do this is to promote their status as human rights holders. It is my experience that children are acutely aware of differential treatment, although they are often powerless to correct imbalance. Justice and fairness are often most clearly discerned by children. Equally, participation offers a sense of efficacy (the power to have influence in our own lives).

The specific skills we might seek to inspire come from the resiliency research. Resilient children and young people:

- Think for themselves and can solve problems creatively
- Can tolerate frustration and manage emotions
- Avoid making other people’s problems their own
- Show optimism and persistence in the face of failure
- Resist being put down and sheds negative labels
- Have a sense of humour and can ‘forgive and forget’
- Build friendships based on care and mutual support (Bloom, Cheney, & Snoddy, 1986).

Dr Karl Menninger observed that today’s children are desperately pursuing ‘artificial belongings’ because this need is not being fulfilled by family, school and neighbourhoods.
In my capacity as Commissioner I am empowered to promote children’s rights as articulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This document is clear that families are the appropriate place for children to grow up in.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has been concerned since 1997 about the outcomes for children of single parents, who are disproportionately affected by poverty. The Committee recommended “…that a study on the projected needs of single-parent families be made in light of this increasing trend, and that measures be taken to supplement those already in place to avoid potential negative consequences for children in these families and their parents in the future (UN Committee, 2000, p.15).

The government response to this concern was The Social Security (Personal Development and Employment) Amendment Act, which took effect in March 2003. In the words of the Ministry of Social Development this “addresses the concerns of the UN committee regarding potential negative consequences for children and their single parent families by assisting parents transition back into the work force” (Ministry of Social Development, 2003, p.2).

The essential tenet of this initiative appears to be that the way to change the situation for the children of single parents is for their parent to go out and work. This has been augmented by the ‘Working For Families Initiative’ of Budget 2004, as well as the provision of 20 hours free attendance at teacher-led early childhood centres, which offers incentives to get partnered parents into employment as well.

I am largely supportive of these initiatives; however important questions arise from them. Do we accept that raising children is important work? Is it only important if both parents are together and working? Will children already deprived of one parent benefit from the other parent moving into paid employment? We need to value parenting and time spent with our children, while recognizing the economic imperatives that force parents into work.

Sole parents provide an easy target. WINZ figures indicate that 69 percent of Domestic Purposes Benefits recipients have been receiving this assistance for less than four years, while 11 percent have been recipients for 10 years or more. This could suggest that it works very well as the safety net it was intended to be.

It is not clear to me firstly how the above is an adequate response to the issue, particularly having regard to the additional stress put on a working parent and the level of remuneration likely to be received by mostly unskilled entrants to the workforce. I can see some virtue in offering incentives for parents to be learning more effective parenting and relationship skills and involving their children in extra curricula cultural, athletic and recreational activities.

Secondly, research identifies poverty at the time of birth and early childhood as particularly difficult to compensate for and remediate. These debilitating childhood circumstances are not addressed by this legislation.
Thirdly, raising children in early childhood centres is not, to my knowledge, adequately researched, as to success, impact, consequences and the best interests of the child. We also have little idea of how family functioning will be affected, how and to whom attachment will occur, and with what success. How will parental expectation and understanding of their children be impacted by spending less and less time with them?

A letter to the Editor in the Dominion Post of October 16 begins:

Though the preservation of many of our national icons, such as the Kiwi, Kakapo and Tuatara receives extensive media coverage, generous government attention and financial support, the plight of the full time mother is being ignored…alongside the provision of childcare centres, subsidised childcare and holiday programmes for parents in paid work, could we not have one thing, just one thing, to assist us and validate our role as full time mothers? (Eden, 2004).

We now have 32,000 infants under two in early childhood centres. What will be the short and long-term outcomes of these social experiments?

I think in the last few paragraphs I have probably raised sufficient large issues to provide research topics for many researchers. Given recent legislation, we must be diligent in evaluating progress and outcomes since if we are not clear that our actions are in the best interests of children, we are well advised to ‘make haste slowly’.

I acknowledge and salute the work you have done and are doing. I invite you to add to our ‘Hard facts’ file as you produce research findings that offer indications of the best direction we can take.

Returning to my opening quote, we have seen the ridicule and the violent opposition to repeal of Section 59, and other issues of concern to those of us who champion children. I look forward to real acceptance of the self-evident need to nurture and carefully grow all our youngest and most vulnerable citizens

Finally a suggestion, from Konrad Lorenz, for your own long life and good health:

It is a good morning exercise for a research scientist to discard a pet hypothesis every day before breakfast. It keeps them young (Lorenz, 1973, Nobel prize presentation speech).

References


Eden (2004). Letter to the Editor, *Dominion Post*, Oct 16th,


