

Elaine Henry, CEO of the Smith Family and Chair of the Stronger Families and Communities Partnership, provides a fascinating insight into shifts in the community services sector involving a move from a welfare to a social enterprise orientation, with greater emphasis on child- and family-focused prevention and early intervention. She illustrates the discussion with some examples of the initiatives of The Smith Family that reflect these changes in orientation and emphasis.

# Families do matter

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Over the last decade, The Smith Family, along with other community organisations, has undergone significant transformation from a welfare-oriented model to a social enterprise organisation focused on children and education. Every step of this transition has been informed by the latest national and international research, not only in terms of evolving individual programs, but at a higher strategic level regarding the range of outcomes we aim to achieve. The overarching purpose of our flagship *Learning for Life (LfL)* suite of programs is to provide disadvantaged children and their families with support and development opportunities at key transition points throughout the life course. This may be at its most basic level financial support (as with our scholarship scheme that provides assistance from early childhood through to tertiary education) or personal support in terms of mentoring, training and advice across significant life stages (for example, ante-natal, early childhood and school-to-work transitions).

## *The importance of family*

Research has shown that helping children access and participate in education (both formal and non-formal) is crucial to their gaining the skills and qualifications necessary to participate in the workforce and become independent, socially-responsible adults. A supportive family environment for children, especially in the earliest weeks and months after they are born, greatly increases their chances for optimal cognitive, social-emotional and physical development as well as for better learning outcomes and more successful transitions from home to school and through other life transitions (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000; Keating & Hertzman, 1999).

Research by the Nobel Laureate James Heckman has been particularly powerful in this respect, suggesting that the major source of inequality in modern society is the inequality of family opportunities provided to children. His research, supported by many other studies, has shown that early family environments are major predictors of both cognitive and socio-emotional abilities of children, and are the most crucial factor in the dynamics of human skill formation. These findings are strengthened by the longitudinal research of Professor Richard Tremblay from the University of Montreal, who has shown that aggression – long conceived to be a learned behaviour peaking in adolescence – actually has genetic origins in early childhood and infancy, with the family environment playing a crucial role in moderating the degree to which this aggression manifests later in life. In Tremblay's words, "Humans do not learn to aggress, they learn *not* to aggress" (2006).

Together, Heckman and Tremblay's complementary evidence is a major point of concern, given the widespread evidence pointing to the deterioration of family environments in many countries around the world over the past 40 years, including Australia.

## *The rise of the lone parent family*

Today, lone-parent families have dramatically increased in Australia by as much as 38 per cent between 1991 and 2001 to constitute close to 25 per cent of all families with children, with this percentage projected to rise further over the next 20 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Similarly, the number of children aged 0–14 years living in one-parent families is projected to increase from 745,000 in 2001 (19 per cent of children aged 0–14 years) to between 875,000 (23 per cent) and 1.3 million (33 per cent) by 2026. We know from widespread research that lone parent family structures, particularly those with poorly educated mothers, are associated with multiple adverse outcomes for children – outcomes that according to Heckman cannot be entirely remedied by schooling or welfare interventions later in life. Children *can* successfully overcome disadvantage in a sustainable manner, but only if they receive appropriate support from family members and other significant individuals in developing their cognitive, social-emotional and physical competencies from an early age.

Hence, nurturing families and home contexts during the early years are indispensable for the development of self-control and the socio-emotional development required for successful home to school transitions. This has informed The Smith Family's involvement in the *Let's Read* program, *Good Beginnings* and importantly, the Australian Government Department of Families, Communities and Indigenous Affairs *Communities for Children* initiative. In seeking to facilitate supportive family environments encouraging of positive values, attitudes and motivations, our long-term outcomes focus on establishing the strongest possible foundations for the transition from ante-natal through to birth, school, further education or work.

### The era of partnerships

Supporting families to become learning hubs for their children requires complex and multifaceted interventions and the coordination of many different players, including parents, schools and businesses. This realisation has ushered in a new era of partnerships in the community sector, and the need to work with and through other organisations has been an influential guiding principle in the strategic transformation of The Smith Family since 1999.

We know today that to effect sustainable, tangible outcomes, community and business partnerships can accomplish far greater things than any group acting alone could achieve (Bowman, 2004). The contemporary concept of 'social coalition' seeks to create a form of corporate social responsibility. This responsibility goes beyond isolated instances of corporate philanthropy to strategic, longer-term and active partnerships that combine resources and talents to achieve mutual goals, develop creative solutions to local and regional problems and most importantly, to strengthen community ties. This is increasingly recognised by many of Australia's leading corporations. Westpac CEO David Morgan has often stated that "companies can do good and well at the same time", and that meeting the needs of the economic machine and the social system are inseparable. This is reinforced by one of the greatest management thinkers of all time, Peter Drucker (1999), who has reminded us that pluralist societies of the past destroyed themselves because they failed to keep sight of the common good, and of the broader community needs.

The evidence shows us that unlocking educational opportunities for disadvantaged families to participate more fully in society leads to greater productivity, employment and consumer capacity. This translates to a happier, wealthier society for all. Our preventive emphasis on early childhood support is therefore aligned with the future interests of corporations in both employing and servicing a skilled and productive community, particularly in the context of a knowledge- and technology-based market dependent more than ever on worker capabilities (Porter & Kramer, 2002).

### Mentoring

Mentoring is one form of partnership that can have dramatic results in improving the socio-emotional skills shown by Heckman to be so critical in overcoming the impacts of adverse family environments. Whereas the cognitive skills such as IQ are usually well set by age eight,

socio-emotional skills such as self-discipline, confidence and self-esteem continue to develop through adolescence. Linking disadvantaged youth to non-parental adults who can assist them in developing these skills has been shown to lead to reduced involvement in drug and alcohol problems, greater success at school and better relationships with their parent(s) (Harms, 2004). Mentoring initiatives, of which The Smith Family currently runs five at key transition stages in the life course, are therefore crucial in providing disadvantaged children and youth with the contextual support they need to succeed.

### Creating a more caring and cohesive Australian community

The economic and social change of recent decades presents new challenges for policies that seek to boost human capital. It will no longer be enough to help people deal with the effects of change. A more strategic, life-cycle perspective will be needed to prevent the emergence of problems in the first place, as opposed to merely treating them (COAG, 2006). Within this framework, the contemporary entity of primary importance is the family, and it is by supporting disadvantaged children within this broader context that The Smith Family, along with other child and family welfare agencies, can help create lasting societal change.

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