

Prevention is Better than Cure – Strengthening Family & Personal Relationships

Strengthening Relationships

Healthy family and personal relationships help each of us to thrive. They are particularly important during difficult times when we might need practical or emotional support.

Those who value and nurture their relationships are more likely to have a positive outlook, maintain perspective when facing a crisis and recover from any setbacks. Indeed there is a growing body of research suggesting that family functioning and healthy relationships are key factors in both physical wellbeing and mental health.

Too often we can get caught up in the demands of daily life, getting through work or school or raising children. We can forget to invest the time and care that our relationships deserve. It can be useful to be reminded, encouraged and persuaded to give priority to spending time with loved ones and staying connected to friends. It can help to have the support of employers, schools and the broader community.

We believe that more priority should be given to supporting family and personal relationships.

Relationship Education

We all accept the value of training and coaching at school, at work and on the sports field. We also love community programs and TV shows that teach us how to cook, garden and make-it-ourselves. Yet we often neglect to give as much attention to the development of our relationship and communication skills.

Most people know that their personal relationships have the biggest impact on their health and wellbeing, yet they may be reluctant to get help when difficulties arise.

On a positive note, relationship education programs for couples who are getting married or moving in together appear to be gaining popularity. Demand for courses such as 'Focus' and 'Prepare' is stronger than ever and relationship educators are working hard in response. Parenting education programs are also gaining acceptance with record levels of participation being recorded in some community settings. Schools are also keen to provide relationship education as part of both the core curriculum and student welfare services.

There is a real opportunity for Australia to invest now in strengthening relationship education.



Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) calls for increased investment in strengthening family and personal relationships. Specifically, we call for:

- 1. A National Public Education Campaign - 'Relationships Matter'.**
- 2. A National Strategy 'Think Families' to identify and promote strategies business, schools and community groups can use to support family relationships.**
- 3. Increase funding for relationship education and support services to expand their capacity across community, work and school settings.**
- 4. Increase investment in free and affordable counselling services, parenting education and support programs and self-help resources.**

Investment Priorities

1. A National Public Education Campaign - 'Relationships Matter'

FRSA proposes a nationally coordinated public information campaign to promote the value of strong family and personal relationships. Healthy family and personal relationships help individuals and families to thrive during good times and survive during difficult times. This was evident during the global financial crisis when many Australians felt anxious about their financial resources and job security, families and relationships were tested and the number of people seeking relationship counselling or support increased. This campaign would have a primary prevention focus, encouraging behaviour that builds and strengthens relationships, alerts people to the potential impact of external events on personal relationships and suggest ways to respond effectively if problems arise. The campaign would also raise the profile of self-help resources and relevant support services. Campaign resources might include a website, public advertising, media strategy, posters and materials for professionals across the health, education and welfare sectors. Experts in relationship education, family strengthening and public education could guide the development of campaign messages and materials with evaluative research throughout the campaign to measure its effectiveness.

2. A National Strategy 'Think Families' to identify and promote strategies business, schools and community groups can use to support family relationships

The top three factors people identify as negatively impacting on their relationships are 'stress', 'work pressures' and 'lack of time together' (see for example Relationships Australia, 2008). A holistic approach to supporting families begins with acknowledging the impact of factors such as the increasing cost of living and housing affordability, employment stability and working conditions on family relationships. A National Strategy 'Think Families' would work at multiple levels to address these issues by bringing together industry, government and community representatives to identify what can be done. This might include raising awareness and developing resources for employers, decision-makers, professionals and policy makers to better meet the needs of families.

3. Increase funding for relationship education and support services to expand their capacity across community, work and school settings.

There is a national network of relationship education and support services across Australia that deliver high quality programs in community, work and school settings but resources are limited. A substantial increase in investment would see programs more widely available. In particular, there is strong support for a nationally consistent approach to including developmentally appropriate relationship education in both primary and high schools.

4. Increase investment in free and affordable counselling services, parenting education and support programs and self-help resources.

When people form a family, whether that means getting married or moving in together, raising children or sharing experiences, most people want their relationships to work, they intend to stay together over the long term and to care for one another. The reality is that almost half of all marriages in Australia now end in divorce; there are more than a million children who have a parent living elsewhere and over 35,000 children are currently placed in out of home care because they do not have a parent who can provide adequate care for them. Nationally, the cost of child abuse/neglect is well over the \$2.2 billion per annum spent on child protection programs (Bromfield & Lamont, 2010) the cost of family breakdown would be much higher again. Prevention is better than cure; this has been proven time and time again with repeated calls for increased investment in programs to strengthen families and support parents. An effective way to encourage people to participate in counselling and education programs is to invest public funds so that programs are free or affordable, readily available and widely publicised so that they become familiar and accepted. There is scope to increase the capacity of current service providers across Australia as part of a prevention and early intervention strategy.



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