

Gold stamps for childhood policy [AU]^[1]

Author: Gittins, Ross

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EXCERPTS

I've come to the conclusion that politicians are like small boys - they respond well to an occasional pat on the head. We're accustomed to berating our political leaders for the problems they've yet to fix, for their failures and their bad behaviour.

Heaven knows, there's a lot worth berating. During state election campaigns I have an almost irresistible urge to attack both sides for the cynical way they respond to the media's (equally cynical) revving up of the public's fear of crime.

If the truth be told, I think we secretly enjoy whingeing about our hopeless polities. It allows us to feel superior, and a problem blamed on someone is a problem eased.

It occurs to me, however, that if we're interested in using the political process to actually achieve improvement, we'd do better to treat our politicians the same way as, under the influence of the psychologists, we've learnt to treat our children.

These days it's all "positive reinforcement". We've discovered that rewarding good behaviour is more effective than punishing bad.

So let me give it a try. I've scoured the country looking for a politician who's actually doing something praiseworthy and come up with Larry Anthony, the federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

He's putting a lot of effort into working with the state governments and half the ministers in federal cabinet to develop a "national agenda for early childhood".

What's so praiseworthy about that? It's good stuff because it's seeking to ensure this country gains maximum benefit from the findings of recent research about the critical importance of developments in a child's first years of life.

This "new brain research" has shown how the nutrition, care and nurturing that infants receive directly affects the wiring of the pathways of their brains. Nurturing by parents in the early years has a decisive and long-lasting impact on how people develop, their capacity to learn, their behaviour and ability to regulate their emotions, and the risks of disease later in life.

Related research justifies Anthony's claim that "the seeds of poor health, drug dependency, school failure, welfare dependency and criminal behaviour are usually planted in a child's early years, especially when the conditions that start them off remain in place".

It's not hard to see from this that prevention is better than cure and that, if governments are going to help people overcome their problems, the earlier they intervene the better. A 24-year study in the US showed that for every dollar invested in services to help families with young children, within three years \$US4 (\$6.5) was saved on child protection, health, education and the justice system. By the time the children reached adulthood, \$US7 had been saved.

One stumbling block to us fully exploiting the insights of this exciting research is that responsibility for assisting young children and their families is spread between many government departments - community services, health, education and more - and, as ever, divided between federal and state governments. (The feds are responsible for child care, for instance, whereas the states handle preschools.)

So there's a vital, if unexciting, job to be done in bringing all these outfits together, getting some agreement on priorities and achieving some co-operation and co-ordination to minimise duplication and departments working at cross-purposes.

Information about the programs different governments are trying needs to be disseminated to other governments, but these experiments need to be properly evaluated to develop our knowledge of which programs do best under Australian conditions.

The ideal bloke to initiate and lead this process is the federal minister for children, and this is just what Anthony is doing with his national agenda. So take a bow, Larry.

All the state governments are waking up to the strategic importance of early childhood intervention and prevention, but the state that's done most so far is NSW. So my next bouquet goes to Bob Carr.

The Carr Government's Families First program involves spending \$117 million over four years to help families with young children throughout the state. It funds early childhood nurses, family support workers, transition-to-school programs, playgroups, parenting

programs, volunteer home visiting and professional help for families in need.

Because such a program can be expected to reduce the number of kids from vulnerable families who end up in trouble with the police (among many other benefits), it can be happily included under the slogan "tough on the causes of crime" - not just tough on criminals (which does more to gratify a fearful public than to reduce crime). When it comes to law and order, there's much about Carr's record that could be criticised. But, sticking to our resolve on positive reinforcement, I have to acknowledge the various innovative things he's done that warrant high praise.

He was the first premier to introduce specialised "drug courts" where offenders are being steered towards treatment rather than punishment. Independent evaluation confirms that these courts reduce the rate of re-offending.

He's begun trials of "circle sentencing", where indigenous offenders are brought together with the victim, the police, their family and the elders as well as the magistrate.

"The presence of elders can have a far more powerful impact on an Aboriginal offender than that of a white judicial officer," he says.

Then there's "justice conferencing" where young offenders are brought face-to-face with their victims. Conferencing encourages kids to accept responsibility for their crime. It puts responsibility back onto parents and families to prevent reoffending. And it gives victims of crime a voice. Evaluation shows that conferencing reduces the rate of re-offending by almost 30 per cent. And, almost as important: it's very popular with the public.

Why is it so successful? I suspect it's because it "un-depersonalises" crime. It finds a new balance between the hot-headed reactions of the shock jocks and their listeners and the cold rationality of the civil libertarians and criminologists.

Man can't live on logic alone. Conferencing puts back a much needed element of emotional gratification. Faced by his victim, the young offender may be moved to contrition.

Victims get to speak their mind, seek restitution and maybe receive an apology (as no one understands better than John Howard, apologies can have great emotional power). The public looks on and sees justice being done.

Way to go, Bob.

-Reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald.

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