

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

SOCIETY AND EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

DANIEL P. KEATING

**THE 3rd MACQUARIE STREET LECTURE FOR
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
9 MAY 2002**

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Members of the Committee on Children and Young People

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Chair's foreword

David Campbell MP, Member for Keira Chair, Committee on Children and Young People

One of the first actions of the Committee on Children and Young People was to commence a series of lectures — sponsored by the Committee — on issues relating to children and young people, under the series title of "The Macquarie Street Lectures on Children and Young People". This is an initiative whereby the Committee invites experts in fields relating to children and young people to address issues in their area of expertise. This series provides a mechanism for the ongoing promotion of discussion and research into matters affecting children and young people in New South Wales.

Previous Macquarie Street lectures have been presented by Mr Michael Jarman ("The Global Agenda for Children: what role is there for us?") and Professor Sonia Jackson ("The education of children in out-of-home care"). Mr Jarman's lecture concerned issues associated with the United Nations Special Session on Children, originally scheduled for September 2001, but rescheduled for May 2002 following the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. The Special Session reviewed progress on children's rights and well-being over the past decade and the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, covering topics as child survival and health, protection from exploitation and abuse, children and the law, education and employment, amongst others. The issues raised in Professor Jackson's lecture—which dealt with the experience of children in care in the United Kingdom—gave raise to a request by the Hon. Faye Lo Po', then Minister for Community Services, for the Committee to inquire into the educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care in New South Wales. This inquiry is in progress currently.

This report publishes the third of the Macquarie Street Lectures on Children and Young People, which was presented by Professor Dan Keating, current Atkinson Chair in Early Childhood Development and Education at the University of Toronto. Professor Keating is also a Royal Bank Fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research and the Foundation Director of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research Program in Human Development.

The lecture addresses the issues raised by Professor Keating, in the book "Developmental health and the wealth of nations", which he edited with his colleague Clyde Hertzman in 1999. As the author of six books and over fifty research and review papers, Professor Keating is an undoubted expert in early human development and society. He has conducted extensive research into how social environments effect the way we think and how social institutions need to change in order to work effectively within increasingly diverse populations.

Professor Keating supports the development of a strong, evidence-based approach to child development, challenging the trend towards faddism in child development theories. He is an advocate of population-level longitudinal and cross sectional studies to determine the critical periods affecting child development and to assess the effectiveness of policies in community services, welfare and health care.

The Committee on Children and Young People has previously examined the evidence emerging from longitudinal and cross sectional studies of child development in its report of the proceedings of a seminar on the development of well being in children¹. This seminar discussed a longitudinal study — the Christchurch Health and Development study (1977 to the present), and a cross sectional study — the Western Australian Child Health Survey.

It is apparent that such research is what is required to develop an evidence-based approach to track the development of young people from infancy through childhood and adolescence, and underpin more appropriate and effective child development policy and programs.

The Committee on Children and Young People will follow with interest the development of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, a national multidisciplinary collaboration to explore family and social issues relevant to children's development, that has, as a major objective, the identification of the long-term consequences of policy innovation. This study is due to commence data collection in 2003.

Professor Keating's lecture provides a context in which such longitudinal studies of child development can be reviewed and critiqued.

Acknowledgments

The Committee on Children and Young People acknowledges the work of Ms Gillian Calvert and her staff at the Commission for Children and Young People in facilitating the series of Macquarie Street Lectures on Children and Young People.

I would like to thank my fellow Members of the Committee for their cooperative spirit and bipartisan approach to this report, as is the case with the general work and deliberations of the Committee.

I am grateful for the assistance of the Committee Secretariat: the Manager, Mr Ian Faulks, and Ms Cheryl Samuels, Project Officer, Ms Rachel Dart, Committee Officer, and Ms Susan Tanzer, Assistant Committee Officer.

¹ Committee on Children and Young People (2001). The development of wellbeing in children—Some aspects of research and comment on child and adolescent development. Proceedings of seminar, Parliament House, Sydney, 7 March 2001. Third report of the Committee on Children and Young People of the 52nd Parliament. Sydney, NSW: Parliament of New South Wales.

Rachel Dart and Susan Tanzer did an excellent job in the administration and arrangements for Professor Keating's lecture.

I commend this report to Parliament.

Contents

| | Pages |
|--|-------|
| Members of the Committee on Children and Young People | 2-3 |
| Chair's foreword | 5-7 |
| Dan Keating Society and early child development | 11-16 |
| Extracts of the Minutes of the Committee on Children and Young People | 17-23 |

SOCIETY AND EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

DANIEL P. KEATING

There is a broad and growing recognition that early child development is crucial for the health, well-being, competence and coping of individuals, populations and societies. This understanding is increasingly supported by substantial, specific evidence from a range of disciplines including the neurosciences, the developmental sciences, epidemiology, economics, and others. Despite this recognition and the strong evidence to support it, many countries in the developed world do not yet have a coherent, integrated system for supporting optimal development during early childhood. It is imperative to move toward establishing an effective and systematic approach to early child development, given the range and magnitude of potential consequences of failure to do so. Among these consequences are significant risks to population health, competence, and adaptability, and the associated difficulties in maintaining a well-functioning society and an innovative, productive economy. On the other hand, investments in early child development that are systematic, sustained, and based on the best available scientific understanding of the core dynamics of development are likely to have dramatic positive impacts on both economic and social advancement.

I take note the many broad questions that arise as we undertake this crucial project. First, I will try to place this project in context. Then, I will briefly review the central and exciting scientific evidence that characterizes the key issues we will need to address. Finally, I will take note of the challenges to society that are presented by a clear understanding of the core issues of early child development.

The Scientific and Social Context for Early Child Development and Education

To begin, I want to emphasize one key point, and to emphasize it by making a somewhat controversial comparison. As I just noted, strategic investments in early child development will be successful *only if* they are “based on the best available scientific understanding of the core dynamics of development.” Even though there are numerous problems associated with the promotion of health and with health care in the population, it is none the less clear to all that there is a health care system. Furthermore, this system is firmly rooted in the medical and biological sciences, from public health to molecular genetics. Specific controversies about treatment or prevention models are understood, so far as the public agenda and public policy are concerned, to be best argued and resolved within a scientific framework.

There are many reasons why the modern practices in health and education differ in this regard, and I leave the analyses of those historical and social trends to others. The point I want to make here is that we are unlikely to succeed in the crucial project of providing optimal supports for developmental health in early childhood unless we root it firmly and unwaveringly in the scientific model, where cumulative knowledge building leads to better and deeper understanding and practice.

The Scientific Evidence for the Importance of Early Child Development

To draw this scientific portrait, I briefly review the key arguments and evidence that we assembled in the Human Development Program of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, a program that I have had the honour of directing since its inception in 1993. We have recently published this conceptual framework and supporting evidence in *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations* (Keating & Hertzman, 1999, Guilford Press). Although each point below summarizes a large body of evidence, the overall picture can be drawn in a series of connected observations.

In all societies, there is a significant association between social and economic status (SES) and health, but societies with sharper differences across this SES gradient have poorer health outcomes overall compared with societies with flatter gradients. This inequality of health outcomes as related to social indicators (of wealth, income, education, and occupational status) has been documented universally, including the most economically advanced countries.

Where this work has been extended to other developmental outcomes, such as literacy, mathematics achievement, behavioural and emotional problems, the same pattern emerges. Thus, for the full range of outcomes from physical and mental health to competence and coping, which can be combined into an omnibus indicator that we have termed “developmental health,” there emerges a similar portrait: Societies with sharper social status differences have generally lower developmental health.

When these epidemiological patterns are explored longitudinally, this same gradient effect is observed using social status indicators of the individual’s family of origin. This suggests that whatever the gradient effect is, it operates across the life course, from early childhood to outcomes of developmental health much later in life.

Although further research is needed to more firmly establish and refine this picture, merely confirming the gradient effect for developmental health is not sufficient either for our scientific understanding or as a guide to social and public policy. We need to “unpack” the gradient effect in order to understand its fundamental processes and mechanisms.

Clues can be found in the specifics of the gradient effect itself. It is *pervasive*, showing effects across many outcomes of developmental health. It is *portable*, in

that individuals apparently carry this legacy with them into new contexts and circumstances. And it is *enduring*, in that is observed across the life course.

These clues point toward a working hypothesis of “biological embedding” in which the contexts and experiences of early development are registered in the biology of the individual, and expressed in various ways across the life course. Exactly how these “embedded” processes will be expressed is also contingent upon contexts and experiences of later life.

Recent research in the neurosciences, including the developmental study of neural, neuroendocrine, and neuroimmune systems, is consistent with a notion of biological embedding. The neural system includes the central and peripheral nervous system, including higher level processes of cognition and executive function. The neuroendocrine system is largely responsible for the production and circulation of neurochemicals that have many functions, including patterns of emotional responding. The neuroimmune system governs the way in which the body’s natural defences respond to physical challenges from invading bacteria or viruses, or from physical trauma.

In all three systems (which are interactive and developmentally interdependent), there is evidence that experiences during early development shape their structure and/or function in enduring ways. These influences begin even prenatally, such that the mother’s exposure to significant stress during pregnancy is linked to lowered levels of immune response in the infant, and this effect is observed well into maturity.

It is important to draw a distinction between the notion of biological embedding and the often, and justly, criticized notion of “infant determinism.” The latter notion argues that early experience equals destiny. Biological embedding, in contrast, is a working hypothesis about the substantial and enduring importance of early development, supported by evidence from the biological sciences, especially neuroscience, and the social sciences, especially longitudinal and comparative epidemiology. Those who argue the opposing extreme position, dismissing the early years as “nothing special,” miss the consilience of the evidence (to use E. O. Wilson’s phrase in his 1998 book of the same name) across disciplinary boundaries and focus unduly on one particular body of evidence or line of inquiry.

This point is important to emphasize. In the recent, and amply justified, excitement about the completion of the Human Genome Project that provides the initial map of *Homo sapiens*’ genetic structure, the bigger picture has sometimes been lost. The structure of the genome, which is an extraordinary accomplishment to have mapped, is only the beginning of our understanding of human development. For the full story of human development, we need to understand the interactions of genetically encoded information (our evolutionary legacy) with the specific developmental experiences of the developing child.

In many ways, the Human Genome Project was the most dramatic scientific accomplishment in the understanding of our species in the previous century. The scientific task now, which may well take us a century or more, will be to

understand the interactions of genes and environment in a far more complete and complex way than we have so far.

The Societal Implications of the Emerging Understanding of Early Child Development

If the working hypothesis of biological embedding is essentially correct – and much work remains to be done on several fronts to test it rigorously – the implications for society are profound. Not only does it provide a biologically grounded account of crucial patterns in population developmental health, but it also suggests that societal investment – or the lack of investment — in early child development will have pervasive and long-lasting downstream effects.

Recent work in economics points to the strong likelihood that the growth economies of the 21st Century will be the knowledge economies, in which innovation is the key ingredient. This, of course, is fundamentally a human resource, and societies that do not sufficiently attend to the conditions that generate that resource run the risk of lacking the key ingredient of the future growth economies.

Recent work on social institutions suggests further that it is not only the availability of human resources that matter to well-functioning societies and economies, but also how those resources are organized. “Learning” or “knowledge” societies are characterized by higher rates of participation and engagement, and by greater reservoirs of social capital. The levels of competence and coping in the population are thus also likely to be crucial resources for the development of adaptable and resilient “learning societies”, which in turn points our attention once again to the central importance of early child development.

Both these points are becoming increasingly recognized in international forums, as in the presentation by economist Jacques van der Gaag to a recent World Bank Conference (“Investing in Our Children’s Future,” Washington, DC, April 2000).

What are the implications of this recognition? First, it is essential to delve more deeply into the key elements of the story, in order to establish its validity by challenging its core claims. Second, if the claims prove to be well founded, it is essential that we understand in detail the linkage between the scientific knowledge about early child development and a societal agenda that can translate that knowledge into useable programs, policies and directions for community and social organization – in other words, to move toward a learning society model for early child development. For both purposes, a network model is the only one that can work, given the interdisciplinary nature of the scientific inquiry and the urgency of moving that knowledge into social action as rapidly as possible.

Before describing that focus in more detail, there are several related issues that it is useful to identify, if only briefly.

The first of these is what we might call the “widgets” argument. This is a criticism of the use of economic arguments in support of an early childhood agenda, especially ones that focus on the importance of investment in this arena because it is tied to human resource development and economic prosperity agendas. This creates a point of contention among colleagues in my own discipline, and parallels the objection to the use of the biological embedding arguments outlined above. Essentially, it is on the face an argument against reductionism, and an objection to reducing all of human development to its biological roots and its economic utility. Let me hasten to agree that a reductionism that characterizes humans as nothing more than biology and economy is misguided. But equally misguided is an approach that ignores biology and imagines that we can generate sustained support for early child development without an understanding of its societal dynamics, including economic ones. Indeed, the risk is that without such arguments, the real and pressing needs of the most vulnerable sectors of the population will be overlooked during this period of rapid social, institutional, technological and economic change. Both in science and in society, there is a desperate need to move beyond the either/or dichotomies of reductionism versus synthesis, nature versus nurture, and economy versus society, and begin the hard task of constructing integrated arguments that are fully grounded in human development.

As we undertake this task, it will become critically important to understand the dynamics of change that are now upon us. We have characterized the nature of this change as an innovation dynamic, in which an accelerating feedback loop has been created through the interaction of our evolutionary and cultural legacies in human development. The acceleration is evident from the timing of the major changes in how *Homo sapiens* has lived, once having acquired a penchant for reproducing culture, from the Neolithic Revolution of 40,000 or so years ago, to the Agricultural Revolution of some 10,000 years ago, to the Industrial Revolution of a few hundred years ago, to the current onset of the Knowledge Revolution. Although we often focus in the historical record on the technological breakthroughs characterizing these sea changes in human experience, it is clear that they are equally provoked by social innovations (respectively, cross-group communication, urban concentrations for knowledge generation, and globalization of trade and information), and in turn provoke the need for new social arrangements. Even a cursory review of contemporary demographics and labour markets indicate the degree and pace of change that we now experience – as if our own lives were not sufficient evidence!

What may make this current “revolution” different is the potential to use the essence of the innovation dynamic in a conscious way to support broader human development goals. If we use the information we now have, and that we will develop, about the core dynamics of human development – especially early child development – to design flexible systems to support development, we will move toward what we have characterized as a “learning society,” capable of monitoring and adjusting social practices and institutions toward that goal. In the same way that we routinely use economic and environmental feedback loops to guide policy, we clearly need “human development” feedback loops that now exist only in rough and emergent form.

As we do this, it will raise the issue of “who is responsible for what.” The simple answer is that we are all responsible. But that does not go very far in helping to design a system. The role of the various sectors in this task requires close examination, and the designs of integrated systems will need to be judged by whether they get the job done. Especially worrisome at the moment are the tendencies to offload the responsibilities to communities without the support of senior governments, or to assume that universal programs will replace the need for specialized services. Only if we view the enterprise as a system, and monitor how that system is functioning, will we be able to move this agenda forward. The reality is that we already have the major tools to do this. The challenge is to use those tools thoughtfully. This will entail significant *investment* in child development, *designing* a system to support the development of all children, and establishing the means to *monitor* progress for individual children but also for communities so that systems can be continuously improved for the enhancement of optimal child development.

EXTRACTS OF THE MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The relevant Minutes of the Committee on Children and Young People are included:

Meeting No. 16 Thursday 14 February 2002

Meeting No. 20 Thursday 30 May 2002

Meeting No. 22 Friday 30 August 2002

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

PROCEEDINGS

**11:00 A.M., THURSDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2002
AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY**

MEMBERS PRESENT

Legislative Council

Ms Burnswoods
Mr Primrose
Mr Harwin
Mr Tsang

Legislative Assembly

Mr Campbell
Ms Andrews
Mr Webb
Mr Smith
Ms Beamer

The Chair, Mr Campbell, presiding.

Also in attendance: Mr Gönye, Acting/Committee Manager, Ms Callinan, Project Officer, Ms Dart, Committee Officer, and Ms Tanzer, Assistant Committee Officer.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr Corbett.

2. Previous Minutes

On the motion of Mr Webb, seconded by Ms Burnswood, the minutes of meeting No. 15, having been distributed previously, were accepted unanimously as being a true and accurate record subject to amendment to indicate that Mr Harwin was not present for the unanimous resolutions.

3. Chair's report

The Chair announced that Ms Gillian Calvert, the Commissioner for Children and Young People has suggested Professor Dan Keating as the speaker for the 3rd Macquarie St Lecture on 9 May 2002. Professor Keating is the Professor of Early Childhood Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto and is world renowned in his field. He is out from Canada as the keynote speaker for an

international medical conference in Brisbane and we would be able to invite him to give the lecture in Sydney at no cost. It is suggested that he be invited to present a lecture on recent work he has been doing looking at developmental health and the wealth of nations: the social, biological and educational dynamics. This subject is relevant to the Committee's interest in the children's early years issues and very relevant for the *Families First* initiative that NSW Government has sponsored and run.

On the motion of Mr Smith, seconded by Ms Andrews:

That the Committee invite Professor Keating to present a lecture on Thursday 9 May 2002 as part of the Macquarie Street Lecture Series.

Passed unanimously.

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6. General business

There being no further business, the Committee adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

Chair

Acting Manager

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

PROCEEDINGS

**9:30 A.M., THURSDAY 30 MAY 2002
AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY**

MEMBERS PRESENT

Legislative Council

Mr Harwin
Mr Primrose
Ms Burnswoods
Mr Tsang

Legislative Assembly

Mr Campbell
Ms Andrews
Mr Cull
Mrs Hopwood

The Chair, Mr Campbell, presiding.

Also in attendance: Mr Faulks, Committee Manager, Ms Samuels, Project Officer, Ms Dart, Committee Officer, and Ms Tanzer, Assistant Committee Officer.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr Corbett, Mr Smith, and Ms Beamer.

2. Previous Minutes

On the motion of Ms Andrews, seconded by Mr Harwin, the minutes of meeting No. 19, having been distributed previously, were accepted unanimously as being a true and accurate record.

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5. Chair's report

The Chair reported that the 3rd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People was presented by Professor Dan Keating on Thursday 9 May 2002. Professor Keating's lecture was titled: "Society and early child development". A draft report of the lecture is being prepared currently.

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13. General business

There being no further business, the Committee adjourned at 10:00 a.m.

Chair

Manager

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

PROCEEDINGS

**10:00 A.M., FRIDAY 30 AUGUST 2002
AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY**

MEMBERS PRESENT

Legislative Council

Mr Primrose
Ms Burnswoods

Legislative Assembly

Mr Campbell
Ms Andrews
Mr Smith
Ms Beamer

The Chair, Mr Campbell, presiding.

Also in attendance: Mr Faulks, Committee Manager.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr Cull, Mr Tsang, Mr Harwin, Mr Corbett and Mrs Hopwood.

2. Previous Minutes

On the motion of Ms Beamer, seconded by Mr Primrose, the minutes of meeting No. 20, having been distributed previously, were accepted unanimously as being a true and accurate record.

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4. Consideration of draft report: "Society and early child development. Daniel P. Keating. 3rd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 9 May 2002"

The Chair presented the draft report: "Society and early child development. Daniel P. Keating. 3rd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 9 May 2002".

The draft report, having been distributed previously, was accepted as having been read.

Society and early child development.
Daniel P. Keating. 3rd Macquarie Street
Lecture on Children and Young People,
9 May 2002: read, and agreed to

On the motion of Mr Primrose, seconded Ms Beamer:

That the draft report: "Society and early child development. Daniel P. Keating. 3rd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 9 May 2002", be read and agreed to.

Passed unanimously.

On the motion of Mr Primrose, seconded Ms Beamer:

That the draft report: " Society and early child development. Daniel P. Keating. 3rd Macquarie Street Lecture on Children and Young People, 9 May 2002" be accepted as a report of the Committee on Children and Young People, and that it be signed by the Chair and presented to the House.

Passed unanimously.

On the motion of Mr Primrose, seconded Ms Beamer:

That the Chair and Manager be permitted to correct any stylistic, typographical and grammatical errors in the report.

Passed unanimously.

10. General business

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There being no further business, the Committee adjourned at 10:10 a.m.

Chair

Manager

REPORTS OF THE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The first steps ... Review of the first annual report of the Commission for Children and Young People, for the 1999-2000 financial year. (Report 1/52, May 2001).

The global agenda for children - what role is there for us? Michael Jarman - The 1st Macquarie Street Lecture for Children and Young People, 6 April 2001. (Report 2/52, May 2001).

The development of wellbeing in children – some aspects of research and comment on child and adolescent development. Proceedings of a seminar, Parliament House, Sydney, 7 March 2001. (Report 3/52, June 2001).

Amendments to the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* and *Commission for Children and Young People Regulation 2000* regarding employment screening. (Report 4/52, October 2001).

The importance of education for children in out-of-home care. Sonia Jackson - The 2nd Macquarie Street Lecture for Children and Young People, 31 October 2001 (Report 5/52, December 2001).

Learning to run ... Review of the second annual report of the Commission for Children and Young People, for the 2000-2001 financial year. (Report 6/52, February 2002).

Amendments to the *Child Protection (Prohibited Employment) Act 1998* regarding convictions for serious sexual offences and other matters. (Report 7/52, March 2002).

The use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications in children and young people. Issues Paper No. 1 – Background issues. (Report 8/52, May 2002).

The use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications in children and young people. Issues Paper No. 2 – Administration of prescribed drugs and over-the-counter medications to children and young people by non-parental carers and self-administration. (Report 9/52, May 2002).

The use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications in children and young people. Issues Paper No. 3 – Children and young people and the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications. (Report 10/52, May 2002).

The use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications in children and young people. Issues Paper No. 4 – Use by children and young people of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications developed for adults. (Report 11/52, May 2002).

The use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications in children and young people. Issues Paper No. 5 – Use of prescription drugs as a mental health strategy for children and young people. (Report 12/52, May 2002).

The use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications in children and young people. Issues Paper No. 6 – Alternatives to the use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications by children and young people. (Report 13/52, May 2002).

Society and early child development. Daniel P. Keating - The 3rd Macquarie Street Lecture for Children and Young People, 9 May 2002. (Report 14/52, August 2002).

Committee on Children and Young People

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