



**THE HON. KEVIN ANDREWS MP
MINISTER FOR SOCIAL SERVICES**

**ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCH OF ARACY'S NEST OPPORTUNITY CHILD
INITIATIVE**

**30 April 2014
Novotel Hotel, Sydney**

***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Thank you Sarah for those inspiring words of introduction.

I'd also like to express my appreciation to Dr Lance Emerson and the ARACY Board for their invitation to address you today.

It's my privilege to appear before an audience dedicated to that noblest of endeavours – the well-being of Australia's children.

It's my honour to launch *ARACY's Nest Opportunity Child Initiative*.

It's an obvious reality that adults create children in the biological sense.

But it's an equal truth that children create adults in the emotional sense.

As every mother and father surely knows first-hand, nothing causes a person to grow-up more quickly than staring into the face of one's newborn infant.

At that moment, the reality of parental responsibility hits home with full force.

No more spur-of-the-moment trips to the beach.

No more partying into the wee hours of the night.

The free and easy life is supplanted by an existence that is costly and complex – but rewarding.

From that moment onwards – and over most of the ensuing two decades – you bear the joyous burden of preparing sons and daughters to assume their place in the world as happy, healthy adults.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Carl Sandberg wrote: “*A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on.*”

It's our responsibility as a society to ensure children always occupy their appropriate place in the family equation – at its absolute centre.

But with one-in-six Australian children at risk of neglect or abuse, we have our work cut out for us.

With one-in-four children unready to begin schooling because of poor developmental environments, we have our work cut out for us.

When the ABS forecasts a two-year decline in current life expectancies of Australian children by the time they reach age 20, we have our work cut out for us.

That's where the *NEST Opportunity Child Initiative* comes in.

The *NEST* will implement a grassroots pilot programme designed to enhance child wellbeing in 20 vulnerable communities across Australia.

I'm sure there's no dispute about the inherent goodness of that goal.

But the real question is not the place we want to go, but the route by which we get there.

To make real progress towards these goals we'll have to think and work outside the box.

To address the multi-faceted needs of vulnerable children with any real chance of success, we'll have to operate holistically and synergistically.

Aristotle described synergy as a process in which:

“the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.”

Achieving that wholeness of effort means transcending – or even dismantling – the silos that delineate inter-disciplinary boundaries and organisational turf.

This is one of the most encouraging aspects of the *NEST Initiative*.

It has already brought together over four thousand advocates, policy-makers, academics and service providers for a common purpose to achieve a common goal.

This combined reservoir of wisdom, knowledge and experience has generated tremendous synergy.

From that synergy flows opportunity.

Opportunity to make a real change for the better in the lives of Australian children.

The *NEST* will draw upon this multi-disciplinary network to address problems that are multifarious in cause and effect.

The Initiative recognises you can't arbitrarily quarantine issues of physical health from issues of social or emotional health.

They're all intertwined.

So while working to enhance childhood nutrition and reduce the incidence of low-birth-weight babies; the Initiative will also address perinatal depression, bullying and positive parenting skills.

It will broach a broad suite of issues ranging from Australia's alcohol culture to restorative justice strategies that reduce youth recidivism and a slide into career criminality.

Above all, the *NEST* will focus on early intervention.

If we've learned anything over the years in the realm of child welfare, it's that sooner is better.

The data is in and it's unequivocal.

We know that the earlier we address problems threatening a child's health or well-being, the more effective our remediation strategies will be.

The Initiative exemplifies this principle by fostering grass roots community initiatives focused on addressing child or family vulnerability before it evolves into full-blown crisis. Research tells us the longer children are exposed to problematic environments, the higher the risk of mental illness, substance abuse, criminality or homelessness later in life.

One Australian study estimated the aggregate annual national flow on cost of child neglect at roughly \$4 billion in 2007.

These statistics make it clear that Australia doesn't only have a moral imperative to improve childhood well-being, but an economic imperative as well.

While talking about dollars and cents, I should note that the *NEST* Initiative is being funded by \$10 million in seed money.

Not a single cent of which has come from government.

This tremendous act of generosity by the *ten20 Foundation* should serve as an example of what can be accomplished by good people coming together to do good things.

Because in the end, our campaign to enhance the wellbeing of Australian children must be a collaborative effort.

The Commonwealth certainly can't do it alone in remote control from Canberra.

Nor can individual providers, each acting on an independent basis.

Success will require all of us – government, academia, civil society organisations and local communities – working together in an integrated, multi-disciplinary manner.

That brings me back to synergy;

That brings me back to working together so that the wholeness of our campaign for childhood wellbeing will exceed the mere sum of our individual efforts.

So let's build on our strengths;

Let's draw upon our collective resources to fill the gaps left by our individual limitations;

Let's work respectfully and collectively to provide healthy, happy and nurturing environments for all Australia's children.

They deserve no less.

We are obligated to provide no less.

Thank you very much.

ENDS