

## A funding win for the children

On 7 April 2004, the Federal Government gave Australian children, families and the early childhood sector a vital helping hand - \$365.8 million to be precise. Announced by Prime Minister John Howard, this unprecedented level of funding is part of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which, over the next four years, will be integral in supporting innovative and grassroots projects for the early childhood and parenting community.

As stated by John Howard, the strategy will principally support early intervention to assist children and families where there is a strong likelihood that those children would not otherwise grow up in a stable and supportive environment. 'This approach', said Mr Howard, 'is based on evidence that effective intervention in the early childhood years leads to better life chances for vulnerable children, including better education and employment outcomes.'

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Honourable Larry Anthony MP, went further, 'Getting it right in the early years can help avoid future reliance on welfare, substance misuse and becoming entangled in the criminal justice system.'

According to the Australian Department of Family and Community Services, strong families with healthy, well-balanced children, require stable communities in which to grow. Given this, the strategy will continue to support communities and initiatives building capacity, leadership and mentoring - all geared towards empowering communities to develop local solutions to local problems.

'Our approach to helping local communities address their complex social problems', said Larry Anthony, 'has involved taking advice from and working with community organisations, business, academics and families. These stakeholders have unrivalled knowledge and understanding of local problems and we will continue to involve them at the highest level of social policy development.'

Funding will be available through four funding streams:

- Communities for Children (\$110 million over four years) will target up to 35 disadvantaged communities providing funding of up to \$4 million for local early childhood initiatives.
- Early Childhood – Invest to Grow (\$70.5 million over four years) will provide funding for national early childhood programs and resources.
- Local Answers (\$60 million over four years) gives communities the power to develop their own solutions and help them help themselves by supporting locally developed and implemented projects.

- Choice and Flexibility in Child Care (\$125.3 million over four years) will continue the in-home care program, extend incentives for all long day care providers to set up in areas of high need, and continue the quality assurance systems for family day care and outside school hours care.

According to Judy Radich, President of Early Childhood Australia, this announcement is 'a testament to the many organisations and individuals who have worked tirelessly to convince the Government, and other political parties, that an investment in children's early years will pay dividends; both in the short- and long-term for the child and for society. There is now no argument that early childhood matters.'

For more information on the strategy, go to the Australian Department of Family and Community Services website at: [www.facs.gov.au/sfcs](http://www.facs.gov.au/sfcs).

## Families and children win in the budget

As a result of the Australian Government's 2004-05 budget maternity payment, parents of young children will have a considerable option to stay at home with their baby in the early weeks of its life.

Entitled the *More Help for Families* package, the Government's allocation of funds in the latest budget - towards the family sector - is significant. Most families will receive an immediate one off payment of \$600 for each child. In addition, the basic family tax benefit will increase by \$600, which will be paid at the end of each financial year. This will be used to offset debts some families accrue because of failure to accurately predict their incomes.

'All families benefit from these measures', said Judy Radich, President of Early Childhood Australia. 'The only downside is that there is no tax relief for low-income families'.

The *More Help for Families* package also includes the introduction, from 1 July 2004, of a new maternity payment, paid as a lump sum of \$3000 for each newborn child. This will be a universal payment to all families (usually the mother).

Also established in the 04-05 budget is the creation of 30,000 outside-school-hours care places and 1500 family day care places, for new and existing services. Similarly, an additional \$16.4 million (over four years) has been allocated towards the Child Care Support Program.

'We know there are still enormous issues to be resolved in the child care sector', said Ms Radich, 'regarding the payment of proper wages and better conditions for the people who everyday are responsible for the care and development of the young children in these services. Nevertheless, taken together: the maternity payment, the changes to other family payments and the gains in child care places, make this budget the best one for children and families in many, many years.'