



Made in NZ: Kiwi Parents

A Discussion Document

Introduction

Background – Where We Stand Now

1. Since its inception, United Future's focus has been the promotion of strong families and vibrant communities.
2. As we stand roughly 15 months out from the next general election, it is an appropriate time to begin our formulation of policy for the 2008 election.

Our Focus

3. We know that it is within the family that a person's most profound development occurs. To raise a great society it is everyone's responsibility to strengthen families, to equip parents to do the best they can, to value the role of parents in society and to recognise that parenting is a vocation.
4. We know that parents are key contributors to the social and economic wellbeing of the nation. New Zealand faces many challenges. To remain competitive we must have generation after generation of top workers and entrepreneurs. We need more of our population working for a better society. Ultimately parents provide the values and strength of character that makes a great citizen. Consequently it is time to stop making parenting in New Zealand difficult. We are developing this policy because we need it for a better future for everyone.

Our Aim

5. This document seeks to ensure United Future policy addresses the concerns and stresses of parents and those who work at the grass roots of family life. We value first-hand experiences.
6. Not every idea mentioned in this document will become United Future policy. Some ideas are mentioned with the sole aim of hearing your views on a policy.
7. Our coverage of "family policy" in this document is not exhaustive, but we have signalled some of the ideas we are keen to get feedback on. We are obviously keen to hear back any other worthy ideas not covered in this document that you feel need inclusion and consideration.
8. We have chosen ideas that are either our policy at this time and we want confirmation/criticism of them, or ideas that are popular and we want to know what your views are on them.
9. Consequently, we have mentioned both the pros and cons of ideas so that you know we are flexible and not tied to any idea.

Our Hopes

10. United Future is a centre party. After the last two elections, we have signed Confidence and Supply Agreements with the Government of the day. It is our intention to continue to be a partner for the Government of the day for 2008.
11. Our hope is that you will work with us to develop our policies so that any gains from future agreements implement policies that reflect what is truly important for New Zealand parents.
12. To make this happen we need your feedback and support. Your responses to this document matter. They will help us form United Future policy for 2008.

Overview

The outcomes we seek are to:

13. Ensure parents have access to the skills and knowledge they need to be better parents;
14. Ensure families have the resources to provide a safe, nurturing environment for children;
15. Ensure children have access to the things that build character;
16. Understand and provide age appropriate support;
17. Prepare the next generation. Most will become parents - how can we ensure they have the skills and enthusiasm to parent well?

Chapter One

Building Futures

Rationale

Parents are, without doubt, the best people to raise their own children. In a perfect world families would have everything they need to thrive, but sadly we don't live in that world. However we can identify significant points of stress that make parenting difficult and work to alleviate those stress points, making it easier for parents to bring out the best in their children. We suggest that there are three pillars that a secure future and parenting success are built on:

1. Wealth and assets
2. Physical and mental health
3. Stable significant relationships

Stress most often comes when those pillars are under attack, such as when families do not have sufficient income, or when parents are struggling with their own relationship. Our policies are focused on helping parents strengthen those critical pillars.

Home Ownership

For most people a home is their most significant asset, and home ownership is the single greatest determinant of living standards for older New Zealanders. A recent study by www.interest.co.nz said that the average wage earner now has to set aside 81.2 per cent of their take-home pay to service a mortgage on an average house. This is up from 43.5% at the beginning of 2003¹.

In Auckland it takes roughly all of an average take-home wage to afford the mortgage on the average houseⁱⁱ. Single parents are on a hiding to nothing in the current environment. A long-term structural affordability problem now exists and any solutions may take decades to take effect.

The fear of receding affordability of homes is old news. What has changed is that experts are now warning that up to 60 per cent of the population (2.6 million) could be life-time tenants, priced out of the housing market. What we need now are solutions and leadership to turn it around before it is too late. The work to date is limited: the Welcome Home Loan (with low income caps and targeted at people living outside the main centres), a couple of green-fields projects; support for local government to manipulate planning mechanisms; and suggestions of a shared equity scheme. There is also an inquiry into house affordability by the Commerce Committee, which United Future supported. From 2010, Kiwi Saver will be able to be used as a deposit subsidy for a house, up to \$5000 person or \$10,000 for a couple, provided their income is under a yet-to-be-decided cap. Kiwi Saver also includes a mortgage diversion scheme proposed by United Future.

But this is all tinkering around the edges. There is no assistance for first home buyers living in cities whose combined income is over \$85,000, not a particularly extravagant income, even less so when it is the combined income of two people. The Government needs to recognise that there is a wider range of people who need help to buy their first home than are currently being assisted.

A quarter-acre section may no longer be the New Zealand dream, but property ownership still is. United Future shares that dream. It is an important part of kiwi way of life. We consider that there are a number of schemes that need to be better explored:

Shared Equity Schemes

Would a shared equity scheme targeted for all first home buyers help? Shared equity schemes act as an extension on an ordinary mortgage. A bank, the government, mortgage lenders or another private financier will contribute up to 20 per cent of a house's value at the time of purchase, reducing the size of the mortgage. No repayments are made for the length of the loan (say twenty-five years) or until the house is sold. At that time, the original contribution is repaid, plus up to 40 per cent share of any increase in the property's value.

In Australia, the schemes are accessible for not only first home buyers, but also to enable people to buy more expensive properties than what they could otherwise or to reduce the monthly/fortnightly repayments of the mortgage by re-financing. However, this scheme could be restricted in New Zealand to first home buyers and owner-occupiers, to reduce the capture of property for investment.

There are potential downsides to the scheme: it may be that shared equity schemes push up property prices, as vendors recognise that prospective buyers have more cash in their pockets. Arguably, this has happened with another Australian scheme, the First Home Owner Grant. But the long-term nature of shared equity, and because it is a loan, may counteract inflationary pressures. The increase to individuals' levels of debt may be another note of caution to the scheme.

Rent-to-buy

A different slant on the shared equity scheme is the rent to buy scheme. This scheme, which was a United Future policy in 2005, enables the rent tenants pay to accrue as equity in the house. Tenants could also buy the house at any time: their deposit could be either the rent paid to date or a percentage share of the capital increase of the property.

The State or non-governmental organisations like the Salvation Army or the Housing Foundation could support this scheme by encouraging its tenants who pay market rents to participate. At the same time, this would allow the Government to replenish its housing stock and so continue to help people who need housing.

Tax-free Income

Continual growth over the last decade without much personal reward has fuelled a demand for personal tax cuts. Counter arguments say this will benefit the rich most and deliver little to average working families, as well as magnify national economic problems like inflation. Yet the desire for income tax cuts remains.

We think that a way to deliver an effective boost to workers is to make base income tax-free: specifically the first \$10,000 earned income tax-free. This already happens in the United Kingdom, where everyone is entitled to £5,225 income tax-free. Immediately this would help all kiwi workers, but it would be disproportionately more useful for lower-income workers as a larger portion of their income would not be taxed.

It allows working kiwis to decide how best to put the extra money to good use, whether that be to buy their first home, pay the mortgage, school fees or unexpected dental bill.

Issues to consider:

- Is home ownership realistic?
- Do shared equity and/or rent-to-buy sound feasible?
- Should the government offer incentives for people who enter into shared equity schemes with family members to buy their first home?
- What do you think could be done to support increased numbers of homeowners?

Relationship Courses

Children are reliant on the good relational health of their parents and any other adult they rely on at home. The skills needed to sustain a life-long committed relationship are complex. As peoples lives change (children grow, job changes and so forth) the skills and understanding needed to maintain a healthy relationship change too - everyone can benefit from help in this aspect of their lives, but children benefit most when their parents' relationship is strong.

The end of a long-term relationship is traumatic – a recent article in the *New Zealand Listener* suggests that a divorce has a longer lasting emotional impact than the death of a spouseⁱⁱⁱ. There are financial costs and impact on children even when the Family Court is not involved. And when a third of marriages end in divorce, is it possible that at some stage, some of those divorces could have been preventable? If that is so, then it seems reasonable that guidance in the early days of a relationship would be useful.

Bearing this in mind, is there a role for the state either as funder or provider (probably through Relationship Services) to assist couples in a relationship course, with the focus on what makes a relationship work?

Relationship Education

Many of us feel uncomfortable seeking help with our most important relationships. Consequently a great many couples wait until their relationship is damaged beyond repair before seeking help. We want to change the nation's attitude to this because it will have enormous social and economic benefits if citizens have the courage to seek help to both improve and save their relationships. The obvious place to start this attitude change is in schools.

If we teach our kids relationship skills then we introduce to them the concepts of seeking help and ongoing relationship education. One of the benefits of relationship education is not necessarily the education itself, but the act of seeking help. This recognition that a person may not have all the answers sets in place a prior example of asking for help when s/he encounters difficulties in a future relationship.

Relationship education would be taught as part of a holistic life-skills curriculum at secondary school. The aim is to ensure that secondary education is focused not just on knowledge, but also its everyday application. Students should be equipped for successful interdependent living, not just for tertiary learning.

The advantages of relationship education at secondary school are that it would be universal and it supports teenagers at a time when they are beginning to form significant intimate relationships to form ones that are healthy. It may even encourage teenagers so that even when a relationship ends, it ends in a mature manner.

Marriage & Civil Union Preparation

Marriage/civil union preparation courses are already provided by non-governmental organisations and the charitable sector. In Australia, the Federal Government funded a relationship education pilot project to encourage engaged couples to participate in pre-marriage education through a voucher scheme and a relationship education kit^{iv}.

There are a few weaknesses to this option. The first is that it relies on couples initiating contact, although this could be offset by advertising. More importantly, it doesn't reach people who don't choose a formal recognition of their relationship. It may also be too late: by the time people choose to formally commit to each other, they have often been living together or in the relationship for years and a short course won't easily break the habits of years, despite good intentions.

Relationship Investment

At the time of moving in together or marriage, couples are obviously optimistic about their chances of a long-term relationship and may be unwilling to consider otherwise. A more suitable time to introduce relationship courses might be the birth of a child, when people realise that their relationship is undergoing change and are willing to acknowledge the stress of their new situation. Generally, the birth of a child is a reflection of the parents' commitment to each other and so a relationship course at this time would assist both parties to adjust to their new roles and needs of the other.

Relationship education through the media

These options above may be too heavy-handed. A third possibility is for a body like Relationship Services to run a broad education campaign in the media, giving people the tools to improve their relationships. There could be ideas about how to appreciate each other and how to handle conflict, for example. The aim would be to encourage people to invest in their relationship with their significant other, by giving them suggestions about prioritising their relationships. The benefits of this approach are that it would be universal and low-key. It would not be threatening and as information is given to people, it does not rely on any proactivity by individuals.

Issues to Consider:

- Do you believe that courses on relationships would help you and those you know?
- Do any of these options sound useful?
- What stage is the most appropriate/useful to benefit from relationship education?
- Would it be a concern for you if the State had a role as funder and/or provider of relationship courses?

Keeping Well

The New Zealand health system does better than most. It has excellent acute health care services, but its long-term elective and non-acute but necessary treatments are difficult if not impossible to obtain. Already operations to treat hernia and varicose veins no longer happen in public hospitals. This should not be surprising: as treatments have increased in volume and skill, so too have their prices. Health is not a bottomless well into which the government can keep throwing money.

If we can no longer expect the state to take care of us when we require treatment, particularly hospital-level care, we need to look to alternatives to make us well again. New Zealand cannot afford for the number of people receiving Sickness and Invalid Benefits to continue to grow.

Certainty of Care

We need to develop certainty in the health sector. A responsible government should tell its citizens what treatments they can expect in the public sector, including an accurate timeframe for that operation. Delayed treatment and empty promises do not make anyone well. It is better that people know what to expect of the public system and what must be conducted in private hospitals.

There are four basic concerns people have over their health services:

- They want it to be high quality with up to date medicines and technology;
- It should be affordable;
- Hospitals need to have the capacity (theatre room and staff) to conduct operations; and
- Operations must happen as soon as possible so as to prevent complications and patient deterioration (timeliness).

Contracts with Private Hospitals

In a country our size it is wasteful to have surplus capacity and waiting lists existing side by side. ACC already models efficient public/private interface and one option is to require DHBs to cull waiting lists by contracting work out to private hospitals. With the likelihood of getting certain treatments through the public system receding by the day, it could be time for a re-examination of the arrangements DHBs have with private hospitals.

Private hospitals assuage the concerns people have about their health services:

- The quality of care and environment at a private hospital is high.
- When contracts are negotiated with the specific intention to ease pressure on public hospitals for the long-term, they are significantly cheaper than the on-demand 'spot' prices charged for an operation the following week. DHBs could become like ACC: their funding cut-price and there is no profit in it for private hospitals, making it a public good.
- Private hospitals do have capacity that could be further utilised and through longer-term than exist currently, this capacity could be expanded.
- Finally, negotiations between public and private a year in advance rather than a week allow on-time operations, with waiting lists and times that are not continually pushed back.

At present, DHBs contract with private hospitals on an on-demand, ad hoc basis, usually towards the end of the financial year to use up funding so that in the next financial year, the funding will not be reduced. Certainty and timeliness of care will never be progressed when contracts are haphazard. When people need an operation, they don't care what name is printed on the bed linen. They just want to get well.

Health Insurance

In conjunction with increased co-operation between public and private hospitals, another way to improve accessibility to healthcare through greater utilisation of private hospitals would be to increase the number of people with health insurance. This could happen through tax concessions for those who take out health insurance or by making workplace insurance schemes tax deductible. If either option were re-instated, then health insurance would be cheaper and more accessible.

Transportability of Care

A third option to improve timeliness of care could be to make operations portable. If a patient is not seen within six months through the public system, then s/he is given a chit and can choose to go elsewhere, whether that be private or to a neighbouring DHB. This chit could be used not only for surgery but also for consultation(s) with a specialist.

This would enable people who can't afford full private care, but could pay in part (perhaps to see the specialist), to receive care faster. However, this still means delayed care by more than six months. As well, it may be that neither the private hospital nor a neighbouring DHB could accept the patient any faster.

Issues to consider:

- Are you willing to accept that some operations are no longer available in the public health system?
- Do you think the Government/DHBs should provide certainty about which treatments will be available in the public system and which will be only available in the private system?
- Under what circumstances should DHBs contract treatment with private hospitals?
- Do you have health insurance? Why/why not?
- Are you willing to part pay for faster treatment?
- Would you consider waiting up to six months for treatment and if that had not happened, to take a hit to seek treatment elsewhere, a satisfactory arrangement?

Chapter Two

New Parents

Rationale

There is increasing evidence proving that the physical, emotional, social and psychological aspects of pregnancy all contribute to the future wellbeing of the child and their parent/s.

Infant care, education and support for parent/s are vital. The growth and development of infants requires parents to rapidly acquire and adapt skills to meet the ever-changing needs of their children. If a parent feels isolated and disconnected during this time, then the experience for both parent and child can become unhelpful to the good health of both. This is particularly true for the stay-at-home parent and the single parent. Parents need to know how to access all relevant services. Parenting networks at a community level are important sources of information and support.

The Brainwave Trust has highlighted the importance of the first three years of a child's life in terms of brain development, and in particular the importance of parental attachment for healthy brain development. Neglect at this stage threatens not just their lives but their humanity - their ability to connect successfully with anyone, and their ability to give and receive love^v.

Too many lives and too many resources are wasted because we won't invest in young parents and they wind up raising problems, not children. Parenting is an investment. The return comes when the child grows up to be a contributor to their society, their community and their neighbourhood.

The push to increase workforce participation is backed up with the provision of childcare subsidies. While there is a benefit for a single parent to stay at home with his/her children, for a couple to choose to have one parent remain at home with their pre-school child is now viewed as a luxury and even unproductive.

United Future believes that questions need to be asked about the long-term cost to the nation of increasing difficulty for parents to have this choice. Do current incentives create a level playing field for couples deciding the care arrangements for their young children?

Income Splitting

United Future promotes income splitting because we consider it to be the fairest, most equitable, enabling mechanism for couples to raise their children. Income splitting is a tax process that permits a couple with dependent children to allocate their income on a 50/50 basis. Each partner is then taxed as if they had personally earned that 50% share with a significant reduction in income tax. It attributes equal value to the different roles each parent plays, whereas our current tax system does not recognise the stay-at-home parent's contribution. As part of the Confidence and Supply Agreement between United Future and the Labour-led Government, a government discussion paper on income splitting is being prepared and will be released in early 2008.

What is income splitting?

Take a single income family on \$60,000 as an example. Under the current system they pay tax of \$14,670 per annum, but under income splitting that would be reduced to \$11,700, a saving of \$2,970 per annum or \$57 per week. Income splitting would be a voluntary scheme.

Couples whose income is derived from a privately owned business or farm can already split their income, but those on salary or wages cannot.

Income splitting integrates paid and unpaid work into our economic structures, creating economic visibility for the work of parenting. It specifically recognises that the partner who has opted out of the work force in order to raise their children is making a full, indeed vital, contribution to our society.

Income splitting targets couples exclusively and offers no advantage to single parents. Consideration will need to be given to what arrangement will be needed for single parent families if income splitting is introduced. Visit www.unitedfuture.org.nz for a calculator up soon to see how much you would save through income splitting.

Home-carers Allowance

In some countries, at-home parents of pre-school children are paid an allowance in recognition of the work they do and the contribution they make. This is not and does not equate to a wage, and does not necessarily increase with the number of pre-schoolers within a household. Like income splitting, it is a mechanism to value the work of a parent who chooses to stay at home with his/her infant children.

It contributes to a level playing field of choice for parents of young children so that they may freely choose the best place for them and their children. Such parents are not taking up child-care subsidies so their funding is redistributed as a home-carers allowance.

It gives young families another choice, aside from the economic imperative for both to work and acknowledges the value of the work that parents do for their children.

In the United Kingdom, the Child Tax Credit is available to parents or carers of children or young people still in education. Families whose income is no more than £58,175 are eligible and the credit is paid directly to the carer.

Issues to consider:

- Should parents who choose to stay at home to raise their child(ren) receive a benefit for doing so?
- Do you have a preference for income splitting or home carers allowance?

Parenting Programmes

When a child is born so too is a parent. Just like a baby, parents have to learn what to do, what their role is and what good parenting requires. While vital work targeted at ante-natal, neo-natal and right up to five years old takes place almost universally, this has as its primary focus the health and well being of the child.

Desire for Support

When consultation with parents took place for the Agenda for Children ideas were sought for improvements to make life in New Zealand better for children. What emerged was the need for more parent education - education for parents about how to be a parent. Furthermore the consensus was that this should be compulsory and/or free. People view a strong link between strong families and effective parenting skills. It is felt that good quality parenting courses would improve the quality of family life.

A wide range of parenting programmes exist in New Zealand communities with different emphasises, depending on age-group focus and geographical base. Generally, all provide peer support, advice and techniques for parents. Adaptability is a key goal of parenting programmes.

Is there an ideal time to provide parenting programmes?

If parenting programmes were made more widely available, when would be the best time to run them? Some have said that the optimal time is when the first child is aged three or less. Others prefer to target parents of teenagers. Interest in attending parenting programmes may be based on the age of the eldest child and the pre-existence of behaviour problems.

Universal Availability?

All parents need information and support at times in their parenting lives, so everyone should be able to access parent education. Currently we spend a lot of money pushing at-risk parents onto courses, which makes parent education seem like a punishment and something that successful parents should not do. This myth keeps many parents struggling. But all parents face the same challenges. We want all New Zealand parents to be the most skilled and highest trained in the world so we want to change both the attitudes and the availability parents have to parent education.

Attention needs to be given to attract fathers to parenting programmes. Mothers are most likely to participate and it is often difficult to recruit and engage other family members. Men are not so inclined to sit in a room and absorb information on parenting the way women do. We need to help kiwi blokes step up and become fantastic fathers. Better outcomes (with long-term benefits) are likely if family members as well as than mother and child participate, especially when the programmes have a whole-of-family approach.

Limits of parenting programmes

Parenting programmes alone may not change well-established years-old patterns of inappropriate parenting. Indeed it is unrealistic to expect them to do so. It will take several generations to change some bad things - but this is worth it. By making parent education more accessible and connecting it with a regime of successful parenting we can begin to shift attitudes. Seeking advice and help when it is needed should not be seen as a failure, but the actions of concerned and responsible family members.

Issues to consider:

- Should parenting programmes be more readily available?
- Under what circumstances should parents/families access parenting programmes?
- What stage of family life is most appropriate for parents/families to access parenting programmes?

One-stop shop family service centres

Home visits by midwives and public health nurses have many advantages for a parent with a new baby. Once those allocated visits are spent parents still need to access information and support. There are a number of obvious barriers like knowing what to ask for, where to ask, and overcoming any cultural reticence about seeking out help. A one-stop family service centre would offer parents information on all the opportunities that exist for them and their children.

Centre services

Such centres stocked with information universally needed by all parents could help de-stigmatise the process of seeking help and facilitate better coordination of services. Centres could alert parents to information about:

- health checks;
- early childhood education options,
- relationship counselling;
- Working for Families entitlements, other benefit information and budget advice;
- parent education opportunities and support (such as the Parents' Centre provides);
- Both government departments and community organisations could be based in some way at the centre.

The experience in Britain has been that centres have as little or as many services available as is needed by the community it serves.

Current work

While an ECE centre based parent support and development project is being piloted currently, this is targeted at vulnerable children and has a strong education focus. This is absolutely commendable and necessary, but it is intentionally limited in its scope. There is so much more information and support available of which people are unaware that there is a need to expand such a service. Bringing together these key family services in one place would be so much easier rather than having to hunt for it at a time when people need help immediately.

United Future sees this as “fixing the family to fix the child” – a policy that values and support families and at the same time encourages parental responsibility.

Issues to consider:

- How useful would family service centres be to you and your community?
- Would you prefer home visits or to visit a family service centre?
- What information would you want to be provided at a family service centre?

Chapter Three

Parenting Primary-Aged Children

Rationale

Children's success during their primary school years is reliant on several key things. Firstly their readiness for more formal exposure to literacy and numeracy learning is vital. Children for instance, with a low record of oral language and from literature deprived homes, often spend their first few years catching up.

The second determinant of success is the ongoing level of parent involvement in their formal education. Another contributor to success is the child's own personal enjoyment of school, which is usually directly linked to their relationship with their teacher and their inclusion by other children when at play.

This is also the time of life when children can develop strong and enduring links to their wider community through extra-curricula activities like sports teams, cultural groups and character-developing programmes like Scouts. For boys in particular, sport gives them excellent opportunities to connect with better role models than they may have at home.

As children age, they become capable of learning more mature socialisation skills including more sophisticated skills of communication, the ability to respect personal boundaries and understand cultural differences. However, they are still dependent and while they are good receptors of information, they are often poor interpreters of what is happening around them. This makes them vulnerable in situations where their key relationships are characterised by conflict.

Character Education

Character education is about incorporating universal values such as honesty, respect for others and the law, tolerance, fairness, caring and social responsibility into a school's culture. Character education programmes, also known as values education and life-skills education, are established in full consultation with parents and staff and operating at least in part at 52% of New Zealand schools.

Different programmes, which favour different approaches and different values, are suitable for different schools and are selected by the school community, to reflect the values of that community. Arguably the demand for integrated and independent schools is a demand for schooling with character education.

Character education is not about having students acquire a "right view" but about ensuring that universally recognised values such as honesty and integrity are an integral part of the tone and culture of the school- even in a pluralist society there is common ethical ground. Schools that have trialled values education programmes report that their school is a friendlier and more caring environment for students and staff.

United Future would also investigate the possibility of introducing a greater component of 'civics' education into the curriculum, to ensure that kiwi students know about their country, its history, and how its basic institutions function.

Issues to consider:

- Have you encountered character education programmes at your children's schools?
- How useful is character education?
- Do you think character education programmes should be established at all schools?
- Should civics be embedded into the school curriculum?

Parenting Children with Disabilities

While all parents find their job difficult at times, we think the parents whose job is most difficult are parents raising children with disabilities. They are the unsung heroes of this country, particularly those whose children have high and complex needs. Considering that 11 per cent of New Zealand children live with a recognised impairment, it is a disgrace how little support is available to them and their families.

It's a well known saying that a society can be judged by how well it treats its most vulnerable members, but we believe that it should also be judged by how it treats those who care for them. In this area, we are particularly concerned about current services for parents of teenagers with disabilities as this is to be an area where the biggest service gaps occur.

United Future is currently working on a fuller policy discussion paper on disability issues, for which we intend to secure feedback from stakeholders in the disability sector. However, we could not have this paper not mention the sacrificial work of these parents. We're looking at these areas and welcome any discussion:

- Introduce a "Caregivers Allowance" for those currently providing unpaid support;
- Ensure that sufficient and appropriate respite care is available in every region;
- Consider the need for client-centred funding models;
- Establish advocacy services so that parents have more energy to give to parenting rather than chasing entitlements;
- Meaningful consultation with carers and clients when services are audited; and
- Addressed workforce planning, pay rates and qualification issues.

Flexible Working Hours

Work-life balance has become one of the buzz words of this millennium with the statistic from the International Labour Organisation that New Zealanders work the second longest hours cited^{vi}.

Raising a family is a hectic time, trying to juggle commitments of work, family and community involvement. The demands upon mothers have been acknowledged for over twenty years now as the 'double day's work', but this also applies to fathers.

What we want to know is how we, United Future in Parliament, can make your lives as parents easier and more rewarding. No one policy on its own makes a country family-friendly. It is the combination of policies together that is important.

These days both parents desire to be active participants in their children's lives. This means that the 'double burden' of paid work and childcare applies just as much to men as it does to women. While women may do more unpaid work, men perform more paid work. In addition, men are not generally acknowledged for the extra work they do in childcare or domestic duties. In a comparison of OECD countries, whereas New Zealand mothers work very similar hours to Swedish mothers, New Zealand fathers work the second longest hours with only British fathers working longer^{vii}.

Despite this, virtually no support is given to policies to help men increase the time spent with their children. In areas such as paid parental leave, the law targets women and permits fathers only to take the leave not wanted by their partners.

An indicative survey by the Department of Labour in 2006 suggests that most negative factors hindering work-life balance are deadlines and schedules, the type of work you do, expectations and attitudes of the supervisor/manager and workmates, and personal expectations about the number of hours needed to work^{viii}.

Employment Relations (Flexible Working Hours) Bill

The Employment Relations (Flexible Working Hours) Amendment Bill allows employees to request part-time and flexible hours and a framework through which they can negotiate working hours. The bill permits this right for parents with children under 5 years, children with disabilities and dependent relatives. That the need for flexible working hours exists was agreed by the whole Select Committee, but the mechanisms to provide them were disputed and where introduced they were not widely available. While United Future voted against this bill at First Reading, we are willing to reconsider our position and are particularly pleased to note that eligibility to negotiate for flexible working hours has been extended to include workers with dependent relatives. As baby boomers age, their needs will increase and will be managed by their adult working children.

There is a growing awareness amongst the business community internationally that reducing stress for workers substantially increases productivity. It is also acknowledged that family worries are some of the greatest reasons for worker stress. When children are sick or there is a sports day at school, parents are regularly torn between work and family obligations.

Issues to consider:

- Is managing the demands of work and family difficult for you?
- How useful would flexible working hours legislation be for you and your family?
- How do parents balance work with children's illnesses, sports days, plays etc? What improvements would help parents and carers manages these conflicting needs?

Chapter Four

Parenting Teenagers

Rationale

Traditionally viewed as a difficult age group to parent, adolescents experience a dynamic season of change. The physical growth and development experienced by puberty, the developing need to individuate from parental control, to more strongly identify themselves with peers and the desire to fit in or belong to a group other than their family are powerful determinants of family stress levels. The opportunity to experiment in activities that pose serious risk with serious consequences increases.

Throughout this time adolescents still need adult input and support. Both parents and young people can benefit from help to develop the new set of skills needed to manage their changing relationships in a positive and constructive direction.

The law progressively permits young people new freedoms and new levels of legal accountability. Secondary education increasingly offers them the chance to become more specialised, the chance to meet national qualification standards, with career paths up for consideration. Many young people avail themselves of after-school, weekend and holiday employment opportunities for the limited financial independence that provides.

Mental Health

The mental health of New Zealand teenagers is an area of concern. Teenagers experience expedient change in a few years: hormonal, physical and emotional, which means that their mental health is fragile. At the extreme, suicide statistics in this country show that all is not well with our young adults, with New Zealand consistently placed in the very top few, if not very top of international comparative rankings. Boys kill themselves at about three times the rate of girls, and Maori are more likely than non-Maori.

While figures are often quoted and lamented, little has changed to address this epidemic over the years. Most discussions stall over concerns that any discussions will result in copy-cat attempts. Some of us wonder if we could more effectively discuss with young people the factors that lead to suicidal thinking without dwelling on methods for committing suicide, and whether this could be helpful. The Wellington Coroner, Garry Evans, in particular has commented that he does not believe that the silence around suicide has helped curb the rate, saying that it is a community problem therefore the community must know what is happening^{ix}.

There are huge numbers of girls suffering from bulimia and other eating disorders. There are increasing numbers of boys displaying behavioural disorders. It is self evident that ones teenage years shape what kind of adults they will become. Investment to create healthy teenagers – mentally and physically is crucial – but this must be focused in the right areas.

Underlying this is that teenage years are a time of risk-taking. It is the very nature of teenagers to practise high-risk activities, in conjunction with little concern for the possible consequences. Some high risk activities can have negative consequences for mental wellbeing of teenagers, but does this mean that blanket bans are the solution?

Issues to consider:

Mental health services available for teenagers appear inadequate. But where should the focus lie? Do we need:

- Secure facilities?
- More psychologists or counsellors in schools?
- Compulsory mental health checkups for teenagers as they are notoriously bad at discussing their feelings and problems?
- More up-front education and discussion on mental health issues with secondary school students?
- More research needed to address what areas need to change?

Secondary Education

Secondary education has its own set of challenges and opportunities. Qualifications, career advice, pastoral care, specialist subjects, zoning, independent, integrated or state school and alternative school options, internal assessment, exams, school discipline, truancy, achievement and representative sport are just some of the issues that parents must face.

School Specialisation

Some in the community are keen to see secondary schools encouraged to become more specialised. While continuing to teach core subjects, schools could develop expertise in performing arts or sport or sciences. There is a drive towards this model in Britain. Some schools may focus on languages and art, some drama and production, others sport or music, some perhaps business studies, with another strong in building and engineering.

This is a model that could be further encouraged in New Zealand in order to provide a better range of alternative choices for secondary schools which accommodate different student's interests and strengths. But does a nation the size of New Zealand have the capacity to offer specialised schools, particularly outside of cities?

Flexible Education

Is there a need for schools to offer alternative methods to offer greater flexibility for students? Teenagers who are failing to take advantage of the opportunities available at the local high school, or simply not performing to their potential may benefit from more alternative programmes that may better suit the individual and foster better learning and personal outcomes.

In an effort to see students succeed, some schools are trying new approaches to the traditional classroom structure. One method adopted has been flexible school hours to better fit the changing biological clocks of their students. Adolescents' need more sleep than adults, but their body clocks are set to stay up later at night, and sleep in longer into the morning – any parent with a teenager can probably attest to this! Wellington High trialled starting the school day at 10:15am for their year 12 and 13 students, receiving positive feedback from students, parents and teachers.

Single sex classes within co-ed schools may benefit teenage students for certain subjects. Vocationally focused courses for students itching to leave and teen parent units to keep students in school are other options that schools could offer to cater for the diversity of students enrolled on their books. Do schools need to look outside the square a little more, or is this just likely to distract the traditional model of learning?

Finally, employers waiting for the next batch of graduates want greater clarity as to how to interpret student records. Many wonder at the number of students that do not seem to have the literacy or numeracy skills essential to make them employable. Should there be a focus on the basics?

The gender gap

Currently boys under-achieve compared to their female counterparts, both in grade achievement and in total numbers completing each year group. The significant majority of teachers are female, and some educationalists such as Dr Paul Baker (Rector, Waitaki Boys High School) argue that the New Zealand school system is better suited to the needs of girls, and the failure of boys is being neglected and trivialised^x. Economist Brian Easton analyzed 2002 NCEA results and found that, after decile had been controlled, boys from single-sex schools were 9 per cent ahead of boys in co-ed schools^{xi}. Dr Baker found similar margins in his study of 2005 NCEA results^{xii}.

This leads us to ask, does a qualifications system with an emphasis on internal assessment results through out the year (such as NCEA) disadvantage boys who, it is claimed, respond better in a more competitive exam-based environment? If so, then should there be more single sex schools built? Or an alternative could be for co-educational schools to offer single-sex classes for some ages or subjects, as boys and girls appear to learn better in different types of learning environments.

Issues to consider:

- Would supporting schools to become ‘specialised’ be a good idea or not?
- Should schools be more flexible in the types of classes they offer; such as teen parenting units, later start times or single sex classes within co-ed schools?
- What other flexibility could be advantageous to students and parents?
- Do schools need to focus more on the basics?
- Does the fact-based learning system of old need an overhaul to focus more on teaching useful skills and knowledge in the internet age?
- Is the gender gap in achievement a significant problem that needs to be addressed?
- What other issues are important to parents of secondary aged children?

Schools

Those who choose to send their children to independent schools often resent the lack of government funding allocated to their child. Others are frustrated that zoning sees them excluded from enrolling their child at “elite public schools” with a good reputation for academic results or sporting success. Parents are anxious that the qualifications their child is working towards are robust and credible.

Zoning

Zoning is a difficult issue and successive governments have introduced it, removed it and introduced it again. The positive outcome of zoning is that it does guarantee a child access to his/her local school. But by doing this, the negative consequence is that it denies parents and children their preferred choice of school. Zoning does create inequality, but parties that support its removal need to explain how they will guarantee that every child will have the right to go to their local school if zoning goes altogether.

During the last ten years, zoning has created artificially high property prices for houses within certain schools’ enrolment zones. If zoning were removed, prices would plunge overnight, wiping tens of thousands off many people’s most significant financial investment.

A school's roll is largely limited by the number of classrooms it can fit on the grounds, while maintaining suitably sized playgrounds, sports fields and avoid overcrowding. Schools can reasonably accurately anticipate enrolment numbers, in which case there could be room for a limited number of out of zone students and their younger siblings.

In 2005, United Future had a policy to review the current zoning arrangements to ensure right of access to local schools without limiting access to other schools. One way to achieve this is by allowing popular schools to expand the number of out-of-zone enrolments by ballot. This decision has to be left up to the school, recognising that many of those schools actually would want to contain the size of their school to ensure that the quality of education is maintained.

Independent Schools

We suspect that there is room for increased support for independent schools by moving to a per student subsidy, rather than the existing capped fund that does not recognise changing enrolment numbers. In return the state could rightly require disclosure of the taxpayer-funded component of fees by schools. This would alert the state and parents to the way the school spends its funds.

Many parents want to send their children to private schools, which lightens the burden on the public system. Should there be more assistance for parents who effectively pay twice for their children's education – once through taxes that support the public system and again through private fees, or would this be an unnecessary use of resources?

Options could include tax rebates for private school fees, or even some kind of a voucher system that would go with the child and allow either entry into public schools or a discount from private schools, paid by the government.

What could be done to maximise parental and student choice in which secondary school they can attend. Are there alternatives to zoning that are workable and desirable or is zoning the best rational system for enrolment?

Issues to consider:

- Do you support zoning? If not, how would you replace it?
- What support should be given to independent schools?

Tertiary Education

Student debt hit over \$9 billion earlier this year – and continues to rise at an express pace. While the Government counts this debt as an 'asset', in reality much of this debt will never be repaid and that which is can be a huge drain on young people for up to 20 years.

Much of this debt is from borrowing for living costs – up to \$150 a week. The percentage of students who qualify for student allowances has dropped over the past 7 years, and depends on parental income for those under 25. United Future secured a commitment from the Government that the age limit for parental income testing for student allowances would drop during the current term. Work has begun in this area, looking ahead for inclusion in the 2008 Budget.

Some students marry before the age of 25 introducing the idiocy of a married student aged 23 or 24 being subject to their parents' income for allowance eligibility. United Future will be pushing hard during negotiations with the Government for married students to be completely exempt from parental income testing. But it does raise the question: up to what age is it reasonable to expect parents to financially support their children in tertiary education?

As society accepts that the general age of adulthood is 18, should eligibility for student allowances be extended right down to 18 year olds? If a universal allowance was introduced, a student allowance would be likely to be minimal so there needs to be a discussion as to whether access should be maximised to reduce student debt for all students while accepting a smaller allowance or should allowances be maximised to benefit fewer people, more.

Issues to consider:

- Are the costs for students undertaking tertiary education reasonable?
- Should allowances be universal; if not, at what age is it inappropriate to means-test parents for student allowances?
- Should loans and allowances be raised from \$150 week for living costs?
- What other major barriers to students embarking in tertiary education have implications for parents & what should be done to break these barriers?

Chapter Five

Separated Parenting

Rationale

Close to one in three children in New Zealand are growing up in a house without both their biological parents. Some children have never lived under a roof with both their parents. Many other children and parents have had to adjust to family life after separation and divorce. A significant number of grandparents have also found themselves raising children that their own children have been unable to parent themselves, for various reasons.

Fatherlessness and the lack of male role models is a huge social problem in New Zealand. This is exacerbated by the fact that in New Zealand less than one percent of early childhood teachers are male and only one in five primary school teachers. By the time children reach secondary school, many have little or no significant contact with their fathers and have never had a male teacher.

Yet parents separate from and divorce each other, not their children. Most parents make every effort to ensure that the impact of their decision is minimised for their children understanding that ongoing conflict between parents is very traumatic and damaging for children. Children adjust more readily to experiencing family over several households if mum and dad collaborate and maintain consistent parenting strategies. The best interests of children are usually served when they have regular and significant contact with both parents.

Ideally all parents should have significant relationships with their children, regardless of their relationship with the other parent. However, post-separation contact arrangements are often difficult to agree on, with arguments about:

- sorting out which parent should have day-to-day care of the child;
- whether care is shared;
- what contact the other parent should have;
- and all this without discussion of money.

Caring arrangements and the family court system

Who should get the kids?

The family court often becomes involved if parents cannot come to an agreement independently, and in the majority of cases order day-to-day care to the mother, relegating the father to visiting or contact rights and instating financial childcare obligations to be paid to the mother. In only one in ten cases are physical guardianship arrangements ordered by the courts to be shared between both parents^{xiii}.

Is this the best pattern for children with separated parents? Is maintaining the stability of a child's relationship with both parents more important than maintaining geographical stability by living with only one parent in only one house?

Keeping it civil for the children

The "Parenting through Separation" programme run through the Family Court was actively supported by United Future throughout its pilot stage (then called "Children in the Middle") to become a nationally available course for families in the midst of parental break-up. The

programme content was written by leading professionals who specialise in helping families when parents have separated.

The information and tips in the programme are highly rated by parents who have already attended. The content covers:

- how separation affects children
- what children need during separation
- talking with children
- talking with ex-partners about arrangements for the children
- keeping children away from arguments
- how the Family Court works

United Future is considering whether such courses should become mandatory for parents entering the family court system. While this may seem authoritarian, there is unequivocal international evidence of the benefits of this sort of intervention. Unfortunately by the time families enter the family courts there is substantial hostile emotion involved and parents can be blinded to the best interests of their family. We accept that this is a normal human process, but if there is any point in a family's life when intervention is necessary, it is at this point and we should not abandon children and parents when they need us most.

Family Court changes

Issues to do with protection orders, delays and legal aid (or lack of) are often mentioned as common difficulties for those in the Family Court system. When parents end up in an adversarial relationship that centres on the future of a child, the risk will always be that half-truths, malicious allegations and tactics will be used by one or both parents to further their cause.

What needs to happen in order to rid the system of the most unfair and obstructive aspects of the Family Court system? Are the changes needed primarily legislative in nature, are they operational (such as reducing delays) or are they systemic in other ways? As going to Court should be the very last option, what can or should be done to encourage better communication and relations between parties, so that care arrangements can be agreed upon independently?

United Future has drafted a Member's Bill that makes explicit that assuming both parents are competent and loving, it is in the child's best interest to continue to have day to day care with both parents after divorce or separation. This would mean that the Family Court would in normal circumstances order that both parents share the care for their (assuming both parents want custody and cannot come up with a caring plan independently). This is a significantly different scenario than is currently ordered by Family Court judgements.

Issues to consider:

- Should parents share parenting roughly equally after separation, or should there be a main custodian and a 'visiting' parent in a normal separation case?
- Should programmes such as "Parenting through Separation" be mandatory for parents who enter the family court with child access disputes, or should counselling be mandatory?
- What changes would you like to see implemented in the Family Court to improve its service?
- What other issues should be addressed to assist separated families to function?

Child Support

The child support system in New Zealand exists to try and ensure that parents fulfil at least part of their parental responsibilities for the sake of their children. It is not an area that the state enjoys adjudicating over. However, it is a necessary intervention when separated parents' cannot reach their own agreements.

One of the difficulties that the child support system faces is the growing number of registered cases that it is involved with, and the associated challenges of growing child support debt.

Inland Revenue has put a great deal of effort into collecting child support debt over the past five years. In 2002 just over \$31 million of debt was collected. In 2006 this figure was more than double at \$67.6 million^{xiv}. However the growth in debt is rising faster than it can be collected which is a serious concern for IRD.

Formula and rules for child support will always be a balancing act between what liable and custodial parents' would like to see happen. Having said that, one way to encourage compliance within any system is to try and create a perception that such a system is as fair and reasonable as possible.

Australia has had many of the same challenges as New Zealand and has made changes in an effort to recognise time and money spent by liable parents with their children. Now the Australian system caps payment obligations above certain income levels.

Issues to consider:

- Should child support liability carry automatic rights of access to the child for the non-custodial parent? How could such a scheme work?
- Is the current payment formula too onerous?

Grandparents raising grandchildren

When grandparents undertake a role as guardians for their grandchildren, they are providing a huge social benefit for New Zealand and the children involved –but also constitute a financial benefit for the state that would otherwise have to care for the children itself. Grandparents raise grandchildren for many reasons, while parents are unable to parent themselves. Often this parenting happens for an unknown time that may start as temporary but turns out being long-term.

The personal toll on grandparents is significant. In a period of their life which would normally be free from dependants, the physical, financial and emotional strain for grandparents can be huge.

While United Future has continued to pressure the Labour Government to honour a pre-election pledge to raise carer rates for grandparents to that enjoyed by foster parents, we are aware that grandparents' raising grandchildren should be offered all the assistance that they need. This could be offering respite care, offering grants for sports gear and other such expenses or other help in areas to be determined by grandparents themselves.

What is clear is that this group provide a selfless service that is of great benefit to society and the children themselves and that this contribution should be acknowledged accordingly in terms of assistance available. These New Zealanders are fiercely independent and loathed to ask for help or demand handouts from the government. Therefore the feedback received through consultation should be listened to carefully, and acted upon as appropriate.

When family members step in to the breach created when parents are unable to provide safe ongoing care for their children, the pillars they have built for a secure future for themselves can be put at risk. Grandparents in particular can find that the added stress of raising young children can affect their health, use up their financial resources and put them in debt. Life-long relationships can take a battering.

United Future is absolutely convinced that grandparents raising grandchildren should receive the same rate and entitlements as foster parents. We also think that more can be done to provide regular respite care and to ensure that kinship care-givers are entitled to legal aid for custody disputes.

Issues to consider:

- What recognition do you think grandparents raising grandchildren should receive?

Feedback

As said at the beginning, the purpose of this document is to put forward a swag of ideas and hear your views on them. Each proposal has its merits, but there may also be downsides – apart from the ones we've already mentioned. Let us know these, too.

Please answer whichever questions you want.

Home-ownership

1. Do you think homeownership is an important goal? Why/Why not?
2. What do you think about the shared equity and rent to buy schemes outlined in this document?
3. What else could the government could do to support increased numbers of homeowners?

Relationship courses

4. Do you think courses on relationships would help you or people you know?
 - Yes
 - No

If you answered yes to the previous question, which, if any, of the options outlined in this document sound useful?

5. Can you suggest any other relationship education options?
6. Do you think the state should play a role as funder and/or provider of relationship courses?
 - Yes
 - No

Keeping well

7. Are you willing to accept that some operations can no longer be provided through the public health system? If not why not?
8. Do you have health insurance? Why/why not?
9. Under what circumstances, if any, do you believe DHBs should contract with private hospitals?
10. What is your opinion of the 'Transportability of Care' option outlined in the document?

Income splitting

11. Do you support the idea of income splitting? Why or why not?

Home-carers allowance

12. Do you support the provision of an allowance for parents' that choose to stay home to raise their children?
 - Yes
 - No

Parenting programmes

13. Do you think there is a need for greater access to parenting programmes?
 - Yes
 - No
14. Do you think such courses should be provided free of charge or under a user-pays system?
15. What stage of family life is most important for parents/families to access parenting programmes?

Family service centres

16. Do you think there is a need for family service centres? Why/why not?
17. Considering the delivery options outlined in the document and any other options you can think of, which option, if any, would you prefer and why?

Character education

18. What do you think of character education programmes?
19. Have you encountered character education programmes at your children's schools?
 - Yes
 - No
20. Do you think civics education should be embedded into the school curriculum?
 - Yes
 - No

Parenting children with disabilities

21. If you are a parent, know parents or carers of children with disabilities, what three things would help them in their job of raising this child?

Work-life balance

22. Is managing the demands of work and family difficult for you?
 - Yes
 - No
23. How useful would the Flexible Working Hours Bill be for your family?
24. Is there anything else that could be added to or changed in the bill to make it more useful?

Teen mental health

25. What are your priorities for teen mental health?
26. Why does our system let us (and our teenagers) down?

School specialisation & flexible education

27. Do you think supporting schools to become more specialised is a good idea? Why/why not?
28. What changes to schools teaching and/or structure do you think would be advantageous, if any? (you may want to consider some of the options outlined in the document or any of your own ideas)
29. In your opinion, what are the most important issues facing parents of secondary school students today?

Schools

30. Do you support zoning? If not, how would you replace it?
31. What support should be given to independent schools?

Student support

32. What is the most important issue for students and parents regarding tertiary education?
33. Do you think student allowances should be universal; if not at what age is it appropriate to means-test parents for student allowances?
34. What do you think about the current maximum weekly entitlement of \$150 for student allowances?
 - much too low
 - too low
 - about right
 - too high
 - much too high

Shared parenting

35. Currently after a separation one parent is usually deemed the main custodian and the other a 'visiting' parent. Do you think that parents should share parenting roughly equally after a separation?
- Yes
 - No
36. Should programmes such as "Parenting through Separation" be mandatory for parents who enter the Family Court with child access disputes, or should counselling be mandatory?
37. Are there any particular changes you would like to see implemented in the Family Court?

Child support

38. Are there any aspects of the New Zealand child support system that could be improved?

General comments

39. Are there any other comments you would like to make on United Future's parents discussion document, or on parenting generally?

Grandparents raising grandchildren

40. Do you think that grandparents who raise grandchildren should receive the same carer rates and entitlements as foster parents? Why or why not?
41. Do you think regular respite care should be provided to grandparents raising their grandchildren?
- Yes
 - No
42. Do you think legal aid should be available to grandparents who raise grandchildren for custody disputes?
- Yes
 - No

Freepost to Judy Turner MP, United Future, Parliament Buildings, Wellington

May we post or email you information?

Name:

Address:

Email:

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- ⁱ <http://www.interest.co.nz/HLA/HLA-NZ-July2007.asp>, last accessed 10 August 2007.
- ⁱⁱ <http://www.interest.co.nz/HLA/Auckland%20home%20loan%20affordability%20July%202007.pdf>, last accessed 10 August 2007.
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- ^{iv} Donovan Research (2001) "Pre-Marriage Education Pilot Project", [http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/premarriage/\\$file/FinalReport.pdf](http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/premarriage/$file/FinalReport.pdf), last accessed 10 August 2007.
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- ^{vii} ^{vii} Callister, P. (June 2005) *The Changing gender distribution of paid and unpaid work in New Zealand*, Wellington: The Treasury, p.12.
- ^{viii} Fursman, Dr L (2006) *Work-Life Balance in New Zealand*, Wellington: Department of Labour, p.19.
- ^{viii} http://ourhouse.parliament.nz/NR/rdonlyres/90BE3C5A-9074-460C-B9A6-8D7B618D5A6D/44947/DBHOH_BILL_6638_38994.pdf (downloaded 4th April 2007), p.1.
- ^{ix} Welham, K. (February 2007) "The silence isn't working" in *The Dominion Post*.
- ^x Chalmers, A. (April 2006) "NCEA 'contributes to gender gap'" in *The Dominion Post*.
- ^{xi} <http://www.eastonbh.ac.nz/?p=442>, last accessed 10 August 2007.
- ^{xii} Baker, Dr P. (April 2006) "Understanding the gender gap" in *The New Zealand Herald*.
- ^{xiii} Question for written answer No. 9643 (2006) Judy Turner MP to the Minister for Courts.
- ^{xiv} Question for written answer No. 6036 (2007) Judith Collins MP to the Minister of Revenue.