

The Essential Role of Social Work in Child Welfare

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Children's Commissioner



ANZASW National Congress
Christchurch
3 April 2008



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CHILDREN'S
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Introduction

- **Role of social work in child welfare becoming more important**
- **Core statutory profession responsible for the safety of children and young people**
- **Challenges**
 - **Soaring notifications**
 - **Creating systems that cross silos**
 - **Creating multidisciplinary approaches**



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Responding to the challenges

- Increased knowledge base
- Partnership with families
- Preconceptions about nature of children, childhood and social problems locate both the problem and the solutions in the wrong places
- Early intervention
- Choices about caring

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.



The Role of the Children's Commissioner

- Established under CYP & F Act 1989
- Focus on operation of the Act and the Department administering it
- Ambiguity and tension led to calls for increased independence



Children's Commissioners Act 2003

- **Independence of role strengthened**
- **Commissioner is an independent Crown Entity**
- **Retain important responsibilities to monitor and review CYF**
- **Additional responsibilities in relation to UNCROC:**
 - **Promote understanding of and advocate for children's interests, rights and welfare**
 - **Raise awareness and understanding of UNCROC**
 - **Promote participation of children in decision-making**



Strategic Goals



Titiro Whakatau Ano' - Thomas
Lauterbach

- Every child and young person is safe and nurtured
- Every child and young person has access to resources and opportunities
- Promote and raise awareness of children's rights

The State of the Nation's Children

MSD Indicators: Education

- In 2006 97% of 3 year olds and 103% of 4 year olds attend early childhood education services
- In 2006 60% of school leavers had NCEA level 2 or above (57% in 2005)

9% more females than males

European 65%

Maori 37%

Pacific 50%

Asian 82%



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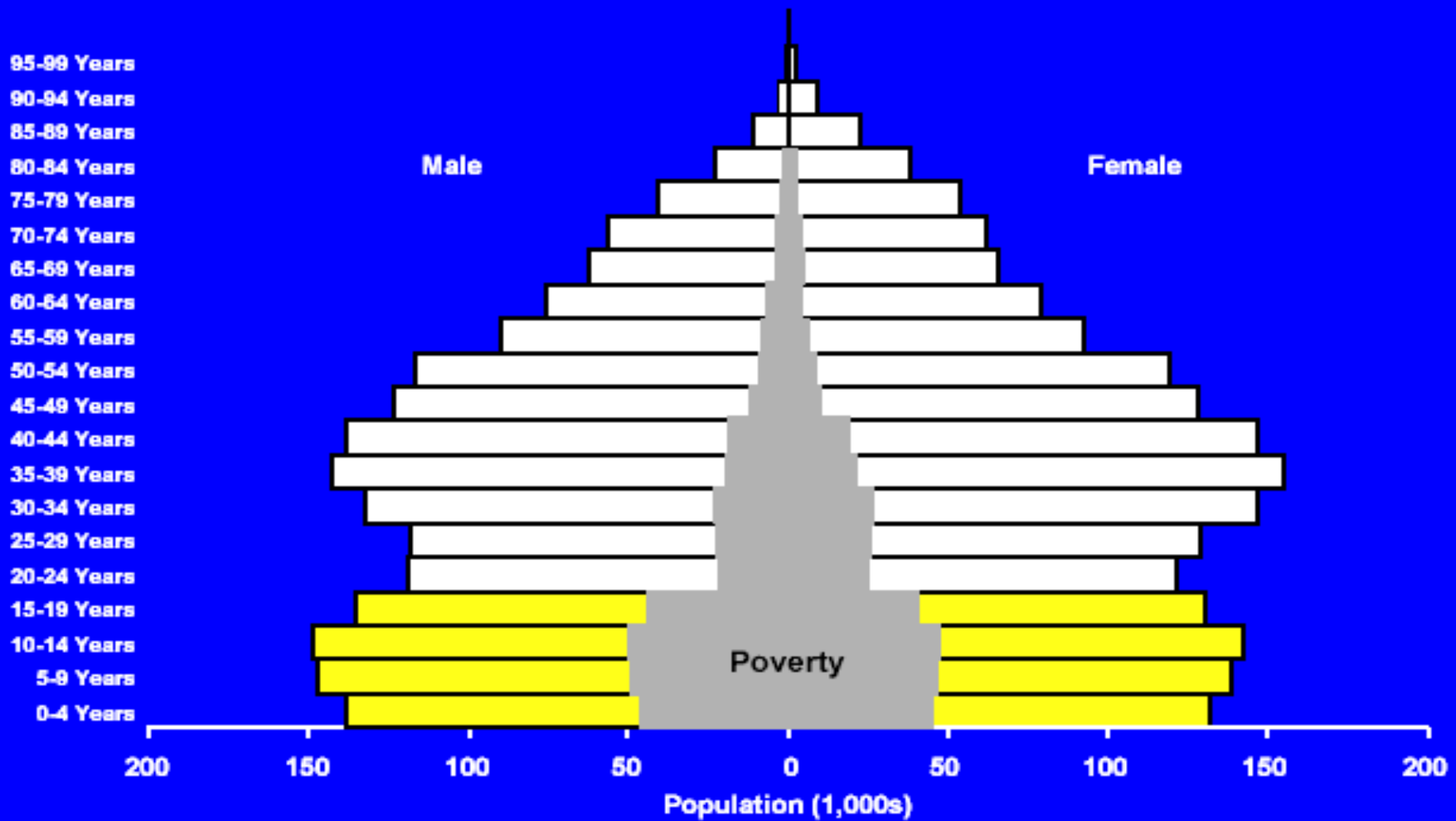


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Source: Professor Innes Asher

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Child Abuse in New Zealand



Tom Scott Productions
24 September 2003

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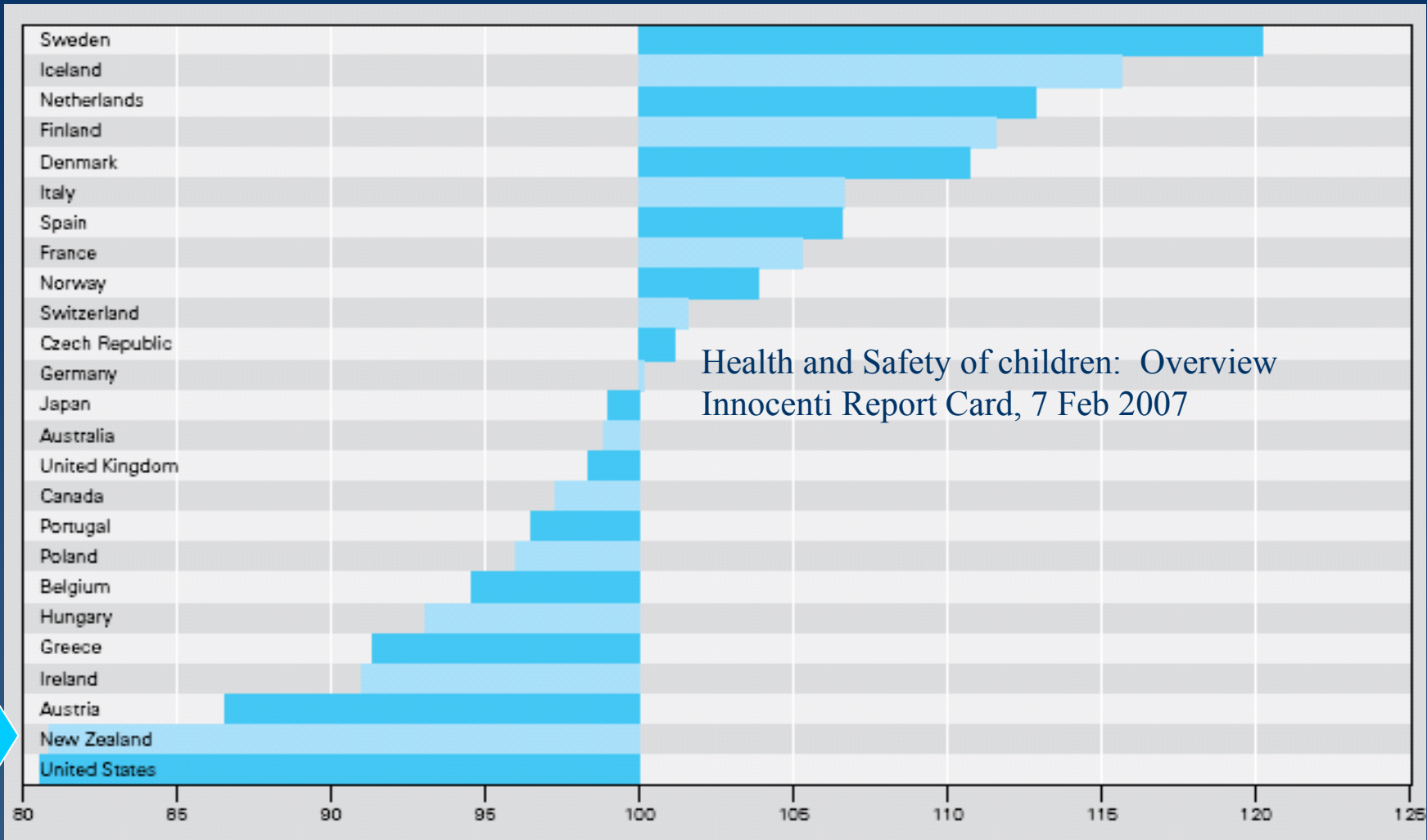
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Safety and survival

- **Major causes of avoidable death from injury:**
 - **Traffic injury, drowning & homicide**
 - **Fire related injury for children under 5**
- **Over half these deaths and a third of hospital admissions involve children under 5 years**
- **In 2004 35 young women and 112 young men committed suicide**
- **Over period from 2002–2004 suicides in 10–14 age group increased**





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Attitudes to Children

- **Debate over repeal of s59**
 - **Polarised children's rights and parents' rights**
- **Fear that parents would be criminalised**
 - **Frightening children as well as adults**
- **Ambivalence about children and their position in our society**
 - **Some way to go before we recognise social processes that allow children to be discriminated against**



Impact on NZ society

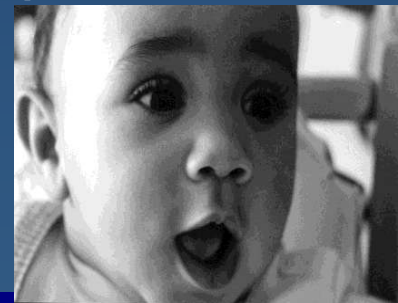
- **Changing demographic structure**
 - Aging population
- **Future productivity of every child and young person is important**
 - For families and for society



Importance of early experience

- Children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn
- Early environments matter and nurturing relationships are essential
- Society is changing and the needs of young children are not being addressed
- Interactions among early childhood science, policy and practice are problematic

(National Research Council Institute of Medicine, 2000)



Impact: Youth offending

- Children who go on to commit serious offences are identifiable by the time they go to school
- High cost of serious youth (and later adult) offending
- When we fail to find out how to prevent it and how to deal with it, it becomes easier to blame offenders and hence to stigmatise all young people



TEENAGERS :

they have no legal rights... let's blame them for society's problems!



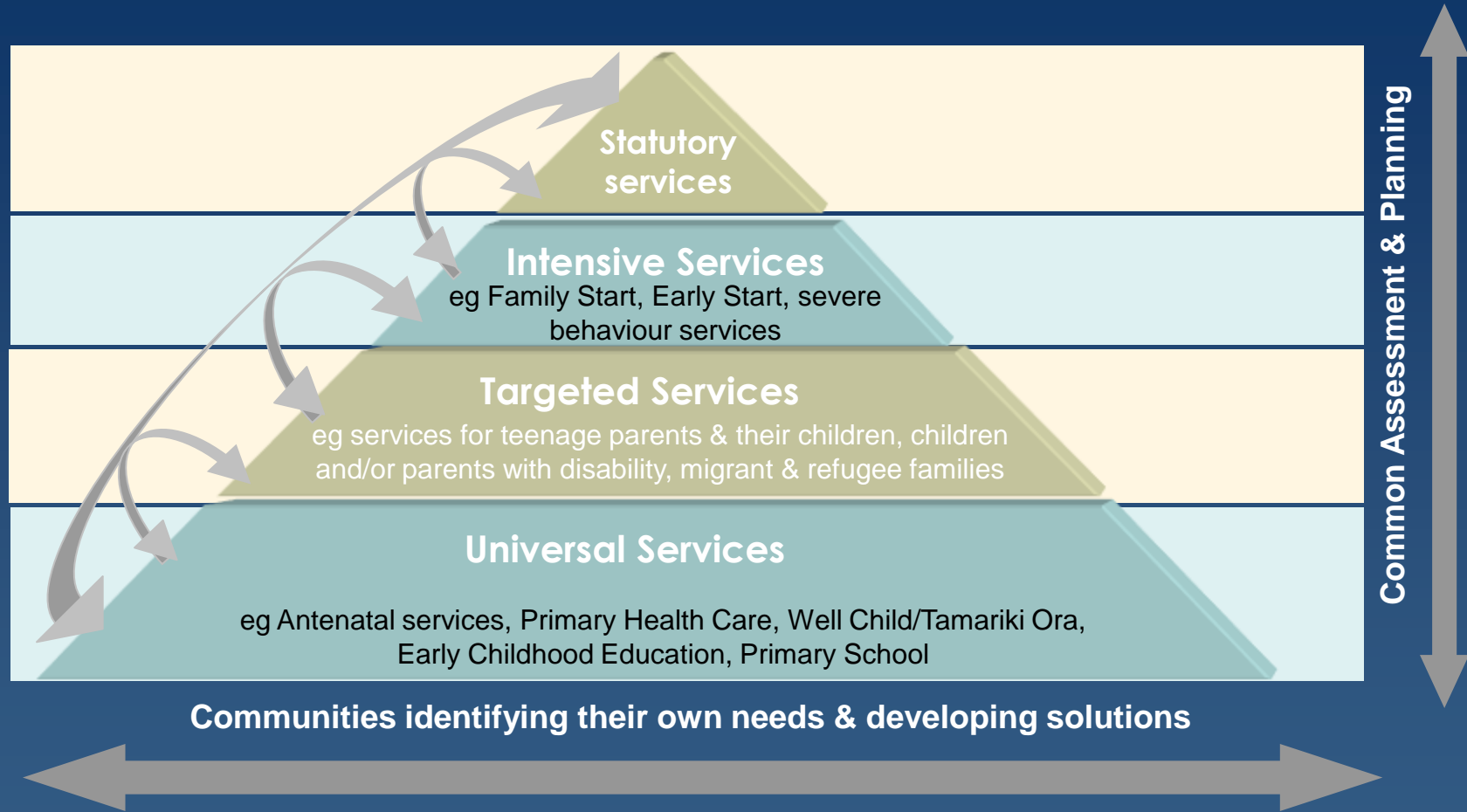
Impact: Parenting

- Parenting behaviour is learned
- Assumptions that parents who abuse are a distinctly different group ignores a number of things:
 - Abuse is a spectrum
 - Physical violence is ok for children
 - Many cases of serious abuse start out as disciplinary events
 - Cyclical nature of abuse
- How we are parented provides the foundation for the rest of our lives



Kia Puāwai - The Framework

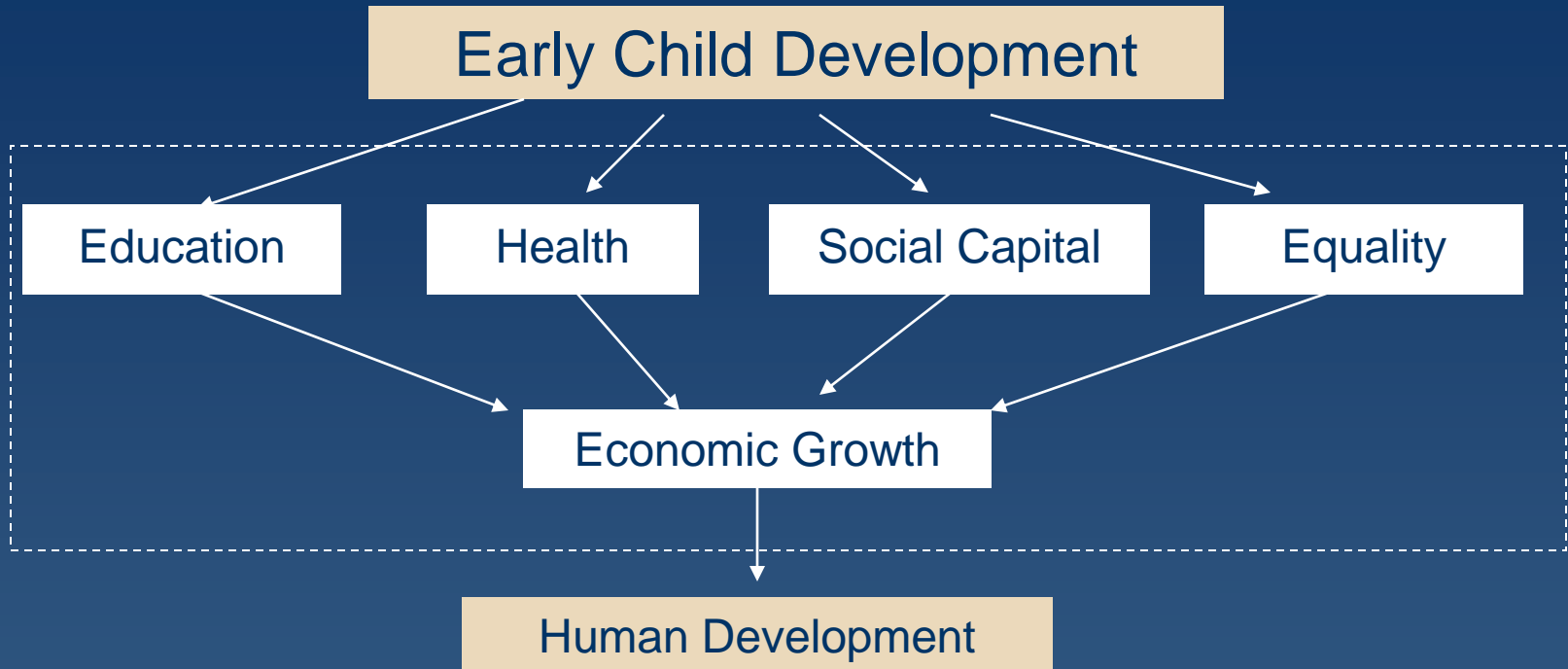
System of services and supports for children & their families



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From Early Child Development to Human Development:

Investing in our Children's Future

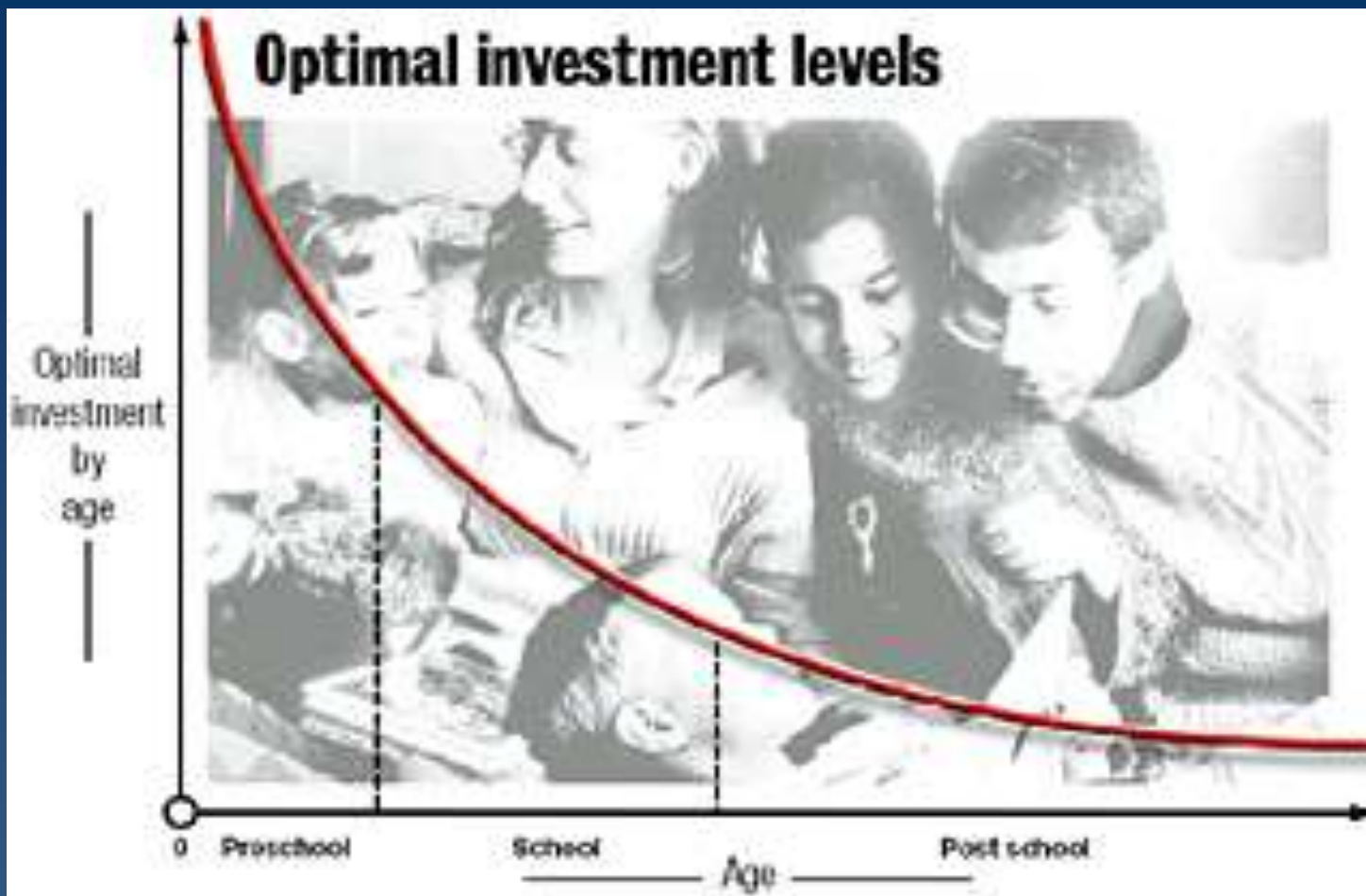
The World Bank 2002, pg 74

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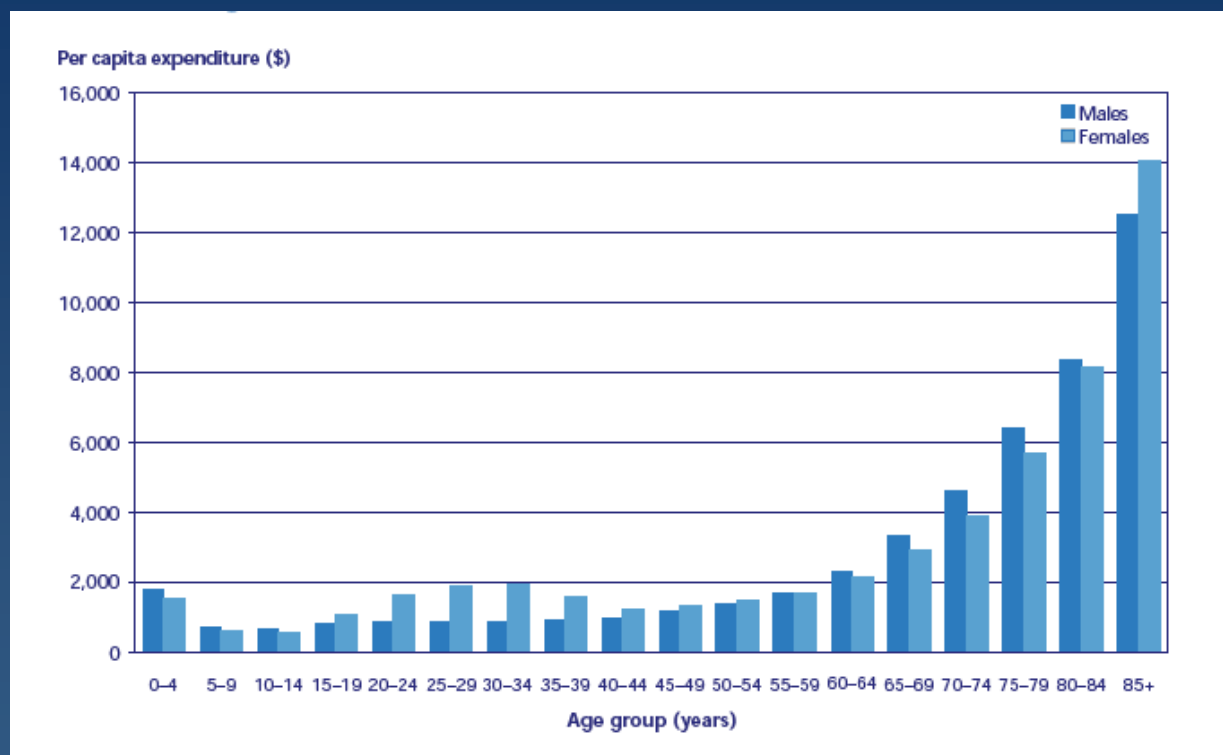


Source: Pedro Carneiro and James Heckman (2003)
Herald graphic 23.05.03

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Estimated annual per capita Vote:Health expenditure on health and disability support services, 2001/02



Ministry of Health,
2003
*New Zealand
Health and
Disability Sector
overview*

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Nature vs nurture

- Children are not born bad
- Come into the world with genetic and temperamental predispositions

BUT

- Outcome is determined by the interaction with the environment
- Nature and nurture

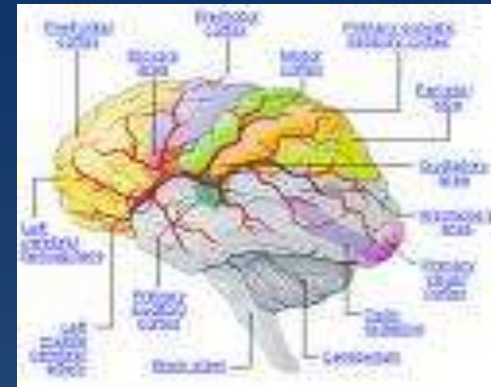


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Brain Development

- Not complete at birth
- Rapid growth over first three years
- Sequential and use-dependent
- Environment is crucial and primary caregiver is the major provider of environmental cues
- Combination of differentiation and integration
- Self-regulation
- Reflective function



Resilience: Protective factors

- **Not all children born into difficult circumstances have negative outcomes**
- **Balance of risk and protective factors**
- **Relationships are the source of the most important protective factors**
- **Early intervention ensures that children are not left struggling in unsupportive environments**
- **Parents want the best for their children - early engagement provides them with opportunities to change**



Early intervention in the life of the problem

- Challenges are not confined to the early years
- Families are not static
- Challenges can arise from normal developmental processes
- Challenges may arise from major life events such as illness, death, and accidents



Role of Social Work

- Children are dependent on adults to notice and intervene when things go wrong in their lives
- If parents are unable or unwilling then other adults must fill this role
- In these circumstances social workers are likely to become involved
- Fragmentation of service delivery and focus on adults may mean that children are overlooked



Children as the focus for intervention

- Children become the primary focus when they offend or there are care and protection concerns
- CYF or community based agencies become involved
- May encounter obstacles in gathering information needed to complete assessment
- Bill to amend CYP & F Act recognises this difficulty and includes provision for exchange of information



Attitudes as an obstacle

- Children are not always spoken to or even sighted during investigations of alleged abuse
- Children rarely attend care and protection Family Group Conferences
- Reasons are framed in terms of protection but their absence silences their voices and increases the risk that adult issues predominate



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Kawerau South School



Young People's Reference Group



Children's right to participation

- **Article 12**

Confers the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and the right to have those views given due weight in accordance with age and maturity

- **Recognised in Care of Children Act 2004 and Bill to amend CYP & F Act**



ANZASW Code of Ethics

2.3 Members advocate social justice and principles of inclusion and choice for all members of society, having particular regard for disadvantaged minorities. They act to prevent and eliminate discrimination against any person or group based on **age, beliefs, culture, gender, marital, legal or family status, intellectual, psychological and physical abilities, race, religion, sexual orientation, and social or economic status.**

Uncertain about the extent to which children are recognised as a group who are discriminated against on basis of age



UNCROC & Te Tiriti o Waitangi

- **UNCROC is explicit about children's right to family and to cultural belonging and identity**
- **No reason that UNCROC and Te Tiriti cannot stand together as founding documents**
- **Given that Maori children are over-represented in negative statistics in all domains arguing against an emphasis on their rights appears to contradict the fundamental social justice premise on which the ANZASW code of ethics is based.**



Social Work's contribution to child welfare

- **Valuing children**
 - **Not just because they are our future but as important human beings in their own right**
 - **Recognise them and prioritise them in actions as well as words**
- **Modelling appropriate behaviour**
 - **Failure to consult children conveys a powerful message to both parents and their children**



Realising the potential

- **Social Work education and training**
 - Importance of early experience
 - UNCROC
 - Communication skills
- **Prioritising children**
- **Timely intervention**



Te Ara Tukutuku Nga Whanaungatanga o Nga Tamariki



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- Ten year vision
- Universal
- Assessment for every child
- Whole child approach
 - Physical
 - Emotional
 - Cognitive
 - Social
- Key transition points



Weaving Pathways to Well-being

Partnership with families

- Child-centred & family focused
- Early identification of need
- Develop and build on strengths
- Professional co-ordination
- Shared information
- Workforce development

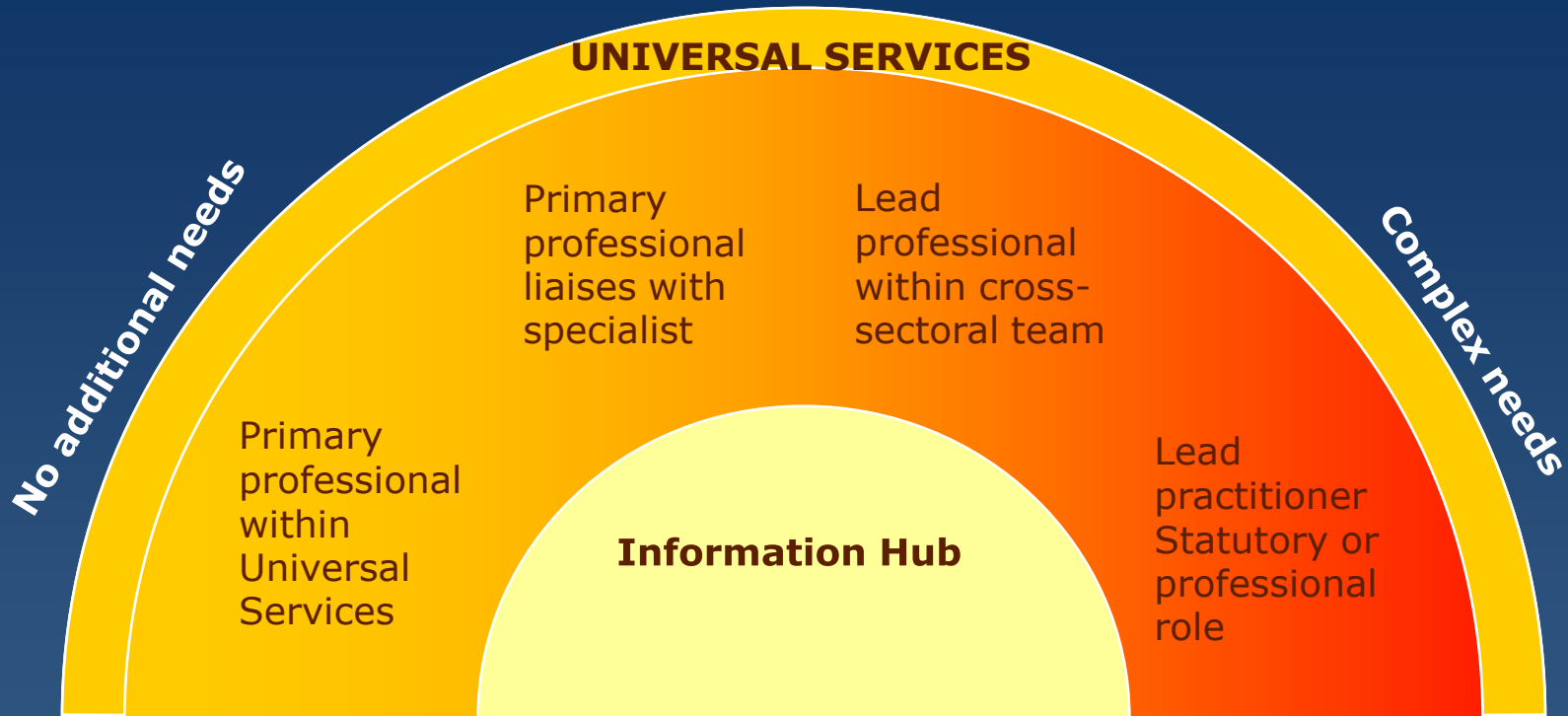


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RESPONSIVENESS

Some additional needs



Adapted from *Making it Happen*, 2006, England

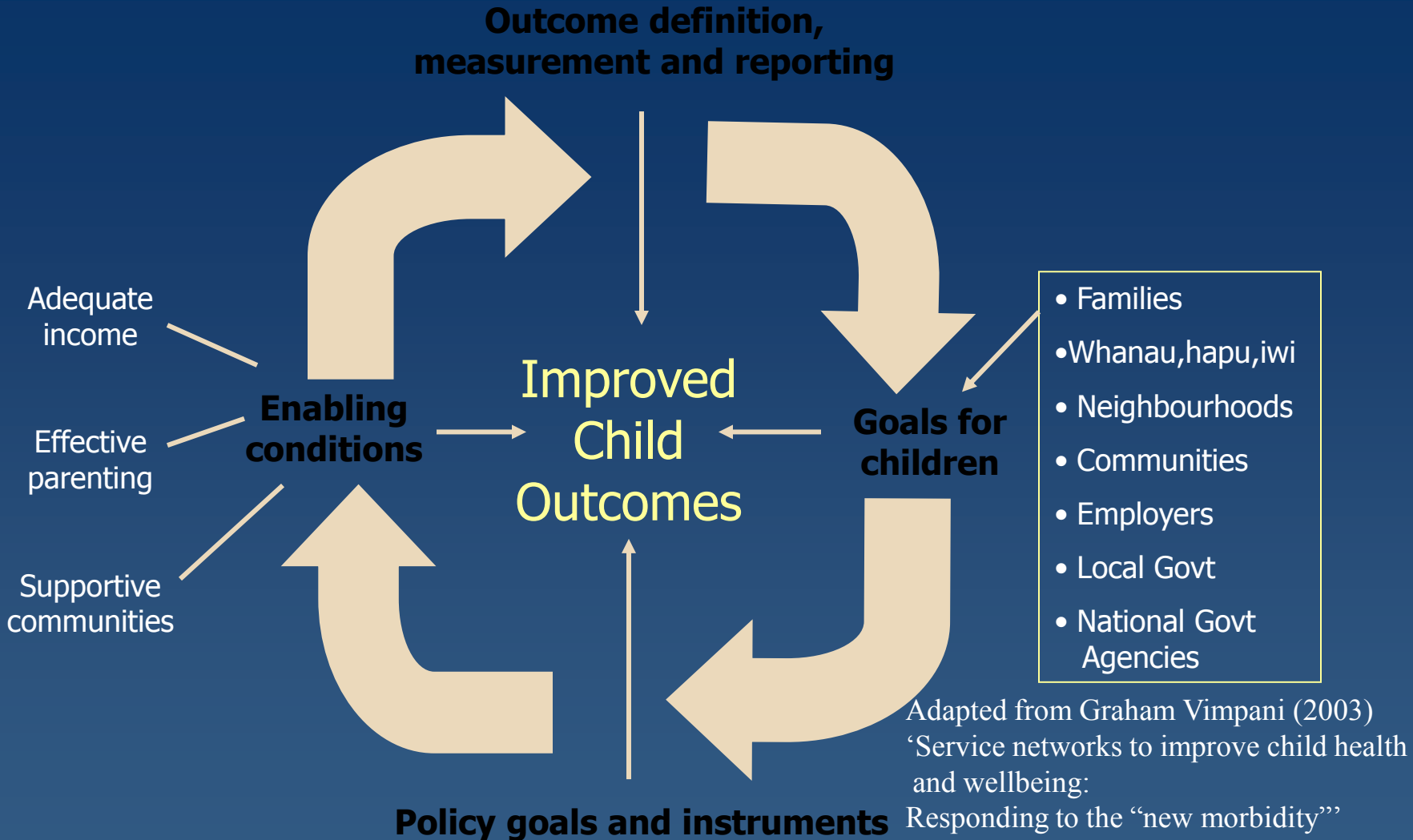
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Components of a Societal Strategy for Children



Developing community networks

- Families facing challenges do better in supportive communities
- Informal networks are more effective than formal networks
- Potential for early childhood education centres and schools to provide support



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Overcoming barriers to collaboration

- Respectful working relationships
- Managing anxiety about abuse
- Being open to new knowledge and models of practice
- Belief that change is possible



Concluding Comments

- To ensure that all children have the opportunity to fulfil their potential integrated service delivery is needed
- Importance of being child-focused
- Heartened by:
 - Excellent programmes
 - Sea-change among Maori and Pasifika
 - Parents who want to do a better job
 - Social workers for sticking to a difficult job
- Making a difference is possible



OCC vision

Healthy, happy, secure and loved children



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A goal we can all aspire to

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