

Our Families

Our Strength

Our Future

Our Families, Our Strength, Our Future - Families are the very heart of Australian life. Our families give us strength and support to carry us through our difficult times. Families are also the best social welfare system ever devised. Stronger families and strong family life mean a stronger and better Australia.

Our Families, Our Strength

Our Future

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Executive Summary

Tax Reform for Families:

The Coalition will:

- **Lower Australia's stifling personal income taxes to increase incentives to work and save.** Under the Coalition's tax plan more than 80 per cent of taxpayers will pay a top marginal tax rate of only 30 cents in the dollar or less.
- **Provide a more generous and simpler system of family benefits with:**
 - **a doubling of the tax free threshold increases provided under the Coalition's Family Tax Initiative; and**
 - **additional incentives to work and save by increasing the income threshold at which family benefits are reduced, and reducing the withdrawal rate from 50 cents per dollar of extra income to 30 cents a dollar.**
- **Provide a 30 per cent tax rebate or benefit for private health insurance premiums from 1 January 1999.**
- **Provide a simpler and more generous system of child care benefits.**

Families and Relationship Support

The Coalition will:

- **Provide \$16 million for 25 new children's supervised contact services** in urban and regional centres to assist parental contact arrangements;
- **provide \$16 million for additional counselling and mediation services** to assist families resolve disputes. This avoids costly legal fees and emotionally debilitating court proceedings;
- **provide \$10.5 million to further assist men in their family relationships** through new support networks and services;
- **provide \$6 million for additional Marriage and Relationship Education Services;** and
- **provide \$3 million for three national toll-free 1800 advice services on family law issues**, for carer parents and parents who are liable to pay child support.

Fighting Suicide

The Coalition will:

- **provide \$48 million for a new National Suicide Prevention Strategy** to strengthen and build upon the Coalition's current National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy and help other at-risk groups within our community.

Caring for Young Disabled People

The Coalition will:

- **provide \$20 million for a further extension of carer respite support** targeted at the carers of young people with a disability.

Labor's record

Families Neglected

Labor failed Australia's families in 13 years of government:

- **Labor left a trail of broken tax promises.** The tax cuts promised before the 1993 election – **tax cuts pledged as L-A-W - were never delivered.** Instead, Labor raised sales tax on hundreds of thousands of common household items and provided no compensation to low income families.

- **Labor's mushrooming government debt and the recession "we had to have", placed greater strains on families through Labor's crippling high interest rates and taxes.**
- **Labor failed to ensure that Australia's children were fully immunised** against diseases such as whooping cough, polio and measles. Labor's legacy left our immunisation rate ranked 68th in the world, behind countries like China and Algeria.
- **Labor was totally irresponsible in its planning and management of publicly funded childcare. Labor allowed unchecked and unsustainable growth in childcare places in some areas, while inadequate services were available in other areas, such as rural and regional Australia.**
- **Labor did not provide adequate assistance to families using Outside School Hours Services.**
- **Labor failed to provide thousands of Australians caring for disabled or frail aged family members and loved ones with adequate recognition or support.**
- **Labor failed to provide adequate funding for suicide prevention.**
- **Labor did not fund and deliver adequate marriage and relationship education and counselling services.**
- **Labor failed to deliver adequate support to men in their family relationships.**
- **Labor ignored the need to provide adequate funds to enable community organisations to give emergency relief to people in need.**

The Government's Achievements

The Coalition remains steadfastly committed to the family as our basic social unit.

Strong families offer the most effective nurturing and support for family members of all ages – from young children to parents and grandparents. Strong families are crucial to maintaining a strong, cohesive and compassionate society, and are the best social welfare system ever devised.

Financial Benefits for Families

The \$1 billion **Family Tax Initiative** was the centrepiece of the Coalition's **Family Tax Package promised during the last election.**

Commencing on 1 January 1997, the initiative demonstrated the Coalition's commitment to relieving the financial pressures on low and middle-income families bringing up children.

Two million Australian families with dependent children continue to benefit from the Family Tax Initiative.

The Family Tax Initiative recognises, through the tax system, the costs of bringing up children, including the income forgone by families with only one parent in the paid workforce.

The Family Tax Initiative benefits needy working families by increasing the tax free threshold by \$1,000 for each dependent child up to the age of 16 and each dependent secondary student up to 18 years. This equates to \$200 a year for each child.

In addition, single income families including sole parents receive a further \$2,500 increase in their tax free threshold if they have a child aged under five. This translates into \$500 a year per family.

In 1997 the Coalition also introduced a rebate for families with private health insurance of up to \$450 a year, fulfilling another Coalition commitment to the Australian people at the last election.

Strengthening Families

The Coalition has implemented a comprehensive **Strengthening Families Strategy** to assist families cope with the pressures of today's society. The strategy emphasises the importance of preventing and overcoming family breakdown by assisting families to work through problems before they reach crisis point.

Key initiatives include:

- **\$23 million each year (an increase of \$5 million a year) for Emergency Relief.** The additional support is directed through community welfare agencies like the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and the Smith Family, which provide assistance to families in financial crisis and other disadvantaged families.
- **\$11.2 million to establish the Prime Minister's Youth Homeless Taskforce.** The taskforce has funded 26 pilot projects to assist young people 12 to 18 years old at risk of homelessness and to assist their families.
- **\$12 million to fight child abuse and provide support for families and parents.** Funds are provided directly to community organisations to support parents raise children for a stronger future.
- **\$3.7 million a year to around 90 organisations for innovative outside school hours activities and peer support** for young people aged 11 to 16 years in disadvantaged areas.
- **An additional \$2 million each year to employ part-time family**

support workers to help families with adolescent children in difficulty.

Families and the Care of Children

The Coalition's family policies have provided the framework to protect, nurture and develop Australia's greatest natural resource - our children. For many Australian families quality, affordable childcare has a significant influence on the extent to which the family can participate in society. The Coalition has acted to improve access, equity and quality of child care, particularly for low and middle income families. Significant achievements include:

- **thousands more child care places established in services across Australia** with new places in long day care (26,500), outside school hours care (10,300) and family day care (3,200);
- **the establishment of around 310 more childcare centres** across Australia;
- **an extra \$30 million over two years to ensure families in rural and remote areas are able to access childcare;** and
- **an increase of \$47 million a year in Childcare Assistance for Australian families.**

Families and Relationship Support

The Coalition's primary aim is to support families to help them stay together. However, when relationships break down, support services are needed to help all who are affected.

The Coalition has undertaken a range of initiatives to assist people to maintain healthy relationships and, if a relationship breaks down, to help people resolve problems themselves and avoid legal fees and emotionally debilitating court proceedings. These initiatives include:

- **Providing \$37 million this year to fund 83 community-based organisations across Australia to support family relationships.** These services include, marriage and relationship education, family and relationship counselling, family and child mediation, adolescent mediation and family therapy, family skills training and children's contact services.
- The Coalition's initiatives include doubling Labor's spending on **marriage and relationship education services. Additional funding of \$6.1 million has been provided to establish 34 new community-based marriage and relationship services.** This will extend counselling services to more than 80,000 Australians, particularly in rural and regional areas.

- **\$6 million to increase men's access to relationship support services**, including **\$1 million** for a telephone help line.
- **\$1.6 million for a pilot program to look at better ways of preventing and dealing with disputes over contact arrangements for children.**
- **\$800,000 to fund pilot projects to assist young women** with the early identification and prevention of domestic violence in their relationships, including indigenous family relationships right across Australia.
- **A National Forum on Relationship Support for Men** focussing on the particular relationship needs for men.

A Better Deal for Carers

There are 540,000 carers who provide care for a family member or loved one with a severe or profound disability.

Caring is demanding work that under Labor went unrecognised. In government the Coalition has taken many initiatives to reduce the burden on carers, make respite care more accessible and flexible, and improve the income security of carers. The \$280 million *Staying at Home* package announced in April 1998 was the most recent demonstration of the Coalition's commitment to carers. Key initiatives taken by the Coalition include:

- **\$92 million to extend eligibility for the new Carer Allowance to 14,000 carers.**
- **An increase in the Domiciliary Nursing Care Benefit** which is paid to carers looking after people who otherwise would require nursing home care of **\$16.60 a fortnight** from July 1998.
- **\$36.7 million for the National Respite for Carers Program**, including funding to establish Carer Resource Centres and a regional network of Carer Respite Centres.
- **\$30 million to expand the network of Carer Resources Centres** from 58 to 73.
- **\$15 million to assist aging carers** who look after adult children with disabilities, to provide alternative accommodation and eventual transition arrangements to full-time care.
- **\$10 million for additional respite care places** for people with dementia.
- **Extension of the Carer Payment** to those caring for an adult and that adult's dependent child.

Fighting Suicide

High rates of youth suicide in Australia are an unacceptable national tragedy. The Coalition is determined to bring solutions and hope to our nation's young people. Key initiatives of our first term include:

- **\$18 million of additional funding for the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy** (now totalling \$31 million) to reduce the high rate of youth suicide.
- These funds have been allocated to provide rural and regional youth counselling services (\$6 million), national telephone counselling services (\$6 million), programs for parents (\$3 million), education and training for professionals (\$2 million), research (\$1 million) and influencing media practice on youth suicide.
- **Establishing a National Advisory Council on Youth Suicide Prevention.** This brings together for the first time all states and territories to address the underlying causes of youth suicide and ensure a co-ordinated national approach to suicide prevention.

A strong economy encouraging small business to employ young people, and maximising training and other education opportunities for young people is essential in providing hope for Australia's youth.

Family Health

The Coalition has worked hard to protect the health of Australian families. **Preventative health is a vital part of the Coalition's health policy. Immunisation, anti-drug and anti-tobacco messages, exercise, screening and free flu vaccination** are all important parts of our strategy to make Australians healthier.

- **Immunisation rates in Australia have now climbed to 78 per cent full protection for children under 18 months.** The Coalition initiated the largest immunisation campaign ever undertaken in this country, the \$30 million "*Let's work together to beat measles*", now running in every primary school in the nation.
- Other preventative health campaigns that the Coalition has launched include the "*Tough on Drugs*" program and the "*Every Cigarette Is Doing You Damage*" initiative.

Defence Families

The well-being of Defence Force families is critical to the recruitment and retention of skilled regular and reserve personnel, and to a stronger, well defended Australia. The Coalition has implemented a wide range of initiatives for Defence families:

- **Establishing the Defence Community Organisation** to provide

effective and efficient support.

- **Establishing the Australian Defence Force Spouse Employment initiative** to enhance spouses employment opportunities.
- **Building new child-care centres at the Darwin, Tindal and Nowra bases.**
- **Increasing the maximum grant available under the Defence Family Support Funding Program** from \$20,000 to \$50,000 to assist families in a range of areas, from settling in a new location to the provision of playground equipment for child-care centres.
- **Improving compensation** benefits for families of Defence Force members killed or seriously injured.

New Initiatives

A the Coalition's Tax Plan for Families

The Coalition's new tax plan helps ease the cost of raising a family.

Families will benefit from personal income tax cuts, totalling over \$13 billion a year from July 2000. These will include:

- **an increase in the tax-free threshold for all taxpayers from \$5,400 to \$6,000**, with the greatest proportionate benefit to low income earners;
- **a reduction in the 20 per cent marginal tax rate to 17 per cent;**
- a reduction in the 34 per cent and 43 per cent tax rates to 30 per cent, with the result that **over 80 per cent of taxpayers will pay a top marginal tax rate of 30 cents in the dollar or less;** and
- **an increase in the threshold of the top 47 per cent marginal tax rate so that it cuts in at \$75,000**, almost twice projected full-time average weekly earnings in 2000.

Building on the Coalition's Family Tax Initiative, family benefits will be increased and simplified. This will benefit over two million families at a cost of more than \$2 billion.

The tax-free threshold increases under the Family Tax Initiative will be doubled. From 1 July 2000:

- **All single income families, including sole parents, with one child under 5 years will have an effective tax free threshold of \$13,000**, more than double the new general threshold.
- **This provides additional assistance of \$490 a year;** and
- for those with **two children, one under 5 years, the additional assistance is \$630 a year.**
- Dual-income families with one child, and single income families

where the youngest child is aged 5 to 16 years, will receive an increase in family tax assistance of \$140 a year (a 70 per cent increase) and, for those with two children, an increase of \$280 a year.

Additional incentives to work and save also will be achieved by **reducing the family benefits withdrawal rate from 50 cents a dollar to 30 cents a dollar and increasing the income at which family payments are tested from \$24,350 to \$28,200.**

Families also will benefit from:

- **A new, simpler child care benefit**, combining the existing Child Care Assistance and Child Care Rebate payments. There will be an increase in weekly assistance up to \$7.50 per child in formal care, with additional weekly benefits where there are two or more children in care.
- **A 30 per cent non-means tested tax rebate or benefit on private health insurance premiums** from January 1999 – worth \$600 a year for a family with a \$2,000 health policy.
- This new benefit is at least as generous as full tax deductibility for 80 per cent of taxpayers, who will face a marginal tax rate of 30 cents or less in the dollar.

B Families and Relationship Support

The Coalition is committed to providing services that help develop and sustain safe, supportive and nurturing family relationships. These preventative services minimise the emotional, social and economic costs that emerge from the disruption and breakdown of family relationships.

Where relationships break down the Coalition is committed to providing alternatives to litigation, to avoid legal fees and emotionally debilitating court proceedings.

(i) Relationship Support Services

Marriage and relationship education is important. Well designed and adequately funded relationship support services make a difference in helping couples develop and strengthen their relationships.

Following the House of Representatives report, 'To Have and To Hold', which looked into aspects of family services, the Coalition will:

- assist couples to strengthen relationships through programs of

- preventative education;
- promote greater community awareness and understanding of the skills involved in maintaining and enhancing the quality of long-term relationships;
 - encourage a wider participation in relationship and marriage education services; and
 - ensure civil marriage celebrants are aware of the full range of community services available to people experiencing relationship difficulties.
- The Coalition will also:
- **provide an additional \$6 million to extend marriage and relationship education services;** and
 - **provide an additional \$10.5 million to substantially extend support services for men in family relationships.** These projects will provide support to assist men deal with the emotional and practical issues that arise when marriages and relationships breakdown.

(ii) Assistance to Resolve Family disputes

Mediation and counselling services provide an integrated approach to enable parties to resolve their disputes before they become legal problems. These services encourage greater use of community organisations to assist in resolving relationship disputes. They also help to avoid costly legal fees and emotionally debilitating court proceedings. The Coalition will:

- **Provide additional funding of \$16 million to increase the availability of services in counselling, mediation and dispute resolution** for families facing difficulties. This includes \$3 million for mediation and conferencing by state and territory Legal Aid Commissions.
- **Provide funding of \$3 million to establish three national advice lines** that will enable all Australians, particularly in remote rural and regional areas, to access family law telephone services, including more services for regional and remote areas.

The first line will provide initial advice and basic information about options and referrals, promote mediation and counselling services and, where appropriate, link the caller to legal aid commission lawyers in the relevant state or territory. The second and third lines will provide more specialised advice and assistance for carer and child-support-liable parents. All three lines will be able to refer clients to face to face advice and co-ordinate physical outreach.

(iii) Expansion of Children's Contact Services

Contact services for parental access arrangements make a difference to the lives of the parents and children who use them.

The Coalition will provide **\$16 million to establish 25 new supervised contact services** in urban and regional centres across Australia, to assist parents in moving to self management of contact and to improve their parenting roles.

C Fighting Suicide

While our first term of office demonstrated a commitment to reducing unacceptable suicide rates through the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, there is still a great deal to be done.

The Coalition will provide **\$48 million for a new National Suicide Prevention Strategy** to strengthen and build on the current National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. It also will respond to concerns about other at-risk groups.

The strategy will reduce the rates of self-harm and suicide, reduce risk factors and vulnerabilities associated with suicide, and increase the protective factors such as self-esteem, resilience and family coping. The strategy will target young adult males, and rural residents whose suicide rates are consistently higher.

D Caring for Young Disabled People

The Coalition has implemented many reforms to help carers to care for family members. A further area of need is assistance for carers of young people with a disability.

The Coalition understands the difficulties involved in caring for young family members with disabilities and recognises that respite in-home is often the most appropriate help. Research has shown that some 25 per cent of carers of people with a profound or severe disability need more respite. The need is great for carers of young people with disabilities as their needs are often more demanding.

The Coalition will:

- **Provide \$20 million to extend carer respite support**, targetted at carers of young people with a disability. This additional support will be provided through the network of 73 Carer Respite Centres throughout Australia.

