

Children First

Labor's plan to give our children the best start in life

**Bracks.
Listens.
Acts.** 

PUTTING VICTORIA'S CHILDREN FIRST

Children are our future. In our second term, we will build on our achievements in putting Victoria's children first. They deserve the best possible start in life and we will give further help at each stage of their development towards adulthood.

The Bracks Government will deliver the best possible services for children and ensure all Victorian children and their families receive the support they need when they need it.

Specifically over the next four years the Bracks Government will:

1. Children's Centres

- ü Transform the delivery of children's services by integrating all of the different activities of State Government agencies and local Government. We will provide a single network of centres to give parents improved access to a broader range of services. These include maternal health, immunisation, parenting information, outreach programs, childcare and kindergartens. To achieve this we will provide:
 - \$8 million over 4 years to provide seeding grants of \$250,000 to establish up to 30 Children's Centres providing fully integrated programs and specialist services such as speech therapy, nutritionists and psychologists. Children's Centres will be co located with other services such as childcare, pre school or kindergarten facilities.
 - \$16 million over 4 years to upgrade local Council Maternal and Child Health Centres and link them to other children's services through the new Children's Centres.
- ü Provide an additional \$6 million over 4 years for additional early intervention services for autism, speech and behavioural problems at Children's Centres to enable early detection and referral for assessment and treatment.
- ü Provide an additional \$1 million over 4 years to boost professional development for maternal and child health nurses.

2. Ensuring the best care and development for Victorian children

- ü Commit \$8 million to provide start up capital grants for the establishment of new kindergartens and pre schools in our growth suburbs with an emphasis on linking these to other services such as extended childcare.
- ü Commit \$5 million to provide computers and Information Technology support to pre schools.
- ü Continue to implement the recommendations of Kirby review to strengthen and improve Victoria's pre schools.
- ü Establish a Victorian Children's Advisory Committee to advise the Premier on the development of an integrated whole of government Victorian Children's Services Strategy.

3. Giving mothers and babies the best start

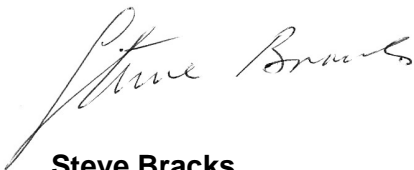
- ü Provide an additional \$4 million to support improved maternity services for rural hospitals including increased midwifery options for women in rural Victoria.
- ü Work with hospitals throughout Victoria to ensure the maximum continuity in midwifery care to women during and after their pregnancy including at least one domiciliary visit for mothers when they return home and more if needed.
- ü Support collaboration between obstetricians, general practitioners and midwives to provide high quality safe maternity care and continue to increase childbirth options for women throughout Victoria.
- ü Provide an additional \$1 million to extend our successful Koori Maternity services (as recently announced in Labor's Women's policy.)

4. Giving the best start to those in special need

- ü Provide an immediate boost to foster carers by providing an additional \$16 million to increase the payments they receive and the Government will also work with foster carers on improved support services.

5. Protecting children from abuse and neglect

- ü Trial innovative approaches to early intervention and prevention of child abuse.
- ü Develop a mentoring program for children leaving residential care to assist them in the transition from care to living independently.



Steve Bracks
Premier of Victoria



Bronwyn Pike
Minister for Community Services

UNDOING THE DAMAGE

All Victorian children have the right to the best start in life. The Bracks Government has worked hard to ensure they get it.

We have improved the capacity of hospitals to deliver quality care for mothers and babies. We listened to mothers through the New Mothers Survey and improved midwifery services. We have introduced a 24 hour Maternal and Child Health line to provide timely advice to new parents.

We have abolished compulsory competitive tendering that was endangering our world class Maternal and Child Health Centres.

We have invested in kindergartens and preschools, which play a critical role in establishing children's capacity to learn. Victorian pre schools were severely undermined by savage funding cuts under the previous Liberal National Government. Under Labor, preschool participation rates have increased from 90.7% to 96.4%.

We have expanded Early Intervention services, helping children diagnosed with special needs. We have initiated the Best Start program to give children up to eight years of age the best developmental opportunities by better linking all services that promote the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of children.

We have improved Victoria's Child Protection system, supporting early intervention programs aimed at preventing children from needing to be taken into care. We have established intensive therapeutic services for children who have been the victims of abuse and neglect. We have employed 60 extra child protection workers to make sure children in care are looked after properly. We have funded special initiatives for indigenous children and their families.

We have rescued residential care services from breaking point caused by massive under funding – ensuring better care for more than 400 of Victoria's most vulnerable children. We have employed extra drug and alcohol workers to support children with substance abuse problems. We have expanded rehabilitation services for these children and young people.

We have boosted support for, and increased the number of, Neighbourhood Houses, providing a valuable support network for parents with young children.

The Bracks Government Juvenile Justice Reform Strategy is successfully helping to prevent young people from re-offending by creating non-custodial options in a safe environment. We have commenced the re-development of Turana.

BUILDING FOR TOMORROW

The Bracks Labor Government is committed to ensuring the well being of children. As a community which values children, our priority is to ensure that development and learning are optimised for all children wherever they live, play and are cared for.

We need to encourage the confidence, curiosity, sociability and resilience of children from birth through to adulthood.

We value the role of parents and we are strengthening support for families by providing services in the communities in which they live. We recognise the changing and challenging environment in which families live and work today.

The early years of life are the critical foundation for successful adult lives. The support given to children from birth through to their early years at school has a crucial impact on how they develop as members of our community.

Children need supportive parents, communities and government. Parents need support – from government, communities and employers - to be as effective as they can. Labor is committed to providing all children and families with access to quality children services and practical help when they need it in the early years of childhood.

We know that having as many children's services at the same location or as near to each other as possible assists parents and in many cases ensures that parents and children get the help they need when they need it.

Labor will encourage the establishment of comprehensive Children's Centres that bring together services like maternal health services, parenting information programs, childcare and pre – school.

Proper antenatal care is critical to optimising human development and reducing susceptibility to disease – expectant mothers need proper nutrition, absence of stress and a healthy lifestyle. Labor will ensure that all mothers receive the best possible antenatal and birthing care.

Families need practical help in adjusting to a new baby. Children develop very rapidly - mentally, socially and physically, between birth and the age of two. Our Maternal and Child Health Centres play a critical role during this period. Labor will expand the range of services provided by these centres and provide more assistance at key development stages.

Between the ages of 2 and 5, children are developing their cognitive, language, physical, emotional and social skills. Labor is committed to ensuring that early child problem behaviours are identified and good parenting skills promoted at this time.

We recognise the critical role of pre school programs in improving the ability of children to learn and making them 'school ready'. We will support our growth suburbs to have sufficient pre schools. We will encourage pre schools to provide flexible programs that suit the needs of working parents.

Labor recognises the importance of childcare in assisting parents combine work and family responsibilities. Childcare is critical when parents, predominantly mothers wish to return to work. Where and how pre school programs are scheduled also impacts on how easily parents can adjust their working hours to meet their children's needs.

After school hours and vacation care programs are also essential for working parents. In all of these settings learning and development is taking place and parents need to be assured that their children's developmental needs are being met wherever they are cared for.

Whilst providing support for all families, Labor recognises that some need special assistance. We are shifting the focus to early intervention, trying to keep families together as much as possible. Where problems are not avoided, Labor will ensure that assistance is available through the best possible alternative care.

The Bracks Labor Government will ensure that Victoria remains at the forefront of policies and implementation of innovative programs for children and their families.

1. CHILDREN'S CENTRE'S

New Children's Centres

Children and their families need easy access to the many different services they need at different stages of their children's development. Some parents need extra encouragement to use the services that are available. It is important for all children that parents have easy access to the fullest range of services. These include maternal and child health services, parent education and information programs, outreach programs, childcare including long day care, sessional care and emergency care, and kindergarten and pre school.

Having these services provided from the one location or within a close range provides the best access for parents and children and will maximise the use of these services. Centres that provide a single entry point to a range of integrated services are better able to direct families to the services they need.

They provide children and their families with regular contact with other children and families in local, inclusive and family friendly settings.

Such centres have the capacity to enrich the lives of children and strengthen parents on their journey into parenthood.

At the same time, Labor supports the key role played by Maternal and Child Health Centres across Victoria in supporting new parents and their babies. This universal service is one of the strengths of the Victorian system of children's services. However the pace and complexity of modern life is placing new and complex strains on many families. Many new parents experience significant difficulties in adjusting to the needs of new babies.

In many instances their problems require the intervention of a number of different professionals. The role of Maternal and Child Health Centres could be enhanced by an expansion in the range of services available through them. Maternal and Child Health Centres should also be more closely linked to the new Children's Centres.

Labor will transform the delivery of children's services by integrating all of the different activities of State Government agencies and local Government through a single network of centres to give parents improved access to a broader range of services such as maternal health, immunisation, parenting information, outreach programs, childcare and kindergartens. To achieve this we will provide:

- *\$8 million over 4 years to provide seeding grants of \$250,000 to establish up to 30 Children's Centres providing fully integrated programs and specialist services such as speech therapy, nutritionists and psychologists. These Children's Centres will be co located with other services such as childcare, pre school or kindergarten facilities.*
- *\$16 million over 4 years to upgrade Maternal and Child Health Centres and link them to other children's services through the new Children's Centres.*

Early intervention for children in need

Labor understands and supports key research that shows that the early diagnosis of conditions such as autism, speech and behavioural problems can make a profound difference in subsequent treatment of children with these conditions. It also affects the ability of these children to be integrated into other children's services including pre-school and primary school.

Labor will provide an additional \$6 million over four years for additional early intervention services for autism, speech and behavioural problems at Children's Centres to enable early detection and referral for assessment and treatment.

More professional development for maternal and child health nurses

Maternal and child health nurses play a critical role in assisting parents to adjust to the needs of their new babies. In addition to medical and health programs these nurses provide vital reassurance to mothers and fathers caring for new babies.

As the role of Maternal and Child Health Centres expands it is important for these nurses to have opportunities for ongoing professional development in order to be kept fully up to date in early childhood development research, policies and practices.

Labor will provide an additional \$1 million over four years to provide additional professional development for maternal and child health nurses.

2. ENSURING THE BEST CARE AND DEVELOPMENT FOR VICTORIA'S CHILDREN

New kindergartens and pre schools

In the expanding suburbs around Melbourne families need access to local kindergartens and pre school programs. Labor recognises the right of all communities to local services. In the past pre school programs have been offered at times of the day that do not necessarily suit the needs of all working parents. While this has changed over recent times further assistance could be given to working parents in the scheduling of preschool programs to make it easier to fit part time work hours around them, and linking these programs to other forms of care.

Labor will give priority to multi use pre school proposals in growth corridors such as Cranbourne, Craigieburn and Melton and to proposals that meet the need of under-serviced areas with high migrant populations including Oakleigh.

Labor will commit \$8 million to provide start up capital grants for the establishment of new kindergartens and pre schools in our growth suburbs with an emphasis on linking these to other services such as extended childcare.

Ensuring the best pre school education

Victorians care about the quality and diversity of their world class system of pre school education. The Bracks Government has begun a long term rebuilding of the pre school system after the damage of savage funding cuts made by the previous Government.

Labor will continue to implement the Kirby review to strengthen and improve Victoria's pre schools.

New IT support for kindergartens and pre schools

The Kirby Review revealed that many pre schools do not have sufficient computer and Information Technology support. Clearly having these facilities greatly assists in the running of the pre school itself, in the dissemination of information amongst those using the service and linking pre schools to other children's services.

Labor will provide an additional \$5 million to enable the provision of upgraded computers and Information Technology support to pre schools in need of them.

Children's Advisory Committee

Whilst funding of childcare is a federal government responsibility, a State government can assist in the development of a strategic approach to the provision of childcare throughout Victoria, which will ensure that the educational and developmental needs of children are met in ways that best suit how Victorian families live and work. We are also committed to achieving better integration between childcare and pre schools in Victoria.

Labor will establish a Victorian Children's Advisory Committee to advise the Premier on the development of an integrated whole of Government Victorian Children's Services Strategy aimed at:

- *Ensuring that development and learning are optimised for all children wherever they live, play and are cared for.*
- *Ensuring that the educational and developmental needs of children are met in ways that provide maximum flexibility to Victorian families.*
- *Pushing for more federally funded childcare places to meet needs in Victoria, including family day care, long day care, out of school hours care and vacation care places and pushing for upgraded Federal funding rates.*
- *Encouraging better links between pre schools programs and the provision of childcare.*
- *Encouraging school communities to establish out of school hours care programs.*
- *Encouraging local communities to provide vacation care programs that are attractive to children across a range of age.*
- *Ensuring maximum flexibility is available for parents using long day care and pre schools to have these services cater for all of the caring needs of families and all of the educational and developmental needs of children.*
- *Encouraging school communities to establish Out of School Hours Care programs.*

3. GIVING MOTHERS AND BABIES THE BEST START

Improved maternity services in rural Victoria

All Victorian women are entitled to the best possible maternity care. It is important that all of those involved in the delivery of that care cooperate to ensure that the best possible quality of care is delivered. Labor recognises the difficulties that rural communities face in ensuring women have the best possible care during pregnancy across the full range of care options.

Labor will provide an additional \$4 million to support improved maternity services for rural hospitals including provision of increased midwifery options for women in rural Victoria based on models such as the Wangaratta Community Midwifery Program, with provision of support for the development of models appropriate to local circumstances.

A Bracks Labor Government will work with hospitals throughout Victoria to ensure the maximum continuity in midwifery care to women throughout their pregnancy and after their babies are born. We will continue to ensure hospitals provide at least one domiciliary visit for mothers when they return home and more if needed.

The Bracks Government will support collaboration between obstetricians, general practitioners and midwives to provide high quality safe maternity care and continue to increase childbirth options for women throughout Victoria.

Extending Koori maternity services

The Koori Maternity Services Program has community support and has been successful in improving access to antenatal care, which is a key factor in improving Koori birth outcomes. Existing Koori Maternity services will be improved with additional recurrent funding for services in Melbourne, Mildura, Gippsland, Morwell and Robinvale to address expanding need. New services will be developed in Dandenong and Echuca.

Labor will provide an additional \$1 million to extend our successful Koori Maternity services.

4. PROVIDING SPECIAL CARE FOR THOSE IN NEED

Improved resources for Foster Carers

Foster carers are critical to the care of young people in particular need. Labor recognises that the young people in their care have increasingly complex needs. This can place great strain on carers and make placements more difficult resulting in difficulties in finding stable family homes for these young people.

Labor is committed to ensuring the best possible support for carers as well as ensuring that when children are placed in care, they receive the best possible care.

Labor will provide an immediate boost to foster carers by providing an additional \$16 million to increase the payments they receive and the Government will also work with foster carers on improved support services.

5. PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Labor will build on the improvements it has made to Victoria's system of child protection by providing additional resources for innovative family support, kinship care, complex residential care and a new mentoring program in an integrated package of improvements to child protection.

Labor will allocate \$28 million over four years from demand management funds held by the Department of Treasury and Finance to provide the following additional child protection measures.

Keeping Children and Families Out of the Child Protection System

The Bracks Labor Government places the highest priority on the need to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect. When necessary, decisive and skilled action will be taken to protect children at risk.

At the same time, we will do more work to prevent the need for children to be placed outside their families. We will provide additional services aimed at preventing abuse and providing additional assistance to families at risk of abusing. Keeping children in competent, confident families is the best outcome for all.

Labor will trial innovative approaches to early intervention and prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Assistance for those Leaving Residential Care

Each year in Victoria, approximately 390 young people aged 14-18 years leave the child protection and placement system. These young people often lack the capacity to live independently and have limited access to appropriate accommodation and support options. These young people are often disadvantaged, with a higher incidence of intellectual disability, lower educational outcomes, higher rates of unemployment, and higher incidence of substance abuse than for the general population.

Labor will provide a mentoring program to children leaving residential care to assist them in the transition from care to living independently.

FUNDING COMMITMENTS

| RECURRENT INITIATIVES | 2003-04 | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | TOTAL |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Boost for Maternal & Child Health Services | \$2m | \$4.5m | \$4.5m | \$5m | \$16m |
| Early Intervention Services | \$1.5m | \$1.5m | \$1.5m | \$1.5m | \$6m |
| Professional development for maternal & child health care nurses | \$0.25m | \$0.25m | \$0.25m | \$0.25m | \$1m |
| Improved maternity services in rural Victoria | \$0.5m | \$1m | \$1.25m | \$1.25m | \$4m |

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|
| Boost for Foster Carers | \$4m | \$4m | \$4m | \$4m | \$16m |
| Child Protection | \$4m | \$8m | \$8m | \$8m | \$28m |
| Total new Children Funding | \$12.25m | \$19.25m | \$19.5m | \$20m | \$71m |
| <i>Less: Demand Contingency held within Treasury Budget</i> | <i>-\$4m</i> | <i>-\$8m</i> | <i>-\$8m</i> | <i>-\$8m</i> | <i>-\$28m</i> |
| TOTAL IMPACT ON OPERATING SURPLUS | \$8.25m | \$11.25m | \$11.5m | \$12m | \$43m |

FUNDING COMMITMENT PREVIOUSLY OUTLINED IN WOMEN'S POLICY

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|
| Aboriginal Maternity Services | \$0.25m | \$0.25m | \$0.25m | \$0.25m | \$1m |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|

All Labor's capital investments will be funded from within unallocated capital budget provided for in existing forward estimates.

| CAPITAL INVESTMENT | TOTAL |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Family and Children's Hub | \$8m |
| Pre School start up fund | \$8m |
| Pre School IT | \$5m |
| TOTAL CAPITAL INVESTMENT | \$21m |

For further details on Labor's policies and team, please contact
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