



Notes for Remarks

Hon. Dr. Marie Bountrogianni
Minister of Children and Youth Services

University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work

March 30, 2005

Check against delivery.

Good morning.

I am delighted to be here.

It's an honour to help launch the National Institute for Evidence Based Social Work.

This is a subject very dear to me, as many of you know.

Right from day one of the new Ministry of Children and Youth Services – we have been developing policy on a foundation of research and evidence.

It is the backbone of everything we are doing.

We even created a new research branch in the ministry to focus on evidence-based research and evaluation.

I'm personally excited about this Institute not only because I wholeheartedly agree with the approach of creating policy based on solid research.

But also because it will help me do my job.

Because I intend to use your research within my Ministry to help guide our work.

So I'm also here to thank you – in advance – for your contribution to our policies over the next many years.

What does it mean to create public policy that is “evidence-based”?

It means we don't say: “well, it worked for adults so it must work for children.”

It means we don't say: “we'll know it's the right decision if they re-elect us in four years.”

It means we don't say: “hmmm, sounds intriguing, let's try it and see what happens.”

That's not evidence-based.

That's supposition-based.

And it's arrogant.

Most of you appreciate the state we found things in when we arrived in government a year and a half ago.

Were it not for dedicated staff that kept on working every day for their clients and patients, we wouldn't have much of a system left at all.

Services were stretched as tight as a drum – only the drum kept getting bigger.

Sooner or later the skin would not be big enough to cover the drum.

Gaps were inevitable.

But of all the investments that weren't made in social services

And of all the cuts that were made

Maybe the most short-sighted was the elimination of all research capacity.

Politically it's easy to see why research makes such an easy casualty.

Believe me. In the three elections I've run in, I've probably knocked on more than 20 thousand doors.

And no one – not a single voter – ever asked me to commit to spend more on researching best practices.

Never happened.

Maybe they're the ones who saw me coming and didn't answer the door.

But governing demands more than supposition.

Every new policy, new initiative and new direction must be rooted in what is known and proven.

But let's not let that prevent us from being bold or innovative.

That's why we monitor.

That's why when we establish a new program we also establish a means for evaluating how it is working. . . .

Whether it is working.

Is it delivering the results we expect?

Because when we measure it, we can improve it.

An initiative I'm particularly proud of is our Best Start plan.

We have embarked on a massive expansion of child care and early learning across the province.

We're bringing together the child care parents need with the learning and health and screening programs children need for healthy early development.

The model is based on evidence from around the world – but particularly here in Ontario.

Evidence that not only makes the case for investing in our youngest citizens, but also shows us the most effective ways to do it.

Two weeks ago I announced that three distinct areas will be model communities for the Best Start Plan.

This is part of our commitment to evidence-based practice.

An urban community in downtown Hamilton.

A rural community in Lambton-Kent.

And a northern-francophone community in Timiskaming.

We'll be monitoring their successes closely –

So we can extend the best programs to communities across
the province.

I'm pleased to see the initial focus of this Institute will be on such critical matters as risk assessment for child protection – and cyber abuse.

In today's technological world, we must be ever-vigilant in protecting children from the dangers of the Internet.

On the one hand, the Internet empowers our children and gives them access to information and ideas like no generation before them.

On the other hand, that same Internet gives other people access to our children.

Our government and in particular my colleagues - the Attorney General - Michael Bryant and the Minister of Community, Safety and Correctional Services, Monte Kwinter - have been front and centre in addressing these issues.

We are giving 5 million dollars to the OPP and the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police to help fight internet crimes against children, like child pornography and internet luring.

We're providing innovative software to help Grade 7 and 8 students in all Ontario schools learn to be safe online and protect themselves against internet stalkers.

We're creating a Task Force on Internet Crimes Against Kids which is developing best practices and tools to improve the way these crimes are investigated and prosecuted.

And we have increased funding to the OPP's *Project P* by 70 per cent to help keep our children safe from sexual exploitation.

I believe Minister Bryant is joining you this afternoon, which is wonderful because I can tell you that he is as devoted as any of us to protecting our children and youth.

Now is the time to get serious about addressing our children's safety on the Internet.

Your other area of focus for the Institute – child welfare – is also perfectly timed.

My ministry is undertaking a broad review of how we protect children who need it.

Because we can do better, and do more for these vulnerable young people.

And we can also operate a more sustainable system so we can have the confidence it will still be there to help children who need it years from now.

We started by figuring out where we wanted to end up:

Prevent abuse and neglect before it happens.

Find permanent homes for more children in care.

And provide stability and security for the children and youth in our care.

Then we established the Child Welfare Secretariat to seek out the evidence and reshape the way we help vulnerable children and youth.

We're working on a long-term strategy for child welfare that will deliver those results.

We know that reform of the adoption system will be at the centre of that effort.

That's why, when we conducted a formal review of the Child and Family Services Act – the legislation that governs child welfare – we focused on adoption.

I invited the public to share their thoughts on increasing adoptions and finding permanent homes for children in the care of children's aid societies.

And they responded.

We heard from many individuals, and also from organizations that work with families and children's aid societies.

This morning we released a report on their input.

It's on our web site and I encourage you to look at it when you get a chance.

The most common theme we heard was that the rigidity that characterizes the system now is outdated, and not meeting the needs of children.

Many of the people who responded urged greater openness and flexibility in adoptions.

And I agree.

It should be possible for a child to be adopted without having to completely sever all ties with his birth family.

This kind of zero-sum equation is seldom what's best for the child.

Let me give you a hypothetical example:

A five-year-old girl has become a Crown ward because her mother, suffering from mental illness, is unable to be her primary guardian.

So the judge, in ordering Crown wardship, quite appropriately allowed this loving mother to have regular visits and phone calls with her daughter.

Under current law, the child cannot be adopted.

Instead she will live in seven different foster homes before she turns 18.

And while they may be deeply caring foster families, how can we expect this girl to keep pace with her peers in school with that kind of instability?

So our Child Welfare team at the ministry looked to the research.

And to Best Practices from across Canada and around the world.

And the evidence supports more openness in adoption.

So that's the direction of the policy that's now taking shape.

We saw the first step in opening adoptions yesterday when my colleague, the Minister of Community and Social Services, Sandra Pupatello, introduced legislation that would make Ontario a world leader in disclosure and protection of adoption information.

If passed, her bill will help adult adoptees and birth parents get the information they want while respecting their right not to be contacted.

This is an important step in modernizing Ontario's adoption system.

So when I hear that the Institute will focus much of its energy on bringing more research to bear on child welfare – it really warms the heart of this child psychologist, who is now charged with the task of overseeing the system.

I want to congratulate the University of Toronto, and in particular the Faculty of Social Work, for this ambitious undertaking.

This is the next chapter in a long tradition of excellence in social work education and in adapting to society's changing needs.

I want to recognize the contribution of Bell Canada.

Their good corporate citizenship is helping get this important new venture off and running.

I know that representatives of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and the Catholic Children's Aid Society are here today, and are eager partners in this Institute.

And I want to recognize the many community partners who are so important to the welfare of Ontario children and families, and will be equally vital in the work of the Institute.

This new Institute has the splendid objective of building a bridge between university researchers and social service providers.

Together, you will work to identify and implement best practices in the field.

To make a strong social services sector even stronger.

And the sum total of these advances will be a safer, healthier, better quality of life for Ontarians.

I wish you every future success.

Thank you.