



everyone's family

**Address by Dr Lisa O'Brien to the
Making a Difference Research Event, Sydney, 9 August 2012**

It's my pleasure to be able to add my words of welcome to Anne's today. High quality research has long been a foundation of The Smith Family's approach. It is now even more crucial with the implementation of our new five year strategic plan.

The Smith Family's mission, as many of you would know, is to *create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education*. Over the next five years we plan to do this work even more effectively than we have in the past, and, in turn, at a greater scale, given the educational challenges facing our nation.

High quality research, such as we will hear about tonight, will be one of the key foundations for us achieving our mission.

As a partner organisation in the *Making a difference* project, The Smith Family has already had the benefit of this research informing our strategic direction and it will continue to do so. It provides direct evidence of how we might work to improve the educational outcomes of the over 117,000 children and young people and their parents and carers, who we work with each year.

While this research is directly relevant to our work, I'd also like to highlight its relevance for a significant and very current national policy issue, that is, the educational performance of Australia's young people.

The key to Australia's economic and social wellbeing, now and into the future, is a highly educated population. However, recent data shows that the relationship between student background and educational outcomes is more pronounced in Australia than in other comparable high performing OECD countries.

Year 12 completion rates, for example, are significantly lower for Australian students from low socio-economic background than for students from more affluent backgrounds – 56% compared to 75%.

Data from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment also highlights some of the educational challenges Australia is facing as a nation. PISA assesses the competency of 15 year olds in the areas of reading, mathematics and science, and a comparison of data collected in 2000 and 2009, shows that our performance has declined.

In 2000, one in eight Australian students performed below the proficiency baseline for all PISA domains, and by 2009 this had increased to one in seven.

It will take the collective action of governments, community organisations, business, philanthropy and the education sectors, informed by the latest research, to address the challenge these statistics highlight. That is why it is particularly pleasing to have such a broad cross section of organisations, sectors and individuals represented here tonight.

The research which Peter and Jen will share with us, makes an important contribution to helping us better understand the direct lived experience of young people living in economic adversity.

At the centre of this research are nearly 100 young people who have generously shared their lives and experiences and their perspectives on what would make a difference. We often hear about poverty statistics, and while they are important, they focus only on the adult experience of economic disadvantage. Through this research, we hear first hand from young people themselves and how they experience exclusion in their families, at school and in their communities.

It gives a more concrete sense of some of the choices they are faced with on a regular basis, including their participation in education and other activities considered 'normal' for young Australians generally.

The research offers some rare insights on what is contributing to some of those educational statistics that I mentioned earlier. Importantly, the research offers direction for policy and program delivery, informed directly by young people living in economic adversity.

One part of the report that particularly resonates with The Smith Family and with the broader public policy agenda, is the impact that a scarcity of resources in a community can have on the schools in that area.

Many of the young people who participated in the research live in communities characterised by a scarcity of services and opportunities, such as:

- Inadequate sport and recreational facilities, public spaces and housing,
- Ineffective family support services, and
- Inadequate access to adequate and secure employment.

This in turn places an undue burden on schools in disadvantaged areas.

As the report notes, schools are the main and sometimes only site where public policies interact directly and universally with the lives of children and young people. The *Making a Difference* research clearly highlights and confirms the need for services and supports to join up more effectively around schools.

For The Smith Family, the research provides further evidence of the need for the reform of school funding, along the lines recommended by the recent Commonwealth Review of School Funding, chaired by David Gonski.

That review importantly proposes a funding model that takes into account both individual student factors known to impact on educational outcomes, such as low socioeconomic background and Indigeneity, as well as school level factors, such as the concentration of disadvantage.

Through the direct voices of those interviewed as part of the *Making a Difference* research, we can see how these factors can play out in the lives of young people.

The research also affirms The Smith Family's practical experience on the ground of the need for strong school-community partnerships – involving schools, families, community organisations, service systems, governments, business and philanthropy. Such partnerships are a central pillar for improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people.

A number of new and deeper school-community partnership approaches are currently being implemented around Australia, such as the Extended School Hub pilots being run by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Western Australian Department of Education, in which The Smith Family is playing a lead role.

There is emerging evidence that these school-community approaches contribute to improved outcomes across a range of domains for students, parents, teachers, schools and communities themselves. The *Making a Difference* research confirms the need for such approaches, yet nationally, we are still in the very early stages.

From the perspective of The Smith Family this is a time of enormous opportunity for enhancing the social inclusion and wellbeing of the three and a half million young Australians who are students of our schooling system, and in particular for those who are most disadvantaged. The *Making a Difference* research provides some important pointers for policy and program implementation, drawing directly on the lived experiences of young people themselves, on how we can realise this opportunity.

The Smith Family has been very pleased to be involved with the Social Policy Research Centre and our government and community organisation partners in this important research. And we thank all of our partners, particularly the SPRC, for the quality of the work we have done together, and the collaborative way in which this work has been undertaken.

Such collaborations are critical if we are to make real progress on addressing disadvantage in Australia. We look forward to participating in other such initiatives which provide new knowledge that is both policy and program relevant.

In conclusion, I would also like to extend The Smith Family's sincere thanks to the Macquarie Group Foundation for their generosity in providing this venue and their hospitality for this evening's event. We are very grateful for their continued support. The Foundation's partnership with The Smith Family spans more than two decades, during which they have provided invaluable support to us through their work place giving scheme and generous matched funding of our events including The Smith Family Challenge and Around the Bay in a Day.

Thank you also to all of you for your interest in this important research. We look forward to continuing to engage and work with all of you on a shared agenda which aims to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and young people.

It now gives me great pleasure to invite Lisa George, Head of the Macquarie Group Foundation to say a few words.