YOUTH ISSUE – BRIEFING

TO: CHIEF MINISTER **DATE:** 1 DECEMBER 2014

FROM: DAVID RIDLEY

TOPIC: THE IMPACT OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN ON THE TERRITORY'S YOUTH

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Northern Territory (NT) Government:

1. support organisations such as Relationships Australia that specifically provide resources and champions parental relationships and the family unit;
2. implement relationship education within primary and secondary schools; and
3. develop effective media and marketing campaigns to increase public awareness of services available to support family relationship and breakdown the social stigma associated with seeking relationship help.

BACKGROUND

As a youth worker, part of my job is working with teenagers who are engaged with the police, failing to attend school and participating in destructive behaviors like binge drinking and illegal drug use. On a personal level, my wife and I are foster parents to a 13 year old boy who comes from a very traumatic upbringing and unstable family life.

I chose this topic because I am passionate about every young person in the NT maximising their potential in life and becoming valuable members of society, no matter what their background or family context.

In my work, I have recognised a correlation between young people who experience family breakdown and young people who fall short of their full potential. In my job I work to develop programs and initiatives specifically aimed at positively re-engaging troubled young people to become valuable members of society and thrive in life. These types of programs and initiatives are essential services for troubled or disengaged youth and need to be continued.

It is at times troubling to see the increasing rate of young people who require these programs and initiatives. There are many contributing factors that lead to young people not reaching their full potential as well as engaging in antisocial behaviors. In this report I investigate the impact of family breakdown on the Territory's youth, a topic that I feel is one of the significant issues facing young people in the Territory today.

Unfortunately I feel the issue of family breakdown has been hidden in broad daylight. This is most likely due to the far-reaching impact of family breakdown on society, as we have all been exposed to it in varying degrees and therefore conscious not to come across as moralistic or judgmental on the issue. This report is a humble attempt to communicate evidence on the importance and impact of family breakdown on the Territory's young people as well as providing some recommendations that centre around early intervention of this complex, multi-faceted issue.

We will never win a battle that we do not believe exists. This report therefore aims to raise awareness of the detrimental impacts of family breakdown and the importance and value of the family unit in combating the rising issues facing young people today. Prevention has always been better than a cure, and building strong resilient families will be the most powerful contributor to strong and resilient young people.

It is important to note from the outset that young people who experience the detrimental effects of family breakdown are not automatically predisposed to negative outcomes or destructive behaviors (Rutter & Madge 1976). Furthermore, not every young person who engages in destructive behaviors has been necessarily impacted by family break down - although this has often been my personal experience as a youth worker and foster parent.

DISCUSSION

The NT is a place full of potential and opportunity. Young Territorians are positioned for a bright future with a growing economy and many new initiatives on the horizon (Pivot North 2014). Sadly, despite these prospects there remains a percentage of young people who fail to take full advantage of these opportunities and sell their future short of their full potential.

The question is why this is the case? In many other nations of the world, young people would sacrifice greatly and fully commit themselves to be put in the running for such amazing opportunities. Through anecdotal experiences, family breakdown is one of many factors that result in young people falling short of their full potential and ability. Furthermore, there seems to be a correlation between the functionality and stability of a young person's family unit and their behavior and aspirations. More specifically, it has been found through research for this brief that young people who demonstrate multiple problem behaviors such as early onset sexual activity, substance abuse and police contact have a history and foundation of severe family breakdown and absence of a loving, safe home environment. This report queries if my personal experiences are in alignment with the current literature and the experiences of young people in the NT.

The vital importance of a young person receiving love and safety can be confirmed by reading literature released by *The Nest: A national plan for child and youth wellbeing*. The Nest consultation, facilitated by the *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)* which included 3000 respondents comprising an online survey and face-to-face discussions (The Nest Consultation 2012). One aspect of the study was related the question, 'what contributes to a good life'. Children and young people being loved and valued was considered by far the most important factor for a good life. (Attachment A.) *'Three-quarters (78%) of children and young*

people and almost nine in ten (88%) adults indicate [feeling loved and safe] to be one of the top three important aspects to wellbeing' (Nest Consultation, 2012).

The obvious primary environment in which young people receive love, support, safety, and stability is the family unit. Just as one survey participant explains:

'Children and young people are loved and valued when they have a home to go to with family that loves and cares for them and they have friends to talk to no matter the situation.' (Nest Consolation Survey participant, VIC, 18-24 years)

If feeling loved and safe are of such utmost importance to society, then one can only imagine the impacts that family breakdown can potentially have on an impressionable young person.

A small survey was conducted for this project (Attachment B) to see if the literature represented the experiences of young people in the Territory. The survey consisted of basic, yet probing questions relating to the young person's family context (were their parents married, de facto, separated or divorced) together with the perceived quality of their relationship with their parents. The survey then asked questions relating to the young persons behavior and self-confidence, in order to identify the potential impacts of family breakdown, and outline any correlations.

Some challenges were experienced during this project in that school students in the classroom setting primarily conducted the survey and many of the questions were personal in nature and may have been sensitive topics to answer in the school environment. One school that was approached to conduct the survey did not return any surveys due to students opting not to fill them out. This was positive in the sense that the students knew that the survey was completely voluntary and anonymous, but made it difficult to gather data.

Of the data collected for this project, although it was a very small population size (13 respondents), 50% of the respondents indicated that their parents had either divorced or were separated (Attachment C). I was encouraged that the young people who had experienced family breakdown did not consistently indicate that they were currently participating in problem behaviors in their life. Although this was great news, it was a surprise to an extent because it seemed to be somewhat contrary to my experience as a youth worker and foster parent as well as the current literature. I believe that there are many variables that contributed to these results including the small sample size and the reality that the impacts of family breakdown are wide and varied, and although family breakdown may increase the susceptibility of a young person engaging in destructive behaviors and suffering from lower self-esteem, there are many other contributing factors at work.

A longitudinal study (Fergusson and Horwood 1994) provides insights into the role of the family environment on young people. The research specifically looked at 1265 New Zealand children from birth to the age of 15 in order to ascertain the impacts of key factors relating to their family context within the first 15 years of life. Fergusson and Horwood specifically studied the young peoples parental background, antenatal practices, child rearing practices and family stability. In

observing these factors they were then able to make correlations between young people who demonstrate multiple problem behaviors such as, police contact, substance abuse behaviors, early onset sexual activity, suicidal tendencies, lowered self-esteem and others. This study along with a substantial amount of other research in the area (Capaldi and Paterson 1991; Paterson, De Baryshe and Ramsey, 1989) suggests, '*Young people who express problem behaviours frequently come from family backgrounds characterised by a wide range of problems and difficulties'* It is important to note that family breakdown is one of many key factors contributing to young people with multiple problem behaviors. Research identifies other key issues including parents having a criminal history, socio-economic status and family history of drug and alcohol abuse to name a few.

The NT has the strongest representation of youth engaged in the Justice System compared with other Australian jurisdictions. Although the percentage is quite small in comparison to the overall population of young people in the Territory, this group largely preoccupies the attention, time and resources of welfare agencies, the police and many other government departments. One potent example is that the Youth Justice System alone costs the government $216 000 a year in detaining one young person. (NT Youth Justice Review 2011). In light of this expense and the strong correlation between family breakdowns as a component contributing to youth delinquency, it is highly merited to investigate early interventions that provide stability and support to the family unit.

There are many other impacts of family breakdown outside of juvenile delinquency. Another longitudinal study conducted by (Zill, Morrison and Coiro 1993) studied the impacts of divorce on 240 young peoples academic success, emotional and behavioural problems and receipt of psychological help. The results of the study were clear in that *'18 to 22 year olds from disrupted families were twice as likely as other youths to have poor relationships with their fathers and mothers, to show high levels of emotional distress or problem behaviour, to have received psychological help, and to have dropped out of high school at some point.'* The researchers went on to explain that the relationship breakdown between children and their parents is the most detrimental to the young person as '*the existence of a strong positive bond with at least one and preferably both parental figures is an indication of successful socialization and a powerful deterrent to delinquency and other forms of deviant behaviour.*'

In light of the literature, it is not difficult to conclude that the ideal environment for young people to thrive in life is a loving family where their parents love each other and establish a stable foundation of love and trust for their children. Furthermore, it is clear that one of many factors that contribute to young people participating in multiple problem behaviours is their family environment. The challenge is to provide initiatives that promote strong healthy families and prevent wherever possible the occurrence of antisocial behaviour.

The most challenging aspect of this report has been to develop concrete recommendations to decrease the impacts of family breakdown on young Territorians. As mentioned earlier, prevention and early intervention is always better than cure and orientating policy towards strong and healthy families is one way to uphold strong families - which are the backbone to strong

communities. The following recommendations must be viewed as long-term strategies and be applied with much persistence, as it will always take time to shift culture.

Recommendation 1: Support and promote organisations such as Relationships Australia that specifically provide resources and champions parental relationships and the family unit

It is recommend that the government supports or develops an organisation that champions and supports parental relationships and strengthens the family unit. A perfect example of this in the mental health sector is 'Beyondblue'. Beyondblue exists to educate the Australian community to *"understand depression and anxiety, empower people to seek help, and support recovery, management and resilience*" (Beyondblue webpage). If someone is struggling with depression or anxiety or knows someone who is, it is fast becoming common knowledge that Beyondblue is the place to start. Their website and marketing campaign is extremely effective in breaking the stigma associated with mental illness. I initially thought that a similar organisation needs to developed that aims to educate the community to understand the value of strong resilient families, empower people to seek help when family relationships are failing and provide resources, tools and links to appropriate programs and initiatives that will assist them.

Upon researching what is already established I came across Relationships Australia. Relationships Australia is an organisation funded by contracts from the Federal, state and territory governments that provides relationship services for individuals, families and communities. Relationships Australia provide fantastic services, however people need to be made aware of them and directed towards them. It is therefore recommended that the NT Government explore ways to support and promote the services of organisations such as Relationships Australia NT in order to maximise the impact of services that already exist to support strong relationships within the family context.

Recommendation 2: Implement relationship education within primary and secondary schools

Schools have a vital role to play in educating the next generation in the importance and value of relationships while also providing practical tools as to how to develop and maintain healthy, strong and stable relationships. It is recommend that implementing a compulsory relationship education module within the primary and secondary school context would be highly beneficial. Research has proven that the best way to improve relationships is through relationship education that commences as early as possible (Walker and Barrett 2010). This education needs to be centred on teaching children and young people how to prepare for relationships, tools in conflict resolution, and provide a culture whereby it is normal to discuss and work on relationships, thus making it more likely for them to ask for help with their adult relationships in the future (Fully Committed 2014). Relationship education needs to be taught as a stand-alone topic in every grade and year level, separate from sexual education. Sexual education is recognised by researchers at Deakin University (Olis, D. Harrison, L. Maharaj 2013) as not being as powerful when coming from a teacher from within the school, and is more successful when run through

external programs that come into the school and run seminars. It is anticipated that this model would also be highly effective for relationship education in classrooms.

Recommendation 3: Develop effective media and marketing campaigns to increase public awareness of services available to support family relationship and breakdown the social stigma associated with seeking relationship help.

The Federal Government has initiated the *Stronger Relationships* trial, which provides up to 100,000 couples with $200 towards relationship education or counseling. The media release for the trial explains that this trial '*will cost less than one per cent of the cost of divorce each year—a relatively small investment considering the enormous social and economic costs of relationship and family breakdown*' (Commonwealth of Australia 2014). This perspective backs up a report released by the UK Department for Education stating that these types of *'interventions might provide substantially greater savings to society through the avoidance of costs associated with relationship breakdown than they cost to deliver'* (TCCR 2014).

Stronger Relationships is a fantastic initiative that represents the recommendations of the current literature. After consulting with a key service provider for the *Stronger Relationships* initiative, Relationships Australia, Darwin office, the staff informed me that so far the trial has had very poor utilisation in the Territory due to a suspected lack of public awareness and strong stigma associated 'getting help' for relationships.

In order for the public to utilise these effective programs, I recommend that the NT Government explore options to change the social stigma about getting relationship counseling and education prior to relationship breakdown. I believe the best way to achieve this may be through effective media and marketing campaigns that educate the public the value and benefits of relationship support and impact of family breakdown on youth and young people.

Initiatives such as these can send a powerful message that the NT Government does not consider relationship breakdown to be inevitable and is prepared to support measures to prevent it where possible and understands there are significant cost savings to be made.

CONCLUSION

Over the past seven months my wife and I have seen profound improvements as we have invested love and support into our 13 year old foster son. The level of trauma and neglect that he has experienced can only be healed with unconditional, relentless love. I believe the family unit is the natural and most effective environment by which this life transformation can take place.

If the NT Government is serious about stemming the trends of youth selling short their full potential and participating in anti-social behaviors, I urge them to look seriously at the evidence testifying of the impact of broken families on not only young people but the entire community – including the public purse.

Research shows that it is possible to reduce the trends of family breakdown and its effects on young people and society, however the government will need to be fully committed to take seriously the evidence that marriage and commitment make a momentous contribution to the wellbeing of children and young people. A change in culture is needed whereby people are choosing to have children within committed relationships and prepare for parenting. Furthermore, parents need to be acutely aware of the immediate and long-term impacts of family breakdown on their children.

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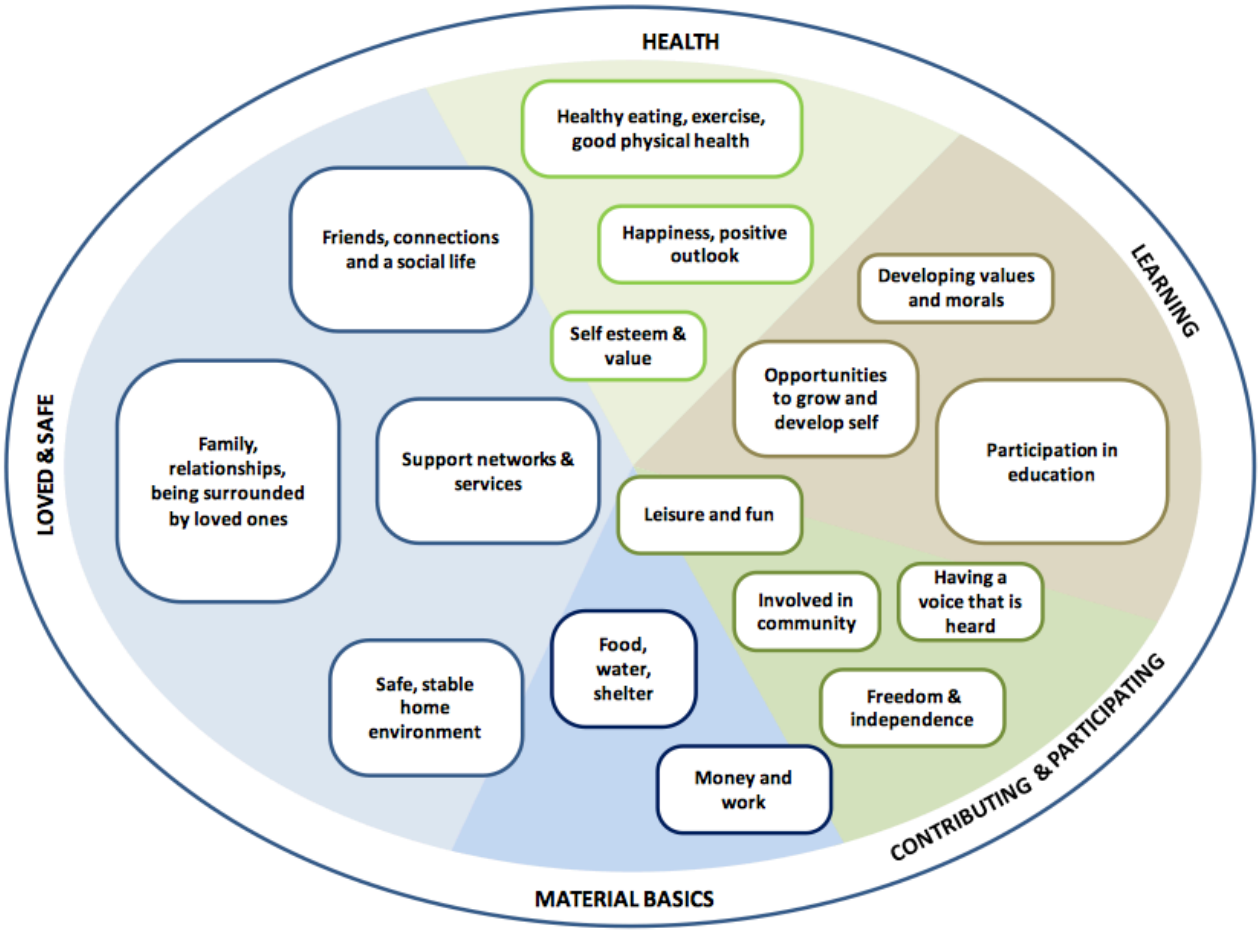
Attachment A



Attachment B

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN ON THE TERRITORIES YOUTH

SURVEY

David Ridley is a member of the 2014 Chief Minister's Round Table of Young Territorians (Round Table) and is investigating the impact of fatherlessness and family breakdown on the Territories youth. Your comments will remain anonymous and will be used for the purpose of data collection. David would really appreciate your help with his project by completing and submitting this survey by 31st August 2014.

1. How old are you?

   ☐ 12-14 years ☐ 15-17 years ☐ 18-21 years ☐ 22-25 years

2. What is your gender?

   ☐ *MALE* ☐ *FEMALE* ☐ *OTHER*

3. *ARE YOU:*

   ☐ *ABORIGINAL* ☐ *TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER* ☐ *NEITHER*

4. Do you live at home with your parents?

   ☐ *YES* ☐ *NO*

5. Are your parents:

   ☐ *MARRIED* ☐ *DE FACTO* ☐ *SEPARATED* ☐ *DIVORCED* ☐ *OTHER*

   _____

6. Have you experienced family breakdown (e.g. mum and dad separating?)

   ☐ *YES* ☐ *NO*

Tick the box that best describes these statements:	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I am generally confident in who I am as a person	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I generally enjoy going to school and getting an education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My immediate family is supporting and encouraging of me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have dreams of what I will be in the future	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My Dad is currently involved in my life (I see him regularly and we get along well)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have a healthy relationship with my Dad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I struggle with life and have been suicidal in the past	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would describe my family as loving	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My Dad hasn't been present in my life due to divorce/separation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family breakdown has directly impacted my life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

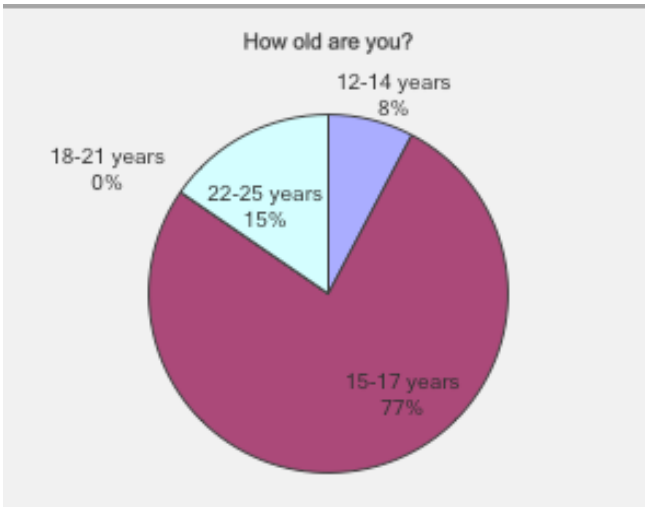
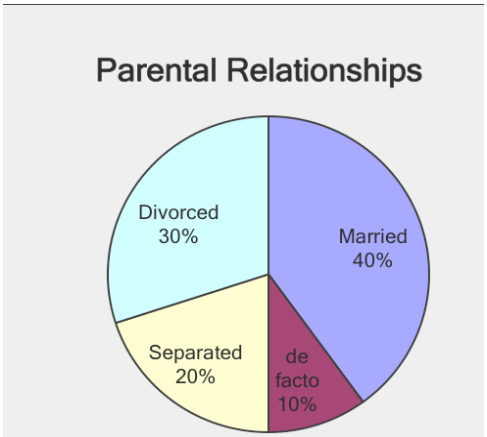
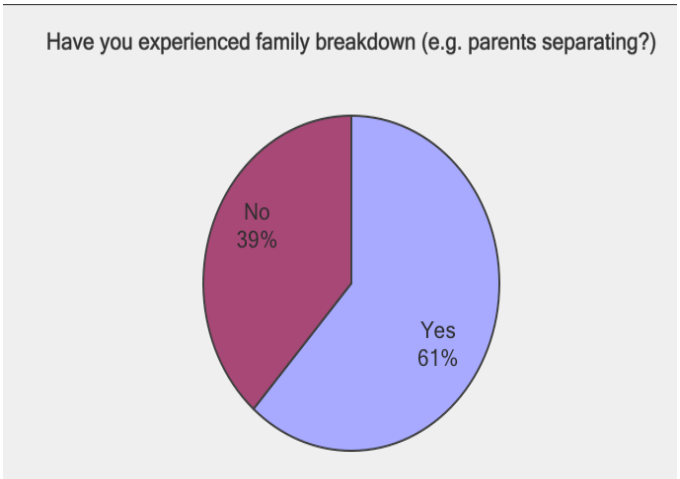
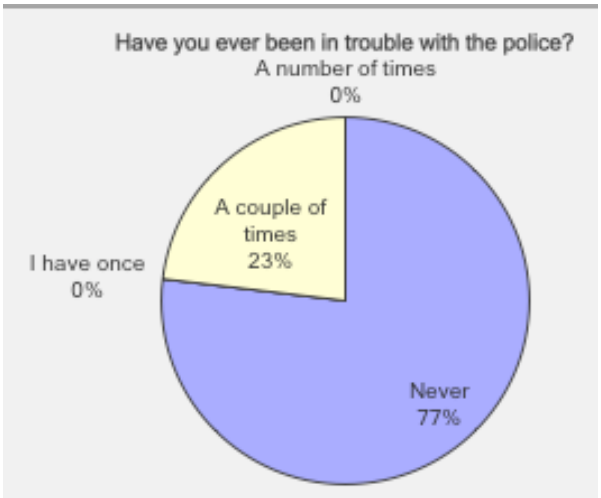
How often do you drink alcohol?:

☐ *NEVER* ☐ *ONCE A MONTH* ☐ *EVERY WEEK* ☐ *MORE THAN ONCE A WEEK*

Do you ever use illegal drugs?:

☐ *NEVER* ☐ *I HAVE ONCE* ☐ *SEMI-REGULARLY* ☐ *REGULARLY (WEEKLY)*

Have you ever been in trouble with the police?:

☐ *NEVER* ☐ *I HAVE ONCE* ☐ *A COUPLE OF TIMES* ☐ *A NUMBER OF TIMES*

Attachment C