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# Together we can help kids thrive



**MATTHEW COX**

WHEN young children fail to grow into independent and capable adults, everyone loses.

This one issue – children not growing to reach their potential – affects everything.

While no one is a prisoner of destiny, children who don't do well before the age of eight are much more likely to grow to be teenagers with low self-regard and then on to be underemployed or marginalised adults. In human development, when you fall behind early in life, you tend to stay behind.

And when these children-now-adults have children of their own, the cycle repeats.

These are not new observations, but the waste of potential that goes with this intergenerational infinity loop have persisted despite decades of attempts to improve things.

In Australia, about one in five children struggles in this journey. As a public policy issue, it drives expenditure on welfare, homelessness, mental health, child safety, family support, domestic violence, justice, police, youth development, prisons, public hospital admissions and job services – to say nothing of the impacts on

national economic output and social cohesion.

Because the “kids not growing up well” problem is so far-reaching in its consequences, it's hard to put a figure on costs. But it's probably north of 25 per cent of all public expenditure – that is, more than \$150 billion annually, or almost 10 per cent of gross domestic product.

It is such an elemental public policy issue you would think that the Department of Growing Kids Up Well would have developed a national response. But we don't have such a department. We have instead a fragmented social investment system that has developed across different agencies.

Overwhelmingly, this system is hostage to issues that it seeks to manage.

There are programs for homelessness, family crisis support, jobless and so on. Hundreds of disconnected initiatives funded through different policy frameworks.

However, at broad scale, social investment over the past 40 years has not made life better for our marginalised citizens. Plan A has failed. In Logan, we are building Plan B.

Initially we're focused on early childhood through to age eight – a time critical for life success. It is a strategic, approach rooted in an understanding of human development. It involves the health system, the early childhood education system, the school system,

the social services system, the non-government sector, every level of government and, vitally, leadership by the community itself.

Our Logan Together project is a universal approach in collaboration with parents and carers. We are interested in every one of the 45,000 kids under eight in our community and, together, we know what to do. We just need to get organised to do it. We'll save money when we do it and we'll help people find their own voice and live better lives.

Logan Together is part of a national network of communities doing the same thing in the same way.

It's a credible plan for change because when kids grow up well, we all win.

Matthew Cox is the director of Logan Together, a project hosted by Griffith University [logantogether.org.au](http://logantogether.org.au)



**VICIOUS CYCLE:** Troubled kids need early support.