

# OK New Zealand, tell me the way to go

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Guest columnist

IN THIS country, this beautiful nation of ours, two children are physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected every hour of every day.

And on average, 10 children die every year at the hands of the people closest to them, the people they love and trust.

I don't know about you, New Zealand, but I've had enough of this. These are our babies. We all know the shameful roll call, most recently added to by the death of Serenity Scott-Dinnington from Ngaruawahia. She was born a perfect baby but at just six months old she was rushed to hospital with bruising to her body, serious head injuries and genital injuries. She died two days later.

This is no accident. As minister of social development, like every minister of this portfolio before me, I see the details of the worst cases every week. I see the same patterns, the same faces and the same outcomes over and over.

A quarter of New Zealand's children are Maori, but disproportionately they make up half of all children abused. Of the last 12 babies and children who've died of suspected abuse, nine were Maori. Abused children often live with a young mother and a man who isn't their birth father. Often they are on a benefit.

Last year 4552 babies were born to teenagers. Half had Maori mums. About three-quarters of teen parents, mostly mums, are on a benefit. They stay on longer than anyone else and four out of 10 young people on DPB will have another child while on the benefit, and so life gets even harder.

Many teenage and young mums do a great job and raise happy, healthy babies. Some even go on to be cabinet ministers. But we have to be prepared to do everything we can to help those who don't have the support, education and the family knowledge to nurture and protect their children.

That's why I initiated supported homes for teen parents in high priority communities with intensive case managers, and for the first time a support programme for teen dads to help them learn to be loving, protective fathers.

Let's not pussyfoot around here – we know which babies are most at risk, we know which adults are most likely to put them at risk. Often those adults are on Work and Income's books. This isn't a race issue or a class issue, it's just the reality we live in.

So, how about this for a radical idea – how about we take over the

money management for at-risk teen parents and make sure their money's spent on their children, paying the rent and power bills?

How about we make it an obligation of receiving the benefit that they take their children for Wellchild checks? How about we make every effort to support those parents and make sure those babies are well cared for? Should we track every baby from birth? Should there be mandatory reporting of child abuse?

Or is that too much state intervention for your liking? You tell me. Isn't it time we started debating how we collectively protect our children? That's why I'm taking a Green Paper to New Zealand, asking you to get involved and actually say how much you want government in the lives of children. When do you want us to intervene and how rigorously



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should we when we do? What are you prepared to give up to make sure children are safe – your privacy? And if that means coming into the homes of those who aren't in crisis, are you comfortable with that? Or is that too far? Are you prepared to pay more to protect our children? We all need to think about these issues.

I've been working on solutions for almost three years. This government has introduced a range of initiatives to address child abuse at different levels. The Never Ever Shake a Baby campaign, First Response pilot, and basing social workers in hospitals to identify children at risk of abuse and act to protect them. We've improved monitoring systems, brought in Home for Life as well as supported housing and help for teenage mums and dads. We're working with government and non-government organisations and with individuals committed to protecting children. I will continue to look for ways we can make a real difference to the number of children who experience abuse.

We have a problem here. It's ugly and unpalatable. But if we don't face this together as a nation and debate how we treat our children, we turn our backs on them. This is an uncomfortable path, but I'm determined to walk it and I ask New Zealanders to walk with me. It is time we stopped arguing about the problem and got on with the solutions.

Paula Bennett is the minister of social development.