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Child advocates warn of destructive effects of ‘work for dole’

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) supports the idea that people should work if there is appropriate work available, but warns that “work for the dole” and associated training schemes which do not lead to permanent employment are economically and socially destructive. Children are the most vulnerable when benefits are cut because of failure to meet work-for-the-dole requirements.

Over the last decade there have been many failed international experiments with various forms of compulsory work-for-the-dole arrangements.

“Compulsory work and training schemes seldom lead to permanent jobs with an adequate income. The most important element in reducing length of time on a benefit is having good economic policies which create jobs,” says Assoc-Prof Mike O’Brien, author of CPAG’s “Workfare: Not fair for kids?”

Make-work schemes must not be allowed to take priority over children’s interests, the group believes. “Those receiving a benefit often have personal, health and family commitments that must be balanced with the demands of paid work,” O’Brien says. “Under rigid work-for-the-dole schemes parents can face harsh financial penalties simply for attempting to put their children first. When already-inadequate benefit income is cut a cycle of poverty is perpetuated, leaving children especially vulnerable to lasting disadvantage.”

There are many reasons why work-for-the-dole policies are proven failures, says O’Brien. “Training schemes without appropriate job opportunities are expensive and easily lead to simple recycling of the unemployed and beneficiaries. Work for the dole is based on the assumption that those on a benefit do not want to work. The evidence from good international research shows that this is false. In fact, the work incentive remains strong, for very good social and economic reasons. Studies suggest that the work incentive among those who are unemployed is in fact stronger than it is among many of those who are working.”

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