

# Future Visions for Queensland Children

## Children's Services Symposium

13 September

Cooloola

### **[Slide 1 – Introduction]**

Good Morning and thank you for inviting me to speak at the Children's Services Symposium today. I have spent all of my working life, in one way or another, working with or for children, so am delighted to be invited here to talk to you as individuals training and working with young children.

I have been asked to tell you something of the role of the Queensland Children's Commission and then address you on the topic of *Future Visions for Queensland's Children*.

Before I talk to you about the role of the Children's Commission I would like to provide you with some figures about our constituents.

There are approximately 870,000 Queensland residents aged between 0 and 17 years<sup>1</sup>. This number constitutes 26.2%, or just over a quarter, of the total population of the State.

### **[Slide 2 - Percentage of children – Queensland 1966]**

The proportion of children within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is much higher than the overall proportion of children in the State, and stands at 46.9%<sup>2</sup>.

### **[Slide 3 Children as a proportion of the aboriginal ...]**

This disproportionate, in today's terms, number of children to adults has implications in many areas, from housing to mentoring and creates a different dynamic from that of the rest of the State. Within the Indigenous community, it is more powerful and pronounced than the bulge produced by the post war baby boom and is a demographic of which all of us dealing with children need to remain mindful.

The Children's Commission's mission statement provides the broadest perspective of the role of the Commission. That is:

### **[Slide 4 – Children's Commission's Mission Statement]**

*The Children's Commission serves to protect and promote the well being of all children and young people in Queensland.*

The Children's Commission of Queensland was established in 1996. It was the first independent commission for children established anywhere in Australia, although South Australia established the Children's Interests Bureau in 1984.

The establishment of the Commission was a formal recognition by the Parliament of Queensland that adults' and children's interests are not always the same. Since 1979, the International Year of the Child, and the year in which work on the Convention on the Rights of the Child began, children's rights have been receiving more attention throughout the world. There has been greater recognition that:

- children and young people are wholly dependent upon the goodwill of adults;
- they must generally rely on adults to voice their concerns; and
- they are without political impact<sup>3</sup>.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child underpins the Commission's legislative framework. Although the Convention contains more than forty articles on children's rights, these can be summarised into four broad areas of rights. These are:

**[Slide 5 – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child]**

- survival rights such as nutrition, housing and medical services;
- developmental rights such as access to education;
- protection rights against exploitation and abuse; and
- participation rights including the freedom to express opinions.

Although we have a long way to go, I am pleased that Queensland, which frequently wears the label of being behind the times on social matters, is in the forefront of promoting an awareness of the issues affecting its children and young people, providing them with an opportunity to be listened to, and protecting their rights.

In my role as Queensland's Children's Commissioner I am charged with – amongst other things – fostering a community culture that focuses on children and young people's interests, their needs, rights and responsibilities.

**[slide 6 – fostering...]**

At present, the Children's Commission maintains a number of key programs including the Official Visitor Program, the Review Unit, an Appeals Function, the Research Unit and a Communications and Policy Unit.

The legislation underpinning our current operations is the *Children's Commissioner and Children's Services Appeals Tribunal Act*, however, this legislation has some limitations that were identified in the Briton Review of the legislation and the Commission of Inquiry Into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions<sup>4</sup>, more commonly known as the Forde Inquiry. The limitations include:

- The Commission's limited scope which extends only to services provided by Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland;
- The lack of investigative powers to allow the Commission to undertake its function of investigating complaints;
- The Commission's lack of perceived independence through its attachment to Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland for administrative support; and
- The limited scope of a clearly defined role for the Commission's Official Visitors.

In October 1999, the Government authorised the preparation of new legislation for the Children's Commission and the establishment of the Children's Services Appeals Tribunal as an entity separate from the Commission. The resultant Commission legislation is the *Commission for Children and Young People Bill*.

**[slide 7 – CCYP Bill title]**

The *Commission for Children and Young People Bill*, which was introduced to the Queensland Parliament in June, will re-establish the Commission as an independent statutory body attached to the Premier's portfolio with extended functions and powers. These include:

**[slide 8– Functions]**

**An Express advocacy function;**

The Commission will have an express advocacy role which will enable it to seek assistance from advocacy organisations, service providers and other organisations as appropriate, to meet the needs of a particular child or young person.

Any child or young person is entitled to express their concerns or grievances to the Commission.

**A state-wide community visitor program;**

An expanded State-wide Community Visitor Program will replace the current Official Visitor program. The new program will include visits to children and young people:

- receiving treatment at authorised mental health services;
- in government-funded residential facilities, including those for children and young people with a disability; and
- in juvenile detention centres.

Community Visitors will be required to provide support to children and young people at these facilities and advocate on their behalf by giving voice to, and working to resolve, their concerns and grievances.

Community Visitors will have the power to:

- enter and inspect a facility;
- talk to a child or young person who wishes to speak to them; and
- access documents held at the facility relating to the residents or the operation of the facility.

**Formal Complaints;**

The Bill provides the Commission with the necessary powers to attend to complaints relating to services to children who are subject to orders under the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992* or subject to intervention or orders under the *Child Protection Act 1999*.

Complaints may be made by:

- the child or young person; or
- a person acting on behalf, and in the interests, of the child or young person.

The Bill provides the Commission with the authority to access all information that is considered to be reasonably necessary for the investigation of a complaint and makes it an offence for a person to provide false or misleading information, obstruct an investigation, or to withhold documents and information requested by the Commission.

If the recommended action is not carried out within the specified time frame, the Commissioner may provide a report to the Minister with the Commissioner's comments. The Commissioner may also request that the Minister table the report in Parliament.

**Employment screening for child related employment not regulated by existing legislation;**

The Bill requires that all prospective employees in child related fields, not covered by current legislation, consent to criminal history checks prior to their employment.

The Children's Commissioner will conduct the criminal history check and assess the person's suitability for employment. A notice stating whether the person is suitable or not suitable for child related employment will be issued.

Those requiring criminal history checks by the Commission include those seeking paid employment working with children in:

- residential facilities providing accommodation for children;
- schools and school boarding facilities;
- community groups, for example churches, clubs or associations, which provide services directed mainly at children;
- private teaching, coaching or tutoring on a commercial basis; and
- child counselling and support services.

Checks on current employees will be done on request<sup>5</sup>.

The laws will also apply to volunteers working in these areas but this will be phased in over time. Volunteers do not include parents of children participating in those activities. That is, a volunteer parent coaching their child in a football team will not need a criminal record check<sup>6</sup>.

A person can appeal the Commissioner's decision through the Children's Services Tribunal.

Penalties apply if: an employer in a relevant field fails to screen a prospective employee; a person who has been issued with a certificate of unsuitability applies, accepts or continues a job in a child-related field; or a non-government organisation employs or engages a person issued with an unsuitability certificate.

### **The ability to conduct and coordinate research into issues impacting on children and young people;**

The importance of the research function was identified in the Forde Report which recommended that the Commission's research capacity be enhanced to enable it to conduct comprehensive research *into all matters relating to the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people in residential facilities and juvenile justice centres*<sup>7</sup>.

In line with this recommendation the Bill provides the Commission with a research capacity which will strengthen its ability to conduct and coordinate research.

The Research Unit currently co-ordinates many of the Commission's submissions relating to issues papers or the impact of draft legislation on children and young people. Last year, for example, the Research Unit was responsible for the Commission's submission to the Queensland Law Reform Commission on *The Evidence of Children* which explored ways in which child witnesses could be treated more appropriately by the judicial system without unfairly prejudicing the accused.

More recently, the Research Unit reviewed the draft *Mental Health Bill* from the perspective of its effect on young people and has been responsible for the Commission's submission on *Strategic Directions: Investing in Queensland's Community Service*.

The Research Unit is currently collaborating with other agencies on a number of projects. These include a research project with James Cook University looking into links between poverty and abuse, and a project developing a fathering program for Indigenous inmates at Lotus Glen Correctional Centre. The Commission is also in discussion with James Cook University and the Mackay and Whitsunday Regional office of Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland in relation to a joint research project on foster care.

The Research Unit is also collaborating with criminal justice agencies to establish a centralised data collection system that will enable matters involving child victims to be tracked across all agencies involved in the criminal justice process. Once established, it is anticipated that this data base will provide a much more accurate picture of child victims and their experience of the legal process and will be an invaluable research tool.

That completes my discussion on the role of the Commission. I will now address the topic that I was asked to speak to and that is, *Future Visions for Queensland's Children*.

I know that I was probably invited to speak on *Future Visions for Queensland Children* with the thought that I would talk of systemic or legislative initiatives that I would like to see implemented in the future, or the anticipated impact of current initiatives. For example, how the Commission will enhance children's right to be heard, or the impact of the Government's Child Protection Reform Strategy, or the changes that will flow from policy or practice initiatives.

The Commission has a responsibility to look at matters in this way and does so through a range of activities including submissions, conference presentations, maintaining frequent contact with other departments, reviewing proposed legislative reform, being on a range of consultative bodies and through the programs I spoke of earlier, particularly our express advocacy role.

I frequently do address audiences with these type of 'big picture' issues, however today, I would like to take the opportunity to approach things a little differently and look at what I would like to coin, the 'little picture'.

By the little picture, I mean the day to day, individual experiences of each child.

Rather than seeing children as a client group, or a subset of the community defined by age, I would like to look at the details that make up a child's existence and which, in reality have much more personal and immediate impact than structural frameworks, strategic plans, or facilitated outcomes, that are so frequently the vocabulary of bureaucratic and organisational life.

I am not implying that we are not all affected in some way by the structures and systems we live under or that we need not monitor them or advocate, or even agitate, as I did when I was student, for change.

As an historian, I know better, and as aging activist, habits die hard. But in the end, it is the immediate issues and the personal impact of things that have the greatest effect on our sense of well being and who we are.

You would all know that your life is not so much made up of the big ticket items but whether you can pay the rent or the mortgage, how you feel about your weight, that you have three assignments due in the next week, how

much you like getting home and kicking your shoes off, or how you feel down on Sunday afternoon because it is so close to Monday morning.

The same applies to children. You might even remember the sort of thing - the chipped part on the wall you used to look at before you went to sleep, or the drawer that never shut properly, the feel of grass under your feet, or the way your Dad sneezed, or your mother's telephone voice.

It is the small issues and details of children's existence that I would like to focus on today because I am concerned that sometimes we forget that whether it is our policies and systems or social and technological change, there is a very real and very personal impact on each child's experience of the world, and eventually, who they become.

On the front glass door of the Commission at the moment there is a poster that was sent to us entitled, *The 10 things children need most*. It lists the following:

**[Slide 9 – The 10 things children need most]**

- The basics: food, clothing, warmth, shelter – and love
- To feel safe and secure
- To be hugged and cuddled
- Frequent smiles
- Praise and encouragement
- Talking
- Listening
- New experiences
- Respect for their feelings
- Your time and care

You might have noticed there is not a play station, mobile phone or child's credit card amongst them.

I do not think this list is exhaustive of all the things children need, but it is not a bad start. You may also have noticed that these needs can also be fairly readily sorted into the four broad categories of rights captured by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Some things I would add would be: good role models, peer acceptance, self-confidence and the need for play and physical activity, with, of course adjustments to the list commensurate with a child's age.

The reason I have included this list, is not because it is the definitive answer to what children need, but because the needs identified here are essentially timeless and cut across all cultural and socio-economic groups. They equally apply to the child living in an African village as they do to the child of wealthy western parents, and they apply now as much as they did centuries ago.

That is not to deny a needs hierarchy such that the starving child's need for food is more important than her need for new experiences, but that collectively, for optimum development, all the needs need to be met. And what is more, those needs do not change with the times.

My concern is that the rapid technological and social change of the past few decades has had an impact on children, biologically, emotionally and socially, that we are sometimes slow to recognise.

For example, Eric Jensen, in his book, *Teaching with the brain in mind*, asks the question: 'Are Kids Today Biologically Different Than They Were 30 years Ago?'<sup>8</sup> He identifies the following influences to support his suggestion that we at least need to look at the issue. Compared with 30 years ago, children now experience:

**[Slide 10 – Compared with 30 years ago]**

- Fewer natural foods and more additives;
- More exposure to drugs and medications;
- Less mobility through car travel and seat restraints;
- More exposure to electronically mediated stimulation;
- Commercialisation of childhood — children as consumers;
- More single parent households; and
- Less early motor stimulation from swings, see-saws, merry-go-rounds because of safety concerns.

We know from American studies that in 1960 the average two-year-old had spent an estimated 200 hours in a car. Today's 2 year old has spent an estimated 500 hours in a car seat.

Have you considered what these changes mean to you as educators and how the children who present to you will have different experiences and competencies than even a decade ago?

My concern is that because of the rapid changes to the way we live and the way the world operates there will be an excessive concentration of certain types of experiences and activities and a gradual but powerful limiting of the way children experience the world in other ways.

In the process, many valuable learning experiences and developmental processes that occurred naturally through the social and physical environment of the past, and consequently tend to be taken for granted, could be lost.

We already have examples of this with the skewing of play towards indoor, electronic, sedentary and solitary play with the result that there are increasing numbers of overweight and obese children, with schools in some places having to teach children to be physically active, and how to play.

Another is the loss of socialisation and communication skills that go with prolonged playing of computer games. We need to consider the effects of the

substitution of a local community and friends by a cyber community, the diminished sensory experiences that indoor electronic play provides, and the effect of violence and persistent role playing.

I would like to suggest that there are many less obvious implications, particularly operating at the neurological level that we are only just starting to consider. For example, what is the neurological, as distinct from visual effect of a focal length fixed at 40 centimetres for hours on end? What, if any is the effect of rapidly changing images, the loss of linear sequencing, the ability to isolate and construct information in blocks rather than basic units, and the almost indiscernible flashing of the screen?

I am also concerned about some of the less identified effects of change on personal and social development. For example, what replaces the sense of independence that a child used to derive from walking to school? Or the sense of contributing that used to be derived by watering a neighbour's garden when she was sick, or the sense of community that came with being able to name ever household in the street.

I would like to ask you to think what things you could do as a child that your children, or children you work with, can no longer do, and determine what needs, neurological, physical, emotional or social, those activities fulfilled. Are there substitute activities that a child can do now days that would serve the same purposes?

I am not suggesting that, in most cases there are not, and sometimes they are much more interesting now than ever in the past. I am also not attempting to hark back to a golden age that never really existed, but simply alert you to the fact that there are needs and experiences that may not be adequately met because of changes to the way we live. And more importantly, that we might not notice how seemingly unrelated changes have the capacity to impact on children.

My list included such things as: getting dirty; being free to explore the neighbourhood as long as I was home in time for dinner; being able to go tadpoling in the local creek as long as I did not use my mother's good strainer; climbing the mango tree; visiting Gran; walking on the fence; playing cricket on the road; hanging on the new rotary clothes line that replaced the old wire and clothes-prop construction when nobody was looking, walking to school; thinking it was wonderful to have sixpence to spend on a lemonade iceblock; being able to have my breakfast on the verandah while watching the 'big kids' walk past on their way to school; and being unworldly and unsophisticated.

I have given you these not so that you will have an insight into my childhood but to point out to you that even the style of houses and fences we build, including the materials and finishes we use, the type of tree we plant and garden design we favour, impact on the way children can now experience the world. As do the type of play equipment we provide, the hours we work, the way we communicate, our modes of transport, the structured activities we

favour for our children, our security concerns, family construction, patterns of spending, and our sense of style and fashion.

There are children who have never climbed a tree or walked to school on their own. Some children have never met their grandparents or know if other children live in their street. We also see children with an awareness for clothes and fashion at three years old and serious consumers before they are out of kindergarten. We see seven year olds following the every move of their pop or fashion idol, and children as young as eleven, anorexic.

Also what of the broader impacts? For example, how do individuals develop a sense of community, if they are isolated from that community by high fences, security screens and indoor activity? If they do not develop a sense of geographical community, are the communities that they develop through interests and activities appropriate and sufficient substitutes? If these communities only includes individuals of a similar age, it means that some children are never exposed to people older than their parents. What is the effect of that on both children and the community?

The list of small but significant differences is seemingly endless and I would like to challenge you to find some for yourself and consider what the impact might be on children, or family dynamics.

For example, what is the impact on the amount of eye contact an infant receives when placed in long term child care? Is there any effect on children when a dish washer replaces washing up around the kitchen sink? What increased pressures are there on children due to television and young people's magazines?

At first glances some of these issues sound trivial and even ridiculous, and some of them well may be, but without exploring the possible consequences of change on children we may not notice the effects until, as with the increase in sedentary play, it takes its toll.

For you as educators, one of the key influences that you need to consider, is the impact of computer use on children.

Queensland academic Dale Spender has identified a range of behavioural and cultural changes that she argues have resulted from computer use and characterise children of the information age. These include that they:

**[Slide 11 – Characteristics of information age children]**

- worship the connection;
- use lateral rather than analytical thinking skills to establish connections;
- are affronted by limits and boundaries;
- play as they work and work as they play;
- do not expect to have to self regulate;
- have low levels of tolerance for systems failure;
- have no time for manuals;

- display little interest in understanding the complexities of the systems they navigate; and,
- are expert in manipulating them to their own ends.<sup>9</sup>

Spender argues that by school age, children operate in two worlds – dependent and passive, in a print dominated environment, and fearless, independent and confident manipulators of the digital environment.

Characteristics of the dependent passive world are:

**[Slide 12 – Spender’s two worlds – the print medium]**

- the print medium
- sit still
- concentrate
- disciplined eye movement
- requires memory retention
- ability to follow a linear argument (usually someone else’s)
- reduce meaning
- fosters a particular and ordered world view
- cause and effect
- beginning and end

Characteristics of the fearless, independent, and confident world are:

**[Slide 13 – Spender’s two worlds – the digital medium]**

- the digital medium
- developing rapid hand-eye coordination
- encompassing eye movement
- mental agility to make rapid connections
- ability to organise information
- deal with the absence of ending
- access rather than memorise
- put a ‘spin’ on information rather than reduce its meaning

Spender even claims that the current epidemic of Attention Deficit Disorder is a measure of this cultural shift.

For you as educators, these changes provide you with a range of challenges. The first is recognising the type of effects that Spender has identified. I would suggest that not all the changes are necessarily captured here and would propose that an interesting workshop activity would be to try to build on Spender’s list. Another challenge is to identify where deficits result from these changes, and what, if any activities can be encouraged to compensate.

**[Slide 14 – Projected percentage of children Queensland 2025]**

Earlier I told you that children currently constitute 26.2 per cent of the Queensland population, but as you are no doubt aware, that proportion is

decreasing. The average number of children in Australian families now stands at 1.7. This low birth rate, combined with the aging of the post war cohort with an increased life expectancy, means that children will constitute a smaller proportion of the population in the future, predicted to fall to 21.8%<sup>10</sup> by 2025, a drop of 4.2 per cent. This decrease will introduce a new range of social issues and pressures over time for both adults and children.

I have wondered how Australia's attitude to children will change as they constitute an increasingly smaller proportion of the population. Will children become valued and cosseted as has happened in China as a result of the one child policy, to the point that they are overindulged and spoiled? Or will their minority status ensure that they are even less considered as the community copes with the aging cohort of post war babies and adults strive for greater autonomy and increasingly pursue their own interests.

In looking at future visions for Queensland children I am not inclined to provide the type of wish list that would include such things as every child be loved and valued, or that no child ever suffer abuse or neglect, or that every child experience school as a positive and rewarding experience, although I would like to see such things and much more, as I am sure you would.

It is just that this type of idealistic view of the world does children no favours but tends to deny the reality of the situation and the hard work involved in achieving even small gains. I feel it is more beneficial to children if, rather than proposing a romanticised view of how we would like the world to be, we work on the possible and the practical and do not fail children simply because we are insensitive to their needs, uncertain of the influences upon them, and unaware of the impact of change.

This generation of children is coping with rapid social change and interacting with technology in a way that no earlier generation has ever done. Rather than being pessimistic about these changes we need to recognise the full range of their effects and find ways to accommodate and build on them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Calculated from ABS, *1996 Census of Population and Housing* (unpublished data) cited in <http://www.statistics.qld.gov.au/stab/multi/ml-14.htm> accessed 22/2/2000.

<sup>2</sup> Source: ABS, *1996 Census of Population and Housing*.

<sup>3</sup> Western Australian Children's Advisory Council, *Towards a Children's Commissioner*, [http://www.acwa.asn.au/acwa/publications/issuepapers/Paper\\_07.html](http://www.acwa.asn.au/acwa/publications/issuepapers/Paper_07.html) (extracted 22.6.00).

<sup>4</sup> Commission of Inquiry Into the Abuse of Children In Queensland Institutions, 1999, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into the Abuse of Children In Queensland institutions*, Brisbane.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Ministerial Press release, Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland, 22 June 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Ministerial Press release, Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland, 22 June 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Recommendation 26.

<sup>8</sup> Jensen, E., *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, 1998, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Bagnall, Op.Cit., p.26

<sup>10</sup> Source: Calculated from: ABS, *Australian Social Trends*, 1997, 41002.0 and *Australian Demographic Trends*, 3101.0.