

Creche & Kindergarten Speech

4 July 2000

Thought for the Day

[Slide 1 - Title slide]

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I was intrigued by the topic I was given, *Thought of the Day*. It made me think of those little quotes at the bottom of desk calendars that are sometimes funny or philosophical or quirky, and other times, just obscure. The trouble is, as with jokes, I am never able to recall them.

It probably has something to do with my early childhood, not having the type of environment that encouraged the required neural connectivity, leaving me with hippocampal deficiency for processing these type of things.

Regardless, I decided to use my connections with young people to provide you with a few of these little thoughts, known in cyber nomenclature, as tag lines.

[Slide 2 – Thoughts for the Day - cued to text]

- Never tell your Mum her diet is not working. (Michael, 14)
- When your mum is mad with your dad, don't let her brush your hair. (Taylia, 11)
- Puppies still have bad breath after eating a tic tac. (Andrew, 9)
- You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk. (Armir, 9)

[Slide 3 – Thoughts for the Day - cued to text]

- If you want a kitten, start out by asking for a horse. (Naomi, 15)
- Felt markers are not good to use as lipstick. (Lauren, 9)
- Don't pick on your sister when she is holding a baseball bat. (Joel, 10)
- Never try to baptise a cat. (Eileen, 8)

As the theme for today is, *Building the Village that Raises the Child*, I would like to offer my serious thought for the day to you, with apologies to Hilary Clinton, as *It Takes a Child to Raise A Village*.

[Slide 4 – Thoughts for the Day – It Takes...]

My reason for choosing this thought is to highlight the reciprocal nature of the relationship that exists between a community and its children.

Our perception of children, as demonstrated in the original statement, *It Takes A Village*, is akin to the old teaching description of the object of a sentence. That is, 'the sufferer or receiver' of a 'doer's' actions.

We perceive the child as the recipient of a village's ministrations, assuming that the child grows and changes over time in response to the influences of the village, but fail to recognise the reciprocity of the relationship and that the village also grows and changes in response to the child.

This reciprocity also exists at the family level, and depending on the quality of the environment, these influences can be for good or bad. Systems theory recognises that the role and behaviour of each individual in a system impacts on other individuals in the system, and the system as a whole. Family therapy works on this premise.

With this notion in mind, when we are deciding what kind of community we want to build for our children, we are also deciding what type of community we want for ourselves. There is no capacity to disengage, one from the other. We cannot have a community that is accepting and supportive and inclusive for its adult population and expect that community to stay healthy if it does not offer the same to its children and young people.

It is now clear that the nurturing and experiences of children in their early years have a marked effect on their life chances and choices. It is also able to be demonstrated that policy considerations and financial investments in the early years of childhood return both social and economic benefits in the long term. It would follow, from this, that even if a community's motivation was purely one of self interest, it would support and encourage social policy and expenditure to focus on the early years of childhood. Yet we generally do exactly the reverse of this, allocating the greatest proportion of financial resources and social policy to the post-compulsory schooling years, law and order, and health care for aging baby boomers.

[Slide 5 Mismatch Between Opportunity and Investment * this is only available on OHT, not powerpoint].

This graph demonstrates this. It shows that our spending is lowest at the time when brain malleability, and hence potential, is greatest, and greatest in the later years, when we are potentiated out. This inverse relationship does not make economic or social sense.

Besides the need for financial investment on programs in the early years, we also need to realise that there are other ways of investing in children and young people. These include providing communities that actively consider them in their planning and processes. It also includes not seeing them as an homogenous group, all having the same needs and demonstrating the same behaviours.

A consistent message that I receive from young people is the sense of unfairness they feel at the stereotyping and labelling that occurs. At the Positive Rural Futures Conference held in Cooktown¹ in May, a young person called for an attitudinal change toward young people. He demonstrated his point by saying that "when a group of young people sit in a park it's a gang, when a group of older people sit in a park it's a picnic."

I'd like you to imagine for a moment the effects on a community where there were no children or young people. This was brought home to me recently in a news item on the tragic fire at the backpacker's hostel in Chinchilla. One of the residents of Chinchilla was talking about how the local community welcomed the young backpackers into the town as they replaced their own young people who had moved to the city. He said that it was the presence of the young backpackers that kept the town vibrant and alive.

Another comment I heard in the last week was by a young woman who had established a 'kids only gym' in Melbourne after being in a park and hearing no children playing. They were, through a combination of safety and convenience and habit, conditioned to stay inside and watch television or play computer games. In essence they had lost the ability to play outdoors and entertain themselves.

¹ Conference co-hosted by the Office of Rural Communities and the Department of Primary Industries for Priority Country Area Program (PCAP), cited in *Education Views*, June 9, 2000.

Although the angle of the story was the lack of physical fitness of many children, the image of a park empty of children, just as the image of country towns devoid of young people, brought home to me what an unrecognised asset our children and young people are. Sometimes it's a case of you 'don't know what you've got 'til it's gone'. In many communities, it is not the actual absence of children or young people that is the issue, but their marginalisation.

When young people do not feel they are valued and have no sense of connectedness to their family or community, they become reactive and destructive. Some times their actions are directed inward, as in substance abuse, eating disorders, and other self harming behaviours. Other times they are directed outward as graffiti, vandalism, and other destructive and criminal behaviours. It also encourages the formation of gangs, which become the young person's substitute community. But it is too late to attempt to simply retrieve the situation by amending policy and practices to be more inclusive of youth or developing programs to engage marginalised young people. The process of consideration and inclusion and understanding has to start right at the beginning.

For this reason, I would like to thank those of you who work with young children for your dedication and commitment in an area which is not given the recognition or prestige it deserves. There is a saying that says something along the lines that, 'as you shape the child, so you shape the man'. My thought for the day could be considered to extend that saying to, 'as you shape the child, so you shape the village'.

[Slide 6 – CC Mission statement and contact details]