

Opening Address
by

Robin Sullivan
Commissioner for Children and Young People

At the
Launch of the Issue Paper Series

at

Customs House, Brisbane

on

Thursday 1 August 2002

I would like to begin by welcoming everyone to the launch of the Commission for Children and Young People's Issues Paper series, and the release of the first Issues Paper in the series.

It is with great pleasure that I see so many friends, colleagues and committed future contributors to this series in the audience.

It is also pleasing to see so many disciplines across represented from so many schools, faculties and departments in tertiary institutions in Queensland.

I believe this new initiative reinforces the Commission's commitment to promoting and supporting evidence-based practice.

As some of you are aware, we have previously held Research Forums in conjunction the tertiary institutions and government department some of your represent.

These include videoconferences featuring Canadian experts Fraser Mustard and Professor Clyde Hertzman, and seminars with internationally-renowned researchers such as Dan Keating.

The Issues Paper series represents a 'next step' in our support of evidence-based practice and quality research.

The roles of the Commission include:

- monitoring research findings
- promoting research about children and young people, and
- collaborating with other researchers, policy makers and practitioners to improve services

to children and young people.

The new Issues Paper series is a key opportunity to inform policy and practice through research into child- related issues from some of the best minds in Queensland and around the world.

The Commission sees the papers as serving a dual purpose.

1. They are high quality, peer-reviewed research papers addressing critical issues facing children and young people in Queensland.

They provide the opportunity for key Australian research to be widely distributed, recognised and drawn on.

2. They also provide information that can be used to assist those working directly with children and young people.

I am not, as I am sure you are not, interested in myths about children and young people.

I want to ensure that the Commission's advocacy and monitoring roles are grounded in relevant, high quality research.

Our policies and practices need to be firmly founded on the latest rigorous findings, not based on outdated understandings.

Although I'm sure many of you have had contact with the Commission for Children and Young People in the past, I would like to take a few minutes to explain the breadth of our role.

The *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000* was passed last February, and enabled the re-establishment of the Queensland Children's Commission with broadened scope, functions and powers.

You would be aware that the Commission promotes and protects the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18 years.

The new Act:

- provides for the most multi-functional and empowered Children's Commission in the world
- acknowledges the "rights" of children and young people and embodies the principals of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- allows the Commission to advocate for children and investigate their complaints and grievances, and
- empowers the Commission to make a difference to the lives of Queensland children and young people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

The Act is unique, as it provides the Commission with both ombudsman and advocacy functions.

The Commission receives, investigates and seeks to resolve complaints about services to children and young people who are under orders of - or subject to intervention by - the Department of Families.

The Commission also has a broad advocacy function.

Any child, young person or adult acting on their behalf, can express a concern or grievance to the Commission, which may then advocate on their behalf.

The Commission also works with children and young people by:

- consulting them in a way that promotes their participation in decision-making
- listening to, and seriously considering, their concerns, views and wishes
- adopting work practices so the Commission is accessible to them
- conducting research into issues impacting on them, and

- being sensitive to their ethnic or cultural identities and values, particularly those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Since my appointment as the Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have focussed on the importance of the early years and the need for quality services to our youngest citizens and their families.

I believe there is still insufficient recognition in Australia of the need to invest in early intervention.

As I'm sure you would agree, there are good reasons for intervening early in life.

Families with young children at risk of poverty, relationship breakdown, and abusive or inept parenting styles are more likely to produce teenagers at risk of criminality and substance abuse.

Once it is accepted that some risks at an early age have multiple consequences later in life, it follows that successful intervention early in life is a cost-effective preventative strategy¹.

There's mounting evidence that greater investment in early childhood programs would benefit children, and save the government money by reducing welfare payments, increasing tax revenues, and decreasing criminal justice system costs.

This is a message I have been taking to policy-makers and practitioners for some time, and it's very encouraging to see that it is getting through.

I would imagine it must be very gratifying for researchers to feel that their hard work doesn't just result in publications, but actually makes a difference to the children and young people studied.

It's for this reason that I take great delight in launching the first paper in our series "An Early Child Development Strategy for Australia? Lessons from Canada" by Professor Clyde Hertzman.

Unfortunately, Professor Hertzman can't be here today.

But for those who didn't meet him when he was here last year, Professor Hertzman is:

- Associate Director of the Centre for Health Services and Policy Research, and
- a Lawson Fellow at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.

With Dr Daniel Keating, he co-edited the influential book, *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations*.

This integrates social ordering concepts with human development, and acknowledges the paradox of contemporary times where material abundance is accompanied by apparent threats to healthy human development.

¹ The Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium, (1998). *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*. A Report for the National Campaign Against Violence & Crime and The National Anti-Crime Strategy, p. ix.

In this paper, Professor Hertzmann outlines the special role of early childhood development as one of the key determinants of later adult health. He also draws attention to the links between the health and social conditions of young people, and the broader economic interests of government.

I take enormous pleasure in publishing this paper as the inaugural publication in our Issues Paper series.

Hard copies of the paper are available here tonight, and we hope you will take these and circulate them among your colleagues.

It has also been posted on our website, along with other recent publications which you may be interested in, including *Children and Young People in Queensland: A snapshot*,

The Snapshot is the first comprehensive scan of data from government agencies about children and young people in Queensland, and examines its usefulness in gauging their wellbeing.

I expect future Issues Papers to be varied and topical, with contributors - many of whom are here this afternoon – indicating an interest in submitting papers on:

- children's mental health
- adolescence and homelessness, and
- integrated child and health services.

The second, to be published shortly, has been authored by Dr Abigail Fagan and Professor Jake Najman of University of Queensland, and examines the gendered and long-term relationship between family practices and children's aggression and delinquency.

So it is with great pleasure that I welcome you here tonight to our formal launch of the series.

I look forward to reading and receiving your many future submissions.