

Acknowledgements

Terese Scott – Chair of the Child Protection Committee

Robin Sullivan – Director General, Department of Child Safety

Norelle Deeth – Deputy Director-General, Department of Child Safety, and

The Child Protection Week Award winners . . .

Good evening,

I'd like to start by thanking the Child Protection Committee for inviting me to speak tonight and by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we stand.

I've been to a number of Child Protection Week dinners in recent years, and have always immensely enjoyed the speakers and admired the courage of those who told their stories. So I have some big shoes to fill!

I'd like to congratulate the Child Protection Committee for the great job it does every year focussing community attention on the importance of getting things right for our children.

Thank you for helping us put the spotlight on our most important and fundamental task – protecting our kids and helping them reach their full potential.

I'm pleased there are so many people here tonight supporting the Committee's efforts to recognise the work being done every day throughout the state to safeguard our children and young people and create child friendly communities.

Their efforts also support the 'work we still need to do' to build consensus and promote action to achieve better lives for all children and young people in Queensland – particularly improving the safety and wellbeing of those most vulnerable.

While in the Torres Strait last week, I was pleased to see that my job title had been effectively shortened to Commissioner belong pickininni – much better than Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian!

It can be said in one breath and actually gives children ownership of the role!

That is the underlying theme of what I really want to say to you.

As Commissioner, I've been inspired by the words of Margaret Mead when I am thinking about the journey ahead, which I am committed to advancing:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has”.

We need to work together for better lives and life chances for kids, but particularly for those:

- who are in, or may enter, out-of-home care or detention
- who have no appropriate person to act on their behalf
- who are not able to protect their rights, interest or well being, or
- who are disadvantaged because of disability, geographic isolation, homelessness or poverty.

Raising children to take their proper place in society is one of the most important things we do as a community. Without this, the world as we know it would cease to exist.

Children are our community's most valuable asset and deserve our focus and care.

To achieve good outcomes, the community must think carefully about its vision for our children and young people and what is needed to achieve it.

This is our key challenge. But I believe we'll see the greatest returns by learning to listen and include our children and young people, encourage their engagement in real conversations and above all, invest in their futures.

They are critical members of our community. Theirs is the voice of the future – their needs and community responses need to be worked out through joint discussion focusing on what is working well, and what is not.

I thought I'd share some of my background to show you where my interest in the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people comes from, and what sustains it.

I was inspired to work in child safety from an early age.

I was born and spent my early years in Singapore and Malaya, and was sent to boarding school in Australia at the grand age of seven - like many others whose families worked in that environment at that time.

My parents stayed in Malaya until I was eleven, so I spent weekends and holidays at the homes of my aunt, uncle and school friends.

Thanks to my mother's preparation and the care I received at school, this was a positive experience. I learnt a great deal in this time and this shaped my life chances.

I was exposed to many different families at close quarters. I believe this sparked an interest in what drives peoples' behaviour at a family and personal level.

I realised fairly young that even in Australia, there were vast differences in economic status and social opportunities.

As the years rolled on I became even more curious about how life circumstances relate to people's life chances.

I noticed that where money was short, family effort focused on supporting boys to take up secondary schooling, as they were expected to be the bread winners of the future.

How did this affect the young girls and why was it so?

I saw great inequities in terms of people's access, inclusion and capacity.

I realised that people are not only shaped by genetics, but **also** through their access to education and health care. And their mental fitness affects the quality of relationships with family and significant others.

As some of you may know, I originally trained as a social worker, and spent years working at grass roots level in child health and welfare organisations in Canberra.

This sparked a special interest in better outcomes for children.

Support services were lean on the ground in those days, and many endured great pain and suffering because there were few choices for them.

Although it wasn't reported and not much was said – we are still working through this legacy to try to establish greater accountability and transparency in the system.

In this period I also worked and lived in a variety of cultures, including South East Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East, and my interest in the diversity of people's circumstances and their outcomes grew.

I studied different community responses to issues, and the impact of this on outcomes for children and young people.

It highlighted the importance of gathering proper information - as outcomes were not always what were anticipated.

As a person with three daughters and two grandchildren I am committed to securing a better future for our kids.

My children have taught me the importance of listening and being flexible, accommodating and patient. They taught me that child raising is a collaborative and influencing activity.

All my life experiences led me to wonder why some people are born poor while others are born into great affluence?

Whether the community shapes those who live in it; or whether people shape their community?

And what can we do help children and young people achieve their best possible outcomes?

Children are a reflection of our own values and behaviour – both negative and positive.

They have not come from a different planet with strange and mysterious habits. They reflect our community – and only they have the capacity to shape the future.

I believe the Commission's vision of a better life for children and young people **is** achievable.

The Commission has been empowered to act as the 'watchdog' of the child safety system in this state, and I am committed to ensuring our children are getting the best possible services to give them the best opportunities in life.

Gathering reliable information about the state of the child safety system and bringing this together in timely ways is our key job.

We want to see improved, sustainable outcomes for kids.

While we can broker solutions for individuals with particular service issues, the Commission's primary role is holding service providers accountable and focussed on the needs of children and young people.

Recently, I asked children and young people in care what they thought of the system and whether they felt things were improving.

This work has complemented information we gather through our Community Visitor Program and systemic monitoring to assess the success of ongoing child safety reforms.

We had a terrific response rate to the survey – of around 5,000 children and young people surveyed, 1703 responded – around a third of all those in care.

I was heartened by some of the results – as I'm sure many of you here tonight will be. We found that:

- 98% of the children and young people who responded said they felt safe in their current placement, and
- around 90% felt life had improved since they came into care.

Some of their comments included statements like:

- *'No one harasses me here. No one annoys me here. I don't get bullied, don't get pushed and shoved.'*
- *'This family is a very caring home.'*

It was good to see that most of those surveyed felt they are well supported by their carers, have a good lifestyle and have contact with friends.

Specific comments on why they think things are better since they came into care included:

- *'Getting cared about. Being listened to. Being fed'*
- *'I'm doing great things at school'*

But there were some issues identified that show me we can still do better.

52% felt they don't have 'much say' or have 'no say at all' in decisions involving them.

In addition, 47% said decisions made about them were explained 'not much' or 'not at all'.

This concerns me. I believe children who are taken seriously are more likely to feel that they can influence their own lives, respect the rights of others and be more resilient.

The results of the survey were largely consistent with other information we had, and provide a rich source of personal anecdotes.

These young people have a range of insights and opinions than can inform improvements to practices and programs including our own.

The strengths and weaknesses of the child safety system are not remote policy documents, but lived experiences.

For example around 11% said they didn't have a case plan, and 62% said they **didn't know** if they had one.

Of those who said they **did** have a case plan – only 26% of those surveyed – nearly **82%** said they didn't know what was in it.

The overwhelming response from young people was that they want:

- more input into decisions which affect them
- to be treated as 'normal'
- more stability and access to therapeutic services

- maintenance of appropriate links with significant people in their lives
- the Department to listen and advocate for them, and
- more contact with their Child Safety Officer.

So how do we address these issues and these young people in putting better arrangements in place?

Firstly, I'd like to see greater support provided to 'at risk' Queensland families to prevent children and young people from entering out-of-home care in the first place.

This has to be our primary objective.

Statistics can show us where more effort is needed; research is available about what can work; but the community needs to signal its strong support for investment in this area to our decision-makers.

We need to stay focussed on strengthening this agenda.

In recent visits to Indigenous communities, children and young people told me they value relationships and their quality, they often want them strengthened, they want things to do with their families and friends which are fun, and they want to see an end to violence and alcohol abuse by adults.

Secondly, there will always be a need to offer some children a safe and protective place not in their families and I want to see **100%** of young people in the child safety system feeling safe and achieving their full potential.

The Commission's full attention will be focussed on monitoring and reporting on wellbeing over the next few years.

Thirdly, I believe we must give these children the opportunity to meaningfully take part in decisions about their lives.

And finally, I want these kids to feel 'normal' – to feel they can do the same things as their friends who are not in out-of-home care.

I understand the risk management issues and duty of care for agencies but I think we must make out-of-home care experiences more fun, as well as safe.

To achieve these outcomes, we have to listen to children and young people and work with them to achieve solutions and address challenges.

At the Commission, we are working on strategies in partnership with them to improve our ability to engage in meaningful consultation about how we perform our role and what issues we need to tackle.

We are also advocating strongly to other agencies about their responsibilities and opportunities in this regard.

To quote another well known social commentator Hugh McKay:

“Our children are like the signpost to the future of our society; they tell us what we are becoming, but they are also our most precious resource for shaping the future, so we had better make sure we are nurturing them and supporting them to the best of our capacity”.

Some of the challenges we face will not be easy to overcome. Intent and commitment without action is not enough. But I believe having a vision informed by key participants will guide our journey.

I'd like to leave you with the words of one young person who responded to our survey.

She said the child safety system will improve if: . . . *'I am noticed, and listened to, and have some say in what matters.'*