



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Address

by

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Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

“Your duty to care”

Queensland University of Technology

Graduation Ceremony

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Acting Chancellor Chris Sarra, Acting Vice-Chancellor Professor David Gardiner, Distinguished Faculty Members, Graduating Students, Ladies and Gentlemen.

In acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered here today, I am reminded of the importance of honouring history as we look towards the future.

Shared histories

Any of us who has experienced a graduation day understands the many triumphs and struggles that have made up your journey and which now form a part of your personal history.

Equally we understand that those triumphs and struggles, and the joy felt at having travelled through them, are not yours alone.

They have been shared with friends, family and the many significant others who make up our networks of support.

The special bonds we share with those who care for us give us strength. This strength fortifies us for the world.

We honour our shared histories when we choose to utilise the strength developed through relationships to support and nurture strength in others.

Teachers' duty of care

For those of you graduating today as teachers, I would like to welcome you into that particular community of practice whose primary responsibility is the care of children.

Teaching places you in the special position of being able to help children and young people build the strength and skills that they will need to face their ever-changing worlds.

Teachers have a fundamental duty to educate, but this is preceded by their duty of care.

This duty largely involves working actively, practically and strongly to create learning environments in which children and young people are protected from harm while in your care.

The community and parents place enormous trust in the teachers of its children, and demand high levels of personal integrity, commitment and professional conduct in return.

Legislation has been enacted in line with these rising community standards requiring education authorities to now make explicit their child protection responsibilities by articulating and enforcing institutional codes of conduct, child protection policies and risk management strategies intended to maximise children's safety and well being at school.

Other contributory child protection safeguards include the Commission's mandate to require organisations providing essential and developmentally focussed experiential services to children in our community -- such as child care, schools, sport and recreation, coaching, clubs churches and associations, home accommodation services -- to foster safer environments for their clients.

The Commission's work is focussed on assisting and encouraging these organisations to take up their duty of care by understanding the importance of and putting in place effective processes for managing child protection risks.

Child protection is a very serious matter and this work needs to be taken seriously and done well.

The Commission has developed workshop materials in collaboration with key experts to engage organisations in thinking through what improvements they need and can make including having agreed codes of conduct, making sure staff and volunteers are trained in working with children and managing any critical child protection issues should these arise.

Good practice by organisations also includes making sure required volunteers and staff in their organisations have up to date blue cards and that they do not employ people who have been denied or excluded from working with children.

The Commission's mandate and work is intended to complement other WHS and anti discrimination requirements that organisations are required to undertake to provide safe and responsible services for children.

Our work doesn't target all services which children may encounter or participate in – in particular we don't have jurisdiction in areas where parents have discretion and where children are not necessarily the primary client and where they are unlikely or should not be unsupervised or be attending frequently or where there are strong commercial legislative and marketing controls.

The Commission's work in fostering safer service environments for children and young people is designed to add to the supports that families can draw on to better protect their children by bringing relevant organisations under a form of greater scrutiny and accountability.

It is also important that these organisations commit to the objectives intended and understand the importance of implementing these processes.

Creating safe environments for children and young people is challenging – not the result of one factor – combination and result of community awareness, effective action – child safety is everyone’s business and needs us all to pay our part.

These measures along with child safety legislation requiring mandatory reporting of incidences of harm at school, are further raising educational authorities and teachers’ awareness of their important role in child protection and how this relates to their duty of care.

Teachers’ duty to care

However, while your duty *of care* as teachers is extremely important, of equal importance is your duty *to care*.

Creating classroom cultures marked by care and support is a powerful method of safeguarding children’s emotional wellbeing and signalling the importance attached to that outcome.

Supportive school environments and a caring teacher should never be underestimated as opportunities for helping children and young people to develop the psychological strength that underpins resilience.

Energies directed at helping or children become strong is especially vital from the Commission’s point of view because of our special concern for children who experience particular challenges.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian is charged with protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in Queensland.

We have a particular focus on those who are most vulnerable, cannot protect themselves or have no one to act for them, live in out of home care or detention, or are disadvantaged by disability, living in isolated areas, homelessness or poverty.

Our mission is to improve their safety and well being. Our three key objectives and activities are directed at working collaboratively with relevant stakeholders to achieve:

- An effective child safety and juvenile justice system in which the needs of each child and young person is appropriately assessed and effective services put in place to address these

- As I mentioned before we are committed to building safer environments for children and young people where risks are identified and managed including appropriate employment screening; and
- Strengthening prevention and targeted and early intervention strategies for vulnerable children so that they too can have opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Vulnerability

Children and young people can be vulnerable at different times and for different reasons.

Some of the children you will work with will be vulnerable because they live in homes where they experience or observe violence or other forms of abuse.

Others will be vulnerable because of their families' inability to meet their physical or emotional needs. These issues often are the result of parents experiencing mental health issues, engaging in substance abuse and not having good parenting capabilities

All of the children you work with, whether or not they encounter these serious challenges, have capabilities and strengths that will flourish when supported in secure relationships.

Secure relationships help children learn and grow better, and enable them to be more resilient in the face of difficulties.

For some vulnerable children, their relationships with their teachers at school will be the most secure attachments they are able to form with adults.

Teachers can demonstrate that human relationships are able to be conducted in a caring and consistent manner.

Teachers can provide a model of how a reasonable adult responds in moments of celebration and frustration, modelling healthy ways of expressing approval and resolving conflict.

Education improves life chances

Of course, teachers also help support vulnerable children and young people by equipping them with knowledge vital to their future participation in society.

Keeping students engaged in education is a critical objective – keeping each child's educational experience stimulating and relevant pays long-term dividends for individual children and the community.

It is known, for example, that high quality early childhood education produces “long-term positive outcomes and cost-savings that include improved school performance, reduced special education placement, lower school dropout rates, and increased lifelong earning potential.” - it provides hope and options for the future. ¹

Teachers and family support

However, teachers have yet another role to play in contributing to better futures for young people from harm.

A child’s teacher is important not only in the life of that child, but in the life of their family as well.

Families turn to teachers for help with anxieties related to their child. How teachers respond can make a difference to a child’s environment.

Dorothy Scott, a prominent child protection scholar, tells us that “Parental stress and low social support are two of the strongest correlates of child abuse and neglect.” ²

Teachers are well-positioned to observe family function and its consequences. They can often tell from the demeanour of parents or children in their class when something is not right.

By reaching out in appropriate and proactive ways, teachers can make a difference in these situations, but they can also act proactively to reduce the likelihood of these situations occurring.

This is by contributing to the development of a whole school community where parents, teachers and children all feel connected to one another.

A school which envelopes parents in such a sense of community has the potential to reduce parental stress by decreasing parental isolation and fostering lines of communication for parents who need help.

These schools make a positive contribution to parents’ capacity to cope.

¹ The Business Roundtable/Corporate Voices for Working Families (2003) *Early Childhood Education: A Call to Action from the Business Community*. Retrieved March 2, 2006 from <http://www.businessroundtable.org/pdf/901.pdf>

² Scott, D. (2006, February). *Sowing the seeds of innovation in child protection*. Keynote address presented at the 10th Australasian Child Abuse and Neglect Conference, Wellington, New Zealand.

To provide a supportive environment, a school must be populated by teachers who view their job as about nurturing the networks of support around a child and that help him/her to learn.

These teachers see the child, the family and the community as part of an interconnected ecological organism – which is the basic building block in our continuity as a community and society.

They understand that supporting every child to fulfil their potential is what our purpose is about. They understand this sometimes means supporting inter-related parts of the organism of which the child is a part.

Some of you will become such teachers. Others of you will go on to pursue other life courses.

However you choose to utilise the lessons learned at QUT, I hope you will take with you a commitment to developing those supportive connections that enrich our community and act to protect the most vulnerable amongst us – and promote the rights, interests and well being of children in our state.

I congratulate on your achievement, and join with you in celebrating not only this very special and important day, but the contribution I am confident you will make to shaping caring and connected communities capable of building futures for our children and thereby securing the longer term continuity and advancement of our society.

Congratulations – Best wishes – and may I encourage you to never underestimate your capacity to make a difference to a child's life and to focus your energies towards this outcome.

Thank you

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