

## Youth Development Australia – Conference

“A thousand good reasons: early interventions and socially excluded young people”

### Opening Address:

**Titled – Socially excluded young people? Who are they, and why is early intervention important?**

**Date: Thursday 5 August 2010**

**Time: 9.15 a.m.**

**Venue: Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre (cnr of Bell and St Georges Road Preston)**

### **(Presentation of approximately 20 -25 minutes)**

(Copies of “Calmer Classrooms” & “Isolation to Connection” have been pre-delivered for distribution at the forum)

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

I would also like to thank Janet Jukes and Youth Development Australia for the opportunity and privilege to open such an important forum seeking to candidly examine early intervention approaches with socially excluded young people. I hope you go away from today challenged and invigorated in the critical work you do.

Before I get further into my presentation today, I will start by quickly summarising my brief, which I

have received from the Victorian Government. As the Child Safety Commissioner, I was appointed by the Premier as the first Child Safety Commissioner in Victoria about five years ago and my functions are set out under the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act.

Briefly these functions relate to:

- providing advice and recommendations to the Minister for Community Services about child safety issues, at her request;
- promoting child-friendly and child-safe practices in the Victorian community;
- annually reviewing and reporting on the administration of the Working with Children Act, as well as educating and informing the community about the Act;

- monitoring the quality of care received by children needing to be placed away from their natural families for various lengths of time;
- conducting special ministerial inquiries or preparing reports in relation to children who have died and were a child protection client at the time of their death or within 12 months of their death;

As you can see, that while not solely, the emphasis in my role is to seek to add value to the services Victoria gives to its most disenfranchised and excluded children and young people.

While this is my current job, my roots are as an outreach youth worker, as some of you know in West Heidelberg. Basically, I still approach my role today, holding very precious to my youth work

experience and values over 35 years. That is, what I have learnt from my interactions with families, young people and children that I have known in the course of that time. Because I had no conceptual education, to a very large degree, the families and young people of the Olympic Village, the Brosnan Centre which works with young people exiting the juvenile and adult prisons, and as community member on the Youth Parole Board have been my uni or learning ground.

Our office has been involved in a number of projects which aims to inform the broader community of the plight of this more vulnerable group of young people. This includes a resource for teachers entitled, *Calmer Classrooms-A guide to working with traumatised children and young people'* and another publication, *From Isolation to Connection-A guide to understanding and working*

*with traumatised children and young people'* which is for a broader range of professionals. There are copies of these publications here today for you to collect. (Extraordinarily distributed 100,000+ copies of Calmer Classrooms). These guides have been produced to assist professionals like yourselves to better understand the impact of abuse and neglect, and, that some young peoples' experiences may provide an explanation for their behaviour. By having access to this kind of information, we can come to think about how we can better respond to these children and young people, in a way that is likely to be more effective, if we take these factors into account.

Many young people do well in spite of adverse and traumatic experiences while growing up. However, far too many of those who end up in our child protection and care, justice and mental health

systems, have survived by adapting to those adverse conditions. The ways they have done this, may have helped them to survive, but these are ways that have also led them into serious ongoing trouble, and to making negative, life changing decisions.

It can be very difficult to understand why some young people act in ways that undermine their own health and freedom, and why some young people who have complex histories don't seem to learn from experience, and in particular, from punishment.

I would like to talk to you briefly today about how trauma and disrupted attachment, can lead to so many difficulties in life, and how, by understanding these things, we can progress our contribution to

their lives by providing a better response to young people who have experienced trauma.

As workers, it can be very difficult to understand and deal with young people who struggle to respond to limits and boundaries<sup>→</sup>, are unable to control their responses<sup>→</sup>, do not have much empathy for themselves or others<sup>→</sup>, seem not to understand right from wrong<sup>→</sup>, and have few, if any, skills in understanding and responding to the thoughts, feelings and actions of others. These young people find relationships difficult, they struggle to trust adults or authority figures, and pleasing the adult world is usually quite logically, not a priority.

Children who have been abused and neglected, will often have had many different experiences of

adversity. Their infancy may have been insecure and abusive with harsh, or neglectful parenting. They may not have had a loving attachment relationship, in which they were reflected in their parent's gaze, as lovable or special. We now know from Shonkoff and Perry that neglect in some cases, may have been so severe, to even limit brain growth and result in learning difficulties. Through this, many children build up a sense of 'unworthiness'. They may not have learnt to adequately regulate their emotions and reactions, or to develop self control. When it came time to learn about the limits and boundaries of appropriate behaviour, they may have been overly shamed or under socialised, leading to profound shame about themselves, but little shame about their actions. They may have also, not have developed much capacity to 'read' others, and so

they may misunderstand social cues and social relationships. All of this may have affected their capacity to empathise with others.

Understanding the complex interplay of abuse, neglect and other trauma can assist us in seeing beyond the disturbed behaviours of such young people and empathising with the lonely, frightened and humiliated child within.

There are many challenges when working with traumatised children and young people. The quality of the relationship we have with them, is pivotal to helping them move from isolation to connection. These children, need to have a sense, that those involved in their lives, will not give up on them, and still respect and value them, even when they demonstrate the worst of their pain.

The extremity of their behaviour on the outside, is only a dim echo of the fear, sadness, pain, loneliness and loss they feel on the inside.

What can we do to better respond to these young people? How can we be better prepared and more responsive when we encounter difficult situations? How can we forge better relationships with young people and more broadly with those services that may also be involved in the lives of these young people to obtain better outcomes for them?

I was recently at a session with the renowned Irish academic in this field, Robbie Gilligan, who talked of the “therapeutic power of ordinariness”, “the healing power of normality” and giving disconnected children chances to have experience of the “ordinary plenty”.

There are many ways to connect with children and young people who have experienced abuse or neglect. These young people need positive relationships to help begin a process of recovery. The main purpose of relationship based practice is to connect to the hurt underneath, the raging and rejecting behaviours. Workers will come to manage their own feelings and reactions to the behaviour of young people with greater tolerance, once they begin to see the pain that lies beneath it, and young people will begin to feel safe, understood and able to move forward, when they begin to make sense of their experiences, through the empathy and compassion of others.

Adults working with traumatised children and young people, will inevitably struggle at times to

remain calm, centred, and well regulated, but this is the key to working with these young people. Professionals, themselves, need lots of support and empathy for their own struggles, to be able to be effective. Good supervision, and putting time aside to reflect, are important ways for workers to ask themselves questions, and look at ways of improving what they do, and how they do it.

The wellbeing of children, whether they are involved in the Child Protection system or part of the broader community, is a responsibility for us all.

I wish to leave you with 2 thoughts, in thinking about the impact of our work on the disconnected children, young people and their families that we passionately want to assist and serve well.

Firstly – In relation to service coordination and how we think about the particular role we have.

Over the years, I have seen so many examples where service systems have not worked together in the cases of 'dual clients'. And, this is not just in the case of external agencies. In so many cases, it is between programs within the Department, such as juvenile justice, child protection, disability services and housing. You will think of other service sectors as well.

Each program I have mentioned here, has a particular role, a particular 'mandate'. They may tend to focus on achieving their own aims, without considering that the issues they are dealing with, are connected to each other.

Too often I have seen multiple programs involved in the lives of a young person. Each service works individually, not knowing what the other service is doing, or taking into consideration other factors in the young person's life. To achieve the best outcomes for children, we need to think about how services can become more integrated and more responsive, so that we can provide more effective responses to children with multiple and complex needs. How often have we heard, 'that is not our role', 'we are not funded to perform these functions', etc, or that services simply don't consider the other factors in a young person's life. Additionally, many adult focussed services do not take into account that their clients may be parents, and fail to consider the impact and influence of children, in their client's life.

How do we, as service providers start to think about a more integrated approach to our service delivery? How do we develop a real 'community of practice', not preciously focussed on our role but collectively focussed on serving the best interests and needs of the children we encounter? Services needs to flexibly serve the client rather than the client compliantly and meekly accepting disparate services that happen to be available.

In the United Kingdom, as part of their Cabinet Office Social Inclusion Taskforce, there has been work undertaken to look at a more 'family centred' approach to service delivery. Within this, the core elements describe there to be 'no wrong door'- that is, a client can have contact with any service and this will offer an open door to joined up support. Services will be designed to take into account factors in their client's lives, so that

support can be tailored to their needs. We need to remember that our clients are all different and have different needs and will respond to different interventions in different ways. Therefore, we need to remember that 'not one size fits all' and where possible, we need to tailor our responses to individual needs.

How an organisation comes to do this is the hard part. Fundamentally, there are three layers that we need to think about to achieve this approach.

1. Part of the role of the practitioner is to think outside of their role and look to the best interests of their client
2. Organisations will need to think about their philosophy and ideology and their organisational culture and climate, and, if necessary, amend this, so that they can

embrace a more holistic approach to their clients

3. Legal and policy constraints may impact on an organisation's ability to expand their role and approach

Working together is so important and we cannot underestimate the positive impact this will have on the outcomes for our clients. When organisations come to develop effective working relationships, our clients are the biggest winners. But organisations also gain benefits through such an approach. By using other people's experiences, expertise or knowledge, they assist us with things that we may not necessarily have any specific expertise in. We know that most of our clients have a range of complex issues in their lives and services are not generally set up to deal with all of

these. I am not suggesting that one agency should be able to deliver all these services, but we must learn to work in a way that does not close the door on people who do not fit the 'criteria' of our service. Having relationships with other services that we know, and are more suitable to deal with particular issues, means that we are in a better position to refer our clients onto appropriate services, without closing the door on them, and make things easier for our clients. In some instances, this may include being as creative as having another agency spend time in your office to see dual clients, rather than them having to attend two locations. We should be thinking about how we can make it easier for our clients, who generally have complex and hectic lives. Not only does this make it less stressful for clients, it tells

them that we are thinking about them and their best interests.

Building a shared approach is not easy. People have to change the way they work and the way they think. Many individuals and agencies are fearful to do this, as they think they will be left to do everything. This is where the development of strong relationships not just between agencies, but individuals, can allow for this type of response to be effective.

Finally, I would like to compel you all to consider bringing a particular aspect to your approach and helping strategies with disconnected children and young people - no matter what your particular role is or the set of professional skills and knowledge that you bring.

To set the context, I'd like to quote to you the following lines from a poem called 'Late Fragment' by Raymond Carver, an American poet:

***And did you get what  
You wanted from this life?, even so?***

***I did.***

***And what did you want?***

***To call myself beloved, to feel myself  
Beloved on the earth.***

The harsh reality is that many vulnerable young people **never feel 'beloved'**. There is a real risk that their future may represent, to quote an Irishman this time ...

***an endless tundra of aloneness and loneliness***

(Brian Friel an Irish playwright).

Young people become vulnerable when they've had backgrounds of trauma and neglect - but so many of them **remain vulnerable**, because they lack a network of safe, trusting, supportive and enduring

relationships with others, and they don't have connections with their communities. I can't imagine what it would be like not to have positive community connections !

Let me finish today by quoting from Dr Len Tierney who was a revered leader in the social welfare field in Victoria from the 1950s to the 1990s:

***"The informal world is vital, to the wellbeing of children and families. However appropriate our programs, and however effective they seem to be in the short-term, services and workers are a tiny part of the picture of change. Unless parents and children have a sustainable livelihood and are embedded within reciprocal and rewarding relationships in constructive social networks, much professional effort will be wasted."***

**Service effects won't stick. In the absence of viable social networks, a primary goal of policy and service development is to create conditions that foster a positive child-friendly social economy.**

Without taking anything away from the range of professional and specialist services that we need to bring to traumatised people, we can all play a part as creative **connectors** of these people to lifegiving community relationships – sure we may need to rehearse with them how to find and make relationships and hang in there with them as they learn to sustain those relationships. Think about how you can bring such a dynamic with the service systems you belong and to constantly influence your every professional and personal encounter with children young people and their families.

We must start to think about empowering our clients to feel part of their community and assisting them to make links with people and organisations in these communities. But don't underestimate how hard this can be. As I have discussed, many young people that we work with will find this extremely hard and won't have the skills to sustain these relationships-but this is where we need to focus our attention, so that young people do not become system dependent, but rather fit into and are part of the community, engaging in community life. The connections also need to be meaningful and fitting, for those young people, so the connections that we help them to make, need to make sense to them. Young people should help to seek out these connections- these connections that will become normal social relationships that they can continue beyond any

service. Having connections to services is not 'normal', but rather a result of negative experiences that people have had in life. As professionals, we should focus on building our client's strengths, resilience and ability to make and maintain connections in the future, with non professional connections, that is connections that are normal, connections that we should all have and need. Most people in the community have social support networks that they can rely on, and call upon in everyday life, that you can seek out when you need a bit of extra help or support; these are the social networks that we must think about establishing for our clients and working with them to establish the skills that they need make to and sustain these relationships. It is a change of focus in the work that we do, but it is crucial to

improving the life outcomes for disconnected young people.

(Reflect on how you would do it differently if you had your time over again with the “Broxy Boys”)

Thank you for your time today and I hope you get into and enjoy the rest of this conference.