

NEWSLETTER

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The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People advocates for and promotes the best interests of young people and children under the care of the Minister for Families and Communities.

Going beyond the practical

For a myriad of complex reasons, many children in care grow up with a smaller social network than the equivalent young people in the general community. In the absence of these networks and other affirming roles, many of the young people we come into contact with develop a consuming identity of 'young person at risk', 'client of social services', a 'young person in care', or 'ex-ward of the state'.

Not only do children have the right to a safe place to live, clothes, food and so forth, the minimum and fundamental things we provide, they have the right to an environment and opportunities that support the development of a positive identity.

We make sure a child or young person has a base-line medical assessment, psychological assessment and reports on their behaviour but where do we ask the questions such as 'who are they connected to, what are their interests, what do we really know about this young person' or even, 'who loves this child?'

Creating positive everyday experiences for the children and young people in our care to forge a sense of belonging is as critical as providing for their physical needs.

How do we help create a sense of belonging and connection?

One way is to uncover a child or young person's interests, no matter how obscured, and build on them. We can help young people to become resilient in the face of adversity by building supports around them and building their sense of belonging and acceptance by people who value them. We can build resilience and self esteem through success in the tasks they undertake.

In practice, this is the social worker who stays late in his office, while the young person in care comes in after school to do his drum practice. This social worker is not only providing a positive role model for this young man, he is also enriching his life by teaching him a skill that will build his self esteem and his identity. We know of other young people who have been encouraged into careers because they showed an interest in something, which was followed up by the carer or the social worker.

We need to make sure that children are nurtured in the belief that they too can make a mark on society. All children need adults who will dream with them for their future, be it as a teacher, astronaut, fire fighter or shop assistant in Darrell Lea's, whatever is needed to help them form their own identity.

From the very beginning, in every care plan, we need to make sure these three higher-order needs, belonging, self-esteem and self actualisation are constantly identified, promoted and evaluated. We should ask, 'How well are we doing in these areas, how are we encouraging this child or young person, what are their interests, their special talents and what are their networks.' If they are not clear, then we need to ask how we can build them.

It doesn't mean that workers or carers have to do this alone. It is about all of us who are partners in caring for this child, including this office. It means identifying and cultivating natural or potential allies in the everyday environment in which the child lives.

Angela Andary, Senior Project Officer

This is a summary of the paper presented by Angela to the Leaving Care Conference in April this year. The full paper may be viewed at the Guardian website, www.gryp.sa.gov.au and follow the links to publications.

How do I tell my mind to listen to my heart?

This is where my real feelings lie in my heart

This is where it all takes place

Why can't the two just get along and make one decision?

Well I cannot give you those answers today or maybe not tomorrow

But I have a lifetime to connect them both together

And in turn hopefully that is what will connect me to life.

by Robert, 17 years



*Pam Simmons
Guardian*

Letter from the Guardian for Children and Young People

At the 2006 Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Wellington four young care leavers said what was most important to them while in care.

Renee talked of stigma. She didn't want to always wear the label of 'kids in care' or overhear talk of 'cases' instead of children.

Ken talked of rights. He had wanted to know what rights he had and what he could do when they were violated. He also said he wasn't ready at 17 to be independent.

Janelle said resilience was essential to being able to cope with change and to build enough self esteem to withstand people moving in and out of her life.

Juanita talked about stability. She wanted a loving, caring environment and for caseworkers to listen and to keep their promises.

It was one of the more powerful presentations at the conference. They are all members of the New Zealand Care to Independence Youth Council.

The voices of children and young people in care are indeed powerful and instructive. However there is much in the child protection system that distracts and diverts us from listening to children. Adults are usually more articulate and speak our 'language'. Adults usually presume accountability is to other adults and, in reality, our 'reportable' accountability is to other (adult) agencies. Adults seek and agree to a child protection intervention.

None of this is to say that the responsibility for protecting children does not sit with adults. It is rather to say that we should not be 'doing to them' or 'working on them' but working and talking with them. Of course that also means that children can choose to *not* participate.

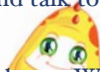
In another presentation on children's voices, young people were asked what they wanted from their social workers. The one that made me smile was that they wanted the workers to 'finish on time'. It tells me that children's time is valuable and they expect this to be respected.

Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People

What's been done

March 2006 – May 2006

The *Charter of Rights* was launched by the Minister for Families and Communities on 19 April at the Adelaide Zoo with 100 children and young people present and a similar number of adults. The *Charter* materials (see the images of the posters below) are now being distributed and Office staff are available to come and talk to your organisation/group about it.



Some of you may have seen the *OOG* character appearing in all sorts of places. We can't tell you what the *OOG* is – not because it is a secret but because we don't know. It can be anything children and young people in care want it to be. We hope in time it becomes a symbol of feeling cared for and safe.

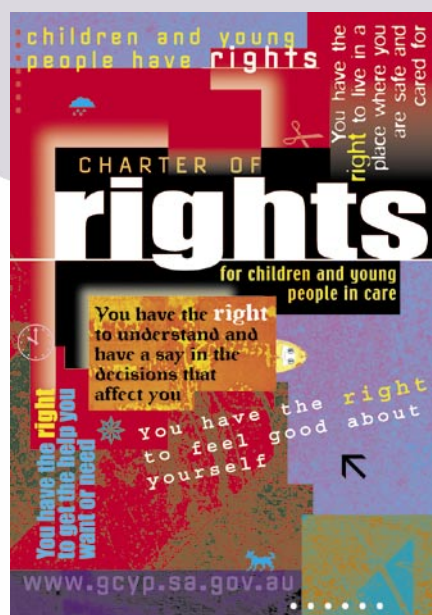
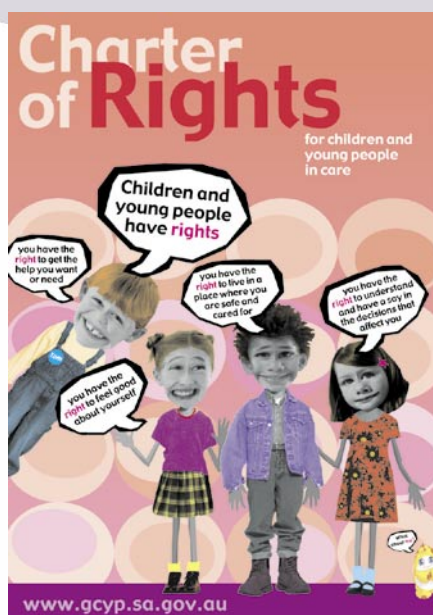
The young people's project advisory group for the Entry into Care project is winding up with its job coming to a close. We gained such valuable insight from their views and experiences of being in care and are grateful for their time and generosity in sharing their knowledge. Seven focus groups with people involved in providing care were also conducted in April. These were with social workers, carers, educators and complaints staff.

We have been taking a closer look at how a services bank for children in care should operate. Thank you to those who contacted us with ideas of what could be included. We should be able to report more fully in the next newsletter.

Over the past three months we have continued our participation in training for new CYFS employees and on the Individual Education Plans as well as making presentations to Homelessness SA forum, Salisbury CYFS Leaving Care seminar, the Children and Law Committee of the Law Society, Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse, Anglicare and the Community and Neighbourhood Houses conference.

The website is now updated fortnightly and a revamped News page provides the latest information on events, reports and activities.

See www.gcyp.sa.gov.au.





Charter of Rights launched

Lions roared, parrots squawked, monkeys howled and the first *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* in Australia was launched.

In a lunchtime ceremony in the Rotunda of the Adelaide Zoo on April 19, young people involved in the development of the *Charter* explained why they felt that a clear statement of rights for children and young people in care was important.

Reflecting on her time in guardianship, 19 year old Rachel Hopkins said, “Most kids don’t know what to expect when they go into care.

“They want to know why *them* and what is going to happen next. The *Charter* will help clear up a lot of those things and make sure they know it’s alright for them to ask questions.”

Eighteen year old David Wilkins who chaired the event said, “Children in care want to feel like any other children – they want to have the same opportunities and support.”

“It’s really important for children in care to know they have rights. For those coming in to the system, this *Charter* will be able to provide them with information to help them deal with being placed under guardianship.”

Surviving a simian heckling that he said rivalled even that of his parliamentary colleagues, Minister for Families and Communities, Jay Weatherill congratulated the children and young people, carers and the many professionals whose work created the *Charter*.

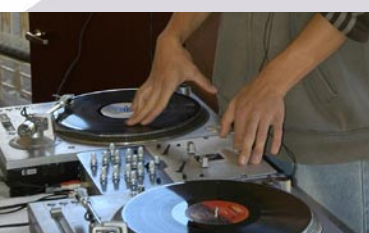
“Children and young people are placed under guardianship when they are unable to remain in their family home making them among the most vulnerable,” he said. “They need to know they can expect to be treated well and cared for properly while they are under guardianship. It also is crucial for them to know they have options if something goes wrong. The *Charter* is a great way of telling them this and preventing problems such as abuse.

“We are going to ask people and organisations providing care to endorse the *Charter* and build it into their ways of working with children and young people including their performance standards and reporting process,” he said as he officially launched the *Charter*.

The launch was attended by more than 100 children and young people and about the same number of carers and other interested adults. After the launch they joined the Office of the Guardian staff for a hotdog and gourmet sausage sizzle and were entertained by young DJ Ben and Dr Blot the clown before spending a sunny afternoon at the Zoo.

The *Charter* and the value of formalising rights for children and young people in care will be promoted strongly over the next few months.

To read the *Charter* and to view the promotional materials, visit the Guardian website at www.gcyp.sa.gov.au and follow the links or call the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People on 8226 8570.



Reunification and more at Elizabeth an interview with Jeanie Barker

Jeanie Barker is a Senior Practitioner and Acting Supervisor of the Duty of Care Team at the Elizabeth District Centre of CYFS. Jeanie has spent 17 years working in the Elizabeth office. Her team works with between 90 and 110 cases at any one time, these children and young people are under guardianship of the Minister until they attain 18 years.

Jeanie told us that the option of being placed back with their families or extended families appealed strongly to many children and young people who had been abused.

“You can’t stop kids from loving their parents – being with birth parents is what ‘normal kids’ have. Our kids will often go into steadfast denial about their parent’s previous behaviour even to the extent of accusing their social worker or CYFS of making it all up. [Rather than their parents] kids can also blame themselves for being abused and at times idealise life with their parents. In many cases our kids will make the decision to go back to their families when they reach a certain age – they will vote with their feet.

“There is a crisis in the availability of suitable placements but that is not the reason that we try to place our kids with their families first. [Placing children with families] ...is not an easy option. We only remove kids in the first place when there is evidence of severe neglect or abuse and the last thing we want to do is place them back into that situation.

“It involves a thorough assessment of the family and planning the placement as thoroughly as we can to make sure that the kid will be OK. But if the families are willing and co-operative, we will try to work with them.”

Jeanie pointed out that the team works with many of the children and their families and this can be over a number of years. She cites the example of a young mother who progressively discarded an abusive partner, confronted a substance abuse problem and re-partnered on the way to being reunified with her children.

“In some families we are dealing with the consequences of generational unemployment, generational abuse and a lack of parent role modeling and parenting skills.

Jeanie’s observation since joining the department has included that alcohol, drug abuse and mental health issues seem to be getting worse. It takes time to address these profound and long-standing issues she says.

“We don’t have a magic wand – we can’t sort all of that out overnight.”

Sometimes just keeping the links with extended family going will enable a solution and Jeanie describes how CYFS assisted a boy under care to maintain his contact with his grandmother interstate and as he reached adolescence he decided that he wanted to live with her instead of his foster family.

“They had a few teething problems but in the end it was good for both of them.”

The journey of the child towards reunification also involves the re-building of trust and learning some new skills.

“The majority of our kids learn to survive abuse by conforming, by keeping quiet and by keeping the family secrets. We need to reverse this so that our kids can live in families and also function in schools and the community. We believe in, and have had great success, in teaching our kids to become more assertive.

On the issue of rights?

“Sure we teach our kids about their rights – but we don’t accept violent or abusive behaviour – they have rights and so do we.”

Long-term solutions?

“The high risk infant program – now a Department priority is a good model. We need to be more preventative in our work with children and their parents in those formative years before the damage is done. It will take a long time to see results.”

Jeanie also proposes a greater role for schools.

“I learned how to parent my two kids from my mother and from my sisters but the extended family is not as strong as it was when I was a kid. Once you could rely on extended family being there if there was a family crisis but those options don’t appear to be as available today.

“Why not start educating about these things in schools – [teaching] a basic set of skills and knowledge about parenting and how to deal with family life. Without some formal education, the [dysfunctional] behaviour our kids see becomes normal to them. We teach protective behaviors, why not parenting?”



Jeanie, centre in the white shirt, poses with what she describes as “a very supportive and solid team.”

“There’s no point in her being at school...” Homelessness and children

*Excerpts from an address to the Homelessness SA forum on the impact of homelessness on children,
31 March 2006*

There’s no point in her being at school, it’s not like you can sit her down at night and read her books, with this stuff going on around us.
[homeless family in a private hotel]

Children come into care to protect them from harm. Their families cannot care for them for a variety of reasons. This ranges from parents who cannot get enough support to care for a child with profound disabilities to parents who seriously and criminally abuse their children. The contributing factors for Aboriginal children are steeped in their families’ history of separation and alienation.

It is of no surprise that the factors that place families under stress and lead to the separation of children from their care are similar to the factors that contribute to homelessness. These are domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, intellectual disability, low incomes, transience and poor family supports, among others. There is significant overlap between homelessness and children being in care.

You’re just a totally isolated unit as a family, friendship just doesn’t come into it. Even the kids, they’re like ships in the night, you know? None of us have any relationships, it’s really weird.
[homeless family]

Children in care who are often changing placement are homeless but have not been considered as such. It is not our notion of what homelessness is.

The impact of homelessness on children is huge but has largely been overlooked. In the past we have treated the family as a homogenous unit with the parents representing and protecting the interests of the children. It is only since the 1980s with growth in the study of children, and the consequent ‘discovery’ that they were social actors, and the commitment to children’s rights that we have started to consider the needs of children as linked to but also distinct from the family as a whole.

From a child’s perspective, homelessness may look like this: losing pets, leaving treasures behind, being in strange and threatening environments, being separated from friends and sometimes siblings, changing or missing school, falling behind, insufficient food, persistent illness with no treatment and adults distracted all the time.

It happened lots. I just got used to it. They’d just come and pick us up and take us when mum was going psycho.
[In their own words, Create June 2004]

Children in care who are often changing placement are homeless but have not been considered as such. It is not our notion of what homelessness is. But the definition of ‘secondary’ homelessness covers such circumstances – constantly moving between relatives or friends because of no home of their own.

We do know that young people who are in state care use homelessness services. In South Australia at 30 June 2005 there were 190 young people on care and protection orders and in independent living arrangements such as private board, renting on their own, engaged in a program of learning to live independently and living with their partner and children. It has been estimated but not confirmed that 100 of these young people drift in and out of homelessness services. We don’t have accurate data here.

There are many things we still don’t know. We don’t know how many families were homeless when the children were removed. We don’t know how many children have been separated from their parents because residential services couldn’t accommodate children. We don’t know how well our homelessness services meet the needs of children or how safe children are while there. We don’t know how many homeless people are care leavers but we suspect it is a significant number. We don’t know how, or if, homelessness services should be integrated with alternative care.

We do know though that child safety starts with awareness of children and empowerment of children. So we can proceed without perfect knowledge to improve our approach to children in planning and providing homelessness services.

Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People