

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.

New tools to inform children and young people in care

Available now are three items which have been prepared by young people in care with the most important messages they want to get across to others in their situation. The booklet *about being in care* makes it clear that what is happening to them is not their fault, they are not alone and they have the right to feel safe and supported. It includes information about what 'being in care' means, court orders and guardianship, talking to someone, the contacts card, their rights, and what to do if things aren't OK. The conveniently-sized contacts card summarises for children and young people the phone numbers of people and services that are vital to their welfare. The third item is a checklist to assist social workers to provide essential information to children and young people entering care or changing placement. The checklist is available in pads of 30.

In style and content, the new materials reflect and complement the *Charter of Rights* materials launched in April this year.

All three products were conceived and made with the active involvement of a project advisory group of young people in care or formerly in care. More products are under consideration for development.

The new materials can be viewed on the Guardian website or contact us on phone (08) 8226 8570 or email gcyp@saugov.sa.gov.au to order.

...at my first carers place they were talking about having a Christmas party there and I said that I couldn't wait for it and they said, 'Oh, we don't know if you'll be here then.' It wasn't until then that I realised it was only a temporary placement.

In their own words, *CREATE, 2004*





*Pam Simmons
Guardian*

Letter from the Guardian for Children and Young People

As you will see on our front page, there are new materials available to help children and young people in care understand what is happening to them.

The materials were developed by young people in care with assistance from a facilitator, designers and communications experts. We had a good time and they can be very proud of the products.

The team working with the young people felt privileged to hear what they had to say about their experiences in care. Their stories were told only to other young people and the facilitator in an agreed confidential meeting. We learnt about their thoughts only as notes from the group as a whole.

They wanted children in care to know that they were not alone, it wasn't their fault, it's OK to be different and they had a right to be safe.

Most had been separated from their brothers and sisters. They wanted children to be told what had happened to their siblings and how they could stay in touch.

There were painful memories of being treated differently from the other children in their carer family and hearing critical comments about their parents. There were also good memories of loving care and stability.

It was also clear that the social worker was pivotal in their lives. They were aware of their presence (or absence) and the important role they played in providing information, making decisions and sorting out problems. The young people said that the younger the child the more important it was that they had trust in their social worker and the worker knew them well enough to tell if something was wrong.

Not surprisingly they wanted people around them to get on well. My guess is their antennae for conflict and tension is always up and active. So they were worried by any discord between carers and social workers.

Without guidance from the young people we would have got it wrong. We had ideas of our own about what children needed to know but some of this was dropped or replaced. We went prepared to talk about the production of a DVD. The young people weren't too taken with the idea and thought the social workers would use DVDs. We weren't too happy about the dog-tag idea and they agreed after some discussion. There were plenty of laughs but it was serious and effective work.

Thank you to the young people in the project advisory group and to the facilitator Angela Hazebroek.

Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People

What's been done

June 2006 – August 2006

Distribution of the *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* is in full swing. The office floor is littered with post boxes, envelopes, labels and posters. The implementation group (pictured) met on 25 July and approved the implementation plan with a number of suggestions for improved distribution and education about the rights. Thanks to all of those who have joined. The group will meet every three months.



To date, nine agencies have endorsed the *Charter*. They are Anglican Community Care, Anglicare, Centacare, CREATE, Lutheran Community Care, Office for Youth, UnitingCare Wesley Port Pirie, YACSA and the Department for Families and Communities.

We have commenced workshops with young people on the charter. The first two at Magill Youth Training Centre were delivered by David Wilkins and Angela Andary.

The first batch of information materials for children and young people in care are now ready for distribution and details are in our front page story.

David Wilkins, one of our Youth Advisers, is mentor to a team of young people in care participating in Youth Parliament this year. We have sponsored a team of eight who have joined in with great enthusiasm and are working on a Bill of Rights for children and young people in care. Lea Spaven, state coordinator of the CREATE foundation, is part of the support crew.

Our formal monitoring of quality of care in the youth training centres has commenced. We appreciate the cooperation of Families SA executive and the management teams at the centres in negotiating and implementing the agreement.

Also under negotiation is how the Services Bank will work between Families SA and this Office. The Services Bank will attract services and products for children in care. There has to be a fair and efficient way of distributing them. Still early days, but in the meantime we have completed the database, prepared the project plan and are talking with people about donations.

The artistic talents of young people in secure detention in Magill and Cavan are being challenged in a contest to design a Christmas card. The successful design will be used in the annual Christmas greetings sent by the Minister for Families and Communities and the Guardian to children and young people under the care and guardianship of the Minister. The winning artists will receive gift vouchers donated by the Guardian and JR Surf and Ski and some selected entries will be displayed on the Guardian website.



Pictured receiving a charter endorsement certificate from Pam Simmons are (from left) Kara Piltz, Executive Manager, Accommodation and Support Services, Dale West, Director, Pauline Frick, Chancellor of the Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide and Elizabeth O'Connor, Executive Manager, Family Relationships Services

The culture of keeping children safe

Unless the organisational culture supports the power of children and young people, emphasises their rights and has a positive child-focused orientation, any obligatory procedures such as complaints mechanisms are tokenistic and ineffective.

Much of the structural response to abuse in care has focused on regulation, monitoring and scrutiny. This is appropriate. However less attention had been paid to organisational culture and power imbalances between children and adults and between staff and management. Recommendations from inquiries into particular incidents or patterns of abuse have tended to focus on concrete issues such as training, supervision and scrutiny and avoid the more abstract influences such as power imbalances between age groups and genders and views about sexuality.

It is precisely the trust that employers and agencies encourage children to have in their staff and the power imbalance created by the agency's authority that exacerbates the abuse. From the victim's perspective the trust is the very reason they do not protect themselves, do not run away, shout or know how to resist.

Unless the organisational culture supports the power of children and young people, emphasises their rights and has a positive child-focused orientation, any obligatory procedures such as complaints mechanisms are tokenistic and ineffective.

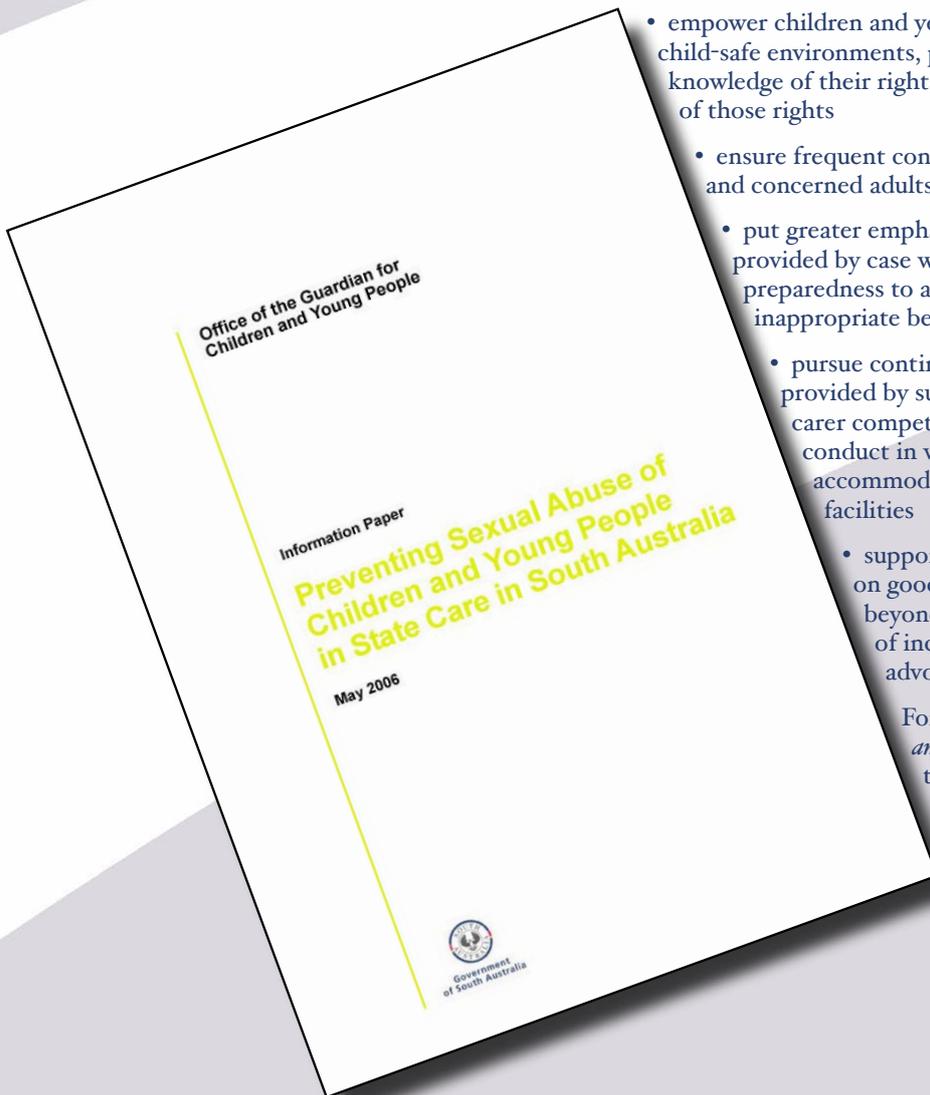
The six priorities for the prevention of sexual abuse in care below are reproduced from the Guardian's information paper *Preventing Sexual Abuse of Children and Young People in State Care in South Australia*. While these priorities address sexual abuse specifically, they have much to say about other forms of abuse and, critically, they stress the central importance of getting interpersonal power and organisational culture right in the prevention of abuse.

Six priorities for the prevention of sexual abuse in care:

- support children and young people in care to form and maintain stable significant relationships with trusted adults
- empower children and young people in care through a focus on creating child-safe environments, participation in decisions that affect their lives, knowledge of their rights and the provision of support to rectify violation of those rights
- ensure frequent contact of children and young people with skilled and concerned adults such as caseworkers or community visitors
- put greater emphasis on the quality and capacity of supervision provided by case workers and carers and organisational preparedness to act promptly on reports or qualms about inappropriate behaviour
- pursue continuing improvements in the quality of care provided by supporting foster carers, building staff and carer competencies, providing guidance about appropriate conduct in working with children, and through appropriate accommodation and staff to resident ratios in residential facilities
- support continuous improvement through agreement on good standards of care, assistance to reach and go beyond those standards, prompt attention to outcomes of incident reviews, and resources to monitor and advocate for the required change.

For the full text of *Preventing Sexual Abuse of Children and Young People in State Care in South Australia* go the Guardian website at

www.gcyp.sa.gov.au >Publications>
Information Papers and Fact Sheets



'He wants to be here'

For many reasons, children in care are excluded from schools at a much higher rate than their peers. Malcolm Downes recently visited a small primary school to distil inspiration and some lessons from their work with a boy we will call Carl.

When 12-year-old Carl joined Rick Whitehead's year 6-7 class at Gumeracha Primary School at the start of 2006 some things were going to go right for him for a change. But it didn't seem likely at first. A traumatic personal history and some bad experiences at previous schools had left him perpetually anxious and angry, prone to walk out of class when asked to do school work and colourfully abusive when confronted.

Rick and Principal Angela Clacherty were not unprepared. They knew something of Carl's history and just two weeks into the term met with Families SA and Education's Student Inclusion and Wellbeing and Behaviour Support Coordinator to work out what could be done. A small table in a corner of Angela's office became a refuge where Carl could safely work out his anger and frustration by pounding plasticine into extreme and sometimes beautiful shapes when tension in the classroom became too much. Fortunately, Carl shared two of Rick's passions, sport and music.

'His eyes lit up when he saw the drum kit set up at the back of the class,' Rick recalls.

The start of the football season also saw Carl playing for Gumeracha juniors wearing the same black and white club colours that Rick had worn a few years earlier.

Carl has developed a good relationship with Kassie Wildman, the energetic School Services Officer who works with him as a consequence of that first meeting. The four hours per week of support she provides has enabled him to tackle some tasks and situations that would have previously sent him racing outside.

He is enrolled in the music program, doing guitar on Monday and drums on Wednesday.

'Occasionally he says he doesn't want to go to music but after a bit of encouragement he usually does,' observes Rick, 'but I think he just wants the extra attention.'

Still, Carl's integration into the school community has not been smooth or easy and is far from complete.

'Carl has good days and he has bad days and sometimes a bad day will be triggered by something outside of school,' says Angela.

[Carl was] perpetually anxious and angry, prone to walk out of class when asked to do school work and colourfully abusive when confronted.

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Angela Clacherty

‘Tomorrow is a new day’ has become something of a mantra for Carl and those working with him, she explains.

The school has an excellent relationship with Carl’s carers, an aunt and uncle who are willing to provide the time and the commitment that he needs. There is trust and a sense of partnership that makes sure that issues that cross the boundary between Carl’s home and school life are supportively addressed.

Talking to Rick and Angela it becomes clear that their own close communication and shared willingness to work creatively and flexibly with Carl is one of his major assets in the school. Angela admits that not all teachers, including some on her own staff, would accept or be comfortable with the latitude that Carl is shown. A photo of Carl proudly holding up a school project beams down from above Angela’s desk and Rick comments on his great sense of humour. They clearly like Carl.

For Carl’s classmates too, these two terms have been a journey.

‘It became clear to them right from the start that Carl was troubled. There were questions and some resentment with a few kids asking why he got favourable treatment, why they had to do work and he didn’t,’ said Rick. He and Angela explain how these questions led to challenging discussions about rules and fairness and also about Carl’s needs and place in the class. Carl is now a part of the class. The minor disruptions are tolerated, his achievements are celebrated and some members of the class even take special pride in looking out for him.

Even with all that has been achieved, the future presents some challenges for Carl and his school. Rick estimates that he is at year three in his school work and admits that, with 24 other children to teach, he cannot put in the one-to-one tutoring that is needed. Carl’s emotional state still limits his ability to concentrate and academic progress is slow.

Next year he will go into year seven and beyond that there is the major challenge of high school.

For the time being, the immense achievement of his teachers, principal, carers classmates and support agencies to date are eloquently summarised by Angela Clacherty when she is able to say of Carl, ‘He wants to be here.’



Rick Whitehead