

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.

Young people taking the challenge in Mission:be



Congratulations to the 16 young people who successfully completed the recent Mission:be program.

The previous three months saw them swinging from ropes in tall trees, crawling through mud, in tents, underground and running around Adelaide in their own version of the great race to learn about themselves and their community.

Fun it might be, but Mission:be is a serious program to empower young people in care to make decisions and create opportunities in their own lives through discovery, development and taking action on their goals and aspirations.

Mission:be is built around seven modules that bring young people together and help them identify their goals and aspirations, help them connect with resources in their own community, challenge them physically, build self-sufficiency and cooperation, celebrate success and take their new skills and confidence into the future.

Strenuous though the activities themselves may be, much of the success of the program comes from the ground work done before the young people even see each other, says co-ordinator, Emily Rozee.

'This last program was in the north of Adelaide so I spent weeks talking to the district centres and other agencies and getting an action team together from that community which would be the backbone of the program.

'Together we worked out what were some of the issues for young people in the north that might be tackled in the program and invited nominations of possible participants.

'I spoke with each of the nominees personally about the program and found out what they wanted from it and we finished up with 19 eager participants.

'From the action team we drew the five support team members who would accompany the young participants in every activity.'

Mission:be taught me to be all I can be and to enjoy life; it taught me a lot of things other programs can't.

participant aged 17



One of the outcomes, says Emily, is the new respect and understanding forged between the young people and the support team. As they face together the same physical and emotional challenges, the old stereotypes about police, social workers and young people fade away.

'After the graduation celebration, I'll be sitting down with each of the young participants separately to work out what they will do after their success in Mission:be. Some may go on with their Duke of Edinburgh (they get the bronze level as part of Mission:be), some may go on to do young consultants training with CREATE or Youth Parliament and some will do other things in their community.'

What are the plans for Mission:be in the future?

'We'd like to give young people in regional South Australia the Mission:be experience.'

Mission:be is run by CREATE and supported by Families SA and the Northern Metro Program was backed by Salisbury Youth Twelve25 Enterprise Centre, SHine SA, BCS Adventure Services and the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Plans for Mission:be include running it in regional South Australia starting with the South-east.



Pam Simmons
Guardian

Capturing public attention in the past two months has been the release of the report from the [Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry](#) (the Mullighan Inquiry). It has drawn renewed focus on past abuses of South Australian children. Such inquiries or investigations have been sadly necessary and repeated across the country and there is great sorrow and abhorrence at the stories of abuse that have emerged.

Commissioner Mullighan took evidence from 792 people who said they were victims of child sexual abuse and 242 had been children in state care at the time of their alleged abuse. Many of the alleged incidents were in the 1960s and 70s.

The Commissioner has acknowledged that most state care provided is good care and, in the glare of the inquiry's spotlight, it is important to remind ourselves of this while paying close attention to what still needs to be done.

Here in the Office of the Guardian we are in a privileged position to see how the child protection system works for children and every day we see evidence of great achievements by children and young people, excellent care and superior professional practice.

We are also acutely aware of the challenges in delivering the *best* child protection service. Not the least of these is a huge change of emphasis from a notification and investigation-driven model of child protection to a child and family-centred system of early response to problems. This is very difficult to achieve in the over-heated political environment that accompanies the stories of children who have been let down by family and state.

There is opportunity, though, to learn from examining what happens when things go horribly wrong. Here are six themes that emerged for me in reading the Mullighan Report.

- Prevent abuse happening through, among other things, empowering children to voice their experience and views in an environment of trust and respect. Much of the response to abuse in care has rightly focussed on regulation, monitoring and scrutiny. Less attention had been paid to the organisational culture and power imbalances between children and adults and between staff and management that prevent the alarm being raised when things go wrong.
- Clear and decisive action is required when children disclose abuse and the response must be constantly supportive of children. The stories of children telling someone but nothing happening are chilling. Alarming too is the response that effectively punishes the child by separation, scepticism, and frightening interactions with too many strangers.
- Clear messages should be sent to all about what constitutes abuse, that it is wrong and that there are serious consequences for perpetrators. This includes timely and resolute pursuit of abusers in dismissal from employment, charges and prosecutions.
- We must also consider how best to follow up with children and young people and adults on the impact of child abuse. This will include assisting them to overcome the trauma, to believe in themselves and to trust others again.
- We must learn from mistakes, oversights and false assumptions by reviewing where things went wrong and then acting on what was found to be deficient.
- Important, but perhaps less obvious, is the reminder to re-examine our routine practices for potential disrespect or disregard that can creep into family meetings, conversations with children, case conferences, case records, decision-making and responses to requests for help.

Other readers will have read other themes in the report but there is no doubt that each will be as determined as we are that such abuse will not occur while we have voice to speak and courage to act.

What's been done

March – May 2008

The response to the release of the report on improving educational outcomes for children under guardianship has been terrific. There is enthusiasm among many in government for working with the strategies. The full report and a summary can be read on the Guardian's website.

In March we released the report on the review of programs in the youth training centres. Families SA has accepted the eight recommendations for making significant changes to the planning, provision and accountability of rehabilitation services offered to young residents. The report has also been used as a source of the most recent evidence available on the effectiveness of young offender programs. Both parts of the report and summaries of each can be read on the Guardian's website.

Certificates to acknowledge endorsement of the *Charter of Rights* were presented to the Salvation Army, the Para-Quad Association and to Parkwood and Grevillea houses run by Families SA. We were pleased to see a recommendation in the Mullighan Inquiry Report to support the *Charter of Rights* in legislation. The *Charter of Rights* implementation group has shifted its focus to monitoring and promoting compliance with rights because the first level organisations have all now endorsed the charter.

The comic book about being in care is progressing, although more slowly than first planned, as we consult more widely and the writers try to convey some very sensitive and important information in an engaging and relevant way. A second consultation was held with some residents of Marni Wodli and the reference group of young people will re-convene soon to consider the latest draft.

The Office of the Guardian and the Department of Education and Children's Services have supported the CREATE Foundation and Budgie Lung Theatre Company to run five drama workshops with young people in care leading to the development of a production based on their experiences. The series of workshops concluded with a performance for family and friends on 4 May.

The Youth Advisors have been busy consulting and talking about what makes a good social worker [see page 6], among other things. Several also helped out with the CREATE Fun Day on 30 March.

We recently welcomed Peta Smith to the team. She will work with us for three months to make progress on projects identified in our strategic planning process. Peta has most recently been working with the Commission of Inquiry Children in State Care while completing her PhD in American Politics. Meet [Peta](#) in the About us section of the Guardian website.



Some young people in rehearsal with Budgie Lung recently.

Better services for young offenders

In July last year, the Guardian commissioned Dr Andrew Day and Dr Sharon Casey of the University of South Australia to review the rehabilitation services provided to the 500 young people who pass through South Australia's youth training centres at Magill and Cavan each year. The *Review of Programmes in Youth Training Centres* was published in March 2008 in two parts, the [Literature Review](#) and the [Consultation and Recommendations](#).

Taken as a whole, the review clearly states that there *is* the potential to divert young people from serious antisocial and criminal activities but that we have some way to go in South Australia before we realise that potential. The need to review and develop services has previously been identified by the Youth Justice Directorate as a key improvement area in the Training Centre Action Plan, and by others such as the Social Inclusion Unit and the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Youth Justice System (SA).

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The *Literature Review* shows that there are interventions that effectively reduce the rate of re-offending in young people. Most effective are those that are based on comprehensive and well-researched theories of human development and criminal behaviour. They need to be designed, delivered and evaluated by specially trained professional staff who are well supported by management and appropriately resourced. Interventions need to be tailored to the skills, age and culture of the young people and sustained over a suitable period of time. The research suggests caution about regimes based on simplistic or gut-feeling understandings of criminality and young people. Evaluations, where they have been conducted, show such ventures such as 'scared straight' and 'boot camps' have no effect in preventing re-offending and can even have the opposite effect.

From their conversations with the young people in Cavan and Magill and with youth justice professionals, the reviewers make practical recommendations to improve the quality and effectiveness of the services provided.

Good communication and coordination between government departments, non-government youth agencies, service delivery staff and the young people and their families is essential. The review points to the need for a coherent policy framework describing how different services work together, and in particular how Families SA, youth justice staff and external service providers can integrate their interventions to achieve common goals.

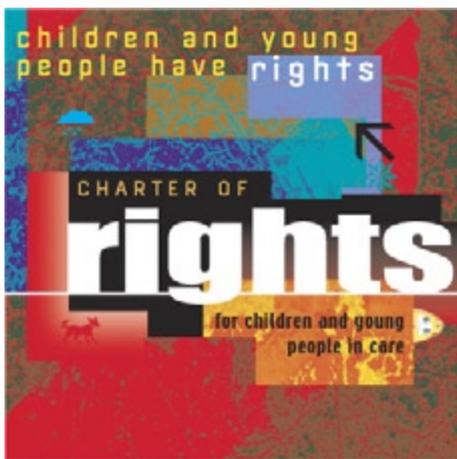
The review also recommends strengthening case management to provide more effective targeting of interventions and service coordination and follow-up. Families SA had already introduced this as the review was prepared. The review recommends the recruiting of additional professional staff with experience in this kind of service delivery to support and train a youth justice intervention team that will operate across both centres and in the community setting.

Of particular importance is the development of appropriate and high quality suites of services to meet the needs of serious and repeat offenders and more responsive interventions for young women and those who identify as from Aboriginal cultural backgrounds.

The review observes that for young people to engage with the opportunities provided, the centres need to provide an environment that is safe, accepting and inclusive for both the residents and staff and recommends that this be a priority for centre management.

During its preparation and since its release, stakeholders have engaged positively with the review and we look forward to reporting on progress in future editions.

The [Literature Review](#) the [Consultation and Recommendations](#) are available in full and as summaries on the Guardian's website under Submissions and Reports in the Publications area.



One of the most important rights for children and young people in care is the right to an education.

This edition focuses on 'Kyle' a boy who turns difficulty into triumph with the help of a dedicated School Services Officer (SSO) and a strong team effort from his school and the people where he lives.

As an Interagency Student Behaviour Management Coordinator (ISBM) over the last seven years, I have rarely seen a more positive example of collaborative support than a boy at an near northern primary school who was successfully supported through Year 6 and into Year 7. In his 18 months at the school, Kyle has gone from habitually losing his diary and all homework on a daily basis to completing quite impressive projects. He has not done this magically but through the help and 'supportive nagging' of his teachers, residential unit staff and most importantly the SSO who provides tutoring/mentoring/caring on a daily basis. She is his rock and sounding board. As a result of months of hard work, honest feedback and firm, repetitive directions, Kyle has tangible evidence of his academic progress. He is proud of his learning in maths and science and happy to expound on his favourite subjects to all comers.

When Kyle arrived at the school he found it difficult to make relationships and trust others. He had considerable gaps in his academic learning and low self-esteem coupled with high awareness of peer opinion and the natural personality of a television emcee. He responded to tutoring that was positive rather than stigmatising, social skills training (formal and informal) and considered mediation. Training in self-regulation skills appropriate to a school setting and his age, additional but sensitive yard support and explicit teaching about his responsibilities to others also helped Kyle gain confidence and participate more fully and appropriately in the life of the school.

Behind the scenes, supportive administrators in the school were prepared to go the extra distance to fill out the copious paperwork to get additional funding, to prepare individualised programs, to find nooks for individual/small group work in crowded schools, to hold the extra meetings and to release staff for further training in attachment disorders, learning difficulties, behaviour management. When setbacks occurred, there was mutual support and determination that the school would do its very best for Kyle.

Donna Nitschke
Coordinator Interagency Student Behaviour Management
DECS East District

Take a look at the [Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care](#).

I love working with [my SSO]. She really helps me deal with my feelings and my school work ... I'm proud of myself.

Kyle

Relationships, relationships, relationships! This is the key ingredient in creating a successful school experience for any student. For a student under the Guardianship of the Minister who has experienced family situations that result in custody orders, relationships needs to be written in capital letters.

Donna Nitschke

Youth Advisors' Page

For kids in care, their social worker is very important. So for this edition of the Youth Advisor's page we asked a few people, 'What qualities make a good social worker for children and young people in care?'

..... First, we asked some young people...



- honesty
- keep us informed when access changes – tells us why
- do stuff for us – find me a new placement when I need it, make sure I see my family
- visit me at my placement – don't just talk with me on the phone
- call us back after we call you
- spend time getting to know me
- ask me what I think about stuff – school, placement, family, the people I live with
- help me sort out problems at school or in my placement
- talk to me about how the decisions are made

Then, a youth support worker's perspective... ..

- communicate regularly with youth support workers about changes in arrangements such as access and worker allocation
- have regular face-to-face contact at their placement, not just in the district centre
- show honesty and integrity
- follow through with promises
- be fair minded and realistic with expectations
- be willing to follow up on necessary funding to cover basic needs like education and health
- provide the necessary support with life decisions



..... Finally, a social worker themselves...



- find the time to get out and about to have face-to-face contact with children and young people, rather than just by phone or email.
- give the children and young people the chance to express their opinions and takes the them into consideration for decision-making. For example, consult with them before annual reviews and when writing case plans.
- make calls or visits for significant events like the first day at school or to go out for lunch to celebrate a birthday.
- make regular contact
- links with as many stakeholders as possible and keep in regular contact to communicate the views of the child or young person in care.

Next edition, we'll hear what the Families SA Executive have to say on what makes a good social worker.