

"Feeling invisible": Why is there no national agenda for Australia's children and young people? – A report to the United Nations

Address by UNICEF Australia Chair, Ann Sherry AO, on behalf of the Australian Child Rights Taskforce: Launch '[The Children's Report](#)' at The National Press Club, Canberra, Thursday 1 November 2018.

<CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY>

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal peoples as the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet today, and pay my respects to Elders, past and present. You will hear today that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in the findings of this report.

Today I am launching *The Children's Report*, on behalf of the Australian Child Rights Taskforce, for which UNICEF Australia acts as Convenor.

The Children's Report holds this name because its findings belong to children. So I'd also like to acknowledge the 527 brave children and young people from across Australia who trusted the authors of this report with their experiences and insights. We thank you. I also acknowledge the 93 NGOs and experts, who have also made expert contributions, as well as the authors of the report..

SARAH'S STORY

So, in the spirit of this title, let me begin by sharing part of a real story one of these young people told us - by reading you something a 17 year old girl in South Australia said during one of the national consultations for *The Children's Report*.

This is a young girl who already had experience of homelessness when she spoke to us.

So that I don't identify her, I will not use her real name – I will call her Sarah.

Sarah was brought up in one of our capital cities. She left home at 16 because she was being sexually abused by her stepfather, and her mother didn't believe her. She moved interstate to Adelaide to stay with her father and her sister, who was a year older. Not long after she got there, her relationship with both broke down and her father kicked her out, shortly followed by her older, now pregnant, sister.

Sarah told us:

"I got kicked out ... my dad left me with nothing - no money - no nothing. I didn't know where I was going to live. And the train station was like, an hour walk from my house, and there was no bus port or nothing. I just had the pair of clothes I had on that day. And I wasn't going to school because it was hard for me, from where I was living... [Then] I was living with my friends for a few months. What's the point of having an accommodation service if some of it is overfilled? They say,

‘Oh, call back and see if there’s room’. But what if there’s no room? ...Maybe you should have a system that everyone can turn to. If you don’t have a place to live at, what’s the point of living.’

MANY FACETS TO PROBLEMS FACING CHILDREN

The reason I have opened with Sarah’s statement is because it illustrates the many facets of the experiences that children and young people in Australia are living through.

Because of their poor relationship, Sarah received no support from her sister and partner. New to Adelaide, she’d had little opportunity to establish relationships and friendships in school. She was truly isolated.

In fact, Sarah spoke about needing to make friends simply so that she could convince them to give her a place to stay.

Sarah’s case is not unique. Many adolescents who are at risk of becoming homeless find the services they need simply can’t respond to the number of young people who require them.

The responses to these issues is poor:-

- many specialist homelessness providers refuse to accommodate children under 16,
- and children between 12 and 15 years of age are often considered *‘too old’* for appropriate foster care placements.

Additionally, in outer urban and regional areas, the availability of these services ranges from scarce to absent,

As Sarah was forced to do, many young people resort to ‘couch surfing’, which is increasingly being recognised as a form of homelessness in Australia. We know that this is particularly dangerous for young women.

Last year in Australia, more than 42,000 children aged 15 to 18 and young people aged 19 to 24 presented as homeless.

Violence is a visceral part of Sarah’s story, as it is for many others. Yet Australia is one of the few developed countries that has not conducted a national prevalence study, which would provide a full picture of child abuse and neglect.

Sarah also mentioned that not having a place to stay meant she could not attend school. We know that poverty, violence and other factors impede a child’s ability to succeed at school. In fact, generally, Australian children are experiencing challenges in receiving quality education.

In 2016, UNICEF’s global *Building the Future* report, which measured progress for children in 41 advanced economies, ranked Australia as middle of the pack against all indicators for children – with the exception of education where we are ranked as 39 out of 41 countries. This report should have been a wake-up call.

However, only this week, UNICEF’s international Report Card 15 was released, which showed Australia ranked in the bottom third of OECD countries on educational equality across early, primary and secondary education. Our position is dropping year on year.

That is despite the platitudes we are all very familiar with – we continue to hear, “children are our future”. In Australia, we often hear that we need an agenda for children, or that we need to listen to children.

And we are here only a week after the national apology to those, who as children, were abused in institutional settings. These are children who are now adults, whose pain was etched into their faces and who clearly said, “words are not enough”.

For, our actions indicate we are not thinking of children in this way. Too many of our children are growing up with violence and inadequate educational opportunities. As the findings and 190 recommendations contained in *The Children’s Report* highlight, - we should be asking the question – “How have we lost track of children in our country?”

Australia is a developed, high-income country that is for the most part stable, and in which many children and young people enjoy love, nurturing, a good quality of life, safety and education.

However, despite our relative prosperity and growth, too many children and young people in our country face enormous challenges and persistent disadvantage. They are not safe, do not have access to basic shelter. They are being left behind.

EXAMPLES OF HOW CHILDREN ARE BEING LEFT BEHIND

Let me list just a handful of examples from *The Children’s Report* which highlight where children are being left behind in our country today, and how they will grow up without having a fair chance at life.

In 2014, one in seven children aged between four and 17 experienced a mental disorder, while in 2016, almost 23% of 15 to 19 year olds were recorded as having a ‘probable serious mental illness.

Kids Helpline recently reported that the largest increase in contact from children and young people seeking mental health support has been within the 10 to 14 year age group.

In our apparently rich and developed country, a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not registered at birth or issued a birth certificate which means difficulties in things we all would take for granted:- enrolling in school, accessing health services, gaining employment, obtaining a driver’s licence, joining sporting clubs or opening a bank account.

In Australia today, children with disability face being pre-emptively removed from their families, despite there being no evidence of neglect, abuse and/or parental incompetence. And shortages of services, such as family respite or in-home support, are driving more and more parents of children with disability to make the deeply distressing decision to voluntarily relinquish their child into care.

Invasive and irreversible medical interventions are being performed on children born with variations of sex characteristics without their informed consent or evidence of medical necessity.

Between 2012 and 2016, 788 children aged 15 and younger took their own lives. The suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people is five times that of their non-Indigenous peers...

Suicide is the leading and increasing cause of death of children and young people in Australia.

How have we let this happen? Why are we so clearly failing children and young people on so many fronts?

Where is their voice?

Why is it that too few people in the parliaments of Australia stand up for them?

WE MUST INVOLVE CHILDREN IN THE SOLUTION

That is why speaking to children is at the core of the way this report has been researched. Because you cannot begin to solve the issues faced by children and young people unless you first talk to them – unless you involve them – unless you listen to them.

Comments from high school students we met with in Queensland and Tasmania included: “Some adults say, ‘I’ve been through what you’re going through’. But that’s at a completely different time”; and “They were kids, but we are the kids now, and it’s changed.” Other children stated: “They probably haven’t experienced things that we have in their lifetime”; and “If the issue is about us, we should be able to have a say.”

In fact, many young people from all walks of life and locations referred to this experience as “feeling invisible”.

In fact, we also heard this throughout the work of the recent Royal Commission - that one of the most profoundly distressing injustices experienced by survivors was not being listened to or believed.

In our research, this picture was thrown into stark relief in consultations we held in South Australia about out-of-home-care.

As I’ve already alluded to, children in out-of-home care are among Australia’s most vulnerable. They are often still recovering from traumatic histories of abuse and neglect, most often at the hands of adults entrusted with their care and protection.

Among them – again - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately overrepresented. An estimated 24 to 30% of these children have some form of disability, and 13 to 15% are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, a great many having been refugees.

Young advocates told us about the continued increase in the numbers of children who have contact with the child protection system, the consistently poor outcomes experienced by children in out-of-home care, as well as the rising associated costs across every Australian jurisdiction, and the variation in responses between these jurisdictions.

On this point, one young girl said, “...people [are] sitting at their desks making decisions about our lives and they have never once, I’m assuming, set foot inside a residential care home or a foster care house. Spend a week there every day for eight hours. Live it. I dare you.”

Her point should resonate loud and clear. It is a challenge to us all.

Indeed, around the country, there have been countless inquiries into child protection in the last two decades alone. There have been 14 national inquiries and commissions into juvenile justice system.

And not only have they told us the same things over and over and over again, they have been unequivocal in their recommendations.

So I ask you, when will we act? When are we going to change this picture?

Who has the moral courage and compass to stop ignoring this issue?

Where is the leadership?

CHILDREN MUST BE ABLE TO BE THEMSELVES

If we think about housing affordability, the widening disparities in incomes and the impacts of climate change, children are inheriting growing levels of inter-generational inequality.

Next year will be the global 30th anniversary of the Children's Convention. Australia signed the convention in 1990. Yet all these years later, we still don't have a domestic mechanism or measure for implementing this commitment to our children.

And as we know, measurement assures accountability.

The Children's Report contains stories and signposts throughout its pages that illustrate the deeply painful experiences of rejection, humiliation and discrimination that children across this country are living with.

Some of this, we refer to it as bullying – which, of course, it is.

But if we dig deeply enough in a conversation with children about this – as the authors of this report did - you will hear that this is frequently about their identities. Who they are and how they identify - their race, cultural expression, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, gender or religion.

Yet, as we know, children do not only experience discrimination and rejection on the basis of their identity in the schoolyard.

A young transgender person in Perth told us:

“When I first came out, my parents said, ‘Well, you can still be you. Why do you have to change your body? Change yourself?’ My response was, ‘I have to. It's not an option. Do you want a dead kid, or do you want a trans kid? Those are your options.’”

A high school student in Ipswich, Queensland, stated, “You can't be yourself if you want to be included”, while another young person in Perth said: “You can be yourself, but you have to accept the risk.”

The great promise of education is that it should be transformative and protective. It should be an equaliser.

School can be a lifeline, and the only place in their lives that they feel belonging. Because we hear from too many children that they are invisible and belong nowhere.

But when children feel that they don't belong in school, we risk losing the potential of education.

Children cannot grow up well, and live well, without quality education where they are learning to think for themselves and problem solve.

But we need to invest more, invest in the early years – where we are setting the scene for their whole lives - and get it right. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disability and children in single parent households.

And, equally children cannot grow up well unless they live free from violence – sexual abuse, corporal punishment, neglect. We have heard child victims and survivors of violence describe how it changed who they are.

When we asked children what 'safety' looks like at home, a high school student in Ipswich, Queensland, answered: "Locks on the door. That no one is scared of other people in the house." High school students in Karratha, Western Australia, spoke of feeling "trapped" in home environments where "parents don't make you feel protected".

A high school student in Wynyard, Tasmania, told the authors: "Violence has just been a part of my life since I was born. I'm used to it. My first instinct is just to get my younger brothers out of the house, the main thing is to keep them safe."

Violence is far too common the lives of children. In the lives of women. In family life. And in out-of-home care settings.

We are living with an epidemic that we are ignoring.

Violence is pervasive. It has a long shelf life. And can cripple healthy development.

We have heard the stories over and over and over.

And of course, we cannot overlook the situation on Nauru.

The harm we have seen over the last five years, and the chronic deterioration in the mental health of asylum seeker and refugee children, has been predicable, inevitable and entirely preventable. When children face intense, and prolonged adversity it often causes acute emotional, learning and physical development delays – whether in Nauru, in Australia or anywhere else. It changes them forever.

It is time for a bipartisan approach. It is time to put children above politics and transfer them now.

HOW CAN WE TAKE ACTION FOR CHILDREN?

Earlier, I posed the question, "When are we going to act?"

Its time Australia had a big agenda for children; there is a lot to address and to action. It is critical for our children's safety, well-being and development today. It is also a critical aspect of our nation building for tomorrow.

To achieve this, Australia needs a big idea and a big commitment. Children and young people are full of big ideas. They are the best authorities on their own lives. So we need to be better listeners.

At the end of this process of compiling *The Children's Report*, what can we say needs to be done to make sure all of this happens? To take the action that is needed?

Here are some concrete ideas - Children and young people in Australia need:

1. A funded and independent national youth peak body to advocate for the rights and interests of children – governments should hear from and act on the concerns of children and young people, in their own words.
2. A dedicated and resourced Minister for Children and Young People who can drive whole of government agendas;
3. A federal Child Rights Act to give practical meaning to the Children's Convention in Australia;
4. A national action plan for children that focuses on preventing violence, and on wholesale reform in juvenile justice, child protection and education;

It is sobering to remember that, back in 1987, former Prime Minister Bob Hawke famously announced that "no child will live in poverty by 1990". And today over 739,000 children live in poverty. That's one in six children under the age of 15.

In a country where most of our political debate is centred on baby boomers, it is time for this to shift.

This is a big and complex problem that deserves our best, our brightest and our biggest thinking.

Yet underlying this is a simple idea – that our children need a fair chance at life - and a fairer Australia.

And that should be our legacy.

Thank you – before we take questions, I'd like to invite the National Children's Commissioner, Megan Mitchell to say a few words.

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