



Message from the National Children Commissioner, Megan Mitchell, as National Ambassador for Children's Week 2017

I am delighted to once again be the National Ambassador for Children's Week in 2017.

The theme of National Children's Week this year is Article 29 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Article 29 complements Article 28, the right of every child to access education, by setting out the aims of education. It provides that education should be directed to the development of each child's full potential, and the development of respect for human rights, for the child's identity and culture, for others, and for the natural environment. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Convention, has said that these aims "promote, support and protect the core value of the Convention: the human dignity innate in every child and his or her equal and inalienable rights."¹

Education empowers children by developing their skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence. With an emphasis on the holistic development of each child, education goes beyond building children's knowledge in a formal school setting, to ensuring that children have a range of life experiences and learning opportunities.

On the one hand, Article 29 provides that education should aim to develop a child's individual identity, from their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities, to their language, culture and values. On the other, by promoting the values of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship, Article 29 sees education as also influencing the way a child views and treats others, and understands themselves as part of their community and society.

Over the course of my work, children have spoken about their mental health needs, school connectedness, their feelings of belonging and having a voice, as key factors for their overall wellbeing in the school setting.

Today's generation of young people face many and complex stressors. As one 16-year-old girl told me, "kids of my generation are exposed to so many distractions nowadays and it's incredibly hard to concentrate on school work and that leads to more stress." According to the 2016 annual Youth Survey by Mission Australia, concerns about mental health have doubled since 2011. Young people continue to nominate coping with stress, school or study problems as among their top issues of personal concern.²

Schools and teachers play a critical role in the development of a child's physical, intellectual, and emotional wellbeing, and are often the first to know when something is troubling a child. School may be the first place where children seek help and as such schools need to be ready to respond in meaningful and respectful ways. While there is

“no one size fits all” approach to addressing the psychological needs of children, school intervention remains one of the most effective ways to address and prevent the development of emotional or behavioural problems. As with the delivery of education, mental health programs in schools should address the individual needs of a child and be able to respond safely and sensitively to students’ diverse backgrounds and cultures.

School connectedness is commonly defined by “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment”.³ These sentiments were echoed by a 14-year-old with Asperger’s Syndrome from Victoria, who told me that “life in primary school was very difficult. Life would be better if people that were different, disabilities, races, religions and any other differences, all accepted each other.” Research suggests that school connectedness has a positive effect on school attendance, academic achievement, and the emotional and physical health of children.⁴ School connectedness therefore is a “protective factor” in reducing risk taking, such as skipping school, alcohol, cigarette and drug use, delinquency and violence, and related physical or mental harm.

The key to fostering school connectedness is giving children opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them. In 2012 the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern that “there are inadequate mechanisms for facilitating meaningful and empowered child participation in the policies and decision-making affecting them in schools” across Australia.⁵ Research suggests that students who felt that they had some level of influence over school administration and policy had higher levels of school connectedness and a greater sense of belonging. They were also able to internalise values such as resilience, responsibility and caring.⁶

Having a genuine say in decisions that affect them is the gateway to children realising all their other rights. This is set out in Article 12, one of the four guiding principles of the Convention.

However, the Committee on the Rights of the Child notes that in Australia “there continues to be inadequate fora for taking into account the views of children who are below the age of 15 and/or of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.”⁷ As one young person told me, “people treat kids my age like we know nothing, are too young to make our own decisions yet too old to not do things by ourselves, it’s confusing and makes kids stressed, anxious and unsure of a lot of things in their life.”

If a key aim of education is “to maximise the child’s ability and opportunity to participate fully and responsibly in a free society”,⁸ as the Committee on the Rights of the Child suggests, we need to do much better in ensuring children are empowered to have a say and have their views respected in all educational settings and in all the “hundred languages” they speak.⁹

Consistent with the emphasis in Article 29 on the holistic development of each child, families, schools and communities each play a role in encouraging and facilitating children’s participation in decisions that affect them. Providing children meaningful opportunities to be heard is both safeguarding and empowering, and supports their preparation for an active, engaged and responsible life in a free society. It also helps adults design and implement policies, programs and laws that meet children’s needs.

I look forward to hearing the voices of children participating in Children's Week about how we can deliver more inclusive educational experiences and environments for them - ones in which children can realise their rights and reach their full potential.

Yours sincerely



Megan Mitchell
National Children's Commissioner

¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *CRC General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education*, 26th sess, 17 April 2001, UN doc CRC/GC/2001/1 [1].

² Mission Australia, 'Highlights from the 2016 Youth Survey', available at: <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/research-evaluation/youth-survey>.

³ Rebekah Chapman et al, 'School-based programs for increasing connectedness and reducing risk behaviour: a systematic review' (2013) 25(1) *Educational Psychology Review*.

⁴ Rebekah Chapman et al, 'School-based programs for increasing connectedness and reducing risk behaviour: a systematic review' (2013) 25(1) *Educational Psychology Review*.

⁵ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 44 of the Convention, Concluding observations: Australia*, 60th sess, 28 August 2012, UN doc CRC/C/AUS/CO/4 [33].

⁶ Rebekah Chapman et al, 'School-based programs for increasing connectedness and reducing risk behaviour: a systematic review' (2013) 25(1) *Educational Psychology Review*.

⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *CRC General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education*, 26th sess, 17 April 2001, UN doc CRC/GC/2001/1 [12].

⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *CRC General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education*, 26th sess, 17 April 2001, UN doc CRC/GC/2001/1 [12].

⁹ Loris Malaguzzi, *The Hundred Languages*, available at: <http://www.innovativeteacherproject.org/reggio/poem.php>.