

Relationships, Reconciliation and Children: Giving Young People a Say

Gillian Calvert

I have realised how central my therapy background and skills have been in my current job. Without being conscious of it, I use much of my background as a therapist in my role as Commissioner for Children and Young People. I probably spend more of my time advocating for children and young people as a group because they are excluded or disregarded on the basis of their status as children.

I usually find keynote addresses a little challenging as it is sometimes hard to know what to say to an audience of specialists from my generalist perspective on children and young people and families. Recently, when I have found myself addressing rooms filled with CEOs of telecommunications companies, criminologists or occupational therapists working in disability, I have wondered what I could usefully add to their knowledge. Today is different though, because I have been a family therapist as well as Commissioner for Children and Young People. I feel like I have come home!

My first impulse was to talk to you about therapy, but it is so long since I have practised and my reading on therapy is not as extensive as it once was; my anxiety levels started to climb. However, I got over it. Thinking about this presentation made me reflect on my first four years as commissioner. I realised how similar my work is to yours — we are both on about children and young people, making their lives better, strengthening their relationships and reconciling them with the other people and structures in their lives. And I have realised how central my therapy background and skills have been in my current job. I use much of this background without being conscious of it.

My job as NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People is to:

- listen to children and young people
- advocate for them; and

- help make the important people and organisations in their lives more responsive to them and supportive of their needs.

Your job as family therapists is to do pretty much the same thing. The main difference is that you work with one or a few children at a time — I work with 1.6 million of them at once.

Young people and their families need both of us to get the changes they need in their lives. The research about creating and managing change says that neither top-down nor bottom-up approaches are as effective in getting real, sustainable change as both approaches together. For best results, these approaches should intertwine and reinforce each other. In our case, therapists working at the family level and commissioners working at societal level may be the desirable mix of approaches.

Our View of Children and Young People

As therapists you know how your view of children and of their place in the world shapes the values that underpin your work and influence your practice. I have found as commissioner that many people and organisations have not reflected on their view of children and young people. When you don't realise you are starting from different conceptions of children and childhood than your colleagues do, then it is harder to work together.



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'Relationships, Reconciliation and Children' was the theme at the Annual Australian Family Therapy Conference in Adelaide in 2003, at which this plenary was presented.

At the Commission, we are currently reflecting on what we do and how we do it. We have looked at the other commissions and offices of the ombudsman around the world and have found that their work is underpinned by four broad constructs. I think these four constructs may be the basis of a useful taxonomy of any organisations and practitioners that work for children and young people.

- The first construct is that children and young people are dependent and therefore vulnerable to harm, so they need special protection, like our child protection laws.
- Second, children and young people have limited life experience, so they need special consumer protection services like complaints bodies with a focus on complaints from or on behalf of children and young people.
- The third construct is that children and young people are particularly vulnerable to abuses of their rights so they need special advocacy services like the National Children's and Youth Law Centre.
- And fourth, children and young people as a class of people do not have status as 'citizens'. Most parents are excellent advocates for their children as individuals, but are not skilled in dealing with issues common to children as a whole. So there is a need for advocates concerned with children and young people as a 'class'.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. A given person or organisation can be active in each area; the NSW Commission is one that is, and most of you probably are as well. And none of them, of course, is the single correct approach. Each has its place.

I probably spend more of my time working from the fourth perspective — advocating for children and young people as a group because they are excluded or disregarded on the basis of their status as children. This means helping society include children and young people. And indeed this is the rationale for having a children's commission. Children and young people can suffer exclusion from almost any quarter. This means that I have to be independent. And that does not just mean independent of governments. I have to be independent of any interests other than those of children and young people.

For the Commission's work to be credible and influential, I have to be independent from political, commercial, professional, industrial and sectoral interests, but willing to work with all these domains. As an independent advocate for children and young people, I think *they* should be central to our public discourse and

public life. We need to make a conscious effort to focus on them.

Children and young people do not often get the opportunity or sometimes don't have the skills to be at the table when issues are discussed. And I do not mean just social issues — children and young people are participants in the economy, and they breathe the air and drink the water. Their views should feature in our economic and environmental discussions as much as in our social conversations. We need to place children and young people in their proper societal context, support their relationships and promote clear and useful communication with and about them. You can see what I mean about my therapy background underpinning my current work.

Who do Children Turn to?

I would like to illustrate how my therapy skills have been reflected in the Commission's work by using relationships as an example. Children and young people's relationships were the focus of one of the Commission's first major projects, our *Inquiry into the best means of assisting children and young people who have no one to turn to* (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2002b). When I started the Inquiry, I had the intention of focusing on very vulnerable children and young people and how to help them at the times of their greatest need. However, the children and young people I spoke with said they wanted me to concentrate on ways to prevent them from becoming vulnerable in the first place. This point was made as strongly by the most vulnerable children and young people as it was by their more resilient peers and I altered the direction of the Inquiry to reflect this.

This was an important step because I wanted the Inquiry outcomes to be as helpful as possible to children and young people — so I was consistent in pursuing the Inquiry goal but quite flexible about the ways to get there. This balance of consistency and flexibility is important to an organisation like mine in building credibility and influencing other organisations. It is the same way you have to be consistent while flexible in your approach to casework in families; consistent in your goal but flexible about how you get there.

The scope of the Inquiry involved the Commission investigating:

- Who do children and young people turn to for help when they are facing tough times?

- Why do children and young people feel comfortable getting help from particular people or organisations?
- How do they go about getting help? and
- How we can make it easier for them to get help in the future?

Their responses told us what they view as important in their lives and how we can provide services that best meet their needs.

During the Inquiry we talked with, listened to and observed approximately 240 children and young people aged from four to eighteen years across NSW. With the help of people working with this population, we held 25 focus groups, in addition to conducting seminars and structured observations. We talked with children and young people from the city and from the country, older ones and younger ones. We spoke with children and young people from different cultural backgrounds and from different types of families. We listened to those who had a disability and those with health problems, those in juvenile detention, those who were homeless and those who were themselves parents.

In undertaking the Inquiry, I had to engage with and talk productively about difficult issues with children and their families. I had to think in systems terms and understand contexts. I had to be conscious of processes and relationships, to work from the strengths of individuals, organisations and communities, and to focus on solutions — I had to use my therapy skills and background to make the Inquiry work. By listening to and talking with children and young people, we were able to find out what the important things in their lives were. We also received more than 40 submissions from organisations that work with children and young people. This gave us great insight into the experiences and learning of child-focused organisations. A number of important findings came out of the Inquiry.

Finding 1: Relationships are Vital

First, we found that relationships are the most important thing for children and young people. This was the single most clear and consistent message that came out of the Inquiry. To be happy, healthy and safe, children and young people need to have good relationships with their family, friends and the communities they live in. When one of these relationships is bad, children and young people will generally be okay if the other relationships are good. But when all of these relationships are bad, things can be really tough.

Finding 2: Help from Parents, Friends, Child-Care Centres and Schools

Second, children and young people told us the people who they most like to get help from are parents and friends. But when these people are not willing or able to give help, it is important that someone else can. From what children and young people told us, and from what we saw, the other people who help most are teachers and child-care workers.

Finding 3: Help Before Things Get Really Bad

Third, children and young people told us that they wanted help early on in the life of the problem they were facing, before things got really bad and overwhelming. So our report focuses on the importance of getting help early. For lots of children and young people, this means that their *parents* need help from other adults so that they can help their children. We also found that where children are living in vulnerable conditions, their vulnerability is reduced most if:

- their circumstances are identified early; and
- intervention occurs quickly, at the appropriate intensity and with a long-term plan.

Finding 4: Help from Familiar People in Familiar Settings

Finally, children and young people told us they prefer to get help from adults they know and trust. They feel much more comfortable seeking help informally from someone like an out-of-school-hours carer or sports coach, for example, than from someone they don't know, like a therapist or GP. The message here is that children and young people will use your therapy experience more fully if you as a therapist spend time building relationships with them. They also said that it was important that adults kept things private, didn't judge and could give practical advice. They told us adults should spend time with them, get to know them and listen to what they have to say. They said that adults can get to know them by doing the things that they enjoy, like playing sport or music or just hanging around with them in places where they, not adults, feel comfortable.

Unfortunately, children and young people told us that sometimes they cannot find help from any of the people they know. Maybe no one is around who they feel they can turn to, or maybe they need help with a special problem that is just too hard for someone they know to help with. That is when people who work at service agencies or organisations come in, by providing assistance or advice about where young people can get help from therapists and other professionals.

In summary, the most clear and consistent message that came from the Inquiry was the importance of relationships. Indeed, a strong relationship with anyone who has the potential to act as a powerful advocate can do a lot to reduce a young person's vulnerability to harm and to help them recover if harm has occurred. So, never underestimate how important your role is in providing a source of help, support, safety and stability in the lives of the children you work with.

We published the findings of the Inquiry in a report which we distributed to many different sectors of the community. The report is an invitation to the whole community — not just government departments and agencies — to help nurture the wellbeing of our youngest generations. To assist this process, we made recommendations that set out some of the things we can do right now to make a big change for the better for children and young people.

These recommendations cover four main areas:

- Helping parents, so their children have someone to turn to
- Strengthening child-care and schools, so children have other people to turn to
- Helping services, like therapy, for children and young people if parents or schools are not enough; and
- Building communities that children and young people can turn to.

These recommendations may ring some bells for you. They are very similar to the directions Mary Pipher suggests for family therapists in her book *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding our Families* (Pipher, 1997).

We have spent the last year promoting the recommendations and lessons from the Inquiry. It has been rewarding for me that the public discourse in NSW around children and young people has started to change. People in policy, research and service provision are now talking about helping children and young people through their relationships. The language is changing. And this change in language is probably a necessary precursor to systemic policy and practice change.

The Commission as Influencer

The Inquiry is a good example of how the Commission works through using its influence — and this idea of influence is a significant similarity between my role and yours. Like you, I have no power to require or force change. Some people have seen this as a limitation on

my role as commissioner. I increasingly see it as a major strength. I don't compel others to operate in this way or that. A coercive approach is incompatible with what I am trying to achieve.

Young people tell us they expect us to work with them through encouraging, explaining, educating, supporting and modelling — not by forcing. So, my ability to improve children and young people's lives depends on my ability to influence, not impose direction on, others. That ability to influence is dependent on skills, knowledge, reputation and credibility. My training and experience as a therapist has been invaluable in developing the interpersonal skills I need to be able to influence other people. I need to be in a position where people will talk to me, consider seriously what I say, and trust my judgement about people and issues. In fact, a commissioner is often able to exert influence simply by talking to people.

Many of our society's systems, particularly at their more powerful levels, operate in an adversarial manner. Debates can be conducted through or influenced by the media and can become unnecessarily heated. Saving face by winning the argument often becomes more important than getting to a good solution. Participants can be worried that changing their minds or modifying their positions will be perceived as weakness or as a 'win' to their 'opponent'. These attitudes to debate are quite common in government, representative bodies, community and industrial organisations, professional associations and educational institutions. You might find them familiar from the style of some of the families you have worked with. I have found it helpful and effective to discuss ideas with decision-makers before matters reach the public arena. This has allowed me to make suggestions for changes for a stronger focus on children and young people's views. I have been successful in modifying or stopping proposed actions through negotiating consensus like this — but no one outside the discussions knows they have taken place. Doing this well depends on having the networks for information about what is developing and how early to become involved. It is also dependent on having the credibility needed to exercise influence through such channels.

I need to be an influential person heading an influential organisation. We have found that an organisation is influential if:

- it understands itself and its context
- is honest about its agenda, strengths and weaknesses; and
- it respects the people it works with

Again, all this sounds to me a lot like the way a good therapist uses influence with families.

Lessons from Family Therapy

I would like to talk now more generally about the parallels I see in our ways of working and explore some ways we may be able to combine our similar approaches, from opposite directions, to make Australia a better place for children and young people and families. I won't claim to be a 'therapist to society' but there are times when I feel like I am attempting to provide therapeutic interventions for NSW! What I am about to say is based on two important lessons from my training and experience as a clinician. First, therapists accept that things are as they are — you have to start from reality and build change from there. There is no point in developing a hypothetical construct of a family or society and trying to change that.

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Second, children and families do not live in a vacuum. They live in a social context of formal and informal networks which interact with them in many ways, often unpredictably. Stronger relationships and family reconciliation tend to occur most if you address the context and the pressures exerted on the relationship and the family. In my role as commissioner, I still have to be conscious of the need to start from reality, to see the big picture and to understand issues within their context — perhaps even more than I did as a practising therapist.

Much of what I said before about our Inquiry will come as no surprise to most of you. The centrality of relationships in children and indeed people's lives is one of the fundamental principles on which you base your day-to-day work. This and the other principles underpinning family therapy are well canvassed in Barbara Fraser's summary paper 'The Common Factors that Connect All Approaches to Family Therapy' (http://www.anzjft.com/articles/fraser-common_factors.html), based on the work of Sprenkle, Miller, Duncan, Walsh, Seaburn and their coworkers over the last ten years. I do not want to

debate the fine detail of this paper, but for me it provides a useful framework for us to think about our complementary roles in making things better for children and young people.

I will give you a feel for some of my work as a systemic advocate for children and young people across NSW and illustrate how it reflects these common factors. You might like to think about how I could draw on your practice wisdom and experiences to help bring about change in children and young people's relationships with structures and institutions. As a result of our learning from the Inquiry, the Commission's advocacy has been perhaps a little different to that of some other advocacy organisations. Our promotion of safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people is based less on putting more services in place, or expanding existing service systems than it might have been in the past.

We now conceptualise successful prevention, early intervention, therapy and rehabilitation services as needing a foundation of adults whom children and young people know and trust. This means *skilling and supporting parents and friends to pass on information and advice* rather than an agency. And when asked about how resources should be directed to preventing suicide or substance abuse, I find myself talking more about developing relationships through accessible, affordable sport, recreation and entertainment activities, with transport available. I perhaps talk about opportunities for children and young people to participate in their communities — rather than asking for more counselors or changes to legislation.

The Commission has also been talking to trainers and training institutions about the need for people who work with children and young people — teachers, youth workers, police — to have high level skills in developing and maintaining relationships with their young clients. I am appreciating more that organisations that work for families, and the people within those organisations, need good, supportive relationships around them.

I surprised some people when my evidence to the NSW Parliament's Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Child Protection Services (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2002c) did not start with a call for more money for the child protection agency. Indeed, it did not even start from that agency. I started from the need to secure community agreement on what it is we are trying to achieve in child protection. Then I proposed building relationships within the child protection agency and between the various organisations to

replace the current assemblage of activities and services that have evolved over the past 20 years, that do not always relate to each other well, and as a result do not always help families. If we are to change the way children, young people and their families are supported, we have to understand that our solutions lie in our relationships. Relationships between people, within and between organisations.

The work of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Child Protection (<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/phweb.nsf/frames/committees?open&tab=committees>) is about building relationships within and between organisations so they too have other organisations to turn to.

I also chair the NSW Child Death Review Team. The Team aims to prevent or reduce deaths of people under eighteen years by reviewing the circumstances of young people's deaths and making recommendations for systemic change (*Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998, s45T*). To inform the reviews, the Team has access to information held about deceased children and their family members by relevant organisations and practitioners in NSW. We have found that the practice of some agencies to treat only a parent as a client and not to consider the needs of their children may have unintentionally contributed to the deaths of children (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2002). *Therapists, like organisations, need to deal with more than one person.*

It has been interesting, as well as distressing, to notice how problems and risks for children and young people increase at the interface between organisations or systems. We have found that children have died after professionals did not report ongoing serious and unstable situations to the child protection authorities, nor did they take their own action to stabilise the situation (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2003a). We also found that some children have died after someone referred a parent to another agency without adequate assessment of the children, or without checking that the referral was followed up (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2002). Children can be put at risk simply by a failure to share adequate information about the child and family with other parts of a service system. I do not claim that all these children would still be alive if the interagency and interprofessional links had worked properly, but we think some of them might be.

Partly as a result of our research and our highlighting the need to deal with more than one person, changes have been made to practice guidelines in maternity wards and drug and alcohol services (NSW

Child Death Review Team, 1999; NSW Child Death Review Team, 2003b). These organisations now require that intake, discharge and referral processes for adult clients include an assessment of the needs of, and risks to, any children living with the adult. And additional training has been provided for nurses, teachers and for police attending domestic violence incidents (NSW Child Death Review Team, 2003a). For the first time, these professionals are now being trained in the importance of assessing the risk to, and taking appropriate action to protect, any children who live in households where domestic violence is occurring. So, just as you base your therapeutic interventions on working with several or many players, my work to change outcomes for children and young people also means working on many fronts at once.

Using Youth-Friendly Media

Another commonality we share is our focus on strengthening positive behaviour change. As part of our work in building a range of ways to communicate with children and young people, the Commission has developed a close working relationship with *Girlfriend* magazine. This magazine has the largest readership among teenagers in NSW — and a surprising number of boys also read the publication! When disseminating the findings of our Inquiry, we talked to *Girlfriend* about jointly developing some stories that would help teenagers build the relationships that can sustain them in tough times. For four consecutive issues last year, *Girlfriend* published our articles about how young people can develop and maintain positive relationships with family and friends, and how they can deal with troubles in those relationships (*Girlfriend*, September 2002–December 2002). The first article was accompanied by a survey to help us find out about how *Girlfriend's* readers in NSW felt about their relationships. We fed the results back to the readers in the fourth issue. Interestingly, children and young people wanted their parents to be proud of them and talked about strengthening positive behaviour change.

The relationship series was so successful that *Girlfriend* this year ran an article based on our work with refugee children in immigration detention centres, to help Australian young people understand the experience of children and young people in detention (*Girlfriend*, September 2003). Through focus groups with children and young people, we had found that Australian children have picked up a lot from the media about the refugee issue and the public debate about it (NSW Commission for

Children and Young People, 2003). But they had little concept that refugees could be people their age with similar sorts of feelings.

The *Girlfriend* article tells the stories of children and young people who had been held in detention centres, in their own words. It clearly and simply explains what those children and young people went through in escaping from their own countries, only to be placed in detention here. The magazine also developed an article about young people and alcohol, based on interviews with young people who were involved in the NSW Young People and Alcohol Forum and the NSW Summit on Alcohol Abuse (*Girlfriend*, December 2003). I hope that by using young people-friendly media in this way, we will be able to have a real impact on their knowledge, attitudes and behaviour about relationships, refugees and alcohol, and strengthen positive behaviour change.

Helping children and young people to develop knowledge and skills to create change, and supporting them through the process, is another tool I have to influence our society to change. It is in this area of strengthening positive behaviour change that I see another way in which the Commission's practice is more like yours than that of many other agencies — we don't tell people what to do.

Minimising 'Recommendations'

A common practice in reports and formal submissions is for the author to include a list, sometimes lengthy, of specific recommendations for future action. I have come to the view that it is more important for the overall messages of a report to be heard and understood by key people. The key messages should be spread throughout systems and sectors. This helps generate appropriate change, because people can see the wisdom of it; they come to the understanding themselves. It is difficult for someone outside an organisation or system to frame recommendations which will achieve the desired outcome within that organisation or system. And it is too easy to generate resentment or to lose credibility by making recommendations that appear to the rest of us to be sound, but to those doing the work seem obviously flawed, misguided or impractical.

Even if implemented, a recommendation may make a small change at the margin of an issue without fixing the underlying causes of a problem. Additionally, the organisation may feel it can move on to the next thing because it 'implemented' the recommendation. The organisation doesn't think about making other changes, which are implied, if not

explicitly stated, by the inquiry or research concerned, because it has 'done its job'.

For these reasons, recent Commission reports and submissions have contained few or no formal recommendations. Rather, they encourage people to see the issues in light of new information or from a different perspective, and to use the new evidence to change their opinions, practices, policies or laws. To influence people to change and get the outcomes we want, we have to use language carefully, sensitively and sometimes strategically. A bit like being a therapist really, it's showing understanding and thoughtfulness, the fourth approach we perhaps share.

Ensuring that Young People's Voices are Heard

Generating and disseminating new information and insights is a key role of the Commission. We have a particular emphasis on letting the rest of the community know what children and young people think. Often adult experts and decision-makers discuss matters of great concern to children and young people without hearing the voice of those most involved. Take schools, for example. If you ask adults what is the one change they would make to schools, they will talk about curriculum, teacher numbers, technology and often behaviour. If you ask children and young people, they are quite likely to say that they do not like the toilets. Many children and young people are unable or unwilling to use the toilets at school. Some school toilets have slippery floors, lighting that doesn't work, no doors on the stalls. Children and young people can be worried about bullying in those circumstances.

Many children and young people also worry about being embarrassed. A number of girls in primary school menstruate. There are also a lot of six-year old boys who wear shorts without flies and who are not familiar with using trough urinals. And some schools simply lock the toilets for a large part of the day. We are trying to understand the dimension and nature of this problem. With a consortium of universities, we are planning a research project dealing with all aspects of school toilets — design, access, safety, hygiene, privacy and so on. I hope this will lead to some new directions for us all, so that children and young people's education and socialisation are not impaired by toileting facilities.

But understanding and thoughtfulness are not always about specific children and young people's issues. Sometimes we have to understand and think about the behaviour of people and organisations. For example, if an organisation asks for support and external help in

managing one of its activities, it may be because it is genuinely trying to learn from others and benefit from a fresh external perspective on what it is doing. Or it may be that it is passing the buck, wanting to share the blame or is looking for someone else to get involved so it can justify moving resources to other parts of its work. If I am to get involved and advocate effectively in this situation, it helps to understand the motivation of the various parties, just as when I was working with a family. As Commissioner, I try to get the idea of emotional needs and supports and emotional intelligence onto agendas. That is a challenge, as you know, in a society where the public discourse promotes thinking, rather than feeling.

Bringing Players Together

I have found that it is useful to involve a range of adult players and a broad range of children and young people who come together to:

- talk about an issue's positives and negatives
- understand how the other thinks and feels; and
- come up with suggestions to strengthen the positives and address the negatives

We did this in our Mobile Phones Forum, when 30 children and young people met with 30 adults from telecommunications companies, retailers, financial counsellors, legal centres and the media. A family therapy session with a difference really! As you know, mobile phones have become an important channel through which children and young people express their feelings. A good deal of socialisation is now accomplished through text messaging. For children and young people with phones, friends are now as close as an SMS. SMS is closer than a phone call and you can broadcast a message to all your friends at once if you want — bliss! For children and young people, mobile phones are often about feeling. For adults, mobile phones are often about thinking — they are a nifty gadget to help you do your work more efficiently. Making progress on mobiles meant that the children and young people's *feelings* had to connect with the adults' *thinking*. Each had to understand that the other was coming from a different perspective. The Forum helped create that understanding. We are now working co-operatively with the industry to implement the recommendations that came out of the forum. This also explains why I was talking to a room full of telecommunication CEOs last month! (Australian Mobile Telecommunications Congress, 2003).

The Forum also illustrates how we can influence simply by opening doors that otherwise would have remain closed and connecting people who otherwise might not have talked to each other.

Reconciliation

I do not see relationships and reconciliation as separate issues. Children and young people, therapists and commissioners agree on how relationships underpin children and young people's lives. Reconciliation is fundamentally about relationships — re-establishing relationships that have been damaged or hurt. Again, therapists and commissioners have parallel roles here. You aim to reconnect children to their families and re-establish a safe and secure place for them in their family. I aim to reconnect children to their communities and re-establish a safe and secure place for them in their community.

We face similar challenges — especially the tendency for children to be blamed for whatever goes wrong, or has gone wrong in the past. I recall that when I was a family therapist in a child and family service we would talk about the IP, or Identified Patient, that is, the child who the family had labelled as the problem but perhaps was a 'scapegoat' for other underlying family hurts. I see it still as Commissioner when local papers scream headlines about children 'out of control and roaming the streets' — though here they are being identified as 'the problem' by communities unable or unwilling to face their underlying racism and inequality.

In working to reconcile children and young people with communities and society, I use some of the same tools and frameworks that therapists do to reconcile children and young people with families. I just work on a different stage. I use communication, negotiation and conflict resolution skills. I work from strengths and support what's good. I encourage participation, think about systems and effecting change, and try to remain flexible enough to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Therapists can work with families to create change for children and young people — the Commission can't. A Commissioner can work with children and young people, families and communities to change major systems — individually, therapists can't.

I would like to invite you provide me with some ideas via your professional associations, to help me with the Commission's strategic planning — what are children and young people telling you matters most to them? I am most appreciative that you asked me to talk at the Family Therapy Conference in Adelaide, because

preparing for the presentation allowed me to reflect on my work in two seemingly unrelated parts of my career. It has made me understand better the connections and continuities between them and appreciate again that the work of both therapists and Commissioners is very valuable to children and young people.

We place young people at the centre of our work. We focus on their relationships and on reconciling them with others when the relationships are troubled. Both of us are needed, and children and young people will benefit from our complementary roles. And while there are not enough therapists, there also are not enough commissioners. Presently, only Queensland, Tasmania and NSW have Commissioners. However, the work of Parliamentary Committees in both ACT (ACT Standing Committee on Community Services and Social Equity, 2003) and Western Australia (WA Legislative Council Select Committee on Advocacy for Children, 2003) suggests that good progress is being made in both places. In South Australia, consultation has taken place about the Commission recommended in the Layton Report (Layton, 2003).

In Victoria, the Law Institute and the Youth Affairs Council are leading a campaign for a commission (O'Shea, 2003). I am sure they would be grateful for the assistance of therapists in convincing the Victorian government to establish a state commissioner. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth Government has said that it does not see the need for an Australian Commissioner for Children. Although a private member's Bill has been introduced to establish one, the Bill may never get a second reading (A Better Future for Our Kids Bill, 2003). I hope further explanation and discussion will change the government's view. Children in Australia would benefit greatly from an Australian children's commissioner.

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