

Lend an ear to kids' fears

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Advocate's child-safety plea

THE best-intentioned support services for children are worthless if they don't feel they are being listened to, the state's Commissioner for Children and Young People says.

Helen Connolly said a survey of more than 260 young people aged 12-17, on what they need to feel safe, showed organisations needed to give them input into what feedback channels they offered.

She said being child-friendly "must go beyond funky posters and murals on the walls or suggestion boxes on the counter", and organisations were failing if children did not trust them. The survey found children wanted organisations to have approachable staff who wanted to get to know and understand them.

"It is only by developing policies and procedures that are informed by experiences and feedback can children and young people be confident we are providing the protection they seek – not placing our own ideas ahead of theirs," Ms Connolly said.

The survey comes as a former ward of the state, now a house supervisor and case manager in the residential care sector, told her story for Child Protection Week.

Mel, pictured, who did not want her surname published, knows the torment of being a child who does not have the most basic of protection from parents. Now 27 and a mum of two, she recalls the loneliness, fear and unpredictability of life when she was left for long periods alone to look after her younger brother.

Mel remembers what it was like to be hungry and living in a house without power, sometimes for months on end.

She was 13 when she and her younger brother were placed into guardianship after a harrowing experience at home where her mum, who had a mental illness, slammed Mel's head against a brick wall.

Mel is now determined to bring hope to children who need it most. "It can change a child's entire mindset if they know there are people who are there caring for them and rooting for them, just as a parent should ...," she said. "I know my carers are proud of where I have come and what I have achieved and that makes me feel proud."

She urged people to consider becoming foster carers.