

We tell children they are important, and that they...

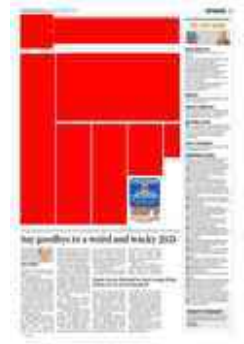
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We tell children they are important, and that they are the future, yet our actions reflect the opposite - Helen Connolly

AS we move into 2022 it's safe to say that 2021 was another year of upheaval and change.

The impact of Covid-19 continued, albeit not as restrictively as in the previous year. But thrown into the mix were bombshells that rocked our faith in political institutions, disrupted the social status quo and challenged many previously held views.

The scrutiny of royal commissions, investigations, and other inquiries pulled back the curtain to expose sexism, racism and inequality in our once-revered institutions and professions.

Many adults are surprised when I tell them these events are not just the topics of tea rooms and front bars. They also feature in the conversations I have with children and young people.

Whether it's a local issue or a global phenomenon, these events are undermining the confidence children and young people have in our civil institutions and in the formal leadership they see. They are also fuelling their continued concern for the future of the planet.

The incidents of inequality and disrespect, of exclusion based on gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and class are so prevalent they are signalling that all is not well with the world. We tell our children they are important, and that they are the future, yet our ac-

tions reflect the opposite. The message they hear through our inaction on the big issues is that their future is less valuable than ours. And they're telling me loud and clear they want this to change.

They want more of a say, and to be taken seriously, in classrooms, homes, communities, and by governments. They want us to see ourselves as they see us – something we find hard to do.

Whether we are parents, teachers or coaches, there is an "adultism" that pervades our thinking. Our words and actions are underpinned by an assumption that as adults we know better. This adultism dismisses children and young people's ideas, as well as their worries and concerns.

It invalidates their feelings, downplays the importance of their friendships, and makes them feel bossed around by adults who they see as hiding from the big issues they should be worrying more about: Climate change, gender inequality, sexual assault and violence.

They plead with us to listen to their insights and experiences. To hear how they view the world and what changes they think are needed to build a future for them.

As a teenager growing up in the '70s, I can remember impatiently looking forward to becoming an adult and experiencing all the freedom, choices, and independence

reaching this milestone held.

I knew my parents worked hard and that they had their own issues to deal with. But, by and large, the worries of their lives were theirs, not mine. I was still able to be a kid and leave being an adult to them.

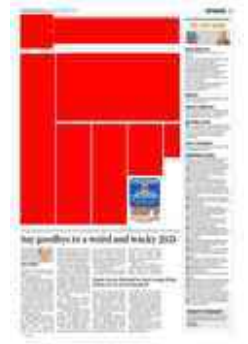
It is in this context that one of the most concerning things I continually hear from children and young people is that adulthood is a stage of life characterised by having no friends, no imagination, and no fun.

They generally regard reaching adulthood as a stressful existence that involves worrying about how to pay bills or of finding a job to pay rent and buy food. Children see, hear, and experience the impact stress is having on the lives of parents and guardians. This stress is filtering down into their daily lives, presenting a view of adulthood that is so unappealing that many believe the best thing about being

a kid is not being an adult. Like the proverbial "canary in the coal mine", we have much to learn from how children speak about themselves and their lives. Their views on adulthood, relationships and issues teach us about ourselves.

If we allow them to tell us what's important to them and how we can best support them to live their best lives, we may just help restore some generational trust they have lost.

HELEN CONNOLLY IS SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Many children see childhood as a time for fun and friendships, which stressed adults don't have much time for.