

# Promoting the rights of Australian families and children

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Helen is passionate about working with children and young people to find new and different ways of increasing opportunities for engagement and participation alongside systemic advocacy to place children and young people at the centre of our thoughts and actions.



Helen Connolly became South Australia's first Commissioner for Children and Young People in April 2017. The position was established under the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016. The Commissioner promotes and advocates for the rights, development and wellbeing of *all* children and young people in South Australia, with a special focus to engage with and listen to children who aren't usually heard.

Helen has 30 years' experience as a leader in human services. Throughout her career, Helen has taken an active advocacy role on the main policy issues that impact on the wellbeing of Australian families and children, with a strong focus on early intervention and prevention strategies.

You can learn more about Helen's career journey so far in our interview with her below!

## **Describe your career trajectory and how you got to your current position.**

I would love to say that I had a calling or a burning desire to work in human services. But to be honest I just fell into a social work degree at the University of South Australia and found I really loved it. Five years, three placements and 2 children later, I graduated. It was a very rewarding time and drove me to continue to seek work in the field.

Saying goodbye to casual jobs in hospitality in my post-student life and embracing a career in human services was literally life changing. Finally, what I thought about the world and what I believed in –

including how I wanted to be and what I wanted to change – were actually in sync with each other. My life had come into balance.

Starting as a social worker at the Hutt Street Centre, I moved into a management role at the Magdalene Centre followed by almost 10 years in a variety of roles with Anglicare SA at the Elizabeth Mission where I ended up as Executive Manager of Policy, Research and Advocacy. Throughout this period, I also had three more children.

After that I was CEO of a children's disability support organisation before going on to become Executive Director of the Australian Red Cross. I also took on active roles in which I volunteered for many organisations including childcare centres, schools, housing associations and community organisations. For the past six years I've volunteered within the reconciliation movement as Co-Chair of Reconciliation SA.

As South Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People my role is to be the state's most senior advocate for children's rights, interests, and wellbeing. This means I am required to look closely at the systems and services being planned and delivered to children and young people to see if they're working or not.

With children and young people's input, I determine whether these systems and services are fit for purpose or need to be changed. I communicate with decision makers about what children and young people have told me they would like to see improved and make recommendations based on their feedback around how this can be achieved.

I explain to children and young people that my job is to see how well adults keep their promises to do the right thing by them, and to make sure they have all they need to develop and thrive.

My job is also to represent children and young people at decision making tables. This representative role mandates me to engage with and listen to children and young people across the state. In fact, children and young people say this is **the** most important part of my role. They want to know that someone is listening to them and working on the things that matter to them most.

## **What does this role mean to you?**

I have a passion for social justice and a drive to make the world a better place, so this role is my opportunity to do my part.

I am driven by doing all I can, to not only support individuals, but to help change broken or outdated rules impacting on children and young people in ways that are making their lives hard or unnecessarily difficult. This includes changing the mindsets of adults who allow children and young people to fall through the cracks, as well as removing barriers to accessing the support they need.

I want all children to feel safe, included and protected, and to have opportunities to participate in their community while feeling hopeful about their future and their generation's future.

## **Take us through a typical day of work for you.**

The best days are those when I have face to face conversations with children and young people, which is currently Tuesdays. After that comes online conversations with groups that are generally held on Wednesdays and Thursdays after school. The rest of the week is meeting with Ministers, Senior officials and working groups tackling issues related to health, education, justice, civics and citizenship, and homelessness. Throw in a few speeches, openings, a bit of media, some report and article writing, reading of formal requests for advice, and formulating a view or views, and that's pretty much a standard week for me.

## **What has working with children and young people taught you?**

Children and young people want people, services, and systems to be kind, inclusive, trustworthy, respectful, and accountable. They want adults to take them seriously, build trust with them, and help them to feel valued and included.

Many children view adulthood as a negative and stressful experience, characterised by anxiety about the cost of living, having fewer friends, lacking imagination, and being a time when you're unable to have fun because you have to manage all the competing demands on your time and money.

We must change that perspective of adulthood if we are to inspire and build trust between adults and kids. One way to do this is to engage and express the perspectives of children and young people on issues they care about; using their voices and allowing them to be heard, so that they know they will be having an impact now and into the future.

Essentially, I have learnt that this generation is as interested in how others are doing as they are in themselves, and that while some kids are doing it tough, the majority are doing okay. They are a bit more tired, stressed, and worried than they were before the COVID pandemic, but overall they're mostly living happy and fulfilling lives with most of their basic needs met.

## **What is the biggest challenge you've encountered in your career, and how did you overcome it?**

Systemic advocacy is slow, and it is never achieved by one single person. It is a collective effort which relies on people working together to bring about change at levels that are often complex and interconnected.

I am, however, confident that I have raised greater awareness of the systemic issues that are impacting negatively on South Australian children and young people. My numerous consultations, surveys, initiatives, submissions, and reports have influenced decision makers to change laws and policies across a number of government departments.

## **If you could go back in time, what piece of advice would you give yourself as you first embarked on your career?**

Not really sure but maybe something like “it’s a marathon, not a sprint, so pace yourself and be a little less impatient”. The best piece of advice I’ve received was to “be respectful and kind on your way up because you will see all the same people on the way down and that’s when you will need them most”. It’s an important message about never getting ahead of yourself.

## **How do you stay motivated to work in this field?**

Engaging with children and young people keeps me motivated. It’s a great opportunity to satisfy my insatiable curiosity for learning about others. I get to ask them for their thoughts on life, love, and everything in between. I am committed to being an adult who is genuinely listening and authentically giving children and young people a voice on the issues that they tell me are the most important to them. I’m not trying to second guess or pretend I know best. They are the experts in their own lives, and I respect that. It has definitely kept me motivated over the past six years.

## **How do you unwind after work?**

My role has a lot of components and commitments which occur outside of business hours, and during the week I often need to connect with students in places and times outside of school. It’s generally only the weekends that are free for me.

While only one of my children is currently living with me at home, the house is always full of kids coming and going to borrow something, or to use the communal shed for storage. Between that and spending time with my grandson, walking the dog, gardening, and cooking, I love catching up with old friends and watching British spy dramas on TV.

## **What was the last thing you:**

**Watched?** – *Slow Horses* on Apple TV. As I said I am a sucker for British Spy dramas.

**Read?** – *Say Nothing* by Patrick Radden Keefe. It’s on the troubles in Northern Ireland.

**Listened to?** – *I’m Not a Monster* podcast. The Shamima Begum Story.