

Is SA's mental health care system 'fit for purpose' asks Commissioner?

As part of **Mental Health Awareness Month**, Commissioner Helen Connolly, is calling on the government to position mental health care within a rights-based framework that has relevance and usefulness to the lives of children and young people living in the 21st century.

She has today released *Missing Voices – mental health as described by primary school children*; a booklet containing 48 quotes that show there can be no doubt some primary school aged children across our communities are facing mental health challenges with which they need our help. The *Missing Voices* booklet is complemented by the Commissioner's latest *Issues Brief: Developing a 'fit for purpose' mental health care system for 21st century children and young people*.

The Commissioner's aim is to ask the question of government and the community as to whether South Australia's current mental health care system meets the needs of children and young people.

With issues including lack of affordability, long wait lists, and services that children and young people say are not culturally safe, gender and identity-affirming, or trauma-informed, the Commissioner is not convinced it is.

Young people continue to report stigma and stereotypes related to mental health, a lack of targeted information about what is available, not feeling heard or taken seriously, and being dismissed when they reach out for help.

They want resources and services to appreciate all aspects of their lives (education, health, safety, relationships, parental mental health, and other social, economic and community factors) and the impact these have on their mental health.

Most South Australian children are mentally well, and not facing challenges relating to mental illness in any ongoing way. But those who are expressing concerns about their mental health, describe bullying, low self-esteem, worries about their appearance, school performance, and fears of social isolation, as personal issues that worry and affect them daily.

These are issues that if left unchecked can potentially become more serious in adolescence and adulthood. If addressed early enough, we can help a child or young person avoid suffering with varying degrees of anxiety, panic attacks, depression, self-harm, and suicide ideation throughout their lives.

Appropriate resources must include addressing issues of concern early and creating the conditions at home, at school, and in the community where children and young people feel listened to, validated, believed, and are in relationships with adults that are based on kindness and patience.

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The *Missing Voices* responses came from students aged 8–12 years who participated in the Commissioner's annual **Student Voice Postcards** initiative via their school. The students provided anonymous answers to open-ended questions about their lives. Questions included what's worrying you, what do you want grownups to know, and what would make things better from your point of view?

The quotes contained in the booklet are unedited. They are representative of hundreds of responses that reflected the mental health concerns of primary school aged students selected from more than 16,000 postcards received by the Commissioner last year.

Quotes attributable to Commissioner Helen Connolly

Although there has been significant consciousness raising around mental health issues relating to children and young people, we generally associate mental health with teenagers and adolescence. What these student postcard responses clearly demonstrate is that mental health concerns can begin much younger, and that if we were to enact earlier intervention, it may well make the difference in some children's lives.

Background:

South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, was appointed in April 2017. Since commencing her **Student Voice Postcards** initiative in 2019, the Commissioner has received more than 50,000 postcards from South Australian primary school aged children across Government, Catholic, and Independent primary schools. The postcards have enabled her to better understand what children are doing, what matters to them, and what concerns they have. They are just one way of ensuring South Australia is meeting its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in relation to providing children with opportunities to express their views on all matters affecting them (Article 12).

RESOURCES

Download [*Missing Voices – mental health as described by primary school children*](#)

Download [*Issues Brief: Developing a 'fit for purpose' mental health care system for 21st century children and young people*](#)

For more information about the work of the Commissioner visit ccyp.com.au

For more information about the Commissioner's *Student Voice Postcard* initiative including the *Things That Matter 4* report visit: commissionerspostcards.com.au

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