

A decade of children's voices on child safety

June 2024



Content Warning

This short paper includes the views and ideas of some children and young people who have a Tasmanian care experience, have experienced the youth justice system, or who may have experienced child abuse, including teen domestic violence. Their views and ideas may not be shared by all Tasmanian children and young people. Please take care when reading this paper, as some of its content may be distressing or raise issues for some readers.

The following services are available for information, support and assistance:

- Kids Helpline | 1800 55 1800
- 1800 Respect | 1800 737 732
- Lifeline | 13 11 14
- Family Violence Counselling Support Service | 1800 608 122
- The Tell Someone website | tellsomeone.tas.gov.au
- 13YARN Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support | 13 92 76

If you are worried about the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person, contact the Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line on 1800 000 123.

Commissioner for Children and Young People (Tas) 2024. A decade of children's voices on child safety

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Foreword

Over several years, children and young people have spoken with me and others about a range of difficult and challenging issues that concern them. To help inform the development of the Tasmanian Government's Child Sexual Abuse Reform Strategy and Action Plan, I have taken a closer look at what children and young people have already told me and previous Commissioners, and others, about child safety and on how to better prevent and protect Tasmanian children and young people from all forms of violence, including child sexual abuse.

I have done this for two reasons. Firstly, I want to remind the Tasmanian Government and broader community that children and young people have been bravely and courageously sharing their views on these important issues for a long time.

Secondly, this work provides a foundation upon which to explore with children and young people whether these issues remain important to them today, and whether there are other issues that they want to share with the Government and the whole Tasmanian community.

Leanne McLean

Commissioner for Children and Young People (Tas)

June 2024

Introduction

To inform the development of the Tasmanian Government’s first Child Sexual Abuse Reform Strategy and Action Plan, I undertook to review, analyse and synthesise the work reflecting what I and my predecessors have heard from children and young people about being and feeling safe.

For more than a decade, Commissioners for Children and Young People have advocated strongly for the rights of Tasmanian children and young people. Over the years, they have been listening to and engaging with children and young people across Tasmania in several ways, including through individual advocacy, creative projects, consultations, informal engagement activities, surveys, and through consultative councils including the CCYP Ambassador Program. The voices, views, rights and wellbeing of children and young people are central to all Commissioner for Children and Young People advocacy.



What I discovered

The information that I reviewed and have reflected in this short report included the voices of children and young people from across Tasmania who were currently living or had lived in out of home care settings, had experienced the youth justice system (including youth detention), were part of Commissioner’s consultative councils including the CCYP Ambassador Program, or who had experienced child abuse, including domestic violence.

I looked at what they said about child safety, about preventing and protecting children from child abuse, and about their participation in decisions on issues that affect them.

In 2022, Tim Moore and Morag McArthur also wrote an important report for the Tasmanian Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government’s Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings, called ‘Take Notice, Believe Us and Act!’ .Their report was also considered as part of this historical review. What I discovered was that many of the things that children and young people have been saying over the last several years were also reflected in ‘Take Notice, Believe Us and Act!’¹

I have grouped together some of the key ideas and themes from my review and analysis below.

1. McArthur, Morag and Moore, Tim, ‘Take Notice, Believe Us and Act! Exploring the Safety of Children and Young People in Government Run Organisations’, (Report, February 2023), <https://www.commissionofinquiry.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/702186/Take-notice.-believe-us-and-act!_UPD.pdf>

Welcome me, see me, respect me, and listen to me

Children and young people want to be made welcome in all settings, they want people around them to get to know them, to understand what makes them unique, their strengths and weaknesses, and they do not want to be judged.

They feel that creating accepting and inclusive environments that celebrate diversity, including those identifying as part of the LGBTIQ+ community or coming from another country, should happen all the time, not just on specific days.

Children and young people feel that they have some control in a relationship with adults when they are listened to. They feel happier when their ideas are acknowledged and believed, and their opinions valued and they said that when adults don't listen to them, they feel that they are not important.

*'If someone doesn't listen to you, it puts you in a mindset that you're not important or you're worthless and it's... it's a... it's not a fun thing...you feel... you don't feel anything... you feel small and yeah, you just feel worthless.'*²

Trust and belonging

Children and young people want to have at least one person that they can trust and rely on because this impacts how loved and valued they feel, and their sense of belonging. They want to have confidence that trusted adults will keep them safe from people

2. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Child Safe Organisations. Start the Conversation. Listen and Act' (Video, 2015), <<https://childcomm.tas.gov.au/resource/child-safe-organisations-start-the-conversation-listen-and-act/>>, ('Start the Conversation') 02:15 mins.

who could hurt them. They want a stable place to live, and they want to be connected to the people, places, groups, and things that matter to them (like pets), because that helps them feel safe and like they belong.

Big changes in the lives of children and young people, like leaving care, can be stressful. Having a trusted adult to speak to about big changes, or about a problem, is important to children and young people. Having the same people involved in their care and the input of positive mentors also helps to build trust.

*'Their [mentor's] attitudes towards me and how they treated me as a person...the two workers specifically I got from [organisation], how they treated me as a person. I grew to like them very quickly and I think in many ways they replaced the parental aspect I'd lost and...don't know... For the most part it just felt like, I don't know, having - I guess just sort of similar to just having a friend show up. It didn't feel like what they were actually there for.'*³

Things that help us feel and be safe

Children and young people want to feel confident that adults will protect them from harm. They want to know that they have a voice and the ability to raise issues with adults and have these concerns addressed.

3. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Listen: This Is My Voice - Young people's experience of the youth justice system', (Report, 2023), <<https://childcomm.tas.gov.au/resource/listen-this-is-my-voice-young-peoples-experiences-of-the-youth-justice-system/>> ('Listen: This is My Voice') 4

*'We're still young. I still wanna be a teenager. I'll be honest, I'm scared about being an adult. My birthday is quite soon. I'm almost 18, right, and moving into a new house is just terrifying in itself, let alone being independent, and like, you don't know what kind of people live around that area, it's like, what if my neighbours are harsh? What are the rules? What can I do? What if there's an emergency? But not so much of an emergency you need to call 000. Like say if you... don't know how to cook pasta... Like, what do you do?'*⁴

Children and young people also want to feel safe from bullies and safe on social media.

*'Bullies make me feel sad and, um, if they punch it makes me feel even more sad'*⁵
(young female)

*'Abuse today is very social media, it's very faceless'*⁶ **(young male)**

Children and young people want to feel physically, emotionally, and culturally safe wherever they live. Physical safety can mean being safe from abuse and neglect, being able to lock things away, have their privacy (especially in residential care placements), feel safe, secure, and protected at home, in the community and online.

4. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Somebody in Your Corner, The views of children, young people, carers and care providers on children and young people being stable and safe in out-of-home care', (Report, 2023) <<https://childcomm.tas.gov.au/resource/somebody-in-your-corner/>> ('Somebody in Your Corner') 38

5. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Start the Conversation' (n 1) 3:19 mins.

6. Ibid. 1:08 mins.

*'I've got locks to my front door and my bathroom but [if you have a look] all the locks and shit in my room and stuff have been removed. Just look on the doors and stuff. I want to be able to have locks. I want to be able to lock my own door. I want to be able to have my own key to lock my stuff.'*⁷

They want to feel that they can express their emotions, engage in new experiences, and are being treated fairly, especially with other foster children or biological children.

*'[It's about whether] [y]ou are being treated fairly to the other kids. Like if you see that your foster carer gives their real kids something, but then they give you the same thing and not exclude you because you're not theirs'*⁸

Children and young people expressed that connection to culture and celebrating cultural diversity contributed to a sense of belonging and acceptance of diversity, and that adults have a lot to do with this.

*'I think adults play a big role in this - for example - being from different backgrounds like I'm African - if you say all these Africans are not great, automatically your kids will pick up and, you know, do the same thing so make sure you will use the right words and make the right comments when you are in front of your kids'*⁹

7. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Somebody in Your Corner' (n 3) 40

8. Ibid. 41

9. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Hear My Story, Acceptance, Belonging and Feeling Safe,' (Podcasts, Episodes #1 - #4, 2023) <<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5zwwq49l36Jq3fgx2PAbrdc>> ('Hear My Story EP#4), 2:56 mins.

Children and young people in care with a disability described feeling safe as having some input into who was looking after them and how that support was provided. Some children and young people talked about feeling less safe in residential care placements than in family-based care, and that sudden changes to their care arrangements made them feel unsafe.

'...I wasn't informed about [name of young person] moving in until the day [name of young person] was moving in'.¹⁰

They talked about peer relationships as positive and protective but, in some cases, peer relationships can place them at risk of violence, abuse and harmful sexual behaviour. Having the right kind of support was a way to help young people to not engage in criminal behaviour, however, having a peer group in youth detention could also be a risk factor when children and young people leave detention.

'Well, in Harley's instance, you don't really know that you're hanging around the bad people until you get caught up, and you get caught up to a point that you don't think there's no fixing it, when you don't have support people there and that. So, I don't really know what could fix it. Just choose his friends wisely, I suppose'.¹¹

Children and young people want positive, trusted relationships with other people, and they want to feel safe about their future.

10. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Somebody in Your Corner' (n 3) 35

11. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Listen: This is my Voice' (n 2) 4

Tell us the truth

Children and young people have been saying for a long time that they want, and expect, to be told the truth. They don't want to be shielded from problems; they want adults to tell it like it is.

'Well, I think you just have to be blunt about the issues that are there in organisations, schools and different communities because there's no way to sugar coat it, there's no way to tip toe around it'.¹²

They also said that adults risk putting children and young people in danger and harming them in a more traumatic way by not telling them what dangers are out there and how to deal with them.

'Parents have this thing I feel that you need to preserve a child's (um) innocence and shield them from all these bad things that are happening in the world so we [sic] tend to withhold information and not alert us to the dangers in the world'.¹³

Children and young people want to know that when abuse happens, they will be reassured that it is not their fault.

'When it comes to circumstances where the child thinks it's their fault for whatever's happened, you need to do your best to make sure they understand that it's not, no matter the circumstance, you know, nothing is ever going to be the child's fault in that sort of circumstance'.¹⁴

12. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Start the Conversation' (n 1) 0:16 mins.

13. Ibid. 1:22 mins.

14. Ibid. 1:34 mins.

Understand where we come from

Children and young people in care and in youth detention have often had difficult and traumatic experiences. Young people in youth detention talked about feeling invisible, that no one wants to help them, and that people had given up on them.

| *'We're invisible, we're like ghosts...'*¹⁵

Some young people talked about acknowledging they had done the wrong thing, but wanted people to know they still have hopes, dreams and aspirations and they needed support to change direction. They can often be trapped in a hopeless cycle of poverty and crime and have had to grow up too soon.

| *'No one ever wants to help us out, no way... why are they doin' this shit...why do they just wanna throw us away?'*¹⁶

They are also often looking for an emotional connection to family and their own relationships, yet they can feel forgotten and don't understand why.

Don't let us down

Children and young people with experience of the youth justice system talked about how they have felt let down by their families and had fallen through the cracks in the system that was supposed to help them.

15. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Diamonds', (created by young people at Tasmania's Ashley Youth Detention Centre, YouTube, 2023) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZcA0FD7Ugl&ab_channel=CommissionerforChildrenandYoungPeople%28Tas%29) 1:48 mins.

16. Ibid. 1:08 mins.

| *'Most kids that get locked up or in trouble they're usually kids that have fallen through the cracks before...'*¹⁷

They talked about how not having a safe home or a supportive family, living with family violence, and how not having a strong connection and attachment to a mother / parent can lead to instability, harmful coping strategies like drug and alcohol use, and engagement in crime.

| *'...It's not cool to have a drug habit because it just gets you in trouble. You get locked up. You just break your family apart and you got no home to go to. You can be homeless and have to sleep in bushes and find places to stay and stuff like that. It's bad. So it's what I've learnt...'*¹⁸

Children and young people who have been kicked out of home said that this can make them feel rejected, abandoned and it puts them at risk of homelessness.

| *'The government doesn't care about these kids that like are sleeping in alleyways or sleeping in parks like you know...where do they go at the end of the night? They sleep in a park. They sleep on the street. It just keeps happening... Yeah, like even homeless shelters, they're all full up all the time...But when they're all full where are those other kids supposed to go? You know what I mean? There's not enough shelters either. But even the kids that are in the shelter, where are they supposed to go? Because they can't live there forever...'*¹⁹

17. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Listen: This is My Voice', (n 2) 14

18. Ibid. 5

19. Ibid. 13

Some young people talked about their experiences of domestic violence and abuse, including sexual abuse, in relationships. As a member of the working group for research by the Social Action and Research Centre (Anglicare Tasmania), I heard that young people felt trapped by abusive partners who exercised control over their bodies and over their freedom and choices. Some young people in these abusive situations also felt that they were manipulated into thinking and acting in a way that was helpful to the abuser and harmful to them. These young people also felt it was hard to receive help once violence and abuse was firmly in the relationship.

*'... I don't think I had any idea that anything that was happening was avoidable. I thought at that point that that's just how it is, and that's what life is like. I thought other people just coped with it better and I just wasn't trying hard enough...'*²⁰

Young people need systems and services that recognise risk, are available and accessible to young people, and provide support for as long as a young person needs it. This includes financial support and somewhere safe to live.

*'...You can have as many helplines as you want. But until there's physically someone there holding your hand, walking you out of there, a lot of people won't get out. A lot of people will just get stuck because it's so hard to even ask for that help in the first place...'*²¹

20. Carmel Hobbs, 'Young, In Love and In Danger, Teen domestic violence and abuse in Tasmania, (Research Report), Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania, 2022 <https://www.anglicare-tas.org.au/young-in-love-and-in-danger/>, ('Young, In Love and In Danger) 31
21. Ibid. 115

They wanted mentors, and the right people to hang out with who could provide stability and support when things were hard at home.

*'... I just felt alone. Alone in this big, wide world. And I had no one to turn to. And then I eventually turned to one of my friends, and she pretty much told me I was lying. And from that moment forward, I never turned to anyone again...'*²²

Adults have a big part to play

Children and young people talked about the responsibility for preventing and responding to child safety issues lying with adults, not children. Some children and young people said that adults could be more careful about what they said and how they said it, such as talking negatively about minority groups or threatening to end a child's care placement.

'I was always very very defensive because it was always on the back of my mind, whenever we got into a little tiny argument with my carer, I'd immediately be like, 'are you kicking me out?' and she'd be like 'no, but if you continue doing this and acting this way, I will'.²³

They wanted adults, including their parents, to tell them what to do if something happens to them, and to be told this in advance. They wanted to be protected if they are in danger, they needed adults to ensure they have access to housing and what they need to thrive, and they want to know that there are responsible, safe and trustworthy adults that they can count on, or who can provide a safe place, when it is needed.

22. Ibid. 38

23. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Somebody in Your Corner' (n 3) 42

We want to participate

Children and young people talked about wanting to be involved in decisions about issues that affect them, and that politicians shouldn't be able to decide things without consulting the people that their decisions affects. They don't want decision-makers to pick and choose when they consult.

'... I feel like a lot of adults don't really take young people seriously. I'm part of the school Climate Action Group where we've been writing letters to politicians asking for climate action and a lot of the responses we've gotten back indicate that they're not even really listening to what we're saying and they don't think that our opinions are worthwhile. We've been told by several politicians that we should educate ourselves more or that we should wait until we're old enough to vote before we start having these opinions...'.²⁴

They want to participate and feel that they have good ideas about what they need for themselves and how things could change that help other people. They talked about getting sad, distressed, and angry when this doesn't happen, and that it damages trust.

'I went from feeling nice and supported, knowing that if something's wrong I had someone to turn to, that sort of thing, if I need any help or information about stuff, blah, blah, blah, I can go to her [case worker]. Then it was kind of just like a really just annoying moment of what the hell?'²⁵

24. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Hear My Story, EP#4' (n 8) 0:25 mins.

25. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'A Place at the Table: An Investigation into a Change to the Care Management of Children and Young People in Care in Tasmania' (Investigation Report, December 2023) ('A Place at the Table'), 78



Children and young people talked about how participating makes them feel valued, respected, and contributes to a feeling of safety. Some said that they were tired of hearing that workers were too busy to involve them in their own care.

'I didn't get told about this change [to the case management approach], because they are too busy. It is always their excuse'²⁶

Children and young people were open to participating in different ways. They wanted to be included in conversations about their own care and cultural planning, were happy to meet and have a conversation about issues, or to fill in surveys.

'...If I tell an adult about something that I am worried about, they should listen to me, and believe me, and do something about it...'.²⁷

They don't want decision makers to assume things, they want them to ask.

'...Don't just assume something...go and ask the person...'.²⁸

26. Ibid.

27. Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 'Start the Conversation', (n 1) 5:25 mins.

28. Ibid 5:22 mins.

Children and young people also talked about the importance of consent and background checks.

*'Straight away, like - I don't remember, in kindergarten? - being taught, you know, asking someone to hold their hand. I remember the teachers telling us, 'You gotta hold hands with the people next to you!' like you've got no option. [...] From the earliest age possible, I think we should teach consent, but also have it reflected in our education system.'*²⁹

29. Commissioner for Children and Young People, 'A Place at the Table', (n 24)



We have some ideas about what can help

Children and young people have lots of ideas about what they think can help keep children and young people safe. Some of the key themes include:

- To be consulted about changes, not taken by surprise.
- To be believed.
- For adults and decision-makers to keep their promises, or if they break them, to apologise, make sure they are okay, and then make it right, because this shows them respect.
- For adults to help them understand what they don't know rather than be pushed aside or seen as immature.
- For everyone who works with them to learn more about their rights and what they need to do to make sure they are respected and upheld.
- To hear about the stories and lived experiences of other children and young people as part of their learning.
- For education to focus on ways to develop and maintain safe, healthy and happy relationships, including about teen domestic violence and abuse, and for this to be direct and up-front.
- For adult staff and volunteers to have background checks done, and to include children and their families in decisions.
- Everyone who is involved in their care and planning to talk to each other so they have the whole picture, and children and young people don't have to keep repeating their story.
- Not to give up on them.

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