

# Listening to Children

An information sheet for the public, and for practitioners working with children and young people in care.

DISABILITY, CHILD, YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES

## Children rely on adults to care for them, keep them safe and make sense of their world

- For most children who enter the statutory care and protection system, all their expectations of adults have been dashed.
- Children who are assessed as being at risk of abuse or neglect have generally been harmed (whether intentionally or unwittingly) by adults FAMILIAR to them, whom they trusted.
- Through notification and risk assessment they become reliant on a new group of adults to provide protection and care.
- Generally these adults are TOTALLY UNFAMILIAR to them – be they workers, carers, counsellors, police officers, advocates or lawyers etc.
- There is a real risk of unwittingly contributing to further abuse ('systems abuse') of these children.
- Our knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours can make a critical difference to the experience of children at risk.

## Children involved in the child protection system feel:

- **FEARFUL** – of the abuse continuing, of talking about it, of being blamed, of losing their family, of losing control, of being unloved.
- **UNHEARD** – being disbelieved, being talked at or 'down to', being silenced, becoming 'invisible'.
- **UNCERTAIN** – doubting what is right, doubting feelings, doubting experiences, losing trust and hope.

Children and young people have given us this information themselves. It has been recorded by international, national and local researchers (eg Cashmore, Dolby, Brennan and Muskett etc) and used in child abuse prevention campaigns (eg NAPCAN, Australian Childhood Foundation, ECPAT).

Children and young people currently in or previously in care have also voiced it loud and clear through projects such as **I'm not a jigsaw puzzle**, a Tasmanian project sponsored through the CREATE Foundation.

## Children involved in the care and protection system say they want:

- TO FEEL LIKE THEY 'BELONG'
- TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISIONS MADE ABOUT THEIR OWN LIVES
- TO HAVE MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS
- TO BE RESPECTED AS INDIVIDUALS, and
- TO FEEL SUPPORTED

It is too easy for adult needs, views and voices to obscure those of the children who are at the centre of the process. Professionals engaged to act in the best interests of children and young people are expected to have:

- **UNDERSTANDING** of child development and resilience theory
- **AWARENESS** of the impact of trauma on child development
- **HUMILITY** in seeking out other known and trusted adults or friends of the child to help build bridges of communication
- **SENSITIVITY** in creating an environment and context where a child may feel safe when talking to a strange adult
- **PATIENCE** in allowing time for a relationship to build
- **FLEXIBILITY** in fitting in times to talk to the child which least disrupts their routine
- **CLARITY** in describing what our respective roles are in ways that are most appropriate for the child – not only words
- **HONESTY** and **AUTHENTICITY** (children and young people are rarely fooled!)