

# Love a start to curbing crime

Dialogue offers a way to avoid kids being alienated, **JEREMY BOLAND** says

**C**rime committed by children is in the headlines again, as are the sad conditions related to overcrowding in juvenile detention facilities.

Recent media attention has highlighted the disproportionate impact of legislation regulating the circumstances under which bail can be applied for and granted to young offenders in NSW and the high incarceration rates among children for breaches of bail conditions set for old offences in the ACT.

Happily, for those who work with children, media attention has also focused on what the community and government – working together – can do to prevent children from getting on and staying on a path that involves incarceration.

At the core of this dialogue are relationships. It is in this “critical zone” of interaction – where children interact with adults, communities and institutions – that we must focus our attention. (It is appropriate to refer to individuals exposed to the juvenile justice system as “children”. To do otherwise covers up the multifarious vulnerabilities with which children who find themselves before the courts present.)

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s annual report on juvenile justice supervision, 5487 children were incarcerated across the country in 2006-07. Most were aged between 10 and 17 years. Or to put it a different way, in 2006-07 about two per 1000 children in Australia aged between 10 and 17 were incarcerated.

While statistically these figures are not mind-blowing, measured qualitatively in terms of lost opportunities for normal development and lost opportunities for inclusion and participation in the life of the community – not to mention the assimilation by many of these children into a dangerous prison culture – the figures start to demand attention.

Consequently, 50 years from now, I think we are going to look back with horror and disbelief on the time we put children in jail. I think we are going to wonder why we didn’t just love our children instead of putting them behind bars.

Firstly, we must understand the impact that exposure to serious environmental stressors has on the developing brain in very young children. These stressors include neglect, separation from loved ones, bullying, harassment, assault, isolation and homelessness. They also include hunger, thirst, persistent illness and feelings of insecurity. We must use this knowledge to inform institutional and community responses to working with children who have experienced trauma caused by exposure to these stressors. This includes understanding the negative impact a one-size-fits-all approach to education has on children’s ability to learn, especially stressed children who may struggle with everything at school from reading and writing to getting along

with their peers and teachers.

Secondly, we must recognise that children want and need to be heard, and do something about it.

Providing opportunities for children to have a voice is critical to enabling their participation in a world that is often scary and alienating. I am not talking about opportunities through standard student representative-like frameworks and so-called minister’s youth councils, which more often than not favour the confident, articulate children who are usually free from stressors that impact on development.

I am, however, talking about taking the time to talk to children when they “act out” – when they are disruptive, angry, violent – and really listen to what they have to say. Why was it hard to concentrate in class? What was it about what that person said to you that made you feel angry? Why did you punch that wall/ sibling/ friend/ teacher? This responsibility falls on the shoulders of all adults.

Encouraging a constructive dialogue about the origins of disruption, anger and violence among children will only be possible if adults take the time to build meaningful relationships with them – as Professor Margaret Simms has shown, relationships are the key to emotional well-being and positive developmental outcomes.

Professor Simms’s research measuring cortisol levels among children in childcare environments has shown that children who felt loved when they were little “demonstrate better school achievement as they get older, are more likely to have friends, are more likely to be healthy, are less likely to have mental health problems, have less extreme reactions to stressful situations” and are more likely to “return to a non-stressed state more quickly”. But embracing children in supportive, loving relationships is not only important for very young children. As Simms notes, despite the fact that the early years are the most important when it comes to minimising the long-term impacts of stress on the developing brain, the evidence also suggests the brain remains capable of reorganisation all our lives.

There is obviously a delicate balance to be struck between ensuring the resilience of appropriate legal frameworks to facilitate answerability for transgressions of the law on the one hand and our specific responses to these transgressions on the other.

However, if we don’t want to regret policy decisions half a century or more down the track, we must embrace our children in loving, supportive relationships from birth in order to minimise their feelings of alienation and encourage their positive participation in a society that embraces them. Loving children will always be a much better alternative to putting them in jail.

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