



# An update from Megan Mitchell

## Australia's National Children's Commissioner

**When I was first given the opportunity to appear in *Every Child* back in May 2013, I talked about my new role and my plans. Since then I have conducted a listening tour across the country called the Big Banter, consulting with children about what they care about, and their ideas on how I might help to make Australia a better place for children.**

I have also tabled my first annual report to parliament, and in that report the voices of the children I spoke with are up front and centre. You can access this report through the Australian Human Rights Commission website.

One thing I am passionate about is that we hear the voices of children, especially in relation to decisions that impact on them. This is because we will ultimately make better decisions if we do, and create communities and places that genuinely engage with and respond to children's

needs and concerns. In making the effort to listen to children, we also empower them as active citizens who have rights and perspectives. After all, children are the experts in their own lives. That's what Article 12 of the *Convention on the rights of the child* (UN, 1989)—respecting the voice of the child—is all about.

And I have found that children are incredibly insightful and imaginative and, no matter what their background, full of joy, energy and hope. They have a natural sense of

fairness, and worry when they see other children in trouble or missing out.

As one child recently said to me as part of the Banter:

'I am aware that some children are getting treated unfairly in verbal and violent ways, so I would like every child to be treated the same and in a good way.'

The main directions for change set out in my first report primarily are those raised by children.

I was fortunate to meet with and hear from thousands of young children during the Banter, including through schools, preschools, and early learning and care centres.

They told me the most important things to them are home, family, pets, friends and school. They love to play and have fun, and enjoy outdoors and nature. They are most worried about not being safe sometimes, and are concerned about violence and bullying in particular. The adults they trust the most and would confide in are those who listen to them and take them seriously. Some worry children cannot have things or go places because their families cannot afford it. They think smoking, alcohol and drugs are bad, and would like to live in a world where people are kind to one another and where there are free movies, rockets to get around and lots of jumping castles. And, of course, chocolate.

When asked what would make life better for children in Australia one young boy said, 'if drugs didn't happen and no parents took them or always drink a lot of alcohol'.

Another young girl said, 'I wish all people could be happy, feel safe, have a home and a family'.

So, what are the main areas I would like to see advanced in coming years for the betterment of children?

First, we need to find more ways to listen to children to ensure their views form part of the consideration of all policies, programs, plans and laws that relate to them. In doing this, the voices of all children—not just the most articulate—need to be heard.

Encouraging children to speak up also means that they can play a more active role in keeping themselves safe and free from harm.

To quote an 11-year-old boy, 'I am most happy when adults listen to kids and understand our feelings'.

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For this to happen, children and adults need to know about their rights and responsibilities. Through undertaking the Banter it became clear that very few children understood what rights were or that they had any. Educating more children and families about children's rights and what they mean in practical terms is a clear and ongoing priority for my role.

Children deserve to live in a world free from violence, as victims or witnesses. How can children learn, engage and develop in optimal ways if they are constantly feeling anxious and fearful about what is happening around them? How will that experience shape their adult lives and their own capacities for social relations, both now and down the track?

To this end, it is clear to me that far too many resources are directed at points after the horse has bolted. There are now over 40 000 children in care nationally, a figure which has increased by almost 30 per cent over the past 10 years. We will never know how many of these children could still be living safely with their families if we had systems that prioritise early action and support. Investing in safe, functioning families is, I believe, the only way we are going to break this spiralling intergenerational problem.

While we know a lot about how children are faring in Australia, there is much we don't know and much we don't measure or measure well. I will be working hard over the coming years to build information holdings that allow me to better monitor, at a national level, how well we are upholding children's rights in areas such as access to education and health care, privacy, physical and mental health, and safety.

There are no more powerful advocates for children than children themselves, and I would like to thank all the children and the people who care for them for helping me understand where I should focus my work.

I'll leave the last word to a four-year-old girl who told me that 'rainbows are important because they make people happy'.

**Megan Mitchell**  
National Children's Commissioner

**Reference**  
United Nations (UN). (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Geneva: UN.

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