

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS EXERCISED BY THE
COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 2018**

Members

**Hon Dr Sally Talbot, MLC (Chair)
Mr K.M. O'Donnell, MLA (Deputy Chair)
Hon Donna Faragher, MLC
Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski, MLA**

Hearing commenced at 9.51 am**Ms MAGGIE DENT****Author and Parenting Educator, Esteem Plus Counselling Training and Education, examined:**

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today. You have already met all of us so I will not introduce people again. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, this privilege does not apply to anything you might say outside of today's proceedings. Before we begin our questions, do you have any questions about your attendance here today?

Ms Dent: Not at all. I was absolutely delighted to be able to put some of the things that I am concerned about and delighted about on public record. I am well known for the sorts of things that I talk about a lot, but lovely to be able to put it into a formal place.

The CHAIR: And that is why you are here —

Ms Dent: I saw it as a privilege.

The CHAIR: — because, obviously, members of the committee have been very impressed by your work, and especially your advocacy on behalf of children and young people. You will know that the commissioners over the years, since the position was created, have always focused on helping people hear the voice of children and young people.

Ms Dent: Yes.

The CHAIR: That seems to have a kind of synergy with the sort of work that you are doing as an advocate.

Ms Dent: Definitely. When they created the position I thought my name was on it because it was such a thing I believed in really strongly.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make any sort of opening statement?

Ms Dent: Definitely. Because it is just such incredibly important to continue the good work I feel that the commission has already been doing with surveys and things and getting the feedback of what is happening out there, so I reached out to all those places that I am patron of and also those who I have worked closely with from government schools, public, independent and Catholic schools. It just crystallises the same concerns. I just wanted to make sure that I am still talking the message that people are concerned about, and the number one is definitely still the increasing anxiety and stress in children in homes. When you unplug what drives that, and what you can do as a government, it sounds really huge, but there are things that are happening in WA that are leading the country to turn these things around. I want to make sure that that is on the public record, that we are now questioning some of the things that we have kind of accepted as now the new norm. Even though there is still work to be done, I want to make sure that we recognise that WA is leading Australia in a return to awesome, adventuresome play, and freedom and times outside, which contribute to quite a few of the things that I am concerned about that I will bring to you today.

The CHAIR: That is really interesting. I know that my colleagues are bursting with questions.

Ms Dent: Yes. Can I start with the concerns that once again I have come back with and I think we need to put on the table?

The CHAIR: That is what I was going to invite you to do, yes.

Ms Dent: Then we can look at what we can do underneath that. My really big concern is overwhelmingly how many of our children are struggling with anxiety, particularly at early years. That “schoolification” with too much too soon is a profound concern right across Australia, particularly here, and obviously, as a boy champion, I am very concerned about our little boys who are not transitioning well into our schooling system and ending up hating it. I think some of those things can be tweaked quite easily. Passivity of today’s children is impacting their health and wellbeing on so many levels, and we cannot just blame technology; we have to look at some other aspects about fear-based parenting and a lack of community at the grassroots level where children do not play as much in their neighbourhoods. I really believe without too much effort we can re-create neighbourhood play opportunities. Technology—it is the monster. I guess it is not so much that that is the monster; it is the displacement of what it takes out of children’s lives, particularly in the formative years. I still stagger—recently a police program was created for early years children to teach them not to take photographs of their private parts and put it online, and I am thinking, “Four and five-year-old children? What are we doing?” It is just beyond belief. The lack of understanding of parents of the potential damage from not monitoring and not getting the sorts of protective things on devices and phones, the decline in human connectedness, particularly family linkages because they are all on devices when they go out for dinner, it is to keep them quiet—to keep them quiet in the car. We do not talk to them and we do not sing any of the songs I sing appallingly to my grandchildren. We do not play “I spy”. All of those things are contributing at another level. We have, I think, a profound sense of disconnectedness in our schools and I think some of the inappropriate behaviour is driven by loneliness, which is unheard of. Our children do not have the same social skills they used to have because you do not develop those on devices. Our schools are seeing it, and I think the other thing is that we are depending too much on it in our schools without any evidence that it is improving educational outcomes. As background, as a teacher, human relationships is what creates exceptional teaching, and our teachers are too exhausted, with extremely low morale, because they are cramming this curriculum that they do not always believe in. As one of them said, “Primary educators, you must deliver as required despite knowing it’s not best for children” is a really fast way to erode what was a very good education system.

Homework is on that list. I think we really need to jump on board with Victoria and say, “Let’s just make sure it’s almost banned until year 6, except for reading and things that improve reading”, because our children are going home stressed, continuing to be stressed, going to sleep stressed, waking up stressed, and that has to impact them on their wellbeing on all levels. And that last one is the demise of play-based learning in the curriculum focus. I think in WA it seems, even though we are coming back towards it, it is like it is this or that instead of both. I think we need to say that you can have academic rigour and play-based learning; it is not just play. I know the department is working really hard around that. I am very proud to say that the WA education department is the only education department in Australia that actually says we need to be following the NQS, which is based on the EYLF and the early learning things. We are just not always following it, but it is in their policy that this is what children need, K–2. We have got some great things that are already in place but not always flowing through. So, fire the questions!

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Thank you. I will say that I think I have got about four of your books, and I regularly follow you on Facebook, because I will say that what you put forward is something that many families need to hear. It is the things that sometimes we forget, and very much what you just talked about. I am interested in, I suppose, a couple of aspects, but what you have talked about in terms of boys in particular in the early years and this notion of, I think you used the words, too much, too soon. Certainly, some of the feedback that I get is that we have this curriculum and the

teachers have to deliver all of it, which is incredibly hard to be able to do in any event, whether or not it is kindy to year 12, but that, particularly in the early years, when for perhaps young boys that can lead to some significant anxiety for them, and then they would feel that they, for whatever reason, cannot do it, and they then internalise it. Then from that we lead to, “We don’t want to be at school; we’re no good”, and all that sort of thing. Is that something that you are seeing more and more, and do you think it is very much linked to the curriculum and perhaps taking away some of that element of play-based learning?

[10.00 am]

Ms Dent: Donna, I am not sure if you are familiar with my submission—I talked to Christopher Pyne in 2013—which was called “Stop Stealing Childhood in the Name of Education”. It is a very long document where I coordinated concerns from parents, allied health professionals and early childhood educators. That was when I started to hear lots and lots more messages about boys where allied health professionals, including paediatricians, are getting sick of seeing healthy boys being sent to them to check if they have ADHD. That passion of mine to understand the differences in our girls’ and boys’ development is not recognised, still, you know—mainstream. The longitudinal study of Australian children had identified that gender is definitely at play in the transition into our schooling. I am also not sure if you are aware I fought an enormous battle to get the flexibility back into Western Australia, which was no longer here because of the same thing. We had children who were developmentally delayed and boys who were quite obviously nowhere near ready for full-time five-year-old schooling. I get emails every week still with parents thanking me for that because their sons definitely needed more time.

I think the perception out there is that the need to have our children ready to be smart in order for NAPLAN in year 3—because of My School, which compares our schools, which parents look at—has created an enormous message that the only thing that matters is whether your children are going to be academically competent. I keep reassuring people that the very smartest people in Australia at the moment, the best academics and scientists and everything and medical experts, probably would have been lucky to have done anything as four-year-olds other than possibly a couple of half days at a kindy. They did four half-days of five-year-old preschool. My own sons were lucky to be in that window and they thought half a day was too long, and they now have seven degrees between them and I have a lawyer, a doctor, a radiographer and all sorts of well educated—but they were not ready. Nothing has changed in terms of it, but our expectations on the department have changed. You are absolutely right; I really do believe we need to have a clear kind of message that says that you are not a failed parent if your child needs that extra year as a four-year-old.

We do know finance drives a lot of that; they want them in because it saves all the money in early childhood. I would love to see universal access for children the year they turn four in a strong play-based environment, but also in the centres that are not linked to schools. I think that is a really important space that frees up that kind of getting them exposed into environments, where they also, it is not so much parents are worried about socialising their children when they are one and two—I keep saying it is actually not really possible until they are around three. We have got this notion that the sooner you get started, the more they are going to—like, they will learn to share quicker. Actually, no, you cannot. It is actually a developmental thing that takes around three. I have just written my latest book about mothering boys, because what I found when I looked at some of the worst perpetrators of violence towards women was many of them had had very unpleasant experiences with significant female figures in their lives. If it was not mother, it was a nasty teacher. We are still punishing and disciplining little boys far more harshly than little girls. So the boys who turn up who are unable to write their name properly are already struggling with a lack of self-worth, because boys need that external version of “what can I do well”. Then their name gets put up when

they get restless because they cannot succeed; they cannot move. And then they get punished for not being developmentally able to do what is required of them. So often those little boys then get punished with no playtime. That has to stop, because we then create a cycle of dislike of school and a sense of being shamed for, once again, not being as ready. I think I am a bit worried because Steve Biddulph is backing off next year, so he is handing the baton to me, which is a little bit difficult when there is only one of me. I think we do need to recognise there are some significant differences in gender and transition into school and we need to be a little bit more respectful of our little boys.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Do you think that there are things that perhaps could be done better from a government perspective in terms of policies and perspectives that are, I suppose, put to schools and, I think, in and around making sure that that is perhaps better understood? I am not saying that as a reflection on teachers, because they are overwhelmed with what they are required to do, but there clearly is an issue here.

Ms Dent: Absolutely.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I am keen to hear whether or not there are areas where you think at a government department level some leadership could be shown in terms of really filtering that then down into schools and other areas.

Ms Dent: Absolutely, Donna; I am right behind you. Teachers are now so busy with everything they have to do that it is just kind of like “I can’t fight all these battles; I can’t then advocate for that.” In that challenge to get the flexibility back in, which was a really interesting journey, both of the gentlemen who I work closely with who are very well respected in WA in terms of education, had held their boys back. They knew they seriously needed more time. I guess it would be lovely if we made that even more of a—“consideration” is probably the word I would like to say—recommendation or consideration that many boys, particularly now with technology, because the more time they spend on devices under five, the less social skills they have already got. In my workshops, I often decode boys’ behaviour because their behaviour is their language. They are later to learn to be able to speak, talk and all those things, so they are often very frustrated in our school environments. I do think that would be a really good discussion paper or something we can have out there that says that the world is moving and in actual fact our boys are even less prepared. We know now that we have the highest number we have ever had of four to six-year-old boys being suspended and expelled across Australia, mainly Western Australia and Queensland, which bothers me a little, because why the other states? In actual fact, what the other states did is they never left play quite as much as what WA did. We went well over and now we are coming back again. I think there is a lack of understanding that gender can play parts. I think we went to the “it’s politically incorrect to talk about the differences in gender” for quite a period of time, and there is an acceptance, essentially, that boys will disengage. I think it follows through to the lowest numbers of our secondary students attaining graduation with, once again, that wonderful test in year 9. Year 9 is a terrible year for any boy to be very motivated. I can tell you it has a lot to do with hormones and crazy antics they have no idea are going on. We are testing them at probably the worst window of their brain development and they do not see any relevance to the test, so quite often they do not even participate; they do not realise how that can impact. I think if you had tested my four boys in year 9, they would have all failed, yet they came a bit better in year 10 and by year 11 they stepped up. It is an interesting window; therefore, they have now decided: “It looks like I’m going to fail school, why try?” There is a difference in us understanding the unique roles of boys at all sorts of levels. Clarke Wight from Guildford Grammar and I often run seminars for teachers who have been teaching for years who are gobsmacked with what they can learn about how boys can definitely learn slightly differently. It does not mean you change the curriculum. It means you often have to have moments where we walk around or we have a breath or something in that environment. Just

one simple thing we know is that boys perform better at 17 degrees, girls at 22 to 24 degrees, and most classrooms are 22 to 24, which makes boys quite sleepy.

The CHAIR: I have heard people talk about the lighting in the room as well, so boys prefer dark —

Ms Dent: Yes, absolutely; lighting really impacts boys. That fatigue we often see for boys is actually linked to their self-regulation patterns early; boys take a lot more time and a lot more physical play and a lot more energy and a lot more to develop self-regulation, and sitting on a couch with a device slows the self-regulation.

I would love to just give another bit of feedback which popped into my head. Early childhood educators across Australia are telling me that we have the lowest oral vocab at transition we have ever had, we have the poorest gross and fine motor skills we have ever had, we have the lowest self-regulation we have ever had and we have the worst social skills—children absolutely unable to initiate play with other children—right across Australia. That is what the digital world is doing to our children.

[10.10 am]

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Just as a follow-on from that, I know that you strongly advocate against the schooling of early learning, but given that we are in that environment currently, what are your thoughts on contemporary or flexible learning spaces that we have seen coming out, particularly in some of the Catholic primary schools, at the moment?

Ms Dent: I have some really big concerns about those, because boys are easily distracted already—trust me. They are just going to go, “Woo hoo, that’s even better!” It suits some children, but it does not suit all, and I worry that you can kind of meet the learning needs of children in the classroom with the mainstream teacher. But I am really passionate about not just desks, because autonomy sometimes with boys says, “Okay, this is the task I need you to do”, but “You can do it laying on the floor, you can do it on the beanbag, or you can do it under your desk” creates the need for them to have sort of autonomous input into their learning experience. So I am a little bit concerned because some of the schools I know that have done it—I have been doing PDs in Melbourne—are starting to question it. It is extremely exhausting for the educators as well, because you can change the environment, but if you do not change the pedagogy in alignment with the environment, then it is not going to be as successful.

While there are some wonderful benefits in terms of it looks more exciting, I have concerns that there are going to be some students who will be disadvantaged; probably the ones who are advantaged by the other system are disadvantaged by that system. Again, I think there is never one size that fits all. I think that is the sign of exceptional educators—to work out how I can meet the unique needs of the students I have in my classroom which is looking like it is right now.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I have some questions about nature play. Obviously, there is a swing back towards nature play and more play-based learning. I heard you speak about it the other night, so I would love for the committee to hear that as well.

Ms Dent: That is really why I get to be quite excited that I still spend a lot of time in my favourite home state. What we noticed when it first started to happen—and you will all know just how much of a loud voice Griffin Longley has been. Tracy Blaszkow and myself kind of aligned several years ago and thought we seriously have to get something happening, because we noticed the resilience in our children dropping. Obviously, the Catholic system got into it early. I do not know that they have different rules, but they seem to be okay with that. When it started to happen, what we noticed was some of the key concerns in schools were a lack of ability to concentrate for very long, which is self-regulation partially; the second one was not much conversation between students; and the

third was definitely no risk-taking—they were all dropped at the door and picked up at the door. Immediately, those things start changing, truancy also drops and reluctance to attend school drops. So what we know is that an engaging play space that is outside that involves children being able to challenge their anxiety levels to the edge of their fear improves all sorts of things that we cannot measure.

I think it is about the whole child; if our parents are frightened and are unable to let them climb that bit higher, which comes from love, when we have a school environment that embraces that, the benefits are huge. But what I did notice was that the schools could not do it until we convinced the parents that they were not going to die and that risk-taking impacts every single thing in terms of our life later. Our ability to be able to take risks also means we will experience natural consequences. One of the challenges around parenting is perfect parenting, and thanks to social media, everyone likes to look like they have the perfect well-dressed child. In terms of child development, the poorly dressed child probably did it themselves, so they are way ahead of the one who was dressed by mum and had her hair blow-dried. They are allowing children to step up and build capacity.

I think what is really, really exciting now—it has taken how many years; I think the first nature playgrounds I opened were now seven years ago?—is the step we have gone beyond. I think some of you might have seen on my Facebook page that if there is a stream flowing rapidly at the back of the school, we are allowing the kids to get down there and get into it—obviously there is a teacher nearby. It is the massive immersion in the real world that I think is returning joy and mirth into our schools again. I think the playgrounds are as boring as bat poo—sorry about that—and we thought we were keeping them safe, but we were keeping them bored. The next shift that is now happening is that after they have built a nature play space, they have suddenly realised they already had a nature play space; they just have to shift the fence from where they fenced the bush area off from children. Everywhere I go now, I am watching that happen, and the teachers say, “You won’t believe what sort of play they’re creating.” I think that is where we are just definitely way ahead, because we are a step beyond that.

There is one other shift that I think is something we could encourage through our education circles: can we have school play date afternoons where we encourage families to stay till four playing on the nature playground? The same children can play together—multi-ages—for a concerted period of time on equipment that they can gradually extend their own fear base. What we find then is that we build human connectedness again; we have parents talking and chatting. Some schools that have started that have organised a coffee van. One of the things that we notice is that parents do not linger in public playgrounds because they are too busy. What we are noticing is that, just with subtle shifts, we need to build that ability to create the village that cares about our children and we do not parent in isolation, even though we are busy, because they can often do it for an afternoon or two afternoons a week, but not every day of the week.

I think it is those sorts of things, but it is also the word “nature”. There is no question in all my research that shows that the less time children spend in nature, the less restored they are naturally, the less concern they have for it and I think the less freedom and autonomous opportunities they have; and that, we know, can flow through to other psychological concerns if your parents have made all your decisions for you. We need to give children those opportunities to be brave and fearless again. We need to be so proud of what is happening in this state, and that is probably the biggest and most important aspect of my advocacy work—to be continually putting it in people’s faces. Accidentally, I have already got it started right near where I live in New South Wales, which is funny because follow me and you are going to see a picture that is going to say, “Gee, why aren’t we doing that? It’s only a log. We can get a log.” It is extremely exciting.

I have a great suggestion: I think that what WA could do that would not cost a lot of money is promote WA as the play capital of Australia—do not come here for the shopping; come for the play. We have got playgrounds everywhere—community ones and spaces. I think we really need to celebrate what we are doing well. It is about learning and it is about resilience. It is about building social and emotional skills. It is about giving kids a childhood, I reckon. That is where I would put your money. Celebrate what we are doing well, so that that promotes it for the rest of Australia, as well as celebrate something we are leading them for.

The CHAIR: I can see it on the numberplates already.

Ms Dent: Yes. I would seriously buy one.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: The other thing I have noticed coming in on the back of nature play—you are right; we are starting to open up bush groves and kids are allowed to play and they are allowed to climb the trees at school now, which is great—is a lot of the schools in my electorate are starting to bring in loose-parts play.

Ms Dent: Yes; that is true autonomy. That is that step again.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Does everybody understand? Do you want to explain that?

[10.20 am]

Ms Dent: I will explain it to you. What we noticed for a time was, firstly, what happened was that schools would save up \$200 000 to build their nature playground. Then we started saying, “Hang on a minute; why don’t you just drop a tree trunk there and why don’t you look at some logs that are in your local council?” So we started shifting it to parent bodies driving it without needing to raise money, because nature just turns up as it is. And then I kept seeing them, and I had a conversation with Griffin one day and I said, “It’s all still fixed. It’s fixed.” I come from Rockhampton in Queensland, where the kids—I love it when kids are brave—in years 4 to 6 came up and said, “We don’t want you to build our nature playground. We want you to leave the stuff and we’ll build our own.” That was where the idea of autonomy suddenly started to appear: “If I can move the stuff around and do it differently every day, then I am using my own creative capacity and my problem-solving to do more interesting play”, which is biologically what we are wired to do as children when we are allowed to free range, if that is possible. So there are many schools that actually look a bit like a rubbish dump—the part where they have all the loose parts. There are often poly pipes, rocks, ropes and flat packs, and you would be amazed at how more engaged children are.

Why is that autonomous play incredibly important? Because today’s children have far too many toys; they have toys that only work one way. A clinical psychologist came up to me after one of the resilience seminars and said, “Maggie, when you’re talking about autonomy and freedom of choice, what happens with intensive parenting is parents make all the choices, because they know what’s best for you.” She said that when she first began working with eating disorders, she worked with 16 to 12 and now she works with eight-year-olds, and one of the key issues underlying that is children have never had any choices, so they can often choose what goes in their mouth. It was such a fundamental lesson for us to recognise: we must give them choices. That engaging play is enough for a child who cannot write or read to turn up to school every day, because we cannot teach them unless they turn up.

It is a bit like the research in New Zealand, when I was doing work in New Zealand; the only way you got Maori kids to school was really dangerous play. They had a Maori play coordinator who sent them down big hills on plastic things and flew them off rocks, and they would not turn up unless—I think we need to look at that in terms of our Indigenous and Aboriginal children in some of our

remote communities because “If there’s something really good gonna happen, I’ll turn up of my own accord.” We will not have to go and pick them up.

The CHAIR: Just play some of that video of the kids jumping off the Fitzroy Bridge into the Fitzroy River.

Ms Dent: I actually have a photo of that. Yes, exactly that. Because they are so biologically wired, again, but also they are much more self-reliant. Those kids have never been cocooned by that. People often think, “Oh dear, look at those children; no-one is supervising them.” They are pretty courageous and brave, and they actually watch out for each other. That is something that we do not always notice in our western way of parenting.

I keep thinking it is just people in Australia who follow me; we now have three different inquiries from different large organisations in China that want me to do some work with them, because they want to have western parenting, not Chinese parenting, because they have identified they have appalling relationships because they do not follow the attachment, they do not much loving connections and they certainly do not let them play freely. Is it not interesting that you can see it from that angle? When I was at the Canadian resilience conference in 2015 with Dr Michael Ungar, who used to be the resident here, I showed the photograph of some of the images at Kings Park and they were gobsmacked that we could be so dangerous, and I think we have just gone a bit further with the latest one; it is even better. If you have not seen Naturescape lately, it is fantastic.

Can you see that perception? You see that just purely through the lens of potential danger, instead of the potential benefit of giving our children those opportunities to be courageous and brave and to take those risks. It is just a shift of the lens, is it not? Risk benefits often outweigh risk assessment.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I have one more question.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: We are dominating here.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: We are dominating here. We are the ones with small children.

Ms Dent: Some people might have grandchildren, you never know.

Mr K.M. O’DONNELL: I am not that old! But, yes, I have three grandchildren.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I will get us back on track here. I am pleased that at moment in our backyard we have a big cardboard box which is a pirate ship at the moment.

Ms Dent: Beautiful!

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: We have a rocket.

Ms Dent: Love it.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: You have also talked about the role of the community and what we could perhaps do better. I suppose part of that is promoting things like nature play and all those sorts of things. I think the good things about nature playgrounds is that they are not only for the children, but also for parents, because generally if it is a plastic fantastic, parents can easily sit there on their phones. But I would say, having been to a few, with nature play, parents tend to become more involved simply because there is a bit more risk involved and all that sort of thing. You become a bit more engaged.

Ms Dent: You want to have a go yourself.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I do that regularly. I am keen to hear your view with respect to the role of the community and perhaps also in the context of—I saw that you are a patron of Bold Park Community School and obviously issues around community kindergartens and all those sorts of

things—the importance of having the community, particularly in the early years. I am keen to hear your views on that.

Ms Dent: I am incredibly passionate about exactly those things. Bold Park was interesting; the very first time I visited and I saw the size of their mud pit, I fell in love with it and said, “Do you need a patron? I’m it. How could you possibly have this much fun in a school environment and it be legal?” Not only that, there are three main principles of Bold Park. One is that parents are very much part of the process. They are consulted and encouraged, and, yes, sometimes they challenge the school in very big ways. The second one is the nature-based pedagogy as a main form of teaching and learning. I am a farmer’s daughter; that is my language. I intuitively felt—they are always outside; seriously, they are hardly ever inside. There are not enough desks anyway! The third one is basing it on Reggio Emilio, which is about respecting children. To me, when I see schools—even individual teachers can do this; there is no question—that was just the way I thought would be a better way to teach anyway: respecting that our children already come quite wise and at different times do not need to be taught at; they need to be encouraged to learn with. That is exactly what that school does.

I also was the president of the Lower King Community Kindy, because they believe very much in the same sorts of things. Parents are so much more busy—let us be really, really honest—so there is sometimes an aversion to going to schools that actually require you to turn up and take part in the learning journey. We know that for kids who do well at school, it is that triangle of the school with the parent with the child. I think one of the things in my building block 10 about strengthening the spirit in children is that we need to create environments that celebrate children and childhood. I think that is another thing that we are shifting beautifully in WA, where we have gone from suing someone for swings on the trees outside on the verge because someone could die to now going, “Hang on, we’ve just eased that back again.” I love driving through those sorts of streets now, where we are seeing swings off the big peppy trees and we are seeing ladders up the trees and we are seeing children up the trees.

I think that when we promote that this is a childhood loving community, and including a few simple initiatives—one is embracing a play-out day. That is something quite big in the UK, because they do not have much space on their streets. A play-out day means that you can apply to the council and have your little cul-de-sac or your street closed off on a Sunday. The idea is that the scooters come out and everything comes out, but also so do the barbecues wheeled out on the verge. What we have found is, over a period of time, any elderly people in the street were out, too. So we were actually rebuilding our communities by giving our kids an opportunity to play on the road.

It is sometimes just little gestures like that and then being able to share that, because people really need to see the idea and they need to kind of get a sense of what it is—those sorts of things in a small way. There is another shift in WA, which I only heard because I listened to Gillian O’Shaughnessy one day on the ABC when she was talking about—she called them play pods—small playground spaces. We know we have the big ones, but some communities, particularly out towards Middle Swan, were creating—a patch of lawn that was in between certain streets was now available as a play space. Yes, you could ask the council if they wanted to drop off a few logs or do something, but it was also an opportunity for the parents in that area with their kids to say, “What shall we do with that space so it’s a space?” In other words, it is a blood-curdling scream from home but they have that sense of autonomy, and letting it be a public play space without needing every single regulation on the planet to prove why that would not be a good idea. I think it is about consciousness and we are moving in that direction. It would be fabulous to see our community celebrate that and not always put the responsibility on the local council to do it. As they ease up on those things, I think that may be even more of a space. We will not have to pull down

those treehouses—you know: “You get that down in case a child climbs on it when you’re not there!” I think underneath that, that will build the social cohesion again that we are needing. If we have it at the grassroots of our community, it will flow into our school communities and people will make that time and effort, I think.

[10.30 am]

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Following on the community sort of vein, our commissioner’s report that just came out had a strong focus on engagement between parents and children, but also the wider community and children. I know that you have spoken about that. Can you give us some thoughts about what, as community members, we can do for parent-to-child engagement, but also the wider community-to-child engagement, big and small?

Ms Dent: I guess it is pretty simply, really; love is spelt T-I-M-E, is it not? We are not prioritising time with our children. I think I have written, and I know I have done a video blog, on what I perceive as digital abandonment. Children know when we are distracted by phones. Every time we have put up an article, and I do it so gently, because one of the things I want on my Facebook page is not to induce guilt, but to educate and empower —

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: You do not induce guilt.

Ms Dent: Lovingly remind might be the words.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: You have almost smacked us over the head a couple of times, but no guilt.

Ms Dent: With great love! If we want to build authentic relationships with our children to grow them into being independent adults, then we need to be the loving guide on their side, but we do not need to be the control freaks of their life, so it is a kind of shift in that consciousness, is it not? I really think we are doing a better job than we were doing five years ago. I know technology has got worse and I know that more and more children have smartphones than ever before, even though we do recommend not until 13, and even then I would be questioning the capacity for some of them to make good choices, but I think parents are aware that they need to make some time.

One the things I talk about a lot is micro-moments. You might not have as much for your macro-moments—you know, the whole day that you can hang out with your children; like heck, that is not easy—but it is more micro-moments over periods of time that can make your children feel very connected and loved. I really believe that if children have that sense—I call it “their love cup is filled”—then the behaviour is often very different. We find children’s behaviour is driven by stress and one of the biggest stresses is “Am I loved; am I safe?” So, very busy parents who are unable to reassure those children because, you know, they just have too many things going on, too many tabs open and too much rushing around; the children do not feel as safe in their world. Then you go to school and you have busy teachers who do not have as much time to create authentic relationships. I do not think I could possibly teach in the environment we have now because, as an English teacher, I believed in making them work at school—it is a novel idea. I think parents would not be happy with that because they cannot see what they are doing and they cannot do it for them. I think they would get upset about that.

I just really believe that nothing has changed. The development needs of children are exactly what they have needed since we began having children; it is just the world around it has changed and I think the pressure on mums is profound at the moment. I think there was one post I put up just the other day, which is one of the best I have ever read, about putting us out into a social media world where we can compare. Girls were notoriously bad at comparing and despairing before we had social media and before we had children, and we all want to be the best expression of ourselves in our work, in our fitness, in our cooking and all of it. If you have children who are not sleeping, it is

just really hard work. I think really people know it; they just need loving reminders sometimes. I do think some of the messages around technology, of turning alerts off, are really helpful. Make sure it does not “bip” when you are in the company of your children, mealtimes everyone’s is locked away and there is an absolute curfew at bedtime when no-one can access anything else are the three simplest that are showing your children: “Hang on, we matter at tea time. We matter now. Guess what; no, I’m sorry, don’t text me, don’t send me anything after 10 because our house is offline at 10. We’re in bed getting some sleep.” I think we can improve the wellbeing of most children on all sorts of levels—simple, tiny changes.

The CHAIR: What is your view about this kind of approach in communities where they have experienced significant levels of trauma? So, for example, if you take the Roebourne community, to say nothing of some of the remote communities—the Billilunas of the world and the Balgos? Do you apply the same set of principles there?

Ms Dent: I think I have actually visited a few of those—not those particular ones, but a couple of others. Rebuilding a community from the ground up is core business, again. When I have worked with the Aboriginal elders in those towns—I was in Kununurra at one point when there was quite some awful stuff happening—it is that the children need somewhere that they are safe. Sadly, in that Kununurra one, what we found—I went out on the street with the youth workers and I spoke to the kids on the street—was the reason that children from four to 13 were on the street at night under the lights was because it was too dangerous at home.

The CHAIR: It was safer on the streets.

Ms Dent: So they were far more resilient and capable. They also watched out for each other enormously; they made sure they did not lose a cousin or a sister, and if they lost one, they would all go looking for them, and they do not go home until it is safe. Sadly, then they were too tired to go to school. When I spoke to some of the elders, and I also spoke to some of those who worked with alcohol and drug authorities, and I spoke to some of the children, they just wanted somewhere to sleep that was safe. The minister at the time was Robyn McSweeney and I went and had a chat to her about whether there was a possibility that we could build a place where local Indigenous people could also coordinate it and watch it, so that when that is happening, instead of being on the street, children could go there and sleep, and then go home in the morning and whatever, and they would be fed and kept safe. I spoke with the Aboriginal elders and said, “Does that look too much like what we did before?” And they said, “No, because they can come and go as they like and we have our own people helping to coordinate it.” I spoke to the Ord River people and they said they would be prepared to give funding to build the building and all they wanted was someone to run it for them and coordinate it. Unfortunately, that did not go down very well at all. Again, at the end of the day, they do not want children removed, but they want their children somewhere safe and they want them safe with some people who are already related to them, who are not the dangerous perpetrators, so that we can get them to school and we can ensure that they keep getting educated, so that they have more tools later when they grow up.

The CHAIR: Informally, that has worked quite well in some committees, but, of course, there has only ever been two or three women and they get old and they are exhausted.

Ms Dent: Yes, massively. They get exhausted and move around. One of the other things that they tell me, too, is that there are so many pilot programs that go into our Indigenous communities. They often last two years and they take all that time to build up trust and knowing, which is great, and then they leave. One older woman said to me one day, “Maggie, we get a lot of pilots; we’d just like the plane.” I thought that was pretty insightful, was it not? She said, “We just want something that stays. We get to learn to trust people and we get to anticipate stuff, and the funding finishes, and

we get a whole new thing that is different.” To them, longevity is incredibly important in trust and rebuilding. Does that answer that question?

The CHAIR: Yes, that is very interesting.

Ms Dent: I feel that we work with them rather than do to them.

Mr K.M. O’DONNELL: You talked about four-year-olds—boys in particular—and possibly staying down. As a boy, there is a bit of a stigma—I am not saying this is just at school—not you are younger, but you are dumber. I know they have changed the ages over here—I do not know about the eastern states—but I am not fan of the staggered years at the moment. My kids did not go through that. If you were Premier for the day, what would you do to make it so that that would have to happen? Is there one thing you could do or say—boys do not start until one year later across the board?

[10.40 am]

Ms Dent: Across the board. And then there is obviously always exceptions.

Mr K.M. O’DONNELL: Do they still go to three and ups?

Ms Dent: They tend to, but it is largely much more freer and play-based. It is just that the four-year-old once again is so strongly now academically driven. If it was what it used to be, they could cope with it in that environment. That is a really big thing around the edges—Steve Biddulph is huge; he thinks all boys should start formalised learning the year they turn six, which means we would have to do what we do to five-year-olds back up to six. In actual fact, that is what I would love to see happen, that that national curriculum—sure, we are starting when they are five, but we are really going to keep it as strongly play-based, fun, engaging, building social and emotional skills as well as lots of rhyming and all the things that build their phonetic awareness, but we do not start the formal stuff until the year of six, and once again that is the faceless monkeys in the corridors of power in Canberra that make that one. I do not think you can change it, but that is what I would love to do. Let five-year-olds be once again, largely, fun-based, with all the things that early childhood educators know, and once again, it is all of them. I talk to the academics in the department. You can, through play, create so much of that early learning. You can, absolutely, there is no question. They can be doing engineering and numbers and everything, but what we want them to do is to grow up a bit and develop the social skills that the digital landscape has displaced from their childhood because they are actually less prepared than they were before.

One of the studies in the Australian early development census, the last one, showed around 22.3 per cent on a national average of Australian children are less capable, have more what they call “vulnerabilities” than they did. Some of those communities are 35 per cent and some of the biggest ones—the high socioeconomic in North Sydney—are still 13 and 14 per cent; that is, developmental vulnerabilities. When we look back, and there is not a lot of data, but academics who have been around a long time said our children were way more prepared to learn when they turned up 25 and 30 years ago. Why? Because we stopped pushing the formalised learning. I have to put the word “Finland” in there because, seriously, they lead the world in academic outcomes and they do not do formalised learning until they are seven. But they are actually in early childhood at three; however, what they are doing is very strong play-based and when they start formalised learning, there is no homework. There is no testing, in terms of comparing schools, and they have the most exceptional outcomes and I think the biggest number one is lower stress levels on children. Stressed children do not learn well.

The CHAIR: And they still have the baby boxes in Finland, do they not?

Ms Dent: They do! My daughter-in-law is English. She has a box. When I saw it I went, “Whoa! That’s cool.” I love it!

The CHAIR: I am going to pick up on Kyran's point, which was if you are the Premier for the day. You might need a little longer than the day; I will give you a week. When you are sitting down with the Treasury bean counters—the kind of people who ask, “Why do we need black cockatoos?”, where does the evidence base for the approach that you are advocating start becoming relevant? Where do you get to a point where you can start seeing the evidence that what you are putting in place pays off in terms of, broadly speaking, happier, more resilient human beings, or better educational outcomes? How do you measure this stuff?

Ms Dent: There are truckloads of education research out there, and that is exactly what the academics keep saying. One of the big ones was learning to read at five and learning to read at seven. There was a longitudinal study in New Zealand that shows that by the time you are 11 and 12, there is no difference. That is two whole years of childhood. We do know some of our children are ready by four and five. One of the other concerns today, not as much in WA, although I am noticing more and more of them popping up, are the businesses that do tutoring for two-year-olds. There is a part of me that looks in that—I have worked a lot around, when I was counselling full time, teenagers who want to kill themselves. There is this spark that goes out in them. But what we need to do in childhood is ensure the spark is light and strong. That is what my worry is—we do have serious concerns with the number of our teenagers who are struggling with mental illness, and they are only the ones who have come to clinical attention. Self-harm has increased enormously; we now have boys self-harming. New research has come out saying boys as young as six to 10 are now hurting themselves intentionally. These are the canaries at the bottom of the coal mine that says, “Hey, listen, we really need to take some serious steps.”

My very first thing—I would have to be Prime Minister to do that, though—is to just completely get rid of NAPLAN, use all the money that that was using to invest into our early years wonderful educators in years 1 and 2, to help the children who have been identified. They know the children who are struggling. We have not got the resources or the time to invest in that. The money needs to come from the federal government so that WA can make sure they have that, and then in terms of that just delay everything 12 months, because we are finding that at the other end, we have these almost unemployable adolescents who do not have life skills, social skills. They struggle to answer telephones without going, “Yo.” This is not going to be helpful in a workplace environment, not that we are raising children to be part of the workforce, but we are raising children to become effective contributors to our world. I do not think what we are doing at the moment is really allowing us to do that. When we had less pressure, less accountability in terms of delivering a curriculum, more flexibility to actually work with children, whoever they were in that time frame, the relationships are more authentic. You have a really, really strong chance to inspire and encourage children who feel disillusioned. We do not have time for that now and I think we are disillusioning most of our brightest kids. The top end are always going to do well, absolutely always, but I am looking at the ones in the middle. Because what happens with NAPLAN, it focuses on lifting the bottom to here, but it is not helping this go to there and it is certainly not helping our bright kids. That is another concern. There is just not enough time with testing to be able to do all those things. I think we needed—to be honest, this is a bit controversial—to have NAPLAN for a few years to have a little look about where we were nationally and I think some schools needed a good kick in the backside to get their understanding of that up, but now it has become a statistically invalid test because it is uneven goalposts. Some start at four and a half and five with their kindy kids ready for NAPLAN; others do two or three tests a year, they are in year 3. That is not the same thing. Does that make sense?

I am also concerned that we are asking children sometimes in our NAPLAN literacy test to do things that I could not teach year 10 students to do. Writing persuasively is a really complex writing task

and we are expecting eight-year-olds to do that. At the end of the day, teachers were already assessing. We need to respect and value them and give them the resources they need to deliver for the children who need the support that they can get it. I would have to be Prime Minister to make that one go I think. Just like, one day, radically stand up and do what Jacinda Ardern did and say, “No, we are going to stop testing between our students and we’re just focusing on the student. We are giving teachers the respect they deserve to do the job that they’ve been trained to do.”

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I know that after you were a teacher, you moved into counselling. You have worked extensively with vulnerable children and children who are at risk of self-harm and suicide. You sort of touched on it before about what advice you would give to policy makers about what we can do to better manage this crisis, but to add to that, also in the commissioner’s report, the students themselves identified that they still wanted their parents to be part of their lives, even if that is not what they projected to their parents. I thought the piece that you did the other night kind of tied that all together.

[10.50 am]

Ms Dent: Yes. There is no question that the research shows—I think it was a really big study—that 82 per cent of adolescents really want a good relationship with their parents, even though they are being mean to them. I guess what drives my work is improving understanding—helping parents of young children realise that they are not lousy parents when they have temper tantrums and meltdowns. It is developmentally important in their development. And the same with adolescents—helping parents to understand that they do not just wake up and decide they want to be awful to their parents. Part of my job at the moment is helping parents understand that this is a very different world that they are transitioning to become adults. They had the same fundamental drivers of adolescents that we have always had, which is kind of autonomy, needing to belong, particularly with their own age group, pushing back and claiming more autonomy. They are not very good developing friendships until around 16, so it is a bit like a two-year-old to a four-year-old.

When parents kind of understand that, they can see why some of their choices—like, if you overcontrol in adolescence, like overcontrolling a toddler, you are not developing their capacity to become autonomous individuals. I really think the biggest issue at the moment—and it is interesting, because I think I have 320 or 330 people tonight, including adolescents, at Taming the Stress Monster—is we need to start a lot earlier than adolescence to prepare them to manage stress. That is hugely why I feel if we—you know, the mindfulness programs that are out there and those. It is so funny, isn’t it? Because I started that well before it was a thing—I created calmness in my classrooms before tests. We had opportunities some days just to put your head on the desk and think about what we have just spoken about for half an hour. Little brain breaks help the brain to cope with learning and I do not think we have a really good understanding of the adolescent brain, given it has been raised in a digital world where they have got so many things going on. The destructive impact of poor boundaries: by the time adolescence comes, if you have not had that relationship, that means you have allowed your child to be heard often; it means that adolescence can be really difficult because they all need to be heard.

One of the things I have just created is a program for schools to build social cohesion and the roles of the importance of a lighthouse, because they have to push back from parents—that is biologically important to push back, even though I like them in the house and can they pick me up and drop me off and give me money when I need it and also cook good food—but that is a safe base that they can return to. Often we can bring our stress from our school into the safe base and that might be where we discharge some of it, sometimes at mum. And that is not always a bad thing. That actually might be a healthy thing so that means I will not have to hurt myself to discharge big ugly feelings.

I think it is almost like not adding to our kids' stress. Only parents—you are the big safe person in their life. But they actually need that significant adult ally that is not mum and dad, and that is what I am doing in the program in schools. Every single adolescent needs a lighthouse in their school environment. If we need to allocate them, we do, but they have got to have somebody who can advocate for them, have a chat to them when they are failing and have a chat to them when they seem to be turning up at student services, instead of always being punished. I wrote a paper on—what was it? Simon Birmingham said, “We will have a zero tolerance to bad behaviour in our school”, and I thought, “Yeah, great. That is going to work!” At the end of the day, no child wants to be badly behaved. So many of the children who struggle and behave really inappropriately have got ACEs—adverse childhood experiences. They are dealing with a really difficult home environment; they may not have been fed. I wanted the notion that says that that one person in a school environment or a couple of them know what is going on in the kid's life and keeps tabs on them to keep them going. There are some schools that are starting to do that. If we can have the allies and the parents kind of keeping tabs a little and have that relationship at the side, then we can guide them through the most challenging time of their life in today's world where getting a text that tells you to go kill yourself is happening—just beyond belief. If I was also Premier for the day, I would ban all schools from having any access for students to phones, from K–12. That gives them five or six hours without being hassled and being able to talk to other children. Number one, that is not going to cost a lot to promote no phones in schools. Brilliant idea. Ban homework to year 6, promote WA as the play capital of Australia, let us make some really big changes. Simple.

The CHAIR: I can see there is going to be some radical changes in some MPs' households.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: It is very telling, though, when, as a parent, my harshest form of punishment is an electronics ban. My daughter got a two-week electronics ban recently because she did not eat two weeks' worth of fruit, so she had no phone, no iPad, no TV.

Ms Dent: How old?

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Eight. She does not actually have her own phone and iPad, but she was not allowed mine.

Ms Dent: That is called “welcome to being a parent”.

The CHAIR: Do we have any other questions?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I could be here all day, but I appreciate you have got other things that you have to do.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I was going to say I could keep you for another hour.

The CHAIR: You have been very generous with your time, Maggie, thank you so much. Is there anything else that you would like to add before we close formally?

Ms Dent: No, I think the only one I wanted to kind of clarify the words of is that it would be lovely if every school in WA was able to create a unique school play policy that is actually in alignment with the NQS and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I think we forget that the UN rights of the child is profoundly important, and asking schools, “Are we doing this? Can we be accountable to this?”, because many of them kind of are, but when we put it right up there, it says, “Where are you in this?” I think it makes sure that we put play right at the centre of not only childhood but also our schooling system. And I would love to see more play opportunities in our high schools.

The CHAIR: We have actually got a reference to the convention in our statutory establishment of the children's commissioner.

Ms Dent: I think I have covered it all, other than there were a few people from country areas to say do not forget them. I am pretty sure that you have been aware that they have been unhappy, and that we need to make sure that they are heard as well.

The CHAIR: I really appreciate that. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 working days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional evidence or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you so much.

Ms Dent: My pleasure.

The CHAIR: You have got a packed schedule while you are here, so it is very generous of you to come and spend some time with us.

Ms Dent: I do.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: We are all devastated you are winding back next year.

Ms Dent: Yes, I am winding back, but it looks like I am going to be—it actually expands the advocacy work and kind of being able to support big initiatives. I think that is important, so let us hope we can keep doing good things. Thank you again for the honour and privilege.

Hearing concluded at 10.58 am
