

They've suffered violence, now these kids need help

Joe Tucci



Violence affects children profoundly. It terrifies them. It overwhelms them. It disrupts how everything works.

Abused children learn that relationships are dangerous. They find it almost impossible to know who to trust. They learn to doubt the motivations of adults around them.

Their belief in others is damaged, often irrevocably.

It is little wonder that abused children give up on relationships. They withdraw from them. They disconnect from them. They learn to protect themselves from getting too close to anyone. They know that they have to survive on their own.

That is why it is so important that we cannot give up on them. And yet we do.

Last week, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People launched a special inquiry into what has been, in government speak, called Alternate Care Arrangements.

It is a particular form of state care that sounds like it should be compassionate, protective and flexible.

In reality, it means there are more than 100 children being cared for in circumstances where they cannot be sure that they will be sleeping in the same bed that they woke up in in the morning. The inquiry will specifically examine why and how there are 26 children living in hotels and motels, 37 living in serviced apartments and 55 in short term rentals such as caravan parks.

All of these children have been removed from their family in order to ensure that they are safe. These are some of the most vulnerable children in our community.

They have all experienced serious



Kids from violent homes need better out-of-home care options

trauma. Some of them have been sexually or physically abused or both. Many of them have been forced to live with family violence. They are all scared. They are all in need of certainty and predictability.

It is hard to believe that living in a motel or caravan park with paid staff meets community expectations of the quality of care that abused children should be provided with.

By now, with all we know about the lifelong effects of complex forms of trauma, the out-of-home care sys-

tem must recognise that permanent, nurturing and stable relationships are the key to supporting children to heal from the hurt of the abuse they have suffered.

The system should not do further harm by subjecting children to environments which are temporary by definition, frequently limit the continuity of carers in their lives and actively fail to support children to continue with their education.

Alternate Care Arrangements have no place in a modern and child

centred state care system. The fact that children are being placed in motels and caravan parks highlights how much of a crisis the out-of-home care system finds itself in.

In 2016, the Tune Report into Out of Home Care in NSW found that it was ineffective and unsustainable. It led to significant investment through the "Their Futures Matter" reforms. But little has changed.

Just last year, another independent review was ordered after two children dubbed Fynn and Lincoln Hughes who, while in state care, were found by a magistrate to have regularly gone hungry and were too cold to attend school because they did not have access to a winter uniform. The out-of-home care system certainly needs ongoing investment. It was a relief that one of the first decisions made by the new state government was to announce an additional \$200 million in funding.

But, it is not only about money. We need to rethink the principles that are built into the very design of out-of-home care.

The system needs to prioritise permanency. Children need to feel that they are worthy of being claimed by people who know them and are prepared to care for them. Being claimed is a deep need inherent in all infants and children. It reassures them that someone will stand up for them when others back away.

The system should be focused on how challenging it is for children to trust again after they have experienced abuse. All out of home care should be therapeutic in its intent and in its execution.

The out-of-home care system needs to be more accountable for the standard of care that is provided to abused children. These children are not for someone else to look after. They belong to all of us, collectively. For that very reason, we should not let our governments think that placing children in motels and caravan parks would ever be acceptable.

Dr Joe Tucci is the CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation