



HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA Inc.

(Reg. No. A0020272M)

Affiliated with the Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS)
and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), London, UK

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National Children's Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001.

INTENTIONAL SELF-HARM AND SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN

SUBMISSION FROM THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC. (HSV)

The Humanist Society of Victoria (HSV) is a secular organisation whose members foster an ethical, rational and responsible approach to life. HSV supports human rights, democratic processes, and a just and inclusive governance.

HSV seeks to alleviate suffering, to promote well-being and the circumstances where all individuals can attain their full potential. It engages in educational and charitable activities.

The views that follow have been formulated at specially convened group discussions to which all HSV members are invited. Further supportive evidence has been obtained from print publications, the Internet, the mass media and from individuals with relevant experience.

The President, Vice-President and Submissions Conveners of the HSV are authorised to present these views.

We congratulate the National Children's Commissioner on their initiative to establish this inquiry.

Humanists uphold the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, both of which place responsibilities upon governments to protect children and their families.

Members of the Humanist Society of Victoria appreciate the opportunity to offer general comments in relation to the following terms of reference:

2. The incidence and factors contributing to contagion and clustering involving children and young people:

Education, Media, Government and the Law:

2a.1. Teachers have everyday interaction with young people who may be at risk, including children who consider copycat behaviour. Educators must be supplied with appropriate curriculum and school support materials, training, and access to emergency welfare services.

2a.2. It is also recommend that universal anti-bullying education (including racist, sexist, homophobic and cyber bullying) and restorative practices be mandated for all primary and secondary schools across Australia.

2a.3. The mass media should provide children with positive role-models who display self-confidence, critical thinking, resilience, and compassion. Children should be taught how to build and maintain empathic social relationships involving intimacy, trust and openness with their close friends and families.

2a.4. The Australian government needs to recognise the potential impact of its political and economic decisions upon the lives and morale of students, children with disabilities or health issues or who live in disadvantaged families; those who are facing poverty or future unemployment prospects, potential homelessness or crime.

2a.5. Religious exemptions in Anti-Discrimination laws simply serve to legitimise and legalise discrimination, bullying and exclusion, which may all contribute to the problem. These exemptions should be abolished.

3. The barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help:

Stigma and fear of “difference”

3a.1. A popular taboo against discussing suicide, self-harm, and mental health issues, may discourage young people from seeking help due to fears of being seen as weak or “different”. This may be particularly so for some adolescents craving peer approval, or for younger children who may feel powerless to challenge family problems.

3a.2. Humanists recommend that avenues for the development of children's self-confidence and resilience – and opportunities for them to seek help for their problems – be promoted in the community.

3a.3. Children need to be taught how to support their friends and to defer appropriately to teachers or counsellors if they recognise danger signs from their friends.

School Chaplains

3b.1. We note increasing Australian government support for school chaplains, to the detriment of professionally qualified, secular counsellors.

3b.2. School chaplains may potentially alienate or misinform young people from diverse sexualities or cultures, especially those who have been traditionally stigmatised or marginalised by religion.

3b.3. We call for school chaplains to be replaced with professional, secular counsellors.

7. The types of programs and practices that effectively target and support children and young people who are engaging in the range of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviours.

7a. Humanists recommend that high risk groups be openly acknowledged and that self-empowerment programs be initiated with members from within those high risk communities. These include:

Some indigenous Australians and others who may live in isolated communities

7b.1. This includes children living in rural or farming communities, and mining towns.

7b.2. Self-empowerment and welfare programs need to be developed and tailored to suit the needs of geographically and/or socially isolated children.

7b.3. These children need appropriate access to health, education, social networks, welfare services, and electronic resources.

Asylum seeker and Refugee children

7c.1. Many independent monitors have identified current Australian practices as negatively impacting the mental health of asylum seekers including children.

7c.2. Humanists ask the Commissioner to call upon the Australian government to abolish the off-shore detention of asylum seekers, and to implement refugee policies and programs which conform to both Australian and international standards of human rights.

Sexuality or Gender-Variant children

7d.1. We ask that the government, mass media, sporting and community leaders be challenged to consider their contribution to this problem. Homophobic language and attitudes can contribute to the problem of social isolation and low self-esteem for young GLBTI adults who may be questioning their self-identity or seeking social acceptance.

7d.2. Positive role models need to be presented in the mass media in order to dispel social invisibility and stigma, to challenge homophobia and to encourage a healthy self-esteem among sexuality or gender-variant children and their families/communities.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse children

7e.1. Welfare and support services should sensitively meet the needs of all communities within our society, and the law should actively protect against bullying and racism.

9. The role, management and utilisation of digital technologies and media in preventing and responding to intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour among children and young people.

9a.1. Humanists recommend that the mass media adopt a code of practice in its treatment of suicide and self-harm, and feature positive role models for those at risk.

9a.2. We also ask the Australian government to investigate ways to fight cyber bullying, and to conduct an anti-bullying campaign online.

Geoff Allshorn
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