



**Creating
a lifetime
of change**



KidsXpress

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**KidsXpress submission Youth Justice &
Child Wellbeing Reform across Australia**



ABOUT US

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I am certain
my son is still
in my life
today
because of
KidsXpress.

Mother of former client

A registered charity, KidsXpress is a specialist children's mental health organisation delivering trauma-focused Expressive Therapy and Education Services to children under the age of 12yrs and their caregivers.

Established in 2005, KidsXpress sought to address the lack of services available to children who were living with the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as neglect, abuse, grief and other types of traumatic events including natural disasters.

Using the therapeutic benefits of art, music, drama and play, our **nationally accredited Expressive Therapy program (AIFS 2015)** supports children towards restored socio-emotional health and wellbeing, while our **NESA accredited (2019) Trauma-Informed Education Services** help build the capacity of educators to better recognise and respond to trauma-impacted children.

Our programs are delivered at our Macquarie Park headquarters and directly onsite at partner schools.

By supporting the child and their caregiving network in tandem, we're addressing the insidious and cumulative effects of ACEs before they become entrenched problems in adulthood and... **creating a lifetime of change.**



1. What factors contribute to children's and young people's involvement in youth justice systems in Australia?

The factors that contribute to children's and young people's involvement in youth justice systems in Australia are complex and multifaceted. Childhood trauma is one of the key factors that has been consistently linked to offending behaviours and involvement in the justice system. Trauma can have a significant impact on a child's developing brain, leading to difficulties with emotion regulation, impulse control, and decision-making, which can contribute to a higher risk of engaging in risky or harmful behaviours. Trauma can also result in a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which can make it harder for young people to cope with stressors and challenges.

Poverty and social disadvantage are also significant factors that contribute to children's and young people's involvement in the justice system. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience a range of adversities, including unstable housing, food insecurity, and limited access to educational and employment opportunities. These adversities can increase the likelihood of exposure to violence, substance abuse, and criminal activity, which can contribute to offending behaviours.

The lack of access to mental health support is another significant factor that contributes to young people's involvement in the justice system. Mental health issues are prevalent among young people, with up to 1 in 4 young people experiencing a mental health condition in any given year. However, many young people do not receive appropriate support and treatment, which can exacerbate mental health issues and increase the likelihood of offending behaviours.

Access to quality psychological services for infants, children and their families is poor across Australia. Only 20-30% of children who experience a mental health need will access publicly funded mental health services and access is heavily dependent on means and knowledge.

Research has shown that intervening early to address mental ill health in children is vital in promoting positive outcomes and preventing long-term negative consequences such as increased interaction with child protection services and the youth justice system. The best age to start interventions varies depending on the specific mental health issue and the individual child's development, but there is growing evidence to suggest that intervening in the early preschool years is ideal and can have significant positive impacts.

Neuroscience research has demonstrated that the brain undergoes rapid development in the early years of life, with the most significant changes occurring during the first five years. This early period is critical for the formation of neural connections and the development of fundamental cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Mental health issues that arise during this period can have lasting impacts on brain development and functioning, potentially leading to long-term difficulties with learning, behaviour, socialisation and susceptibility to peer influence.

Statistics show that approximately 1 in 7 children and adolescents experience mental ill health, with many mental health issues having their onset in childhood. Early intervention can significantly improve outcomes for these children. In 2015 KidsXpress was investigated through an independent cost benefit analysis conducted by Deloitte Access Economics and found that children aged 4-12yrs experienced an improvement in their wellbeing following participation on our Expressive Therapy program by almost 50% in the first year alone. These benefits included reduced medication usage, fewer appointments to other health professionals, but mostly enhanced quality of life for the children and their families.

2. What needs to be changed so that youth justice and related systems protect the rights and wellbeing of children and young people? What are the barriers to change, and how can these be overcome?

To protect the rights and wellbeing of children and young people in the youth justice system, there needs to be a greater focus on prevention and early intervention. This includes addressing the underlying causes of offending behaviours, such as trauma and mental health issues, and providing access to appropriate support services. The following are some of the key changes that need to be made to ensure that youth justice and related systems protect the rights and wellbeing of children and young people:

- a. Invest in prevention and early intervention: Prevention and early intervention programs to children under 12 yrs that address the underlying causes of offending behaviours are critical in reducing the number of children and young people who become involved in the justice system. These programs need to be evidence-based and trauma-informed, and they should prioritise the needs of children and young people who have experienced trauma or are at risk of experiencing trauma. Early intervention for child mental health concerns has been shown to be highly effective in reducing risks and costs, yet 3 out of 4 children with mental health disorders aren't accessing care and few child mental health intervention services are effective. For children with limited language skills and vocabularies, and particularly for those who've been impacted by trauma and family adversity, Expressive Therapy - like the accredited program delivered by KidsXpress (AIFS 2015) is widely recognised as a safe and best practice psychotherapeutic intervention for children.
- b. Provide access to appropriate support services: Access to appropriate support services, including mental health support, drug and alcohol treatment, and family support services, is critical in preventing offending behaviours and reducing the likelihood of children and young people becoming involved in the justice system. These services need to be accessible, culturally appropriate, and responsive to the needs of children and young people and their families.
- c. Shift towards a restorative justice approach: Restorative justice approaches that focus on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships have been shown to reduce reoffending and improve the wellbeing of children and young people. These approaches prioritise the needs and wellbeing of children and young people and aim to address the underlying causes of offending behaviours.

The barriers to change are complex and include a lack of resources, systemic issues such as racism and discrimination, and a focus on punitive rather than restorative justice. When young people feel that they are being unfairly punished or discriminated against, they may become disengaged from society and more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. This is especially true for young people who have experienced trauma or other forms of adversity, as punitive measures can trigger or exacerbate their trauma and lead to further disengagement from society.

Secondly, punitive measures can deteriorate youth mental health by increasing feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and depression. Incarceration, in particular, can have a significant negative impact on mental health, as it can lead to a loss of identity, social support, and sense of purpose. This can exacerbate existing mental health issues and lead to the development of new mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. And so the cycle continues.

Finally, punitive measures in youth justice systems can undermine the potential for rehabilitation and positive outcomes for young people. Research has shown that punitive measures are often ineffective in

reducing reoffending and that restorative justice approaches that focus on rehabilitation and addressing the underlying causes of offending behaviours are more effective in promoting positive outcomes.

3. Can you identify reforms that show evidence of positive outcomes, including reductions in children's and young people's involvement in youth justice and child protection systems, either in Australia or internationally?

There are several reforms that have shown evidence of positive outcomes in reducing children's and young people's involvement in youth justice and child protection systems, both in Australia and internationally. These include:

- a. Trauma-informed care: Trauma-informed care is an approach that recognises the impact of trauma on a person's mental health and wellbeing and seeks to create a safe and supportive environment that promotes healing and recovery. A trauma-informed approach is essential in reducing reoffending and improving the wellbeing of children and young people in the justice system. Trauma-informed care recognises the pervasive impact of trauma on individuals and emphasises the need for compassionate, safe, and empowering care. Trauma can disrupt the development of key brain regions and systems that are essential for regulating emotion, forming healthy relationships, and managing stress, leading to a range of mental health issues and behavioural challenges.

In children and young people, trauma can manifest as difficulties with emotion regulation, impulsivity, aggression, and self-harm. These behaviours can lead to involvement in the justice system, and punitive approaches can further exacerbate the trauma and mental health challenges that these children face, leading to an increased likelihood of reoffending.

In contrast, a trauma-informed approach emphasises the need for compassionate, strengths-based care that is grounded in the principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. By providing children and young people with a sense of safety and control, trauma-informed care can help to regulate the stress response and promote the development of key brain regions and systems that are essential for healthy emotional functioning, relationship-building, and adaptive coping.

Research has demonstrated that trauma-informed approaches in justice settings can reduce reoffending and improve outcomes for children and young people. For example, a study by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network found that children and young people who received trauma-informed care had significantly lower rates of reoffending than those who received traditional punitive approaches. Similarly, a meta-analysis of trauma-focused interventions for justice-involved youth found that these interventions were effective in reducing mental health symptoms, behavioural problems, and reoffending.

Trauma-informed care is one of the main tenets of KidsXpress.

b. Family and community-based programs: Family and community-based programs that focus on building caregiving capacity, strengthening relationships and providing support to children and young people and their families have been shown to reduce offending behaviours and improve outcomes for children and young people in the justice system.

More specifically, parenting programs that teach attachment theory can be highly effective in building caregiving capacity for parents, enhancing children's mental health, and reducing future interactions with the youth justice and criminal systems. Attachment theory suggests that early relationships between children and their caregivers play a crucial role in shaping the child's psychological and emotional development.

Parenting programs that incorporate attachment theory such as Circle of Security and Tuning into Kids (two programs we deliver at KidsXpress) focus on promoting secure attachment between parents and their children by teaching parents about the importance of positive parent-child interactions, building trust, providing emotional support, and creating safe and stable environments for children. Such programs can help parents to understand the needs of their children, build their capacity to provide responsive care, and improve their communication skills, all of which are essential for building healthy parent-child relationships.

Research has shown that parenting programs that incorporate attachment theory can be highly effective in reducing the risk of child maltreatment, improving parenting skills and building caregiving capacity for parents. For instance, a study by the Centre for Parent and Child Support found that a parenting program that focused on attachment theory resulted in a significant improvement in parenting skills and reductions in child maltreatment rates. Research has consistently shown that a history of childhood maltreatment is a significant risk factor for involvement in the criminal justice system. A study by Widom and Maxfield (2001) found that individuals who were abused or neglected as children were more likely to be arrested, charged, and convicted of a crime than individuals who did not experience maltreatment. Similarly, a study by Wilson, Stover, and Berkowitz (2009) found that childhood maltreatment was a significant predictor of involvement in the juvenile justice system.

It is important to note that the link between childhood maltreatment and involvement in the criminal justice system is not deterministic, and many children who experience maltreatment do not go on to become involved in the justice system. However, addressing childhood maltreatment and supporting children who have experienced maltreatment can be an important step in preventing involvement in the criminal justice system and promoting positive outcomes for children and families.

c. Diversionary programs: Diversionary programs that offer alternative pathways to justice, such as drug and alcohol treatment or community service, have been shown to reduce reoffending and improve outcomes for children and young people in the justice system.

d. Education and employment programs: Education and employment programs that provide young people with the skills and opportunities they need to succeed have been shown to reduce the likelihood of offending behaviours and improve outcomes for young people in the justice system.

4. From your perspective, are there benefits in taking a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform in Australia? If so, what are the next steps?

There are significant benefits to taking a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform in Australia. A national approach would ensure consistency and coherence in the delivery of support services and justice interventions for children and young people across the country. It would also facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practice and enable a more coordinated and effective response to the underlying causes of offending behaviours.

The next steps in taking a national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform in Australia include:

a. Developing a national strategy: The development of a national strategy that sets out the priorities, goals, and actions needed to improve outcomes for children and young people in the justice system is critical. The strategy should be informed by evidence and the experiences of children, young people, and their families.

b. Ensuring adequate resourcing: Adequate resourcing is critical to the success of any national approach to youth justice and child wellbeing reform. This includes investment in prevention and early intervention programs, access to appropriate support services, and the development of effective diversionary programs.

c. Fostering collaboration and partnership: Collaboration and partnership between government, non-government organisations, and the community are critical to the success of a national approach. This includes engaging with children, young people, and their families and ensuring that their voices are heard in the development and implementation of policies and programs.

d. Monitoring and evaluation: Monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and programs are critical in ensuring that they are achieving the desired outcomes. This includes collecting data and evidence to inform policy development and ensuring that policies and programs are responsive to the needs of children and young people and their families.

e. Greater support of community organisations: Supporting community charities who work at the coalface of some of society's biggest issues is vital because they are often the first point of contact for individuals and families who are experiencing challenges and difficulties. Charities like KidsXpress are well-placed to understand the unique needs and challenges facing their communities, and they can provide tailored and responsive support to meet those needs. They've built trust with community leaders and overcome cultural, social and language barriers. They also play an important role in filling gaps in service provision and supporting individuals and families who may fall through the cracks of larger systems and institutions. And they are a wealth of knowledge, often overlooked by decision makers.

f. Creating school centralised hubs: Creating school centralised hubs offering mental health support is crucial for reducing children's involvement in crime through prevention and early intervention. These hubs provide a safe and accessible space within the familiar environment of schools, allowing children aged 4-12 years to access the mental health support they need. By integrating mental health services into schools, we can effectively address the underlying emotional and psychological challenges faced by children impacted by trauma and mental ill-health. Early identification and intervention are vital in preventing the escalation of mental health issues that can contribute to criminal behaviour later in life. The presence of centralised hubs in schools ensures timely and convenient access to professional support, fostering a proactive approach to mental well-being. By empowering children with the tools and resources to cope with their emotions, manage stress, and build resilience, these hubs not only promote positive mental health but also equip children with the necessary skills to make better choices, avoid risky behaviours, and ultimately reduce their involvement in crime.