

MEDIA RELEASE

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RESPONDING TO YOUTH CRIME – THE ANGLICARE NT APPROACH

Over the last few months there has been much public discussion about youth crime, particularly in Alice Springs and Palmerston. Much of the discussion has been focussed on victims of crime and takes a ‘tough on crime’ approach.

At Anglicare NT, we understand the impact on victims, but we are also committed to supporting lasting change through professional and evidence-based approaches that work with young people.

In our work with young people, we start from the premise that there is no such thing as a bad child. Does a baby who cries because of an unmet need get labelled a ‘bad baby’? The cries are neither convenient nor pleasant. The cries are a call to action and lead us not to blame the baby or discipline her, but to meet the need that caused it.

As a child gets older, things become more complex. We assume the child has the freedom and responsibility to make choices. It is often their ‘choices’ that don’t agree with our values, and elicit our judgement that they are bad children. Young people do have more freedom and responsibility as they develop from babies to adults. But they do not have the same abilities as an adult, no matter how much they look like or act like adults, and even less so if their development has been hampered by trauma, poverty, violence, health issues, addiction and other social disadvantages.

Meet one of our young people with a history of trauma and unmet developmental needs:

“Mum and dad have always dumped me since I was small. No-one’s there for me, no one cares for me. I wish I didn’t exist, I’m unwanted, I was a mistake, that’s why mum and dad don’t want me. Mum only cares about grog. Mum and everyone around me is mad and a mess. They all just drink their life away, they get beat up by their men and then one of them gets locked up. What kind of life is that?! I look after myself, I’ve always looked after myself. I don’t need anyone. I went to hospital because, well... I didn’t want to let myself die. I really hate my life. Honest. And I hate this place, I want to get out of this town. Honest.”

This young person’s experience of the world has been shaped by instability and an absence of any consistent, attuned and nurturing adults. Her parents both used alcohol and extreme violence, and her network of safe and caring adults was compromised as a result.

Mostly these young people regularly express that they want to do the right thing. But when you have very limited choices, the routine of time in detention looks appealing. And three meals a day with a place to sleep feels like a place to belong – even with the reputation of our juvenile detention centres.

These young people must have their real needs met. They don’t need smart phones or branded shoes. Their needs are survival needs, emotional and human needs. Their behaviours are their cries for the things they need to survive: the more desperate the needs, the louder the screams.

Of course young people’s crimes are not acceptable in our community and must be addressed. We’re advocating that they are addressed in an effective and meaningful way.

By Chris Warren, Intensive Youth Support Service Program Manager and David Pugh, CEO, Anglicare NT

FOR COMMENTS OR INTERVIEWS

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