

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find below a letter submitted to the "inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians"

Please let me know if you need any more information.

Sincerely  
Susan George

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2009

Re: Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians with reference to

- perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians;
- links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians;
- the relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians;
- social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians; and
- strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.

Dear Committee ,

I wish to make comment on the inquiry investigating violence by young Australians and strategies that can help reduce youth problems. I find that there are 2 main necessities to reduce violence among young people.

1. Encourage, empower and educate parents:

Parent's need to be released into more positive relationships with their children. They need to know how to set boundaries and discipline as well as have fun with their children.

- With discipline parent's need to be educated and equipped to use a variety of strategies that communicate behavioural boundaries and consequences for breaking them that will help the child learn not to break the boundary again. A small minority of the population do not appear to know the first thing about how to treat children with respect and in such a way that they come to behave properly. Parent's need to be given a DVD or booklet on basic discipline when they give birth.

- lop-sided, ill conceived legislation that leaves good parent's terrified of false accusation of abuse or neglect (powerless to defend themselves and their children against malicious allegations of abuse), or impotent for setting behavioural boundaries and enforcing consequences (i.e. smacks) needs to be changed to ensure parents are empowered and not prevented from being effective parent's who raise well-balanced law abiding, ethical citizens.
- Those who believe the smack should be outlawed need to remember that the cultural greeting of the “hi-5” often exerts far more physical “violence” on the child than a smack. We are most certainly not “assaulting” a child when we greet them in this manner; neither are we “assaulting” them when we discipline them and use a smack to effectively communicate a boundary that they need to learn for the good of self and society. Of course in one context the child may smile and in the other cry but we exert the same force upon them.
- Those who believe all children, in all situations, at all ages, for all reasons learn only from one disciplinary method (e.g. an intellectual “reasoning” and “reflection” on behaviour) need to take a broader perspective on the reality of what contemporary scholarship shows about the diversity of learning styles, and child's abilities for abstract thought about their behaviour and situations. Parent's need a whole toolkit to draw upon for bringing their child to absolute well-being. Legislation must not intrude so deeply into the individual's life that parents are prevented from raising their child; nor assume all children benefit from a high level of reflective reasoning about behaviour at very young ages. Most are unable to engage in such even as adults. Children need to see a consequence for bad behaviour and all parent's aided to help teach such.
- We also need to listen to the child's voice. If we are to engage in authoritative parenting – not authoritarian – then we are to involve children and respect their wishes – not do them the violence of imposing yet more adult-initiated legislation that further undermines their autonomy. Many children ask for a smack as their form of discipline when they have violated boundaries. We must respect their choice in setting boundaries and determining consequences; not impose and disrespect their opinions.
- Those who believe the smack is responsible for all the violence in society and that physical discipline is to blame for young people's problems have (a) disregarded virtually all other issues that bear upon a young person's behaviour - young people do not become violent criminal thugs because they were disciplined with a smack, or given the “hi-5” ; they also (b) take a narrow and negative focus on the parent-child relationship, forgetting that parent's need not only to learn how to discipline but also need to be released to have positive fun times with children. All discipline is more effective when the basic relationship bond is there and children like and respect their parents. Rather than telling parent's what not to do, tell them and aid them, to foster the child's respect and have fun together as the flip side of the government trying to micro-manage details of a particular parent-child discipline situation.

Parent's also need to be released to have fun and build relationship with their children. Workplace pressures and children's own busy-ness explain some of the “lack of time”

that families have – and there are many ways workplaces can be more family-friendly - but societal attitudes to parent-child relationship also need broadening. “Child-friendly” has come to mean parent and child go their separate ways with the child taken to separate programs, spaces and activities “segregated” from normal community and society, instead of being “integrated” into it through the expectation that parent and child belong together. We perceive children as “different” even inferior, developmentally limited and in need of separate age-appropriate intellectual environments; we miss the reality that adults and children have much in common – not least the need for relationship – and are equals as people.

There are few programs in society that do plan for parent-child building relationship (other than perhaps the playgroup or the Christian Mothers-of-Preschoolers program). Once children start school we certainly do not “program” nor stimulate parent-child togetherness. We need more social opportunities for and promotion of “family-friendly” activities. We need to understand that childcare alone and peer-based education alone, do not meet the child's need for socialisation. Peers cannot replace parents, although there is an unspoken myth that children need peers more. Most children – from “good” socio-economic backgrounds - know nothing like the healthy relationship that they should enjoy with their parents. Do all you can to lead and stimulate parents and children learning, growing, having fun and being together in positive family relationships.

## 2. “Integrate” children and young people with society; don't “segregate” them from it

Many young people are often very isolated from society. After many years of peer-based socialisation, in extremely impoverished narrow social environments, devoid of more mature influences or family, young people are highly “segregated” from society and normal community. Many social problems arise from children who are “isolated” among peers: from violence and crime, to alcohol and substance abuse; suicide; promiscuity and unwanted disease, to teenage pregnancy, and a repeated cycle of parents' ill-equipped to bring children to well-being.

We think that childcare and schools meet young people's needs for healthy socialisation. They do not. The lack of generational diversity; mature role models; mentors; family and significant “connection” beyond the peer group leaves the young person in an impoverished environment, lost in a world filled with immature others. The richness of social relationships that they might have known in normal community are lost; intimate, on-going nurturing adult/parent relationships are replaced with fickle acceptance by peers; while they are denied connection with wider society. The child suffers in a myriad of ways when confined to impoverished social environments, devoid of role models. Youth so abandoned often come to find belonging in youth gangs with exclusive membership and intense rivalry leading to violence.

Extreme peer-based worlds merely perpetuate the generation-gap – and all its harmful influences on individuals, workplaces and society. They teach young people that they do not belong in adult society; have no place; no value; no role; no connection with it or to anyone in it. Society is irrelevant to them and they to it. Young people in the youth sub-culture are “separate” from society in dress; fashion; music; values; beliefs and more. Many sub-cultures have “dark images” of death; suicide; anarchy and rebellion against the adult world that has rejected youth so intensely. For years we have stimulated age-appropriate social isolation for education or care, and the child's relational, emotional and social needs for belonging in adult community are not met. This must be changed.

In contrast when young people are “integrated” with society – even minimally through intergenerational learning initiatives as have been trialled in America – crime is reduced and outcomes for children “at risk” improved. Children come to have a sense of identity in the adult world – not some artificial sub-culture in which they are “trapped” for many years. Peer pressures – positive and negative – are just that, pressures to conformity that are intensified by the developmental immaturity, homogeneity and social isolation of groups of young people cut-off from society and normal community. Young people need opportunity to discover their adult identity in society; find belonging and acceptance in society and positive mature role models and mentors from outside their peer group. Currently they look to famous figures in sports or music to inspire beyond their peer group, but these artificial, public images portrayed are a far cry from the real, personal role models who can inspire the young person on a daily basis.

Children and young people need adults to lead the way in over-coming the decades of generation-gap that have assaulted society since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; through programs and initiatives that expect generational diversity to be the norm, not impoverished peer-based environments. Adults – including parents – have to open their lives to children and young people. There needs to be an increased expectation that young people and children are a part of society - connected to people within it and contributing to it. Preventing the social isolation of children and young people among their peers is the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reverse the imbalance generated from 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To reduce the negative social impact of extreme peer-based socialisation on young people society would benefit from:

- Schools presenting themselves as, and being, communities of mixed ages – of parents and friends and extended family members; having a social life beyond the peer-based classrooms that so isolate children from normal community. Schools need to promote positive parent-child relationships; and remind parents that peers are just one ingredient of healthy socialisation and education. We have come to rely upon peer-based education in so many ways;

and its isolation of children and young people is causing society many problems.

- Schools stimulating the wider engagement of children in society through “volunteer” programs that encourage children and young people to both (a) overcome the barriers of generation and (b) take up some responsible role in society. From caring and visiting the elderly; to undertaking some environmental improvement; assisting the disabled or serving refreshment. Children and young people – as their age and ability allow – need to engage with society, play a useful role and take pride in the role.
- Schools need to take seriously moral and ethical education – implicit and explicit – of children. All children need sound example and older children need to understand the levels of moral reasoning that guide their actions; and to see how the consequences of all their actions will morally impact self, others and society. Young people need a moral ethic that is more than irresponsible hedonistic pleasure seeking. We currently have about two psychological theories on the child's moral development and woefully neglect this dimension of education (and research), yet want law-abiding citizens to mysteriously emerge from schools.
- Schools need to utilise intergenerational learning programs – where seniors and school children are brought together to build relationship and share a skill, or knowledge – from the arts, dancing and craft; to science, computers and technology. Such programs must focus on individual relationship building. We must move away the pinnacle of education being many school children served by a single teacher in classrooms or elsewhere. Children need to be released into relationship, away from peers (but under wider protective scrutiny), and given the chance to learn from personal dialogue in real situations from real people.
- Children and young people need a positive purpose that guides them to build up Australia with almost “religious” fervour; renewing patriotism, giving them a “cause” and channelling potential to positive outcomes, away from hedonistic pursuit that all too often ends in destruction of self and wider society. Children need a “spiritual life” and for Australia to take up its legal obligation, made when it signed the 1989 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, to facilitate children's “spiritual development”. We currently ignore it, or assume that religion somehow is the same thing as “spiritual well-being”. It is not. Children need their moral and ethical life nurtured; their sense of connection and relationship fostered and their perspectives of something “bigger than them” opened.
- While we are transitioning to positive, more diverse communities of mixed ages, there needs to be formal and informal mentoring systems available for all young people to help them make connections with the adult world - a sort of social worker “buddy” available to all children to help transition to work or study, the next year at school or other; currently drug pushers are more personally interested in young people than members of any institution of society. They are waiting at the school gates when the rest of society has abandoned these children.

In tandem with these ways of integrating children and young people with normal adult society – and so alleviating the social problems caused by the implicit “segregation” of the young – there needs to be a new way of dealing with young offenders.

- Young offenders need tough penalties and those adults who also destroy society through violence; drug and substance abuse; theft, vandalism and other crime also need penalty that is (a) strong enough to discourage the undesired behaviour - and not all citizens use high level abstract reasoning to reflect on and modify behaviour; and (b) which is “reforming” and relieves the aggression – not compounds it – either from physical outlets that exhaust the violence or from counselling that helps resolve psychological issues that create it.
- Police need a presence in schools – friendly visits - to let children know that they are there; that certain standards of behaviour apply; that there will be consequences for not abiding by the laws of society and that they are there to help when you are victims of violence. They need to have a presence not just for the older children (who have already formed their opinions about the police) but for the youngest children still in pre-school and early primary years. Sometimes it appears children are left with the impression that there are no restraints and society is just like the dysfunctional home where parents let you do anything. From early ages they need to know that there is a world beyond their family (and school) to which they can turn, and to which they have responsibilities and will receive consequences from. We may not go as far as the State of Texas and issue the death penalty for a child, but that is why we signed the 1989 Convention on children's rights and why American did not, because it still legitimises the state's execution of a child if they commit a crime. We affirm the child's basic right to life in all cases except the unborn child; here we still deem it acceptable that the child is killed with the state sanctioning the ultimate violence against the most defenceless of human beings. It is an absurd situation that these children can be murdered by the state and yet a parent cannot smack a child with a wooden spoon.
- Young offenders who are violently disposed would especially benefit from “physical” means of outworking aggression - from tending community gardens, to manually working the land to produce their own food. Hard physical work relieves stress, exhausts aggression and channels energy into constructive (and necessary) tasks. Too many labour saving devices and machines cause frustration and leave no purpose other than pleasure seeking (e.g. drug abuse etc.). Prisons often only intensify aggression, rather than providing a relief. They certainly don't transform a self-focused individual into one who wishes to serve society's highest interests (i.e. to attain the highest level of moral reasoning that directs action).

There are many other societal factors that contribute to “adult” violence.

- We need to understand the effect that urban spaces have upon stress and aggression. Society can be “calmed” through the introduction of greener environments; more space (not less) in gardens; better transport and reduced need for commuting; Urban landscapes dominated by cars; people stressed in

traffic; running late; busy and annoyed, frustrated in reaching their minor daily goals add to the “stress” and “rage” that society at large suffers.

- When media portrays violence it ought to be done with great care, making it clear deviant uses of force are unhealthy, socially abnormal and unacceptable ways of resolving personal issues. Currently certain uncontrolled violent outlets (such as swearing) are portrayed as normal and we end up shaping society - especially through television media - rather than reflecting it. Media does shape society; and given it has such a power we need to use it to show individuals who are more in control of their thoughts, words and actions.
- Violent computer games, music and other culturally acceptable – but questionable – expressions of violence and aggression need to be given higher “ratings”; and reduced general exposure in society. Children and young people need to be shown alternative constructive outlets for energy: especially sports and physical exercise, over violent video games and other inactive pastimes that leave them non-active, frustrated,unsatisfied,without purpose and imbalanced.
- Alcohol needs to be taxed, taxed and taxed again, to reduce its consumption and raise revenues to help deal with the social problems it causes. It needs to be harder to get, and clubs and venues that promote hedonistic pleasure seeking also taxed, taxed and taxed again to fund sports and community groups that help young people lead responsible, law abiding, lives that are creative, enjoyable and positive for others – not just themselves.

I thank you for your consideration of these factors that impact children and young people in society, and urge you to attend to the “integration” of children and young people into society and the stimulation of the parent-child relationship. As you undertake these two important actions you will help alleviate the generation gap; reduce crime and many social problems and embark on the first significant step of Australia's commitment to the 1989 United Nations protocol on the rights of a child, in the area of ensuring the child's right to “spiritual development”. No member state yet takes seriously their commitment to children and young people in this “non-material” dimension; yet it is foundational, the key to unlock young people's potentials and the nation's ability to thrive.

Sincerely

Dr. Susan E. George