

Submission

No 106

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

Organisation: Saint Mary's High School

Name: Ms Erin Skamp

Position: Student Counsellor

Telephone: 02 6662 2255

Date Received: 10/09/2008

Saint Mary's High School
P.O. Box 236
Canterbury Street
Casino
NSW 2470

Phone:
(02) 6662 2255

Parliamentary Committee for Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney
NSW 2000

3 September, 2008

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing this submission on behalf of Saint Mary's High School. It has been authorised by the Deputy Principal of the school, Mr. John Hamilton.

It has come to my attention as a school counsellor, on the North Coast of New South Wales, that children and young people between 9-14 years of age are wanting and needing mental health support beyond the counselling services that are offered at their schools. I am particularly aware that children and young people in this age group are wanting to have more choice about the adult/s from which they can seek professional emotional support. They have also expressed the desire to have adults in their lives who are simply willing to *listen* to them, not only diagnose and medically treat their presenting problems. Children and young people in my local community have also expressed the need to share their personal problems with adults who are familiar to them.

I have observed a gap in the mental health services available to children and young people between 9-14 years of age on the North Coast of New South Wales. This gap can be best described as the lack of mental health professionals, beyond the school environment, available to children and young people who are *not* classified as being in a state of 'crisis'. As a result of this gap, many children and young people do not receive the support they need to *prevent* them from reaching a crisis point. It is my fear that these children and young people are the individuals who sometimes choose to escape their problems through self harm and suicide.

In light of the above, I am proposing that counselling centres be created within the actual neighbourhoods that children and young people live. This would mean that they could 'drop in' to seek support from qualified counsellors on their way home from school (between 3-6 pm) and on the weekends (between 9am- 5pm). Such centres would aim to be the equivalent of the 'wise old man or woman' that children and young people may have once visited in their local neighbourhood, when families were more community orientated and not so obsessed with individualism and independence.

In the hope of expressing the purpose of these counselling centres to children and young people, they could be called "Listen Up!". In order to meet the need 9-14 year olds have to be listened to, it would be most suitable for such centres to employ professionals with specific training in counselling and/or pastoral care (as opposed to only being trained in psychology). In addition to providing conventional forms of counselling, art and music therapy would also be effective and dynamic forms of support to offer children and young people of this age group. Furthermore, mental

health professionals with an openness to discussing spirituality would greatly assist children and young people as they begin to explore some of the bigger questions about the meaning of life.

In addition to the above, it would help to educate the parents of children and young people about the actual process and purpose of counselling, and its benefits. This would hopefully prevent such parents from developing a negative attitude to the services that “Listen Up” centres could offer to their family. Furthermore, when parents have a more positive understanding about the objectives and outcomes of counselling, they are more likely to encourage their children to access it for themselves.

It is my hope that when the psychological needs of children and young people are being met, they are more able to reach their full potential as human beings in this life. It is for this reason that I hope you are able to respond to the needs of children and young people in my local area by providing them with greater access to counselling and therapy services beyond their school environment. Furthermore, if counselling services are offered to children and young people in the wider community, I will know that the students who do not visit me as a school counsellor still have a hope of receiving help when they need it most.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission.

Yours sincerely,
Erin Skamp.