

Youth Justice Reform Select Committee inquiry into youth justice reform in Queensland

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Submitted by: [REDACTED]
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I have spent most of my working life working in child protection, intensive family support and training/assessing foster carers to provide out of home care. Neuroscience is clear about the importance of the first three to five years of life. The developing brain works from the bottom (brain stem) up (pre-frontal cortex). We know that chronic neglect and abuse can lead to anatomical abnormalities in the brain, as well as problems with connectivity and function. Adverse childhood experiences are accumulative. The two categories are household dysfunction (substance abuse, parental separation/divorce, mental illness, domestic violence and criminal behavior) and childhood abuse (psychological, physical, sexual and neglect). These events exert a powerful cumulative effect on human development. The current approach fails high risk children. We recreate the chaos, fragmentation, trauma and neglect these children have experienced in their homes. The question is not what is wrong with these children but what has happened to them. The so-called "therapeutic detention" approach is a myth. A 17-year-old boy in the juvenile justice system only has the relational skills of a 3-year-old. To expect this boy to function well in a group setting or detention environment is unrealistic. Bruce Perry, an American psychiatrist, developed the neuro-sequential model of therapy whereby matching the correct therapeutic activities to the specific development stage and physiological needs of maltreated or traumatized children is the key to success. Transforming care principles (safety, connection, co-regulation) need to be taught to caregivers including detention centre staff. More funding needs to go towards community organizations to support the first three years of life.