



Speech by

JULIE ATTWOOD

Member for MOUNT OMMANEY

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DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES

Mrs ATTWOOD (Mount Ommaney—ALP) (6.31 p.m.): I rise to speak about the great things this government is doing to tackle the issue of child abuse and to ensure an effective and proactive Department of Families. This government has ensured that this department has adequate funding to meet the cost of much-needed reforms. Child sex abuse respects no social, economic or geographic boundaries. It impacts on the whole community, often with devastating effects. It has been a long-standing problem regardless of which government has been in power. However, there have always been funding shortfalls during past governments.

The findings of a major survey released a few weeks ago into child abuse were extremely concerning. Many Queenslanders might not have seen the Australian Childhood Foundation's report and would be disturbed to learn that a large proportion of the community tolerates violence against children. A staggering one in five of those surveyed did not regard injuring a child as serious enough to merit charging a parent with assault, and almost one in 10 would not support a prison sentence for parents convicted of sexually abusing their child. This demonstrates to me that, despite the media's heavy focus on child abuse in the past two years, large sections of the community still do not accept that violence against children is extremely serious. Others are simply confused.

Almost one in four of those surveyed either did not believe that sex between a 14-year-old girl and an adult is sexual abuse or were uncertain about it. The community must move towards zero tolerance of child abuse. So what is the Beattie government doing to shift public attitudes by raising awareness? In 2000 we developed a child abuse prevention training package, and in May this year we distributed 550,000 copies of a special edition of the *Queensland Families* magazine. Then in June a \$1 million statewide campaign of prevention was announced. This was one of the recommendations from Project Axis—a joint inquiry by the Queensland police and the Queensland Crime Commission into child sexual abuse.

The findings of that inquiry were personally very disturbing, considering that up to 45 per cent of females and 19 per cent of males may have been victims of child sexual abuse during their childhood. Children are most often sexually abused by somebody they know and trust and most often that their parents know and trust. Most child sexual abuse occurs in or close to the child's home. One in five offenders find their victims in organisations they are involved in. About half the victims of child sex abuse never report the abuse to another person.

If you are a parent or responsible for the care and safety of children, you need to be aware of the facts of sexual abuse. Being a member of and visitor to a number of community groups in my area, I understand the importance of being aware of the indicators. We have all learnt in the past decade that child abuse flourishes in darkness and cover-up. Our minister, Judy Spence, has always advocated total open accountability and debate on this issue. For too long the Department of Families has been accused of having a secretive culture. Last year Judy Spence announced in this House the establishment of an information gateway to ensure that the Department of Families becomes open and accountable. A hotline to hear complaints and an independent audit into all of our existing foster-carers was established.

That is why it is essential that this government introduced an awareness campaign to target parents, carers and organisations working with children and young people. Being informed about child protection issues is crucial to preventing child sexual abuse. All allegations should be investigated

because one abused child is one too many. This government is encouraging every member of the community to treat as serious any incidents or suspicions they might have. Child protection is everybody's business.

Through television commercials, radio and newspaper advertisements, information folders as well as advertisements in shopping centres, bus shelters and on buses we hope to raise awareness of sexual abuse, and allow parents and carers to access important information on this issue. The key message of the campaign is, 'Things you need to know', which reflects the importance of an informed community in child sex abuse. Because we cannot be with them every minute of the day, there are things we need to know as a parent or a carer, as a member of a community organisation or as a member of the community in general. Information has been provided to parents, carers and organisations with comprehensive and practical information about child sex abuse. The Project Axis recommendations highlighted the need to increase awareness generally and to more effectively inform organisations working with children and young people about dealing with child sexual abuse issues.

I have outlined a number of measures that this government has been taking to ensure that the community is equipped to be on the lookout for situations of child abuse; that they know how to handle these cases; and, finally, that the government can deal effectively with this information to prevent tragedy.

Time expired.