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Removing problem kids not the solution

Tony Pietropiccolo

Concerned: The issues Karl O'Callaghan raises about juvenile behaviour are not new.

n his comments at the weekend on juvenile justice and the need to hold parents to account for their actions, Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan raises some important social issues. His concern for the present and future wellbeing of children is well founded.

There is a relatively small percentage of families in which parents do not look after children as one would wish or expect. This can result in children becoming involved in petty crime and other antisocial activities.

The issues that the commissioner raises are not new. A number of years ago the Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008 gave a number of government departments the ability to apply to the Children's Court for Responsible Parenting Orders.

The Act was an attempt to deal with the lack of support, guidance and supervision provided by some parents to their children. At the time, the community felt that something needed to be done to deal with parents who did not show adequate responsibility towards their children.

This legislation is still in place but is used infrequently. My assumption is that this is because it is largely ineffectual to deal with the issues it was intended to resolve. The difficulties that lead to children's "misbehaviour" are not resolved by short-term parenting programs or imposing fines on parents.

So, is the solution to remove children from households where they do not receive adequate support or protection? The number of children being removed from the care of their parents is increasing and has been for years. In my experience there is no

reluctance on the part of child protection authorities to remove children from unhealthy and dangerous situations.

However, there is a great deal of caution in this work. This comes from years of hard evidence that shows that children are best left with their parents even when their home life if not optimal. The potential long-term psychological damage to children removed from their families must always be carefully considered.

It is true that greater care options are needed but they will need to be thoughtfully and sparingly used.

Removing children from their homes may have short-term benefits but often has long-term negative consequences.

It may be possible to reduce or even stop the antisocial behaviour of very young people by placing them in a supportive, foster home or other environment but it won't necessarily stop their longing to be with family. Feelings of inadequacy and alienation can linger through a lifetime, with personal and societal consequences.

Forcibly removing children from their parents, however well intended, cannot be equated with situations in which parents voluntarily encourage

their children to live elsewhere.

Through the stories told in the Bringing Them Home report and the inquiry into institutional sexual abuse we know the long-term impact that removal from family can have. It is for this reason that every effort is made to reunite children with parents and extended family as soon as it is safe.

If we are to remove children, we first need to make sure we have used every other avenue to resolve their difficulties. The road that leads to unhealthy family situations is often long standing and intergenerational. As a consequence the problems are not easily resolved. It involves slow and painful work.

Ongoing in-house advice, early intervention and other practical supports are the most effective way of intervening.

Unfortunately, the investment in such programs is spasmodic and largely inadequate to bring about the depth and extent of change that we all desperately want.

Until we make this investment we will continue to look for quick fixes.

Tony Pietropiccolo is the director of Centrecare, a leading WA not-for-profit, community services organisation