

## **TALKING POINT - Supporting our children during uncertain times**

March 2020

Many Tasmanians are feeling anxious and uncertain. This is understandable. None of us are really sure how the next few months or maybe more will play out. This uncertainty is very real, perhaps more so than at any other time I can recall, and it's real for our children and young people as well.

Now, more than ever our children need the adults around them to listen to them, to answer their questions, with honesty and openness. This is how we give them as much certainty as possible, in uncertain times.

Indications are, at this stage, that COVID-19 does not cause severe illness in most children. They are, however, indirectly affected, quite significantly. We are trusting our leaders on the advice of public health officials to implement measures necessary to reduce the spread of the disease and to keep some semblance of normality.

They are doing a terrific job. As a result, while most of our children are still attending schools, many of them are not attending after school activities or social events. Sometimes, this is hard for them to understand. Some children and young people are already home from school because their school has closed, or because their parents have taken the decision to keep them home, which they are entitled to do. This is also sometimes hard for children to understand.

Consider COVID-19 for a moment from the perspective of our children and young people. It is dominating every news medium, including social media aimed at young people. But most importantly, it's dominating conversations between adults that our children and young people are listening to. Whether it is their carers, parents, teachers or other adults in their lives, everyone is talking about Covid-19, or washing their hands, or using terms like 'social distancing', 'flattening the curve', 'self-isolating' and 'protecting our grandparents.

It's only natural that children and young people are listening; they're often worrying, and they're questioning the world they live in right now. This is particularly the case for children and young people who are vulnerable.

I recently asked some children within my own networks if they had any questions about COVID-19. The response was quite staggering. More than 80 questions



rolled in almost immediately, by video and text message from children as young as four. Questions included:

- When will all this end?
- How many grandparents will die?
- What can I do to make a positive difference?
- Will schools close? How long for?
- Where did Covid-19 come from?
- Will I have to isolate and if I do, how long will that be for?
- Why is everyone wearing masks?
- Can I still play at the playground?

These are valid questions deserving of respectful answers that are in a language that our children and young people can understand. When they are well informed children can actively participate and be a part of the solution.

My strong view is that honest communication from parents and carers is best. Validate your children's concerns and let them know you're listening.

Over coming days and weeks I will be working with public health officials and the government to directly answer children's questions.

Also, our response to this situation is constantly changing – it must, as our public health officials are continually considering whether our social distancing measures should be further stepped up. While at the time of writing, this is not required, there may come a time that schools are required to close and we should be prepared for that, just in case.

If schools do close we must carefully consider what that might mean for the wellbeing of all children – particularly those who are our most vulnerable. Sadly, for some children in Tasmania, their school is their place of comfort and safety, where their friends and supports are, where they are sometimes even fed and clothed. If this is removed from their lives due to Covid-19, we must have an alternative plan in place to support them and their families. That plan needs to be in place now.

The impacts of our response to this outbreak will last in the hearts and minds of our children and young people for generations to come. By bringing them with us on this journey, we will set our society up on a more sustainable footing for managing events.

**Leanne McLean, Commissioner for Children and Young People**

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