A focus on ECE



Last month, early childhood education (ECE) teachers were invited to participate in the SSTUWA's first ECE Forum for 2023.

The afternoon event focused on supporting the safety, development, well-being and bright future of young people.

Participants heard from Dr Kay Ayre from Edith Cowan University (ECU) and the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Jacqueline McGowan-Jones (pictured, left to right).

The Commissioner has a long working history in education, child protection and First Nation affairs. Jacqueline shared an overview of her work and is clearly passionate about the role she undertakes.

When Jacqueline was working as an executive director, she led the development and implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework that is now embedded in schools across WA. Although not a teacher herself, it was clear to all participants that Jacqueline demonstrates a passion for all children and young people.

Jacqueline shared some of the findings from the Speaking Out Survey, which was undertaken in 2021 by the commissioner at the time, Colin Pettit. A record 16,532 children and young people took part in the survey. Here are some of the findings reported from the survey:

- Approximately 634,000 children and young people live in WA (154,000 in regional areas) and they make up 23 per cent of the state's population.
- In the last 10 years there has been a 17 per cent increase in the number of children aged six to 11 years living in WA.
- An estimated 105,000 children and young people are living below the poverty line in WA.
- There are about 50,000 Aboriginal children and young people aged zero to 19 years in WA.
- Female students rate their well-being less favourably than male students. Mental health is a critical issue for young people.
- Many children and young people do not always feel safe at home, at school or in their community.
- Two-thirds (64 per cent) of students say they spend time with family every day and the same proportion (64 per cent) hang out with friends at least once a week.
- The top three stressors for girls are school or study problems (93 per cent), body image (63 per cent) and mental

health and well-being (61 per cent).

The full report can be found here.

Following the commissioner's address, participants heard from Dr Kay Ayre. Dr Ayre is a lecturer in early childhood studies at ECU and has worked extensively with disengaged and disruptive children, their teachers and schools. Dr Ayre has a passion for helping build the capacity of teachers, to develop and maintain positive, inclusive classrooms with a focus on supporting children with trauma.

Dr Ayre's session, *Trauma Informed Practice in Early Childhood*, was rich in information, statistics and research data. Participants were provided with hands on resources and left with practical strategies that could be taken back to the classroom.

Dr Ayre highlighted the fact that family creates the reality for children and they don't know that other families are different to their own. It is important to remember that:

- Trauma is not a fad and is not something that is going to go away.
- Trauma occurs on a continuum from simple to more complex.
- Different children have different responses to traumatic events.
- In excess of 25 per cent of all children and youth experience one potentially traumatic incident in their lifetime.
- The younger the child, the more significant the stress.
- A child will not learn if they don't feel safe. A child may be safe but it is critical that they feel safe.
- Trauma disables curiosity.
- It is vital to keep in mind that adversity doesn't equal destiny.

One important aspect highlighted throughout Dr Ayre's session was the importance of including play.

Play helps to heal from traumatic events and free play "helps children affected by trauma gain trust, build emotional regulation, make choices, develop empathy and reduce physical aggression".

Play is learning and is the "most important job description for a child's growth and well-being" (Nicholson and Kurtz, 2023).

If you missed out on the wonderful opportunity to hear Dr Ayre's address, you have another chance to hear her insights at the SSTUWA ECE Conference, being held on Friday 4 August.

This conference is an opportunity to "Reignite Your Passion" and be inspired by a range of guest speakers and workshop presenters. Full details about the conference can be found here.



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