



Opinion Piece

Jenni Perkins, Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People, as published in The West Australian, 24 April 2014, p.24

It takes a whole community to build resilient kids

To successfully navigate their way through today's complex and stressful world, young people need the confidence to embrace challenges and the ability to handle setbacks and problems.

In other words, they need resilience or the capacity to 'bounce back' when the going gets tough.

International child resilience expert Michael Ungar, who next month will undertake a two-week Thinker in Residence program focused on this subject, says this is a community-wide responsibility.

Parents certainly, but also schools, government and business all have roles in providing an environment where young people are supported to grow into resilient young citizens with a well-developed sense of personal and social responsibility.

Dr Ungar's work has applications for parents who want guidance about how to deal with behavioural and social issues involving their children and also for professionals and organisations working with children who are already overburdened with challenges.

For children and young people affected by child abuse or who are involved in the juvenile justice system this is an opportunity to build on our knowledge about interventions that can change the course of their lives and help put them on a pathway to achieving their potential.

During a brief visit to Perth last October Dr Ungar talked to Perth parents about giving kids "the opportunity to shine" by giving them meaningful roles in family routines and encouraging them to fix problems they themselves cause.

He advocated non-punitive discipline where children learnt there were relevant consequences for their behaviours.

By exposing children to age-appropriate levels of risk — not perilous dangers — they learn to be responsible for their actions and develop the skills and confidence to start solving their own problems.



Risk-averse parenting and protecting children from failure denied them genuine learning experiences from which they build a valuable set of coping skills, Dr Ungar said.

While it could be time-consuming and difficult watching children make mistakes, he said letting them “trip a bit” and problem solve for themselves was the job of parents.

The topic resonated strongly with many who attended Dr Ungar’s presentations and who showed great enthusiasm to learn more about practical ways to help their children develop better self-reliance.

During his visit as 2014 Thinker in Residence, Dr Ungar will hold a forum for parents to further outline resilience-building strategies that have been shown to be effective in a home and family environment.

Dr Ungar’s visit will also have relevance for educators, organisations and professionals working with children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or have complex needs.

In this context, I look forward to travelling with him to Kalgoorlie where we will meet Aboriginal Elders, community members, young people and parents.

His work in Canada focuses on nurturing resilience in vulnerable young people from disadvantaged and emotionally complex backgrounds.

Dr Ungar has more than 25 years’ experience as a family therapist and continues to practise in association with Phoenix Youth Programs, a prevention program for street youth and their families.

During this residency Dr Ungar will share his latest research and new perspectives on resilience building with a broad range of government, non-government, business and community organisations.

This will provide a valuable opportunity to consider how this information can be applied to policies and practices across a range of areas such as child protection, education, mental health, health, juvenile justice and local government.

When treating children and adolescents from troubled and marginalised backgrounds, Dr Ungar maintains it is important to focus on the sources of healing and resilience in young lives, rather than on the complexities of the child’s behaviour and circumstances.

While acknowledging that some young people face greater challenges than others, Dr Ungar says all young people need common factors to develop the resilience to navigate their way through adversity and to overcome risky and troubling behaviours.



Commissioner for Children and Young People
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As a community we will all benefit from a population of thriving young people with the ability to develop innovative solutions to societal problems and lead into the future.

A/Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

Jenni Perkins

More information on the 2014 Thinker in Residence is available from
ccyp.wa.gov.au