A Submission for Consideration to the National Children's Commissioner.

I work as a child, adolescent and adult counsellor, (PACFA and CAPA registered), and an accredited ETIA facilitator for the Parenting program P.E.T. (Parent Effectiveness Training) based on connecting and communicating with children. I am a parent of three, now aged 23, 21 and 17 years.

I am passionate about the importance of parenting.

What I have observed through my practise, in my family, and friends I share below.

1. What are the main reasons children and young people engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour?

From my experience and observation there is no simple answer, in general I believe that many children and young people do not feel truly accepted, or feel connected or understood by their parents. Even when parents tell them they love them, parents are often not skilled enough to know how to meet their children's emotional needs, and young people are under a great deal more pressure today, through social media, schools and general parent and community expectations to succeed. Therefore I believe it is crucial to implement preventative work with parents and children before they reach high school. Their pain goes inward and the self harm is their response. Programs for both parents, and children could be implemented to help them. (see suggestions below).

There are several areas that affect their wellbeing.

The Pressures

The pressures on kids today, through social media, and school are greater than the more carefree days of my upbringing. Several young people have commented to me, in regard to the TV series Puberty Blues, that "I wish I had grown up in the 70's when we didn't have mobile phones and social media as there is such a pressure to be connected to it all the time."

The pressures on parents for their children to "reach their full potential" and "have children reading by the time they go to school". Parents' anxiety is very high.

I have been told by some parents and young people the pressure to stay at school, doesn't suit every child, that there is too much emphasis on the HSC, getting a high ATAR and going to Uni, and if they do go to Uni, will they get a job at the end of it? And they have to pay for it with HECS and now interest! Young people could have the opportunity to do apprenticeships instead of Year 11 and 12. This would make them feel better about themselves as they are then achieving rather than being forced to study subjects they have no interest in, and that only makes them feel worse about themselves, when they are not academic enough to go to Uni.

This pressure is increasing now in primary schools. Many parents are feeling the pressure that their children need to do well in the Naplan tests. The children feel their parent's anxiety and then they become anxious. Why is this happening? Why don't the schools just do a test one day without telling parents or children what day the test is on? Why put pressure on these children, because they are the ones who end up with the pressure.

We need Grief Education for families.

Indigenous cultures, believe "It takes a village to raise a child".

Who is caring for a child/young person's shock, confusion, anger, sadness and questions when a parent dies, and the other parent is grieving or parents separate and are in conflict and under major stress themselves? With divorce rates so high, and many other parents in conflict, couples therapy needs to be cheaper more accessible, it certainly costs the government millions of dollars and enormous resources as a result.

How do children have a sense of belonging in families, and gain a strong sense of identity, two of the most important strengths required for resilience, when their grief is not acknowledged, or supported.

Our culture does not support, community well, like the Asian or Mediteranian countries whose families support each other, (extended family support). We have sport in our community, and again that is based much around competition, rather than relationships. Yes, kids make friends through sport, but if you are not good at sport, but it is not enough, community involvement. We are an isolated culture, in many respects, and too much emphasis is put on achieving well at sport or at school and not true authentic, supportive relationships.

Our 'She'll be right mate' culture doesn't teach children, to trust their feelings, to honour who they are, or help them build resilience when IDENTIFYING, ACCEPTING, AND VALIDATING feelings is not taught in families. When parent's can't identify, express and own their own feelings then how are children to learn their feelings about events in their lives are normal, understandable and taught that the grief process will pass if honoured and supported by loving significant others. If not anger is what emerges and it then plays out in self-harm, depression (anger often turned inwards), confusion, and feeling of worthlessness.

Sadness and fear are often seen as weak in our culture. And yet, we are seeing more children with anxiety, and depression and as we know, a great deal of it stems from home. Either from anxious or depressed parents, or parents that neglect emotional coaching or don't know how to emotionally coach their kids. Even when the anxiety comes from school, eg: social or academic, are parents able to or willing to validate feelings, teach social skills or get more support when a child is struggling?

Grief: The breakdown of the family. Parents separating, divorcing or major conflict in the home. Parents are often so caught up in their own pain they can't see what is happening with the children.

Grief and Trauma: Death in the family – a favourite family pet, parents, grandparents, sibling, cousin, friend. Break up of first boyfriend or girlfriend. Often destructive to relationships as not many parents know how to emotionally coach and guide their children, through these times, by listening to their needs and teach problem solving skills and resilience.

Poor attachment – insecure attachment – eg: mothers with post natal depression, mothers who had insecure attachment themselves with their own mothers

Self-harm is a way to express emotion, if they do not have the means to express emotion in any other way. Also, if they feel they have no control in their life – if they live with autocratic, dominating parents or are in a school system, then self-harming is something the child/young person alone can control.

Bullying, isolation because of poor social and emotional skills.

Self-esteem movement ("you're so clever, you got in the top 98% of the class"), which can result in little resilience because the child is reliant on others for a reflection of their worthiness in society. This external referencing doesn't build inner strength.

I don't believe our culture honours the importance of parenting our next generation. Dr Thomas Gordon, who wrote the Parenting Program P.E.T. said "Parents are often blamed but seldom trained". Young people spend one year learning to drive. Parent's need support, and guidance to do the job of parenting, it can be emotionally draining, takes time and effort and requires important skills which many parents do not have.

One parent told me how after taking 5 years off from paid work as a nurse to raise her two daughters she then had to pay \$10,000 to re-train as a nurse. It was not taken into account that in those 5 years, she did an enormous amount of nursing. Most parents do a crash course in first aid when they become parents!

2. What factors appear to contribute to contagion and clustering involving children and young people?

There is so little emotionally healthy guidance for children and young people when grief affects them and so are guided often more by their peers. They hide their true feelings and thoughts because they don't want to be seen as being weak. Vulnerability is seen as weak in our culture.

They also use the internet to ask other young people how to solve a problem because they either have parents not engaged in their life, or do not feel comfortable to ask parents. Even if they do ask parents, they are often not knowledgeable or have the skills to support their children through these emotionally difficult times.

Children and Young People need caring, connected adults who know how to really listen to their concerns, sadness and fears, help them process their problems and teach them problem solving skills.

If a young person has a **strong sense of themselves**, they will be more likely to listen and trust their 'gut instincts', their intuition, and listen and know what is harmful to them and know copy cat behaviour is not healthy.

If children have been brought up in an autocratic household, where they are expected to be obedient, they may take this learning into the school yard, and follow the lead of friends who self harm. If they are susceptible to outside influence because they do not have a sense of internal discipline (or inner locus of control), then they will be less likely consider alternative means of expressing distress – if self-harming is the way their peers express their emotions.

Self-harming may allow a young person to feel 'accepted' in a group, particularly if it becomes 'normalising' behaviour.

However, when young people have adults in their lives that emotionally coach and help them to problem solve and trust their feelings they learn to trust themselves and their 'gut instincts' or intuition and know that self- harming is not the way to solve their problems.

What prevents children and young people from seeking help?

I believe our culture still has too much stigma attached to mental health issues. Our culture still has negativity around vulnerability. Many parents find it shaming that their children 'have a

problem', and don't seek help for them early enough, hoping their child will grow out of that phase! Or often, parents don't recognise the problem or are afraid of what is happening with their child. Many parents still say they don't know where to go, and their GP doesn't always advise them who to see in regard to therapy. Even if the first point of call is the doctor, medication is not always the answer.

Seeing a Counsellor, or Psychologist, for therapy, particularly grief that can look like depression, is not always recommended or encouraged by the doctor. Doctors need to recommend Registered PACFA Counsellors as well as Registered Psychologists. Many PACFA Counsellors often charge a smaller fee than Psychologists as most PACFA registered Counsellors, only have some health fund rebate and not medicare rebate provider numbers.

If self-harm is a 'normal' expression of emotion amongst peers, then the young person may not feel a need to seek help.

What are the features of programs and practices that more effectively target and support children and young people who engage intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviours?

Cognitive behaviour therapy helps with the faulty thinking.

Acceptance, validation and acknowledgement is the primary, fundamental and essential basis of effective practice for those at risk of self-harm or suicide. Forming a connection and relationship with the person at risk is essential, particularly if the root cause is poor parental attachment.

Mindfulness. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Dialectical Behavioural Therapy, and Psychotherapy.

Building and developing individual strengths, working towards goals, teaching kids emotional intelligence, social skills and being able to express their honest feelings. A program in the school curriculum could be based around Youth Effectiveness Training, and educating parents (through P.E.T) on how really actively listen to their children, not to 'fix' their problems for them, but to support them to solve their own problems. To educate parents to help develop resilience, and to mirror to their children their positive attributes and their efforts and achievements by active listening and reflecting builds connection and good communication. Parents who value their children as individuals and not extentions of themselves. To resolve family conflicts with the aim to have a win/win outcome by valuing and respecting opinions that are different to their own.

The parenting practices will validate children, help ensure good attachment, resilience, and a strong sense of self-worth – all qualities that will help a young person be less at risk of self-harm.

What could help?

A list of all counsellors and psychologists, social workers who are in private practise that work with young people, and children. PACFA registered clinical members and clinical members of Counsellors and Psychotherapists Assoc. Of NSW, not just Registered Psychologists and Social workers. (As the Catholic Education Department has recently declared that all school counsellors need to be Clinical members of CAPA, or Psychologists and Social workers. Lists to be made available to schools and school counsellors/parents.

Many parents are not aware or able to access therapists that work with children and young people. **This list would be helpful.**

P.E.T. teaches parents how to give positive regard to their children that promotes motivation and self worth (as per Dr Carol Dweek on "How to praise your kids" Ego praise versus Action praise).

P.E.T. teaches parents how to actively listen to their children, a skill counsellors use, so kids feel really heard and assists with problem solving.

P.E.T teaches conflict resolution with the aim for a win/win solution

P.E.T teaches that underneath "unacceptable behaviour there is often a need not being met" so parents don't ignore their children's basic needs for love, belonging, identify and acceptance.

P.E.T. teaches parents how to develop and build deep connections and lasting relationships with their children. And shows in a gentle way how parents can take responsibility for their actions as parents and be a guide for their kids. Which is what most kids want. They don't want to be controlled and they need to learn problem solving skills and resilience, which P.E.T. also teaches parents.

Are public education campaigns aimed at reducing the number of children who engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour an effective strategy?

I believe Reach Out, Beyond blue, Black Dog Institute, and the information on their websites are helpful. Kids Helpline.

The Parenting Program Triple P, is based on parent's controlling behaviour of their children, and this is not helping as we understand that controlling children doesn't help kids to grow and develop faith in their own abilities. Many parent's have said to me that "Triple P doesn't work by the time their kids are 8 years old" and I tell them it is because they need to build and develop their relationship, and then behaviour improves and controlling their child either makes them rebel and/ or not have confidence in themselves. I believe Triple P could be replaced with P.E.T. Parenting Program.

I don't believe we are doing enough to educate, who is teaching emotional intelligence, communication skills, problem solving skills, conflict resolution, building relationships when not taught in homes or schools?

When children feel valued, heard, understood and respected by their parents, children usually value and respect themselves. When children respect and value themselves they usually respect others.

P.E.T. Parenting program, aims to in a gentle way encourage parents to look at their own behaviours and most parents have said they noticed 'quite a few' positive changes in themselves by participating in the program. (I have many testimonials to validate this comment and I have parents willing to validate the effectiveness and positive results in their families from the P.E.T. program).

I believe a program in primary schools and middle school based on Youth Effectiveness Training, combined with mindfulness, and acceptance.

To rekindle a sense of faith, which is missing in so much of our culture. What has happened to kindness, love, peace and acceptance? Meditation, and mindfulness or a love of nature, with the aim to build inner strength and faith in our own inner knowing, our intuition. And more discussion in schools on emotional coaching and the importance of emotional regulation and respect and self-respect. Giving children the credit for taking control of themselves and a belief in their own

uniqueness so copy cat behaviour won't exist so much, so an understanding of themselves more will lead to more inner confidence to trust in themselves.

We need a paradigm shift in how we treat our kids. One way is to roll out support in every school, both private and public for the PET parenting program this will attract many parents who want to be empowered to emotionally connect and communicate better with their children. And another program based on the same principals for children aged from 5 to 14years. (Youth Effectivness Program, with other elements included).

Below is a testimonial from a parent currently half way through the P.E.T. Parenting course with me... I include it with her permission, and have honoured her courage to share her painful experience, in the hope to help others.

In 2012 I was told by a clinical psychologist my daughter had depression. I thought...what has she got to be depressed about, she has all the things I didn't have growing up and I am fixing all the things no one helped me with. I put her low mood down to exhaustion as she had returned from a hectic sport tournament.

Things unravelled by the end of that year and she started cutting herself. We sought help and she went to ongoing sessions with a clinical psychologist and visited the school counsellor when needed. After 14 months the psychologist said I believe XXX is okay and she doesn't need to continue with regular sessions. Yeh, I felt she was cured!

Within 2 months some strange behaviour started to surface in XXX. Yet again I thought what has she got to be depressed about. Goes to a private school, doesn't have to do too much around the house, all her primary needs are being well met. XXX was still continuing to train up to 6 times a week for a sport that keeps her fit and healthy and we were giving her concessions not to do too many tasks around the house as she embarked into year 11.

Within in the first week of year 11 there was this very uptight girl obsessing she couldn't miss a day of school as the Board of Studies and her school wouldn't allow it. She soldiered on even if she was unwell. By week 7 there was a big whole my daughter wanted to bury herself into, she collapsed on the floor unable to go to school, do her assignments. The anger, the frustration seethed out of her. My inability to communicate with her only escalated her low moods, where she threatened to run away and harm herself. She became angry and destructive with outbursts that included trashing her room, grabbing carving knives and kicking a hole in her door or kicking anything in her way.

What happened to my happy go lucky little girl who was so optimistic and tackled everything with enthusiasm? No mountain was too high! Yet a molehill now stopped her in her tracks.

Embarking on P.E.T. training seemed daunting given the exhaustion I was experiencing. Yet it gives you the tools to learn to listen without judgement. It teaches you how to sit with uncertainty and have your child peel back the layers of their despair. It helps them become resilient by coming up with the solutions

for their problems. To actively listen and not judge, fix, or make things right, is difficult when all you want is your child to return to that perfect being you gave birth to.

I gained resilience growing up because I had to parent myself. My father had left and my mother was seldom around. I thought I would do all the things as a parent I felt I needed growing up. But all I really needed was a parent who could truly listen, sit with me, be non-judgemental and try and stay connected. If I never had the experience of being heard growing up, how would I be able to stay connected with my daughter.

I wish I could turn back the clock and have done this course 4 or more years ago. Maybe my daughter would be okay. At least I wouldn't have pushed her into a box labelled with my judgements, my reality and my expectations.

3. How can digital technologies and media assist in preventing and responding to intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour among children and young people?

If the Government endorsed and encouraged parents to do P.E.T. (Parent Effectiveness Training) Parenting Program, and if a program was implemented in the school curriculum PDHPE for 5 to 14 year olds, based on the same principles (Youth Effectiveness Training) then, there wouldn't be as much of a need for young people to use computers to have relationships, as their interpersonal skills, emotional and social intelligence would be more developed.

In this submission I seek endorsement from the National Children's Commissioner for Parent Effectiveness Training, PET which is a component of Effectiveness Training Institute of Australia ETIA Ltd www.etia.org, to make our services known in all schools. Written by Dr Thomas Gordon in 1962 who was nominated three times for a Nobel Peace Prize for his work, in the late 1990's.

The skills taught in PET teach both parents and children *emotional* and *social intelligence*, and help children develop *resilience*. Parents become more aware of their children's needs, children become more considerate of the needs of parents (and others), and families feel more peaceful and less stressed on completion of such courses.

Our society today is under pressure, particularly the family unit. The importance of parenting on the well-being of children (emotional and physical), cannot be overstated. In recent times, study after study has documented the importance a young child's environment (including parenting practice) has on the adult outcomes for that child. Early childhood intervention can have a ratio of benefits to costs of eight to one. Professor James Heckman, Nobel Prize winning economist, who calculated this ratio, also noted that successful outcomes for children depended more on social and emotional intelligence, than IQ.

Fundamentally, relationship is at the heart of all human relations. The way we work with our mechanic, the way we treat the shop assistant, the way we treat our employees, the way we work with co-workers, the way we care for our children, our partner or our aging parents. If this relationship is respectful, empathic and aims for peaceful, considerate resolution of conflict, then the relationship is strengthened, and all parties feel enabled. Karl Meninger, MD, made a statement that encompasses the reason for this submission. He said, "what's done to children, they will do to society".

Parenting courses

It is important to note that parent training is now a multimillion dollar industry. Only a few courses have been well researched and evaluated. Each course will provide different suggestions, different authors, different modes of delivery. Parenting courses can be reduced to two types of courses, based on very different philosophies.

These are that either: (a) parent and child work together in a relationship of mutual respect, to solve problems within that relationship (a relationship-based, democratic, child-and-parent-centred approach); or, (b) the parent is in control, with the ultimate requirement of the child being compliant and obedient (a behavioural, parent-centred approach).

Each type of course emerges from deeply different theories of human behaviour, is originally clinically based, and each has value for different problems. These approaches cannot be combined (within the one course), because the philosophies underpinning each approach are so radically different.

However, what research on PET has shown and through testimonials with parents, that by building and developing a deeper emotional connection and effective communication skills parents find that children's behaviour improves as the mutual respect improves in the family.

Recommendations

- 1. Early intervention. As outlined above, the cost benefit of early intervention is enormous. Parenting courses, such as PET, provide a cost effective and evidence based means of early intervention.
- 2. *Informed choice*. That if this government puts early intervention as a budget priority, and chooses (for example) to enable parents to attend parenting classes, the government must also provide parents with informed choice. That is, parents need to be offered a choice between a relationship-based, democratic parenting course, (P.E.T) or a behavioural course, (Triple P) If this choice is not offered, then government can be seen as endorsing one style over another.

Evidence Based

Here is the link to Kidsmatter primary. The very interesting part of this description is that P.E.T has a full circle for evidence, whereas Triple P (level 2) is not seen as backed up by evidence (although its level 3 group program rates better), and 1,2,3 Magic is also not given a full circle for evidence base. https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/compare-program/1115,1161,1201,1202.

"https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/programs/parent-effectiveness-training - Larissa Dunne ACT PET Instructor, wrote this for the Kidsmatter program in 2012. research and resources page on Larissa Dann's website (www.parentskills.com.au),

Recognition of the importance of the relationship within the family unit. No matter what style of family unit – nuclear, blended family, same sex, grandparents caring for grandchildren – relationship is at the heart of the success or failure of this unit. Failed relationships cost government dearly (for example, the Family Court, homeless children, illness, suicide, lower productivity at work because of unhappiness at home). Investing money into improving family (and work) relationships will enhance the Australian community, and its productivity.

PET focuses on relationship building training during a 6 - 8 week course. 2.5 – 3 hrs a week. The theory is presented and parents practice a range of skills to assist them to deepen their relationships with their children. PET is a non-punitive approach, giving parents additional strategies, not necessarily intuitive, to assist their children develop an emotional vocabulary, empathy for others and problem solving skills. PET is particularly relevant today as there is a national focus on reducing mental health problems in children and adolescents and reducing violence in families

PET has a long and proud history in Australian schools. Since early in the 1970's when parents flocked to the courses and left feeling liberated as a result of their newly acquired relationship skills. In recent times, other parenting courses largely based on a behavioural parent-centred approach have been available to parents in schools. In contrast PET is based on a relationship of mutual respect, to solve problems within that relationship (a relationship-based, democratic, child-and-parent-centred approach. The philosophy is based largely on the 'Characteristics of a Helping Relationship' by philosopher Carl Rogers PH.D. Dr. Thomas Gordon founded and delivered the first PET course in 1962. Since then it has gained favourable recognition and is delivered in many countries around the world. Dr. Thomas Gordon was a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, 1998, 1999 and winner of the 1999 American Psychology Institute Award for Peace Studies in 2000. The Effectiveness Training Institute of Australia (ETIA Ltd) is affiliated with Gordon Training International (GTI). For additional information: http://www.gordontraining.com/. The PET course in Australia is culturally appropriate and has been updated with exercises and role plays relevant in 2014. The fundamental structure and philosophy of the original course has been retained. PET Instructors are trained by Australian accredited trainers and are offering courses around the country.

Nina McCabe, who was the Acting Principal at Garran Primary in Term 2, 2013, completed the course, and included it in the national KidsMatter framework report to ACT Education. "Through offering the Parent Effectiveness Training course (PET), "we were able to make that as one of the major initiatives in our Parents & Carers component."

Offering PET courses in primary schools seems logical. Schools have facilities for the delivery of the course (which could then reduce fees) and schools can run advertisements prior to the course in parent newsletters.

Most of the groups I have run have been via word of mouth from previous parents attending one of my courses, often through clients from my private practise wanting to be empowered to help connect and communicate better with their children. Despite this, it is often difficult to attract the number of parents required to make it viable to run regular courses. As small business operators we have an ABN number and pay Indemnity insurance to hire venues to run the courses. Course fees vary for each instructor, however it is approximately the cost of one or two visits to a psychiatrist, or three visits to a psychologist, which makes it a great early prevention program.

PET Instructors are available to run courses in Australian schools (additional instructor training would be required, to cover some areas) and you will find below testimonials from parents who have participated in my recent courses. Endorsement and encouragement from the Education Department will assist PET Instructors when we approach schools in the future to offer courses.

Summarised findings of a research project on men attending P.E.T. courses have recently been published in the Fatherhood Research Bulletin. This is an occasional publication of the ARACY Fatherhood Research Network, produced by Dr Richard Fletcher of the University of Newcastle.

The published article is below. To see the poster from which this research was summarised, please follow the link: http://parentskills.com.au/sites/default/files/Poster%20-%20QEC%2010-2a.pdf

Getting Fathers to Parenting Groups (without really trying) – my experience with Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.)

By Larissa Dann

I have been teaching Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) in Canberra for the past 16 years. During that time I have noted a high attendance rate (35%) of men (fathers, step-fathers and foster parents). Intrigued, I sought to examine possible reasons for the interest of men attending P.E.T. courses in Canberra, and to look at some outcomes for participants over time.

P.E.T. takes a Rogerian, relationship-based, assertive and yet benevolent democratic approach to parenting, (in contrast to a behavioural approach, as with Triple P). The 16 hours to 24-hour course (over 6 - 8 weeks) teaches relationship skills in the form of respectful communication. P.E.T. helps parents empathise with their children, to look beyond the child's behaviour to their need, thus aiding a change in attribution of intent.

I designed a10-question survey designed using the on-line tool "Surveymonkey", and sent it to 61 men who had participated in P.E.T. courses from 2008 to 2010. The survey was anonymous, and responses could not be linked with participants. Thirty-two (53%) of the men surveyed responded. 90% of the respondents had attended the course more than six months previously. Active listening was the skill most commonly retained and utilised by the participants (90%).

Participants reported they:

- had better communication with their children, through utilising the skills of active listening and conflict resolution (taught in P.E.T).
- had better insight into the other's perspective/behaviour, and greater empathy.
- were "less authoritarian"

Participants found:

- they had calmer, more peaceful, cooperative and harmonious households
- there was a benefit of a consistent P.E.T. approach to parenting with their partner.
- They had a better relationship with their children,

It was clear that these fathers wanted an alternative to being, or being seen as, authoritarian or the 'disciplinarian'. Survey participants valued the P.E.T. approach, with its emphasis on relationship skills and listening skills. Interestingly, respondents retained many of the communication skills taught in P.E.T. – well beyond six months. Fathers emphasised the significance of relationships with their children (and partners). These survey results support the importance of a course such as P.E.T. being available to fathers. For contact: www.parentskills.com.au

Testimonials (from past P.E.T. parents via Parent and Teen Support)

"A fabulous course that every parent could do to understand our role as parents and the importance of building relationships."

"The knowledge is both exciting and empowering and has already lead to good changes in our family" -

"I could take P.E.T into all areas of my life, not just my family".

"I have been really amazed at the outcome and results when these skills are put into practise"

"I think all mum's and dad's would benefit from taking this course".

"Thank you, Johanna, this course has changed our family's relationship in so many positive ways" (Parent from P.E.T. course)

"This course not only has beneficial tools to help raise kind and considerate children but opens lines of communication within the family". (Parent from P.E.T. course)

Kind regards

Johanna Fisher
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