

Legislative Council

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YOUTH VIOLENCE

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (20:10):

I also rise to support the motion of the Hon. John Dawkins in relation to initiatives to discourage youth violence. It has long been my gripe in this place that this government does very little to deal with social issues in a practical and proven manner, and youth violence is of great concern because the patterns that our young people establish often remain with them for the rest of their lives or until some kind of trauma occurs to force behaviour change.

Our children are exposed now to violence in so many ways, in their immediate environment through media, video games and often music videos, and sometimes it seems that even cartoons target our children and promote violence and abuse at a lower level. Of course, as they get older we do have that influence of alcohol and drugs that is another factor in how this seems to be a problem that is raging out of control.

I remember, just after I came into this place, my son, who was then 19, went for a night out at a local hotel, band playing, and went outside to wait for a taxi and was set upon by seven young people with bats. He was beaten to the ground and kicked in the head and had to be taken to the hospital. It was an unprovoked attack. They were not even looking to rob him. They just wanted to bash him, and if it had not been for a security guard at that particular venue daring to cross the road and get involved, I actually fear what would have happened to my son at that time.

I also have a nine-year-old son who attends a local state school here in South Australia. I have to say that the high school attached to this was where that young boy was hanged by two of his classmates. I want to make it clear that this particular primary school takes extraordinary steps to identify and deal with abusive or violent behaviour even at a primary school level. Their challenge is that they have children who suffer autism spectrum disorder and Asperger's, and those children are integrated well into normal classes but they have their quirky behaviour that can quite often be antagonistic for the other kids. I am talking here about years 1, 2, 3 and 4 children who do not yet grasp that these kids' brains are wired differently.

The teachers have quite a challenge in trying to get the kids who do not have this disorder to understand the behaviours and the quirks of these other kids and not to retaliate. As I said, the school has a restorative justice system in place that is a wonderful model, and I have seen my nine-year-old son go from one mindset of, 'Well, you know, if these kids want to continually be disruptive and whatever and provoke in the playground, then what am I to do?' to being able to work in a group setting with other students and a school counsellor to develop strategies that include those children who are perpetrating this violence in this group session where their peers are able to express to these children exactly what effect their behaviour is having on them and how it is making them feel.

I have to say that, since my son has been going to this school for the past 2½ years, I have seen a level of growth in him as a nine-year old that makes me proud and pleased that we have chosen this school, because it had a functional, restorative justice program in place. I believe this is the place to start, as well as acknowledging the work of the Sammy D Foundation and other foundations and the campaigns that were mentioned by the Hon John

Dawkins and Tammy Franks—the One Punch Can Kill campaign and the 'Step Back. Think' are one level, but we have the ability, as this school, Para Hills West Primary School—and I will put that on the record—should be used as a model for all other state schools in this state.

We withdrew our son from a private Catholic school because they were not enforcing their bullying policy and were not offering any strategies to either the bullies or the victims to help stop that bad behaviour that often turns kids away from going to school in the first place. In this two-year period with this school all of my admiration goes to the principal and assistant principal of this school and their staff, because their staff actually went, in their own time and at their own cost, and got training, first, on how to integrate children with Asperger's and on the sort of stimulus they need to be able to bring them to a higher level of functioning and to be able to socialise and, secondly, for this restorative justice program they have and they are consistent and persistent with their application of this.

I honestly wish that the Minister for Education would pay a visit to this school and speak to the principal and assistant principal and note the application of, first, their anti-bullying policies but, secondly, their restorative justice program. I do not believe there would be any schools in this state that operate at that function and prevent children from getting into the cycle of violent and abusive behaviour in the classroom and in the playground. I just wanted to put that on the record because I actually do not like standing on my feet all the time and being critical of the government, so I think this school, being a government school, deserves the credit I have given it.

In saying that, there are many reasons why our children have become desensitised to violence and to the effect it has, not only on their own psyche and their own emotional development but also on their victims. It has become a mindless practice against a minority of our youth but nonetheless, as the Hon. John Dawkins mentioned, it is put out there so easily over Facebook, phones and whatever now that it has become a fashionable trend to glorify this kind of behaviour, and any steps we can take to change that message is important.

Governments should be on the front foot with this; they should be looking at what is being done on a number of levels around the state and country and do what they can to provide leadership in this area. At the end of the day we have seen some drastic changes in our social structure and the way we live our life, and parents today do feel quite powerless in their ability to adequately protect their children. That level of caring and concern does not end when our children turn 18—actually I think it is amplified after the age of 18.

I remember the days when we felt safe, the days when we were children, free to roam and have our childhood adventures—sometimes to the distress of our parents—and go to our friends' homes and socialise, and there was a true sense of community. That life is disappearing, and I believe that our kids are acting out the disconnectedness that they are now experiencing and the inability of many to have an acceptable level of safety and freedom which was our right.

I will not go into my views on all of the causes of these changes because that is not what this motion is about, but I will say that parents feel powerless to adequately protect their children these days. As a result, our children are restricted in the activities that most of us were able to participate in and that literally contributed to our independence, our free thinking and, dare I say, our desire to strive and achieve. We now see so many kids attracted to gangs because it gives them a sense of belonging. Of course, we all know that gangs are not just about social networking and that those young people find themselves in a lifestyle that expects violent and criminal activity to be integrated into the everyday lives of their members.

It has always been my view that if a government addresses these sorts of issues and reflects community expectations through its actions, then the community generally feels supported and their concerns validated. Sadly, I have to say that since I have been in this place this has been the one concept that I have seen sadly lacking with this government: their expectation of citizens to live to a code of conduct that is quite often unreasonable, when their own responsibilities and what is expected of them by people is to lead by example.

I have said this before, and I will say it again: I have not been in here as an Independent under another government, but I was a lobbyist when the Liberal government was in power, and I have to say that the Hon. Dean Brown went out of his way to make sure that community people and community groups got the support they needed to help to change the negative cultures that were going on out there. It was certainly my experience, as the founder of the DrugBeat program, that he was available.

When he was the minister for human services, I can remember having meetings with him in here at 9 o'clock at night. He made himself available, and that is something that I just do not see happening with this government. I think that when a community is disconnected from its government, and does not feel supported or validated, that then flows from the top down, and I have used the phrase 'the fish rots from the head' in here before.

This is an opportunity for the government to grasp this motion of the Hon. John Dawkins and look at these campaigns and at what is happening in schools like Para Hills West Primary School to try to break that cycle early and change our children's behaviour and our children's perception of what is acceptable and unacceptable and look at how to socialise them. That school hands those skills down to the parents, and we play a very proactive role in working with the school to keep that message consistent. There are many, many things that we need to do.

I note that the Hon. John Dawkins and the Hon. Tammy Franks made mention of Sammy D, and the family that established the Sammy D Foundation after the death of their son, who was king-hit at a house party in 2008. I can relate to why parents get motivated, get up off their backsides and try to do something to prevent other people in the community from feeling the pain and trauma of the loss of a child, because I did exactly the same thing in relation to substance abuse. It is not because you want to impose your views or your values on anybody else; it is because you want to do something valuable, something to contribute and make sense of the tragedy you have actually experienced.

Inevitably, those foundations and groups that are started up by people who have themselves experienced that trauma have an element of understanding and caring that can never ever be duplicated by trained social workers or be put into policy and procedure by bureaucracy, because it is of the community, for the community and by the community. This would only enhance supporting these sorts of organisations and foundations, as well as running campaigns like the One Punch Can Kill and the Step Back and Think campaigns. I have also seen those campaigns on television in Queensland; they are hard hitting and get the message through.

As the Hon. Tammy Franks said, the community has actually embraced that message and it has taken ownership of it. If we could do that in South Australia I believe it would be a huge feather in the cap of not only this government but this parliament; to actually send a message out there that we care enough to get involved in these sorts of things to try to protect our children and to protect families from the trauma that comes from what we are basically doing now, which is turning a blind eye and sweeping it under the carpet. As I said, I support the

motion of the Hon. John Dawkins and commend him for bringing this and other important social issues to this place for debate.