



Royal Commission
into the Protection & Detention
of Children in the Northern Territory

VOICES

WHAT CHILDREN HAVE TOLD US
- CHILD PROTECTION



If you could choose anywhere you would like to live, where would that be?

--- "With my Mum."

Okay. If it wasn't sort of quite right for you to be living all the time with her, is there anywhere else that you have had experience of, or you've seen, that you think might work for you?

--- "No, just my Mum."

INTRODUCTION

The role of the Commission is to inquire into and make recommendations about the youth detention and child protection systems in the Northern Territory. To do that we wanted to hear directly from children who have experienced those systems.

We have heard from children in a variety of ways including:

- youth forums and consultations
- attending youth detention centres and speaking with detainees
- talking with children in communities and urban centres
- written statements and evidence of young people in our public hearings
- the collection of 430 informal statements and stories to inform our work and identify issues.

They have spoken about their involvement in the child protection system, what they think works and what doesn't – in a frank way. We are very grateful to them all for sharing their experiences and acknowledge their courage in coming forward.

Here we set out some of the things that children have spoken about. These are their words. This is how they feel. It is important to allow their voices to be heard.

To protect the identity of the children they have been given a pseudonym and any identifying material has been removed. The statements or recorded stories of all the children are on the Commission website. The Commission does not comment here on the content of their words.

SUPPORT

Some readers may find these stories difficult and challenging. We urge any person who may experience distress when reading these stories to seek assistance.

If you need support you can call 1800 500 853 – a free helpline answered locally

- This is a free service and is available 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday.
- Support is available to children, young people, their families and others impacted by the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory.
- Experienced and qualified staff can refer you to a range of services including counsellors, therapeutic support, and health professionals.

Please note that calls made from a mobile phone may incur additional costs.

There are a number of other services available which can provide support wherever you are in the Northern Territory. If you need support you can call the following services.

LIFELINE FREECALL	KIDS HELPLINE	NT MENTAL HEALTH HELP LINE	HEADSPACE (12-25 YEARS)	BEYOND BLUE	RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA NT
1800 551 800	1800 682 288	1800 659 388 or 8931 5999	1300 224 636	1800 551 800	(08) 8923 4999 (08) 8950 4100

WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT SEPARATION

"Trauma can be complicated and it is easier to connect with someone, like your sibling, who has lived the trauma also. It brings about a unifying sense of strength."

Statement from AI tendered to the Commission 21 June 2017

"I was scared and crying and I knew I was being taken away from Mum and Dad. It was a terrible day and the worst experience of my life."

Statement from DB tendered to the Commission 26 June 2017

"Our family always had a lot of involvement with child protection growing up. We would often go back and forth between departmental care and my mother's care. Usually we would go into foster care for short periods then back to my mother's care. I don't think that child protection were fully aware of her mental health issues. I really believe that DCF should offer mental health assessments on all parents before access visits and before releasing their children back into their parents care. My siblings and I truly loved our mother and begged child protection authorities to go back to her, which really was a decision we were not fit to make. I know I was sure to be safer under Departmental care."

Statement from AI tendered to the Commission 21 June 2017

"No one from Department of Children and Families ever explained to me why we had been taken away. I didn't understand back then why it had happened. I felt confused and upset."

Statement from DB tendered to the Commission 26 June 2017

"I was scared and crying and I knew I was being taken away from Mum and Dad. It was a terrible day and the worst experience of my life."

WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT FIRST EXPERIENCES

"It was difficult for me, because I wasn't aware of access or anything like that on my first day, so the first day that I was admitted into DCF care was very confusing for me. I didn't know if I was going to see my brothers or sisters again. Access, visitations, and things like that were not explained to me, just because I think DCF were overwhelmed by the nature of my situation"

Closed Court transcript of AI, 21 June 2017

"I was 5 years old and we were at school. My big brother, my big sister and my little sister and we were waiting for my mum and dad to pick us up from school but they were running late. And that is when we seen two white people were walking in. And one turned into the Principal and one kept on walking up to the Principal's office where we were to come and pick us up and they took us to one carer."

Recording of DM played to the Commission 22 June 2017

"And the kids that stay in these – in these placements, they develop a lot of trust issues. And you don't – when



you move into the residential care houses, you don't know who you're going to be living with."

Recording from AH played to the Commission 30 June 2017

"I got into sniffing aerosols there. The carers must have known we were doing it. There were empty cans lying around everywhere. They never tried to do anything about it. I think DCF would have known too."

Statement from DF tendered to the Commission 30 June 2017

"Well they took us to this one carer and they told us we were staying there for the weekend and that we'll be going back to our parents after the weekend. When the weekend was finished they came and picked us up and took us to the airport. They sent us to our community from where we were from. We were living with our two nanas and it just wasn't nice."

Recording of DM played to the Commission 22 June 2017

"I got into sniffing aerosols there. The carers must have known we were doing it. There were empty cans lying around everywhere. They never tried to do anything about it. I think DCF would have known too."

“Welfare came to talk to us. I was ten years old. They said Mum needed some time to sort out housing for us. So they told me my [redacted] and I that we would go into respite care for two weeks. We agreed ... [redacted] and I were placed in a foster home Even though we were told it would be only for two weeks I was in that home for almost two years.”

“Eventually mum hit a crisis point with her mental health and surrendered to DCF. She let DCF inside our house to chat with her. By then we were starved, riddled with bruises and covered in lice. Our house was full of rotten food, maggots and garbage at the time. We often lived off food scraps to survive while my mother was away.”

Statement from AI tendered to the Commission 21 June 2017

“Other times I would just wander the streets all night if I didn’t have anywhere to go. I was scared.”

Statement from DF tendered to the Commission 30 June 2017

“Welfare came to talk to us. I was ten years old. They said Mum needed some time to sort out housing for us. So they told my [redacted] and I that we would go into respite care for two weeks. We agreed... [redacted] and I were placed in a foster home... Even though we were told it would only be for two weeks I was in that home for almost two years.”

Statement from DF tendered to the Commission 30 June 2017

“A few nights after we arrived a lady came with an overnight pack. I remember it contained a teddy bear, toothpaste, toothbrush and some new clothes. I don’t remember it being helpful in changing my feelings. I still felt so confused and alone when she left. The woman who gave me the pack had a short discussion with me about why I was in foster care but I felt it was not child appropriate. The language was not age appropriate and I found it all very hard to comprehend. If someone had just explained to me *DCF exists to keep children safe and that we will be working with your mum to help her learn how to keep children safe* that would have helped. As a child, living with your mum, you don’t recognise if you are being neglected. I wish they had explained this more to me so could have understood sooner regardless of my age.”

Statement from AI tendered to the Commission 21 June 2017

“I can’t remember how many different placements but I had about 20 different placements because I was just getting moved a lot and one time ... I was always getting moved to different hotels mainly.”

Recording of DM played to the Commission 22 June 2017



“I can’t remember how many different placements but I had about 20 different placements because I was just getting moved a lot and one time ... I was always getting moved to different hotels mainly.”

"I was [redacted] years old at the time. Two ladies from the department came to our house and told us we were going to McDonalds. We thought mum was going to meet us there, she had said we were. There were [redacted] kids in the car. I was the oldest in the car at the time. We were taken to the DCF office and I remember waiting in the car park and not knowing what was happening. They left us in this van while they found placements for us. When we realised what was happening we cried and screamed for our mother and each other. We thought and felt we had been tricked."

Statement from AI tendered to the Commission 21 June 2017

"I didn't like it there. I had a dog that came to the house with me. I saw one of the carers beating my dog with a stick and then it passed away."

Statement from DF tendered to the Commission 30 June 2017

"The carers are mostly males in their twenties and thirties and I feel intimidated by them. They are much bigger than me. They don't treat anyone else the way that they treat me. "

WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT CARE

"I remember one time on my big brother's birthday my mum and dad sent us a lot of food, like party food and cake and stuff. And one of my nanas told my brother to run up to the other house and get batteries and when he came back all the food was already gone even though it was his birthday. It was just not nice there. Yeah, I didn't like it."

Recording of DM played to the Commission 22 June 2017

"Some of the workers at the residential house were good and some were bad. The bad ones would get cheeky with me by teasing me or being sarcastic. If I got upset the bad ones would laugh at me and that made me more upset. There were not many of them who I felt I could really talk to about thing or who I felt understood me. I would get angry if I left that they were not listening to how I felt about things and this was most of the time."

Statement from DB tendered to the Commission 26 June 2017

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Statement from DF tendered to the Commission 30 June 2017

"I had this inherent condition that I was not aware of up until I had an episode. So what I mean is that I think it's really important for children to be aware of their medical history and things like that in foster care, because if you're not engaged with your parents, you have no way of knowing what conditions run in the family, if you have a heart defect, if you have a mental health problem, there's no way of knowing if you're not engaged with your parents."

Closed Court Transcript of AI, 21 June 2017

"One time I had this one lady that I was staying with. She took me to the duck pond and I was about, I think I was about 7. And she was with this guy and we went out to have, like, something to eat and I had ice cream. And because I had the ice cream all over my shirt they told me to come back with them to the boat. And we went back to the boat and then they told me to have a shower and change into his clothes so we could go to the movies and I was really happy and wanted to go to the movies. And then like when I finished having a shower, I went to try and open the door they were in and they slammed the door on me basically. So I went and sat down outside and when they came out they said they were reading a book but when I look back I don't think they were reading a book I think they were doing something else that they shouldn't be doing. That was just horrible."

Recording of DM played to the Commission, 22 June 2017

"I had carers that wouldn't even cook us dinner, because they have no idea how to cook. I – I couldn't believe that they didn't know how to cook. Like, who becomes a carer if you can't cook for the child you're meant to be looking after?"

Recording from AH played to the Commission 30 June 2017

"When the carers wouldn't feed us my brother and sister would go through the bin and find food for me, they would put it in their mouth to clean it before giving it to me, making sure it was clean and safe."

Statement from DG tendered to the Commission 22 June 2017

"This was when I was 8. I stayed with this one lady and I always smelt black smoke in the house. One time I went into the bathroom and in the cupboard I found a bong, a bowl and scissors. I confronted her about it and she said that it wasn't hers. She just didn't watch me and, like, she would let me roam around the streets and go to the next suburb and I would, like, hang out with my friends."

Recording of DM played to the Commission 22 June 2017

"They didn't ever feed me, they never do anything. That was like rough. When I go there they always go to the Government building at Darwin next to Kmart area. Always go and ask them "Where my carer? He's not here, he's not here. He's gone for lunch." And I said "Come on, he can't be gone to lunch every day, every minute. Where he got to be?"

"They sucks the welfare people. They're not doing good things. They say they're letting them carer to buy us stuff. They can buy us stuff because we staying at their house, but the carer where we're staying in that house, they're going to DCF mob, tell them mob, give more money for them kids. They don't even do anything about it."

Recording of DO played to the Commission 19 June 2017

"I think the qualities of a good foster carer come down to the relationship that they build with you. There has to

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be a genuine – a true human one, not a work relationship.”

Closed Court transcript of AI, 21 June 2017

“Soon after I got to [Redacted] I knew they didn’t care about me. I wished I could go home. I thought [Redacted] was going to help me. Now I just think [Redacted] is about ruining people’s lives. Because my life was better before [Redacted].”

Statement from CL tendered to the Commission 2 June 2017

“I ended up telling DCF that I wouldn’t stay in any family home. I hated it there, even if the family was nice. Because they weren’t the family I grew up with I always felt like the odd one out in the house and I didn’t like that feeling. They were not related to me, they treated me differently and I didn’t belong there.”

Statement from DB tendered to the Commission 26 June 2017

“That’s when I went to another carer. At first me and my big sister and my little sister were staying there and my big sister, she started running away first because she told me one time that when she was at a bus stop my carer and her oldest daughter pulled up and they double banked my big sister and they had her against the bus stop and they were just, like, hitting her and that.”

Recording of DM played to the Commission 22 June 2017

“The decision to remove us from our Mum and Dad destroyed our family. I know that my brothers and sisters have also all suffered because of it.

“I notice with Dad that whenever I talked about the past or about what happened my brothers and sister are doing he puts his head down and looks real upset. I now he feels broken because of what happened.”

Statement from DB tendered to the Commission 22 June 2017

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WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT CASE MANAGEMENT

"I had more than 12 case managers, and half of them I didn't even meet, had no idea that they changed. Many case managers didn't even – when they did change they – you expect them to call you in the first two to three days, you know, just to let you know that you've got a new case manager. Maybe they meet up with you to get to know you, instead of just reading what's on your file. But no. None of them do that."

Recording of AH played to the Commission 30 June 2017

"A case manager should stick with the kid throughout the order, not changing back and forth, and they have to invest in the best interests of the kids, not what they think is best. They need to ask us what is best for us, not them, It's our life."

Closed Court transcript of DF, 30 June 2017

"You've got to be real persistent and call them every two minutes to speak to your case manager. I remember calling my mate's case manager for her while being at the office and they told me he wasn't in the office, but I could see him sitting at his desk. And I was just standing there, like, "You guys think I'm blind."

Recording of AH played to the Commission 30 June 2017

"Yes, my old case worker, she – she help me a lot. Very lot. She made my life more and more happy than I've ever had. She made me experience that I could actually talk to and actually have a yarn and actually get all them bad things off my chest I needed to get off, that I wanted somebody else to hear but nobody wanted to sit down and take the time to listen to my story. They just kept saying that I was a bad person but they didn't know really what's going on inside my heart, how I was feeling and how I was hurting and I felt just like my heart was just crashing to pieces."

Closed Court transcript of DG, 22 June 2017



WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT SIBLING SEPARATION

"I enjoyed primary school and I was good at schoolwork. But when I got separated from my little brother and sisters and started hanging out with the bad kids I lost interest in school. I also found it harder to keep up with the work when I did go back and no one would really help me."

Statement from DB tendered to the Commission 26 June 2017

"There's not many foster carers in Darwin that are willing to take on siblings, whether there's just one or two. They just – I don't know – the siblings could rebel together, so they just separate them. I did live with my siblings a couple of times, but not much."

Recording of AH played to the Commission 30 June 2017

WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

"My hope is that children will not fall through the system and I hope that children will be – I don't know someday have the confidence and be aware that they can seek help. because in my childhood if I had ever just spoken up, if I ever had just put my hand up and said. "I need help" – sorry. Just so many things could have been avoided, I believe."

Closed Court transcript of AI, 21 June 2017



“Something like that, but all for FACS children, just for – place for everyone to belong and not feel lonely or scared or anything like that.”

“I like welfare to actually – actually look at their self and think of their self just like they would treat their own child. Doesn’t matter what colour you are. What are you. You need to understand every children should love.”

Closed Court transcript of DG, 22 June 2017

“The main subject I’d like to bring to the Commission is the connection between welfare and outcomes. There are times when I sit down and I think before I go to bed about my outcome, and I think it could have been different. I don’t have a relationship with my mum or dad. I haven’t seen my brothers in years.

“Don’t get me wrong, some of my experiences were good. I learnt life lessons, but things could have been different, maybe better. I was blessed to have [Redacted] which was good experience. I think DCF needs to put Aboriginal kids with family, or with Aboriginal people or help them visit family. I feel like I had to make my family for myself, and the kid shouldn’t have to do that.”

Statement from CJ tendered to the Commission 31 May 2017

“I think it will go really good, to be honest. I’m going to get a Grammy award, or something like that. I don’t know what award you get for, like, carer’s award or something. I’m going to, I’m going to go far. Me and my best mate we had a dream. Like, she didn’t ever want – she never wanted kids.

“But we were going to adopt every Family and Community Services child and make this big house and have them all living like – you know 101 Dalmatians, they make that big house so all the hundred dogs can live there?

“Something like that, but all for FACS children, just for – place for everyone to belong and not feel lonely or scared or anything like that.”

Recording of AH played to Commission 30 June 2017

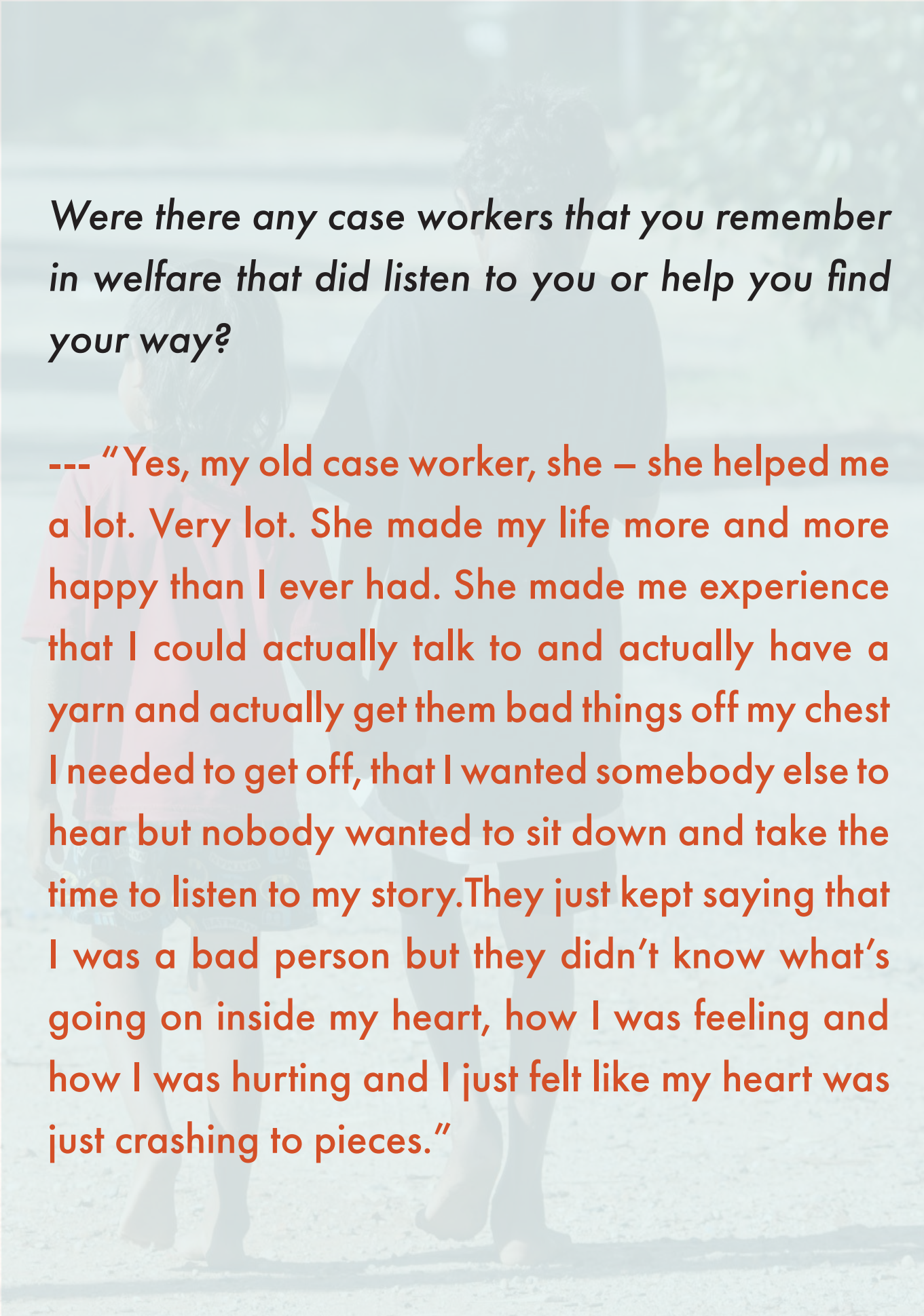
“I previously had a great relationship with my school counsellor, and it’s really – it really has helped having someone from the school who’s fully aware of your situation, giving them a safe space to go to. I think it’s very important, especially for children who are at risk or vulnerable, children who are in care who are currently enrolled in school, I think it’s definitely important to have a relationship with the school counsellor.”

Closed Court Transcript of AI, 21 June 2017

"I like welfare to actually take more time with kids and actually learn experience of kids, how they feel and how they want to feel. Make them feel like they're at home than making them feel like it's hell. Welfare's not meant to do that. Welfare's meant to have – welfare's meant to be a happy place. Not a – not to feel stress, upset and want to hurt you and harm yourself. That's not good enough. I like welfare to actually – actually look at their self and think of their self just like they would treat their own child. Doesn't matter what colour you are. What are you. You need to understand every children should love. You should love is the way that you love your own child. You treat a kid – you treat a kid just the way you love your own child. Don't the make the kid one different than your own child, because that kid's going to feel down and feel bad. You need to understand that kids, they can feel that, they can feel the heart. They know what it feels like and it really hurts the kid's feeling, really makes the kid more life and really hard for them to live in their life."

Closed Court Transcript of DG, 22 June 2017





Were there any case workers that you remember in welfare that did listen to you or help you find your way?

--- "Yes, my old case worker, she – she helped me a lot. Very lot. She made my life more and more happy than I ever had. She made me experience that I could actually talk to and actually have a yarn and actually get them bad things off my chest I needed to get off, that I wanted somebody else to hear but nobody wanted to sit down and take the time to listen to my story. They just kept saying that I was a bad person but they didn't know what's going on inside my heart, how I was feeling and how I was hurting and I just felt like my heart was just crashing to pieces."



ROYAL COMMISSION

INTO THE PROTECTION & DETENTION OF
CHILDREN IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY