

Exploring the ups and downs of Tasmania's child protection system

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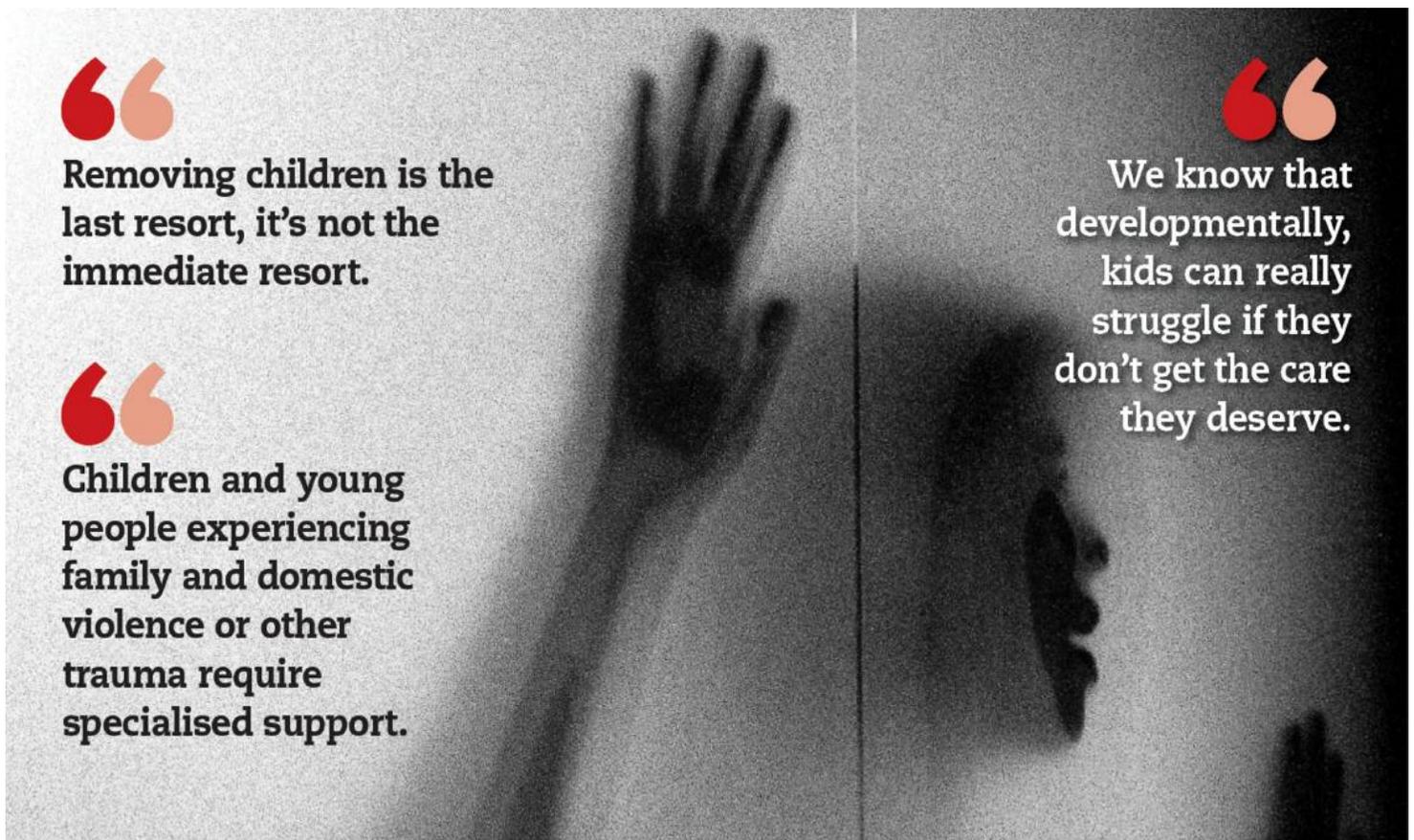
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KEEPING OUR KIDS SAFE: Stakeholders agree that early intervention through education and care services are part of the solution when it comes to keeping children safe in care.

The term out-of-home care is one we hear often, but it can be a hard task attempting to navigate the complex system. Out-of-home care has become an umbrella term, but can refer to many different types and styles of placements.

According to the [government's *Out of Home Care Reform in Tasmania* paper](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/164121/Out_of_Home_Reform_in_Tasmania.pdf) (http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/164121/Out_of_Home_Reform_in_Tasmania.pdf), released in 2014, about half of all children in care in the state were aged between four and 11.

The most common placement type was foster care, about 40 per cent of children, other types of care offered included kinship care, a third party guardian, cottage care or a family group home.

Therapeutic residential care, which is a placement model for children with the most complex or severe needs, cost significantly more than other types of care.

One way a young person might end up in care is through a report of suspected or actual child abuse or neglect made to the Department of Health and Human Services. Once this report has been made, Child Safety Response practitioners can visit the family and assess whether there is a risk to the child.

“Through careful planning and working supportively with the family, solutions for the long-term well-being of the child can be found,” the department's website said.

Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that in 2015-16, 225,487 children were suspected of being harmed or at risk of harm across Australia.

This was an increase in numbers from previous years.

The institute found that in Tasmania, the most common type of abuse was emotional, accounting for about 47 per cent of all primary substantiated harm types against children.

Neglect went on to make up about one third of claims, and physical abuse about 13 per cent.

Courts have the ability to make a care and protection order if they believe that a child is at risk – these can last for a short period of time or until a child turns 18.

The *Tasmanian Foster and Kinship Carers Survey* found many carers felt dissatisfied with the support offered to them and their child.

“There undoubtedly needs to be major changes in regards to carer support services,” according to the association’s website.

“Effective casework in child protection cannot be achieved or maintained without the development of strong and supportive relationships between case management and carers who are responsible for the day-to-day care provided to the children.

“The question we face is how can we better meet the needs of these children and those who care for them.”

The Tasmanian government has committed to a redesign of the state’s child protection system, which includes investment into early intervention services, hiring additional staff and streamlining the reporting process.

This month, the government announced its aim for a 50 per cent reduction in the rate of serious child abuse in the state by 2022 and a 10 per cent increase in the housing available for young people at risk.

But the commitments come after a string of allegations against the sector and governments in recent years.

Human Services Minister Jacquie Petrusma said everybody in the community had a responsibility for child safety and well-being.

“Removing children is the last resort, it’s not the immediate resort because ... removing a child unnecessarily from the home without putting in place early intervention and supports is not the best thing for the child,” Ms Petrusma said.

“The child protection redesign is all about putting in early intervention and supports early enough instead of nothing being put in place until that child does reach the statutory threshold.

“Most parents love their children, they just haven’t been taught what is appropriate care and this is about trying to put in place those measures.”

But she said the changes would take time.

“We can’t do it all overnight and we know there’s a lot more work to be done,” Ms Petrusma said.

“As new things come about from the mainland or overseas we want to continuously adapt and change as time goes on.”

Opposition child safety spokesman Josh Willie said the child protection system, across the nation, was struggling.

"We know that developmentally, kids can really struggle if they don't get the care they deserve, whether that's emotionally or socially," Mr Willie said.

"We need to ensure there's more alternative education options for kids, but we also need to ensure that if the state does intervene, that the outcomes are better.

"We know family connections are incredibly important, so when a child is removed we need to make sure that visitation meetings are conducted in a way that is appropriate."

He said everyone needed to be working in synergy and that leaders needed to stand up and work together.

"There's a really important role for government to be active," Mr Willie said.

Shelter Tasmania executive officer Pattie Chugg said Tasmania needed to urgently address the lack of appropriate accommodation and support for young people between 12 and 16 years old in the state.

Ms Chugg said she was particularly concerned about young people who fell through the gaps, who were not eligible for help from Housing Connect or Children and Youth Services and had no legal guardian.

"Children and young people experiencing family and domestic violence or other trauma require specialised support," she said.

"Any increase in accommodation must also include an increase in appropriately trained and experienced support staff to work with the complex needs of those children and young people who are impacted.

"The shelters do an excellent job but they are under resourced and lack any legal authority to provide the guardianship these young people deserve."

Look out for the next edition of the *Keeping Our Kids Safe* series in The Advocate on August 30.