

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Geelong — 19 September 2016

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Witness

Ms Leah Thomson.

The CHAIR — Hello, Leah. I have seen you sitting in the audience. You have been with us most of the afternoon.

Ms THOMSON — Yes, I am very interested in this topic.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Ms THOMSON — Thank you. I met Christine at the TAFE the other night. She came and did a talk about what she has planned for the Geelong area, and I was very excited to be involved or get more knowledge in regard to this. I have two teenage daughters; one is 13 and one is 15. The 15-year-old was diagnosed with ADHD at 8 and autism at 12. As a mother of a teenage girl, or teenage girls, and also her being diagnosed that late, I found it very difficult to find programs in Geelong for that specific age. There were lots for 12 and under or services for more extreme disabilities. There are lots of volunteer services like Treehouse, but there was not anything in particular that fancied my daughter's stature, I suppose. Her problem was that she felt she was not the same as the other people on the spectrum — did not look as severe as the low-functioning and did not want to be seen as someone with a disability.

We celebrate differences within our house, and there is no such word as 'normal'. She is very, very intelligent, and she attends St Ignatius. That is a private school, so they do a lot of academic structure and sport, whatever they need to do. They are really meeting her needs, and she has got the routine, the structure and the firmness that you get from the private school, that extra support, even though there is not a particular support for her.

The reason why I wanted to talk today was particularly about the programs in Geelong for teenage girls. I was looking at bringing in a program myself, or at least just doing volunteer work at some of the private schools around particularly the 11 to 14-year-old age group, to develop their social skills and interpreting and understanding what people say and how to respond appropriately, how to understand their emotions, what that emotion means and what to do with it in a healthy, acceptable way.

The other thing I wanted to take into consideration was the social media aspect as well that you hit on earlier. As you are probably aware, most autistic people like to sit in their bedroom with the doors closed and the laptop open. I am assured there is nothing for me to worry about, but I know there is, because I have great FBI characteristics. Even though they think I do not know anything about technology, I have got them totally sussed.

In the autistic world it is either you are a friend or you are not. On Facebook you have got 236 friends. Regardless of where they are on your friend tree, it is a minefield, and it is really scary as a parent to know that my daughter is talking to someone from America because he is a friend of a friend, and because it says 'friend', he is a friend. Disclosing that information of what you would disclose to your close personal friend, after three days they are your close personal friend, because you have had a close conversation. That really scares me, and I would really like to jump on board and help in any way that I can.

I have developed a program that I call Lil Butterfly — SOCIAL Butterfly. I have got my own business that I run from home, which is called Lil Butterfly. If we can put in the social butterflies, we can help to teach these girls what to say, how to say it, what is appropriate, what it means when you have got your hair spread out against the pillow and your lips pouted. They do not think that that means anything, so I have to explain to my daughter that you are going to get a few boys responding to that and why. What message is that sending out? Yes, it is really scary, even just for neurotypical girls let alone autistic ones.

I have spoken to the assistant principal at Clonard, and she is very keen on some empowering girls program, which Christine said she was trying to implement next year or going to implement. Also the wellbeing officer at St Ignatius was very keen, because they do not have enough staff. I cannot go in because I am not qualified, hence the reason why I went back to TAFE — to get that box ticked so that we can start the process of helping these girls, because it is needed. It is really needed.

The CHAIR — Absolutely. Thank you so much. Wonderful. Thank you, Leah.

Witness withdrew.