

Submission
No 133

INQUIRY INTO CHILD PROTECTION

Name: Name suppressed
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Partially
Confidential

Terms of Reference - GPSC No 2 - Inquiry into Child Protection

1 (i) Any other related matter

Attn: The Hon Mr Donnelly, The Hon Mr Green, Mr Shoebridge, The Hon Mr Mookhey, The Hon Mr Mason-Cox, The Hon Dr Phelps, The Hon Ms Taylor,

I wish to submit details of my experience with the dancing industry which is currently unregulated and therefore, not required to comply with child protection legislation.

I recently emailed the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian as I have some concerns regarding the Eisteddfod practices within the dancing industry. I sent the below email (specific identifying details have been altered) to kids@kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au on 03.09.2016.

I have attended two Eisteddfod's that were organised and managed by my daughter's former dance school. One event was held in May and the other in August. Both events were held at a public High School.

The first event saw all children being made to change in the auditorium with no privacy screening what so ever. People had to pay to enter the auditorium as this was where the stage was. I guess this may ensure that only people related to the children were in the auditorium but still not an ideal place to have children undressing down to underwear. Children of various ages were lined up around the interior walls and undressing constantly to change costumes. I was not comfortable with this so changed my child in the toilets. I had very real concerns that this was not best practice and potentially dangerous for children or a parent who inadvertently looked in the wrong direction at the wrong time.

The second event was similar. This time all children were made to get changed outside underneath a classroom awning. There were no privacy tents or screens provided. From this area you could be seen from the car park and adjoining residential properties. You did not have to pay an entry fee to access any of this area and it was easily accessible by the public. Again, I was not happy with this arrangement and chose to change my child in the toilets. The toilet door had a hand written sign on it saying "Female Change Room". Whilst I was changing my child in the toilets I was approached by a person wearing a t-shirt identifying them as a representative of my daughter's former dance school. This woman did not identify herself, by name, to me but asked me to leave the toilets as I was not permitted to change my child in there. I told her I was not changing her outside for the public to see. She again said that the owners of my daughter's former dance school do not allow people to change in the toilets and that this was not allowed. I was told again to exit the toilets and bullied by this woman until I left the toilets.

I was very upset and had concerns that, surely, this could not be right. There must be child protection laws to stop these kinds of things from occurring. They could not guarantee that there were no sex offenders in such a public area. Anyone could wander in from the street.

I attended another Eisteddfod at a public High School, but this time I took a pop up ensuite to change my child in. All children were again changing outside in public. This leads me to believe that this is common practice and accepted by the parents within my daughter's former dance school. Whilst we were changing a woman from the dance company who were hosting this Eisteddfod came out to inform us that there were change rooms provided and that no-one should be outside getting undressed. It was so refreshing to know that not all dance companies put children at risk as was done by my daughter's former dance school.

During the Eisteddfod it was announced several times that due to strict child protection laws set out by the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian, all children must change in the change rooms. Not only was I relieved to know that my concerns were valid, that some child protection laws had possibly been breached but it was good to see that not all dance companies do what my daughter's former dance school have done and continue to do, by ignoring their responsibility to abide by relevant and necessary child protection laws.

If what I have explained in this email is a breach of any child protection laws I wish to lodge a formal complaint. This practice of having children as young as 3 and as old as 16, undress in public must cease.

To date I have not even received an acknowledgement of receipt for this email. Whilst I understand that this may seem insignificant compared to the many more serious complaints they must receive, some advice or acknowledgment would have been appreciated.

Further to this email I have spoken with a woman who runs a dance organisation committed to change within the industry. This woman advised me that there are no current regulations or specific dancing related child protection laws that would protect children from people like the ones mentioned above. I find it absolutely appalling that this is acceptable to any government or child protection agency, who should be doing everything in their power to ensure ALL children are safe no matter what activity they choose to participate in. I am assured by this woman that my daughter's former dance school are not a shining example of the usual practices within the dance industry. Unfortunately, an unregulated industry attracts these types of people. This must stop! We MUST regulate and safeguard our children.

These children have been exposed to possible paedophiles and at the very least child pornography. In the changing areas as mentioned above, men and women were wandering around amongst these, at times, semi-naked children. Not only were they walking through this "change area" as a thoroughfare but some were sitting and lingering in this area. Parents were taking photos and video of their children in costume with other people's children in the background in various stages of undress.

For all we know, there are images of children as young as 3, in their undies only, being circulated on paedophile and child pornography websites thanks to the easily accessible and unsupervised changing area. How is a parent protected from inadvertently creating and disseminating child pornography if there are no laws or regulations preventing them from taking pictures or videos within a change area, a change area that is out in the open? With everything we know about paedophiles and predators, why are we accepting that our young children are ok to change in public areas, totally exposed to the very real risk of intelligent and highly organised paedophiles.

Having children change in an open environment with no privacy what-so-ever cannot be ignored just because no-one has bothered to regulate this industry. Children do not have the ability to choose for themselves whether they will or won't get undressed under these circumstances. Adults are supposed to ensure their safety. Whether that be a parent, a concerned citizen or even the federal or state governments. Isn't that the reason we have the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian or a minister for Children?

The other concerning aspect of the dance industry being unregulated, is the child abuse that occurs during classes. During my time as a parent with my daughter's former dance school, I witnessed children being emotional tormented and abused by an owner. This "teacher", I use this term loosely

as I am unaware of her qualifications, if any, to teach children, used bullying, intimidation and humiliation as training techniques during her classes. In actual fact I witnessed both owners of my daughter's former dance school, use passive aggression to control and manipulate their student's parents also. These are things that are also unreportable apparently, due to the lack of government interest in regulating this industry. I don't even know if the teachers have their Working with Children's checks. These owners have numerous adult volunteers, including their own children, who teach, manage different age groups (these are called Troupe Mum's) and receptionist. Whilst I see they are technically exempt, as they are exploiting one of the exemption criteria's to avoid a Working with Children check, it does raise concerns about why they feel the need to do so. What are they hiding? My understanding is volunteers can have a Working with Children check done free of charge, so it can't be for financial reasons.

While the government sit back and do nothing how many children are going to be emotionally traumatised, go on to endure mental illness as a result and become a burden on government for various reasons. It seems the only way the government will listen is if it affects their back pockets. So let's avoid unnecessary mental illness, victim counselling, victim compensation, court costs etc. and regulate this industry. Let's start protecting our children from sexual exploitation, possible sexual assaults, physical assaults and emotional trauma. This needs to happen as a matter of urgency.