

Australian Children's Rights News

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Australia's little prisoners



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Children are locked up in Australia behind fences topped with razor wire and prevented from escaping by guards in khaki-brown uniforms. These children wear identity tags with a number and respond when addressed by that number. Those who are born here are incarcerated from the moment of birth. The children of the

immigration detention camps are Australia's little prisoners. With only their parents to cling to, they are the unwitting subjects of a polemic that compels this nation to re-affirm its commitment to humanity.

In order to understand what is happening to children in these camps, it is important to examine how they got there, what happens in detention, and what some consequences of that detention are. My argument is that it is unethical as well as illogical to incarcerate children.

Until recently, the population in detention centres consisted mainly of single men who arrived from troubled countries to seek refuge in Australia. But in October 1999, a legislative amendment was proclaimed to prevent individuals from bringing their families to Australia after they are granted refugee status. As a direct consequence, more men now arrive with their families by boat, so that children arrive in ever increasing numbers.¹

Children and their parents are arrested when the boat makes it to the Australian shore. Most are detained in Woomera in South Australia or in Curtin in Western Australia, until the outcome of their application for refugee status is decided. Both centres are located in the desert, where the geographical isolation and the harshness of the climate make escape an almost suicidal endeavour.

The Woomera camp is brightly lit at night and can be seen several kilometres away from the Stuart Highway. Within the boundary fence, additional fences subdivide the camp into compounds.

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Guards are placed at corners and at other strategic points, so that every part of the fence is always in full view. Other guards patrol the perimeter and monitor the guards at the static posts, lest they take their watchful eye off the fence.

Children live with their families in flat army-style barracks. Scant light gets into the dormitories during the day because the tiny windows are covered with sheets to keep out the heat. Air conditioning is barely effective when temperatures soar to 48 degrees Centigrade in the summer months. At Woomera, there are no trees to provide shade.

The smaller rooms sleep four people in double bunks, with little floor space between the beds. Two families often share a large dormitory. Sheets serve as makeshift curtains between each family area, to give the illusion of privacy. There are no keys to the doors, so that the living quarters cannot be locked, not even at night.

Life is regimented for detained children. Random head counts occur at any time of the day or night, when the siren calls to muster. Even asking for a cake of soap or for nappies becomes a semi military operation. A uniformed guard controls access to household items and issues day-to-day requirements.

Play lacks the colour, clutter, and spontaneity one expects whenever children are carefree. Only occasionally are they reprimanded for making a noise. Detained children learn to play quietly on the barren ground at the Woomera centre. A child falls over and lands on the gravel surface. The result is another bleeding skin graze that gets patched up at the medical clinic.

Older boys sit outside with the men and wait for the time to pass. Or they sit on the ground and watch the men play soccer. Sand kicks behind running feet, and children get dirt into their eyes. There are no cheers when the ball flies through the imaginary goal post. Nobody objects when guards walk through the makeshift playing field. The purpose of the game is to distract the mind, to escape the burden of thinking.

Education focuses on English language classes, and English-speaking detainees often teach the material. Other subjects receive little attention. Attendance is not compulsory, and there is no formal curriculum with approval from the Education Department.

This means that education is effectively interrupted for the duration of detention.

Imprisonment behind razor wire and wearing an identity number is no way to bring up children.

They need to grow in a climate of trust, security, and attachment to others. But they also need playgrounds, toys, grass, and formal education. Detention does not provide these crucial ingredients to successful growth and development. Given that most asylum seekers are genuine refugees and therefore allowed to stay in Australia, it seems short sighted to place children into an environment that does not meet their developmental needs.

Psychotherapists have long argued that basic requirements must be met so that children grow to become satisfied adults who live harmoniously with others in society. From his observations of homeless children in post-war England, Bowlby concluded that children need close parental ties and emotional predicability. He later formulated his classic attachment theory which states that childhood deprivation damages people.²

Chances are that refugees are traumatised before they arrive in detention camps. Instead of providing an environment where healing can occur, we perpetuate the trauma.

Alice Miller warns that negative experiences in childhood create loneliness and suffering later in life, because "the way we are treated as small children is the way we treat ourselves the rest of our life".³ On this basis, one could argue that the abnormal developmental influences in detention camps produce damaged adults.

These early developmental elements are crucial and have universal relevance. Miller clearly spells out the relationship between childhood influences and emotional development:

"Children who are respected learn respect. Children who are cared for learn to care for those weaker than themselves. Children who are loved for what they are cannot learn intolerance. In an environment such as this they will develop their own ideals, which can be nothing other than humane, since they grow out of the experience of love."⁴

It is no wonder, therefore, that the United Nations safeguards the interests of children worldwide. The preamble to the Convention of the Rights of the Child stipulates the aim that children grow up in an environment "of happiness, love and understanding". Article 3.4 defines the environmental contingencies that enable such emotional comfort to include "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities".⁵

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Australia ratified its commitment to this Convention in 1989. Yet today there is a vast difference between our international and moral obligations, and what is happening in the remote lock-ups of this country. As former Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti observed in his report on last year's visit to the Curtin detention camp, "the basic problem is detention itself".⁶

Current legislation requires that asylum seekers are detained until their refugee status is clarified. This process can take years. The assumption is that the indefinite detention stops other asylum seekers from also arriving illegally.⁷ But detention equals prison, because detainees are not free to come and go, and because they are excluded from Australian society.

Prison is the harshest form of punishment legally available in Australia. Unlike criminals who are tried in our courts, asylum seekers cannot hope for leniency. Detention is the punishment for all. But by punishing adults, we are also punishing the children. These children arrive through no fault of their own. They arrive because adults bring them here. Yet they are held accountable for the problems created by grown-ups. The indiscriminate detention of children, therefore, is a reflection of how this nation treats those who are innocent. A legal and political framework that scapegoats children and uses them as a deterrent to stop others from arriving, is offensive to Australians.

Setting children free is the only logical step available. Yet it is not enough to free only the children because,

as we know from the work of developmental researchers, to separate children from their parents becomes the blueprint for generating even more harm. Therefore, the children and their parents (not just the mother) need to be released together. Anything less goes against the laws of development and comes at the expense of our previously good reputation for kindness and compassion.

While social and clinical researchers will not be able to demonstrate the long-term impact of the systematic incarceration of these children for some time, the problems that are actively created today are likely to prevent these children from developing to their full potential as adults. Keeping children as prisoners is wrong because of its inhumanity and because of the likely long-term damaging effects on these children.

¹ *Not the Hilton. Immigration Detention Centres: Inspection Report.* The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Joint Standing Committee on Immigration. September 2000, page 86

² John Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love.* Pelican Books, London. 1955

³ Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good. Hidden Cruelty in Child Rearing and the Roots of Violence.* Farrar, Straus, Grioux, New York. 1983, page 133

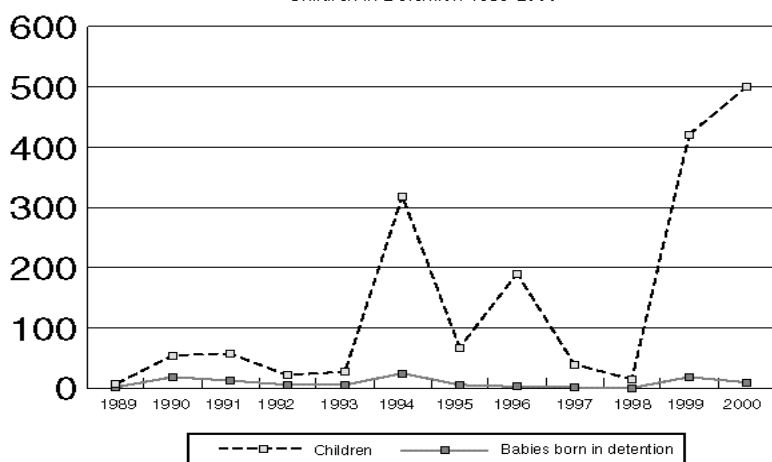
⁴ Alice Miller, *Though shalt not be aware. Society's Betrayal of the Child.* Farrar, Straus, Grioux, New York. 1984, page 97

⁵ *Convention of the Rights of the Child,* United Nations General Assembly. <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/k1drc.htm>

⁶ *Report on the Human Rights Commissioner's Visit to Curtin IRPC in July 2000,* Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/asylum/index.html

⁷ "Australia faces the quandary of locking people up", *The Age* (Newspaper), 2 December 2000.

Children in Detention 1989-2000*



*Note: These figures refer to the total number of unauthorised boat arrival children spending any period in a detention centre in the course of the year, and includes children detained for only a matter of days or for much longer. (Source: Detention Strategy Group, DIMA, January 2001)

Dr Philip Veerman, the International President of Defence for Children International has issued the following statement:

"The reported conditions in Australia's immigration detention centres, where minors are also deprived of their liberty, and the allegations of child abuse, excessive punishment and other violence, have shocked us at Defence for Children International. The reports we have received suggest systemic violations of the human rights of children which go beyond the reported incidents. In such conditions we can expect that children are suffering violations of their rights in more or less every moment of their lives. Deprivation of liberty has to be the last resort and in these cases could have been prevented. Defence for Children International (DCI) supports calls for an independent judicial inquiry with terms of reference that make explicit reference to Australia's commitment to children as a State Party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child."