

Play by the Rules – Megan Mitchell

You're listening to a Play by the Rules Podcast making sport inclusive, safe and fair.

Peter: Okay, welcome. Today I'm with Megan Mitchell, National Children's Commissioner and it's a great pleasure to be able to meet up with Megan today. I read today Megan that you're the first National Children's Commissioner, is that right?

Megan: Yes, I am the first. I started my role in 2013 even though the Australian Government had signed up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child way back in 1990.

Peter: Can you briefly then describe the role of the National Children's Commissioner?

Megan: Yes. My role is basically to protect and promote the rights and interests of all children in Australia; that's all 5.2 million children and young people under the age of 18. I also am charged with reviewing the laws and policies that affect children in Australia and making commentary and advocating about ways we can improve those laws and policies in the interests of children. I also can do education and research around children's rights and obviously I need to promote the fact that children have rights to children themselves and to adults because not everybody knows about the Convention of the Rights of the Child or that children have rights.

Peter: We'll cut to the chase I guess, if I were a local sports administrator or a volunteer in a local sports club, I have a concern around child safety. I used to make sure that my club was as safe as it could be. What are some of the practical things that can be done at a local level?

Megan: First I want to say that from my observation that most people involved in sports and that are involving children in those spaces do want to do the right thing and do want kids to be safe and so in order to do that I think the first thing is to ask the question "well, what have we got in place that will keep kids safe and happy?" because when we talk about children's rights they're kind of indivisible. Being safe is one thing but being feeling included and part of the organisation and feeling you can speak up if you've got concerns, that's really important too.

So, the first thing I'd say to people involved in a local sports club is to look at your practices and policies, have a little review of them, have a discussion with the others that you're working with about whether you think you've got the right things in place that would allow children to raise concerns if they had them in particular and also that everybody in the organisation, big or small as it is, knew about the policies and procedures that you had in place and they can ask questions too about what they can do. In the end it's about valuing children, understanding their rights, understanding what makes them feel

good and what hurts them, making sure that there's nothing around them physically or emotionally that would harm them.

Peter: From some of the feedback we get at Play by the Rules it's a real challenge for some people in sports to speak to children and listen to children about those concerns if there are concerns. It may be just that it's somebody in the Club who is shouting at children, something as basic as that but it's a real challenge for some people in the clubs to talk about the issue and to get the feedback of children and young people themselves in the clubs. Have you got any kind of advice or tips or whatever to help people with that?

Megan: Well the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has done some research in this area as has others about children's views of safety and how they perceive safety in organisations and what they've shown and what I found in talking to kids is that they're very well placed to comment on what concerns them and what they're okay about. They're a great source of information about what they're worried about so don't be afraid to go and ask kids, they'll tell you. They've incredibly insightful, you just need to give them the opportunity and the platform to speak up. It really is about listening and making sure kids feel that there is a place for them to raise concerns or issues if they need to. You might have a suggestion box. You might have a quiet time when you discuss safety in the Club and kids who want to be involved in that discussion will come and give you some advice. These are all just easy ways of listening to kids about what you can do and what they can do to protect themselves as well because they actually are **agents** in their own protection.

Peter: Yes, I came across an example the other day where they'd formed a kind of kids leadership group within the Club. They had leadership groups with the senior players and coaches but they'd formed a leadership group within the Club to feed back about some of the young people's issues, which I thought was a great process.

Megan: I think that's a fantastic idea. From how training is run to what happens at registration days, to what your policies are about taking people on and off at the game, all of those are things kids will have a view on because they're part of all those things.

Peter: You mentioned the Royal Commission, I do want to talk about obviously you've had quite a bit of involvement with the Royal Commission. There were some big lessons I thought for sport coming out of the Royal Commission. What do you think were some of the lessons?

Megan: I'd go back to that initial comment I made about the importance of listening and seeing kids and valuing kids. I mean so many of those cases time and time again unfortunately showed that those organisations or those clubs didn't have processes in place to listen to kids, they didn't believe them, the kids didn't want to raise things because when they did raise them they weren't believed or nothing was done about things so you really do need to

make sure there are things in place that allow you to see and hear from kids in ways that empower them, not silence them.

Peter: Yes, I think one of the issues for me was certainly that point you made of listening to the voices of young people and kids themselves in clubs. One of the issues that we've come across in this whole space is – “well it hasn't happened to us before”, “it's never been an issue here before”, “we don't think it's an issue”, “we're too busy to address these issues”, “we don't think it's an issue anyway, it never happened.” How can we raise the level of awareness so it's more front of brain?

Megan: Well I think the Royal Commission shows you that it does happen and just because you didn't know it happened doesn't mean it doesn't happen and clearly it happened to people in ways that they've suppressed it for years and years and years and it's come out later in life, so it does happen. When you've got kids and adults in a situation and there's an institutional arrangement in place, you often get at least power imbalances and you really need to recognise that it's a power imbalance and that things can go wrong in that situation unless you've got a really good weather eye on what's going on and that everybody is working off the same page in terms of understanding their responsibilities to children to keep them safe and well and being okay. That's why leadership is so important and I think there's another lesson from the Royal Commission that the leadership of the organisation needs to embed that culture of child safety, of child rights, of wellbeing of children, right throughout the organisation or the club so that everybody else will call it out if it doesn't happen.

Peter: Yes, sport is great. It's like society I guess, but sport has its power differentials with captains, you've got coaches, you've got a whole range of people in sports who have that so it's a really important point I think.

Megan: Yeah, and of course kids are told to respect authority and so if authority does the wrong thing they will often let that go by but kids as all of you know out there have an amazing sense of fairness and if they feel they've been unfairly treated they will feel it and they'll either tell somebody, I hope, if they're empowered kids or they'll remove themselves from that situation and we all want kids to play sport. We all want kids to enjoy sport and enjoy the camaraderie and the physical exercise and just feel good about themselves and the things that they can do in that physical space. We don't want kids to isolate themselves and take them away from that space or their parents to take them away either.

Peter: We've just at the back end of Let Kids be Kids campaign. That was about parental behaviour and sideline behaviour in junior sport and you mentioned parents there. There's a bit of research that tells us that parents are critical in terms of how kids enjoy their sport and if they keep going in sport as well. I guess they have an important role too not just from a parental point of view but from a volunteer point of view in a club. They're asking the right questions when they go to the club.

Megan: They're an absolutely critical accountability piece, parents and family members, but as the campaign that you're talking about Let Kids be Kids shows, they can also be a deterrent for kids. They can be an "oh, dad/mum" moment and so I think we really need to be careful what behaviour we're modelling in front of kids and how we're making them feel in playing sport. I mean, it's about them, not about the parents but they are an absolutely important and critical accountability measure in terms of ensuring that where their kids go, where their kids play sport is safe and so they need to be able to see the signs of safety as much as the kids need to be able to.

(audio then played with the following comments made by various children and adults)

Saw a father bashing his own son.

All the parents were arguing with each other.

It was really stressful and it made me just not feel good at all.

I stopped because I was being yelled at and it just wasn't any fun any more.

If they've got to yell out they could say something encouraging like "good job", "good pass" "you're doing great" "you're good, just keep trying and you'll get there".

Just let kids be kids.

Peter: I realise it's an almost impossible question but in five or 10 years time if you look at sport and the whole issue, where would you like to see sport placed in 5-10 years given that the Royal Commission now is finishing, their reports come out in the year and things are happening for sure, but what does it look like in the future?

Megan: Well I hope the sporting environment, as I said, from grassroots up to elite sport is somewhere where every child can feel safe and is safe, where every child can speak up if they need to if something's going wrong for them and that isn't necessarily just about abuse, it's also about feeling comfortable, welcome, part of a great group of people that they want to hang out with and that offers them all that social, emotional and physical wellbeing in their lives and that this is something that parents and communities also support and get behind but also keep to account on an everyday basis but the sporting organisations themselves, it's just normal practice, normal culture that children should be safe, that children's rights should be appreciated and upheld and that they understand and adults working in those situations understand their responsibilities and their duty of care of the children.

Peter: You're right, I think it comes down to culture and the habits that clubs in sports has in being more front of brain in that way. Megan Mitchell, thank you

very much, it's been an absolute pleasure to meet up again and so thank you for joining us on Play by the Rules.

Megan: Thanks Peter.

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