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This is the Accepted Manuscript, peer reviewed version of the following article:

Lines, L. E., Hutton, A., & Grant, J. M. (2022). Are children still seen and not heard? *Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Nursing*.

Which has been published by Taylor & Francis in *Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Nursing* on 16 February 2022, available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24694193.2022.2039037>

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**Title:** Are children still seen and not heard?

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### **Title: Are children still seen and not heard?**

Adults know best and 'children should be seen and not heard'. This historical Victorian claim reflects adult superiority about what's best for children. With shifting societal values, and the landmark United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990), Western parenting typically favours more democratic parenting styles. In higher income countries, there is a trend towards having fewer children and investing more emotional and financial resources into these children. The significant emotional investment of parenting means that children are precious, and parents have high hopes for their children's future success.

Our collective values about the importance of children were highlighted in Australia most recently when four-year-old Cleo Smith went missing from her Australian bush campsite (Mallett, 2021). The search for Cleo sparked immense public concern and support for Cleo and her parents. These instances are not without unhelpful commentary, with Cleo's parents receiving speculation on social media about their involvement in the disappearance (Mallett, 2021). The disappearances of children such as Madeleine McCann in Portugal during 2007 remain embedded within public memories of missing children and parents becoming victims of suspicion and mistrust (McNair, 2014). In these instances, our concerns about children's safety are fuelled by anxieties about perceived parental failings of what 'should' or 'could' have been done.

### **Have our values about listening to children changed?**

As a society, it would appear that we are clearly interested in our children and their wellbeing. But have our core values about how we see children really changed? Most countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). We have since embedded children's right to be heard many areas of society, such as legislative provisions which enable children's input into decisions affecting them. For example, many countries have legislation that enables courts consider children and young people's views when deciding upon parenting arrangements after separation. Similarly, child protection legislation generally works on the principle of children's 'best interests' (Glover & Justis, 2015), to enable courts to seek children's preferences and views. This enables children's right to participate in decisions about them.

Children typically also have a greater say in what happens to their own bodies. Schools increasingly teach about consent and right to bodily autonomy to protect children from physical and sexual abuse (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The pressing need to protect children from sexual

abuse was highlighted by both the *Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017)* and the *Investigation and review of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's handling of allegations of sexual abuse by former USA gymnastics physical Lawrence Gerard Nassar (Department of Justice, 2021)*. In each report, there were cultures of silence and covering-up crimes perpetrated against children. In Australia, this Royal Commission subsequently led to the publication of the *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (2018)* which have been endorsed by Australian Commonwealth and state/territory governments. The National Principles are for all organisations providing services to children and aim to prevent harm through early intervention when potential signs of abuse are observed. Importantly, Principle 2 outlines Australia's collective commitment towards listening to children, with the expectation that children and young people can 'participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously' (Council of Australian Governments, 2018).

These changes should represent an overarching shift in Western values where children's views are truly valued and taken seriously so they can be protected from harm. Even with these policy and legislative changes towards a more child-inclusive society, children are dying at the hands of adults and their voices remain unheard.

### **How do we know?**

Despite shifts in the way that we view children, many children continue to die from abuse and neglect despite attempting to communicate their distress to adults. Out of the hundreds of fatalities from abuse and neglect, well-known names include Daniel Pelka (UK, 2012), Anthony Avalos (USA, 2018), Arthur Labinjo-Hughes (UK, 2020) and Charlise Mutton (Australia, 2022). These children showed many physical and behavioural signs of their distress, and in some instances even verbally communicated their concerns to adults. For example, despite Daniel Pelka acting 'solemn and withdrawn' and displaying obsessions with food, no attempts were made to seek his views (Staffordshire Safeguarding Children Board, 2013). Reasons for not listening to children include that they being young they are 'unreliable' (Montgomery, 2013). Older children are also ignored, as demonstrated by the ongoing coronial inquiry into the Australian case of fourteen-year-old Zhane who took his own life. Zhane had been in foster care most of his life. After his foster carer experienced financial difficulties Zhane was placed in a residential care facility against his wishes where he did not feel loved or safe (Carter & Campbell, 2021).

These are blatant examples of our failure to listen to and value children's perspectives. Failing to listen to children also happens in less public ways. Although children are legally permitted to have a say in the justice system, the complexity of systems and services means that the practicalities of voicing concerns is difficult or impossible (Carson et al., 2018; Together: Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights, 2020). Similarly, in the 2017 UK *Review of Children's entitlements in the victims' code*, many children and young people who were victims of crime felt they were not taken seriously (Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, 2017). This finding is echoed in Australia, with the most recent Children's Rights Report (2018) identifying that children stated 'no' when asked if they were able to 'have a say about things that are important to them'. Instead of listening, children perceived adults would try to put a positive spin on the circumstances by saying things would be okay or get better over time (Institute of Child Protection Studies & Australian Catholic University, 2015). Children found these responses unhelpful, and instead wanted adults to acknowledge their concerns and provide support to work through the situation (Institute of Child Protection Studies & Australian Catholic University, 2015).

### **What needs to change?**

Significant gains have been made in legislation and policy about how we must listen and act upon children's views. Creating a child-safe society that truly values children requires commitment from all adults who encounter children personally and professionally. This means listening all the time – and not just when children tell us what we like to hear. Listening and believing is crucial when children tell us things that are distressing or raise complex questions about their safety and our responses.

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