



NEW SUPPORT PROGRAM REDUCES ANXIETY FOR CHILDREN AT COURT

A new program at the Ballarat Law Courts is reducing the stress of the court process for mothers and children while protecting children from further traumatisation. McAuley Community Services for Women began *Court Support 4 Kids* in Ballarat late last year, after seeing positive outcomes from the program at Sunshine and Melbourne courts and a need in Ballarat.

Court Support 4 Kids worker, Lynda was based at the Ballarat court three days a week to offer practical support to mothers and their children until the coronavirus pandemic hit. Lynda said



while families were discouraged from bringing their children to court, some were be unable to secure childcare if called to court at late notice, or they may not have support networks or the resources to arrange for care.

"My role is to support them primarily through offering distracting play for the children to make sure they have as positive a court experience as possible and to allow the parent to do what they need to do while they are in court with minimal distraction," she said.

"This also ensures the children aren't re-traumatised through hearing information that is not age appropriate for them to hear. We talk to them about their feelings and experiences if that is initiated by the child. Children can be quite anxious when they are attending court, anxious for both themselves and the parent."

Court Support 4 Kids also offers material support like nappies, snacks, baby carriers and toys. Many parents are required to attend court at short notice and can be un-prepared to spend the day there. Lynda said many mothers expressed relief for the service that allowed them to focus on what they needed to achieve at court.

Lynda said the program was about more than just providing practical support. "On the surface it might look like we are playing with a child, but there are a lot of layers to that," Lynda said. "We recognise we have this window of opportunity with the parents and their children. We advocate for the family if there is a young baby to have the matter heard as early as possible in court, we will link into services and refer them to services in the community and we are trained in regards to trauma responses in children."

"With the children, it is about helping them recognise they are their own individual person and they have their own experience and perception of what is going on. We are quite a strong advocate for the children for their experience and feelings to be recognised. Sometimes it can be as simple as saying to a child, 'How are you feeling about being here today? What do you think about the court? What is your understanding of why you are here?'"

"A lot of the children who come in are extremely hypervigilant as a result of trauma and many feel they need to offer a protective role to their parents. We allow them to be a child in that setting and not have to take on adult information, adult responsibilities and hear information that would re-traumatise them."

McAuley Community Services created *Court Support 4 Kids* two years ago after a staff member noticed mothers coming in to court for family violence intervention orders were being turned away by magistrates and told to put their children in care, meaning they left the court without a protective order.

The program's expansion to Ballarat followed the opening of the specialist family violence court and McAuley House in Ballarat.

"We are really lucky to have the program in Ballarat and the specialist family violence court in Ballarat is a real asset," Lynda said.

Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier, text by Rochelle Kirkham