

Media Release
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RESPONSE TO PLANS TO PUNISH YOUNG CRIMINALS

Plans to punish children as young as 10 and hold them accountable for criminal behaviour has been condemned by youth and social workers at The Wayside Chapel, one of Sydney's leading welfare agencies.

"It's not feasible to suggest that children at 10 are old enough and developed enough, both emotionally and mentally, to be held accountable in such a strong way for their actions," Mr van Breda said.

"If anyone thinks back to the kind of person they were when they were 10 - we're talking about children who are in Years 5 and 6 – they will admit to having made mistakes. To think we would potentially label these children as fully fledged criminals before they have even reached high school is really disappointing.

The plans, suggested in today's newspapers, also commit 17-year-old offenders to the adult court system.

"It's fine to promote that there are always consequences to people's actions but continued court appearances are more likely to have a negative impact on impressionable teenagers than have any success at rehabilitating them," Mr van Breda said.

The Wayside Chapel has long been a safe haven for at risk youth and marginalised children. There is increasing demand for programs, activities and support to be provided to young people to divert them from anti-social behaviour however funding is always limited.

The innovative Client Panel is used at Wayside to assess and come up with a course of action with offenders responsible to their peers meaning they are more likely to deter them for behaving badly than punishing them after the event.

"We have to have more responsibility for our children and teenagers than just pushing them into court and hoping they learn their lesson," Mr van Breda said.

"They need mentoring and education not constant punishment and retribution."

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The Wayside Chapel is a well known Sydney Icon that provides unconditional love, care and support for people on and around the streets of Kings Cross. It has a long history of being at the forefront of social justice issues. Wayside pioneered Australia's first 24 hour crisis centre, the first Drug Referral Centre, co-founded the Aboriginal Affairs Foundation and started Life Education Australia. In the 60's and 70's it was also considered a first-class arts establishment.