



## So...podcast – Episode 3 Terry Laidler

*You're listening to So...podcast with John McKenna*

John: Greetings. John McKenna, and welcome to another So...podcast. I've got a friend and a very interesting guest with me. G'day Terry, how are you going?

Terry: I'm well John, and it's been a long journey since I saw you last.

John: It has. I'm talking about Terry Laidler. Some people know the name. Terry's going to talk a little bit about himself and then we're going to talk about interesting topics such as child protection, family breakdown, resilience, but more importantly Terry, the community and where that plays.

Terry: It sounds a bit sombre when you put it that way doesn't it?

John: It does indeed.

Terry: I'm not intending it that way but when we knew each other best and worked most closely, I was at RMIT running a little research centre that looked at how people use communications and information technology. My journey since then has taken me in a totally different direction. I'm a psychologist by training, and I've worked a lot within the Family Law system and within the Child Protection system looking at how we protect the best interest of kids I suppose. How we support kids in those two difficult types of situations and that's led me to think a few things about how we should support kids generally.

John: We're talking kids under 18?

Terry: Yeah, but I'm not being technical. Most of the kids I see are either primary school age or early secondary school age. By and large the Child Protection system operates with kids in that sort of domain. The Family Law system certainly does but notionally the court can make decisions about what happens to kids up until they're 18. But the judges aren't dumb, they sort of realise that if you tell a 17-year-old to do something they don't want to do, your chances of getting compliance are pretty slim. So the Family Court tends to back off on kids when they get to about 14 or 15.





John: For sure. Terry, I went through those points. Yeah, they're a bit sombre but let's talk about the positive side of resilience and how does it work?

Terry: Well there's a bit of a worry I think in the community in general. I don't want to overplay it John, whether we're mollycoddling kids too much. So all the emphasis on protecting kids from external danger, stranger danger, for giving them the equipment they need to look after themselves in respect to their bodily integrity and all that, and all the sort of stuff that is involved now in getting kids to school.

When I was a kid, I don't know what you did, when I was a kid, we walked two miles to school in a group without adults with us. I presume there were some risks for us in doing that, but none that our parents thought were so extreme that they had to pick us up in their SUV before and after school. Do you know what I mean?

John: I do, for sure.

Terry: I think there was a preparedness to trust the community a bit more and to let kids experiment out in the community a bit more, and that seems to me to have gone a little bit. We've also put a lot of emphasis on protecting kids from bullying and that's a great thing. I mean there were kids I know who were bullied at school who wear the scars of that 50 years later, and I'm not joking. That long down the track.

So we don't want bullying. We want schools to be positive, affirmative places. We want kids protected from external danger and able to be assertive within their community and the family group. But the end product of a lot of that I think, is a growing level of apprehension in some kids, in a lot of kids, about what the future holds for them and what the world's like. Such that you get courses run now in resilience.

How do you teach kids, one of the courses I know about, it's called "No Scaredy Cats". So how do you teach kids to have the assertiveness and the confidence they need to manage the risks in the world in their own way?

John: Honing in on Child Protection, it's an environment that affects everybody that go through it. We're talking justice, we're talking security guards, it's a vibe that really freaks people out.

Terry: It's a pretty chaotic situation. When a family has broken down enough that the state feels it has to intervene, otherwise kids will be neglected, abused or harmed, it's a pretty bad situation. So you're talking about one end of a long spectrum where things are pretty





terrible. And I think people try to intervene then to protect the best interests of the kids but we all know that the state is a pretty lousy parent.

John: Are you talking about the state of Victoria?

Terry: The state generally. I mean look at the history of kids who've gone into state care in English speaking jurisdictions but across the western world and all that. Yeah, the state hasn't done particularly well even where you couldn't leave kids in their family because they were chaotic. So a lot of emphasis now in trying not to move kids out of their families. So we talk about 'kindred care'. We try to find grandparents or uncles and aunts or cousins or something who will keep their kid in their family.

Then we prefer foster care where a couple looks after kids as part of a family group before we look at institutional care. But we still do put some kids in institutional care, and the outcomes for all those kids are, I'd have to be frank, pretty ordinary.

John: So for parents listening to us talk right now, there may be a grandparent saying "Okay, I need to do something to make the children I love and care more resilient." Knowing of course, the opposition for that parent or grandparent is they're going to get onto Facebook. They're going to use social media to also get support. Let's be honest, parents and grandparents and family, we're competing with social media to get advice.

Terry: Probably. But I don't think social media is a big problem.

John: You don't?

Terry: In the work I do, the real problem, seriously, if you wanted to identify the number one problem that leads to kids being neglected or abused, it's uncontrolled substance use by their parents. The most common substance that's abused is alcohol by a mile. We forget about that. Alcohol puts kids in abusive families, in violent families. Alcohol doesn't do it.

John: I doubt that anyone would disagree there, for sure.

Terry: The second biggest problem we've got, where I am at the moment in Victoria, is with parents whose ice use...

John: Say that again?





Terry: Parents whose ice use, methamphetamine use, really impairs their ability to function as parents and then there's levels of use of other substances that are problematic. But that's the main risk to kids that I observe wherever I work.

John: So yes of course, parents play a huge role and carers. But if we talk about children becoming their own self-advocate, to become empowered, how does the carer encourage that?

Terry: I think by encouraging age-appropriate risk taking and that's where sometimes the balance goes awry too, in my view. When's the first time you let the kids go down the street to the 7-Eleven to buy the newspaper on their own? It seems to me when I look at this, it's still in regional areas where people have a bit more confidence in their communities. They're prepared to canvas that sort of independence with kids a bit earlier than people are in the cities. But the task of getting kids to take that sort of independent... well, to take independent decisions and do things a bit independently belongs to parents in my view, no matter where they reside.

In the cities, these days certainly, that involves actually being prepared to talk through issues with your kids. Kids' brains are still developing and until they get to about 23, their brain's very big because it includes first of all their family group, that's part of their brain. It includes their peer group as they get a bit older, that's part of their brain and especially when parenting is having its most efficient impact which is really from the time the kid gets language, two and a half, three, through to about 12, 13, 14 when they start to develop a fair degree of autonomy. It's the parent's modelling of how boundaries are set to be both protective but also challenging, that shapes what the child themselves will do. And we know that, the research on that's good.

John: And of course the carer or the parent wants to monitor the progress of the kid in the area of community connection and resilience. There are no tools out there to score are there? It's a combination of gut feeling and perhaps talking to other parents.

Terry: I don't want to overlay it but I think our communities have become weaker. We don't have the bonds and links that used to be provided through things as diverse as church groups, Scouts and Guides. We used to have a lot of institutional structures where we very directly invited the rest of the community to share our child raising with us.

One of the things I think we ought to be doing in our community at the moment, is really supporting sports clubs because I think sports clubs have stepped into that role. That a lot of good is done for kids through their swimming training and their tennis coaching and their Auskick and later their underage netball and basketball and football teams. That's





often a place where they can take safe risks, to be quite honest with you, if the adults involved in those things are the right sort of adults, and by and large they are. I think kids get a lot of what I'm talking about, the build-up of resilience out of those sort of groups.

John: I'll respectfully challenge that.

Terry: Go!

John: Because sitting in my electric wheelchair, we talk a lot about sport. Sport solves everything and I know from a disability perspective, someone has an accident, they go and start playing wheelchair basketball, all that. But I am really focussed on, you know, there are other ways like music, like good healthy..... So I agree with it.

Terry: Fine.

John: But I reckon there's too much emphasis on the word 'sport'.

Terry: Right. Your wheelchair tennis has gone off has it?

John: What's that?

Terry: Your wheelchair tennis has gone [laughing].

John: That led to my golf, it's terrible. My golf is gone. You ought to see my handicap. But yeah, so I respectfully challenge how sport, yes, plays a role, but there's got to be other stuff out there like music.

Terry: I'd said yes 'and'. You know what I mean? So what I'm saying with sport, I think can be true of the local drama group, of the local choir, of all those sort of things. But they're diminishing too. It might be something that we really need to look at from the point of view of people with disability. A lot of the structures, that was my argument, that used to give us the community links that were important, seem to me to have diminished. For example, I don't know, I'd have to go and look at it, whether there are so many choirs around these days. Are there?

John: I'm not sure.

Terry: Music groups, I don't know.

John: The Choir of Hard Knocks has been a great success story hasn't it?





Terry: Yep.

John: And that's because of media coverage.

Terry: Yeah.

John: Well Terry, I've really enjoyed this conversation. I think we've covered really fascinating topics around children and how they need to, not need to survive, but how we can support them. Any closing comments?

Terry: I think the people who are stressing resilience are onto something. I think we might have got the balance a bit wrong on the side of being protective towards kids. And I don't want to say 'Don't do that' that's not what I'm saying at all, and a bit away from helping kids to take productive and safe risks. Safe risk, can you say that?

John: You can here.

Terry: You know what I mean though don't you?

John: I do indeed. You could also say it a different way 'Dignity of risk'. We see that in the disability sector a lot. Allow people to have a dignity of risk.

Terry: Yep.

John: Before we close, you've got your own website if people want to learn a bit more about yourself?

Terry: Oh no.

John: Don't want to talk about that?

Terry: Not unless they want a psychologist. That's the other thing, most people don't need psychologists, I'm telling you [laughing].

John: Okay, thank you. Add that to your list, parents listening. I'd like to thank everybody for listening. This is another episode of the So ... podcast. What's important for me as I develop these podcasts is feedback from you out there, my listeners. So please feel free to give me some feedback, on what you think of this conversation or past ones. This is John McKenna saying again to Terry for coming along and we'll see you next time.





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