

From Vicki O'Halloran, Chief Executive Officer,  
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## CHILDREN'S LIFESTYLE AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE TOP END

The Top End of the Northern Territory is a kaleidoscope of cultures presenting our young people with opportunities to share in the many and various lifestyles we enjoy. Our tropical weather allows families to enjoy the outdoors 12 months of the year – we are not dictated to by the four seasons.

We know that good role modelling, positive attention and encouragement motivate our society's children, and this is something us adults need to focus upon. But we also need to take account of the genetic make-up we inherit and this may include physical characteristics, such as eye colour, hair texture, as well as some behavioural and emotional characteristics. Some children may have problems concentrating, or have a tendency to feel sad or depressed, which can be attributed to a genetic influence. Then there are those who kick goals for the sporting team and win races – just like their forbears have done in the past – or achieve significant goals of other sorts. Being a winner – with its associated feeling of exhilaration – has to be one of the best confidence boosters we can have. How important it is for us to win from time to time in whatever it is we do – it is so normal to want to come out on top every now and then.

I recently interviewed a number of Darwin children who had just completed their first week of school for 2008 in an attempt to get some insight into their thoughts about living in the Northern Territory. Our discussions usually ended up being around why the Top End is better – I must say there was no shortage of confidence and motivation apparent during this process.

Out of a group of six young Territorians, the recurring theme was that it was great to escape long winters. The children's comments made it clear that they appreciated their warmth-induced casual lifestyle. Did I know that, due to the warm weather, 'you don't have to wear many clothes'? I was actually informed by one 10-year-old that 'the same shorts and bathers were fine for a week or two'. And a 7-year-old told me, 'if it is raining in the Top End it is always warm, so what better way to have fun in your clothes out running in

the rain – the sun usually comes out a short time later and dries you off'.

I see evidence of this casual approach to clothing on my drive past many schools in Darwin on my way to work. It is interesting to note the many and varied uniforms, often polo shirts, with shorts or skorts. The new Darwin Middle School uniform is a reflection of our Top End lifestyle and environment – a blend of sea blues and greens with patterns of waves and shells.

I couldn't quite sign off from this brief 'bulletin' from the Top End without reference to the Federal Government 'Intervention' and its impact on our children. This is presenting plenty of challenges to those of us working with children and young people. To do justice to this topic, I would have to discuss at length the many facets of this system which is attempting to protect our most precious assets. However, I will share with you one of the most recent decisions – welfare payments for almost 500 Top End residents in Indigenous communities have now been quarantined. Centrelink is withholding half of the payments from the communities in Darwin, Palmerston, Adelaide River and Belyuen, with a plan to ensure the money is spent on 'essential items'. Almost 6000 people in Central Australia have already commenced this program as part of the Intervention. Our new Federal Government is supporting this income management scheme to ensure money is spent in the best interests of children. Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin has said that income management provides better financial security for many mothers, grandmothers and other community members to feed and raise their children.

So far, early indications are that there has been an increased proportion of spending on food, and some community stores specifically noted an increase in fruit and vegetable sales. This can only be a good thing – but we shall await longer term results of this scheme with interest.

Vicki O'Halloran