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Eileen Wood

4 Dec 2021, 3:30 a.m.

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 **TIME FOR TOUGH KIDS:** South Australian Senior Australian of the Year Mark Le Messurier works to safeguard the emerging spirit of young people.



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PARENTING and educating through "soft eyes and warm hearts" is the ethos of 2022 South Australian Senior Australian of the Year, Mark Le Messurier.

The 67-year-old Adelaide educator, child mentor and parent coach has devoted his life to improving the self-worth, wellbeing, mental health and life outcomes of young people.

He focuses on who he calls the "tough kids" - those who are struggling in some capacity. This includes children with disabilities, global developmental delays, disadvantage, disorders, neglect, or a combination of issues.

And it would seem that Mark's work and understanding is more important than ever with today's children and young people facing challenges never before encountered.

Australian research shows that 40 per cent of children experience traumatic events which can change thinking and behaviour. Also, 7.4 per cent of children have some level of disability, yet little time is spent in teacher training on disability, so practical and positive ways to support these young people to find success is patchy, thin, or absent.

Then there are the pressures of modern day life such as social media.

As Mark says, "The speed and fluidity of social media and the expectation on young people to continuously post to prove they have a life that's worthy".

After a 20-year teaching career, Mark opened a private-practice consultancy to mentor children and teenagers who needed support beyond the school system, and to coach parents.

His goal has always been to create environments that set children and adults up for success.

He's authored numerous books for teachers and parents, including co-authoring *What's the Buzz?* - a world-class social and emotional literacy education program. It has become a standard course in the training of

teachers, counsellors, psychologists, social workers and youth workers in more than 90 countries.

As a young graduate teacher, Mark was mentored by some female colleagues who had a connected, child-centred approach, and helped shape his attitudes about children, families and communities in schools.

He and wife Sharon adopted their two daughters from South Korea, which also brought challenges. His youngest daughter Noni now works alongside him and the eldest Kim is a scientist and mother of three living in Memphis.

'Tough kids'

Mark says his decision to work with the "tough kids" was no light bulb moment.

He credits Sharon and his early teaching colleagues with some of the impetus for the direction he has taken.

"Parenting and educating children with 'soft eyes and a warm heart' safeguards a young person's emerging spirit because we separate their behaviour from who they are, and who they can be in the future," he said.

"For all kinds of reasons - disability, disadvantage, neglect, trauma, anxiety and so on - a large group of young people in the community are not able to engage with peers, connect, and establish healthy relationships."

He acknowledges the important role that grandparents play.

"Grandparents can have a really beautiful role, because there's no urgency to make things right," he says.

"A grandparent can be a very special adult that can walk alongside them (the child) and can do it without having to instruct like a parent."

Mark and other state and territory winners go forward to the national awards which will be announced in Canberra on January 25.

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