

## Agony is a captive child

By Ruth Ostrow

MY little girl is playing in the park. There are so many bright, coloured streaks called children around her, slipping down the slide, swinging high into the air, it's hard to make her out in the crowd. But still I watch - like a hawk, like an eagle - for the red hat she is wearing, for her golden hair bouncing around her shoulders, for any sign that reassures me she's OK.

This is a mother's lot. To watch and worry, even in the idyllic calm of Byron Bay. Watch that no harm may come to her. That no one snatches her, abuses her, that she doesn't fall and cry. It's the crying that always cuts my soul.

To keep a child safe is one of the greatest responsibilities and honours an adult can have. But the irony is bearing down on me, for we are at a rally in the park, thrown by the local community in support of refugees.

Fellow journalist Mungo MacCallum has just left the stage in tears. Friend and writer David Leser is here to talk about the impact mandatory detention is having on refugee children. While my seven-year-old daughter runs off to play on the nearby swings, Leser tells a story of life in one of several detention centres he has visited.

"I am here today to talk about Amy. She is nine years old. Recently she tried to hang herself," he says. My skin crawls. "She tied a sheet to the ceiling, swallowed a bottle of shampoo, then put her head in the makeshift noose. When the guards managed to break the door down, her parents and younger brother found her lying in a sea of vomit, her face translucent with death."

Her Christian family - fleeing persecution - arrived on a rickety boat that broke up on Ashmore Reef, he explains. At that time, refugee children were imprisoned in detention centres behind razor wire and forced to contend with searing temperatures, scorpions, sometimes snakes, inedible food and millions of flies. They were privy to regular acts of desperation and self-harm. Some children cried all day.

Leser is obscuring my view of the playground as he speaks. I stand up, step to the side, and maintain my watchful vigil, as he continues his gruelling tale.

"Amy began wetting her bed every night, vomiting and suffering from insomnia and nightmares. She would put her foot in her mouth and refuse to clean her teeth or take herself to the toilet because the toilet was hundreds of metres away and she was too frightened to walk there on her own. She avoided meals, scratched herself till she bled and constantly talked about death.

"She had seen countless people trying to end their own lives including one man - a father of a one-year-old - who, in total despair, finally swallowed insecticide and then hung himself from a leafless tree which detainees dubbed the Hanging Tree."

He says Amy pleaded with her parents to take her home to die rather than let her die in the camp. "She asked her parents constantly why they were in prison. Why

they had failed to protect her as they'd promised. Her parents, buckled by grief and despair, had no answer for their daughter. They thought they could keep her safe in Australia."

My tears begin to flow. For if we continually obsess about the safety of our own precious children and we strive to keep other people's children safe - driving slowly in school zones, chasing after someone else's child who is running towards a road - then why can't we grasp what life must be like for these desperate refugees and their poor, frightened children?

What's stopping the flow of compassion and empathy to our hearts? It is the "not us" nature of the situation. Leser has anglicised Amy's real name for two reasons. One is to prevent the family being deported for talking to the press. But the other is that by using an Anglo-Saxon rather than ethnic name we can identify a fragile, vulnerable child through the veil of our prejudices.

"When you feel that little girl's hand in yours, when you hold her father in your arms and he trembles and crumples into you in fear and gratitude, your heart opens with the human bond, the sameness, between you," says Leser.

The federal Government's position is that it is not ideal that children be detained. However if they arrive unlawfully, the law requires that they be detained. But in this situation, it is our souls that are detained. For, as Leser says, this is not about boatpeople, asylum-seekers, queue jumpers or terrorists. "It's about human beings. Pregnant women, terrified men, tortured, destitute families and sad, wretched children like Amy, all of whom have been locked up for the crime of seeking our protection."

I am not a political creature. I'm just a mother. And as one over-protective, loving, worried mum keeping a watchful vigil on her child, I ask only that as a nation we ensure other people's children be kept safe too.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 20 JUL 2002