
Opening Address delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Karl Vella Foundation Conference, “Left in the Sideline: Illness in the Family through the Eyes of the ‘Healthy’ Child”, 11 May 2018

Ms Pauline Micelli
Ms Claire Chircop
Distinguished guests,
Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to address this important conference, facilitated by the Karl Vella Foundation.

Let me take this opportunity to commend the leadership of the Foundation’s Chairperson, Claire Chircop, and her team, for their tireless efforts.

In fact, it has been my privilege to support the Karl Vella Foundation since it was first established in 2014, with the mission to support and empower children and young people, who are experiencing serious illnesses within their families.

The Karl Vella Foundation, with its centre-of-operations located at the President’s Kitchen Garden, is capable of offering essential services to a growing number of children and families in the Maltese Islands.

I am pleased to note that these services include various forms of therapy and counselling, which are a vital life-line to all those, who are passing through times of crisis and uncertainty.

I believe it is crucial for Maltese society to invest in the work of the Karl Vella Foundation, which is directly supporting many children, by safeguarding and nurturing their holistic wellbeing.

This is particularly necessary when a child is exposed to serious experiences of chronic illness, of a close family member, such as a sibling or a parent.

The vulnerabilities of childhood are compounded by the sudden concentration that a family has to place, on managing and addressing the complex needs of a sick family member.

In this context, let me quote an important study by Professor Jo Aldridge, who is a specialist in social policy, and Professor Saul Becker, who is a world leader in the field of child carers.

This important study is entitled “Children as carers: the impact of parental illness and disability on children’s caring roles,” and was published in the Journal of Family Therapy.

Their study concludes that;

“Research evidence over the past ten years has suggested that when children take on care-giving roles in the family, their educational, social and emotional experiences, and health, can often be seriously jeopardised.”

For this reason, today's conference and the focus it will place on offering more effective supportive outreach to children, who find themselves within caring roles, or who have to deal with the impact of the illness of a parent or a sibling is crucial.

Today's conference is creating a much-needed safe space, where awareness and visibility are being provided, about the psychosocial wellbeing of the child.

Furthermore, the conference is moving from theory into action, by providing practical advice and strategies for professionals who are working closely with such children, in order to meet their complex needs in a more effective and comprehensive way.

I believe that there should be more focus, by our society, to help in addressing the complex needs of the child, who is experiencing the additional stress of family illness.

This is important, because we need to ensure that the realities which they are facing do not have negative or long-term effects upon their own mental health and social development.

We all know that children are resilient in the face of life's challenges; however, it is our duty, as adults and as responsible members of society, to ensure that the child is given the freedom to enjoy their childhood to the fullest extent possible.

This is why I must reiterate my congratulations to the Karl Vella Foundation, and the passionate team of professionals and volunteers who give their time, to achieve these goals.

I would like to encourage us all, to continue to ensure that every child and their family, in the Maltese Islands, is empowered with the knowledge, the skills, and the ability to face and overcome the challenges of life, with a spirit of strength and empowerment.

We owe our children nothing less.

Thank you for your attention, and I wish you all a fruitful conference.