

## Associate Professor Georgina Dimopoulos

### Qualifications:

PhD in Law, Bachelor of Laws (First Class Honours) and Bachelor of Arts (Media and Communications), from the University of Melbourne

### Institution:

Southern Cross University, Faculty of Business, Law and Arts

### Research Field:

Ensuring children's voices are safely heard in family law processes; improving how courts make decisions in cases involving family violence; and helping achieve safer, more child-centred outcomes



## IN THEIR WORDS

**I'm driven by a passion to make children's rights "business as usual" in Australia – especially children's right to participate in decisions about their lives.**

The collaborative research that I do with children and young people who have lived experience of family violence and the family courts highlights just how much we can learn from children if we are open to listening to and understanding them.

This is about building trust, and giving children a safe space and enough time to share their views, experiences and ideas.

It's also about making decisions with, not only about, children and their lives – which can apply to decisions made by courts, governments, schools, and even parents and carers.

As a solo mum of two, I'd like to think that I practise what I preach with my own children!

The wise words of 11-year-old Olive (not her real name), who helped to create the Family Law 4 Kids toolkit ([familylaw4kids.au](http://familylaw4kids.au)), will stay with me as I continue advocating for children's rights through research: "You gotta listen to the children, 'cause it's their lives. But it's also like, sometimes they've got some pretty great ideas too."

# GIVING KIDS A VOICE

**G**iving children a say in the legal process surrounding divorce has driven Southern Cross University researcher Georgina Dimopoulos to develop a unique toolkit to provide support for young people and practitioners.

Through more than 15 years focused on children's participation in Family Court proceedings, Associate Professor Dimopoulos discovered children often found the legal process more traumatic than the family breakdown.

"What inspired me to do this line of work was studying family law and children's rights at uni as a law student. I just find the complexity of human relationships is just so challenging, and we haven't been able to overcome this tension between protecting children from their parents' conflict and making sure they can participate and have a say in decisions about their lives," she said.

After completing interviews with 41 children and young people from 10 to 19 years of age, she now has produced Australia's first co-designed resource for navigating family law for children

and practitioners. The Family Law 4 Kids toolkit, launched in October by then National Children's Commissioner Anne Hollands, was co-created entirely with young people who have lived through the system.

Videos, animations and messages of hope – all created by young people for their peers – sit alongside practical resources explaining children's rights to participate in decisions about their lives.

The toolkit also includes guidance for family law professionals and parents, creating a whole-of-system approach to change.

"One child said the family court process and not knowing was more traumatic than their parents' separation," Associate Professor Dimopoulos said.

Her research found that children often breach family court orders because they feel the system doesn't listen to them and by the time their views reach decision-makers, the message has changed entirely.

"A lot of children felt they weren't genuinely listened to and heard, and a lot of them felt that their views were

just a 'tick the box' exercise. They also felt that they didn't know enough about the process," she said.

"A few used the term 'Chinese whispers' and said (their concerns) went to one person, and went to another and another, with the heart of their concern being lost or diluted along the way."

Associate Professor Dimopoulos said the problem wasn't just frustrating for children; it had the potential to undermine the entire system. When children feel unheard, they simply refuse to comply with orders about living arrangements or parental contact time.

The Family Law 4 Kids toolkit isn't just for young people but also for law practitioners who reported they often struggle on how to engage with children because they fear re-traumatising them or don't know how to start a conversation.

"There are certain roles that do engage directly with children, but not all family lawyers, not judges. Even mediators and family dispute resolution practitioners, it's not common practice to involve children

in those proceedings," she said.

Associate Professor Dimopoulos has won an Australian Research Council 2026 Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) – the only law project funded across Australia in that round – for a three-year study developing trauma-informed frameworks for for children in Family Court proceedings experiencing domestic violence.

The project represents a natural extension of her family law research, addressing what happens when separation involves violence.

It will produce practical frameworks for professionals working with vulnerable young people.

"I have an obligation to the children and young people I work with to get their voices to people who can make a difference," she said. "With the research I do, I actually send it to the Family Court, and I send it to judges, and I send it to people in the Attorney-General's department because I know that they're interested.

"I know that this can influence what they're doing in some small way. Then I feel that I'm doing my job."