

Submission

No 52

## INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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Partially Confidential



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5 May 2008

The Committee Manager  
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Dear Sir

**Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 years in NSW**

In response to the invitation received from the Hon Carmel Tebbutt MP, Chair of the Committee on Children and Young People to make a submission to the above Inquiry, attached is the Institute's submission.

The prime purpose of the Institute's submission is to inform and give examples to the Committee of data from a range of Institute sources, including the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Australian Temperament Project (ATP).

A selection of materials that expand upon the research described in the submission will be forwarded separately to the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any additional information.

Yours sincerely

**Professor Alan Hayes**  
**Director**

Attach.



**Australian Government**

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**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

**Parliament of New South Wales**  
**Committee on Children and Young People**

**Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW**

**Submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies**

**Prepared by:**

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Professor Alan Hayes, Director

5 May 2008



# **Submission to the Parliament of New South Wales Committee on Children and Young People: Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW**

**May 2008**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is pleased to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years*. Children's development and wellbeing is one of the Institute's central research interests through its *Children, Youth and Patterns of Care* stream. The Institute leads two internationally renowned longitudinal studies of children's development: *Growing Up in Australia, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* which is following two large cohorts of children from infancy and from 4-5 years; and the *Australian Temperament Project*, which has followed a cohort from infancy and is now in its 25<sup>th</sup> year. It is also managing the longitudinal study *Stronger Families in Australia*. This study will provide evidence of the impact of the Communities for Children initiative on outcomes for young children and their families. As well, the Institute houses the *National Child Protection Clearinghouse*, an information, advisory and research unit focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect and associated family violence.

The terms of your enquiry provide a welcome focus, as the middle childhood years have at times been in danger of being overlooked. There has been much attention to the early years of children's lives and the need to ensure that children and families get off to a good start. This is clearly very important. However, these efforts must be sustained to ensure that children, particularly those at risk, continue along a positive pathway and successfully negotiate the challenges of later developmental stages. As Brooks-Gunn (2003) points out, it is naïve to expect that the provision of supports and services in the early years will somehow 'inoculate' children into the distant future and protect them from the challenges, pressures and adversities they encounter.

Middle childhood, which encompasses the transition from childhood to adolescence, is a time of extensive physical, cognitive, social and emotional change for children. Between the ages of 9 and 14 years, the onset of puberty usually occurs, bringing with it substantial hormonal and body changes. Young people become increasingly capable of complex cognitive processing (e.g. thinking abstractly and logically, gaining greater control of their emotional responses). At this time, young people may also begin to engage in risky or experimental behaviours, as they test different roles, behaviours and belief systems in an attempt to find their unique identity (Robinson, 2006). The continuing brain development and major neurological changes that occur during this developmental period are thought to underlie these cognitive, behavioural, emotional and hormonal changes (Hayes, 2007).

At the same time, shifts in social and family relationships also occur, with young people increasingly turning from their parents to their peers for companionship and support (Robinson, 2006). This developmental period also witnesses the transition from primary to secondary school: typically two vastly different educational systems. Children move from an educational setting in which they have a close one-on-one relationship with their teacher to a less individually focussed system that is organised very differently and can create problems for children with learning vulnerabilities and emotional difficulties.



Due to the number and magnitude of the changes that occur between the ages of 9 and 14 years, middle childhood can be a challenging period for some young people, and consequently, a time of elevated risk. It is noteworthy that a number of serious behavioural and emotional problems first begin to emerge during the age period focused on by this Inquiry. Among these are antisocial and delinquent behaviour, substance use, depression, and eating disorders. Some of these problems pertain particularly to girls, e.g. depression and eating disorders, while others are more prevalent among boys e.g. antisocial behaviour. Early pubertal development can be a particular problem for girls during this age period, with its associated social and sexual risks.

Middle childhood is also a period in which the onset of problematic pathways often first becomes apparent. Research evidence from the Australian Temperament Project (ATP) provides insight into the important role that the middle childhood years play in the genesis of a range of behavioural and adjustment difficulties (see [www.aifs.gov.au/atp](http://www.aifs.gov.au/atp) for further information). For instance, research examining pathways to adolescent antisocial behaviour (such as fighting, theft, drug dealing), found that the transition from primary to secondary school was a period of change in which children who had apparently been progressing well began to be involved in antisocial activities – for some only transiently, but for others throughout the teenage years (Vassallo, Smart, Sanson, Dussuyer et al., 2002; Smart, Richardson, Sanson, Dussuyer et al., 2005). For these children, late childhood and early adolescence were the periods when problematic pathways first began to develop.

In other work, mid to late childhood was identified as a sensitive period for the development of anxiety among girls. While boys who went on to report high anxiety in adolescence could be distinguished from their counterparts from as early as age 3, it was not until late childhood (age 11) that girls who later reported high anxiety could be differentiated from their less anxious peers (Letcher, Sanson, Smart and Toumbourou, 2008). Similarly, other ATP work looking at patterns of internalising problems (e.g. worrying, unhappiness) from 3 to 15 years (Toumbourou, Williams, Letcher, Sanson and Smart, 2008) revealed 5 main across-time trajectories. Among these were increasing and decreasing trajectories, with a much higher proportion of girls than boys found to be following an increasing trajectory. Those on increasing and stably high trajectories were at greater risk of depression in late adolescence. Interestingly, the changes in trajectories for the increasing and decreasing groups were first visible in mid to late childhood, demonstrating that this can be a time of change in developmental pathways.

Just as mid and late childhood may present a period of heightened risk for some young people, it may also present an opportunity for positive change for others. We turn again to findings from the ATP to illustrate this. As part of our investigation of antisocial behaviour undertaken with Crime Prevention Victoria, we examined the across-time development of a group of children identified as high risk for antisocial behaviour because of their acting out, aggressive behaviour, more difficult temperament style and lower social skills in childhood. While some of these children became involved in antisocial behaviour in the teenage years, a larger number did not. Comparisons of the at risk children who did, and did not, later become involved in antisocial behaviour revealed that they were similar to each other and more problematic than the rest of the sample from infancy until 11 years of age. However, from 12 years of age onwards (Year 7 for most), at risk children who did not later become involved in antisocial behaviour improved in many areas of life (e.g. personal qualities such as aggressiveness, peer and family relationships, and school connectedness and adjustment). Some factors that may have protected this group from progressing to adolescent antisocial behaviour were their avoidance of friendships with antisocial peers, lower attraction to



sensation-seeking, a more reserved personal style and the closer supervision they received from parents (Smart, Vassallo, Sanson, Dussuyer et al., 2003; Vassallo, Smart, Sanson, and Dussuyer 2004).

Conclusions from this work are

- a) The 9-14 year period is an important one developmentally. A number of serious problems first develop in this period, such as depression, eating disorders, antisocial and delinquent behaviour.
- b) Children's pathways are not 'set in stone' and remain open to change in mid and late childhood. Change can occur for the better, but also for the worse. Middle childhood can be a period when problematic pathways first begin to appear, but also a time when they may be most amenable to change. As Loeber and Farrington (1998) point out, it is 'never too early, never too late' for intervention efforts to be successful.
- c) The transition from primary to secondary school seems to be a particularly sensitive period when children are especially open to change, emphasising the importance of helping children make a successful transition.

**Some opportunities for policy development and service provision are:**

- a) An increase in teaching specialisation in the primary school teaching service. A specialist focus on the middle years would equip teachers, in conjunction with educational and psychological support services, to help children move away from early emerging problematic pathways. Further, specialist teachers could assist in preparing all children for the transition from primary to secondary school.
- b) Promote a smooth transition from primary to secondary school. This will require joint efforts from both sectors. The trialling of transition programs should be encouraged. Current initiatives such as the establishment of middle schools should be carefully monitored and evaluated.
- c) Provide supports for families with children in this age period. These are often less well defined than are supports for parents with younger or older children. Yet the establishment of effective parenting practices during this developmental period (for example building parents' knowledge and supervision of children's activities and friendships) can lay a critical foundation for successful parenting in adolescence.

Materials that expand upon the research described above will be forwarded to the Committee.



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