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

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Submission to the NSW Joint Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People

Inquiry into children and young people 9-14 years in NSW

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1.   The Commission for Children and Young People

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') promotes the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people in NSW.

The Commission was established by the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* (NSW) ('the Act'). Section 10 of the Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

>   (a) the safety, welfare and well-being of children are the paramount considerations;
>   (b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account; and
>   (c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.

Section 12 of the Act requires the Commission to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable children. Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

Section 11(d) of the Act provides that one of the principal functions of the Commission is to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

2.   Introduction

The Commission is pleased to make a submission to the Joint Parliamentary Committee *Inquiry into Children and Young people Aged 9-14 Years in NSW*.

This submission is informed by what children aged 8-15 years have told the Commission as part of our research into children's understandings of well-being. In collaboration with the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, we asked 126 children and young people between 8-15 years across New South Wales about what well-being means to them. 117 of the children involved in the research were aged 9-14 years.

The well-being research was conducted over three stages and included individual or group interviews, as well as activities to facilitate further discussion. Children were also able to undertake their own projects, such as photography, map trails, collage, drawing and journal keeping to further explore a well-being theme that interested them.

We designed this study so that we could come to an understanding of children's well-being in which children's experiences were central. This research is unique as most research defines children's well-being in terms of developmental milestones or what is negative in children's lives, focusing on child abuse and neglect or juvenile crime.

In our well-being study we found that well-being is essentially about children's emotional lives and their relationships and connections with others are central. The centrality of relationships to children's well-being has been a constant theme in the Commission's consultations with children, not only in the middle years, but across all ages, since our establishment.

In our consultations with children as part of our *Inquiry into the best means of assisting children and young people with no-one to turn to* (2002) and *A World Fit for Children* (2005), children said that good relationships with families, friends, school and communities protect them from becoming vulnerable and therefore enable their well-being. Of these aspects families are the most important. The importance of relationships with teachers was reinforced in our consultations for the NSW Department of Education and Training's *Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation* (2004-05) and the importance of relationships with people in their community was reinforced during consultations for the Parliamentary Committee's *Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment* (2005-06).

While the needs of children in any group are complex, the Commission's well-being research found nine general themes that make up children's understanding of well-being and their needs. Within these nine themes there are three that are fundamental – agency, security and positive sense of self. These three provide a means to understand the remaining six themes, which contribute to children's well-being without having to be present in children's lives at all times.

In this submission we have used these nine themes as a basis for thinking about what children in the middle years need from their families, schools and communities to enable their well-being. We have used the findings of the Commission's previous consultations, and the recommendations we have made on a broad range of issues, to support each of these themes and highlight what enables children's wellbeing in the middle years. All of the Commission's submissions that we have referred to in this submission are available from our website at www.kids.nsw.gov.au.

3.   About children in the middle years

In 2006, there were 446,561 children between the ages of 10-14 years living in NSW. They make up almost one third (28.4 per cent) of the total population of children under 18 years and 6.8 per cent of the total NSW population.

There is significant diversity in the cultural backgrounds of children in the middle years, with 4.1 per cent of this age group Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 16.6 per cent speaking a language other than English.

There are also many vulnerable children within the middle years. As at June 2007, children 11-15 years made up 26 per cent (3,287) of the total number of children in out-of-home care in NSW.[1] The NSW Department of Juvenile Justice (2007) reports that in 28.4 per cent of the children on control orders in detention were under 15 years at the time of admission. While 50.5 per cent of children who participated in a Youth Justice Conference were under 15 years.

Today children in the middle years are living in a world markedly different to that of ten years ago, let alone the world their parents grew up in. How they spend their time and their interests are likely to be very different to previous generations of children. Technological changes have influenced many aspects of children's lives from their pastimes to the way they communicate with family and peers. They have also increased the amount of time children are engaged in sedentary behaviours such as watching DVDs or playing computer games. Many children in the middle years are likely to use mobile phones, MP3 players, instant messaging or online social networking sites such as Myspace and Facebook almost everyday. Children have greater access to information, as well as a broader range of influences and more opportunities to communicate, through the internet and globalisation of the media.

Children in the middle years today are more likely than ever to have both parents, or if they are living in a sole parent household, that parent, in the workforce. Therefore, they are likely to spend less time with their parents than previous generations and less time the older they get (Craig and Bittman, 2005).

The majority of NSW children in the middle years (67.3 per cent) live in major cities. As these major cities move towards higher density housing, children are also living in more compact cities. Living in housing such as units and townhouses where both outside and inside space is limited has impacted on the types of activities children do, how they get to and from school and their physical health. In addition, housing shortages and increasing rents in NSW are very likely impacting on the living situations of many families with children in the middle years.

4.   Why the middle years are important

The middle years of childhood have attracted less attention from policy and research than early childhood or adolescence, perhaps because the middle years are perceived as a less dramatic period of development. However, the development and social changes that generally occur in a child's life between 9-14 years are significant. Consider the difference between the abilities, interests, relationships and understandings of a nine year old girl in Year Four at primary school compared to those of a 14 year old teenage girl in Year Nine at high school. In recognition of this significance, there is a growing body of research emphasising the importance of the middle years in a child's development and on their well-being (Huston & Ripke, 2006).

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[1] DoCS' data on children on children in out-of-home care is broken into 5-11 years and 11-15 years age groups.

The middle years of childhood are a time of increased sophistication in thinking, as well as growing social and emotional maturity. In these middle years children are shifting from the security of their home environment to a wider influence of school, their peers and adults outside their families. As children learn more about the world outside their families, relationships between children and their parents are likely to continue to change during this period. Children in the middle years begin to increasingly feel the effects of peer pressure.

At the older end of the middle years, children are beginning adolescence which brings with it major physical and psychological changes. Many behavioural problems, such as involvement in criminal behaviour and alcohol and drug abuse may become evident in early adolescence. Research on recidivism rates of young offenders shows that children who make their first court appearance between 10-14 years then go on to have significantly more court appearances than children who first appear when over 14 years (Chen et al., 2005). In addition, the risk of receiving a prison sentence from an adult court is higher if a defendant's first court appearance occurred with they were young, and even higher if they are young and Indigenous (Chen et al., 2005). Early interventions during the middle years are important in stopping these behaviours from escalating as children enter into adolescence.

As the middle years are a time of significant physical growth and when lifestyle choices begin to be established, these years also provide a window of opportunity for children to develop healthy attitudes and behaviours. The role of parents and carers is significant in supporting children to develop these healthy attitudes and behaviours.

During the middle years identifying and responding to early warning signs of later problems can help children from becoming vulnerable and make a significant difference to children's lives. As Huston & Ripke (2006) state in their analysis of longitudinal research on children in the middle years since 1981:

> *Although the preschool years establish the base for future development, experiences in middle childhood can sustain, magnify, or reverse the advantages or disadvantages that children acquire in the preschool years.*

This theme will be taken up by Professor Stuart Shanker when he meets with the Committee in July.

We should not forget there are significant differences between children of the same ages within the middle years as children reach social, cognitive, physical and emotional milestones at different ages. There are also significant differences between children at nine years and at 14 years. Therefore, the needs of children in the middle years will vary accordingly. There is no one strategy or project that will suit the needs of children across the middle years age range.

5.   What well-being means to children in the middle years

5.1   Agency - having the power to make decisions

During our well-being research children told the Commission that it is important to their well-being to have the power to make choices in everyday situations and be involved in decisions about their lives. Research demonstrates the many benefits of having a positive sense of self control including, a better ability to deal with stress, less anxiety and depression, more initiative and better physical health (Thompson, 2002).

Children tell the Commission that they want to participate in both formal and informal decision-making processes. Children have told us they want to be involved in decisions about their personal health in our consultations with children about their health for the NSW Health's *Health Futures Project* (2006).

> *Children should have a say in how they receive advice about their health and which services they receive. This is because they would feel more comfortable and would be more likely to use these services. (Boy, 14 years)*

At home, as children in the middle years grow and develop they are typically given more freedom and responsibilities by their parents. For the children the Commission interviewed in the well-being study, finding a balance between being cared for and learning through experience was important. In our well-being research children said they wanted their decisions to be respected by adults. However, children want guidance from their parents to set boundaries and provide advice and support. The opportunity for children to develop their agency is only possible within the boundaries set by adults, particularly parents, who both restrict and allow children to exercise their decision making abilities.

> *I don't know, I just think that when we are changing and we are sort of thinking for ourselves more, it may be daunting to parents. (Girl, 14 years)*
>
> *I know like they think oh... they have changed so much they are not like the same little girl anymore but we can't be. (Girl, 13 years)*

Children in the middle years have also told the Commission that they want to be more involved in formal decision making processes at school and in their communities. Children we spoke to for the DET Education Futures project told us they wanted to be involved in how their school runs, as well as in how they learn and what they are taught. During the Commission's consultations for the Built Environment project children told us they want to be consulted about planning and development decisions.

5.2   Being safe and feeling secure

Feeling and being safe are important to children's well-being. Children told the Commission they feel safe when they have the protection of parents, a safe place to be, or trusted people around them.

Children said that parents were primarily responsible for keeping them safe. Having a safe home was fundamental to children's sense of well-being. Home was seen as a place defined through family, where children receive basic care and where they can relax and be themselves. Home is also a place where children have their possessions and hopefully a place where they can have fun.

In the community, the design of the built environment is important in making a community feel safe to children. When children feel safe in their neighbourhood they feel part of it. In the well-being research children identified factors that make them feel afraid and place restrictions on their ability to participate in social life, including design of the built environment and parental concerns about children's safety. Their concerns about safety were similar to those raised by children we spoke with during the Commission's Built Environment project consultations.

Children in both the well-being and Built Environment projects associated a lack of safety in their neighbourhoods with a decline in 'community spirit'.

> *I don't think I would go out on the street and introduce myself to my neighbour's children and play with them because... everyone keeps to themselves now. There is not quite as big a community spirit as I think there was. (Girl, 14 years)*

Children in the well-being were also concerned about their personal safety, such as being a victim of assault or theft, and global threats, such as war and terrorism, feeling helpless to do anything about world events. For some children these concerns meant that they lived their life in a cautious way to protect themselves from risk as much as possible.

> *The thing that's scary about the park is you could probably be there alone and somebody might come and do things to you that you might not like…Or you could be wearing bare feet and step on syringes. (Girl, 8 years)*

5.3   Having a positive sense of self

Children said that how they feel in themselves was important to their well-being. Positive self-identity has often been described as an important characteristic of resilient children and can also protect against peer victimisation (Werner & Smith, 1992). More specifically, it has been suggested that positive self-identity is one of the most important factors for Aboriginal children's attachment to school and positive school outcomes (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2005).

One thing that contributes to children's sense of self is being valued and respected by others and children value positive recognition, either formal or informal, from others. Research shows that children's sense of self is influenced by how they see themselves as well as positive appraisal and support from others who are important to them, such as parents, friends, teachers and peers (Harter, 1990).

> *Oh, so they made it really big, made me feel really special, like really gave me good attention. (Girl, 9 years)*

Taking time out to be on their own was seen as important for children to help them reflect on difficulties and work out how they feel about things happening in their life. Children said they like private spaces that allow them to do this. During our *Inquiry into children with no-one to turn to* children told the Commission that confidential resources that support and help them understand what they are going through are important for this reason, for example websites such as *Reachout* or phone lines such as *Kids HelpLine*.

5.4   Coping with difficulties

Children said that successfully coping with difficulties in their lives made them feel good about themselves. Examples of such difficulties at home included parents separating, changes like moving house or changing school, arguments with parents and family illness. While fights at school, not fitting in and conflict with friends were also mentioned as common difficulties for children.

Children's ability to cope with adverse circumstances is developed through the support they are given during difficulties and adverse events. Children told the Commission that having a caring and supportive family is important to help them deal with difficulties. As they grow older, friends who are 'there for you' and can empathise also provide essential supports for children.

> *That they (kids) get enough help when they need it such as feeling down. (Boy, 15 years)*

In the consultations for the *Inquiry into children with no-one to turn to* and *A World Fit for Children*, children said that when they didn't have someone to talk to or help them it was important that there were services with understanding people to provide assistance.

5.5   Being involved in activities

The fun and freedom of being involved in activities such as formal sports, hobbies, being with friends and educational activities is important to children's well-being.

Children described how they were having fun when they felt they were learning something, which could be through both structured and unstructured activities. What activities children do are not important as such, rather it is the meanings they attribute to them, in terms of how the activity influences their sense of self, their relations with others and their actual enjoyment of life, that is important. Play provides the opportunity for children in the middle years to test themselves, work out feelings, experiment with roles, learn rules and expectations as well as develop and practice skills for later years (Manwaring & Taylor, 2007). Play is also responsible for brain and muscle growth and diversity of play is important as different types of play can facilitate the growth of different parts of the brain (Manwaring & Taylor, 2007).

Children described to the Commission how activities in which they achieve are important to them because they contribute to experiences of competence. Activities where children can exert some control are most associated with well-

being. If children do not feel competent at an activity they may feel excluded or humiliated by other children or by adults. The experience of competence is important to children because it contributes to children being given recognition and being appreciated for achieving, which in turn makes children feel good about themselves. Many researchers have also concluded that competence and personal esteem are central to a child's well-being (Eccles, 1999)

In the well-being study children discussed the importance of supportive adults for helping them learn new things and to 'develop'. Adults who are not sensitive to difference in competence among children can contribute to children's feelings of powerless and humiliation. In areas such as education, feelings associated with lack of competence can lead to resistance and rebellion.

5.6   Material and basic needs are met

Children in the well-being study understood that money provided opportunities, for example to go on holidays or enrol in music lessons, and a greater capacity to purchase goods and services. For some children in the middle years low family income can be a significant barrier to participation in sport and recreation activities, which in turn can impact on their physical health and development of competence.

Children told the Commission that what was important to their own well-being was that their families, not themselves as individuals, had enough money to live a reasonable standard of living. Some children had concerns about their families making ends meet. Children described how poverty carried emotional costs that impact on their sense of well-being – both through sharing their parents' anxiety in struggling to make ends meet, and through the experience of labelling, shame and exclusion.

> *Some families haven't got enough money to buy their children new clothes so they are always getting handed down clothes from their older siblings and then those younger kids are going to be like, I never get anything new and they are going to feel left out of things. And then they will get put down at school, just from what I've seen. They get put down at school. And that makes them in themselves not as good. (Girl, 15 years)*

5.7   Keeping physically healthy

Children told the Commission that being physically healthy is important to their well-being. In NSW most children in the middle years are generally in good health. The *2005-2006 NSW Population Health Survey Report on Child Health* found that 91.7 per cent of the parents or carers of children aged 9-15 years reported that these children had excellent, very good or good health (Centre for Epidemiology and Research, 2007).

> *You know you are healthy when you can go about your everyday business with no problem. (Girl, 14 years)*

To stay healthy, children in the well-being study said they needed appropriate care, healthy food and physical activity, all which were seen as the responsibility of the home. While parents have the primary responsibility for children's health,

the middle years are often when children become more active in choosing foods, getting involved in physical activities and have direct encounters with health care professionals. The middle years are the ideal time in which to develop positive eating, health habits and help seeking behaviours.

5.8   Enjoying the physical environment

For children, the design and physical features of the environment around them also provide a sense of well-being. Consistent with the comments from children in the Commission's built environment consultations, children in our well-being study described child-friendly environments as places where they could have fun, meet with other children and play, for example parks and playgrounds. Environments that were noisy, dirty and traffic-dense were not favourable to wellbeing.

Children in the well-being study said that places of natural beauty, which were associated with feelings of relaxation and freedom, were also significant to their well-being. Studies have shown that access to green or open spaces, such as gardens, bushes and creeks, is associated with better mental health. In terms of development, when children play in natural environments their play is seen to be more imaginative and creative, fostering language and collaborative skills (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000).

> *Sometimes it's good when you just go outside and you feel the fresh air and you can swim and play and stay outside. (Girl, 9 years)*

5.9   An understanding of social responsibility and morality

Children told the Commission that they felt good about themselves when they help out friends and their parents, do well at school and are generally a "good" person. Important people in their lives, like parents, provide guidance to children and set an example of how to act. Families are the most important source of values for children.

> *Cause if you are brought up in a bad environment then that is the only way that you know. And you'll treat other people that way possibly. (Boy, 15 years)*

It is during the middle years that children further develop their understanding that other people have a different point of view and knowledge than they do. The ability to understand another person's perspective is often seen as a hallmark of resilience (Benard, 2004). Empathy helps in developing relationships and forms the basis of morality, compassion and caring for others.

By becoming involved in activities such as environmental initiatives, Scouts, Guides, fundraising events, church and faith groups, children can gain the opportunity to help others and feel good about themselves, as well as develop skills and competence.

6.   Resilience and well-being

Research shows that resilience is a universal, developmental capacity of every child (Masten, 2001). Resilience is not a rare or special characteristic that exists in some children and not others. As Benard says (1991, p. 18):

The development of human resiliency is none other than the process of healthy human development.

Most children in the middle years, even those who experience significant difficulties, will overcome adversity and achieve positive developmental outcomes (Benard, 2004).

However, this does not mean that nothing should be done by governments and communities in the hope that most children will make it somehow. What this innate resilience requires is a nurturing environment where children can continue to develop a positive sense of their own well-being (Masten & Reed, 2002). As children have told the Commission, they need an environment in which they have a sense of autonomy and positive sense of self, as well as feeling safe and secure. Children need an environment where they are involved in activities, where their basic needs are met, they are physically healthy and their surroundings are child friendly. What children have told the Commission is, not surprisingly, supported by research. For example, in a number of longitudinal resilience studies the feeling of having control over decisions has found to be a key determinant of resilience (Benard, 2004).

Adversities that threaten these factors present the greatest threat to children's well-being and therefore their development. The Commission believes that if policies and services are to be successful in supporting children's resilience it is necessary to understand what well-being means to children and begin to focus on the positive aspects of children's lives. In our consultations with children we have continually found that children want us to respond to the positive, rather than the negative.

7.   What enables children's well-being in the middle years

From the Commission's earliest work, our *Inquiry into children with no-one to turn to*, to our current study on children's well-being, children in the middle years have told us that their families, schools and communities all play an important part in enabling their well-being.

Drawing together the nine themes from our well-being study and the Commission's work since our establishment, we have summarised the threats to children's well-being as poverty, poor parenting, lack of time with parents, poor quality schools, unsafe institutions and empty communities. However, as children have told us, in order to promote well-being we need to focus on the positive, rather than the negative. As we have described in this submission the Commission has done work, and made previous recommendations, in each of these areas that we believe enables children's well-being. However, there is much more that can, and needs to, be done.

7.1   Family

7.1.1 Sufficient income

As children in the middle years have told us, their families need sufficient income in order to meet their basic and material needs, as well as giving children the opportunities to be involved in activities and cultural opportunities. Poverty is a significant threat to children's well-being, and children from one parent families are at particular risk of poverty.

The latest AMP and the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) report on income and wealth shows that the lower a family's income, the greater proportion of it is taken up by the costs of supporting and caring for a child (AMP.NATSEM, 2007). It is estimated that a low income family with children aged 10-14 years spends 25 per cent of its income on supporting and caring for their children while high income families spend 15 per cent.

The greatest cost associated with children is typically food and in regional and rural areas the cost of food is significantly higher than in metropolitan areas (AMP.NATSEM, 2007; The NSW Cancer Council, 2007). Children in regional areas have recently told the Commission that fresh fruit and vegetables are not available in their local stores. It is likely that stores in regional or rural areas cannot afford to buy fresh fruit and vegetables as the high prices may mean that it will not get sold. When parents are unable to access or afford to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, children's health is very likely to suffer. In the *2005-2006 NSW Population Health Survey Report on child health* only 32.5 per cent of parents or carers of 9-15 year olds said their child eats the recommended daily vegetable intake of at least four serves a day. Almost half (48.2 per cent) of children in this age group are reported to eat the recommended daily fruit intake of at least three pieces a day. With increasing petrol prices, this is likely to worsen.

The cost of health services, such as dentists, can also impact directly on children's health in the middle years. In the *2005-2006 NSW Population Health Survey Report on child health* of those children aged 9-15 years who had an oral health problem, parents reported that 18.8 per cent did not see a dentist and 13.7 per cent of parents said their child did not visit a dentist as it was too costly (Centre for Epidemiology and Research, 2007).

As the cost of necessities consumes a greater proportion of the budget of households with lower incomes, then less money is left over for other goods or activities such as sport and recreation. Children with parents who are unemployed are less likely to get involved in sport and cultural activities (ABS, 2006). However, it is children from low income families who most benefit in terms of improved social skills, social behaviours and academic results from participation in structured activities (Ripke, Huston & Casey, 2006).

Families with low incomes are faced with difficulties finding affordable housing in areas in which there are quality support services and schools. Poverty and disadvantage amongst children are strongly linked to poor educational outcomes. The Commission is interested in the *Homelessness and Education in the Middle Years* project currently being undertaken by the Education Foundation, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Hanover Welfare Services in Victoria. The three

year project which began in 2007 includes a pilot project and study that aims to develop an understanding of homelessness, its impact on children in the middle years and what is required to reduce its effect on children's educational outcomes.

The Commission recommends:
1. The expansion of school dental services in order to improve access for children from low income families.[2]

2. Investigating the barriers to, and options to improve, the provision of affordable fresh fruit and vegetables for families in regional areas.

3. Investigating and developing a subsidy scheme to help families of children in the middle years with low incomes to meet the costs of participation in sports, including registration and clothing.

7.1.2 Supporting parents
Most children in NSW do live in a safe home with people they can trust around them, which children in the middle years have told us is crucial to their well-being. However, there are some children who are particularly vulnerable, for example Aboriginal children are much more likely than non-Aboriginal children to experience violence in the home. In addition, there is some evidence that parental substance abuse, domestic violence and parental mental illness or disability are all on the increase throughout the general population (Cashmore, Scott & Calvert, 2008). All of these factors are significantly associated with child abuse and neglect.

It is no longer viable to expect that a statutory child protection service, such as the Department of Community Services (DoCS), can address all of the factors that contribute to children's vulnerabilities. While those relationships with families are the most important to children, schools, communities and governments all have a role in strengthening the supports to vulnerable children, which should include supporting these relationships.

As the Commission said in our joint submission to the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services* (2008), what is needed is a public health approach to child protection, one that is research informed and prevention focused. Such an approach should include primary prevention strategies aimed at directly reducing parental drug and alcohol misuse, promoting children's needs, as well as cross agency strategies in disadvantaged communities. Secondary prevention strategies that respond to vulnerable sub-groups within the population and that support adult services to be more child focussed should be part of the approach. Tertiary prevention strategies that address the needs of children who are have experienced abuse and neglect are the last component of this approach and should include improving the stability and emotional security of children in care and supporting them in education.

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[2] Recommendation, Submission to NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues *Inquiry into Dental Services in NSW* (2005), p. 9.

The Commission recommends:

4. The development of national frameworks through COAG aimed at reducing disadvantage to children caused by poverty, domestic violence, parental alcohol misuse and illicit substance use, and parental mental illness.[3]

5. Developing a comprehensive and ongoing program of public education regarding specific parental behaviours which represent a risk to the well-being of children using evidence-informed health promotion and social marketing approaches, supported by services to respond to the demand this may generate.[4]

6. Specifically address the needs of children and young people, including better integration of criminal and support services and the removal of the offender not the child in violent situations, in the Framework on Family and Domestic Violence (being developed under the NSW State Plan).[5]

7. Drug, alcohol, mental health, disability and housing services should develop and trial an intake process that identifies adult clients who are parents and then develops an intervention plan that also meets the needs of the client's children.[6]

7.2   Schools

7.2.1 Supportive environments

During the Commission's consultations with children on the DET *Excellence and Innovation* project, children in the middle years repeatedly said how critical teachers were to their experience of schooling. The relationships that teachers develop with children play a large role in determining attitudes about schooling, ongoing engagement with learning and consequently the ultimate success or failure of the children they teach. Children want teachers who they can talk with, who are respectful and who will be fair.

> *It's probably the individual teacher, like, their personality and that, that's what you get along with, teachers, their personality. (Boy, 13 years)*

The role of teachers, as well as other adults in schools such as school counsellors, can be critical when children are going through difficult times at school, for example bullying. While bullying affects children in both primary and high school, it is often reported more amongst primary school aged children. Evaluations also show that anti-bullying strategies are more successful if implemented in primary school (Lodge, 2008). As well as starting early, a thorough approach that involves the entire school community has been found to

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[3] Recommendation 1, Joint Submission to the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services* (2008), p. 3.

[4] Recommendation 3, Joint Submission to the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services* (2008), p. 4.

[5] Recommendation 6, Joint Submission to the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services* (2008), p. 5.

[6] Recommendation 4, Joint Submission to the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services* (2008), p. 5.

contribute to the success of anti-bullying strategies (Lodge, 2008). The level of teacher involvement can greatly influence the success of interventions and strengthening relationships between children and teachers, which helps to build social cohesion within schools, can be a significant help in addressing bullying.

For some children in the middle years the transition from primary school to high school can be a difficult time. Children move from relatively small and personalised primary schools to larger, more impersonal, and independent learning based high schools. Children are also exposed to new peer groups. This transition is happening at a time when children are also entering into adolescence, which brings with it a range of physical, social and emotional changes. In particular, many Aboriginal students with positive experiences at primary school lose their sense of identity and belonging and begin to feel isolated at high school (NSW Dept. Education and Training, 2005).

How children adapt to the transition can have a major impact on their well-being, future education and subsequent development (Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-Hessling, 2004). There is clear evidence that children making this transition can suffer a decline in their self-esteem, increased feelings of alienation and a decline in the quality of their relationships with teachers (Tonkin & Watt, 2003). Transition programs that provide ongoing case management and mentoring for children can be successful in helping children get ready for high school and improving their experiences of the transition.

Motivation levels can also drop in the transition to high school as children become overwhelmed with their new environment. Teachers need to be supported to develop innovative learning programs if they are to engage children in new curriculum. Children have suggested to the Commission that one way to make the curriculum relevant and teaching engaging is to involve them in the development of it.

The Commission recommends:
8. Pre-service teaching training should include developmental experiences for trainee teachers in developing and refining the critical capacity to develop and maintain friendly and respectful relationships with children.[7]

9. Teachers, as part of their teacher training and induction on taking up a school appointment, receive information and training on policies, strategies and practices which can reduce bullying and protect the most vulnerable students.[8]

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[7] CCYP Submission to NSW Department of Education and Training *Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation* (2005), p. 13.
[8] CCYP Submission to NSW Department of Education and Training *Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation* (2005), p. 34.

10. Increasing the minimum ratio of school counsellors to student to 1:500 and remove the requirement that school counsellors must hold teaching qualifications to increase the pool of potential counsellors.[9]

11. Develop strategies to get feedback from students and to encourage their participation in curriculum development, the choice of subjects offered and the manner in which subjects are taught.[10]

12. Funding and developing research on what works to support children in the transition from primary to high school, including a specific focus on Aboriginal children's needs, and implementing any successful strategies.[11]

7.2.2 Adequate facilities

Children in the middle years have often expressed their concerns to the Commission about the rundown nature of their schools. Many children notice that the buildings and amenities provided for students and teachers at their public school do not match those available in other schools, public and private, in other neighbourhoods. In particular, children from lower socio-economic communities have drawn the Commission's attention to the poor condition of buildings, computing equipment, grounds and amenities such as toilets and bubblers. Poor amenities make it difficult for children to feel comfortable at school or do their work.

The Commission recommends:
13. The allocation of sufficient funds to refurbish toilet blocks and water bubblers in all schools.[12]

7.3   Business

7.3.1 Work and family balance

Relatively little research has been done on the impact of parents' paid work, or increasing paid work pressures, on children in the middle years. However, we do know that parent's well-being generally impacts on their children's well-being. If parents are feeling overworked, working unsociable hours or having difficulty balancing their work with caring for their children, then this is very likely to impact on their children (Repetti, 1994). Because children are largely dependent on the adults around them, they are vulnerable when those adults are affected by difficulties and stresses in their own lives or by larger economic forces.

Changes in Australian workplaces, such as increased casualisation, an increase in part-time work, the spread of 24 hour, seven days a week services and the rise in employment at unsociable hours, are likely to affect parents' access to high

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[9] Recommmendation 12, *Report of an inquiry into the best means of assisting children and young people with no-one to turn to* (2002), p.135; CCYP Submission to NSW Department of Education and Training *Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation* (2005), p. 40.

[10] CCYP Submission to NSW Department of Education and Training *Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation* (2005), p. 20.

[11] CCYP Submission to NSW Legislative Standing Committee on Social Issues *Inquiry into Closing the Gap-Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (2008), p. 2.

[12] CCYP Submission to NSW Department of Education and Training *Futures Project: Excellence and Innovation* (2005), p. 37.

quality jobs. High quality jobs are typically described as those with job security, job control, access to family friendly provisions and no job overload. For parents, job insecurity poses a threat to the family's economic resources and income while high job control gives them more capacity to fit their job requirements around their own and their family's needs.

Canadian research on children at both the early and middle stages of childhood found that the timing of their parents work is strongly associated with the quality of children's family environment (Strazdins et al, 2006). When fathers or both parents worked unsociable hours, family functioning was markedly worse. For instance, interactions between children and their parents were more likely to be hostile when parents worked in the evenings, nights and weekends. Adverse family environments were significantly associated with increases in children's difficulties. As the authors (Strazdins et al, 2006:407) of the research note, these results:

> *Raise questions about the consequences for families and children as jobs and labor markets become 24-hour, seven days a week.*

In Australia, a recent analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) data shows that both the quality of a parent's job and parental levels of psychological distress are associated with variations in parenting practices among dual earner couples (Bittman, in press). Having an insecure job increases the likelihood of mothers' irritable parenting by 50 per cent. Whereas high consistency in mothers' parenting practices was associated with better job security and more flexible work hours. Clearly more secure jobs, with flexible and sociable hours are associated with better outcomes for parenting practices and, therefore, children's well-being.

A pattern of particular concern that emerged from the LSAC analysis was the low quality of part-time work. Part-time is often seen as a solution to competing time demands of working parents and is often the preference for working mothers (Glezer and Wolcott, 1997**)**. However, being employed casually or part-time is associated with poorer quality jobs. For example, part-time employment halves the rate of access to family-related paid leave. As the preference of many mothers with school-aged children is to work part-time, improving the quality of part-time work needs to become a priority.

Children in the middle years have also said that they prefer more time with their parents over more income and less time (Pocock & Clarke, 2005). For example, when children are sick they need their parents to care for them. This means that parents need access to adequate leave from their employment to enable them to spend time with their children when they are sick.

> *Career- focussed parents are ignorant of their children's health. They are tired, and not around as much. There needs to be more consideration by employers for parents who have kids to take care of. (Girl, 13 years)*

Parent's' involvement in their children's schooling can be affected if their work obligations mean they spend less time with their children. A number of studies

have found that family involvement and effective communication between educators and families benefits students' learning (Ofsted, 2003).

Parents' concerns about their children's safety while they are at work may mean that children are enrolled in structured activities, clubs and sports everyday so that their parents know where they are. This leaves children with little time for spontaneous play. A decrease in children's spontaneous play can restrict their development of motor ability, social skills and emotional resilience (Manwaring & Taylor, 2007).

The Commission recommends:
14. Workplaces provide flexible and supportive options for working parents, including additional parental leave provisions for families with sick children.[13]

15. Develop strategies to improve the quality of part-time work, including improving job security and control.

7.4   Communities

7.4.1 Child safe and child friendly organisations
During the middle years children are involved in activities such as sport, clubs and music. It is important that adults within these organisations develop ways for them to become places where children can feel safe and comfortable, to have a say and be involved in decision making.

Current research suggests that in making organisations safe for children we need to not only assess the past records of individuals but manage any risks that arise in their employment circumstances (Smallbone, Marshall & Wortley, 2008). In fact, managing employment circumstances that might encourage or allow individuals to harm children may be more important than simply keeping out those individuals thought to bring unacceptable risks of harm to the workplace. These findings have convinced the Commission of the importance of moving beyond the Working With Children Check as the key risk management tool for organisations. We need to help organisations to actively manage the risks to children in their workplaces so that they can become more child safe and child friendly.

In performing our legislative function to encourage organisations to develop their capacity to be safe and friendly for children the Commission has developed, and is implementing and monitoring, an approach to support the well-being of children in organisations and institutions in NSW. No additional funding was allocated for the Commission to fully implement this new function. The Commission has raised Commission's submission to the *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW,* March 2008. As part of the Commission's child safe and child friendly work, we are also continuing to promote our *TAKING PARTicipation seriously* kit. *TAKING PARTicipation seriously* is designed to assist organisations involve children and young people in decision making.

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[13] Submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Discussion Paper *Strking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family* (2005), p. 5.

> *The Commission recommends:*
> 16. Increasing support for organisations through the child-safe and child-friendly program. The Commission should be allocated an additional $600,000 per annum to support employers in child-safe and child-friendly practice.[14]

7.4.2 Child friendly communities

Children have told the Commission that having safe communities in which they feel welcome and where there are activities for them to get involved in are important to their well-being.

As children in our well-being study told us, a result of both their parents and their own concerns is that children may not play in parks, walk to school, use public transport or feel comfortable in public places where they do not know anyone. Children are less present in public places, and in turn public spaces are designed without children in mind. For instance, fear of litigation appears to have resulted in the removal of more adventurous play equipment. The impact of this is that play areas can be uninteresting to children.

> *Like you've got to go to tennis classes. Like, you can't just hit a ball out on the street. You've got to go for tennis lessons one afternoon. ... Like everyone is there and you've got a coach and like he is there or she and you feel you can be more safe. (Girl, 13 years)*

The growing concern over children's safety is a paradox given that children are just as safe now in public as they have been for the last 20 or 30 years. Research has shown that rates of anxiety in children are on the rise because of parent's concerns with keeping their child safe (The Daily Telegraph, 2008).

Lack of access to suitable activities after school, on weekends and in the school holidays is an issue for children in the middle years in many parts of NSW. During the Commission's many consultations with children since our establishment, children have constantly raised the need for affordable, accessible and interesting things to do in their local area.

Some children up to the age of 12 years are able to attend out-of-school hours care (OOSH) which provides them with a safe place where they can be with friends and get involved in supervised activities. However, the quality of these services differs throughout NSW and in many areas there are no OOSH services at all. For children over 12 years there are even less organised before and after school activities or school holiday programs that are appealing to them.

Even if there are things to do, children's increasing need for independence during the middle years can be hampered by a lack of public transport, safe walking paths and bicycle tracks so they can access activities (Tranter, 2006). In our submission to the 2003 *Ministerial Inquiry into Public Passenger Transport in NSW* the Commission recommended improvements to the provision of

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[14] CCYP Submission to the *Special Commission of Inqiury into Child Protection Services* (2008), p. 14.

community transport, inclusion of transport provision in planning, better information about transport for children and improved safety on transport.

As part of our built environment project we are trialling indicators for child friendly communities. Children's safety in public spaces, the accessibility of transport and activities and how children participate in the development of the built environment are all featured in the indicators. The aim is to develop a tool that can easily be used by local councils in planning and evaluating projects to increase child friendliness.

The Commission has also entered into a partnership with Wollongong City Council to document planning processes and identify opportunities for participation by children and young people in the planning process. With input from other Councils, the outcome of this work will be a best practice planning document that can be used across NSW to increase the participation by children and young people in local council planning decisions.

The Commission's work in this area takes up the some of recommendations of the *Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment*. However, the Commission has not received additional funding and therefore the other recommendations we will not be progressed.

The Commission recommends:

17. A state-wide funding initiative be developed for local councils or other interested organisations, in collaboration with local communities, to develop and run outside of school activities for children in the middle years.

18. Funding for the Department of Local Government playground grants program be increased to extend playground equipment facilities for children in the middle years.

19. Improving the cost and accessibility of public transport for children in the middle years to allow them to better access activities and programs.[15]

20. The inclusion of transport provision in planning decisions, including integrated infrastructure planning, particular in relation to those facilities that are used by children and their families.[16]

21. The Commission be allocated additional and new funding to implement the recommendations of the *Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment*.

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[15] CCYP Submission to *NSW Ministerial Inquiry into Public Passenger Transport in NSW* (2003), p. 4.
[16] CCYP Submission to *NSW Ministerial Inquiry into Public Passenger Transport in NSW* (2003), p. 5.

8. Conclusion

While the needs of children in the middle years are diverse, seeking the views of children can identify those issues not sufficiently being considered in policy. The Commission's previous recommendations in this area that are yet to be addressed show that the threats to children's well-being in the middle years continue.

In developing policy to support children's well-being it is essential we consider how to better support families. Families who are supported are more likely to protect children against vulnerability and enable their well-being by supporting children in dealing with difficulties, developing good health habits and providing for children's basic needs.

The importance of school in facilitating children's well-being during the middle years necessitates a commitment to improving the quality of schooling. This includes increasing investment so that children have better facilities and better maintained schools, as well as quality teaching and supportive school counsellors.

The well-being of children in the middle years can be supported through the provision of more family friendly workplace practices. Parents, who have a positive work life, and more time to spend with their children, are likely to be more supportive parents who can protect their children from vulnerabilities. Business and industry have a significant role to play in providing quality part time work and supporting parents to balance work and caring for their children.

Policies aimed at creating more child friendly cities can also help to improve the well-being of children in the middle years. Communities, services and organisations that are welcoming, safe and supportive of children's needs will help children to develop their competence and a positive sense of self that is essential to their well-being.

Well-being for children is complex, has many components, and as the Commission's research has shown, is understood by children in a holistic way. Therefore, any strategies that address the needs of children in the middle years need to also be developed in a holistic way, with input from children and their families. The Commission encourages the Committee to consult with children in the middle years as part of the hearing process for this Inquiry.

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