

Submission

No 49

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

Organisation: Network of Community Activities
Name: Ms Robyn Monro Miller
Position: Executive Officer
Telephone: 02 9212 3244
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Inquiry Into Children and Young People In NSW

Introduction to Network of Community Activities.

Network and its members have over 30 years experience working with children in their middle years.

Network of Community Activities is the peak body in NSW for groups involved with leisure programs for children 5-12 years old, although some services take children up to the age of 18 if they have a disability. In general these services are known as Out of School Hours Services (OOSH) and operate before and after school and during school vacations.

Network of Community Activities represents the interests of children in their middle years on State and National committees and advisory groups.

This submission incorporates the views of service users and practitioners. In addition the children from the following services contributed to the submission;

- Raby OSHC
- Tweed Heads OSHC
- Loftus 10-14's vacation care
- Girraween Activity Centre
- Pole Depot, Penshurst

About Out of School Hours Services (OOSH)

Overview of OOSH Services in NSW

No of services; 1100

Ages of children attending; 5-12 years.

General Hours of Operation; 7am till 9am and 3.00pm till 6.00pm with opening hours during school holiday periods for full days

Out of School Hours Services have a history of working with school age children facilitating opportunities for them to experience a sense of community and develop relationships. They have become the streets and neighbourhood focal point for many communities. Primarily located in schools and managed by not for profit parent groups these services are placed in a unique position to provide a fine balance between home and school.

Focus of Submission

The Network of Community Activities submission will respond to each term of reference and focus on the following key issues;

- The importance of the middle years in a child's development.
- The role of adults in supporting children's development.
- Early intervention as a strategy for use throughout childhood.
- Consultation with children
- The inclusion of children in planning processes.
- Access to suitable services for children with a disability.
- The role of Out of School Hours Services.
- The Development of accessible activities and transport options
- Workplace practices to meet parent needs.

1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years between nine and fourteen.

'Whatever the level of investment society makes, without the active participation of children there will be no social future. It is therefore, necessary to reconsider children's claim on citizenship " Alan Prout¹

Critical for the healthy development of 9-12 year olds are opportunities for independence, risk taking, leadership engagement with their local community and the provision of supportive role models. The goal to ensure that children are resilient and able to cope with life's successes and disappointments is an important developmental outcome for this age group.

Currently there is an over emphasis on the early years of a child's life without the recognition that all aspects of childhood are significant to their overall development.

There is growing evidence of research to support the need for children of 9-14 years to be allowed safe play opportunities. Children interviewed for this submission overwhelmingly called for more play opportunities – skate parks, places to ride their bikes, opportunities to hang out in safe parks and basketball courts. This generation is witnessing a cultural shift in that children are increasingly engaged in formal programs of music, competition sport, coaching and other structured activities or retreating into a world of technology. In the virtual world they exist on face book, and in game rooms and communicate through texting. This has been at the expense of play and sadly resulting in a constructed false reality of the world. Imagination, curiosity and spontaneity in a child's life are being lost. Harry Harlow in the 1970's undertook research into the effects of play on Primates. This research concluded that without play primates became socially disturbed and unable to connect with their fellow primates. In the year 2008 there is growing evidence that children are suffering from play deprivation. In the words of Bob Hughes, a UK Based advocate for play

"The phenomenon of play deprivation is causing huge numbers of children to feel miserable and aggressive, others are showing signs of psychiatric disorders, and some are even resorting to lethal and serial violence.

..... The spectre of play deprivation and its impact of undermining all that makes children civilized and humane, looms as large in my view, as does AIDs and Global Warming."²

¹ Hallett, C. and Prout, A. (2003) "Participation, Policy and the changing conditions of childhood. *Hearing the voices of children: Social Policy for a new century.* London, Routledge Falmer. p21

² Hughes, R. "Play Then and Now" (2007). Presented in Network News March 2008.

2. The extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and level of disadvantage.

Whilst there are many areas of disadvantage and variety in needs of this age group, Network wishes to alert the enquiry to three areas of significant disadvantage that should be addressed as a priority.

❖ Children with a Disability

There is growing demand for access to suitable services for children 9-14 years. Inclusion support services have long waiting lists and access to respite care is limited. In Out of School Hours Care there is a growing trend for young people with disabilities to continue to access the service up until the age of 18. This is largely due to parental pressure and the service acknowledging that there is no other care available. This situation results in children as young as 5 accessing a service with a disabled 18 year old. The situation for either child is not satisfactory or appropriate. There is an urgent need for services for this age group.

Where free or youth orientated activities are held in the community there is rarely any access or provision for children who have a disability unless specifically organised by carers from a disability organisation.

❖ Children in remote and rural areas.

Access to suitable activities in rural and regional areas is limited. Where there are potential support structures improved interagency co-operation and flexibility is required. An example of this is the isolation of children on farms and properties when the school bus ceases it's run during the school vacation periods.

There is a pressing need for more creative approaches to the development of services and activities to respond to the needs of children this age group who live in rural and isolated communities.

❖ Children at Risk.

The absence of access to refuges for the 12 – 14 year age group requires attention. Currently there are no safety valves for this age group to draw on. From the comfort of a primary school with one teacher per class, children are moved into an arrangement seeing up to 8 teachers per day. Transition to High School arrangements are of critical importance to support children at this stage of their development. Many children move from accessing a safe Out of School Hours service centre into forced arrangements of patchwork care or being sent home alone to an empty house. Often their younger siblings are in care arrangements. As one child confessed, his greatest fear in life at present was the concern his older 12-year-old brother went home alone each afternoon and “could get hurt or kidnapped”.³

³ Response from a child at Raby OOSH when asked to list the things that concern them. April 2008.

Recommendation 2.1

Examine opportunities and new approaches to address the areas of significant disadvantage for this age group – children with a disability, children in rural and remote areas and those at risk as a priority.

3. The activities, services and support, which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience.

“Children in the past have been assumed to have capabilities that we now rarely think they have....so fixated are we on giving our children a long and happy childhood that we downplay their abilities and their resilience”. Hugh Cunningham⁴

The Importance of appropriate training and recruitment of staff to work with the 9-14 year age group cannot be underestimated. Retention of staff is critical to the success for any program as relationships are established and developed with the children from a young age. These staff are able to provide supportive and positive role models for children moving into young adulthood.

Recommendation. 3.1

Access to funded and relevant training opportunities for people be included in any funding provision for new projects aimed at the 9-14 year age group.

In planning for after school activities Fraser and Nash (1998)⁵ identified five guidelines for promoting resilience. These five guidelines prove a useful framework when considering the provision of opportunities for children to develop resilience.

1. Individualised approach

One of the failings of work to address the needs of this age group to date has been the absence of localised planning models for 9-14 year olds. Often where funding is required a blanket model has been imposed.

Example - Out of School Hours Service to be eligible for funding must open a minimum of 52 weeks a year and be available for 5-12 year olds.

Most recently the Better Futures model has sought to address this with pockets of localised State Government funds and planning. Such a model

⁴ Cunningham, H. *The Invention of Childhood* (2006) BBC Books London.

⁵ Nash, J. and Fraser, M. (1998) *After School care for children; A resilience based approach, Families in Society; A journal of contemporary human service*. July August

needs to be provided on an ongoing basis. The funds offered by “*Better Futures*” are significantly less than to that offered in the “*Families First*” program. The focus on *Families First* is early intervention and the early years of a child’s life and draws funding of 3.6 million in the Sydney metropolitan area with a further 23.8 million statewide for the current financial year. In contrast *Better Futures* accesses a mere 2.2 million state wide. Government funding has prioritised in a manner which disadvantages service development for the older child.

Early intervention needs to be seen as broader than the first five years of a Childs life. Early intervention must be recognised as that which provides support structures before the development of more invasive and costly measures.

Investment in programs and services for 9-14 year olds will result in the development of more resilient teenagers and significant returns for the community.

It is interesting to note current figures show the daily cost per juvenile in custodial services in New South Wales in 2005-06 was \$572 (\$565 in 2004-05).⁶ . The Department of Juvenile Justice Annual Report for 2006/2007 show is an average daily number of 331 children and young people in custody. At a rate of \$208,000 per year per child, any investment that reduces the rate of juvenile detention will be significant not just for the community but also for the economy.

Local Government.

Network is aware of a number of Local Governments making provision for the 9-14 year age group. Waverley Council in Sydney’s east has provided specific funding 9-14 year old children’s programs. City of Sydney and Sutherland also offer “Tweenies” programs for the 10-14 year age group. The children from the Sutherland Council 10-14 years holiday program identified the provision of the service as a support structure in their lives. In particular their access to ‘vacation care leaders’ or staff when they needed help or support was seen as a valued part of the service provision.

Local Community

Local community groups have also developed models for children to address the needs of the age group. The Pole Depot located in Penshurst in Sydney’s South offers a successful program known as “Youth Zone” that attracts high numbers of the age group, a key indicator by which to measure success.

Unfortunately these local governments and community groups are only part of a patchwork of provision for the age group. Unless a community or local government deems it is a priority these children remain isolated.

There is no universal provision. In the words of one local Government General Manager he only followed the three R’s when planning in their community: “Roads, Rubbish and Rates” Unless there is a State Government commitment to address the needs of the vulnerable age group more children and young

⁶ NSW Auditor Generals Report, 2005/6 ((Unaudited figures)

people will become disengaged from their community and have no access to services.

Recommendation 3.2

A Pool of Government funds could be provided by State Government to contribute grants for special initiatives to address the needs of 9-14 year olds that will be based on the unique needs at a local level developed in consultation with local children, families and services.

2. Child Involvement in the plan

A second identified factor in provision, the involvement of children in planning is critical. In Out of School Hours services there is a common philosophy and understanding that children are to be involved in planning and consultative processes as everyday practices. Such an acknowledgement comes after many years working with school age children and recognises this as a valuable practice for high quality provision.

Network in its role as a resource and advisory service for centres has identified services who maintain ongoing active and meaningful collaboration with children retain more 9-12 year olds than those with limited or tokenistic child consultation methods and they report less behavioural issues.

This knowledge and learning from the local implementation must be applied at a global level to achieve any real results in planning for the older age group. Children from Tweed Heads suggested that each Council have a local children's committee in order to receive feedback from the children in the community. This could be developed through local schools and other service groups such as Out of School Hours Services and Youth Groups.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People has actively promoted consultation with children yet it still remains limited in the broader community and indeed as a critical part of Government policy. In Article 12 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation is seen as a right of every child. Australia as a signatory to this convention should consider children in all forms of new legislation and policy as it does with the Environment in the form of Environmental impact statements.

Recommendation 3.3

a) A Child Impact Statement should also be required by all levels of Government prior to implementation of legislation.

b) The State Government will adopt the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child in developing policy and legislation for this age group.

Children must be encouraged through consultation and collaboration to take responsibility, ownership and leadership. The ability to allow children ownership in decision making enhances their self worth and provides safe opportunities to experience risk taking – after all there is always the risk that your decision is wrong and there is always risks in others not agreeing. When opportunities for risk are removed from an environment we force children into taking unsafe risks.

Harry Shier, a noted campaigner from the United Kingdom, on Consultation with Children addressed the Network of Community Activities conference in May 2001 and delivered this message to us

“..children learn the really important lessons in life, not from what we teach them, but from the environment we create for them, and above all from how we as adults choose to be with them”

3. Encouraging academic performance;

Academic achievement is an indicator for building resilience in young people. Currently due to the absence of formalised care for 12 -14 year olds many children are turning to libraries as a quasi care/homework centre to support their intellectual development.

Recommendation 3.4

Local libraries consider a model where additional support staff are accommodated at the libraries in the afternoons to provide supervision and guidance for young high school students in accessing reference materials and research.

Fraser and Nash they also identified children’s access to museums and galleries and libraries as contributing to that academic performance. Currently the cost of accessing a range of NSW galleries and educational museums, is prohibitive for young people, nor are they encouraged to attend these places unaccompanied by an adult by administrators of such institutions.

Consideration should be made to providing opportunities for open days at Museums and special events during the school vacation period where children 12 and over can attend for a nominal fee or even free as part of a transport package. In providing such opportunities Museum staff will be on hand to oversee and guide the young visitors and provide security to ensure that children feel safe to wander freely throughout the venue.

Accessible public transport is essential for children 9-14 years to be able to access any events or outings independently. When travelling with adults the cost of transport coupled with access to suitable venues can mean that it is often unaffordable.

Recommendation 3.5

Transport accessibility could be supported and enhanced with the introduction of a “Juniors Card” for 9-16 year olds available for use during the school holiday periods. The card would provide the same style of service as the Seniors card currently offers - a flat rate low cost fee for transport and discounted access to exhibitions and displays. Its aim would be to encourage children to use public transport during their holiday periods in order to access local and city events and to develop confidence and independence.

4 . Fun and Opportunities for Play.

The research supports the child’s right to play and to hang out and do very little. The recognition that any after school environment is more successful where children have a choice in how they spend their time is reinforced in the research.

Diminishing access to safe playgrounds and parklands for children to access is a reality in the local community today.

“The right to play is a child’s first claim on the community, because play is nature’s training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and lasting damage to the bodies and minds of its citizens”

David Blunkett UK Secretary of State for Education September 1999.

Concerns regarding the erosion of spaces and places for children 9-14 years continue to exist.

Feedback from children overwhelmingly refers to hanging out and riding bikes. Popular pastimes that are threatened when due to litigation and safety concerns children are forbidden from riding bikes in playgrounds or returning to visit their old schools and Out of School Hours Services once they enter high school. Basketballs hoops are take from the school playgrounds each afternoon in an effort to dissuade potential basketball players, equipment removed from parks to avert any accidents, and loitering banned in shopping centres. The approach to risk management is effectively forcing children to become excluded and disenfranchised within their own community.

However children from diverse areas who contributed to this submission overwhelmingly provided examples of outdoor play activities, with minimal adult supervision which they thought should be available for them to access;.

- Local parks
- Footpaths
- School playgrounds
- Skate Parks
- Soccer fields

In the United Kingdom children’s need for free range play is supported in a number of local Burroughs with the employment of Play rangers who facilitate and support opportunities for play in the loca area.

Recommendation 3.6

Examine the UK Model of Play Rangers for application in NSW to encourage more opportunities for children to play freely.

5. A collaborative approach.

The final guideline acknowledges the need for parents and practitioners to work together as partners. Such an acknowledgement needs to be made in all planning for activities, services and support for children.

Discussion of “over parenting” and addressing the concerns and perceptions parents have regarding their child accessing youth services.

There are real and imagined concerns around the difference in ages. Waverley Council has adopted a strategy whereby children were able to access the youth centre at a different time to older children in order to address these concerns.

Opportunities for greater collaboration between community, schools, and governments must be encouraged.

Out of School Hours Services are frequently constrained by the financial challenges of maintaining low cost accessible care that meets the needs of children and families. Schools where these services exist provide a variety of different levels of support some charging no rent to others charging a high rental that is passed on to the families in the form of fees. Greater collaboration within the State Government would ensure that all schools were able to offer their facilities at low cost for the organization and operation of not for profit services for children to access.

We need a holistic approach to supporting 9-14's not piecemeal and not to be deemed as an innovative program – instead, to be recognised as an essential program for the support of children and families.

Recommendation 3.7

Adopt of a whole of Government approach to the development of strategies to assist 9-14 year olds including mentoring opportunities by older children, Transition to high school programs offered through youth centres and Out of School Hours services, and an extension of the current “Under 5's school as community centres” model extended to High schools.

4. ***The extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years including possible changes to the workplace practices which have the potential to benefit children and young people in the middle years.***

At first I liked going home by myself, but after a while I started to feel scared about going in the house alone. My mum did not know why I was taking so long to walk home. I did not want to worry her because she has to work. I just wish sometimes she was there to talk to. It is OK I am OK. It is just something I would change if I could.

Former user of OOSH service, Girl aged 13.

Workplace reform has to date focussed on the early years of a child's life with access to maternity leave and paternity leave for a child's first 12 months and in a range of corporate and government organizations access to employer sponsored child care for under 5's or vacation care for 5-12 year olds.

Based on our knowledge of child development and the vulnerability of children in early adolescence it is critical that emphasis in workplace practices falls on parenting as a role regardless of a child's age. The provision of workplace practices that support parents of young adults also reinforces to parents the vulnerability of their child. Often social pressures result in a parent assuming that once the child reaches high school they are sufficiently independent not to require additional consideration. Such an attitude is dangerous and negates the importance of adults in a child's life at this crucial stage.

The need to review and implement workplace practices to more adequately meet the needs of children 9-14 years and their families should include provision for the following workplace practices, designed to assist support parents of young adolescents, to be incorporated into workplace legislation.

In particular attention needs to be give to those employees in production based environments such as factories and shops. Many family friendly initiatives are offered in the corporate sector without the same consideration being applied to all workers. This behaviour then disadvantages the children of more traditional blue collar industries.

Such workplace practices identified for potential inclusion in industrial awards include;

Meetings within core working hours.- Organisations identify core hours for work which are based on those most suitable for accommodating carer responsibilities 9.30-3pm. The resulting strategy is that meetings are only ever held within those core hours. This provides employees with the safeguards for not needing to arrange care outside of their formal child care arrangements and not have the stress of needing to leave meetings early or arrive late. This

strategy is written into the workplace policy of a large number of organisations currently using it.

Flexible parental leave – Parental leave be deemed different for maternity leave and able to be accessed for caring duties for a child up to 16 years of age. This leave could be offered as unpaid, however some organisations may offer it at a paid rate or on half pay to promote staff retention. Additional support could be provided with provision for parental leave to be taken small blocks of time.

Grandparent Leave. This unpaid leave, similar to the universal access to unpaid maternity leave would provide up to 12 months leave to be the primary care giving of grandchildren up to the age of 16. It could be available in small blocks or as a whole. Eligibility to all permanent staff after 12 months of service. This leave would promote support for the family in caring for their child, particularly during the difficult transition to high school phase.

Flexible leave provisions – Current leave entitlements are maintained however a proportion of leave ie one week, can be taken in two hour increments. This allowed employees to manage children's school functions and other parenting responsibilities.

Purchased Leave provision- Option for staff to purchase at beginning of 12 month period additional 2 weeks of leave. This is deducted from fortnightly payments pro-rated over annual wage. No loading applies to purchased leave provisions

Phone Access – The majority of workplaces make sure all employees have access to a phone to call their families. Some workplaces have a designated staff person to take calls from children after school if their parents are not available, and to ask the child questions and alert the parents if the child has concerns. This same strategy could be extended across into a local or regional telephone support network for children.

The issue of time in lieu and flexible working hours are also important for family friendly work practices, unfortunately for many employers these two provisions may be harder to manage depending on individual circumstances, hence they have not been emphasized as integral to an industrial relations workplace.

Recommendation 4.1

Introduce workplace legislation that promotes child friendly work practices for all families with children up to 16 years of age.

5. Other

It is not within the scope of this inquiry however Network wishes to highlight another concern of relevance to this age group for the Committee's attention.

Marketing and Sexualisation of Children.

Network of Community Activities remains concerned at the increased marketing and promotion aimed at the 9-14 year age group. This marketing is often intrusive and stereotypes teenagers and the image they should try to maintain.

Other more overt marketing often sexualizes children and the presence of products on the market that influence negatively the innocence of childhood need to be addressed by Government. Network believes that unless this is addressed we as a State are contravening one of the recognized human rights of children.

Article 9 "The child shall be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation. He shall not be the subject of traffic in any form"⁷

The community is disgusted by the sexualisation and marketing to children yet without a stronger stand by Government how can their voices be heard. Surely the role of Government is to act as a guardian of childhood?

Recommendation 5.1

That the Committee holds an Inquiry into Marketing to Children and the sexualisation of children through the media and marketing of products.

Conclusion

Network acknowledges the work done to date by Out of School Hours Services in supporting this age group. However we recognize that there is still a shortfall in provision of services and activities to adequately address the needs of the age group if they are to become engaged, self confident and responsible citizens. We believe that a whole of Government approach and interagency collaboration is urgently required to address this important and significant stage of childhood. Network welcomes an opportunity to speak to this submission.

⁷ Declaration of The Rights of the Child. Proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 12386(XIV) 20 November 1959.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 2.1

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