

Submission

No 61

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

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Att: Me I

May 1, 2008

The Hon Carmel Tebbutt MP  
Chair of the Committee  
Committee on Children and Young People  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney  
NSW 2000

Dear Minister,

I am pleased to send on behalf of Wesley Mission our submission to the Inquiry into children and young people 9 – 14 years in NSW.

We thank you for all that you do.

Warmly yours,

Rev Keith V. Garner  
Superintendent/CEO

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- 6 MAY 2008

The Committee Manager,  
Committee on Children and Young people  
Parliament House,  
Macquarie Street,  
Sydney NSW 2000

This submission is written on behalf of Wesley Mission, including Wesley Mission Family Services, Youth Services and Dalmar Out of Home Care. Wesley Dalmar has been providing Out of Home Care for children and young people since 1893. This service has gradually expanded over the years to include Family Support, Early Intervention and Community Development Programs and Youth Services. At present Wesley Mission is working with approximately 400 families through Family Support Services and Brighter Futures Early Intervention Programs, 180 families in Youth Services and providing homes for approximately 200 children in Out of Home Care.

### Submission to the Inquiry into children and Young People 9 – 14 Years in NSW.

The years 9 to 14 in children's lives are periods of enormous change and transition. They move from concrete to abstract thought, face major neurological changes in their brain function and the challenges of puberty, and they must deal with the enormous emotional impact of moving from childhood to adolescence. In this period of upheaval, transition and challenge they must be supported by systems which provide them with security, stability and understanding.

#### ***The needs of children and young people in the middle years:***

- The greatest need for children in this age group is the surety of a secure, nurturing family which is supported by a strong socially cohesive social structure.
- Children in this age group are beginning to develop independence and a desire to move beyond the family unit. To do this they must have an environment in which they can do it safely, in an appropriately supervised setting with a wide variety of activities in which they can engage with peers.
- As they develop the ability to make more mature decisions they need the respect of the adults around them and this needs to be demonstrated by listening to their opinion and allowing them full participation in decisions which affect them.

- They need to have access to appropriately funded health resources which are available in close proximity to their home and schools. These resources should not be in anyway dependent on their family's financial situation. The children in the most financially disadvantaged families are the most vulnerable to being denied the health services they require and this can have wide ranging impact on their educational and social development.
- Educational opportunities are essential for this age group if they are to be able to reach their adult potential. Schools and school support systems need to be aware of the transitions and upheaval these children face and offer support, especially during the major transition between Primary and Secondary Education.
- Children in this age group who are experiencing developmental or behavioural problems need to have these addressed as a matter of urgency before the issues become entrenched and much more difficult to address. School or external counselling needs to be made available early and in a setting which does not expose the children to stigmatisation.
- Those at risk of developing Mental illness must get immediate appropriate intervention. Many mental health issues that begin to develop in early childhood, such as attachment dysfunction or anxiety, can become more critical during the middle years and early diagnosis and treatment are essential.
- Children in this age group need to be able to access supports that enable them to develop a knowledge of, and value for their religious and cultural heritage.
- The issues faced by this age group are complex and varied and as a result a multidisciplinary approach is essential. This is dependent on the adults supporting the child having a wide understanding of the challenges faced by the other disciplines.

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

- Although the basic needs of all children for shelter, security, and the opportunity to develop their potential are essentially the same, every child is an individual and the timing and level of assistance they require will vary according to their personal circumstances. It is essential that systems for these children are sufficiently flexible for individuals to access them as the need arises.
- These children face many changes which are part of their developmental journey and it is, therefore, essential that their support systems remain as stable as possible. Professionals supporting these young people need to have the skills to engage with the whole range of

developmental challenges so that the child only has to cope with his/her own changes not changes in the people to whom he/she must relate.

- Children who are growing up in situations which are disadvantaged need more social support than those who are growing up in a more stable, nurturing and affluent environment. These supports are best provided to the family unit within a structure which enables the entire community to develop and benefit from them. The emphasis on family intervention recognises that children are part of the family system and intervention in isolation from that unit is less likely to be successful.
- Providing support for individual children can be beneficial but when isolated from their family and the community in which they live the benefits are less likely to be sustained in the long term. Particularly in this age group where peer relationships begin to have a greater influence on the decision making process.
- If supports cannot be provided within the family unit the children need to be provided with other opportunities for on going adult support. People who offer this support must be prepared to engage with the child on a long-term basis. Short term support only adds to the changes which can already be overwhelming.
- This age group is when most children consolidate their attitudes to gender roles. It is important that they have access to appropriate input into these sensitive areas and that any inappropriate beliefs be addressed as soon as possible. Children, particularly in this age group when belonging is a major motivator, need help to accept that sexual difference is a natural part of human diversity and any form of sexual harassment or attempted domination unacceptable.
- Children should not be categorised by age or denied services because these are quarantined by age group. Assessment for eligibility for a service should be based on need not age especially in this age group when its transitory nature means that issues tend to be revisited in a cyclic manner.

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

- The primary factor supporting resilience in children is having a nurturing and secure family unit. Families suffering disadvantage need support to provide this for their children and to cope with their own distress. Services such as Health and Education need to be sensitive to the support needs of these families and the financial pressures which even common health issues such as asthma can place on families.
- If this stability cannot be provided by the family unit other long term supports through mentoring, social connection or education must be

provided. The emphasis being on stable relationships. Short term support only reinforces the child's sense of instability and his/her belief that no one will be an ongoing support for them. This is especially important when so many children are coping with family breakdown and over 40% of marriages ending in divorce.

- When children are in this age group can be a particularly stressful time for families and many marriages fail under this stress. This can lead to the children losing the father figure in their lives, with up to a third of separated fathers not having ongoing contact with their children. Fathers need to be supported to recognise the importance of their role in their children's lives and couples need to be supported to move beyond their own conflict and to focus on the ongoing well-being of their children.
- Another area which supports resilience is engagement with Education. Frequent non-school attendance caused by children having to prepare for school by themselves because both parents work and have to leave home before the children leave for school need to be addressed by creative measures such as community buses picking them up for school and good quality, *inexpensive* before and after school care.
- Children need special support when moving to Secondary Education. Many face a transition from a small, nurturing Primary school to a very large comparatively impersonal High school. The possibility of "Middle Schools" with staff trained with an emphasis on 9 to 14 year olds should be explored as a transitional stage to address this issue. Many children do not cope with the change well and this can have a disastrous impact on their ongoing engagement with Education.
- Children who are involved in peer social activities have been seen to have a higher level of resilience but these activities need to be attractive to the age group and appropriately supervised. Many children are engaged in social activities centred on Sport and, for the children involved, these are highly beneficial providing motivation, peer engagement and healthy exercise. However there needs to be a recognition that not all children are interested in sport and as wide a range of activities as possible should be offered. Creative activities such as Art or Music have also been found to be very beneficial, particularly for children who have less developed social skills. These activities need not involve competition or the ability to work as part of a team but never the less engage the children with their peer group and help develop social relationships.
- The need to belong is a primary driver in this age group and activities which provide them with opportunities to engage with their wider social community through clubs, churches or other local social networks connect children to the social context in which they live and also have the "fringe" benefit of helping to engage the entire family with their social network. The lack of these links is demonstrated by the gatherings of children of this age group in shopping centres and parks. If not given attractive opportunities the need for belonging and

independence will lead them to create their own, generally without appropriate supervision.

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

- Children in this age group have been particularly impacted by the demands made, especially on low income families, for both parents to undertake full time work.
- Many parents of children in this age group, when faced with the cost of before and after school care, consider the children old enough to supervise themselves while their parents are at work. This also impedes the children's ability to be part of a social activity group as these are usually offered during on weekdays; there is often a cost involved; and frequently no one who is available to transport the children to the activity.
- Parents in this situation usually discourage their children from having other children in the home when they are not present. This can lead to social isolation or to the children defying the embargo and having other children there with no one to supervise their activities.
- After school care ends when children are twelve leaving no organised after school care for children in early adolescence. This can often lead to them not only being unsupervised, but to being the carer for the younger children in the family. School based after school activities could address these issues, if adequate funding was available.
- Workplaces which could recognise family demands and apply flexible arrangements such as staggered work hours or allowing parents to work from home for part of the day could help address these issues but unfortunately the ones who are most likely to provide this flexibility are those in the higher paid areas of employment rather than those of disadvantaged parents where the need is greatest.
- Family leave is now an essential workplace entitlement and should be available to both men and women. At present many parents, especially fathers, are forced to either lie about the reason they are not at work, take leave without pay or annual leave to care for sick children.