

Submission

No 21

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

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BARNARDOS AUSTRALIA

**Inquiry into Children
and Young People
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Inquiry into Children and Young People 9–14 Years in New South Wales

Barnardos works with many young people in the age group 9–14 years of age who are either separated from their parents and in permanent Out of Home Care, or live with their parents but are ‘in need’. We do work ‘on the streets’ with young adolescents in inner Sydney and Orana Far West. Many of our service users are indigenous or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Overall we believe that the age group 9–14 receives inadequate policy attention and is often lost between early childhood and adolescent work.

Barnardos has submitted extensive documentation to the Wood Inquiry, currently underway in this State, on the needs of young people in this age group in Out of Home Care and in the child protection system. Attached is a summary of our position. The full submission can be made available on request.

Among our key recommendations for young people are those for Out of Home Care in this age group:

1. Introduction of standardised case management systems in New South Wales for all children in care. (‘Looking after Children’ is internationally recognised and widely used in New South Wales, and mandatory in other States, but not by the Department of Community Services (DoCS). It was recommended by the Fitzgerald Inquiry into Out of Home Care in 2000 and for a time included as a goal of DoCS’ future plans. ‘Looking After Children’ is a paper based or electronic system which enables the assessment of health, education, identity, self presentation skills, emotional and social development. The system also ensures planning for children entering the care system is achieved and reviewed. It ensures that the standards required by the Children’s Guardian are documented and accountable.)
2. Pro-active use of adoption for children who will never return to their parents’ care, involving their participation and if necessary applying for dispensation of parental consent.
3. Ensuring that realistic contact visits are made with parents if children are going to stay in care—the level should be pitched at maintaining a level of identity but balanced with attachments to new families. If these young people are to return home then regular and frequent contact with their parents in the most normalised situation possible is required.
4. More support to foster care with adequate payment to carers to provide ‘family-like placements’.

To prevent entry to Out of Home Care these young people need:

- Changes to legislation and administrative arrangements to ensure that adequate helpful services reach the families of children ‘in need’. We need to ensure that locally provided services which really help families are got to them as quickly as possible, and not rely on a forensic investigative child protection approach where resources are absorbed in classifying not assisting. The Wood Inquiry submissions document much of this.

In addition we would like to point to some particular needs and services for low income families of 9–14 year olds who are experiencing difficulties:

- Our community development programs in low income areas such as Penrith, South Coast and rural areas point to the need for safe activities in welcoming communities. Boredom and lack of adequate transport and community facilities are significant problems as young people come to adolescence. Spaces in which young people are able to socialise and extend themselves are critical for this age group.
- These young people need support to cope with increasing ‘racial tensions’. We are particularly concerned for Muslim young people. Our services report the vulnerability of young Muslim women in this age group who may need support and safe refuge.
- Families of this age group need parent training. Barnardos has trialled parenting groups for families in this age group and believe that it is important to establish greater support for parents trying to cope with difficult early adolescent behaviour.

Evaluation of this report attests to the effectiveness of the program:

The feedback we received from both parents and co-facilitators indicates that the program is very effective. The material offers constructive parenting support through hints, tips and ideas and enables parents to feel more confident about their parenting skills and the changes they can implement. It develops a sense of empathy between parents and their teenagers and provides insight and understanding into adolescent behaviour. It also guides parents to reflect on their own behaviour and the impact this has on their relationships and parenting styles. (December 2006 Board Report)

Our programs report that many parents feel they have no control and influence over their own children, for example, children taking no notice of curfew times. A significant percentage of our clients come from single female headed families and lack positive male role models, which for boys in this age group is a critical time in developing their identity and acceptable behaviour.

Early intervention for this age group has been overlooked by government programs. There exists a general gap in services catering to this age group and providing appropriate age related programs and activities.

We note that young people in this age group have been very responsive to group work that uses the arts, for example, circus skills, art work, theatre workshops, for both the engagement strategy and educational/skills development intervention. For example, in the Far West region (Cobar, Warren, Nyngan) we are currently working with this age group delivering art workshops and circus skills workshops in school time and during school holidays, combined with the ‘Straight Talk’ program (a program that develops self expression, language and communication skills). In addition, the parents of the children attending the workshops are offered the ‘Empowering Parents’ program (Barnardos’ Local Answers—Arts in the Dust project).

We would like to see increasing government focus on developing more opportunities such as creative and sporting activities and workshops for this age group. In rural areas there are often more young people wanting to participate than there are places available. We are aware that many young people in this age group have been keen to participate in community activities that benefit others, for example, fundraisers organised by students for overseas natural disasters and local causes, World Vision’s 40 hour famine and the Cancer Council’s Relay for Life. Many young people participating in assisting their community and developing teamwork and leadership skills do so through programs such as Better Future’s Youth FUN’d Program (auspiced by Barnardos). We would recommend support of such opportunities by government.

We are concerned about the usage of alcohol and other drugs as there are many young people aged 12+ who use alcohol to excess. Sometimes this is supplied by parents and alcohol is often consumed at friends’ houses with parents present.

There is also a lack of intensive support services for this age group particularly in rural areas. They do not fit the criteria of many support services unless they are under the age of 5 or over 12, or in severe crisis. We see young people in this age group with very complex needs. They are only a small percentage of our clients.

Many of our services report that DoCS consider this age group to be of a low priority. It is extremely difficult to get DoCS to take an interest in any of our clients. DoCS are very reluctant to provide support services for their clients.

An example of a ten year old boy in this situation comes from our Orana Far West Centre. This young man is eligible for very few support services and although his situation is not at ‘crisis’ point a holistic, intensive intervention is required. DoCS’ intervention is mainly focused on his younger brothers and sister. His parents use drugs and have never held stable employment. His older brother is in juvenile detention. This boy has had some police attention, is in regular conflict with his parents, frequently stays with friends and is starting to use cannabis regularly. He often misses school and is frequently suspended for bullying, hitting other students or stealing. His family does not provide nutritious food, exercise or structured sport, or recreational activities and he has low self esteem.

Poverty is affecting many of these young people and cutting off recreational and social opportunities. Our programs report that families are unable to afford sporting and extra curricular activities for young people due to financial constraints and the increasing cost of living, for example, the cost of fuel. This is exacerbated in areas

where there is a lack of public transport options such as in the country. Lack of recreational activities can lead young people in this age group into anti-social activities.

School issues for this age group include difficulties with transition into high school and associated bullying and initiation. We see a number of 9–14 year olds who are then truanting from school, which leads to them falling behind with their education to the point that they then require tutoring to catch up. Tutoring however, is financially prohibitive for these families and so children are leaving school before they get their school certificate and have no jobs to go to. These young people require assistance with social support as well as educational assistance.

We are particularly concerned about the numbers of indigenous children who drop out of school prior to high school. We believe that this group requires additional homework and social support in grades 5 and 6 to ensure that they have adequate skills to go on. Our homework centres are under enormous pressure to provide services for the 10–14 age group.

School suspensions affect a small group of young people who are highly disadvantaged and this leads to increased disadvantage when their suspension is spent at home with stressed families (leading to increased conflict), hanging around on the streets, bored and without direction. Suspensions that last days or weeks add to already disadvantaged families. We need programs for disadvantaged young people when suspended from school.

If young people are asked to leave a school (which often happens instead of being formally expelled), or do not re-enrol in school at the beginning of a school year, there is no follow up by the Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO). There do not seem to be any reports generated that the young person is not at school (as they are not enrolled). Similarly, if a young person stops going to a non-government school, and does not then go to a government school, it does not appear that there is anyone responsible for following this up. We are aware of many young people who are under the school leaving age but are not at school, often with their parents' knowledge.

Workers report that there is only one HSLO for all of the Western Sydney/Central Coast area (based at Gosford, New South Wales). The Department of Education and Training (DET) has eleven HSLOs that are only accessible through formal application instigated by a school's principal. Principals may have a lack of incentive to access these services, for example, to assist in reinstating a troublesome child (often with complex needs and displaying very challenging behaviours) back to their school. Our workers believe that we need a system in which non-government agencies, families and interested community members can provide input regarding children not attending school. We believe that individual schools need to be held accountable for non attendance of these children and it should be the school principal's legal obligation to insist on attendance for all children 14 years and under, within the school's individual catchment area.

We draw the committee's attention to:

- Lack of crisis accommodation in many rural areas for young people and their families who need to leave home due to domestic violence.
- Lack of public transport in rural areas which limits employment and training opportunities, for example, there is no public transport to travel from Mudgee to Dubbo for many TAFE courses that provide employment in the town such as hairdressing and hospitality.
- Lack of targeted and preventative mental health services. Many 12+ year olds reporting anxiety, often cutting their arms and legs. Little support is available and available mental health counselling is reserved for extreme cases.
- Lack of affordable dental care. Many families do not go to the dentist at all because of cost and long waiting lists.