

Submission

No 22

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

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Australia
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Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
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To whom it may concern:

Please find attached a submission to the inquiry into Children and Young People in NSW from the Youth Unit of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia for your consideration.

This submission aims to share the knowledge and experience of the Youth Unit in its work with young people. It includes several recommendations for your consideration.

This submission has been approved by Rob Hanks, Youth Unit Coordinator.

Your consideration of this submission is greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

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The Youth Unit of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia submission to:
The Inquiry into Children and Young People in NSW
by the Children and Young People Committee

29 April 2008

Prepared by Steven Schubert

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The Youth Unit of the New South Wales Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia welcomes this opportunity to make a submission on children and young people aged 9-14 years in NSW.

Youth policy is arguably one of the most important considerations for our society, as it effects what our common future will look like. The needs of young people can be fleeting and hard to ascertain to an extent that it seems almost impossible to try to create meaningful policy, and even harder to implement it. The purpose of this submission is to share the experiences and knowledge of the Youth Unit about the needs of young people.

The Youth Unit works mainly with young people aged 12-25 years, with an emphasis on leadership in the mid to late 20s. Therefore, the age group we have the most experience with in relevance to this enquiry is 12-14 years. However, we have worked closely in the past with the Synod children's worker, and while children under the age of 12 are not our primary age group, we hope we still have some insight to offer. The Youth Unit exists to encourage young people in the Uniting Church to explore and shape their faith. However, our role is a holistic one, as one cannot seek to encourage faith development without seeking to encourage personal development. A key part of our role is developing communities of young people and authentic connections with the community.

This submission addresses four broad areas: the needs of young people in the middle years, disadvantages between groups of young people, developing resilience in young people and the effect of workplace practices on young people. The submission forms conclusions and make eight recommendations.

1. The needs of young people in the middle years

Social researcher Richard Eckersley (1995, p. 10) suggests that as a culture, we are failing our young people. He argues that the task of a society is to provide young people with a framework for identity and meaning, a sense of belonging, and an ethical and moral framework that helps them live mature, well-adjusted and full lives. We agree with Eckersley's suggestion that this is a fundamental task of society, and his argument that so far we have failed in this task.

When we fail to adequately listen to young people, we are not only failing them, but failing our own future. "Young people must be assured that they are being taken seriously in their wish to be accepted as adult members of the society" (Wilson, Wyn, Reeders & Woock 1986, p. 43).

We need to acknowledge and accept that young people operate out of a completely different paradigm to any other generation. This is the first generation that has known nothing by hyper speed change. Older generations tend to not cope well with change, but for young people, change is a given. The result of this difference in generations is that neither group feels like the other understands them. Older generations should make every effort to completely engage and consult with young people.

1.1 The role of the church in the social inclusion of youth

In the post-modern era we find ourselves in, religious institutions are finding themselves increasingly irrelevant. Charismatic and evangelical churches are the only churches that find themselves with an increase in attendance (Bellamy & Castle 2004, p. 7), while other denominations find their numbers dropping. In fact, the church has an older average age than the Australian community (National Christian Life Survey, 2008).

However, young people still engage in spiritual quests. People are interested in faith, but not necessarily religion. The church could potentially play an important role in facilitating the spiritual inclusion of young people.

1.2 Challenging young people

The task of our community is to offer young people affirmation of things that are healthy, good and positive so that they can build on them. However, there are certain areas where young people need to be challenged. Some people would argue that this means setting inflexible boundaries, however we contend that challenging young people about their values and decisions is more effective than punitive or condescending measures.

Areas in which young people need to be challenged about their values and decisions include consumerism, hyper-individualism, and selfish and apathetic behaviour. The church has a role in challenging these facets of young people. The church, as part of our greater society, needs to challenge consumerism and encourage young people to consider alternatives. Unfortunately, not all denominations encourage this.

1.3 Developing a healthy sexual identity

Sexuality is a vitally important part to the identity of a young person. Unfortunately, it is generally dealt with poorly.

The church is in part to blame for this. There are so many different opinions, many of them diabolically opposed, that it seems much easier to avoid the subject altogether. Yet, to do this is to dramatically fail our young people. Some parts of the church are culpable for constantly preaching the message that abstinence is the only form of safe sex. To send this message is dangerous and irresponsible.

Young people need to learn how to have a healthy and mature understanding of what it means to be a sexual being, and what is a healthy sexual relationship with themselves and with others. There is a certain amount of biological and physiological information being taught in schools, but this does not cover the personal development and spiritual sides of what it means to be sexually mature. By neglecting this area, the issue is not dealt with healthily. As a result, we see things like the National Rugby

League hiring a gender studies expert to talk to players about power relationships and what is and isn't appropriate.

Despite the minefield of society's expectations, parental permission and debates about the role of the church, this is an area that needs urgent attention. Young people need to deal with this issue like they would any other issue of identity.

2. Disadvantaged young people

Unfortunately, it would be impossible to discuss all possible levels of disadvantage for young people. It would be hard to argue that there is a true equality between the sexes, and this is something that we should continuously try to address. The same could be said be indigenous and non-indigenous young people. This section deals with some groups of disadvantaged people that we deal with.

2.1 Disadvantages for young people from broken homes

A large amount of problems in a troubled young person can be traced back to problems in the family. Broken families can stunt social skills, threaten education and blur moral and ethical lines. However, generalisations of young people from broken families being systematically disadvantaged should be avoided. In some cases, the breaking of the family unit may be the best option.

2.2 Disadvantages for young people in rural and regional areas

The needs of young people in rural and regional areas vary greatly from the needs of young people in urban areas.

Rural churches have had a problem for a long time that young people will ultimately leave small rural areas for work or university. Quite simply, in a large percentage of rural areas there is little incentive for young people to stay. Although the church has been aware of this issue for quite some time, the disappearance of young people is a problem that affects the greater community. The lack of employment opportunities

and centralisation of vocational education are problems that have continue to plague rural communities.

One of the main disadvantages for young people in rural areas is mobility and distance. Public transport is often an unrealistic alternative for young people in rural and regional areas, and this means that attending social events is simply not possible. Social networking sites are perhaps part of the solution. The emergence of youth orientated internet communities helps to bridge the barriers of distance and mobility. However, they are no substitute for face to face contact with other young people.

2.3 Disadvantages for young homosexuals

As discussed in section 1.3, sexuality is an important issue for young people in their middle years. Young people who identify as homosexual need support and acceptance. Although we use the term homosexual, we use it as an umbrella term to incorporate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex and other sexual orientations. It can be particularly hard for people who identify in on of these ways to feel like they fit in or belong. Sadly, young people who identify in one of these ways are three times more likely to commit suicide (Heath, 2003). This is a problem that needs urgent attention.

3. Developing resilience in young people

Resilience in young people comes from a community based on strengths. The notions of previous generations of duty and honour to a school, town, or God, king and country are not relevant to young people. This should be recognised and accepted.

Young people appreciate anything that taps their strengths or passions. Schools that thrive tend to have teaching staff that convince young people they are valued learners. Using a young person's strengths makes them feel needed, and this has positive effects on social inclusion and self-esteem: two vital factors in developing resilience.

3.1 Existing research into developing resilience in young people

The Search Institute in Minnesota, USA, has developed 40 assets that should be in every young person's life. The 40 assets cover a wide range of areas that young people have in their life, such as family, school, their neighbourhood and self-esteem. By developing assets in different areas, young people can overcome difficulties if one particular area of their life falls apart, for example their family or school situation.

We believe that this or some similar model for community development could be implemented on a large scale. This would involve training people in contact with young people, like teachers, youth workers, church workers, as well as community training.

Widespread training would help form more positive relationships for young people and would lead to increased resilience. If the wider community was familiar with models of community that built on young people's assets and strengths, we would be one step closer to adequately addressing Eckersley's challenge to provide a framework for identity and meaning, a sense of belonging, and an ethical and moral framework that helps young people live mature, well-adjusted and full lives.

3.2 Developing networks of young people

Encouraging networks of young people will foster resilience. However, there are several problems in achieving this.

Years ago shopping centres were meeting places for the community. In a sign of the trend to privatise public spaces, young people are increasingly being asked to move on from their hang out spaces. This means not only that young people find it difficult to find a space to meet, but also disenfranchises and disempowers them. Of course there are sometimes legitimate reasons to move people on, but the consequences of this are not always fully realised. Further, the suburban backyard has replaced the local park as a meeting point for young people. This is born out of legitimate safety concerns, however it does mean that meetings have to be planned, rather than spontaneous. The sense of community is lost.

As mentioned in section 2.1, developing networks of young people becomes harder in rural areas. Driving is not an option until a young person reaches 17, and public transport is impractical if it is even available. The church is one community body that usually tries to provide a social network for young people through youth groups, but the rest of the community needs to supplement this.

3.3 Church, community and government cooperation

There is a great untapped potential for closer cooperation between church, community and government groups in providing services for young people. This could involve greater sharing of resources and projects. Care would need to be taken to ensure that any such partnership fell into the category of a church's mission, not its evangelical prerogative.

4. The effect of workplace practices on children and young people

Our society has become more consumeristic, and this is manifested in our workplace practices. People are working longer hours to try finance a bigger house, a second car or another DVD player. This means that parents are not as active in their children's lives as they could be, and this has a huge effect on young people.

We need to challenge these workplace practices and encourage family friendly alternatives. School holidays in particular can be a particularly hard time for working parents. Parents are forced to look for alternatives, as there are 10 weeks a year of school holidays, and most workers get four weeks a year annual leave. Maternity leave and paid family leave are also areas that need to be heavily scrutinised and improved.

We also need to look at the consumerism that is encouraging people to work longer hours, and encourage people to live within their means.

Conclusion

Our task as a society is to help young people develop the skills and coping strategies to live fulfilling lives. We need to do this through engaging with them and accepting young people as they are, rather than trying to make them fit an idea we prescribe. This does not mean we cannot challenge young people's ways of thinking, but we must understand and accept that their way of thinking is different to previous generations.

Disadvantage between different groups of young people is wide ranging. Every effort should be made to overcome any disadvantage, as any disadvantage can lead to disenfranchisement from society. Some disadvantages have obvious solutions, however many do not.

Resilience in young people comes from feeling connected to a community. This community should be varied and young people should have a range of support bases. There is existing research into models of community development that provide interesting ideas. Developing networks of young people is extremely helpful in developing resilience.

As our society has become more consumeristic, parents working longer hours has had a negative impact on young people. There is a need to implement family friendly work habits and challenge this consumerism.

Recommendations

1. Young people must be fully consulted in any inquiry concerning them.
2. Young people should have an opportunity to learn about and discuss the emotional and spiritual sides of sexual relationships.
3. The government should ensure that counseling and support programs are readily available to any disadvantaged young person, particularly young people from broken families and young people questioning their sexuality.

4. The government should subsidise regular social and cultural events for young people in rural and regional areas. Public transport options should be made available to increase accessibility.
5. The government should fund training in the Search Intitute's 40 Assets community development model, or a similar community development model, for people who are in regular contact with young people. This would include teachers, social workers, youth workers, church workers, sporting coaches, parents and the general community.
6. Young people should be provided with their own autonomous spaces to socialise and form networks with other young people.
7. Parents should be provided with adequate leave for family purposes, and encouraged to spend more time with their children. Parents should be encouraged to live within their means.
8. These recommendations should be supported, implemented and funded by church groups, community groups and the government. These parties should work cooperatively to share these projects and their resources.

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