

Submission

No 17

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

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Date Received: 2/05/2008



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

Dear Committee Manager,

The Association for Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW.

ACWA has 50 years experience representing non-government organisations that provide services to children, young people and their families in NSW. ACWA is committed to building a truly civil society that facilitates inclusion, and strengthens the human services sector in NSW to better respond to community needs.

In preparing this submission, we have collated feedback received from our members, and relied on the present and past experience of staff that have worked directly with children and young people.

While there are many factors that impact on the development of children and young people, we urge the Committee to consider the impact of accessibility, affordability and the barriers to inclusions on young people of that age group and their families. In addition, we recommend that the Committee takes a broader perspective that encompasses the whole family when addressing children and young people needs. Finally, we support a re-evaluation of the role of all tiers of government and the private sector in reconfiguring the workplace in ways that support parents with children and acts to strengthen the family unit.

Should you wish to discuss this submission further, please contact Sylvia Ghaly, Policy and Membership Manager, on 02 9281 882.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Andrew McCallum'.

Andrew McCallum
CEO

5 May 2008

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

- Young people in middle years need a safe and nurturing environment to grow; that includes but is not limited to the home environment, the school, places of recreation, places of worship, the neighbourhood and public places including malls, shopping centres and parks.

Making these places safe for children to access is the responsibility of the family in some cases, the community in other cases (especially in relation to access of public places) and of the three tiers of governments in most cases (to provide the infrastructure and the resources needed to employ trained and qualified staff to interact with and support children in these environments).

- They need guidance in order to mature into responsible adjusted adults. They need role models to look up to, and heroes, both real and fictional, to aspire to follow their footsteps.

Many people play an important role in the lives of children and young people, including parents, older siblings, extended family members, neighbours, family friends, teachers, health professionals, religious leaders, coaches and mentors, among other people. It is important to ensure that all these people leave a positive impact on the lives of the younger ones. While this is the case in general, in some cases, there is a need to promote good parenting and mentoring practices, and the importance of positive reinforcement on children and young people.

- They need stability. While most families provide their children and young people with a stable home environment to grow in, there are incidents when work commitments, relocation or migration disrupt this stability. In these incidents, it is important to reduce the impact of change by developing new routines.

Children who live away from home, whether by choice (boarding schools, ...) or by court order, experience a greater level on instability, which needs to be overcome by ensuring the stability of placement by applying good placement principles.

- They need to belong and they need to get active and to get involved: Children and young people have high levels of energy. Group activities and team sports enable them to release this energy and to develop their social skills in a safe and constructive environment. In addition, it reinforces their need to belong to a group, a team, or a gang. Developing a sense of belonging is important for the development of children and young people.

- They need to have access to primary services including health, education, and accommodation. They need to have options (pathways) in order to learn to make choices.
2. The impact of age, gender, and level of disadvantage:
- Children and young people who come from disadvantage backgrounds tend to experience disadvantages as adults. It is important to break the cycle by providing adequate support services to families experiencing difficulties.
 - Peer pressure and sibling rivalry tend to have an impact on children and young people, especially when there is an aged difference: Younger children tend to be influenced by older ones who might have either a positive or a negative impact on them. Through positive parenting campaigns, parents and carers would be in a better position to monitor these relationships and interfere when needed.
 - Younger children who experience abuse and neglect, and who are experiencing difficulties, might aim at concealing these difficulties out of shame or due to lack of confidence in the support provided. Regular health checks and adequate staff training are needed to ensure the safety and protection of these children and young people.
3. The activities, services and support required to develop resilience:
- Big brother/ volunteer mentor: It is particularly important for children who experience social isolation due to disability, mental illness, developmental issues, or other factors, to have access to an adult they can trust and look up to, if such role model figure is not available within their natural environment.
 - Leadership skills: Encouraging community involvement through participation in groups such as the Scouts and Girls Guide help with positive development.
 - Having the freedom to express oneself is important for this age group as they are searching to assert their identity and looking for acceptance. This could be done through participation in arts groups, sports teams and other social and recreational activities (which need to be funded adequately to capture the target group)
 - Accessibility, affordability and inclusion: the mere factor that there are social and recreational programs catering for disadvantage children alone is creating exclusion. While there is a need for a wide range of programs to address disadvantages, it is important to reinforce inclusion by making services accessible and affordable to all.

To respond to issues experienced by disadvantage young people, there is a need for a range of services, including:

- crisis and supported accommodation programs for 9-14 (consider extending SAAP and Reconnect programs to include 9-14 yo)

- sexual health services
- drug and alcohol services equipped to deal with a younger age group
- counselling services for children and young people experiencing domestic violence
- adequate income support for those who do not live at home
- brokerage or emergency cash assistance with flexible guidelines for agencies dealing with children and young people
- early intervention programs
- child protection/OOHC services (removal of children from home should be a last resort solution after exhausting all other options)
- youth centres/ drop-in centres/ recreational activities (accessibility, affordability and inclusion)
- programs specifically designed to re-engaging school age students who are at risk of dropping-out
- adequately funded before and after school care

4. The impact of changing workplace practices on children and young people:

- The impact of changing workplace practices on parents and the subsequent impact on their children:
 - flexible working environments help parents juggle their work/family balance which leads to strengthening the family unit
 - Job satisfaction and income security are two important factors that have a direct impact on working parents and their ability to support their children both financially and emotionally
- The impact of changing workforce practices on children and young people accessing services:
 - changing funding cycles, and guidelines result on changing service delivery models, confusion and interruption of services
 - changing staff result on a breakdown in the trust/ rapport and connection (balance the needs of the staff vs the needs of yp)
 - the competitiveness of the funding process prevents coordination and cooperation among agencies and hinder the possibility of achieving positive outcomes for young people
 - poorly funded programs result on staff spending their time securing funds and reporting, rather than delivering services, which lead to poor outcomes for young people