

Submission

No 83

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

Organisation: Mission Australia
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Your Ref: PS/fer0049

The Committee Manager
Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Re: Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW

Dear Committee Manager,

We refer to your letter dated 10 March 2008. Families with whom Mission Australia works have children within the age groups referred to for this Inquiry, primarily through our Adolescent and Family Counselling Program located in Wagga.

We address the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry as follows:

1. The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age;

Mission Australia Adolescent and Family Counselling Program works with children and young people in the middle years. We find this age group are dealing with complex issues and have needs similar to those of older teens of 17 and 18 years.

Children and young people are in the developmental stage in which factors such as communication, empathy, help-seeking, goals and aspirations become major milestones in their development. Often young people exhibit an aura of independence but still look to their parents and other adults for everyday love, attention, involvement and discipline. Our Adolescent and Family Counselling Program encounter many young people who doubt their self worth and lack self confidence. Young people are redefining themselves through this transitional period of puberty, changes in mental abilities, and in social relationships (family, school, and friends); and where the young person begins to pay more attention to him/herself in early adolescence.

Young people aged 9-14 years require appropriate responses and support to deal with issues, behaviours and difficult situations in which they often find themselves. These situations include:

- low self esteem;
- depression and mental health problems;
- lack of social skills;

- isolation as a result of a lack of family and social support;
- peer pressure;
- conflicts with peers;
- smoking;
- substance use and abuse;
- suicide and self-harming practices;
- complex sexual situations involving pressure, drinking and drug use, relationships that are moving too fast for them to handle; pregnancy, and sexual abuse;
- violence and assault; and
- lack of resilience.

It has been our experience generally that the above risk factors are significantly related to mental health problems in young people. We have seen an increase in the number of children who present with low self-esteem, mental health problems, and the desire to inflict harm upon themselves. Research indicates that there has been an increase of children and young people experiencing anxiety and depression, correlating with a rise in the rates of adolescent suicide, and substance abuse. This trend is reflected in our Adolescent and Family Counselling Program which has seen an increase in the number of referrals for children as young as 9 years old experiencing family breakdowns, withdrawal from support networks, and displaying risky behaviours such as sexual activity and alcohol and drug use.

Targeting children in early stages of adolescence will reduce increasing levels of mental health problems through a greater focus on preventative therapies, rather than crisis interventions. A review of the age criteria for services such as the Adolescent and Family Counselling Program to expand the client group to include 9-16 year olds could be considered. Implementing early intervention strategies for children and young people at an earlier age may reduce risky behaviour, mental health problems and provide greater motivation for young people to utilise their social development and inter-relational skills.

We believe that mentoring programs – such as the ‘Big Brother, Big Sister’ program – are of benefit as many young people lack a supportive role model in their lives. Mentoring programs also provide a complementary function to services such as our Adolescent and Family Counselling Program. A suite of programs which include counselling and mentoring will assist in providing the support required to the young people.

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.

Research indicates young girls are twice as likely as young boys to suffer from depression. Young girls are also more often victims of sexual assault and other forms of violence.

Mission Australia’s Adolescent and Family Counselling Program has found that generally, girls favour strategies associated with empathy, communication and cooperation to express themselves, to seek help and for solving problems.

With boys, however, it seems that their belief in the importance and usefulness of empathy, communication and cooperation decreases as they get older, and they become less interested in using strategies to solve problems. The many young boys the Adolescent and Family Counsellor has engaged with tend to separate themselves from

difficult situations and assert their individuality and autonomy without emphasising the need to be defined with other social supports.; this contrasts with the behaviours observed in girls.

Many of the children and young people who are involved in Mission Australia's Brighter Futures program come from families where there is unreported sexual abuse, domestic violence and drug and alcohol use. These young people tend to feel responsible for the raising of and welfare for younger siblings, and try take on the role of the adult. The outcome of this is that these children appear to mature well ahead of their actual age; where we see girls at the age of 10 years looking and dressing like 14-16 year old teenagers and acting out adult behaviour.

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

It is essential that young people develop strategies to help them express themselves, seek help, problem solve, manage emotional difficulties, think in positive and empowering ways, and build resilience and coping abilities for future difficulties they may encounter. The Mission Australia's Adolescent and Family Counselling Program focuses on methods for young people to resolve previously experienced difficult situations, encouraging them to learn from those experiences. We take a comprehensive approach, addressing a range of health, relationship and behavioural issues, but also the erosion of self confidence, motivation and opportunity that is all too typical for many boys and girls during the transitional period of 9-14 years of age. Our job as caring adults and professionals is to help these girls and boys build confidence and pursue opportunities. Other programs run within the umbrella of Mission Australia's Adolescent and Family Counselling Program include the Resourceful Adolescent Program, the Friends Program and the ACE Program, who focus on the above, reaching girls and boys at this key transitional age when they are forming their values and attitudes.

Mission Australia's Adolescent and Family Counselling Program provides assistance with reconciliation between young persons and their families leading to restoration of relationships where this is acceptable and appropriate for both parties, or to some other acceptable and appropriate alternative. The primary role of an Adolescent and Family Counsellor within Mission Australia's Adolescent and Family Counselling Program is to offer counselling and family therapy to young people aged 12 - 18 years and/or their families who present with issues of family breakdown. These Counsellors are specialists who assist young people requiring additional assistance than that offered by generalist workers. The role of Adolescent Family Counsellors comprise assessing the operation of the family system; developing an appropriate program intervention drawing on a range of family therapy models; implementing interventions through formal sessions with the young person and the family; liaising with other agencies for the purposes of consultation, referral, joint case-planning, monitoring and review and effecting termination of the case either via reconciliation/restoration where that is possible and appropriate.

Incorporating resilience programs into school curriculums would benefit children and early adolescents. Barriers to implementing programs within the school system have been faced by The Adolescent and Family Counselling Program. The programs do not require an enormous amount of resources. Access has often been denied or disregarded, with schools stating they have other priorities within their curriculum, and running programs outside of school hours was considered to disrupt the usual routine of

the students. However, some schools have agreed to Mission Australia's Adolescent and Family Counselling Program running programs for their 12-15 year olds within the school day. In these instances the Adolescent and Family Counsellor received positive feedback from staff and student participants.

4. 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.

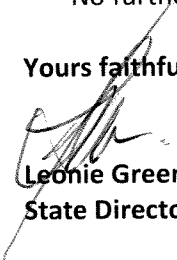
While family friendly work practices are becoming more common in Australian workplaces, many parents – and in many cases both parents – work long hours, which impacts upon their children. Aside from a decrease in involvement and interaction between parents and children, young people are often burdened with the responsibility of looking after younger siblings until parents arrive home from work.

In particular, we have seen issues arise in families where parents' employment involves shiftwork. When parents work shifts, it is difficult to put in place regular routines, or set boundaries in place for children. Parents may want their children to have stability, and to follow rules and boundaries; however, they are often unable to be consistent and supportive due to their work commitments. In response to these factors, Mission Australia's Adolescent and Family Counselling Program runs parenting programs.

5. Any other matter considered relevant to the Inquiry by the Committee.

No further comment.

Yours faithfully



Leonie Green

State Director NSW/ACT