

Submission

No 24

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

Organisation:

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Middle childhood is an important, and distinct time, in a child's development. While great emphasis is rightly placed on early childhood, in particular early intervention for the 0 to 3 year olds, children's needs in the years between 9 to 14 are given scant attention.

The middle years are a time when children need to be given the opportunity to develop the life skills and mental tools to deal with the rapid changes they are about to experience in their lives. Children need to gain independence, take responsibility, solve problems and make decisions with support from caring adults. It is a time when children make friends and need the opportunities to mix with their peer group.

This learning does not only take place within the confines of the home and school. Government and the community have a responsibility to support children during these formative years in order that they gain the resilience to cope with future challenges in a rapidly changing world. In spite of the importance of these formative years, there are few services specifically designed to meet the needs of this age group.

Issues

- Changing work practices mean that many parents are not at home after school or in the school holidays. These are often worrying times for parents. School age after school and holiday centres are generally not able to adequately meet the needs and interests of the 9 – 14 age group. Youth centres generally cater for an older age group and parents are often reluctant to enrol younger children in these centres. Funding is not available to provide age specific programs. There is a risk that children will become involved in delinquent behaviour out of sheer boredom. The cost of keeping one child in a juvenile justice centre is far higher than providing appropriate services in the community.
- In middle childhood children need choice and the opportunities to try out a range of activities and to experiment, not all children have the same interests. While sporting activities are often well catered for there may be few other choices.
- Children in rural areas are particularly disadvantaged. Few towns have programs and transport is a major problem. School buses do not operate in school holidays and many children are isolated and not able to meet with their friends. For many parents the cost of transporting children to activities is prohibitive and time consuming.
- Children with special needs pose a particular problem as funding does not usually enable adequate staffing to meet the child's individual needs. Special school transport is also discontinued in school vacations meaning the child may have to remain at home posing a big problem for working parents. These children are also denied the social interaction so essential to this age group.
- Parents need to know that children are safe. Children also need to feel safe. They need to be able to progress, to undertake new and challenging tasks and be given responsibility according to their maturity and confidence. Too often children start secondary school without having the opportunity to gain the independence needed to cope with their new situation.

Actions for consideration

- A whole of community approach, including parents, children, schools, community organisations and all levels of government, to address the need for programs that are flexible and meet the needs of different communities – ‘one size will not suit all’.

This could include

- Funding to assist age appropriate programs at existing centres and enable cooperation and sharing between centres to utilise resources available.
- Special activities coordinated within the community with assistance from business and community organizations. This is not a new idea. One local council coordinated a range of activities with outdoor recreation, sporting and creative arts groups as well as businesses such as hairdressers, restaurants etc. A special pass could be purchased for each holiday period and be available for children to access appropriate activities and events at a discount.
- Adequate supervision at popular attractions such as skate-board facilities should be provided so that parents are confident that their children will be safe.
- Special day travel passes, similar to the Seniors' Pass, during school holidays so that children can access activities and travel easily by public transport.
- Rural families need to be consulted as to solutions for transport, activities and how best to provide opportunities for 9-14 year olds in their area.
- Indigenous communities should be consulted as to the most appropriate programs for their children. Adequate funding and training should be provided for local people to run the programs.

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