

Submission

No 57

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

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To: **Committee on Children and Young People**

For: **The Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW (Inquiry)**

From: **Ku-ring-gai Council
Communities department:**

- **Children's Services**
- **Leisure Services**
- **Youth Services**
- **Art Centre**

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Background

The following comments are based on Ku-ring-gai Council officers' experiences, viewpoints and observations working with children 9-14 years of age in Council programs, in the Ku-ring-gai Local Government Area. The council projects include children's services, leisure events and activities, youth outreach programs and arts centre activities. The comments are confined to Council officers' responses to the five terms of reference areas.

OOSH refers to out of school hours care services. OOSH services are formal child care services for school attending children usually 5-12 years of age and include before school care, after school care and vacation care services.

ONE (1)

The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between 9-14 years of age

Views of Children Considered

There is a scarcity of opportunities for children's views to be formally heard in matters concerning their lives. Limited consultation of children aged 9-14 years occurs in services focussing on children of that age group. Sometimes a gathering of children's viewpoints occurs in student councils at high school however this is usually conducted with children 12 years and over.

Article 12 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, states the opinions of children should be heard and respected taking into account children's views are appropriate to the child's maturity level.

Recommendations:

- Provide accessible formal and informal opportunities for children aged 9-14 years of age to provide their views on service provision relevant to them.
- For all levels of government to provide accessible child-friendly opportunities to consult younger aged children (9-14 years) in relation to major children's policy directions.

Children's Rights

Article 42 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, mentions, "State Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike."

Recommendations:

- To educate children aged 9-14 years of age about their basic rights in relation to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- To educate adults on the Convention on the Rights of Children to enhance service provision principles.

Safe Places to ‘Hang Out’

Children require safe, public spaces including parks, recreation facilities and other public areas to independently meet their friends. The places need to be accessible and close to their homes, schools, shops and public transport systems.

When safe and accessible child friendly public spaces are lacking, children may tend to congregate in places like shopping malls. Teenagers may be told to ‘move on’ by security guards at shopping centres and shopping malls reducing a safe congregation area for children.

Recommendation:

- To provide an increase of and a variety of child friendly public spaces and facilities for children 9-14 years to utilise.

Rest and Leisure Opportunities

Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child state that children have the right to relax and play and be able to join a variety of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

Recommendation:

- To provide leisure opportunities in cultural, artistic and other activities relevant and accessible to 9-14 year old children.

Youth (12 years plus)

This is a critical age when it comes to addressing serious anti-social behaviour in young people. It is very hard to change entrenched patterns of anti social behaviour which may include poor school attendance, bullying behaviour or even criminal activities. Therefore children aged 12-14 years of age and beyond need positive engagement and support, with the ability to earn certain freedoms or benefits and take responsibilities for negative behaviours.

Recommendation:

- For the provision of support services for children who are at risk of or already engaged in anti social behaviours.

Vacation Care Activities

The 9-14 year old age group are observed to enjoy very active recreational activities during the school holidays programs. Vacation care activities have responded to children’s interests and their need for stimulation and have adopted ‘on the go’ leisure activities in Council’s vacation care program. The activity based program seems to be enjoyed by both girls and boys of this age group. Children in vacation care appear to respond well to the structure of planned activities and excursions organised.

Recommendation:

- To provide interest based and active activities are for vacation care programs for 9-14 year old children.

TWO (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

Gender Issues

Activities: In vacation care activities, enjoyment of the planned activities was observed following gender stereotypical divisions. Whilst both boys and girls enjoyed hands on, active pursuits in the programming, on the whole the boys still had a preference for sporting activities and the girls generally seemed to enjoy less physical organised activities.

Body Image: 12-14 year old girls seem to be very conscious of their body image and girls in this age group were observed discussing dieting and calories and refusing to eat food at a BBQ because they were “watching their weight”. Girls had very negative associations with being over weight whereas boys were not observed to be worried about body image.

Gender of Staff: Male staff at children’s services is seen as a positive benefit to boys attending vacation care services. Boys respond engagingly to male staff due to positive role modelling and the novelty of male staff in a predominantly female children’s services field. The lessening of male teachers numbers in the primary education system has also reduced male role models to boys outside of their family environments.

Youth services reported the gender of the staff did not necessarily increase the voluntary attendance of boys or girls at the youth centre. Youth centres are attended mainly by teenage boys (90%) regardless of the gender of the staff. An increase in female staff members did not increase the number of girls attending.

Girls attendance a youth centres tended to be infrequent and spontaneous whereas boys attendances are regular especially if their friend attended the centre.

Ages 9-14 years

The content of information changes as children move through the 9-14 year age timeline and their levels of independence, freedom and problem solving increases with their age.

Education on Drug and Alcohol and Nutrition and Health is useful to be started early, so children are informed about issues that will confront them now and in the near future.

Youth: The maintenance of stability in a child's life is important as they enter adolescence. Youth workers attempt to make a positive impact on this age group and influence positively the child's view's of their relationship with society. Methods tailored to individuals needs and wants as opposed to generic solutions are more likely to succeed, and whilst they will involve more thought, preparation and work, in the long run it will save these same elements.

Vacation Care: Most vacation care services conclude at age 12 years yet services for children older than 12 are still required by some families. Council's services extends to 14 year old children and is found to be very popular with families who do not want to leave the child unsupervised during holiday periods.

Recommendation:

- To increase the provision of vacation care services for the older children aged 12- 14 years.

Children with Disabilities

Once the children are over 12 years of age there are limited vacation care options for children. Mainstream vacation care services are sometimes challenged to cater for children with disabilities as additional staff and training is sometimes required. Additional resources can be required to integrated children with disabilities in vacation care activities especially excursion programs. Children with disabilities require mainstream and customised services for their children during the school holidays.

Article 23 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child states children's right to special care and support to live a full and independent life.

Recommendation:

- To provide appropriate and inclusive children's services for children with disabilities, with additional resources when required.

Disadvantages of the Advantaged

Council staff reported observed drawbacks to children living in more affluent parts of Sydney. Observations are qualitative only and may only represent a small number of children however 'some' children were viewed as spoiled children who expected things to be done for them rather than being problem solvers themselves. A certain 'culture of privilege' was observed amongst some children and this was also reported in the older youth ages. Children seemed to be over-protected by their parents at home and lacked maturity and problem solving skills in situations with their peers. Staff guessed this maybe due older aged parents being cautious in the parenting skills and overprotecting their children

THREE (3)

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

Organised activities which educate, support or provide recreation can have the potential to develop resilience for children of all ages. Similarly, services and factors that enhance community capacity may also support children's resilience.

Some suggested activities or services to support 9-14 year olds

- Vacation care for older children up to 14 years of age
- Transitional activities for older primary school children
- Education programs to children for preventative drug and alcohol use
- Weekend sports programs
- Arts programs
- Bike, skate events
- Variety of recreational options
- Guitar classes
- Music based activities as an introduction to other Arts areas.

Youth Specific Facilities

Public space that allows children to 'hang out' is required and would benefit young people. This facility may contain: basketball courts, Art projects, skate facilities, public space to sit down in the shade, trees, friendly places to meet friends and be close to shops to food and public transport.

Art Opportunities

Provision of children 9-14 years of age with an integrated Arts based program where children would become involved in a variety of art modes including music, creative writing and the visual arts (drawing, painting, collage). This could occur through funding of arts projects in different local areas and could occur each school holiday period.

Vacation Care

Council staff's vacation care research, experience and community feedback has revealed there is a severe lack of school holiday based care services which cater for children up to the age of 14, with the exception of a small number of services, most vacation care and school holiday programs cease servicing children at age 12. Feedback from parents over several years has indicated that a large proportion of parents do not feel comfortable with children this age either staying at home by themselves or with siblings or engaging in school holiday activities without parental supervision.

Youth

A greater focus on life skills, personal growth and awareness at this age group may benefit children. Being involved in their local communities through varying projects, services and programs is something that can boost the self esteem of children who may not perform well at school or sports.

Parents need support to help support their children

Parents need parenting workshops to equip them with knowledge on raising their children. Parents tend to be isolated when they have trouble with their children and do not speak to other people about their problems fearing being labelled as “bad parents”. Good past attendance in Council organised parent seminars for parents of teenagers have shown the high level of interest regarding parenting information.

Parent education may be required on:

- Youth services
- Teenage development
- Parenting workshops
- Statistics on young people
- Empowerment of parents

Four (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

OOSH Services

The majority of children attending formal children’s services including before and after school care and vacation care services are attending due to the work commitments of their parents or guardians.

Children may go to before and/or after school care during the school term and then proceed to attend vacation care services due to the work arrangements of their parents. For 9 and 10 year olds attending OOSH services, the formal child care time constitutes a large sector of their non-school time. It is not uncommon for children to be enrolled for the full two weeks of a vacation care program run by Council and be quite tired by then end of the holidays, not enabling children to have a break from the school hours routine. Children in full time vacation care continue to have limited time to spend with their parents.

“It may be more useful for parents to have more family leave to spend time with their kids during the school holidays than to give parents more money via tax and Child Care Benefits so they can purchase child care,” expressed some OOSH staff.

Parents views for children 12-14 years of age

Working parents feel their children should be supervised in the school holiday times when they are working. It is especially so during the transition years when children first enter high school and coming to terms with the changes associated with school and adolescence.

See Section 3 under Vacation Care.

Busy Children

The overloading of children's activities is also reported by some OOSH workers. There appears to be limited unstructured time for children regardless of their attendance in formal child care or not. Children are observed rushing from one after school activity to another, eg. Sports, music or dance classes. Again children are observed to be very tired by week's end due the amount of organised activities after school.

Youth

Youth workers stated that some of the children they see at the youth centres have parents who work long hours so children are at the youth centre after school when the house is empty.

Youth workers mentioned children in the 14 years age group would be nearing or obtaining their first part-time job so education to children from schools or other services about their workplace rights, taxes and other work matters would empower young people who are vulnerable to unscrupulous employers. Tales of young people being treated unfairly by employers are commonly heard by youth workers.

Recommendation:

- To provide education to 14 year olds about workplace rights and conditions.

FIVE (5)

Any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee

Allergies

There is an observed increase of children with anaphylaxis reactions attending services for children. This has been reported from Council's arts projects during their school holidays classes where approximately five children out of 110 children attending would arrive with epipens (injections for severe allergic reactions).

The Art Centre has had to adopt a no nuts products policy, remove snacks containing nuts from snack machines, send out policies and letters to parent asking them not to send children in with these products, in order to minimise risks to children attending the centre. This change whilst seen in child care centres has not appeared in leisure activities such as art classes until recently.

Recommendation:

- For the provision of more education and support to services about anaphylaxis.

Court Support

Court support for young people facing court cases required as the Children's Courts are located long distances from the Ku-ring-gai local government area. Children do not receive support for their court processes and may feel overwhelmed or discouraged from attending their court appearances.

Recommendation:

- For the provision of locally based Court support services children attending Children's Court.

Homeless Children

There is an absence of a youth refuges in the Northern Sydney area so homeless children have no local support services to assists them.

Recommendation:

- For a youth refuge and associated support services to be located in the Northern Sydney area
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