Submission
No 79

INQUIRY INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE OUTSIDE THE SYDNEY CBD

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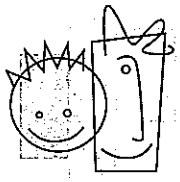

nsw commission for
children & young people

Mr Ninos Khoshaba MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Public Works
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Khoshaba

I am writing regarding the Public Works Committee's *Inquiry into the development of arts and cultural infrastructure outside the Sydney CBD.*

I welcome the development of an arts and cultural plan for NSW as an integral part of the NSW State Plan. This is an opportunity to support the well-being of children and young people through arts and cultural participation.

I believe that children and young people should be a specific priority within this plan. There is strong evidence that participation in arts and cultural activities is essential to children and young people's well-being, as it helps to build identity, self-esteem, inter-personal relationships, social networks and connections to the community. I have attached a copy of the Commission's report *Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being* for the Committee's information. The Commission anticipates undertaking further research into the impact of arts and cultural activity on children's well-being in 2009.

The Commission consulted with 33 children and young people outside Sydney, ranging in age from four to fifteen years, to help inform the Committee's work on this Inquiry. These children and young people reported a lack of activities and facilities appropriate for them, particularly in rural and regional areas.

The children also said that they wanted to be involved in arts and cultural planning and funding decisions that affect them, as they understand what makes cultural activities and infrastructure appropriate and engaging for children and young people. We have found that children and young people's involvement does enhance decisions leading to better outcomes for children. I therefore strongly recommend that the development of a NSW arts and cultural plan be informed by a children and young people's participation strategy. The Commission would be happy to assist the Department of Arts, Sport and Recreation to develop and implement such a strategy.

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The Commission's work with children has also shown that arts and cultural interests and needs vary with age. An arts and cultural plan should reflect the need for activities, facilities and education appropriate to each stage of the life course.

Our recent consultations with children showed that children under five years want activities where they can play, learn and make noise if they want to. Primary school aged children wanted activities where they can have fun, freedom, learn and be with friends. Adolescents want to be social and interact with their peers and other members of their community, to be active, and to have more chances to expand and explore their interests. Arts involving technologies such as the internet are of particular interest to young people. School aged children said they wanted to learn about arts and culture both at school and in the broader community.

A key issue for children and young people outside city centres is access to arts and cultural opportunities. Providing facilities and activities may not, by themselves, allow participation. Children and young people can only participate if they can get to the activities. There is limited public transport in outer suburban areas, and very little public transport in rural areas. The increased costs of petrol have meant that families, and older adolescents who can drive, are decreasingly able to transport children to arts and cultural activities. This is perhaps the barrier to cultural participation most commonly identified by children and young people, and by arts and cultural agencies supporting them. It is important that a NSW arts and cultural plan address access to activities for children and young people, in addition to the provision and funding of such activities.

Thank you for the opportunity to make these comments.

If you require any further information, please contact Ms Maj-Britt Engelhardt, Manager, Policy at maj-britt.engelhardt@kids.nsw.gov.au or on 9286 7205.

Yours sincerely

Gillian Calvert

Gillian Calvert
Commissioner
16 October 2008

Encl. Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being

ask the children

Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being[1]

nsw commission for children & young people

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People and the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney asked 126 children and young people across New South Wales about what well-being means to them.

This Ask the Children provides an overview of the study and the key themes that emerged.

WHY WE DID THE STUDY

Focusing on well-being

Most research on children's well-being defines well-being in terms of what is negative in children's lives. It focuses on topics such as child health problems, child abuse and neglect or risk-taking behaviour. The consequence of this is that we know more about what we don't want for our children than what we do want. This is reflected in policy and service provision that responds to vulnerability rather than promoting positive standards for children.

This approach is out of step with an increasing body of evidence showing that the best way to prevent negative outcomes for children is to promote well-being throughout their lives, rather than only responding to vulnerability and crisis. We need to know about and respond to both the positive and negative in children's lives.

The other limitation in the well-being literature is the little that is known about what children and young people identify as well-being, what it looks like and the factors which affect their sense of it. This includes whether children and young people think about well-being in both positive or negative terms and, whether they integrate these feelings in their life.

Starting from Children's perspectives

If policies and services are to be successful in supporting children we need to understand what well-being is for them. Because research has been limited in this area we cannot be sure if children's experiences are the same as adults' understandings of children's well-being, and whether our current understandings of well-being are meaningful to them. This is important if we are going to measure and monitor children's well-being in a way that captures what is important in their lives. Once we have done this we will be in a position to know whether we need to complement and refocus our existing concepts and measures.

Children have legitimate views on their own well-being and their views need to be considered when developing policy, services and monitoring frameworks. Without children's views our appreciation and understanding of their well-being may be blunted and inadequate.

How we did the study

To respond to the information gaps, we designed this study so that children's experiences were central to interpretations of well-being. The methods we chose and the approach we took allowed children's experiences and attitudes to drive the process.

Our research involved 126 children and young people aged between eight and 15 years from around New South Wales.

In total, 178 interviews were conducted, totalling approximately 150 hours of transcript. Our sample included children from each statistical sub-division of Sydney (82 children), Newcastle (21 children) and one regional statistical division (23 children); and children from each quantile of the Index of Economic Resources[2]. Of the participants, 85 were female and 41 were male, 74 participants were aged between 8 and 11 years of age, and 52 aged between 12 and 15 years of age. It is unclear

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at this stage what impact the difference in numbers of females and males has on the findings. We have not yet analysed whether age, gender and other socio-economic characteristics makes a difference.

The research was conducted over three stages. Not all children participated in all stages; some felt they had fully explored the subject in the first interview, others stopped at the second stage because they were not interested in doing a project, and others remained until the end of the third stage. Initial analysis of interviews was undertaken after the first stage. However all the interviews were then analysed together in a systematic way to provide the themes. The process gave children an opportunity to elaborate and further emphasise what was important to them. In some cases this added new dimensions to what had previously been said, in other cases it provided a deeper understanding of what had previously been discussed, and in others it simply confirmed previous understandings.

In this way, children's own perspectives on what were the important themes became part of the interview and were integral in guiding the analysis. Therefore the themes, while identified by the researchers through analysis across interviews, are grounded in what the children and young people said. Further information on stages and the methods used can be found in the last section of this paper on page 18.

OVERARCHING THEMES OF CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING[3]

We found that well-being is about children's emotional life. Their relationships and connections with others are central to how children understand well-being. A diverse and sometimes contradictory range of emotions are associated with well-being. For example, some children considered well-being as being able to integrate anger and sadness, as well as happiness, in their lives. They understand well-being as having both positive and negative dimensions.

Children told us that well-being can be experienced at a particular point in time through specific circumstances or encounters with particular people, for example, feeling competent when you do something well. However it is often these point in time experiences (which on the face of it may be transitory) that build the enduring experience of well-being, for example feeling you are a competent person.

Children understand that well-being is complex and they understand it in complex ways. We found that while there are nine themes that make up children's picture of well-being, three are fundamental:

- Agency: having agency or power to take independent action, leading to some control and capacity to act independently in everyday life;
- Security: having a sense of security to be able to engage fully with life and do the things that one needs to do; and
- Positive sense of self: having a positive sense of self, that is feeling that you are an okay or good person, and being recognised as such by those around you—for who you are as well as what you do.

These themes are integral to the other six themes. They form a lens through which we have to understand the other themes, and are present, to differing degrees, in the other themes. The relationship between these themes (for instance how agency and security reinforce each other) form the basis from which children discuss the other themes.

The six other themes that make up children's well-being are:

- Activities
- Adversity in children's lives
- Material and economic resources
- Physical environments
- Physical health
- Social responsibility and moral agency

KEY THEMES

Agency—I have power to take independent action

Children told us it is important to their well-being to have the power to take independent action. This includes being able to make choices in everyday situations and influence everyday occurrences at home and at school. Children feel that they have less control over their own lives than adults have over children's lives. This level of control is one of the things that children say make them different from adults, who control what goes on day-to-day.

As well as being able to exert agency in everyday life, children identified how it was important to their well-being to be involved in decisions about their lives and that

having some degree of control is important to achieve important goals. However agency is only possible within the boundaries set by others, particularly parents, which both restrict and allow children to exercise their agency.

Agency and boundaries

To exercise their independence, children and young people want age appropriate guidance from their parents, such as setting routines and boundaries, and providing advice and support. Guidance provided them with a sense of certainty within which they could act, particularly when situations or problems were complex. The following extract drawn from a longer discussion with a 9 year old girl about parents is illustrative.

PARTICIPANT (Female, 9 years): [Adults] are in charge of me when I was small. I'm in charge of myself when I am big.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so how do they start to understand that?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah it happens gradually. It is just nature. I don't know how it happens.

INTERVIEWER: So does it mean that adults like your parents are the people who have got the power, like they are the bosses, is that what it is like?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, that is how it is.

INTERVIEWER: Until what age do you see that happening?

PARTICIPANT: About five. As soon as like you get to school you will be like dressing yourself. You will be like having showers. Because before you might like put the shirt the wrong way. You might slip in the bathtub or something.

Children stated that it was important for these boundaries to be negotiated as they change. Boundaries could become restrictive or inappropriate when children felt their parents did not fully appreciate how much they had changed. Sometimes they felt their perceptions of themselves were quite different to those of their parents, as these two females discussed with the researcher:

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): ...They [parents] are used to having their morals and values rubbing off onto us but I don't know whether it is just high school or just when you are growing up and overall all those kind of changes that everybody goes through. I just think when we change our parents often see that, but don't see it from the way we feel it. I don't know if that makes much sense.

PARTICIPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): I don't know, I just think that when we are changing and we are sort of thinking for ourselves more, it may be daunting to parents.

PARTICIPANT 1: I know like they think oh... they have changed so much they are not like the same little girl anymore but we can't be.

PARTICIPANT 2: Yeah everyone grows up and everyone has their own ideas of what is right and wrong once they are older..., it just changes. It is not completely different but...

PARTICIPANT 1: They are our decisions.

Older children described tension between parental fears for their safety and their desire to go out with friends. Understanding and respecting their parents desire to protect them did not take away the dilemma. Finding a balance between being cared for and learning through experience was important. This is illustrated in the following extract where the researcher explores comments the 15 year old girl had made earlier in the interview on protection:

INTERVIEWER: And I think you said that one way your mum looks out for you and tries to protect you is that she doesn't always let you do everything you want.

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): Yeah

INTERVIEWER: Um, so do you think it is important for your well-being to have a mum like that who does look out for you?

PARTICIPANT: Um, yes and no. Because like if we didn't have parents like that then bad things or we could get ourselves into danger but um, no because we have to learn and experience life ourselves. We can't just be protected all the time. Because when we do get older and we are out there by ourselves we are not going to know what to do.

Agency and decision making

Children want to be involved in and make decisions that affect their lives, both immediate everyday decisions and those with longer term consequences. This is especially so when they have to live with the outcomes of the decision.

When it comes to everyday rules one nine year old boy described how these should be negotiated between parents and children:

> **INTERVIEWER**: Do you think children should be part of making rules, like should adults make them on their own or should they ask children?
>
> **PARTICIPANT** (Male, 9 years): Well, I think, that both sides should co-operate together and should have, like, meetings together and make up the rules because it is more fair that way.

It is important that children know that they can make decisions. In our research, children spoke about responsible decision-making having two dimensions: the process of acting responsibly, and responsible outcomes. The process of acting responsibly was expressed as knowing you have the capacity to process information, make morally sound decisions, and be able to stand by the reasons for your decision. Responsible outcomes involved knowing that by making a sound decision, good outcomes would be achieved for yourself and for those affected by your decision, especially the people close to you. This is discussed further under the Social Responsibility theme.

Agency and achievement

Having some control is also important for achieving goals, being able to negotiate and solve problems, and developing moral orientation and sense of self.

> **PARTICIPANT** (Female, 9 years): Like having your own ideas means you like grow up a little bit more and means you're intelligent. And if you keep on following other people's ideas you start not to learn by yourself. You learn from other people. What I mean is like you're not supposed to learn from other people, like you are supposed to, but not all the time.

Safety and feeling secure – I can live life to the full

Children told us that feeling safe and being safe are both important to their well-being. They spoke about their fears and described the things that made them feel safe.

Children's sense of security and safety increases when they have the protection of parents, a personal safe place to be, or trusted people around them.

Parents as protectors and home as a safe haven

Parents are the people who children and young people said were primarily responsible for keeping them safe. There are two related aspects to this; a sense of being cared for combined with trust that parents will provide protection; and the practical things that parents do to keep children safe (such as making the household physically secure; teaching safe behaviours; and making sure that children don't place themselves in unsafe situations or do unsafe things).

Having a home that is a safe place is fundamental to a sense of children's well-being. Children expect that home should be a place where personal threats do not exist and emotional and physical security is promoted. In our research, some children described this as a feeling of 'togetherness'.

Being with others

We found that some children felt that safety came in numbers; being with other people, such as family, friends and neighbours, or simply having them around provided protection. Children feel most unsafe when they are alone. They associated this with being vulnerable. This was the case regardless of whether they were at home or in public. When discussing being left alone at home, a ten year old girl told the researcher:

> **PARTICIPANT** (Female, 10 years): 'It is pretty scary because no-one is with me and I'm lonely and sometimes someone else comes in and might steal stuff because I'm all alone'.

A 15 year old described how his community provided safety for him:

> **PARTICIPANT** (Male, 15 years): And like everybody in general just looking out for each other and making sure everything is okay.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, yep.

PARTICIPANT: So like if you need anything, if something is wrong with someone you help them to get through and things like that.

Safe places, safe neighbourhoods

When children feel safe in their neighbourhood, they feel part of it and are able to act independently within it. The design and qualities of the built environment are important factors in making a community safe or unsafe and influence how safe children feel. The lack of 'safe spaces' for general use restricts children's capacity to engage in activities in their own way.

Traffic was the main 'public' danger mentioned by children that limited their capacity to explore their local environments. A 10 year old boy described how living on a busy road meant he was not allowed to ride his bike freely:

PARTICIPANT (Male, 10 years): I used to be allowed to like ride by myself just around the block and everything with my friends, like when I was really little. My friends used to live next to me and we just rode around but now I can't because it's busy and anything could happen.

Lack of safety is attributed by some children to a decline of what has been described as 'civil society', or 'community spirit'. Neighbourhoods are not welcoming or safe because people did not 'look out for each other' and are less inclined to take responsibility for children in their neighbourhood. During a longer discussion about how during their parent's childhood, neighbourhoods were safer to play than now, two 14 year old girls explained:

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): It is not necessarily quite as safe ... there is not that kind of freedom where everyone, I mean you can't even go on the street anymore because you are afraid of getting run over by a car because there are so many coming around.

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): It is like zoom, zoom and they are there and they don't see you. It is like oh is that a car because they go so fast and you try and have speed limits and stuff but who cares. No-one can see you.

PARTICIPANT A: I don't think I would go out on the street and introduce myself to my neighbour's children and play with them because... everyone keeps to themselves now. There is not quite as big a community spirit as I think there was.

PARTICIPANT B: Not everyone knows each other like they used to.

Feeling unsafe and managing risk

Children described having fears about their immediate personal safety, especially being a victim of assault by a stranger and having personal property taken, either at home or in public. When talking about her concerns regarding threats to children's property when alone outdoors, one 15 year old girl told the researcher:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): 'I've heard that like girls have had stuff taken off them like phones and wallets and things like that from the boys and so I don't want that to happen to me.'

Fears were also expressed about global threats, such as war and terrorism. Children felt helpless to do anything about this and expressed anxiety that something horrific could happen close to home. They had a general insecurity about their own future, and of their community and society. Feeling unsafe could therefore compromise well-being because children would live in a risk-averse way to manage risk.

For some children their concerns meant they lived life in a restrictive, guarded or risk-averse way, either as a result of restrictions imposed by others or by themselves. They managed risks to optimise chances for a secure future and for some children this undermined their capacity to live in the moment. The following extract, taken from a longer discussion between the researcher and two 14 year old girls about how risk was managed and the impact this has on their lives, is illustrative:

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): I think... living for the present would also be good but it is probably not something that many people do.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that is?

PARTICIPANT A: Everyone is always worrying. It is going back to that thing where you have to always look around you to make sure.

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): (Y)ou have to look over your shoulder like...

PARTICIPANT A: Just to make [sure], you've got to always make sure. You've got to always it is, like, no 'ifs' or 'buts'.

PARTICIPANT B: What if I just jump off that spring board and I hit my head on the back of the thing I don't want to do that. It is like a risk.

Sense of self—I am a good person

Children told us that having a positive sense of self is important to their well-being. Children described this as 'how you feel in yourself', feeling that you are a 'good' or an 'okay' person, having a general sense that things are going well and feeling appreciated for who you are, including what you do. Acting with self-integrity, being given positive recognition from others and having time to reflect are things that children identified as important to a positive sense of self and well-being.

Sense of self and self-integrity

A positive sense of self is closely linked with a sense of self-integrity described as 'trying to be someone I want to be' and as 'being yourself rather than pretending to be someone else for the sake of others'. Self-integrity required acting with some degree of self-determination. A 13 year old boy discussed the importance of being given responsibility by others to his well-being:

PARTICIPANT (Male, 13 years): Yeah it is important. It makes you feel good and it makes you feel you can do stuff and it gives you the ability, if that is the right word um, to be able to do it. Helps you on your way to greatness.

Children described how sometimes they felt they couldn't just be themselves and had to project a false self-image in order to meet the expectations of friends and family. This is described by one 12 year old girl:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 12 years): Like being someone who I wasn't

INTERVIEWER: Right. What were you doing that you weren't?

PARTICIPANT: Well I'm really quiet and I was being really noisy and um, being loud and trying to show off. And I thought that wasn't me. And so yeah I've thought about that.

INTERVIEWER: So why do you think you were being noisy and loud and showing off?

PARTICIPANT: Because I had friends that were popular and they were like that.

Sense of self and recognition and belonging

Being valued and respected by others for who they are is important to children. Obtaining positive recognition, and feeling a sense of belonging are crucial elements for a positive sense of self.

Positive recognition (either formal or informal) is obtained through small everyday acts or big events. Formal recognition might include official acknowledgement, such as receiving awards, celebrations and rites of passage or other special events that focus on the child. Events included graduations, family and religious events, and milestone birthdays. Feeling competent in an activity and having this competence recognised makes children feel good about themselves.

Education is a significant context for formal recognition for children and they understand that rewards in this context are provided to those who do well. However, children distinguished between doing well formally and feeling they did well. The latter involved having a sense of satisfaction with their progress, linked to knowing that they did their best. In discussing the end of year awards at her school, a 10 year old girl explained:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 10 years): Six people get chosen in your class... and then they get the end of the year award... They are like the six best students.

INTERVIEWER: Oh okay, so you are one of the six best in your class. Congratulations. Okay. And how did that make you feel?

PARTICIPANT: It made me feel proud of myself.

Informal recognition includes everyday acts of appreciation by those close to the child. Small acts of respect and recognition often stand out for children. For instance, one child recalled a train trip with her uncle as a 'well-being' time because she was given her own seat

on the train. This seemingly small act captured for her the care and respect that her uncle had for her. Other examples included everyday expressions of care and love from parents, particularly when children were feeling unwell or down, invitations to outings and events from friends, positive feedback from teachers and expressions of thanks to the child. During a discussion about an incident when she fell off a horse, one 9 year old female described the importance of being cared for and made to feel special:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 9 years): Oh, so they made it really big, made me feel really special, like really gave me good attention.

INTERVIEWER: So they did all the right things when you fell off the horse. So, is it important that when things happen to children that people really make them feel special and look after them properly?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. ... Cause sometimes when your mum takes extra care of you that can be a bit special.

The opposite of positive recognition and belonging is feeling harassed and excluded. In our research, one of the most common examples was exclusion from friendship groups or peer activities, including being denied opportunities to develop friendships. Many children shared situations where they had observed other children being excluded, singled-out and harassed.

Sense of self and having time for yourself

Taking time out to be on your own, to relax, reflect, and 'chill-out' allows children to process how they feel and what is going on around them, and to reflect on particular difficulties they might be experiencing. When discussing a photo of her room one 14 year old female explained:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 14 years): I think even being on your own can often make you feel good. Um, I think giving yourself time to think and process everything that is going around you. You can find good and happy things in life and that can also make you happy as well.

In some cases, taking time out involves children retreating into their own personal space, usually their bedroom (a space described as a sanctuary from routine, concerns or rules). It can also involve taking the dog for a walk, going for a jog, or using imaginative processes like creative writing to explore and express the complexities of their inner world. The important thing was the autonomy to move away from routine expectations to focus on what is occurring in their life.

Time out also serves as a retreat from troubles (such as with parents) or a way for children to deal with being upset or angry. During a discussion of managing her feelings of powerlessness about not getting on with her step-mother, a 10 year old female said:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 10 years): ... I try to forget everything that has happened and what I usually do is I read a book and then I think about what is happening in the book and I can't think of anything that is going on in my mind.

OTHER THEMES

Activities—freedom, competence and fun

Children told us that activities, including formal sports, mucking around, informal hobbies, educational activities and special occasions with family and friends were important to their sense of well-being. This was not so much because of the activity, but because the activity was associated with fun, freedom from constraints (such as rules and routine) and feeling competent. Children feel secure learning something new when they perceive that adults could appropriately manage any risks that were involved.

Activities and fun and freedom

Fun was described as "enjoying yourself in something" (Female, 9 years), like sports activity (the experience of physical exhilaration) and creative activities (the experience of the creative process).

Choosing their own activities or doing activities in their own way were important for children—"playing what they like to play and ... using their own moves" (Female, 9 years).

An extension of this was 'hanging out' with friends which was associated with leisure, being free from pressure and constraints.

Activities and feeling competent

Activities that extend children, where they feel they are achieving something, learning something new or feel

competent or gaining competency at the activity are associated with well-being. This is especially so when achievements are positively recognised and appreciated.

The following is part of a discussion about a photo of a basketball court a 14 year old male had chosen to talk about:

PARTICIPANT (Male, 14 years): .... you have to practice to be good at something. So the more I practice the better I'll become. I haven't been, like it is like the first time I've played basketball like for the school or for a team cause I'd played basketball but just during sport or something and yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Right. And so you enjoy doing that because you are getting better at it?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah.

Adversity—dealing with difficult times

Children described how adversity is part of their lives. Adverse events and circumstances include fights at school; not fitting in and conflict with friends; family transitions (including parental separation, family departure through migration); other transitions (like moving house, changing school, moving from primary to high school, gaining or losing friends); arguments with or between parents; conflict with other adults; and family illness.

Adversity varies in duration and intensity. Some children experience enduring adversity in their lives, as a result of ongoing family difficulties, and others face intermittent adverse events and circumstances. Children described how dealing with adversity sometimes involved significant adjustments in their sense of self and described how they were able to develop resilience because of the factors that support them through adverse times.

Adversity and making the adjustments

Sometimes adverse circumstances, especially those involving significant transitions require adjustment and establishing new life patterns. Feelings of disorientation and uncertainty could be a part of the transition, sometimes expressed as feelings of loss, such as when friends or a house that they were emotionally attached to had to be left behind.

Re-adjustment takes time and includes coming to terms with changes in their own sense of self. One child, when discussing moving house, described how difficult it is when "you are expected to get on with it" and act like normal because "no one else around you understands what you are going through as a result of the change" (Female, 14 years).

Being supported to deal with adversity

Individual experiences of adversity need to be understood and support needs to be provided. When this does not occur children feel the significance of their experience is discounted and this can make children feel isolated and alone in dealing with the adversity.

Children's ability to cope with adverse circumstances is developed through the support they are provided in specific contexts and within specific relationships. Children did not describe resilience as a personality trait but something developed through relationships and encounters in everyday life. Through this support, they develop an understanding and ability that they could use in the future; and are better able to cope with the adversities they confront.

The presence of a supportive and caring family is important in helping children deal with a variety of difficulties and adverse circumstances. Family provide the context to discuss daily problems and obtain the assistance to deal with emotional and practical difficulties. Knowing that there are people to 'fall back on' or 'turn to' when faced with adversity provides children with a sense of security.

Having a group of friends who are 'there for you' and 'who stick by you no matter what', is also important. More specifically, children identify certain friends who they can confide in because these friends understand where the child is 'coming from' and can empathise. Often the depth of friendship developed through shared experiences allows children to share their experiences of adversity, as described by this 15 year old girl:

INTERVIEWER: So what is it about friends that you think is important to our well-being?

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): You can go and hang out with them and just have a good time when you are with them and if there is something that I can't tell my mum or something like that, I can tell my friends and know that they will be able to understand what I feel and everything. And when I have had a fight with my mum I always tell [my friend] that what's happened and she is always like, 'Oh, all right then'. She can understand because we've been friends since

preschool... and over the last few years she's been really close. So we understand each other... We're both 15...and she knows my mum really, really well, so she understands where I'm coming from.... And we are friends at school we just hang out together and in class.... And if we get in trouble, we get in trouble together.

Being able to distract themselves from difficulties was also a way children manage adversity in their lives. Different children draw on different strategies at different times. These include being on their own, reading, taking the dog for a walk or doing something physically vigorous. For example, one 10 year old female described how her cat soothed her and took her mind from her troubles by providing a sense of comfort and physical and emotional security:

INTERVIEWER: Are there certain times when you might want to cuddle up to the cat?

PARTICIPANT (Female, 10 years): When you are feeling sad or unsure about something.

INTERVIEWER: Okay and how does the cat help do you think?

PARTICIPANT: I think because it puts your mind off what, what's happening.

Material and economic resources —what families need to get by

Children told us that it is important to their sense of well-being for their family (not themselves as individuals) to have enough money for a reasonable standard of living. Children described how poverty was also experienced as having emotional costs that impact on a sense of well-being. Children also told us that money was important for social and cultural participation but distinguish between having commodities that are nice to own, and special items that they own which have an emotional significance. The latter items are more significant to a sense of well-being.

Material and economic resources and an appropriate standard of living

For children, the financial security of their family and having enough money to do things together as a family constitute an appropriate standard of living. This was expressed as "what families need to get by and do their thing".

INTERVIEWER: So...does mum working mean that you will have more money?

PARTICIPANT (Male, 12 years): Yes ... It is good because then we will be able to buy the house and we will be able to do more things on the house and it will be better for everybody. And we would be able to go more places because we will have more money.

Material and economic resources and cultural participation

All the participants understood that money allows them to do things; it provides opportunities for leisure and other cultural and social activities, and enables them to purchase commodities.

There were age differences in the commodities children sought. For younger children toys were an important part of their cultural life and could be the basis of important peer group interactions and exchanges. The following was part of a conversation with one eight year old male about things that he associated with well-being:

INTERVIEWER: Yep, and they are your favourite toys? Your Bey Blades?

PARTICIPANT (Male, 8 years): Yep and Yugiho cards

INTERVIEWER: And tell me why in particular do Yugiho cards make you feel good?

PARTICIPANT: Because you get to have fun, three people play fifths and duelling ...

For older children money allowed them to go out and engage in social activities.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I think the other thing that I was thinking, does money affect what we get to do?

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): Um, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Does it ever mean that we miss out on things or...

PARTICIPANT: For sure, because like if you... can't afford to go somewhere then you are not going to be able to do that like.

Part of 'fitting in' with a peer group might require ownership of particular things. This was especially the case when part of a group's identity was to look a certain way and do certain activities. However children described that these things reflected their personal taste and interests, rather than being a pressure imposed by the group.

Material and economic resources and the emotional costs

Many children discussed times of 'going without' or compromises that had to be made so that their family could make ends meet. In talking about these times the focus was often on the emotional impacts and the ways in which they and their family coped, as this following discussion illustrates:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): Well, for example, if at Christmas, and my mum is a bit tight for money so she can't go out and buy everything that she wants... I said to her, cause my brother is younger and he is still growing up, I said get his presents first and get mine later because I've seen through it. I know what it is all about... He is growing up and he believes in the whole Santa thing and everything.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, if you had the power to change anything what would make that situation better?

PARTICIPANT: Maybe I could help my mum with Christmas—money-wise help her out. Basically get some things for other people and that.

Children in these circumstances are often concerned about other members of their family. They sense their parent's anxiety resulting from financial hardship, despite their parent's attempts to shield them from this. Following on from a previous interview a 14 year old female spoke about this issue:

INTERVIEWER: Now remember when we first started talking and you said that maybe one of the ideas about well-being could be like things like companies... that look out for their financial well-being. Do you think in families we have the same or similar sort of thing?

PARTICIPANT (Female, 14 years): Yeah. We do because, especially from my mum's point of view, because ... single parents can't do much for your kids and then you have to work and that so she is always worried. Like, I don't want to open this bill. I know how much it is going to be.

The emotional costs of going without for some children include labelling, shame and exclusion. In a broader discussion about standard of living a 15 year old female explained:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): Some families haven't got enough money to buy their children new clothes so they are always getting handed down clothes from their older siblings and then those younger kids are going to be like, I never get anything new and they are going to feel left out of things. And then they will get put down at school, just from what I've seen. They get put down at school. And that makes them in themselves not as good.

Material and economic resources and items of emotional significance

Several children described how special possessions, like gifts, awards and mementos, have an emotional value that is important to their sense of well-being. These items have value because they are associated with particular people or events and form part of their identity.

Children distinguish these items from other commodities which are nice to have and important for participating in peer culture, but did not have the same significance. Owning 'stuff' brought pleasure, but special items brought happiness. The following excerpt, taken from a lengthy conversation between two females aged 14 and 13 years about standards of living, is illustrative:

PARTICIPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): I just think those kinds of things... are things that can be treasured more. Whereas I mean a mobile phone it breaks, you throw it out, you get a new one. Whereas with a doll, if it breaks, you probably would try to fix it and keep it.

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): Yeah, you feel like something special or something close to your heart. Like oh, I didn't want that to break. With a mobile phone you go oh well that was a good phone so I'll just get a new better one.

PARTICIPANT 2: Yeah

PARTICIPANT 1: It is not as close to you.

Physical Environments

Children told us that the design and physical features of the natural and built environment can provide a sense of well-being for children. This was particularly so when the physical environment allowed children to engage actively in their community (this is taken up in more detail in the safety and physical health themes), where the physical environment facilitates a special occasion with family or friends and where the physical environment was associated with feelings of calm and relaxation for children.

Child-friendly environments

Child-friendly environments are described as places where children could have fun, meet with other children and play. A common example was local parks, as a 15 year old girl described:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): Yep, well down the road there is a park with equipment ... with a slide and things.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, so a place to play.

PARTICIPANT: And me and my friends will just walk down there sometimes and just muck around, fool around ... roll around on the grass and muck around. And because it is an open area, no-one is really going to be able to miss it if you are in trouble or anything.

Physical environments and significant places

Physical environments are also associated with well-being when they provide a platform for special and fun occasions with family and friends. Particular places become important because they allow for important and happy times to occur. For instance one 12 year old female participant described the significance of her grandparent's home:

INTERVIEWER: Right. So are there special places that you like to go to, that you feel happy at?

PARTICIPANT (Female, 12 years): Yep.

INTERVIEWER: Where are the places you feel happiest?

PARTICIPANT: Um, well when we go to my Nan's she has a nice place and it is fun to be there....

INTERVIEWER: And why is it a fun place to be?

PARTICIPANT: Because she does a lot of things but and she like takes us places down there.

One child described a cubby house his grandfather built for him as special not only because it was a fun place that he felt some ownership over but also because it represented his grandfather's care and love (Male, 9 years).

Physical environments and relaxation and freedom

Environments are also associated with well-being when their innate features evoke feelings of calm, relaxation and freedom. This was especially so for places of natural beauty. The following excerpt is from a discussion about what well-being meant to one eight year old:

INTERVIEWER: ...Why did you choose that picture there? [A picture of a secluded beach viewed through bush in the foreground]

PARTICIPANT (Male, 8 years): (pause) Because of the view. When it is far away you can see, you are in the picture because from a place to the beach. And, again, because of the calmness.

INTERVIEWER: The calmness. Right and that is of the beach isn't it? Is there anything else about the beach or that makes you think about well-being. What well-being means for you?

PARTICIPANT: Just the trees blowing from side to side and the water rushing through.

Often natural environments provide an escape for children from the everyday routine and obligation. These are places where they could relax, be free, explore and 'muck around':

INTERVIEWER: And I was wondering was there something more about the beach that makes it such a good place to go and have fun?

PARTICIPANT (Female, 15 years): Cause it is just away from where you normally are and in your own space ... (to) have fun and be who you want and not have to worry that you might see someone that you know. You can be free... and just go crazy. It is like 'whoo-hoo' and who cares.

Various natural environments are significant for well-being because they provide children with places away from hectic every-day life—places to slow down and be calm.

Physical Health—eat well and be active

Children told us staying physically healthy is important to their well-being. Children distinguish between health and illness. To stay healthy, children said they need appropriate care, to eat healthy food, and be physically active—the domain of households. Illness was described as recovering from sickness, and about treatment and cure—the domain of doctors and other health professionals. Children's focus was on the area where they had most agency—staying healthy and avoiding illness. As described by this eight year old male after picking a picture of people playing football to describe well-being, good health allows for an active life and the capacity to do things that children want to do.

PARTICIPANT (Male, 8 years): I picked it [a picture of people playing football] because it is all about health and if your health is okay then you won't have any surgery.

INTERVIEWER: Right okay and tell me about health. Why is it important to be healthy, why is that important for well-being?

PARTICIPANT: To get your heart pumping up so you will be able to move everywhere.

It is not surprising, therefore that most discussion of health was related to eating and being active.

Physical health and healthy eating

Children exhibited high levels of knowledge about healthy eating and healthy alternatives to junk food. Much of this knowledge is obtained from school health promotion programs and curriculum.

Some children discussed the importance of eating well to stay fit and maintain a healthy body. Weight problems were associated not only with poor physical health but with poor development, or as one child put it, 'what you grow up to be'. Children also discussed complex issues about body image, and how body image was perceived by others; overweight children were bullied, excluded and harassed.

Some children felt they had some capacity to influence what they eat. This is illustrated in the following excerpt where two 14 year old females discuss the influence they have over their mothers' food buying habits:

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): Oh yeah I have now. Like we have mangoes and stuff now because I like them. And I eat them.

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): My mum... asks us what we want for lunch... so, when she goes shopping, what we say influences what she buys.

PARTICIPANT B: She buys what we want?

PARTICIPANT A: As well as what she wants. So she tries to be healthy but also get what we want. She's good at juggling things.

Children's capacity to exert influence over eating choices is, however, mediated by factors such as advertising, access to good food, and parent's work patterns. We found that children feel that advertising and readily available junk foods undermine their resolve. Junk food advertisements undid the work of health promotion campaigns and place a lot of pressure on children to eat unhealthy foods. Children are very aware of the conflicting messages given to them as illustrated in the following discussion between two 14 year old girls:

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): I think... that we are encouraged to eat a lot more healthy but they go and advertise unhealthy products and stuff. I just think that everything is working in reverse. Like it is one step forward, two steps back, kind of thing. Because they say one thing but then other people end up doing another and... something needs to be done to make everything balanced. ... We are encouraged to do so much for one thing and then we are encouraged to do so much for the other which is not necessarily right.

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): It is like contradicting themselves.

Junk foods are considered by some children to be too easily available at home. Given the choice between junk and a healthy food alternative, it was difficult to take the healthy one, as described by these two female participants:

PARTICIPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): I mean you can try to an extent but I mean you go and look in the cupboard and it is like, okay, I can choose from those rice crackers, water crackers or I can have a big chunky chocolate...

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): What is appealing about the white rice crackers, they are, like, white and they are dry, and they are boring!

PARTICIPANT 2: But they are probably a lot more healthier for you but... you've got those big labels of [chocolate] and, like, oh well what do you choose? It is that kind of thing.

Physical health and activity

Along with healthy eating, physical activity and 'keeping fit' were described by children as important for physical health. Staying fit contributes to feeling healthy and being fit provides children with the physical energy to do everything that they need. While discussing a photo of a bicycle, one nine year old female told the researcher:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 9 years): Well it is important to keep fit and stuff and like run around and play stuff and do things.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, what is important part of that?

PARTICIPANT: Well you've got to stay fit to like be healthy and if you want to be healthy you've got to do that.

Some children believe that while they were encouraged to exercise and lead a physically active life, they are constrained in achieving this. In particular some feel that there was a lack of safe places in the community to just go out and play. For these children to feel safe, activities have to be organised and supervised by an adult. In discussing what they considered to be healthy and the things that make them healthy two female participants, aged 13 and 14 years, explained:

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): Like we are encouraged now to exercise more.

PARTICIPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): Eat healthy...

PARTICIPANT 1: and be out there...

PARTICIPANT 2: play sport.

PARTICIPANT 1: But, as I said, you can't go out in the streets in the afternoon... any more because it is just not quite as safe as what it used to be. So in a way we are... encouraged to do more exercise. It is all well and good them saying that but it is kind of hard to put it into practice.

PARTICIPANT 2: Don't want to risk ourselves.

INTERVIEWER: So there is not as many opportunities to do sort of exercise in a free way.

PARTICIPANT 1: Like you've got to go to tennis classes. Like, you can't just hit a ball out on the street. You've got to go for tennis lessons one afternoon. ... Like everyone is there and you've got a coach and like he is there or she and you feel you can be more safe.

Social Responsibility and Moral Agency—being a good person

Children described how they view their relationships with other people, how they treat others, and whether they believe they are doing the right thing as important to their sense of well-being. Being a 'good person' is important. This is also apparent in children's discussion in other themes, such as how they deal with economic adversity.

Children feel good about themselves when they help out friends, do well at school, look out for parents by helping around the house and do what they are asked. In responding to the researcher's query about the question the participant would ask other children about what well-being meant to them, a 10 year old female replied:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 10 years): Um, do you do nice things to other people or are you very kind.

Children told us that it is important to their sense of well-being to feel as though they have a sense of their own values that they can act out in everyday life. Important people in their lives, especially parents, are significant in providing guidance and setting an example of how to act. However while children want support they also want to make their own moral decisions. These decisions are acted out in different ways in three contexts —in their personal lives, within their communities and globally.

Social responsibility, morals and values

Having a coherent sense of their own morals and values is important to children. It is particularly important that they

feel they can and are behaving according to their own sense of values, which is crucial to a sense of self-integrity. These are sometimes, but not always, based on codes of values such as a religion. For example one 14 year old male described his Christian belief system, as a source of values which guided him in the way he lives his life.

PARTICIPANT (Male, 14 years): That is like, well that is part of being a Christian... you don't even think about it. Or I don't think about it when I'm doing it. Like it is something good like when you sit and think about it...That is just like that is how it is supposed to be like. You are not even supposed to do good things... because you know it is good. You are doing it because you want to or something.

Acting morally means different things to different children. Children described how ethical principles and action are context dependent and worked out in specific circumstances, rather than based on a fixed set of moral principles. The process of moral reasoning was described as dealing with information in a context specific way to make a morally sound decision. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion between two 14 year old girls is illustrative:

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): Yeah... it is almost like you have to freeze a moment...if you are in a situation and if you have to make a choice and you have to... look at it from all angles... using your better judgment. What is right and wrong.

INTERVIEWER: Okay so freeze the moment and make a decision. What sorts of things would you take into account do you think? When you make those sorts of decisions?

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): Whether what you are doing is necessary. Whether is it a thing you have to do or it could be left.

Social responsibility and guidance

Significant adults, particularly parents and carers, provide the value base and also the guidance for children through practical advice and modelling behaviour. In a continuation of the discussion documented above, the girls went on to say:

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): Um, maybe whether you could also take it back to your parents. Like what would somebody else do in this situation, someone who is a little bit more wiser than me?

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): Yeah.

PARTICIPANT A: ...Obviously you get a lot of your morals from your parents and you sort of have to take it and sort of look and say well what would somebody else do in this situation and then take if from there, in what in your better judgment, as to what you think is right?

Families are the main source for the transmission of values. Children discussed the importance of early socialisation in establishing appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and the sorts of value base that they use to make moral decisions.

PARTICIPANT (Male, 15 years): Cause if you are brought up in a bad environment then that is the only way that you know. And you'll treat other people that way possibly.

INTERVIEWER: Because you don't know any different or better?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. It is like my mum has this thing and it says if you teach, if you respect your children, or teach them how to respect they will respect others and then if you do something else they will know how to do it as well or something.

Social responsibility and growing up

Children were clear that they turn to adults for moral guidance, not moral arbitration. The following excerpts have been taken from a discussion between two girls about wanting to make their own decisions illustrates this point:

INTERVIEWER: So you might turn to other people for advice but you feel as though, well look it is my decision?

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): I have to end up, I have to sign the paper kind of thing.

PARTICIPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): Yeah.

PARTICIPANT 1: I've got, it has got to be from me and um, I do go to other people for advice.

PARTICIPANT 2: Yep.

PARTICIPANT 1: I don't think I've ever really...had a major decision where I haven't talked to somebody. But I think overall I do what I think is best.

Children described the importance of owning their decisions. This is seen as part of 'growing up'. By negotiating moral situations (and being supported in these negotiations) children develop their ideas about moral issues and build critical capacities, including their ability to reflect on their own values. Through experience moral concepts are enlarged, refined and replaced.

Children want to be able to make mistakes and to learn through experience. Sometimes the boundaries set by parents and carers limit this:

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): Um, I think there is still room for us to learn from our mistakes.

PARTICIPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): A lot of boundaries.

PARTICIPANT 1: ... A lot of control from higher power people. Parents, for example... they often stop you from doing mistakes before you can make them. You still learn from it but you haven't actually done the mistake yourself.

PARTICIPANT 2: And like it is harder to remember. [Laughter]

PARTICIPANT 1: You haven't physically injured yourself it is kind of hard to remember.

INTERVIEWER: So what are the boundaries around do you think? What are the things that they are not wanting to let you learn from experience?

PARTICIPANT 2: Oh, say you wanted to go for a big bush walk or something and there was snakes, and stuff, they will say, 'No, no, you will get bitten', or something like that.

PARTICIPANT 1: Um, I don't think this would ever really happen but if somebody wanted to try drugs or smoking to see whether they taste good, parents would often stop that, um, I know they probably would.

Social responsibility and context

Children identified three contexts in which they exercise their social responsibility—at home and in their personal lives within their community; and globally. The sort of responsibility and engagement required of them is qualitatively different for each context and is dependant on the proximity of the relationships involved.

The most important context of social responsibility and moral obligation is at home and in personal life. Children talked about this as cooperation and respect, helping out (doing 'one's share'), supporting and caring for family members and trying to meet parental expectations. This was shown in a range of behaviours, including cleaning up your room, trying your hardest at school, looking after siblings, contributing to household income, and generally behaving 'okay'.

Many children are motivated by a sense of reciprocity towards their parents but also wanted to help out to ease their parent's burden. In discussing what makes a family environment happy, these participants described their own responsibilities:

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): Okay, I'll go first. I think I try and make things happy. I try and do my part within the home and make sure that I do as I am told so that it helps mum. I mean, she's single at the moment. So if you help her and have a willingness to sort of give her a hand and understand where she is coming from. That she has to raise two children and you, you have a willingness in yourself to help out and make things happy, then it often helps. Everything sort of just flows together I think.

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): Yeah and my mum gets really pleased when I do really well in school. So when I tell her my results... she gets really happy and that helps. I do stuff around the house and that helps her.

At the community level social responsibility and moral obligation is about civic engagement with people who are not connected through bonds of family or friendship. These interactions are premised on a general sense of being a good person, and treating others according to their own values, for example treating others fairly and honestly. For example one participant described how he was asked to tutor a younger child to learn how to read:

PARTICIPANT (Male, 14 years): And she asked me if I would be able to help him read because he

was fine except he couldn't read. So after school, every day, he would come over and he would sit by the pool and he would read... and then, afterwards, we would play or do something.

Children discussed global social responsibility and moral obligation, particularly issues of global poverty and war. Children's concerns reflected both personal anxieties and a sense of empathy with others. The following is taken from a discussion with a 10 year old girl following the researcher's question about things she would like to change:

PARTICIPANT (Female, 10 years): So there won't be any wars.

INTERVIEWER: Yep okay. And how do you think it affects you, the fact that there are wars going on? Is it something that affects you?

PARTICIPANT: Not really.... It is just that it is sad to know that there are wars going on and that there are people getting killed.

CONCLUSION

In this research we explored how children and young people define well-being, what constitutes their sense of well-being and what factors they identify as affecting their well-being.

Children tell us that their well-being is about their emotional life. Like well-being for adults, well-being for children is complex and multi-faceted, covering both negative and positive dimensions, and is understood in a holistic way. It is about more than just being healthy or staying out of trouble. It is about childrens' need to act independently and have some control, to have physical and emotional security and to feel positive about themselves. These three facets inform other areas of children's lives, including the activities they are involved in, how they respond to adversity, how they feel about and use the material resources they and their families have at their disposal, how they interact with their environment, their physical health and their moral lives..

What children told us about their well-being gives new meaning and context to some issues which are already in our focus, for example health, poverty and safety. They also draw attention to issues important to children that are currently not in focus, such as social responsibility.

We have gained a more complete picture of factors significant to the lives of children by concentrating on children's own perceptions of well-being. If we want to improve children's lives it is important that we routinely include their understandings in what is studied, counted and acted on in policy and practice.

Focussing on children's own perspectives of well-being complements and challenges existing policy and research on children. It contributes to the possibilities for making policy and research agendas more sensitive to what children say is important to their well-being rather than being constrained by current research and policy agendas that largely rely on adult perspectives on children's well-being.

What we act on in policy and services

These findings suggest that some aspects of children's experience have not been sufficiently considered in policy for example agency, social responsibility and sense of self. Consequently our current policy frameworks may not deliver to children the well-being outcomes they value. Further our policies and actions may have had unintended consequences because some key components of children's well-being have been regarded as policy irrelevant or unimportant.

They also suggest that children's well-being requires a coordinated effort involving families, government and the broader community and that policies need to reflect this holistic nature of well-being.

As a first step, the Commission will develop a children's policy framework based on and informed by the child's perspective on well-being, using the themes identified in this study. This framework will form the basis of the Commission's future policy development and analysis work.

At a service provision level these findings remind us that individual children have a range of inter-related needs. At the point of service delivery it is important to children to be in relationships which reflect a sense of agency, security and respect. If these things are taken into account they will contribute to making service delivery more effective for the individual children involved.

Children's perspectives on their well-being emphasise not only the significance of broader structural issues, but also the significance of small acts in daily interactions, in promoting their sense of well-being. For those who work

and live with children, including parents and teachers, the challenge is to consider how their behaviour and decisions impact on children in light of what children have told us.

What we count

The findings of this study add to the body of work on monitoring frameworks aimed at improving the safety, welfare and well-being of children. This research provides a previously missing understanding of what, from children's perspectives, are good child outcomes. Children identify the factors which affect their sense of well-being. By including children's perspectives in monitoring frameworks, we can achieve accurate measures of the conditions children face and the outcomes of various policies and programs. In order to implement this, it is likely that existing data sources will need to be broadened and new data sources developed.

As a first step the themes presented in this *Ask the Children* will be used to develop the Commission's framework which is represented on Kids' Stats. Kids' Stats is a website developed by the Commission that monitors changes in the status of children in New South Wales over time by presenting data on key domains of children's lives. It looks at how well children in New South Wales are doing in these areas; where there have been improvements; and where there are trends that are worrying.

In summary, our findings both confirm and challenge what we know about children and childhood. They add depth to our understanding of children's lives. It is important that these findings enrich our understanding of children's well-being.

MORE ABOUT HOW WE DID THE RESEARCH

Our research demonstrates that children, when given the chance, have the capacity to participate in research about their lives and express the complexity of their lives in sensitive and thoughtful ways. In all our research endeavours we need to be open to the possibilities of children's participation.

A total of 126 children from rural and urban locations in New South Wales participated in the research. A purposive sampling strategy was employed. Unlike quantitative studies that aim for a representative sample, purposive samples aim to maximise the diversity in the sample. By obtaining a heterogenous group, commonalities and differences can be seen across different groups of children. This is particularly useful when exploring abstract concepts, such as well-being.

The sampling strategy was guided by three selection criteria:

- Children enrolled in government, catholic and independent schools. Seventy-eight children from government, 21 from catholic and 27 from independent schools participated.
- Children in two of the major urban centres of New South Wales (Sydney and Newcastle) and rural and regional New South Wales. Our sample included children from each statistical sub-division of Sydney (82 children), Newcastle (21 children) and one regional statistical division (23 children).
- Children from the spectrum of socio-economic disadvantage. A standard index comprising disposable income including family income, housing status and car ownership was employed for this purpose. Fifty-two children lived in areas falling within the 25 percent of most disadvantaged postcodes in New South Wales, 47 between the 26-50th percentile of disadvantage and 21 children in the 25 percent of least disadvantaged children (for six children information about their residence was not obtained).

While these criteria provided guidance for the selection of areas and schools to approach, the final composition of the sample was determined through the voluntary participation of the children and their parents and carers.

With the cooperation of school staff, a class or several classes were selected. The researchers discussed what the project was about with the class groups and left information packages with the school. These packages included age appropriate material for the children or young people and their parents or carers. Interested children and young people took a package home.

To participate in the study, we required the written consent of both the child or young person and their parent or carer. The researchers, aware that consent is about an ongoing process, checked the consent with the child or young person and their parent or carer throughout the research, including at each stage of the research. The children and young people knew they could withdraw from the research at any time.

Research with children and young people takes place within a broader social context in which children are often used to not being heard. When their contributions are sought, it is often in the course of adult processes which are not appropriately explained to children. The methodology we developed attempted to minimise the power imbalance between adults and children by giving the children some control over the research process.

We did this through developing dialogue with children about the research process, and facilitating their own exploration of the research topic, and acknowledging the expertise children brought to the project, and being respectful of them and by treating their own interpretations and analysis as important, genuine and valid. While the research questions and topics provided overall direction, the children were free to explore the research topic in their own way.

The research was made up of three stages. The same researcher followed through in each stage with the child or young person. This allowed trust and rapport to be developed between the participant and researcher. This was done by engaging with the participant on their own terms, by making the purpose of the research clear to them, by adapting the research to the individual preferences of the participants, spending time with them doing things they like to do, and taking a respectful attitude to what the participants said and did. The relationship developed between the researcher and child or young person promoted an open discussion and allowed conversations to build on each other, either within a single interview, or over multiple stages.

Each stage offered the children and young people a range of activities (see below). It was entirely up to the participants whether they used these activities or not. These activities were aimed at making the research fun, putting participant's more at ease and, reducing the pressure on them to talk if they did not want to.

The first stage

In the first stage we sought to find out what makes up well-being for children and young people. We did this either through individual or group interviews, depending on the participant's preference.

The interview sought to answer the following:

1. What well-being means for the child or young person;
2. How well-being is experienced in everyday life, and;
3. What are the factors that contribute to a sense of well-being.

The questions we asked included: what does well-being mean to you and other children; what people, places, things and times make you feel well or okay; describe a time in your life when things were going really well for you; what would you do to change a not well-being time into a well-being time and, what would you ask other children if you wanted to find out about other children's well-being. These questions provided a starting point for a conversation that explored the research topic in the way, and to the depth they wished.

The questions were contained in booklets that the child or young person could use during the interview; how they used the booklet was up to them, they could follow the questions or skip through. In the end, many of the interviews were quite unstructured, with discussion grouped around themes.

The rapport developed between the child or young person and the researcher in this first stage was essential to the success of the research. In this first stage the relationship allowed the child or young person and the researcher to develop a shared understanding of the project, and the child or young person to express their expectations, hopes, and fears of their participation.

The second stage

Building on the first stage, the second stage explored in more detail (again through individual or group interviews) the main themes identified from the first interview. This stage allowed us to obtain greater insights into what was important to the child's well-being, and for the researcher to check their interpretations of what was important to their well-being with the child. The latter formed a critical part of the analysis at every stage allowing us to verify our interpretations with the children.

This second stage was not envisaged in the initial study design. It was introduced following input from the children and young people who wanted dialogue to continue around themes they identified as important.

While the first two stages took the form of individual or group interviews, a range of activities were available to the children and young people. They provided a springboard for discussion between the child or young person and the researcher. These activities allowed them to express their views in ways which best suited their skills, interests and abilities, and to 'frame' the discussion.

The activities included:

- talking about photographs they chose from a range of photographs provided to them by the researcher of common environments and objects which may be relevant to well-being;
- using drawing to express key topics such as 'well-being places';
- using a magic wand to discuss how they would change a not well-being time into a well-being time;
- using pictures of faces expressing different feelings to describe well-being and feelings associated with well-being;
- using story and narrative to describe well-being, for instance describing to an imaginary space creature what well-being means and what it feels like to be well; and
- using lists and tables to 'map' what was important to well-being.

An example of how using these activities provided a different dimension to the research for the participant's is provided in this assessment from two 14 year old participants:

INTERVIEWER: What sorts of questions would you ask if you were doing this project?

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): Um, I definitely like this wand idea. I think if I could make, if I could ask any child what they would like in the world I would definitely ask it. I think it would be interesting to find out what everyone's ideas are. What they want.

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): It is like a creative way of asking what would you really like. It is like putting a nice edge to it.

The third stage

In this stage, the children and young people completed a project of their own design that explored a particular

well-being theme or themes of interest to them. They had free reign and chose to use photography, collage, drawing and journal keeping in their projects. The researcher provided the material resources for the project, and support when it was requested.

Many of the children and young people invested a lot of time and energy in creating their projects so they could convey what well-being meant in their lives. Others preferred not to undertake projects, as expressed by these two participants:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, can you tell me what was what you liked about it [doing the Stage 2 project]?

PARTICIPANT C (Male, 9 years): Um, you didn't have to do the same old stuff at home. And then you can get out of the house and do stuff.

INTERVIEWER: And what about you? What was it like for you doing it?

PARTICIPANT D (Male, 8 years): Oh, I don't know I never really got time.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, what was it like coming to the meeting?

PARTICIPANT D: Good. Fun.

The project meant the child or young person largely set the parameters of what would be discussed by emphasising what was of greatest interest and importance to them and determining what they wanted to reveal to the researcher. Through the interview children's own interpretations of their project work was sought.

The relationships formed between the researcher and the child or young person, sometimes over an extended period, made it important that the research was not broken off abruptly. However, because a lot of time was spent initially setting the parameters of the research, informing everybody what was involved and checking expectations along the way, the participants were clear that the process had a beginning and an end.

The last interview provided the participants with an opportunity to summarise their experience and viewpoint about well-being and invited them to comment on the research process. At the end of the research their contribution to the research was formally acknowledged. The children and young people will be provided with a copy of this paper through their schools.

Overall it is hoped that the process gave participants an opportunity to express their views on matters that they generally do not get an opportunity to discuss, in a way that was respectful and engaging:

INTERVIEWER: So do you have any questions for me? Or any comments that you would like to make?

PARTICIPANT 1 (Female, 13 years): It was good to have a chance to be able to say what we think and stuff.

PARTICPANT 2 (Female, 14 years): I think the path that you guys are taking is awesome. ... I'm happy that people are actually even doing this.

PARTICIPANT 1: Like people care enough to do a whole big study on this stuff. So that is really good.

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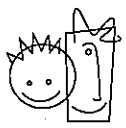
Notes

1 Prepared by Toby Fattore (NSW Commission for Children and Young People), Jan Mason and Liz Watson (University of Western Sydney).

2 The Index of Economic Resources highlights disposable household income.

3 In this document specific, single quotes are used to illustrate themes and sub-themes.



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