

Submission

No 103

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

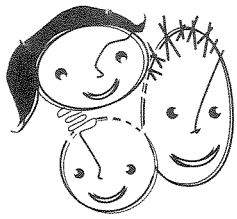
Organisation: Queensland Commission for Children and Young People
and Child Guardian

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

Dear Mr Keenan

Thank you for inviting me to provide a response to the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW.

The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) has a mandate to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18, particularly those who are most vulnerable. As a consequence my response in relation to your request, attached in Appendix A, will focus primarily on vulnerable children and young people.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Fraser
**Commissioner for Children and Young People
and Child Guardian**

Appendix A

Priority Issues for Children and Young People Aged 9-14

The transition into early adolescence can be a challenging time for children, young people and their families. For children and young people who are at-risk or who live in alternative care these challenges are magnified when there is a lack of family support and/or unstable living arrangements.

If these factors are not addressed the young people are at greater risk of educational disengagement, behavioural problems, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, entering the juvenile justice system, and homelessness.

Access to support

Families with children and young people need to be able to access support services when the child and/or their family are facing challenges they are unable to handle. Key supports needed are support to the family, safe and stable housing, and support when difficulties arise at school.

Family support

Children need a stable nurturing environment to help them reach their full potential. Ideally this should be provided by the child's biological family, however, not all parents are able to care for their children and provide them with a safe and supportive home environment.

The value of having a functional and supportive family unit cannot be underestimated and is the best inoculation children in the middle years can have to help them cope with all the other challenges of this age.

The focus for strengthening and supporting the family unit needs to be on prevention and early intervention rather than waiting until problems become so acute that the only option is to place a child in alternative care. Accessing family support for families with young people in this age group can be difficult as prevention and early intervention programs primarily target families with young children.

It is important that support services are available to families with children of this age group and not only to families with young children.

Safe and stable housing

All children need a safe and stable place to live whether they live with their families or in alternative care.

The Commission became aware through its monitoring activities that there are some children and young people aged between 9-14 years who are homeless and unable to access essential support mechanisms. The Commission conducted a Self-Placement Audit of children and young people who had left home or an approved alternative placement without obtaining permission between 1 July 2007 and 31 December 2007. The audit provided an insight into young people's experiences of homelessness and revealed that the age threshold is a particular barrier for some vulnerable young people trying to access support services. This is an essential service gap for this age group.

To help address these issues it is suggested that the following matters be considered:

- strategies to address the service, mentoring and advocacy gaps for children and young people in the middle years who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, and
- increasing the supply of crisis and long term housing and contact person options for young people in this age group.

Educational support

Educational disengagement is a major barrier to a positive future for children and young people and is an area that needs a priority focus.

Children's experiences of their primary school years and their transition to secondary school play a crucial role in their retention in the school system and their educational outcomes.

A range of factors contribute to disengagement including difficulties with literacy and numeracy, social marginalisation or isolation, low self-esteem, bullying, poor teacher-child relationships, poor instrumental support from the child's family in terms of getting the child to school and providing the necessary equipment, and parents who do not value education. Children experiencing any of these difficulties face an elevated risk of disengaging from school, and those with multiple risk factors face a markedly increased risk.

The schooling issues for Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander children are even more challenging. The Commission recently explored the issue of educational disadvantage for this cohort in Queensland, and found low teacher expectations; school work difficulties; teasing and racism from other students; school alienation; lack of family support; language difficulties, and unrealistic goals to be major contributors to poorer educational outcomes.

Factors which enhance opportunity for educational success for Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander children at school include, support from family, teachers and the school, and aligning their subjects and university courses with realistic career goals. Specific supports include:

- targeted language programs for children and young people, and
- fostering an appreciation of different cultures.

Effective Programs

The Commission does not propose to identify programs from other agencies or organisations as, although programs may be effective, their success can often be attributed to, or dependent upon, a particular person or context and may not transfer successfully to other places or contexts.

Commission's Community Visitor Program

One program that the Commission considers would transfer to other jurisdictions however, is the Commission's Community Visitor Program. This is a state wide visiting program that visits children and young people in alternative care in Queensland, i.e. in foster care, residential facilities and in detention.

The Community Visitor Program provides an independent check of children's and young people's wellbeing and the quality of the care they receive. It also provides an avenue for the children and young people to raise any issues or concerns which they

may have. This provides another avenue of advocacy and support for vulnerable children and young people in any age group and provides the Commission with a greater understanding of the issues and concerns of children and young people they visit.

If you have any queries and wish to discuss this matter further please contact Ms Adrienne Schneider, Senior Policy Officer, Strategic Policy and Research on tel. (07)3008 8984 to further discuss the issue.