

Submission

No 64

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

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Centre for Children and Young People



research, education & advocacy

The Committee on Children and Young People

Parliament House

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RE: Children and Young People 9-14 years in NSW (Inquiry)

The Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee in relation to this inquiry. The Centre aims to promote the participation of children and young people in research, education and advocacy by bringing together four important strands: an interdisciplinary approach; a focus on research, education and advocacy for children and young people; an emphasis on cross-sectoral partnerships to promote evidence-based policy and practice; and the inclusion and the participation of children and young people.

The Centre recommends that this Inquiry should consider how children and young people can be supported to participate in the work of the Committee and, more broadly, in the development and evaluation of social policy, programs, services and initiatives concerning them.

Background

There is now a very well established body of international jurisprudence and social science research that suggest children's participation in social and political life offers important and far reaching benefits for children's well being, and for that of their families and their communities. The benefits have been shown to include:

- enabling the positive development of children's identity, competence, sense of responsibility and sense of belonging in the community
- enabling children to protect themselves
- better decisions, development programs and policy results
- broadening and deepening how we practice democracy and citizenship.

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Research also shows that children attribute a great deal of importance to being recognized and acknowledged as individuals with opinions and feelings of their own and as agents capable of contributing to decisions made in their everyday lives. When children are understood as participants, they see themselves as being important and legitimate players in social, cultural, economic and political life. Whilst this research concerning participation applies across a spectrum of ages, from very young children to young adults, it is particularly relevant for children aged 9-14 years as they make the transition between ‘child’ and ‘adolescent’ status and negotiate the quite complex issues in families, schools and communities that they are part of.

Apart from the benefits of children’s participation for children, their families and communities, children’s participation is very much in keeping with the principle of evidence-based policy and practice. A growing body of research suggests that children’s participation contributes to the well being of communities by making policy more sensitive to social needs, and therefore more likely to work. As the Children’s Rights and Protection Unit of the Canadian International Development Agency (2006) suggests: “The active involvement of program beneficiaries leads to better development decisions, better development programs and more sustained results”. When children participate, policy and practice with and for children becomes more relevant, effective and sustainable.

Consistent with the above rationale, the following issues for consideration by the Inquiry are based on a recent consultation with the CCYP’s young person’s consultative committee, *Young People Big Voice* (YPBV). Members of the YPBV are young people, aged 13-19 from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The group meets once every month to advise the Centre and to support its work by:

- suggesting important issues for research about children and young people
- advising on research activities, including how to involve young people in research and evaluation
- finding and mentoring future participants of the YPBV Committee, and
- attending and addressing seminars and conferences about issues that affect young people.

The YPBV considered the terms of reference for the Inquiry at a meeting on April 29, 2008. The young people would particularly like to bring the following matters to the attention of the Committee.



Key Issues for Consideration

Separation and Divorce

The issue of separation and divorce was seen to be a significant issue for the 9-14 age group. In particular, the group considered that there is not enough information or support available for this group about what the transition to post separation life involves (e.g. maintaining a relationship with parents and their new partners, managing the practicalities of living in two different homes, dealing with parental conflict, coming to terms with different rules in different homes, and resisting the pressure to do stupid things at a time when children feel confused, vulnerable, lonely and isolated). The group indicated that in their view adults, including parents, do not understand separation and divorce from the child's perspective and they were concerned that community perceptions of children and young people whose parents are divorced are low. Finally, while children and young people might want a say about where they will live and who they will have contact with, having a say is hard and children in this age group need more support to have a say, and parents need more education about how to let their children have a say.

Literacy

The issue of poor literacy in high school was seen as a significant issue for this age group. Because literacy is largely assumed, there is little acknowledgement in schools of the marginalisation and isolation that children and young people feel arising from their low literacy levels. In particular, the group commented that while it is well known that there are low literacy levels of children and young people in this age group, less is known and understood about the emotional consequences of low levels of literacy for children. This issue is very much alive for Indigenous children and young people in this region, and the group considered issues of literacy contribute to Indigenous children being made to feel different and excluded from school life and community.

Transport

The lack of safe, regular and affordable transport for young people was an important issue for this age group, especially those in high school. Since children and young people in the age group 9-14 do not drive and have to rely on others for transport in rural areas, they often resort to hitchhiking between social events. The group expressed concern that there is a growing population of children, particularly young girls, in this age group who hitch hike alone or with just one other person.

Sexualisation of children in the media

Much discussion took place in relation to the group's perception that the media continues to publish highly sexualised images of young models in inappropriate magazines such as Ralph. The Group considered that this 9-14 year olds are particularly vulnerable to the influence of such representations at a time when they are negotiating and learning about their own sexual identity.



School counsellors

A number of comments were made by the group in relation to school counsellors. The first concerned access. The young people in the YPBV commented that, in their schools at least (4 schools in the region), school counsellors worked in a part time capacity and so not so easily accessible. The group further felt that the children in the age group 9-14 were often unsure about how to make an appointment or to see the counsellor without their peers knowing they were seeking help. Several comments were also made that school counsellors can sometimes be “bookish” and “formulaic” in ways that prevent them from listening and taking seriously the concerns of children. Concerns were also raised about the growing number of counsellors who recommend children and young people be prescribed antidepressants when “teachers can’t handle the kids or what they have to say” or when quick judgements are made about what is happening for that young person.

Young People in the Workforce

The primary concern in relation to the workforce continues to be that children and young people are not educated about their rights and are vulnerable to employees taking advantage of them. Many examples were given of personal experiences where businesses underpaid young people and/or informed them they must accept food or goods in exchange for overtime and weekend/holiday loading. The group also commented briefly on the high numbers of children and young people in schools whose parents were full time employed or who lived with one parent who worked full time. They commented that little is known about the safety and other implications of coming home to an empty house for children and young people, including having to prepare food for themselves and look after younger siblings.

Brief discussion also touched on issues in relation to the benefits and difficulties of same sex classes, issues for children of same sex couples, transition to high school and racism in the community.

Where To From Here?

We are of the view that consultations, such as that outlined above involving the *Young People Big Voice* consultative committee from the Centre for Children & Young People at Southern Cross University, potentially provide the Committee with important and relevant insights into the issues that exist for children and young people aged 9 – 14. The Centre respectfully suggests that an important task for the Committee is to generate the meaningful and ongoing involvement of children and young people throughout the course of this Inquiry. We suggest that this might include: involving children and young people throughout the course of the Inquiry, developing joint guidelines with children and young people about the purpose of their participation and what will and will not happen as a result of their participation, ensuring the Committee’s processes are as child friendly and focused as possible within the legislative structures which the Committee must operate, supporting children with relevant and appropriate information and resources and ensuring feedback is provided at the completion of their involvement.



Conclusion

The Centre for Children acknowledges the NSW State government's commitment to addressing the issues and needs of children in the age group 9-14 years, and commends the government for initiating this Inquiry. The Centre for Children and Young People and its consultative group, *Young People, Big Voice*, are willing to support the work of the Committee in any way that the Committee considers would be useful and relevant to the Inquiry.

For further information about the Centre or this submission please contact:

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