

Executive Summary

The middle years, which may be defined as the years between 9 and 14, is a time of significant physical, social, emotional and psychological change. It is a critical transition period with children moving from primary to secondary school. It is also a time when peers assume greater significance in the lives of children and young people. Increased autonomy and responsibility mean that children and young people in this age group begin to spend more time without the supervision of adults, assume greater levels of family responsibility and may also commence employment for the first time.

As the years between the ages of 9 and 14 are crucial to physical, social and emotional development, they provide a key opportunity for positive intervention to help children and young people reach their full potential. Identifying and responding to early warning signs can help prevent children in this age group from becoming more vulnerable and make a significant difference to their current and future lives. Research indicates that intervening in the middle years can be effective, and that this period of major transition and heightened risk can be a key turning point for children and young people.

While in recent years there has been an increased emphasis on providing services and conducting research about children 0-8 years, children and young people in the middle years have been largely overlooked. Evidence to the Inquiry identified gaps in services across a wide range of areas critical to the education, health and welfare of this age group, and has identified a number of promising programs.

Many programs and approaches that have the potential to impact on the health, wellbeing and resilience of children and young people in the middle years are discussed in this Report. Of particular interest to the Committee are those programs that are likely to impact on multiple outcomes for this age group. For instance, well-designed sport and recreational activities conducted outside of school hours can assist in the social, emotional and skills development of 9-14 year olds; reduce the risks associated with lack of adult supervision; contribute to improved health and wellbeing; and in some circumstances support parents/carers to participate in the workforce.

Indeed, the Committee has found that in many cases programs may be relevant to the work of more than one NSW Government Department and has recommended a cross-government approach to the planning and implementation of such programs. Therefore, the development of a whole-of-government plan for children and young people from 0-18 years is a key recommendation of the Committee. The plan would identify a small number of significant programs/approaches with the potential to impact on multiple outcomes for different age groups (such as 0-8 years, 9-14 years). It would include a focus on early intervention, as well as on programs for disadvantaged children and young people.

The Committee considers that funding for programs for this age group should not be piecemeal. Instead, a funding stream to provide services and programs for 9-14 year olds should be recognised as essential for the support of children and families. This

would allow for the development of services for the 9-14 age group identified as priorities in the whole-of-government plan, and would support the implementation of a number of other recommendations in this Report.

Research indicates that the participation of children and young people is likely to contribute to better decision-making about policies and programs. The Committee found that the input provided by children and young people throughout its Inquiry was both inspiring and informed. A more systematic approach, by all levels of government, to involve children and young people in decision-making that may affect their lives, is needed. To this end, the Committee has recommended that the NSW Commission for Children and Young People work with relevant NSW Government Departments to develop plans to increase the genuine participation of children and young people in New South Wales.