



Young and Wise

A review of what Australian children and young people say they need to thrive

September 2024



every child **thriving**
aracy

“

If the issue is about us, we should be able to have a say

Young person (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

”

“

Often research fails to engage youth in the process, so it falls short of reflecting the true concerns and opinions of youth

Jane, young advocate (Nguyen et al., 2021, p. 15).

”

“

We provide a lot of feedback, but we never hear back from those who ask for our advice. Was our feedback valuable? Does it create positive changes? ... It would be courteous to respond with an update...

-Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

”



About ARACY

ARACY's mission is clear: to champion all Australian children and young people to thrive.

As children's needs grow and change, so too must the support systems around them. We back good practices and best policies to prevent disease and provide the best conditions for their holistic health.

Our team stands at the frontline of this mission, bringing the latest evidence, practitioners, and policymakers together to develop child-centred strategies that make a real difference.

In solidarity, ARACY supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the need for truth-telling about the history and impact of colonisation. We treasure the rich and diverse cultures and customs of First Nations people - valued knowledge holders, leaders, and partners in creating the conditions for all our children to thrive. We are also dedicated to bridging the equity gap between First Nations children and their non-First Nations peers.

We listen to and amplify the voices of young people. Amplifying their issues and solutions. When we say 'thriving' and 'wellbeing', we mean living a life of value as defined by children and young people.



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ARACY acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands we work. We pay respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

ARACY treasures the rich and diverse cultures and customs of First Nations people -valued knowledge holders, leaders and partners in creating the conditions for all our children to thrive.

Contents

About ARACY	3	
Acknowledgements	5	
Contents	6	
Foreword - ARACY	8	
Executive Summary	10	
Summary of Recommendations	16	
About this Report	18	
About The Nest	20	
Background and Purpose	24	
Young People's Response	25	
Methodology	30	
First phase of literature search – core reports	30	
Final core reports	34	
Analysis	34	
Supplementary reports and articles	34	
Limitations and conclusion	35	

Childhood (0 to 8 years)

Introduction	37	
Consulting with very young children	39	
Key themes	41	
Playing	41	
Being outside and in nature	41	
Family support, culture and the importance of home	42	
Being creative and learning	42	
Recommendations	44	

Middle Years (8 to 14 years)

Introduction	47	
Valued, Loved and Safe	48	
Identity and culture	62	
Material Basics	68	
Healthy	72	
Learning	80	
Participating	86	

Adolescence (12 to 18 years)

Introduction	95	
Valued, Loved, and Safe	96	
Identity and culture	114	
Material Basics	124	
Healthy	130	
Learning	149	
Participating	156	

Early Adulthood (16 to 25 years)

Introduction	170	
Valued, Loved and Safe	172	
Identity and culture	183	
Material Basics	186	
Healthy	202	
Learning	223	
Participating	236	
References	244	

Forward

ARACY exists to ensure all children and young people in Australia thrive. Based on what Children, young people, their families, and experts have told us, this means feeling: valued, loved, and safe; having their basic material needs met; having the opportunity to learn and participate; being healthy; and having a positive sense of identity and culture.

Children and young people have a wealth of lived experience and insights to share about what they need to thrive. The evidence is clear – children and young people are capable participants, that the opportunity to share their views is empowering and beneficial to them, and the incorporation of their views makes outcomes better, across research, policy, and service provision. The right to have a say is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Yet despite this compelling evidence and human rights imperative, partnerships with children and young people in policy-making, research and service and program design and implementation are not yet routinely embedded.

This publication aims to shine a light on some of the valuable insights children and young people have already shared with us. It is by no means a comprehensive representation of all the avenues where children and young people can be supported to thrive. It does, however, provide a starting point. It shows what we can do now to begin to build a brighter future together.

Children and young people are our future leaders, teachers, healers, and caregivers. Empowering them to share their voice and listening to what they have to say is imperative to enable us to work with and for children and young people, to build a better and fairer today and tomorrow.

Prue Warrilow
CEO, ARACY



“Children and young people are our future leaders. Empowering their voices and listening is key to building a brighter, fairer future where every child in Australia thrives.”

Executive summary

Purpose

Children and young people have asked to see their words brought to action. Through this exploration, we aimed to:

1. Highlight existing research to help inform decision-making.
2. Synthesise the findings into recommended actions now and into the future.
3. To inform and guide future consultation.

Our efforts were underpinned by two fundamental concepts; the first, that children and young people have a right to have a say in decisions that affect them, consistent with the UNCRC, with their views being given “due weight in accordance with [their] age and maturity” (United Nations, 1989). The second is that evidence shows incorporating the perspectives of children and young people is beneficial to them and to outcomes.

What we did

Our approach was to combine well-known sources of consultation (such as by Commissioners of Children and Young people) with a review of literature. We included only that which attempted to understand the views of children and young people holistically and which permitted some form of free-text response (as opposed to purely numerical data). This was to minimise the effect of the researchers influencing the themes and direction of consultation.



From this we identified six key reports to form the backbone of this work:

Year	Jurisdiction	Report Title	Age	Sample Size	Early Years	Middle Years	Adolescents	Young Adults
2021	WA	WA Speaking Out Survey - Summary Report	8 to 18	16,532	N/A	Y	16,532	Y
2022	SA	The Things That Matter 3 - Views of 8-12-year-olds on life, school, and community	8 to 12	13,868	N/A	Y	13,868	N/A
2020	QLD	Voices of Hope: Growing Up in Queensland	4 to 18	8000	Y	Y	8000	N/A
2022	National	Mission Australia Youth Survey	15 to 19	18000	N/A	N/A	18000	N/A
2022	National	The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer: Understanding young people in Australia today	18 to 24	500	N/A	N/A	500	Y
2021	TAS	Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Consultation Report	0 to 25+	Variable pending age	Y	Y	Variable pending age	

In the style of a narrative review, we expanded on the emerging themes and explored specific demographic groups from additional papers with narrower content and organised these themes according to age and topic.

What we found

- **Commendable efforts had been undertaken to consult with children and young people across a range of topics** and with concerted efforts to engage demographics with reduced opportunity to share their voice. Children's commissioners, both nationally and across states and territories, were a source of abundant consultation, but was variable across jurisdiction.
- Consultations had been undertaken across a variety of topics and demographics, but much of the discourse just focused on identifying problems. **Children and young people want and need to be consulted** and partnered with in developing the solutions. This is an area which could be further developed.
- **Younger children**, especially those under the age of eight years **were consulted less**.
- **Every age group referred to the importance of the natural environment to their sense of safety and overall wellbeing**. In younger children, this means having opportunities to play outside and among nature. Older children were concerned about protecting plants and animals and keeping the natural environment clean and healthy. Adolescents and young adults expressed a desire to address climate change mixed with anxiety about the future.

- **Belonging emerged across all age groups as fundamental to wellbeing, but sense of belonging wavered with increasing age**. For young children, this was expressed as a love and connection to family. Children in the middle years were more socially orientated, with concerns about bullying emerging. Adolescents commonly experienced loneliness and found it more challenging to make and keep friends. Young adults identified friendship groups, common experiences (such as being part of a queer community), romantic relationships, and work friends as sources of belonging.
- **All age groups valued being listened to by their families, communities, government, and services**. Younger children were more likely to feel listened to by their families and communities than adolescents. Children in the child protection system, especially younger children, people with disability, First Nations young people, LGBTQIA+ young people, and females were less likely to feel heard by the people and systems around them.
- **Mental health, stress, and education were closely intertwined**. While younger children expressed joy in relation to learning (largely through play), progression through formal education coincided with increasing stress levels and poorer mental health and overall wellbeing, peaking in adolescence. School-related stress was nominated as the top issue of national concern by young people aged 15-to-19 years.

- Children and young people consistently recognised **the formal education system as a means of supporting their wellbeing, expressing a desire for education systems to empower them to recognise and manage their mental health**, support the mental health of their peers, and equip with the skills needed for adulthood.
- For young adults, **transitions were identified as particularly stressful**, including common transitions (such as transition into employment or further education, financial independence, moving out of home) as well as transitions for specific demographic groups, including transitioning from out-of-home care into independence.
- **Gender differences were marked across several areas, especially mental health, and feelings of safety**. This included differences between males, females, and gender diverse children and young people. Males generally fared best regarding mental health and safety, followed by females. Gender diverse children and young people had marked inequities in relation to mental health and feelings of safety and were not always identified/disaggregated in consultation.
- **COVID-19 was also referred to regularly largely as an exacerbating factor for existing challenges**.



How young people responded to this work

We consulted with 14 young people between the ages of 15 and 25 years. Young people were overall enthusiastic about the concept and purpose of the report. Most felt that the priorities and actions identified in the report were a fair representation of their lives. They also wanted to see more specific recommendations, and more accountability for the recommendations set out in the report.

Specific themes that young people felt needed more prominence include:

- The availability of “third spaces” for young people to relax and socialise
- The impact of phones and social media on mental health
- Lack of trust in the privacy and confidentiality of institutions, especially those which provided support services for issues considered to be stigmatised (such as mental health)
- A need for greater emphasis on wellbeing and mental health support in schools beyond the earlier stages, which tended to be replaced by greater emphasis on academic outcomes
- A desire for young carers and young people who are neurodiverse to be recognised as group with distinct challenges, including experience of discrimination.

Young people also provided insights into what they wanted to be asked about by decision makers, and what opportunities they would like to be provided to act upon and address their wellbeing priorities.

Next steps

This report is not a comprehensive review and cannot capture all relevant issues for children and young people. It is, however, a starting point to inform the actions and decisions of stakeholders in the wellbeing of Australia’s children and young people. It is also a catalyst to demonstrate the wealth of experience and knowledge of young Australians and, therefore, to encourage others to harness such knowledge by partnering with children and young people.



Key recommendations

1 Give children the best start in life: Invest in creating safe, supportive, and nourishing home and learning environments for young children by eradicating poverty, strengthening parenting supports, and investing in a robust early childhood education and care sector in the first 2000 days.

2 Cultivate positive mental health: Embed a cross-sectoral, prevention-focused, life-course approach to fostering positive mental wellbeing by addressing evidence-based determinants of mental health. This includes:

- a. Optimising the first 2000 days through: sustained nurse-home visiting, addressing poverty, and addressing child maltreatment
- b. Continuing to fund and improve evidence-based parenting supports
- c. Partnering with children, young people, and families to understand and support children transitioning across the middle years and throughout adolescence to prevent the deterioration in wellbeing across multiple indicators throughout this period.
- d. Embedding mental health and wellbeing literacy in formal education systems from early childhood through to high school
- e. Proactively fostering inclusive cultures in families, communities, places of education and employment, and systems for children and young people regardless of their gender, cultural background, First Nations identity, and ability.
- f. Embedding a child wellbeing lens in all policy and services, from urban planning through to education, health, and community services.
- g. Partnering with children and young people with increased risk of mental health challenges to develop and implement targeted mental health supports, particularly children and young people who are sexually and gender diverse, live with disability, or have a history of child maltreatment.

3 Prioritise the environment: Prioritise climate change and protecting the environment in all policies and practices, and ensure that children and young people have access to balanced, age-appropriate media sharing information about climate action and outcomes.

4 Enhance wellbeing literacy: Empower children and young people to support their own mental health and broader wellbeing, especially by developing skills healthy relationships, managing stress, and optimising their physical health. Reorientate the education system to have a greater focus on wellbeing holistically, in alignment with the model proposed in *Reinventing Australian Schools* (Sahlberg et al, 2023[i]).

5 Foster belonging and connectedness: Recognise belonging and loneliness as powerful determinants of physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Investigate and address drivers of stigma at home, in communities, and services and systems. Invest in partnerships with children and young people of diverse lived experience to with to better understand and foster sense of belonging and connectedness across families, communities, social networks, and places of education and employment.

6 Embed children's voice: Government, non-government organisations, researchers, services providers, philanthropists, and other stakeholders working in partnership with children and young people as an integral part of their work. This should occur from design through to development, consciously seeking out children and young people with diverse lived experience and less opportunity for their voice to be heard. A culture of child and youth participation can be cultivated by linking funding opportunities and performance indicators to genuine child and youth partnerships and co-design.

[i] https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/2305_Reinventing-schools_Discussion-Paper.pdf

About this Report

Young and Wise is a collation of direct consultations with children and young people in Australia between 2018 and 2023.

It includes consultations via surveys, conversations, videos, artwork, and other means. It is not an exhaustive review but aims to incorporate holistic consultations with children and young people about overall wellbeing, supplemented by papers focused on specific groups or topics.

The report covers ages from birth to 25 years and is structured by age and by the six wellbeing domains of wellbeing framework, [The Nest](#).

“
Children are strong people and
they deserve to be heard
”

10-year-old (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019)

About The Nest

The Nest is Australia's wellbeing framework for children and young people. It is a way of thinking about the whole child in the context of their daily lives.

Wellbeing can be thought of as a child or young person having everything they need to thrive and reach their full potential. It encompasses all areas of a child's life, which are linked and interdependent.

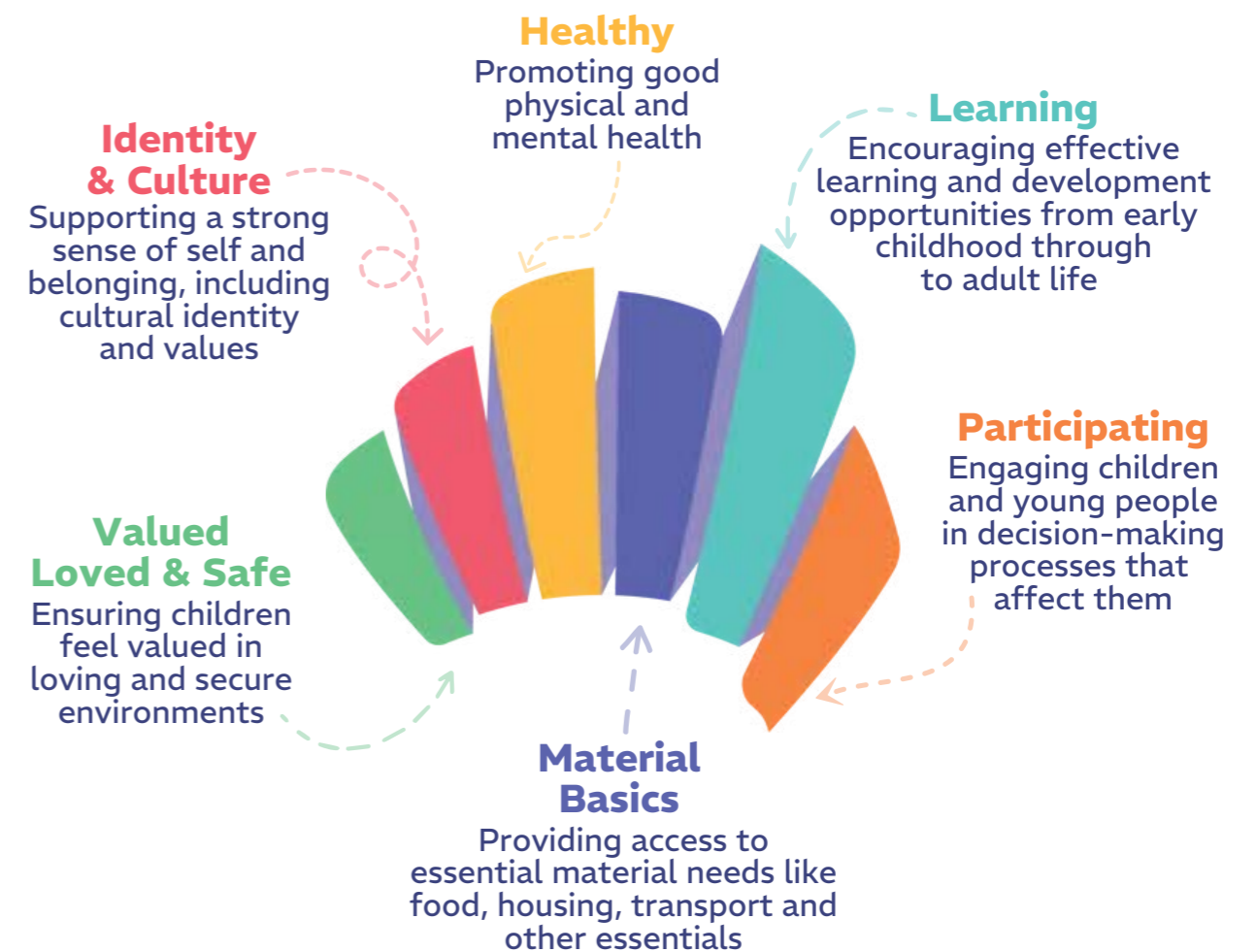
Originally informed by the voices of more than 4,000 children, young people and experts, The Nest was developed by ARACY in partnership with 150 organisations between 2010 and 2012 and is regularly updated with feedback from practitioners, children and their families (ARACY, 2014).

The Nest shows that for a child to thrive, their needs must be met in six interconnected areas:

- Being Valued, Loved and Safe
- Having Material Basics
- Being Healthy (physically, mentally, emotionally)
- Learning (within and outside the classroom)
- Participating (in decisions, groups, community)
- Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

The Nest, and one of its practical applications, The Common Approach® (ARACY, 2012), have been adopted by governments and organisations across Australia and internationally. The Common Approach®, is a prevention-focused and flexible way of working to help everyone have quality conversations with young people and their families about all aspects of their wellbeing.

THE NEST



Valued, Loved, and Safe

Being valued, loved, and safe means having loving, trusting relationships with family and friends. It involves a child or young person feeling valued by teachers and other adults in their life and knowing that they are important to others, and that others are caring and supportive of them. It involves feeling safe at home, in the community and online. Safety also means feeling safe about their future which includes the knowledge that the environment and climate are a priority and are being protected

Material Basics

Children and young people who have material basics have the things they need. They live in suitable, secure, stable housing, with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air. They have access to transport, to required local services (e.g. plumbing) and to open spaces in nature. Their family has enough money for necessities. They have the material items needed to develop as an active member of society such as school supplies, suitable technology, or sporting equipment.

Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Having a positive sense of identity and culture is central to the wellbeing of all children and young people. This is important for all, regardless of background, but in Australia, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. It encompasses having spiritual needs met, a sense of cultural connectedness, belonging and acceptance at home and in the community – and confidence that their identity, culture, and community are respected and valued. It involves feeling safe and supported in expressing one's identity, regardless of gender, sexuality, culture, or language.

Learning

Children and young people learn through a variety of experiences within the classroom, the home, and the community in which they live. Their individual learning needs are addressed to allow them to realise their full learning potential. Families are engaged in their child's learning. Children and young people are supported and encouraged to learn in a wide variety of settings, including formal education. They have opportunities to participate in a breadth of experiences where their learning is valued and supported by their family and in the wider community.

Healthy

Healthy children and young people have their physical, mental, and emotional health needs met. All their developmental health needs are provided for in a timely way. They receive appropriate health services, including preventative measures to address potential or emerging physical, emotional, and mental health concerns.

Participating

Participating is about children and young people having a voice, being listened to, and taken seriously within their family and community. It means having a say in decisions that impact them. It is being empowered to speak out and express themselves. Participating includes involvement with peers and groups through a variety of activities, including online communities. Participating means being an active member of society.

Background and Purpose

Children and young people are experts in their own lives. The UNCRC states children and young people have the right to have a say in issues that affect them (United Nations, 1989). Research shows that engaging children and young people in the development and execution of research, policy and practice provides better outcomes (Moore, 2011).

While there is a growing awareness of the importance of listening, consulting, and co-designing policy and programs with children and young people in Australia, consultation does not always occur, and when it does, does not always result in meaningful action.

This report seeks to reduce this disconnection through understanding and collating what children and young people have already told us, synthesising it into key action areas, and translating this into practical next steps – based on what we know works to address the issues identified, and what children and young people have asked for themselves.

We used the six wellbeing domains of The Nest framework for child and youth wellbeing as the foundation to inform this report, drawing on information within and across the domains. This framework allows us to understand the areas where children and young people have been consulted, as well as highlight areas where they have not, informing the direction of future consultation and enabling us to appropriately direct resources and efforts.

We acknowledge the limitations of consultation being the first step in the engagement spectrum. Engaging children and young people in matters that affect them can range from consultation, where feedback is heard, through to partnership and youth-led initiatives.

We hope that by completing this process, it will be easier for government and policymakers, researchers, philanthropists, service providers, non-government organisations and other stakeholders to incorporate the insights of children and young people more readily in their work and so lead to real and meaningful change for young Australians.



Young Advisory Group Response

We consulted with 14 young people between the ages of 15 and 25 of diverse lived experience (see Figure 1). Young people were recruited via a call-out to known young networks including children’s commissioners. Young participants were provided with a summary report relevant to their age and then participated in one of two 90-minute structured online workshops. Remuneration was provided and they were allowed to bring a friend or support person if they wished.

I identify as having the following lived experiences (tick as many as apply)

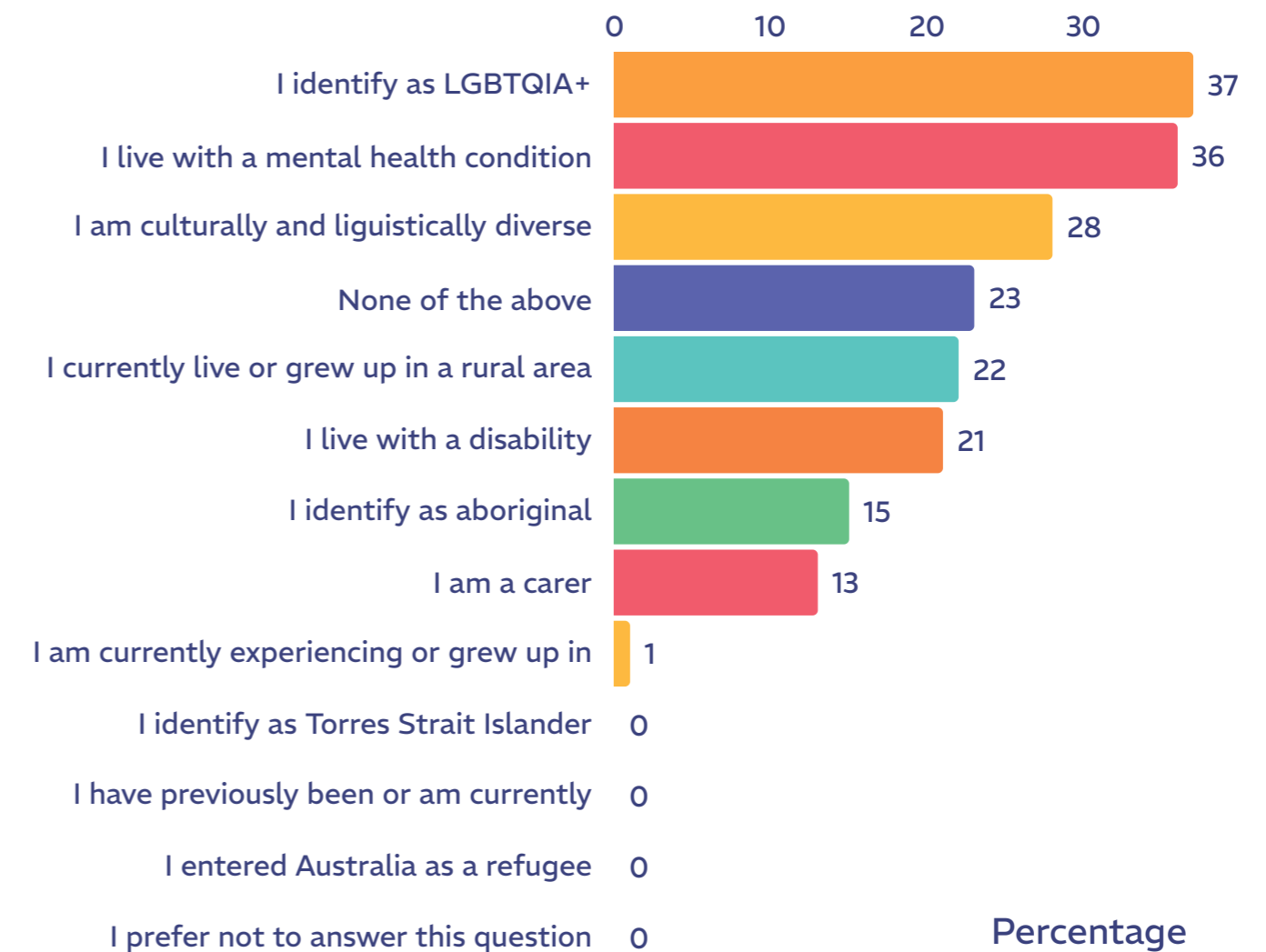


Figure 1: Self-identified diversity of lived experiences among 'Young & Wise' advisory group.

Reception

Young people were overall enthusiastic about the concept and purpose of the report. Most felt that the priorities and actions identified in the report were a fair representation of their lives.

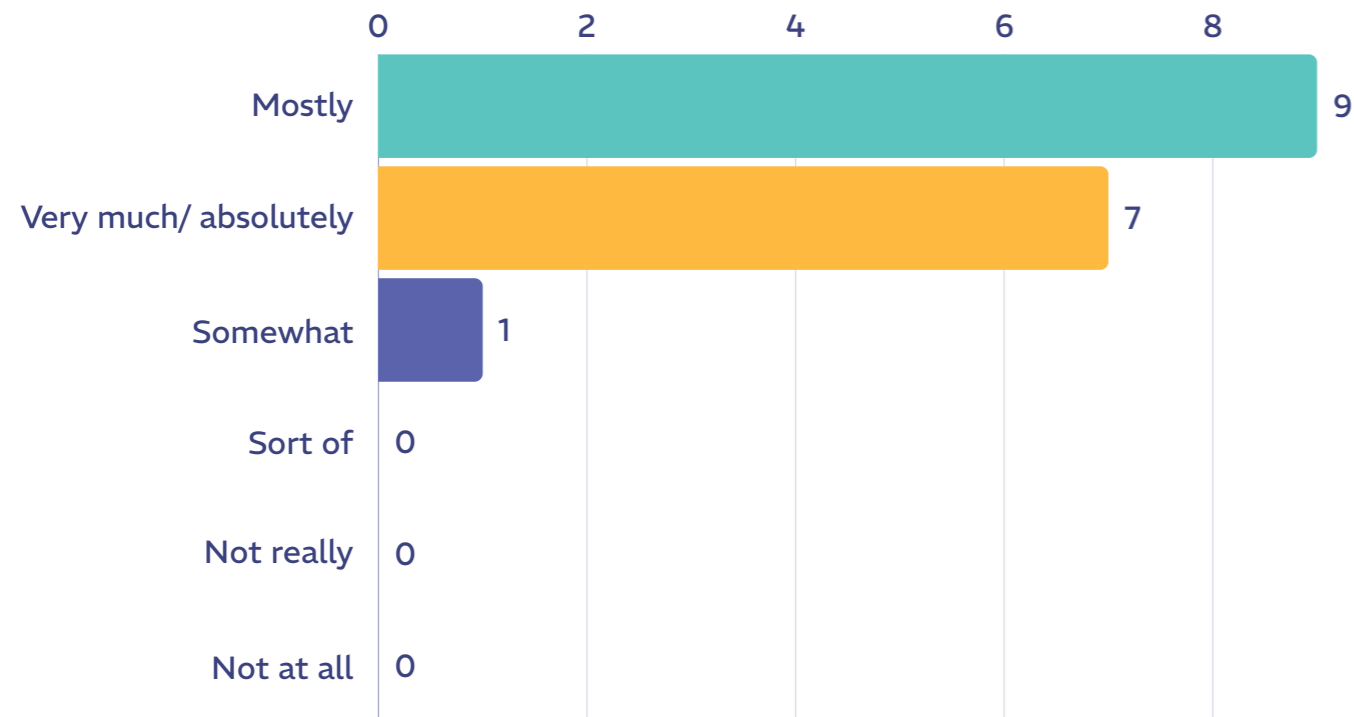


Figure 2 : Young and Wise Advisory Group responses to the question 'As a young person aged 15 to 25 do you feel the priorities and actions in this report are a fair representation of your life?'

Emerging Themes

Among younger participants (still in high school), strong themes which emerged included concerns about the lack of emphasis on non-academic wellbeing in school. Many young participants felt their mental and overall wellbeing needs were not considered a priority, and that they were old enough to be able to manage their wellbeing. This was a notable change from the earlier high school years where young participants felt their overall wellbeing was more supported in schools.

Other themes include the lack of trust in support services. Young people in our consultation were aware of the concept of confidentiality but were concerned about their anonymity when seeking help.

Older participants (beyond high school) wanted more specific recommendations, and accountability for who was responsible for actioning these. Specific themes included the desire for more young person friendly "third spaces" i.e. places which were not work or home to relax, socialise, and focus on their wellbeing. They noted the complexity among systems of ensuring such measures were able to be attended to, citing for example the need for urban planning to factor in wellbeing.

Another theme which emerged was the absence of phones and social media in the literature presented in the report. Both third spaces and phones/social media were considered to be closely linked to mental health yet did not feature strongly. Another finding was the desire for young carers and young people with neurodiverse backgrounds to be considered a distinct group who experience challenges including discrimination, and for the desire for this to be reflected in research and policy more broadly.





What young people wanted to be asked about

Noting that young people often aren't involved in the research design phase and therefore have little control over the content of consultation more broadly, we asked 14 young people "What would you like decision-makers to ask you about, or ask you more about?" The following word clouds were generated from their responses.



Figure 3: Young participant responses (out of high school) to the question "What would you like decision-makers to ask you about or ask you more about?".



Figure 4: High school student responses to the question "What would you like decision-makers to ask you about or ask you more about?".

What opportunities young people wanted to participate in addressing wellbeing

We also asked 14 young people what opportunities they would like to support young people's wellbeing, and then extended this question to our online network of more than 140 young people aged 13 to 15 years. The responses we received are included below:

What opportunities should decision-makers provide for young people to act on and address these and other priorities?



Figure 5 : Responses from young people beyond high school. There were written responses and have not been edited to ensure accurate reflection of the young people's contributions

What opportunities should decision-makers provide for young people to get involved in addressing wellbeing priorities?



Figure 6 : Responses from young people beyond high school.

Methodology

A review of the literature was undertaken in response to the overarching research question *What do children and young people (aged birth to 25 years) in Australia have to say about their wellbeing?* The review was conducted in two phases.

Desktop review

An initial desk-top review was conducted among the outputs of Australian commissioners/commissions for children and young people at the national, state and territory levels; and national surveys of children and young people. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to ensure the research and consultations examined for this report were:

- Timely and recent
- Reflective of the Australian context
- Reflective of specific age-groups
- A product of direct consultations with children and young people that provided opportunities for open-ended responses in their own words
- Reflective of a holistic interpretation of wellbeing, not focused on specific topics or domains
- A product of robust and ethical consultations with children and young people.

Inclusion criteria

- Published between January 2018 and June 2023
- Used primary data
- Includes qualitative data
- Includes data and information from children and young people (birth-25 years)
- Main topic of consultation centred on children and young people's wellbeing, supported by a holistic conceptual framework (e.g., the Nest, rights-based focus, social determinants of health etc.)
- Findings were disaggregated by and/or focused on specific age groups

Exclusion criteria

- Published outside the date-reference range
- Only includes secondary data
- Only includes quantitative data
- Includes data and information predominantly of people outside the age range of birth-25 years
- Not the most recent iteration of a survey or data
- Findings relate to more than one age range (i.e., early years, middle years, adolescence, young adults) and findings were not disaggregated by age-range
- Main source of data was administrative and/or not directly from children and young people (e.g., hospital data, parent, or teacher-report data)
- Focus was on a specific social/demographic group or theme (e.g., children in out-of-home care, cyber-safety, vaping etc.)



Final core reports

This first phase of the review examined six 'core' reports.

- *Western Australia Speaking Out Survey*
- *The Things That Matter 3 - Views of 8-12-year-olds on life, school, and community (South Australia)*
- *Voices of Hope: Growing Up in Queensland*
- *Mission Australia Youth Survey*
- *The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer: Understanding young people in Australia today*
- *Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Consultation Report*

Analysis

An initial thematic analysis was conducted on the six core reports on the needs (i.e., wellbeing issues raised) and strengths (i.e., sources of support, what is working well and possible solutions to challenges experienced) raised by children and young people in the consultations and research. These topics were grouped by the relevant age-range, and The Nest domain.

Supplementary reports and articles

Reports and consultations reviewed for the first phase that did not meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria (for example, comprised mainly quantitative data and information and/or were specific to a specific topic rather than general wellbeing, or were state-specific/place-based) were drawn on to supplement and support the findings of the initial analysis of the core reports. Supplemental material also included research, reports, and consultations already available.

For these supplementary reports and articles, priority was given to Australian-based work, included information direct from children and young people, and involved key social demographic groups that were not otherwise included in the 'core' reports, specifically:

- LGBTQI+ children and young people
- Children and young people living with a disability
- Children and young people in contact with the child protection and/or youth justice system
- First Nations children and young people
- Children and young people as risk of or experiencing homelessness

Limitations and conclusion

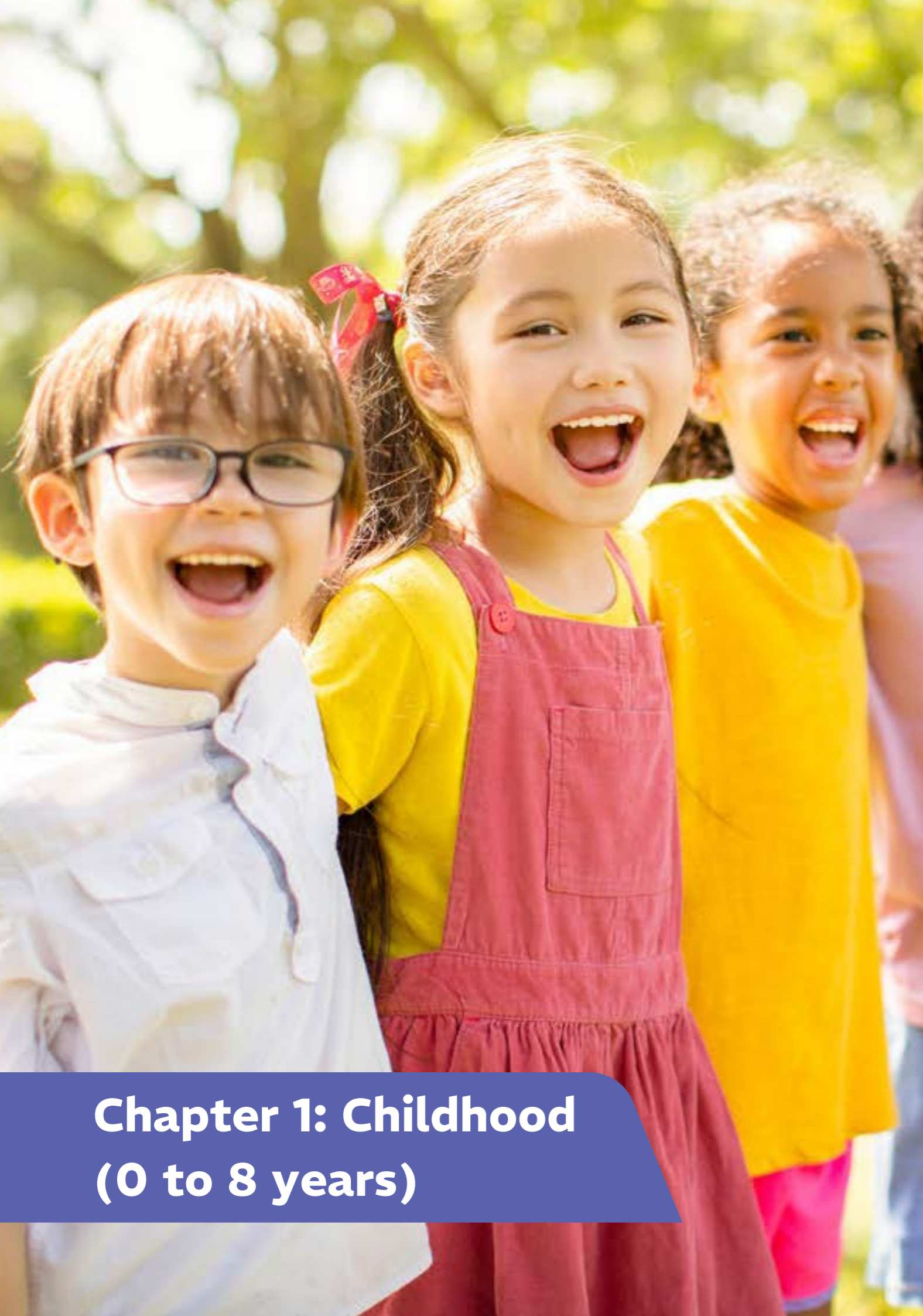
As this was not a systematic review of the literature, the findings in this report cannot be extrapolated to all consultations with children and young people in Australia. Further, it is acknowledged the responses of children and young people within the consultations included in this review reflect only the questions they were asked, the environment in which they were asked (i.e., through a survey, focus group or interview), and the way they were asked (i.e., the expertise and cultural competency of the facilitator).

Therefore, the emerging themes are not primarily child/youth-led and are constrained by the assumptions held by the adults conducting the research and consultations. Further, the review is limited in how much it reflects the views of age groups not specifically focussed on in the core reports.

Nonetheless, the findings provide valuable insights into:

- Key themes and issues young people have raised about their wellbeing across age-ranges
- Possible consultation gaps
- Next steps for services and policy-makers.





Chapter 1: Childhood (0 to 8 years)

Introduction

Children from birth to 8 years undergo the most rapid brain growth of their lives, with around one million neural connections formed every second (Center on the Developing Child, 2023).

Protective factors for optimal brain development and wellbeing include:

- secure attachments
- responsive and regular interactions between parent/carer
- language rich interactions
- regular shared book reading
- stable home and financial environments
- participation in quality early childhood education and care.

Conversely, risk factors for optimal brain development include toxic stress, which can be caused by trauma, family dysfunction, parental addiction or domestic violence (Center on the Developing Child, 2023). Low socio-economic status, insecure attachments and non-participation in early childhood education and care are risk factors for optimal brain development. This period has been targeted by families, researchers, advocates, policy-makers, and governments as a focus for preventative support and intervention.

Article 12.1 of the UNCRC, states “Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”.(United Nations, 1989). Infants, preschool-aged children, and those in early primary school are no exception. Harnessing their insights and the creativity unique to their developmental stage (Leggett, 2017) is vital to inform the decisions made about their lives.



Although not a systematic review and, therefore, not necessarily reflective of the literature, the review conducted for this report found limited examples of consultations with children under the age of eight.

There were, however, examples of research and consultation with children aged four and over that were included in the section focused on the middle years due to a lack of disaggregation with the eight to 14-year range. Due to the lack of consultations found exclusively with this age-range, this section of the report will start with a framing of evidence-based approaches to provide infants and young children with an opportunity to be heard on specific topics and aspects of their lives. Preceding this sub-section is an overview on what children under the age of eight have said about their lives and wellbeing. The two core reports relevant to this age-range that were used to frame initial key themes include the consultations undertaken for the Tasmanian Government's development of their state's Children and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, done in partnership with their state's Commissioner for Children and Young People (Tasmanian Government, 2021); and the Queensland Family and Child Commission for the Growing Up in Queensland project (Voices of Hope report: Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

Supplementary reports drawn on for this section include consultations held by the Australian Human Rights Commission for their Children's Rights report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019); a report further detailing the Tasmania's Commissioner for Children and Young People's consultations with young people for their state's Strategy (When I wake up I smile; Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 2021); and place-based consultations in the Shellharbour and Maroondah regions (Barnardos Australia, 2021; Maroondah City Council, 2019). The information from these consultations was primarily gleaned from children via drawing pictures, facilitated imaginative activities and focus group/interviews/conversations with trusted adults.

Consulting with very young children

As ascertained by the findings of this report's review, and reflecting previous reviews on the extent young people actively participate in research (Grace et al., 2019), children under the age of eight are rarely provided the opportunity to provide insights into their lives and/or on specific topics relevant to their wellbeing. The exception is perhaps research on early education outcomes (Grace et al., 2019). Table 1 below provides a summary of the most common approaches used to engage with infants and children from birth to eight years on specific topics and questions, and to collect information and data on their insights. Considerations of which methods to employ are commonly based on participant and other characteristics including (Haijes & van Thiel, 2016):

- Cognitive, physical and language skills of participants (according to age, developmental stage, and/or disability)
- Social demographics of participants
- Objectives of the research/consultation and the type of data/information the researcher/consultant is seeking.

Generally, verbal, and written methods are most suitable for school-aged children, and observational, visual, and active/creative methods better for younger children (Haijes et al., 2015). Where visual and more active, non-verbal methods are used, importance is given to children being able to provide an explanation or interpretation of their creation, avoiding a research/consultant-based interpretation (Haijes et al., 2015).



Table 1: Participatory methods for research and consultation commonly used among children from birth to eight.

Approach type	Description	Conditions for use
Multi-method/mosaic approach	Multi-method using drawing, map-drawing, walking tours or interviews, participatory observation, pedagogical documentation, photography, role play, storytelling and interviews and discussions with children.	Be tailored to the cognitive and physical ability of participants. Provide choice to participants about which methods to use and engage with.
Observation and ethnography approach	Examination of everyday social relationships and play, or social exclusion and equality between children, usually in an early childhood education setting. Involves observations by researchers and use of field notes.	Most appropriate when dealing with very young children and smaller groups.
Language-based methods	Interviews, sometimes with supplementary material (e.g., toys) and/or in a group setting.	Best used in later stages of the research when the children know the researcher. More appropriate for preschool-aged and older. When children are interested and engaged. When there are no verbal communication barriers. Not appropriate for sensitive topics, particularly in a group setting.
Visual methods	The use of drawings, videos and cameras by children (with photos and videos taken by preschoolers and toddlers to provide their point-of-view of their environment).	When possible, allow the participant to provide an explanation of drawings.
Creative and playful methods	Asking young children to compose, draw, act, photograph, tell a story, plan, or create something new. This is often supplemented by an interview or language-based method.	Be tailored to the cognitive and physical ability of participants. More appropriate for preschool-aged children and older. When possible, allow for participant to provide an explanation/interpretation of drawings or creations.

Adapted from (Haijes & van Thiel, 2016; Sevon, Mustola, Siippainen, & Vlasov, 2023)

Key themes from consultations with children from birth to 8

Consultations with children from birth to 8 years highlight broad themes that have substantial overlaps across multiple domains. These themes centre on playing; being outside and in nature; the importance of family, culture and the home; and being creative and learning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to 4 years also valued connection to culture and participation in cultural activities, while children in remote areas felt that having a safe home was important.

Playing

Relevant to Learning; Valued, Loved and Safe; and Participating domains
Children know their main job is playing.

The consistent theme of consultations with children under the age of 8 was the importance of playing. This is highlighted in the consultation with preschoolers by the Tasmanian Government when asked what their hopes and dreams for children in Tasmania were (see Figure 1 below), where the substantial number of contributions focused on playing. This was also reflected in the Australian Human Rights Commission’s consultation with children aged 4 and under, which found that one of the key themes was their love of playing (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019).

Specifically, children identified playing with family and/or friends, and using toys, playgrounds, nature and other public spaces as important to their wellbeing and that of other children their age (Barnardos Australia, 2021; Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 2021; Maroondah City Council, 2019; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).



Figure 7: Responses from preschool-aged children through pictures and other creative responses (What are your hopes and dreams for children and young people in Tasmania?) Source: (Tasmanian Government, 2021)

Being outside and in nature

Relevant to Healthy, Participating, and Positive Sense of Identity and Culture domains
Children want to be outside and to take care of nature.

The importance of nature and being outside was highlighted in all consultations reviewed for this report. Children wanted to be able to play outside with their friends and be in nature. In some consultations, children recognised the importance of taking care of nature and wildlife (Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 2021)

Family support, culture, and the importance of home

Relevant to Valued, Loved and Safe; Positive Sense of Identity and Culture; and Material Basics domains

Family and culture are the central touchstone of children's lives, and home is where they feel safe.

In terms of who they feel safe with, and who they like to spend their time with, family emerged as the touchstone for children. Similarly, their home and house emerged as the place they feel safe and supported.

"I feel safe at home because that's where my Mum and Dad are"

5-year-old (Barnardos Australia, 2021)

"[The] most important thing in life is my mummy, daddy, brother, and sister. They are important because I really love them"

4-year-old (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019)

For First Nations children, connecting with culture and participating in cultural activities and in language also emerged as central to their lives (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019; Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania, 2021), and children in remote communities identified the importance of a safe home (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019).

Being creative and learning

Relevant to Participating and Learning domains

Children want opportunities to be creative, learn, and have future dreams of what they will do as adults.

Playing with toys, playing sports, doing crafts, music, dancing, reading books and learning/getting help with things were identified across consultations as important to this age-group. For the small group of preschool and early primary school-aged children consulted with in Queensland, these interests also aligned with/reflected their future career aspirations (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).



Recommendations for the Early Years

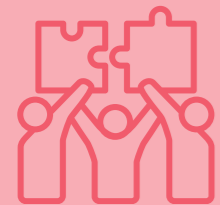
Children under the age of 8 have said that they feel safe at home and with their family. Having a home and people that loved them was the touchstone to their lives and their wellbeing. Children identified having people and things to play with, and spaces to play as essential. They also outlined the importance of taking care of nature and the desire to be outside to learn and play. First Nations children also highlighted how their connection to culture and participation in cultural activities are important to them..



Recommendations for the Early Years: Valued, Loved and Safe

Based on what young people in the early years have told us, we recommend stakeholders work to:

- Ensure families who need it are provided access to evidence-based parenting programs and support services (e.g., nurse home visiting programs)
- Invest in and support a child-safety system that provides young people with continuity of care both in terms of placements and the workers that support them and their family
- Preserve natural play spaces now and into the future by investing in climate action.



Recommendations for the Early Years: Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- Ask and consult with children in this age-range on their conceptions and practice of culture and traditions so they can be supported to participate and build their identity in ways that are important to them, their family, and their community
- Enhance the cultural safety of ECEC services. Specifically by (as outlined in SNAICC's submission to the Early Years Strategy; (SNAICC, 2023)):
 - Providing secure and flexible funding to ACCO-led ECEC services
 - Embedding local First Nations culture and knowledge into early-years curriculum in mainstream ECEC settings.



Recommendations for the Early Years: Material Basics

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- Enact policy that provides stable housing for all families and households.



Recommendations for the Early Years: Healthy

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- Increase free, public, child-friendly spaces such as playgroups, parks, ovals, sports fields, community centres and nature reserves.



Recommendations for the Early Years: Learning

We recommend:

- A continued focus on the importance of play-based learning within regulatory and guidance frameworks governing early childhood education and care in Australia
- Facilitation and continuation of play-based learning approaches in the early years of primary school (within the curriculum and teacher instruction and guidance resources), in conjunction with the introduction of more explicit teaching practices.



Recommendations for the Early Years: Participating

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- Engage with, and seek input from, children under the age of 8, particularly First Nations children, children living with a disability and those from regional and remote areas. This should be done through inclusive, developmentally appropriate techniques applied by skilled researchers who are able to engage young children creatively and meaningfully
- Empowering adults to engage and consult meaningfully with children through the uptake of evidence-based training programs and the use of evidence-based consultation guidelines, such as [UNICEF's Communicating with Children: Principle and Practices to Nurture, Inspire, Educate and Heal](#).



Chapter 2: Middle Years (8 to 14 years)

Introduction

This age-range, occurring during late primary school and early adolescence, encompasses important social and developmental changes in a young person's life. The onset of puberty is a time of dynamic neurodevelopment (Patton et al., 2016) with physical and hormonal changes coinciding with a shifting importance in a young person's identity from the home to peer groups and social groups outside the home (Renshaw, 2019). Therefore, this age-range is a critical period of psycho-social development for young people (Eccles et al., 1993) and a significant intervention point in a young person's life that can impact their trajectories into late adolescence, early adulthood and beyond.

This age-range also features important transitions in service-provision, within education (primary to secondary school), health services (from paediatric services to more youth-based health services) and community services (from family to youth-based community and social services). There is a well-documented gap in services and policy for this group, with a focus skewed towards the early years (birth to 8 years) and late adolescence (12/14 years and onward) (Parliament of New South Wales, 2009).

The core reports drawn from for this age-range include the Voices of Hope report from the Queensland's Growing Up In Queensland Project (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021); Commissioner for Children and Young People's (South Australia)'s consultations with 8 to 12-year-olds in The Things that Matter report (Connolly, 2022b); Western Australia's Speaking Out Survey (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021); and consultations held by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Tas) for the Tasmanian Government's development of their state's Children and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (Tasmanian Government, 2021).



Relationships

Most Australian children in the middle years consulted with feel valued, loved, and safe; with family relationships remaining the foundational source of support for young people in this age-range.

Quality family and peer relationships are rated extremely important for children in the middle years to feel loved, valued, and safe. The 8 to 12-year-old children the South Australia Commissioner for Children and Young People consulted with deeply valued their friends and family relationships (Connolly, 2022b). Parents/carers, friends and teachers also emerged as the trusted people for 5 to 12-year-old children from complex backgrounds consulted with by the Australian Human Rights Commission (90% indicated a parent/carer, 84% a friend and 75% teachers; as the people they could talk to, to help them feel safe; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The Western Australian Speaking Out Survey showed three-quarters of students in Years 4 to 12 agreed their parents or family believe in, listen to, and care about them a lot (Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2021). More than 89 per cent reported it was true that they lived with a parent or another adult who believed they will achieve good things, while 78 per cent reported it was true that they lived with a parent or another adult who listened to them when they have something to say (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Younger students were more likely than older ones to report being able to talk to their parents about their problems, to feel their mum or dad cared a lot about them, and that their parents listened when they had something to say. For example, two-thirds of students in Years 4 to 6 reported it was 'very much true' they lived with a parent they can talk to about their problems or worries, compared with less than half of Year 7 to 12 students (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

"I sometimes feel stressed about little things, but my family, mainly mum and my friends help"
11-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

"I go on holidays a lot with my family, and it's just a good time for us to bond and not worry about things back at home"
Year 9, male, inner Sydney (Saunders et al., 2018)

The South Australian Wellbeing and Engagement Collection dataset showed that most students in the middle years (Years 4 to 9) indicated that they have at least one supportive friend they can talk to and who understands them. Younger students identified having more support than older students (73% of the Year 4 cohort identified having a supportive friend compared with 63% among the Year 9 cohort; Government of South Australia, 2023).

The Environment

Children in the middle years have expressed in multiple consultations their need to have the environment protected and climate change addressed to feel safe.

In an Australian Human Rights Commission consultation, of which 86 per cent of children consulted were aged 9 to 12, having clean air to breathe and clean water to drink were ranked as one of the three most important rights for children (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019).

In consultations with 8 to 12-year-olds, the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People found environmental issues and the health and wellbeing of people and animals in their communities were a top concern (Connolly, 2022b, 2023c). When children in Tasmania were asked about their hopes and dreams, the top issues for young people aged 6 to 15 were about climate change, litter and more general concerns about the environment and animal welfare (Tasmanian Government, 2021).

In 2023, the ACT Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment sent postcards to schools across the ACT asking students about their hopes for the environment. Out of the 638 postcards submitted, 80 per cent were written by children aged 4 to 12.

The top-three themes cited by children on these postcards were:

- protecting plants and animals (61%)
- ending pollution (34%)
- reducing waste (29%).

Children's sense of safety in their environment now and in the future was closely linked to how they perceived adults were protecting and caring for animals and plants, and reducing pollution (Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment, 2023).

"I think everybody deserves a non-polluted earth to learn, play, thrive and grow on"
9-year-old (Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment, 2023)

"No pollution so we have more life on planet earth"
8-year-old (Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment, 2023)

"I think we should create areas in cities for animals and plants by transforming dirty, black cities into large, green areas where animals and humans live in cooperation"
8-year-old (Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment, 2023)

They have personally experienced natural disasters and want to be heard by governments about responses to future events.

In 2020, 1,500 children and young people aged 10 to 24 from all states and territories participated in an online survey on climate change, natural hazards and disaster risk in Australia (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2020). Around 90 per cent of children and young people reported they had experienced at least one natural hazard in the last three years, 40 per cent had experienced the impact of bushfires, while 63 per cent felt disasters were occurring more often. In addition, only 13 per cent of the young people surveyed felt their views were listened to by leaders in government (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2020).

“Responsibility to fix this global crisis is falling on youth, because we are the ones growing up with this as our reality. It makes me angry. It makes me anxious. I am tired of being angry and anxious about this huge problem, especially when I feel so small and powerless”
14-year-old (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2020)

“[I wish that] the government and grown-ups cared about our future and didn’t just ignore the fact that we are ruining earth and basically just making a bad future for the next generation”
11-year-old, female, Adelaide Hills, SA (Connolly, 2022b)

“I’m 10 and I’ve lived through two bush fires in six years which were across the road from my house and we had to leave... we weren’t sure if we had a home anymore”
Excerpt from a speech by a 10-year-old (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023)

Young people in the middle years want to see action to reduce climate change and have ideas about how this can be done.

Children aged 9 and older have consistently spoken in various consultations about why it was necessary for adults to address climate change and that they wanted to be involved in the process. UNICEF’s 2021 consultations found children and young people show a sound understanding of climate change and environmental issues and wanted decision-makers to recognise children and young people as agents of change in climate action (UNICEF Australia, 2021). This was also reflected in a consultation with 8 to 12-year-olds by the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People’s (Connolly, 2022b).

Collectively, these consultations have highlighted the following self-identified environmental actions that children in their middle years want to see:

- serious action to reduce emissions and pollution (including a greater focus on establishing renewable energy sources)
- increase investments in First Nations land management
- protect children from the impact of climate change and environmental degradation
- place children and young people at the centre of climate-change strategy policies
- make Australia a leader on climate action globally.

“There’s no good reason why we can’t be transitioning to renewable energy rather than making new coal plants, and it doesn’t make any sense to me because there’s only so much coal that we can dig out of the ground. But if we set up a system that’s gonna work to the future and for a long, long, long period of time, that just seems so much more logical and people can still have jobs”
High school student, Years 7 to 9, Regional NSW (UNICEF Australia, 2021)



Safety at Home

Feeling safe at home is a priority for young people in the middle years.

s outlined in the *Children's Rights Report 2019*, a poll of 22,700 children (of which 86 per cent were aged 9 to 12) in Australia found the two rights most important to them were: they are safe; and they are cared for and have a home (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). 'I can be cared for and have a home' was the second-most common right the respondents felt were largely true for children in Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). The Australian Human Rights Commission's consultations with young people from disadvantaged and complex backgrounds found that children aged five to 12 years said that the most important services and support for their age group were a safe place to live (84 per cent), talking to an adult they can trust (47 per cent) and no violence (38 per cent) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The vast majority of young people across age-groups in the *Speaking Out Survey* identified that they feel safe at home all or most of the time (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021) as did children aged 5 to 12 years children from complex and/or disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia (92% felt safe at home; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). Notably, children surveyed about how safe they felt at home over the past two years during COVID-19 lockdowns (aged nine to 17 years) reported lower levels of safety than in 2019 (Hand et al., 2022).

Some groups feel less safe at home than others.

The Western Australian *Speaking Out Survey* found that once children in the middle years enter high school, the proportion of females reporting they feel safe decreases (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2022). Alarming, this survey found that one in ten female students in Year 7 to 9 felt safe at home only sometimes or less. Across age-groups, the *Speaking Out Survey* found that females are more likely to be hit or physically harmed at home than males (75 per cent female vs. 32 per cent male), and twice as likely as males to have been harmed by an adult (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021a). Notably, children who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or having a disability reported feeling unsafe at home more than children without disability or non-Indigenous children in the Australian Human Rights Commission's consultations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Out-of-Home Care

Most young people in the middle years in out-of-home care feel safe at home.

Most children (93 per cent) in the middle years (aged 10 to 14-years-old) feel safe and settled in their out-of-home care arrangements (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). About 96 per cent say they feel close to their biological family and their foster carers/family they live with, and 71 per cent say they are satisfied with their contact with biological family members; 91 per cent aged 10 to 14 say they have at least some knowledge of their biological family background and 89 per cent have some life history recorded. Further, 80 per cent are satisfied with their levels of contact with close friends, and 98 per cent report having a significant close adult in their lives.

Young people in the middle years in out-of-home care indicate a mistrust of the systems that are there to support them and want meaningful contact with their biological family.

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People found that children in out-of-home care regularly feel powerless. Children in out of home care describe navigating complex interpersonal relationships with multiple adults, including other family members, carers, placement workers, support workers, social workers, therapists, and lawyers who they either weren't familiar with and/or didn't understand their role. This resulted in children feeling unsafe and fearful of the adults and systems around them (Connolly, 2023a).

Children under 10 are the age-group most likely to express dissatisfaction with the child-protection system for supporting them to have contact with their biological family and friends (AIHW, 2019). This may be due to those children struggling to understand the complex decision-making processes and systems in place surrounding them once they enter out-of-home care (Connolly, 2023a).

Children under 10 years in out-of-home care consistently had the lowest rates of all age groups when asked (AIHW, 2019):

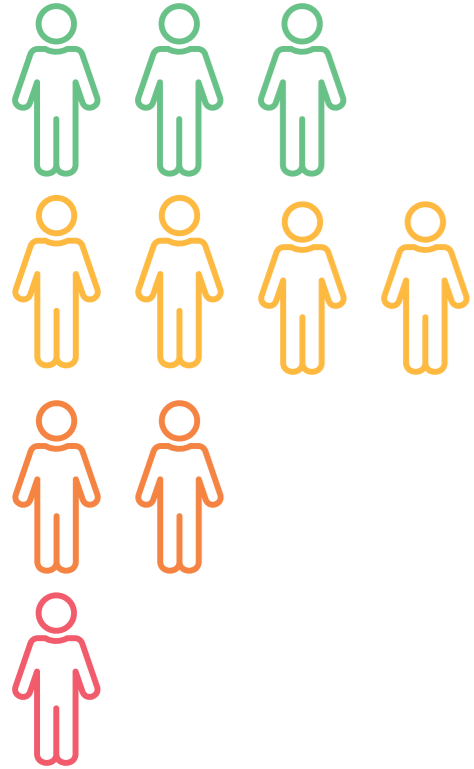
- if they were satisfied with their level of contact with family members and close friends,
- had knowledge of their family background, and;
- had life history recorded.



Safety in the Community

While most young people in the middle years feel safe in their community and neighbourhood, a substantial proportion did not.

The *Speaking Out Survey* indicated just 40 per cent of participants in Years 6 to 8 reported feeling safe when out in their neighbourhood during the evening.



Less than one-third (28 per cent) of students in Years 4 to 12 reported feeling safe in their local area 'all the time' (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Two in five (41.3 per cent) said they feel safe 'most of the time' and the remainder – nearly 30 per cent – feel safe only 'sometimes' or less (**19.8% 'sometimes' and 9.4% 'a little bit of the time/ never'**).

"The thing that makes the community a great place for us is that there are many child-friendly meet-up spaces and activities. Also the people are nice"
12-year-old, female, metropolitan (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Young Queenslanders aged 13 to 15-years-old outlined specific features that made public spaces in their community feel unsafe: these included rude people; insufficient lighting; and insufficient security staff, police officers and/or security cameras (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Features that made these areas feel safer included the presence of crowds, open spaces, and the presence of friendly people and/or people they know.

Young people across age-groups discussed how not being able to access important information contributed to feeling unsafe, particularly during pandemics or natural disasters (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

"I feel unsafe when I can't access important information I need to stay safe – for example, when COVID or bush fire/safety information isn't provided in clear/plain English, without Auslan interpreters, with busy/distracting graphics."
Young person (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).



Some groups feel safer in their community than others.

The Western Australian *Speaking Out Survey* found older teenagers were more likely to feel safe in their local area than children in the middle years (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Children aged 5 to 12 from complex and/or disadvantaged backgrounds reported the lowest feelings of safety in the general community when compared with safety at school and in the home (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). Overall, only half (51 per cent) of this group said they felt safe in the community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children with a disability, reported the highest rates of feeling unsafe in their community. When asked about what they needed to feel safe, 84 per cent reported that they wanted "safe spaces" to live, and 38 per cent reported they did not want any violence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

"I guess it's kind of expected now for me to feel a little unsafe when I'm out. I guess people have the power to make me feel somewhat unsafe"
14-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2021)

"I feel unsafe as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community in my conservative town. And feel unable to express myself for fear of getting verbally attacked"
12-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2021)

Limited information was available on feelings of safety among LGBTQIA+ children and young people in the middle years.

Safety at School

Most young people in the middle years say they feel safe at school.

Eighty-four per cent of young people aged 8 to 12-years-old in Queensland indicated they like being a student at their school (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). In the Western Australian Children's Commissioner *Speaking Out Survey*, nine out of 10 children in Years 3 to 6 reported feeling safe at school most or all of the time (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018a, 2021). In the same survey, nearly one in two students in Years 3 to 6 in Western Australia stated that they like school 'a lot', and only 4 per cent said they don't like school at all.

Some groups feel less safe at school than others.

Again, there is a trend for children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds or children living with disability to feel less safe than the general population. In the Australian Human Rights Commission's survey, just over half (53 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reported feeling safe at school, and children living with a disability reported the highest level of feeling unsafe out of all groups, at 14 per cent (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

"Friends help you feel accepted and also make the environment feel safer and more enjoyable/comfortable"

Child in Years 3 to 6

(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

For children who had been taken into care from school, their views of school as being a 'safe place' changed as a result (Connolly, 2023a). They expressed embarrassment about being removed from school in front of their peers and feared being perceived differently and potentially bullied as a result.

The *Speaking Out Survey* showed that older teens in Year 10 and above report feeling safer at school and more positive about their relationships with classmates than do younger teenagers in Years 7 to 9 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). The survey also showed that the proportion of Year 7 to 9 students that reported feeling unsafe at school in 2021 was greater with that compared in 2019, which may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Young people have the solutions.

In *Hearing Children's Voices from the Katherine Region Report* (The Smith Family, 2019), children in several remote schools (mainly Years 4 to 6), created ideas about how to ensure students feel safe at school. These included:

- no bullying, teasing, or fighting
- consequences for bullying and bad behaviour
- programs for bullying, including explicit teaching of strategies against bullying
- implementing peer-support systems
- having adults model how to talk about their feelings, being kind, respectful and helpful.

Bullying

Being bullied, mainly at school, was a consistent concern of young people in the middle years.

Bullying from peers at school is a persistent issue mentioned by children in the middle years. *The Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study* (CATS) data showed nearly one in four children in Years 3, 4 or 5 reported being persistently bullied (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). The Queensland Family and Child Commission (2021) found bullying was the most-mentioned important issue for children aged 8 to 12.

Although there appear to be similar rates of self-reported experience of bullying in Years 4 to 6 and 7 to 12 (47 per cent vs 50 per cent), older students were more likely to identify being cyber-bullied (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). According to the Butterfly Foundation (2022), 13-year-olds were most frequently reporting appearance-related teasing at school (72 per cent), followed by at home and on social media.

About half (52 per cent) of the Year 4 students surveyed for the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (Hillman, 2023) – over 5,000 in total – report they are 'almost never' bullied. But 35 per cent reported being bullied 'monthly' and more than one in 10 (13 per cent) reports being bullied 'weekly'. Students in schools facing disadvantage were more likely to report being bullied than those in schools with less disadvantage.

Young adolescents in the middle years are more wary of social media, though less likely to experience online bullying compared with older adolescents.

In the *Voices of Hope report* (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021), 13-year-olds were less likely than older teenagers to feel safe on social media (59 per cent, compared with 70 per cent). They were also less likely to have experienced cyber-bullying (20 per cent), compared with 28 per cent of 15-year-olds and 27 per cent of 16-year-olds (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).



Persistent bullying affects the learning of young people in the middle years.

Alarmingly, the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* found Year 4 students who indicated they were bullied 'weekly' scored 30 points lower on average in reading than students who said they were 'almost never' bullied (Hillman, 2023). Similarly, experiences of persistent bullying in late primary school have been associated with students falling 10 months behind peers in numeracy (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018).

Some groups are more likely to experience bullying than others.

Concerningly, various sociodemographic difference increased the likelihood and severity of bullying in the middle years. In the *Voices of Hope* report, children with a physical health condition were substantially more likely than other children to have experienced all types of bullying (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). *The Australian Child Wellbeing Study* found that students in Years 4 and 6 from marginalised groups such as young people living with a disability, young carers, materially disadvantaged young people, young people from non-English speaking backgrounds and First Nations young people reported higher levels of bullying than children who did not identify as being from marginalised groups (Redmond et. al., 2024).

As outlined in the *Voices of Hope* report, LGBTQIA+ young people were more likely to experience verbal, physical, social and online bullying than other groups (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Females were more likely to have experienced bullying than males, and gender-diverse young people were more likely to experience bullying than females and males. Cyber-bullying was experienced the most by gender-diverse young people.

"I believe the most important issue for kids my age is bullying. I believe this because I see it at my own school. Both me and my friends have experienced bullying"
11-year-old, male, Darling Downs South West, QLD
(Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

"I feel that we are becoming more and more toxic with social media and playground bullying, and the only way our teachers handle it is by asking the bully or antagonist to say sorry. This continues the bullying though! It's getting to a point we can only go downhill from here with suicide, crime, mental health issues – and nothing is being done about it. HELP US PLEASE"
12-year-old (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019)

Transitions

Young people in the middle years have demonstrated clear ideas about the type of support they need from the adults in their lives, specifically through important life transitions.

When asked about what they would like adults to know when supporting them through major life transitions, students in Years 5 and 6 sought the following (ACT Children and Young People Commissioner, 2018):

- Mutual respect – to be afforded the same respect that they are expected to demonstrate to adults
- Investment of time
- To be known and understood
- To be seen as capable and provided with autonomy
- Be encouraging and supportive
- Give clear guidance and instructions on how to navigate life challenges.





Recommendations for the Middle Years: Valued, Loved, & Safe

Young people in the middle years largely feel valued, loved, and safe, particularly at home – yet bullying among school peers is a chronic issue, and there are certain groups that feel unsafe in their community. They are worried about the future of the environment and perceive the very real threat of further natural disasters. Further, young people in this age-range in out-of-home care indicate a level of mistrust of, and difficulty in, navigating the system.

Based on what young people in the middle years have told us, we recommend stakeholders work to:

- Tackle bullying in schools. Specifically, by:
 - resourcing and providing information for schools to build an inclusive culture
 - supporting the implementation of evidence-based bullying programs and peer support systems
- Support local governments to ensure young people in this age-group have access to public spaces in which they feel safe and can socialise with their peers
- Place young people at the centre of environmental and climate-change policy and response to natural disasters. Specifically provide:
 - child-friendly education and news broadcasts in the event of natural disasters, perhaps partnering with media platforms such as Behind The News (BTN)
 - child-friendly information available on current affairs relating to the environment as outlined in the Valued, Loved and Safe recommendations for the Early Years, invest in and support a child-safety system that provides young people with continuity of care both in terms of placements and the workers that support them and their family.



Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Connection to Culture and Community

Young people in the middle years are not often asked about culture, traditions, and heritage.

Although this report does not reflect a systematic review of the literature and, therefore, may not be representative of all consultations with young people, in the studies/consultation pieces reviewed, none asked young people in the middle years about their conceptions and practice of culture, traditions and heritage. When asked, however, an open-ended question about the important things in their lives, children in the middle years in the Katherine region identified taking part in cultural activities such as fishing and hunting (The Smith Family, 2019), and in South Australia, dancing, learning culture, and speaking their language (Connolly, 2022b).

Connecting to family and community is important to young people in the middle years.

Connections with family and friends, and participating in the community, are vital elements of a young person's identity, and the middle years are a crucial time for their development of who they are, and where they fit in (Renshaw, 2019). As detailed in other sections of this report (notably in the Valued, Loved and Safe; and Participating sections), spending time with family and friends, and participating in their community, hold great importance to young people in the middle years.

Young people in the middle years need to feel that they belong in their community.

Ninety-one per cent of young people aged 8 to 12 surveyed in Queensland's Voices of Hope report indicated they like living in their town (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). However, younger teenagers were more likely to feel a sense of belonging with their communities and view their communities as friendly and helpful to people their age, compared with older adolescents (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

A study involving young people in NSW regional and rural areas aged 9 to 14, showed that young people who have a positive sense of community belonging reported higher levels of perceived self-efficacy (i.e., confidence and sense of capacity in a range of settings, including socially, at home, at school and in decision-making). Those living with a low sense of togetherness in the community reported lower levels (Rawsthorne et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of perceived community connection to wellbeing and a positive sense of identity.

Self-awareness and aspirations for the future

Young people in the middle years have a perception of their role in broader society and think about the future and their place in it.

Consultations with 8 to 12-years-olds in South Australia highlighted an awareness of their role as global citizens, and the importance of interpersonal relationships and collaboration. When asked what actions would make the world better, many highlighted the importance of inclusivity, being kind to one another, working together, and an acceptance of diversity (Connolly, 2022b).

Young people in the middle years are aware of their strengths.

Young people consulted in South Australia aged 8 to 12 were asked what they were good at. They highlighted a range of skills and strengths, including (Connolly, 2022b):

- playing sport and being active
- using their imagination
- playing games and being creative
- being kind and treating other people well
- looking after animals and the environment and
- learning new things and solving problems.

But they show vulnerability in their perceptions about their competence in learning and making friends.

Further, 85 to 93 per cent of students in South Australia indicated a 'high-to-medium' rating of self-perceived competence and confidence in their ability to achieve academically – although the proportion of those rating 'high' declined with each cohort (71 per cent of the Year 4 cohort compared with 48 per cent of the Year 9 cohort) (Government of South Australia, 2023).

In the *Speaking Out Survey*, more than half the students reported feeling very good at making and keeping friends and 40 per cent said they were okay at it (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Notably, middle-years children at the end of primary school reported being more confident about their ability to make and keep friends compared with students in high school, by a margin of nearly 10 percentage points (59.3 per cent for Years 4 to 6 and 51.1 per cent for Years 7 to 12).



They have clear hopes and dreams for their future.

Young people in the middle years have clear ideas about the future. This includes potential occupations – often tied to their current interests – and the health and wellbeing of their family and friends (Connolly, 2022b; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). They also hold concerns about the future of the environment, which is detailed in other sections of this report (notably the Valued, Loved and Safe section (Connolly, 2022b; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

Consultations among Queensland’s young people in the middle years indicated desires for certain occupations, with the most common being sportsperson (10 per cent), scientist (10 per cent) and teacher (8 per cent) (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). When asked about their hopes for the future, young people aged 8 to 18 in Queensland mentioned hopes related to employment (31 per cent), education (14 per cent) and care for the environment (7 per cent) (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

When asked about what things would facilitate them reaching their dreams, the most common theme in responses were (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021):

- education (48 per cent)
- experience/practise (19 per cent)
- a support network (7 per cent).

“My hopes for the future are that the rainforests in tropical Queensland will not be cut down to make room for more houses ... If the rainforests are cut down, many different species of animals will have nowhere to go. We all need to help save the rainforests”
9-year-old, female, Central QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)



There are indications that hopes and dreams vary by gender.

In the Queensland consultations, females were more likely to mention education-related career aspirations, and males were more likely to mention sports-related occupations (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

And that they vary by age, with young people in the middle years holding more positive views of the future and themselves, compared with older adolescents.

When asked about their hopes for the future, young people in Queensland aged 8 to 12 were more likely to highlight issues related to others (for individuals and society in general, wildlife and the environment), compared with adolescents aged 13 to 18 (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). When compared with older cohorts, young people in the middle years were more likely to have a positive view of themselves (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021) and a more positive view of the future (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

Disability and identity intersect in nuanced ways for young people in the middle years.

Themes about identity were also raised within the South Australian Children’s Commissioner’s (2022) consultation with children living with a disability. Most children participating in the consultation sessions conveyed they did not want to be identified by their disability first. Rather, they wanted to be identified by their age, relationships, achievements, and social roles (i.e., son, daughter, brother, sister, friend) (Connolly, 2022a) – similar to how their peers without a disability identified themselves. In mainstream education settings, children living with disabilities felt they were consistently singled out as different to their peers and wished they didn’t have to strive to ‘fit in’ with how other children do things.

Some disability communities, however, such as the deaf community, spoke positively about their connection, feeling of belonging and identity and culture as a deaf person. These children spoke proudly of their differences, did not identify as having a ‘disability’, and were more concerned about having inclusive social environments such as the broader community-use of Auslan (Connolly, 2022a).



General happiness and life satisfaction

Young people in the middle years are generally feeling happy and satisfied with their life, yet a substantial proportion face behavioural and emotional challenges.

Generally, rates of life satisfaction and positive outlook towards school and learning were higher in this age group than in older age groups (e.g. Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021), with 76 per cent of Year 4 to 6 students providing a high rating of life satisfaction, compared with 58 per cent of Year 7 to 9 students and 48 per cent of Year 10 to 12.

Family and friends were cited by most young people aged 8 to 12 years in Queensland as their source of happiness (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). A study of young people in the middle years asks annually about their general happiness and positivity while in Years 3, 4 and 5. While a majority rated neither very high nor very low scores to these questions, nearly 10 per cent rated persistently very low scores and one in five showed persistent emotional and/or behavioural problems (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018).

Recommendations for the Middle Years: Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Young people in the middle years have told us that engaging in cultural and traditional practices is important to them. However, consultations with this age-group do not seem to focus on this topic. Further, the middle years is a time during which initial positive perceptions of themselves can start to decline, and peer relationships gain complexity.

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- consult with young people in this age-range on their conceptions and practice of culture and traditions, so they can be supported to participate and build their identity in ways that are important to them, their family, and their community
- enhance confidence and self-perceived capability of young people as they transition to adolescence. Specifically:
 - support schools to implement evidence-based teaching practices in the classroom that aim to foster self-efficacy and social-emotional skills
- focus on establishing inclusiveness and safety in the community and public spaces, especially for groups that are feeling marginalised and unsafe, as recommended under Valued, Loved and Safe.





Material Basics



On our second day in Australia, when we woke up we had nothing to eat or drink. We just walked and walked through the street. We found a man on the street who was really kind. My father told him we needed some food, and so he took us to a place to get food and he bought us food.

9-year-old asylum-seeker living in Sydney, NSW
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)



Cost of living and stable access to material basics

Children in the middle years value safe housing highly and many express their support for universal access to housing.

Universal access to housing and employment were two areas highlighted by young people aged 8 to 12 years in South Australia when asked what would make the world a better place (Connolly, 2022b). In the Keeping Kids Safe and Well Report, 82 per cent of children aged 5 to 12 said a safe place to live was the most important service or support (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). When asked what their hopes and dreams for young Australians in Tasmania were, addressing housing and homelessness was the second most important topic raised by 6 to 15-year-olds (Tasmanian Government, 2021).

In a report by the Children’s Commissioner, Western Australian children as young as 10 indicated their support for interventions to address homelessness:

“I think we should help the homeless people, like give them homes, money, food, clothes and all this stuff will make the homeless people have a better life”
10-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2020)

“...there isn’t that many jobs that give out enough money to families and for people to be off the streets and be able to have a good and fun life”
10-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2020)

“[We need] more houses for more people because [there’s] not enough houses for everyone”
10-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2020)

Young people in the middle years are not passive participants in the economy—they notice and are impacted by household financial pressures.

When asked “what would make your life better?” in the 2019 Maroondah City Council Engagement Strategy, 12 per cent of children aged 5 to 11 said ‘money and being rich’ would make their lives better (Maroondah City Council, 2019). Some young people in the middle years are also active members of the workforce, with one in 10 (11.1 per cent) Year 7 to 9 students surveyed in Western Australia reporting having a regular part-time job (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Some children in the middle years talked about the impact of financial strain on their family:

“It worries me, because nearly three times a week I’ve heard my mum crying at night or afternoon and sometimes we’ve been running out of money [...]”
10-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2021)

“Both my parents work hard because dad says things are not cheap no more. I get scared because dad says it’s going to get harder to get a job because nobody wants to give Aboriginals work. He has two jobs and I hardly see him, which makes me sad...”
11-year-old, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2020)

Links to Social Inclusion

Access to material basics is essential for young people in the middle years to participate in and be included in their community and with their peers.

Longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys of young people in the middle years have shown the strong associations with material deprivation to reported social exclusion. Based on responses of 6 to 11-year-olds in the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*, children in jobless families were twice as likely to be bullied or face social exclusion, and almost 2.5 times more likely to be disengaged from school. Further, children living below the poverty line were nearly twice as likely to lack good relationships with friends and almost 2.5 times more likely to be disengaged from school (Sollis, 2019). This aligns with responses of Year 7 to 9 students in NSW who, when asked in a focus group setting, indicated that they were dependent on their parents for money to socialise and participate with their peers (Saunders et al., 2018).

This trend was also demonstrated in the *Australian Wellbeing Study*, with young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds reporting lower levels of life satisfaction and teacher support. This project also showed that experiences of exclusion at school mediated the association between experiences of material deprivation and life satisfaction (Redmond et al., 2024). School engagement, teacher support and experiences of bullying accounted for about a third of the association between family wealth and life satisfaction, and a quarter of the association between deprivation and life satisfaction – highlighting that material disadvantage plays a role in the unhappiness of young people in the middle years through the process of exclusion at school.



Recommendations for the Middle Years: Material Basics

Young people in the middle years have told us how they are impacted by financial pressures on their family, and how experiencing material deprivation can lead to social exclusion and bullying at school and in the community. Young people in out-of-home care have told us that home can be an unstable environment with multiple placements and movements from different houses, with little consultation.

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- enact policy that provides stable housing for all families and households, as outlined as a recommendation under Valued, Loved and Safe for children in the Early Years
- ensure that young people in out-of-home care have continuity in placements and have an opportunity to be involved in decisions about where they live, as outlined in recommendations under Valued, Loved and Safe.
- work with schools to ensure students experiencing financial disadvantage are not socially excluded (related to the recommendations under Valued, Loved and Safe around schools supporting a safe and inclusive culture and environment).

Nutrition

Young children in their middle years tend to perceive themselves as healthier, eat meals more regularly, and care more about their physical health than older students.

In 2021, more than 80 per cent of children in Years 4 to 9 rated their health as 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent' in the Western Australian *Speaking Out Survey* (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). However, as seen in other wellbeing domains, a difference emerges in the middle years between Years 4 to 9. Children in Years 4 to 6 in this survey were more likely than children in Years 7 to 9 to rate their health as 'excellent' (23.1 per cent compared with 13.5 per cent). This difference is also reflected in self-reported sleep and diet patterns in this survey, with children in Years 4 to 6 more likely to eat regular meals and more likely to get the required 8 to 11 hours of sleep per night. Younger children reported caring more about eating healthy food and being physically active, with almost half (48.5 per cent) of those in Years 4 to 6 caring 'very much' about eating healthy food, compared with just over a third (34.5 per cent) of those in Years 7 to 9. Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of children in Years 4 to 6 reported caring 'very much' about being physically active, compared with 56.4 per cent of those in Years 7 to 9.

Young people understand the basics of nutrition and healthy eating.

Children in the middle years report sound knowledge regarding the importance of nutrition and the mechanics of healthy eating, discussing the various food groups needed to have a healthy diet (de Vlieger et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2018). Children in the Katherine Region from multiple remote primary school groups also shared the importance of healthy eating (The Smith Family, 2019).

"I think there should be healthier food around where we live"
8-year-old (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019)

Consultations with Year 3 to 12 students in Western Australia suggested schools could contribute to increasing fruit and vegetable intake by providing healthy and affordable canteen food and hosting regular breakfast clubs (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018a). Similarly, primary-school students from the Katherine Region reported they needed support to eat more vegetables and fruit, and not too much sugar. This could be achieved by schools providing healthy meals and through teaching children how to cook and bake 'yummy healthy food' (The Smith Family, 2019).

"Yes, it is good to learn about nutrition. Because at this age, you're at a growing point and if you don't eat healthy, then you won't be able to grow that well"
10-year-old, female (de Vlieger et al., 2020)

"We could grow a veggie garden for the school canteen"
Child in Years 3 to 6 (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2018a)

However, there are gaps in their knowledge and need for support in putting their knowledge into practice.

It is apparent that children in the middle years need greater support to put this knowledge and intent for healthy eating into practice. The Australian Dietary Guidelines recommends two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables per day for children aged 9 to 18 (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2013). In 2020 to 2021, just 9 per cent of children aged 2 to 17 met the daily vegetable recommendation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

De Vlieger et. al (2020) found that although the children consulted with (aged 9-12 years) stated it was important to eat healthily, there were gaps in their knowledge about how to read food labels to identify more nuanced nutrition information to determine healthy status, and most could not recall nutrition education at school (de Vlieger et al., 2020). Further, while around two-thirds (67 per cent) of children reported they ate healthily, they reported eating 0.63 serves of fruit and 0.5 serves of vegetables per day on average – substantially lower than the recommended two and five daily serves of fruit and vegetables (de Vlieger et al., 2020).

Children in this study consistently acknowledged and believed in the importance of nutrition and their health but had significant gaps in their understanding. Children made suggestions about how to improve their nutrition education by making the content engaging and fun. Most discussed wanting more nutrition education at school and gave tips on how it could be more engaging for students, such as incorporating interactive elements.

Another barrier to eating the recommended daily fruit and vegetable servings may be due to the cost of healthier food, as found by Saunders et. al (2018) in their consultations with children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds aged 11 to 17 years. Children in this study reported that while a healthy diet was considered a need, many of their households sought cheaper and usually healthier alternatives. For example, one young person spoke about buying a chicken burger from McDonald's because it was cheaper than buying a chicken sandwich from the local café, despite acknowledging that the sandwich would be healthier.

Children in this study understood the discretionary nature of food, such as lollies, chocolates, cakes and hot chips, but felt like they 'needed' to eat these types of food every day (Saunders et al., 2018).



Physical activity

Young people in the middle years value being physically active.

Children in the middle years value being physically active at school, at home and in the community (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021; Connolly, 2022b; The Smith Family, 2019). Children across Australia asked for access to clean, pollution- and rubbish-free outdoor environments to support their health (Barnardos Australia, 2021; Government of South Australia and Child Development Council, 2019; The Smith Family, 2019). Children consistently spoke of the importance of spending time in outdoor spaces such as the beach, lakes, parks, playgrounds, sports courts, or fields, and how anxiety around climate change contributed to lower feelings of security about their future and mental health.

The South Australian Children's Commissioner's consultation with children aged 8 to 12 in South Australia (Connolly, 2022b) asked this age-group what they were good at – the most common response was 'being good at sport' and 'being active'. Children wrote about participating in a range of activities, including football, soccer, basketball, netball, swimming, tennis, gymnastics, cricket, hockey, taekwondo, and lacrosse. They also wrote about riding bikes, skateboarding, roller-skating, running, playing chasey, jumping, skipping, horse riding, fishing, rock climbing and climbing trees. These responses show the variety of knowledge and access to sports and physical activities that Australian middle-years children have.

"[I am good at] soccer because of all the hard work I do to get better"

11-year-old, male, Far North SA (Connolly, 2022b).

"[I am good at] roller-skating. I love doing spins and jumps the most, and it is always fun learning a new skill in class"

11-year-old, female, Eastern Adelaide, SA (Connolly, 2022b)

The nature and rate of being physically active varies by gender, with this gap expanding as children progress through the middle years.

A marked difference emerges in the middle years between the exercise patterns of females and males. According to the Speaking Out Survey (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021), the proportion of male students reporting that sport is an important part of their life was mostly consistent across year groups in high school, at about 60 per cent. However, the proportion of female students in Years 7 to 9 stating that sport was an important part of their lives was lower at 51 per cent, and 41 per cent among female students in Years 10 to 12 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Further, only one in two female high school students reported exercising vigorously at least three times per week, compared with three in four male students in high school.

Like nutrition, young people in the middle years need greater support and information to implement healthy exercise habits.

Like nutrition, there is a discrepancy between young people's self-reported care and understanding of physical activity on their health, compared with actual time spent being active. *The Australian Physical Activity and Exercise Guidelines* recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day for 5 to 17-year-olds, and no more than two hours of sedentary recreational screen time per day. In 2018, Australian children ranked 140 out of 146 countries for physical activity (Guthold et al., 2020), with about 1 in 5 young people aged 5 to 17 years meeting the recommended daily physical activity guidelines (Hesketh et al., 2023).

Children from the Katherine Region were keen to increase opportunities for exercise within their communities by having more extracurricular sports and activities on offer outside school, investment in sports equipment for schools and community centres and infrastructure for fun exercising activities, such as water parks, playgrounds, indoor sport facilities and ovals (The Smith Family, 2019). They suggested schools could promote physical activity by increasing recess and lunch times, and have teachers organise games and sports for children to join in.



Sleep patterns

The *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Statistical Report for 2018* found that a quarter of teens aged 12 to 15 were not getting enough sleep on school nights to meet national sleep guidelines (Evans-Whipp & Gasser, 2018). This is despite four in five youth in the same survey reporting they believed they were getting enough sleep. Children who were not meeting minimum sleep guidelines were more likely to show symptoms of poor mental health, have absences from school and have increased screen time. Concerningly, one in five female students in Years 7 to 12 said they often go without eating or sleeping because of their mobile phone (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Mental health

The pandemic had an immediate and long-term effect on the mental health of young people in the middle years.

In early 2022, the Australian Human Rights Commission launched an online survey which gathered 4,559 responses from children aged 9 to 17 – 84 per cent of whom were aged 9 to 13 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022). Around 41 per cent of children reported the pandemic had a negative impact on their wellbeing, and one in four reported they were feeling more down, scared or worried than they used to before the pandemic (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022). A higher proportion of females and young people identifying as non-binary or other genders reported a negative impact of the pandemic on their wellbeing compared with the general sample (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022).

In WA, one-third of young people in the Speaking Out Survey reported their life had been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). The same study found fewer students rated their life 'the best possible' in 2021 compared with 2019, and more students rated their life 'the worst possible' in 2021 compared with 2019 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

"COVID has changed the way I live. I've missed out on a lot of activities, and that makes me really upset"

9 to 11-year-old, female, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022)

Concerns about body image became apparent in this age-range...

Body image issues appear to emerge during the middle years, particularly coinciding with the timing of high-school entry. The Butterfly Foundation (2022) found two thirds of 12-year-olds (66 per cent) reported some level of body satisfaction. Some level of body dissatisfaction was highest for 14-year-olds (58 per cent) and lowest for 12-year-olds (26 per cent). A quarter of 12-year-olds (25.7 per cent) reported social media made them feel dissatisfied with their body, compared with nearly or more than 50 per cent of respondents from older age-groups.

... and the pressure felt from adults' expectations of them, particularly around school performance.

A commonly cited problem seriously affecting levels of stress and mental health for children in the middle years was school. The prevalence of school as a stressor also increases with age. More than two-thirds (70 per cent) of 13-year-olds surveyed in Queensland experienced stress about their academic results, rising to 87 per cent of 16-year-olds (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

"Most schools and teachers don't know how much pressure and stress they put on their students. Sometimes I have been so stressed that I just cried. [...] So please remember we are still young, give us room to breathe please"

12-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Children in South Australia reported an incredible weight of pressure and expectation from the adults around them (Connolly, 2022b). In this consultation, girls particularly wrote about being under pressure for their academic performance more frequently than boys. In the WA Speaking Out Survey, girls similarly were more likely to report being affected by school or study problems as their number-one stress, at 93 per cent (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

"I feel like they (schools) push our mental health aside because we are so young, apart from some little speeches that don't do anything, the only times they actually bother helping is if you have a diagnosed mental disorder. Apart from that, they think I'm just not bothering to pay attention. There is also a lot of sexism, mainly from boys. I am a transgender boy so I was born in the body of a girl and I have to be really careful who I tell or I will probably be bullied and discriminated against"

9 to 11-year-old child who identifies as non-binary or other, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022)





Recommendations for the Middle Years: Healthy

Young people in the middle years have told us that they have trouble implementing their knowledge of healthy food into their daily eating habits and they value and want to use outdoor facilities and the natural environment. Young females in this age-range have reported a decline in sport participation and seem particularly vulnerable to pressures around body image and expectations about school performance.

...we recommend stakeholders work to:

- examine ways to support young people this age-range to put into practice their knowledge and valuing of healthy eating and being physically active
- provide targeted support for female participation in sport
- invest and prioritise young people having access to both outdoor sport and recreation facilities and the natural environment
- provide resources and education to young people and their families around sleep hygiene
- have staff in secondary schools dedicated to pre-emptively engaging with feeder schools before transition and monitor middle years children's wellbeing during their first year of high school/transition from primary school, particularly around issues regarding:
 - academic pressure
 - body image
 - social media
 - navigating peer relationships
 - family engagement around pressure about school performance and expectations
- provide mental health literacy education to young people in primary school, focusing on fostering positive mental health and preventative measures
- provide targeted support for young people in this age-group in fostering mental health among girls, LGBTQIA+ young people, young carers, children living with disabilities and First Nations young people.



Motivation and engagement in learning

The motivation and engagement to learn can decline over the middle years into adolescence.

The *South Australian Wellbeing and Engagement Collection* data show that measures of persistence (extent that students persist with classroom tasks) have declined with each cohort from Year 4 to Year 9 (in Year 4 = 61 per cent rating highly, and in Year 9 = 33 per cent rating highly). This same trend was seen for students' perception of their ability to learn (i.e., academic self-concept; 71 per cent rating highly among the Year 4 cohort, compared with 48 per cent among the Year 9 cohort) (Government of South Australia, 2023). The same dataset also shows a dip in ratings of emotional engagement with teachers in the Year 7 to 9 cohorts for both female and male students (increasing again for the cohorts in the senior years of high school, Years 10 to 12) (Government of South Australia, 2023).

Similarly, surveys of students in Western Australia show a greater proportion of perceiving school attendance as important among younger students (74 per cent of Year 3 to 6 students, compared with 67 per cent of Year 7 to 12 students) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018a).

Declines in motivation and engagement during this time are associated with negative learning outcomes, although this relationship is complex.

One in six students disengage from school during the late primary school years, resulting in a loss of one year's progress in numeracy (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). This relationship was reciprocal, with students making lower learning progress more likely to disengage from school.



Young people want greater flexibility from schools and the education system.

When the South Australian Children's Commissioner heard ideas from young people in the middle years about what would make the world better, some young people suggested ways schools could be more flexible to accommodate the different ways people learn. For instance, some asked that schools be more flexible with start times, and for classes to be grouped by skill level rather than age. Others indicated that the education system needs to better accommodate students living with disability, health issues or who move around a lot (Connolly, 2022b).

Children in Years 3 to 6 in Western Australia stated they found it difficult to learn in 'unhappy learning environments' described as disorganised, having poor classroom management, high noise, interruptions, distractions and yelling (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018a). Children in this consultation (Years 3 to 12) gave many suggestions to improve school life, most of which relate to the ways schools could foster and facilitate connections with family, peers, and school staff. This included:

- more opportunities to see and work with friends at school
- promoting positive relationships and support to develop and navigate friendships
- more caring and respectful school staff who work with the child holistically and care about their wellbeing
- a focus on creating optimal and safe learning environments
- reducing school commitments such as homework to maximise time spent with family
- increasing student choice and having a say in the school environment and their learning.

"Sometimes I know it's hard to learn when the environment is loud, noisy and distracting"

Year 3 to 6 student (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2018a)

"[make school a] fun, happy environment whilst still doing work – (not feeling like you're in jail)"

Year 3 to 6 student (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2018a)

"Games that are educational are cool because it helps people learn while having fun"

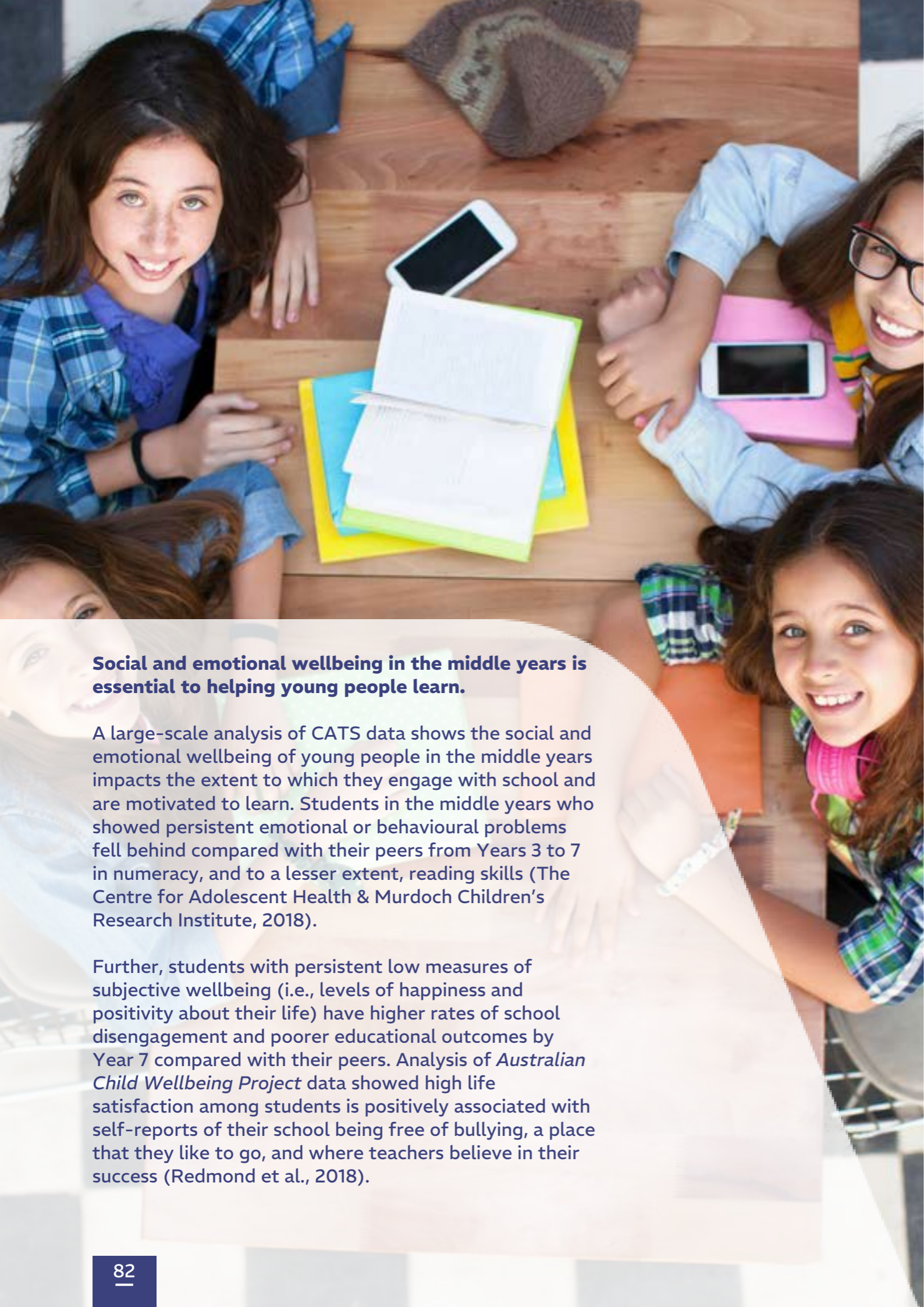
Year 3 to 6 student (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2018a)

"[...] if we choose the books we would like to read, more students might want to read books"

Year 3 to 6 student (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2018a)

There are some young people who need support in their engagement with school.

Analysis of data from the Australian Child Wellbeing Project showed young people who were caring for a family member with mental illness or alcohol/drug dependency were negatively impacted in their levels of school engagement and needed greater support (Hamilton & Redmond, 2020).



Social and emotional wellbeing in the middle years is essential to helping young people learn.

A large-scale analysis of CATS data shows the social and emotional wellbeing of young people in the middle years impacts the extent to which they engage with school and are motivated to learn. Students in the middle years who showed persistent emotional or behavioural problems fell behind compared with their peers from Years 3 to 7 in numeracy, and to a lesser extent, reading skills (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018).

Further, students with persistent low measures of subjective wellbeing (i.e., levels of happiness and positivity about their life) have higher rates of school disengagement and poorer educational outcomes by Year 7 compared with their peers. Analysis of *Australian Child Wellbeing Project* data showed high life satisfaction among students is positively associated with self-reports of their school being free of bullying, a place that they like to go, and where teachers believe in their success (Redmond et al., 2018).

Belonging and transitioning to secondary school

Feelings of belonging and interpersonal relationships at school are important to students in the middle years – but can decline in quality as they progress into high school.

For students in the middle years, feelings of belonging and interpersonal relationships at school are important but can decline in quality as they progress through high school. Although regularly captured in national surveys among older students (such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) young people in the middle years' sense of belonging at school is an identified data gap in some states and territories (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020b), despite its importance to student wellbeing. A qualitative study involving interviews with a small group of Year 6 students in Victoria their conceptions of belonging in school, and why it is important. This was done over a period of 18 months which included their transition to Year 7. Students conceptualised belonging as comprising relational, behavioural, and emotional elements – of relating and acceptance, being and doing, felt, or lived. It was considered by students to be a significant marker of resilience and doing well at school (Longaretti, 2020).

"...if you belong at a school [where] you feel comfortable and feel safe and don't feel embarrassed ...you feel comfortable talking to your friends about a problem and feel like they accept you, and that you belong"

Year 6/7 student (Longaretti, 2020)

The main factor underlying a sense of belonging at school for these students was peer friendships. This gained greater importance after their transition to Year 7 (Longaretti, 2020).

The South Australian Department of Education collects self-reported measures of belonging and school connectedness on an ongoing basis through their South Australian Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (Government of South Australia, 2023).

It showed in 2023, the proportion of students who rated highly on measures of school belonging (i.e., having a sense of belonging and feeling valued at school) and school connectedness (i.e., having a supportive adult at school), declined with each year cohort. For instance, 61 per cent of Year 4 students rated highly on measures of school belonging, compared with 27 per cent of students in Year 9 (Year 5 = 53 per cent, Year 6 = 50 per cent, Year 7 = 45 per cent, Year 8 = 29 per cent). The same trend was observed among measures of school connectedness (Year 4 = 69 per cent, Year 5 = 67 per cent, Year 6 = 66 per cent, Year 7 = 56 per cent, Year 8 = 53 per cent, Year 9 = 50 per cent).

Moving from primary to high school is an important life transition for young people in the middle years which they can be worried about, and for which they rely on their friends, family, and school to help navigate.

Consultations with children and young people in Years 5 and 6 highlighted moving schools and grade change (i.e., moving to high school) as one of the biggest self-identified life transitions (ACT Children and Young People Commissioner, 2018). Young people identified a range of supports that helped them through this change, but the predominant top three were friends, spending time doing things that they like, and help from their parents.

Using the Schools Concerns Questionnaire, participants were asked about their concerns about starting high school (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). Encouragingly, most students were not extremely concerned with their transition to secondary school. What students were most worried about was losing old friends, homework and getting lost (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). When students did the questionnaire again in Year 7 (post-transition), their level of worry declined, particularly around getting lost. Female students, however, were more likely pre- and post-transition to indicate a higher level of concern than male students (though they also demonstrated a decline in the level of worries in Year 7). One in five students indicated they were not involved in the decision of what secondary school they would go to, and the same proportion did not have friends at their new secondary school (The Centre for Adolescent Health & Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018).

Recommendations for the Middle Years: Learning

Some young people in the middle years report a decline in motivation and engagement in learning during the middle years, with young people seeking support from their peers and the adults in their lives and a sense of belonging in their school.

...we recommend stakeholders work to:

- Support schools to implement evidence-based strategies to foster motivation and engagement among students and a sense of school belonging.
- Support schools to foster self-efficacy and peer relationships among students, as outlined in recommendations in Valued, Loved and Safe.
- Support schools to explore ways they can incorporate greater flexibility in the curriculum and structure of the school day to better meet the needs and interests of young people in this age-group
- Resource schools with staff to assist young people to navigate the transition to secondary school and monitor and respond to their wellbeing needs, as outlined in recommendations under Healthy.
- Support and resource schools to tackle bullying and foster an inclusive school environment, as outlined in recommendations under Valued, Loved and Safe.



Participation in the community

Young people in the middle years want to be active, socialising outdoors and in nature, and they want more spaces to do this in.

A theme occurring among children in the middle years in several consultations across state and territories, and urban and regional areas, was increasing free, outdoor spaces in the community for children and young people's recreation and activities (Barnardos Australia, 2021; Connolly, 2022b; Maroondah City Council, 2019; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021; Rawsthorne, 2019; Saunders et al., 2018; Tasmanian Government, 2021). Children in Saunders et. al's study (2018) identified public green spaces in their local neighbourhood as important to their daily lives, particularly if they didn't have a backyard at home.

Proximity was also important, and a five to 10-minute walk was considered reasonable for these young people. Children in the Queensland consultation reported their appreciation for community centres, skate parks and shopping centres and requested further investment in creating more parks, sporting facilities, pools and water-parks (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Similar requests were also made by children in the Katherine region (The Smith Family, 2019).

Young people in the middle years are active participants in structured activities and sports outside of school.

Young people in the middle years report having opportunities to play, be active and creative are extremely important (Connolly, 2022b; The Smith Family, 2019). South Australian children in the middle years report wanting to be in communities where everyone has access to a variety of fun, affordable and safe places to go with interesting things to do (Connolly, 2022b). Consultation with 8 to 12-year-olds in regional NSW indicated a majority are involved in out-of-school activities (Barnardos Australia, 2021). However, these consultations also showed a real need for more activities and programs, and spaces like community centres, to be available for this cohort.

The Western Australian Speaking Out Survey (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021) found that over 42 per cent of children in Years 4 to 6 regularly played or practised a sport every day. Young people in this age-range identified sports as a way to meet new people, make friends, alleviate boredom, provide distractions from school and home, and benefit mental health and wellbeing (Saunders et al., 2018). They also spoke about the need to have choice and variety of activities on offer.

There are differences between genders in the nature and rate of participation.

Differences, however, were observed between genders. Females in the middle years reported decreasing their time spent daily practising or playing sport between Years 4 to 9, whereas males increased between these years (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Participation in unstructured outdoors activities saw a similar difference in genders and decline over age. In Years 4 to 6, 40 per cent of girls and 47.9 per cent of boys reported being active outdoors almost every day, compared with 32.7 per cent of girls and 48.2 per cent of males in Years 7 to 9. There was a large increase for girls stating they participate in outdoor activities less than once a week, hardly or never, from 18.9 per cent between Years 4 to 6 to 27.6 per cent in Years 7 to 9. There was a slight decrease for boys in the same age range.

[I am good at] roller-skating. I love doing spins and jumps the most and it is always fun learning a new skill in class"

11-year-old, female, Eastern Adelaide, SA (Connolly, 2022b)

Differences were observed between gender regarding middle years children's preferences for activity participation. Boys generally discussed more organised team sports including soccer and football, and girls discussed more organised individual sports such as tennis, swimming, dancing, music, and languages (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018; Saunders et. al 2018).

Costs and inclusiveness can be barriers.

Cost was cited as a determining factor for accessing organised sports and lessons, and many children from low socio-economic backgrounds discussed seeking cheaper options, or not participating at all (Saunders et al., 2018). Accessibility of extracurricular activities was also mentioned in the *Speaking Out Survey* (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021), with students claiming they had no fun things to do in their community due to relying on adults for transport and feeling they had little agency over their lives. Children in out-of-home care said their lives would be better if they had more access to participating in extracurricular activities and exercise (Connolly, 2023a).

Children living with a disability highlighted that participating in online gaming increased their sense of belonging, inclusion, and ability to make friends. Children living with a disability also discussed how much they enjoyed sport and recreational activities outside of the school community, particularly when these activities are designed for children living with disabilities and to meet their needs, from music and football programs, to Minecraft and Lego groups (Connolly, 2022a).

The middle years may be a turning point in extracurricular activity participation.

The Western Australia Speaking Out Survey demonstrated lower participation rates for early high school students taking part in music, dancing or language lessons compared with primary school students (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). A place-based consultation in the Shellharbour (NSW) region showed similar lower levels of extra-curricular activity participation among 8 to 12-year-olds compared with 13 to 18-year-olds (Barnardos Australia, 2021).

Activities in the home and with family

Spending time with family and friends is a priority for young people in the middle years.

Spending time with family and friends was consistently rated as a high priority in various consultations with children in the middle years. Two thirds of children in the Western Australian Speaking Out Survey reported they spend time with their family every day, and the same proportion spends times with friends at least once a week (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Saunders et. al (2018) found the frequency with which children spent time with their family was often dependent on household income.

Children in this study defined spending time with family by doing events requiring money such as eating out, day-trips and holidays. In this study, eating out at a local restaurant for a special occasion was the most commonly mentioned way children described spending time with their families (Saunders et al., 2018). Holidays were particularly special family bonding times mentioned by students and described as a 'need' rather than a 'want'. Children in this study described family holidays providing respite from the stresses of everyday life and an opportunity to spend quality time together, especially when visiting extended family that lived in a different city or state.

How young people in the middle years spend their time changes as they get older.

Differences in how children in the middle years spend their unstructured time at home, outside of school and online emerge between the last two years of primary school and the first two years of high school, according to the Speaking Out Survey (2021). A higher proportion of students in Years 4 to 6 report spending time hanging out with family every day or almost every day than students in Year 7 to 9 (71.9 per cent compared to 64.9 per cent; Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Similar numbers of children in Years 4 to 9 report spending time with friends every day or almost every day, at about 30 per cent. However, one in five children reported hardly ever or never spending time hanging out with friends outside of school, with similar percentages between year groups.

More older children reported helping with housework every day or almost every day (59 per cent) than younger children in Years 4 to 6 (44.7 per cent). Significantly fewer younger children report using the internet on a smart phone or computer every day – 51 per cent for Years 4 to 6 and 87.9 per cent for Years 7 to 9. Gender differences were observed regarding electronic gaming, with 40 per cent of girls in Year 4 to 9 playing games every day or almost every day compared with 56.9 per cent of boys of the same age. Similar numbers of children watch television every day at around 50 per cent.

However, there is a drastic difference in how often children in the middle years read books between primary school and high school. More than half of boys and girls report reading a book every day or almost every day in Years 4 to 6, and this reduces to 27 per cent in Years 7 to 9, with a large increase in children in Years 7 to 9 stating they read less than one a week, hardly or never (approximately 15 per cent to 44 per cent) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

“[I am good at] soccer, video games like Nintendo, Mario, Rocket League/ fun fact I have some of the most expensive items in Rocket League”

10-year-old, male, Northern Adelaide, SA (Connolly, 2022b)

This significant decrease in reading of books may correlate with the drastic increase of time spent on the internet by children in Years 4 to 9. The *Speaking Out Survey* reveals some concerning trends of online behaviour among children in the middle years, particularly as they get older. Older children were more likely to report feeling 'bothered' when they are not able to use the internet (26.9 per cent in Years 4 to 6 compared with 35.3 per cent in Years 7 to 9). Nearly 18 per cent of students in Years 4 to 6 report communicating online with someone they have not met face to face at least once a week compared with almost 38 per cent of students in Years 7 to 9 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

However, in the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People's report on things that matter 8 to 12-year-olds, children in the middle years clearly stated adults should not blame everything on phones and devices (Connolly, 2022b). They cited generational differences, that their generation use devices as a method of communication, and many people can have a successful life 'behind a screen'. They also noted perceived hypocrisies, such as adults being on devices and screens just as much as their children. Middle-years children in this report had a nuanced understanding of the beneficial and negative opportunities technology provides.

Many children wanted adults to understand how beneficial online activities and online friendships were to their lives, but at the same time wanted the adults in their lives to spend more time with them and less time on social media. The most common generational misunderstanding and source of tension around technology cited by children in this report was the fact that live online games cannot be paused.



Feeling heard and opportunities to have a say

Young people in the middle years don't feel heard.

"I feel included, when people listen to what I have to say"

Female, 11, SA (Connolly, 2022a)

"Children are strong people and they deserve to be heard"

10-year-old (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019)

Children in the middle years felt they are not listened to, underestimated and overlooked as having valuable opinions due to their age (Connolly, 2022b). They indicate a strong wish to be heard when decisions are made that affect them, not just in the home, but by governments and politicians.

"We may be small but we have big ideas and ways to make them work"

Female, 12, Yorke and Mid North, SA (Connolly, 2022b)

"[I want grown-ups to know] that kids have a voice about things and we will try our hardest to show & express the voice we have that we get told to hide"

Female, 13, Murray and Mallee, SA (Connolly, 2022b)

As outlined in the *Children's Rights Report 2019*, 86 per cent of over 22,000 children (composed largely of 9 to 12-year-olds) ranked 'I can have a say about things that are important to me' as the least true of the rights experienced by children in Australia. Only 37 per cent of children said they could participate in decisions within the home, and 35 per cent said they could at school (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019).

Young people in the middle years have told us what is important to them and what they want adults to know.

When the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People asked 8 to 12-year-olds what they believe adults should know, their responses centred around the following themes (Connolly, 2022b):

- Grown-ups should take an interest to learn about what children care about, their feelings and aspirations
- Grown-ups should appreciate that children have ideas and rights and can be trusted and taken seriously
- Children appreciate what grown-ups do for them; however, grown-ups need to look after the environment, children, and each other better
- Children need help sometimes but also need independence and privacy
- Grown-ups should learn more about what happens to kids at school and what it's like to be a child in the 21st century
- Grown-ups should know how important it is to play and spend time with children
- Understand how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact children's lives.

The Queensland Commissioner also found that younger children aged 5 to 12 were more likely express hopes and concerns for others in the community, for example, significant people in their lives, society in general, wildlife and the environment. Half of all postcards received by the Queensland Commissioner from 8 to 12-year-olds described hopes for others, compared with 35 per cent of 13 to 18-year-olds (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

This altruistic vision was also the finding of the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People's consultation with 8 to 12-year-olds who, as noted elsewhere in other sections of this report, stressed they believed it was important to help the environment and animals, to show more kindness, respect, equality for people from diverse backgrounds, and to get rid of poverty and homelessness (Connolly, 2022b).



Consultation with government

Young people in the middle years want governments to listen to them.

Children in the middle years want to be active citizens and have their opinions listened to and respected by people in power, including the government. In the Keeping Kids Safe and Well survey (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021), 84 per cent of 5 to 12-year-olds said it was important that government listens to what they have to say. When asked the best way for children to share their views, 5 to 12-year-olds said:

- a discussion in class (40 per cent)
- a survey (34 per cent)
- talking on the phone (22 per cent).

"I think the government should put aside their own personal beliefs and biases and focus on what children and young people are saying we need them to do. I think it's very important for them to understand that we know our struggles best and often know what works for us and what doesn't"

Child, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Out of Home Care

A substantial proportion of young people in out-of-home care, particularly children aged 8 to 9, do not feel heard in the decisions made about them.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's survey of children in out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019) demonstrated that 67 per cent of 10 to 14-year-olds feel they can usually have a say in decisions that affect them, and they feel listened to. This is less than 15–17-year-olds (73 per cent) but more than 8 to 9-year-olds (53 per cent).

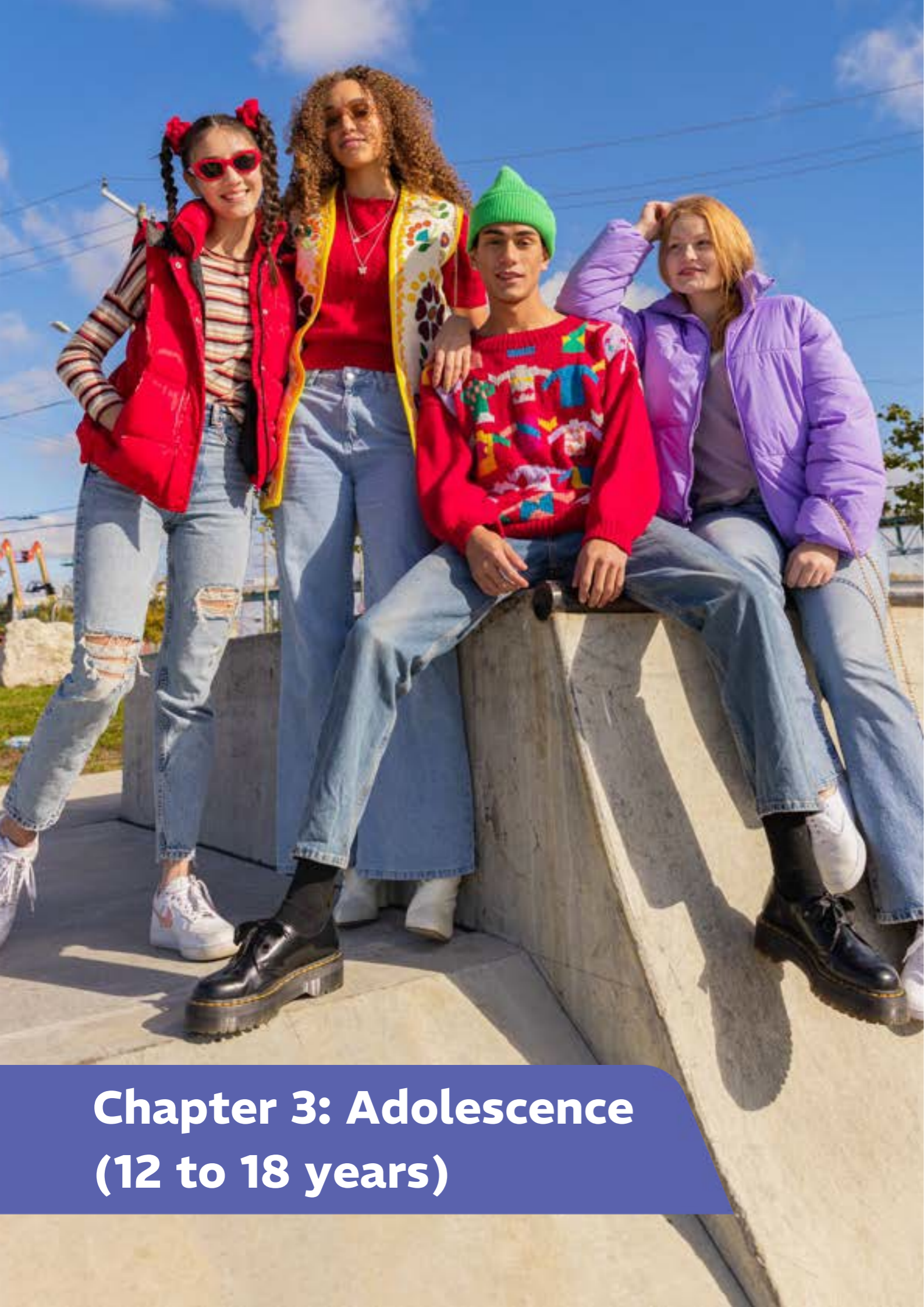
Recommendations for the Middle Years: Participating

Young people in the middle years have shown they enjoy participating in activities outside of school with friends and peers and using outside spaces. However, they have spoken about how they would like more opportunities and options for programs that cater to their interests and age-groups. They have indicated they don't feel heard by the adults in their lives and those in positions of authority, and they don't have input into the decisions made about their lives. This is a particular issue for young people in out-of-home care in this age-group. This age-group has also consistently spoken about their concern for the environment and demonstrated a frustration that their concerns are not being taken seriously by governments.

We recommend stakeholders work to:

- establish a mechanism for young people in the middle years to have input into policy and services that affect them, supported by the establishment of:
 - a federal minister for children that would encompass the needs of this age-group
 - a coordinated approach to policy, funding, and resourcing of services for this age-group across government levels, with a focus on:
 1. structured extracurricular activities and financial support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate
 2. training for people working with this age-group around their specific developmental needs
 3. urban planning for public spaces that can be used by this age-group to socialise and spend time with peers and family
 4. Climate and environmental policy.





Chapter 3: Adolescence (12 to 18 years)

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of extensive psychological, biological and social change (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2019). The extent of brain development and remodelling in adolescence is said to be second only to that which occurs during the early years (Backes & Bonnie, 2019). Risk-taking behaviour increases and relationships with caregivers can become strained. Such behaviour is indeed driven by expected brain changes that help the child to distinguish themselves as an individual and as an adult within their communities. In addition to the extensive physical and cognitive changes, adolescence is a time of immense social change, including transitions into and out of high school, their first experience of employment, the development of romantic and sexual interests and changing relationships with friends and caregivers. Adolescence is also the most common time for onset of mental health symptoms.

The dynamic changes in structure, function, and connectivity of brain circuitry mean that adolescents are highly sensitive to experiences and environmental influences, including adverse experience such as exposure to alcohol or maltreatment as well as positive influences and supports (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2019; Thomson, De Bortoli, Underwood, & Schmid, 2019)(Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2019) Body). Positive experiences at home, school and in the community can support adolescents transition successfully into adulthood (Fox et al., 2015). Consequently, adolescence has been referred to as a 'second window of opportunity'.

Adolescence is a highly dynamic developmental phase from a physical, social, emotional, and cognitive perspective. Ensuring adolescents have what they need to thrive in this time can support healthy transition into young adulthood.



The Environment

Climate change and the environment is the top national priority for young people. Concern about the environment and climate anxiety are a source of stress and are affecting their mental health. There appears to be limited engagement with young people about how they can be empowered to address their climate concerns and the impact this is having on their wellbeing.

The environment was nominated as the top issue of national concern among adolescents aged 15 to 19.

The environment was the top issue of national concern identified by young people aged 15 to 19 in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (2022). Open-ended responses were sought from more than 18,000 young people about the “three most important issues in Australia today”, of whom 51 per cent nominated the environment (Leung, Brennan, Freeburn, Waugh, & Christie, 2022). This has increased significantly from preceding years, with 38 and 30 per cent nominating it as a top issue of national concern in 2021 and 2020 respectively (Leung et al., 2022).

Concerns about climate change are linked with poorer mental health.

Further, an analysis of Mission Australia survey data found young people who expressed climate change concerns were more likely to have higher psychological distress, poorer mental health, lower personal wellbeing, and a more negative future outlook (Gao, 2023).

“The largest personal challenge I’ve experienced over the past year is probably dealing with anxiety around climate change. I’ve found that general responses to anxiety, such as CBT [cognitive behaviour therapy] or distraction aren’t helpful for large, borderline world-ending events, and that instead I need to find my own ways of dealing with climate anxiety”
Mission Australia Youth Survey respondent, (Gao, 2023)

“Being worried that there won’t be a future for us due to climate change and the over-exhaustion of the planet’s resources”
Gender-diverse participant, 18, QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

“Being a young person today means you have no choice but to be very aware and conscious of what we consume, how we consume and how we act as a collective”
Aboriginal female, 17, QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

“If the government/s (Australian but also internationally) and corporations took stronger action against climate change, I think I’d be less worried”
Female, 15, NSW (Leung et al., 2022)

However, when asked about issues of personal concern (as compared to national challenges) personal concerns about stress, mental health and education consistently trumped those national challenges.

In the same Mission Australia Youth Survey, participants were provided with a list of potential challenges and asked to rank their level of concern about each (Leung et al., 2022). Climate change was the fifth-most common issue of personal concern, of which a quarter (25.5 per cent) of participants responded that they were ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned (Leung et al., 2022). Concerns about climate change were outstripped by concerns about by ‘coping with stress’ (44 per cent ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned), ‘school or study problems’ (40.5 per cent ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned), ‘Mental health’ (38.5 per cent ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned), and ‘Body image’ (34.5 per cent ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned).

This finding is consistently across other studies. Although not directly comparable due to different demographic characteristics, data from adolescents in Queensland and Western Australia show sources of stress and personal challenges arising from mental health and education rank above climate change. For example, in a survey of 13 to 18-year-olds in Queensland, the environment ranked as the third-most important issue for people their age (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

The environment was nominated by 7 per cent of respondents, following mental health (27 per cent) and education (8 per cent) (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Similarly, in a survey of young people in Western Australia in Years 9 to 12, climate change came in at 10th, nominated by 9.1 per cent of participants (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). This came in below school or study problems (first at 88.7 per cent), mental health (second at 49.3 per cent), and themes relating to relationships/conflict, body image and personal safety (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).



Some information implied a desire by young people for older adults and those in power to take shared responsibility for the environment.

While the environment was listed as the top issue of national concern among young people, is ranked as the fifth highest issue of personal concern (Leung et al., 2022). This disparity suggests young people consider the environment as a societal issue requiring a societal response, much like the economy, crime, housing, and politics.

The environment was mentioned in a survey of Queensland adolescents in response to questions around what adults need to “take more seriously” (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

And lastly, one young person made explicit reference to the need for involvement of others:

“Our planet’s climate, although it’s not all ours to do, the older generations helped create the problem, let’s all help fix it”

Male, 18, QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

However, the actions and responses desired by young people in relation to environment and climate action can only remain speculation, as none of the reports referenced above explored young people’s ideas on how they could be supported or what needs to be done.

Taken together, these findings imply while adolescents care about the environment and would like to see national action to protect it, intense levels of competing personal stressors (especially educational or stress and mental health concerns) are taking precedence. Further, the background stress of climate anxiety may be exacerbating the stress and mental health issues being experienced by young people. There also appears to be limited engagement with adolescents by researchers and policy-makers on how they can participate in addressing climate concerns, despite the evidence that participation by young people in issues that affect them is empowering, beneficial to them and outcomes, and consistent with their basic human rights under (United Nations, 1989).

We therefore recommend stakeholders take immediate action to address the concerning levels of stress and mental health concerns experienced by adolescents by partnering with young people to understand what is needed to reduce stress and support their mental health during this critical developmental period. (This is explored in more detail throughout the report).

We also echo the joint recommendations of Orygen and Mission Australia to address climate anxiety by (Gao, 2023):

1. partnering with young people to better understand and address the mental health concerns associated with climate change
2. including climate change in future government youth and mental health strategies
3. providing training to professionals working with young people to identify and respond to climate-related stress and anxiety.

Relationships and belonging

Many young people value their friendships highly as a source of support. However, loneliness is common.

Young people value relationships with their friends highly. When surveyed about who they go to for help with important issues, friends (80.2 per cent) were the most frequently cited source, ranking higher than parents (71.3 per cent) (Leung et al., 2022).

Adolescence can be a challenging time for young people with regards to their friends and social settings. Relationships were ranked as the third-biggest issue of personal concern in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (Leung et al., 2022). Loneliness is common – almost one in four young people aged 15 to 19 reported feeling lonely all or most of the time, with a further one in five feeling lonely a little or some of the time (Leung et al., 2022). One in five students in Years 10 to 12 feels they do not have enough friends (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Almost a third of young people found ‘fitting in and socialising with everyone’ hard to do (Leung et al., 2022). This feeling was even higher for gender-diverse young people, with more than half (59.2 per cent) reporting it is hard to ‘fit in and socialise’ (Leung et al., 2022).

“It is easy to feel lonely and low. Every day you feel down or upset and you don’t know why. You feel alone and as if you will never find true happiness again. The added pressure of school plays a huge impact on this”

Female, 16, QLD (Leung et al., 2022)

“The biggest personal challenge I have faced in the past year would probably be the maintaining of friendships, as I feel sometimes I try too hard to fit in and do things I thought others would find funny, laugh at the wrong things etc, constantly losing friendships because I am trying too hard to be somebody I am not.”

Male, 15, QLD (Leung et al., 2022)

COVID-19 may have compounded feelings of loneliness.

This disconnection from friends may have been compounded by the effects of COVID-19 and social distancing:

“[My biggest personal challenge was] dealing with COVID as I felt disconnected from friends and lost a lot of motivation ...This has also made it hard to connect with friends again as I grew used to being isolated”

Female, 16, NSW (Leung et al., 2022)

“I struggled a fair amount academically, and my depression was triggered a lot. However, the way it has mostly affected me is I can’t see my friends and family. I have felt very isolated and alone over the past year.”

Gender-diverse, 16, NSW (Leung et al., 2022)

Young people identified creating diverse social and recreational networks and investing more in their relationships as ways to address their relationship challenges.

Young people identified several ways they could address their relationship challenges. These included increasing the diversity of their social and recreational networks, making a dedicated effort to 'open up' more freely to family and friends, and nurturing deeper friendships (Leung et al., 2022).

"[I] try and work things out with my family and friends by having a long conversation with them about how I feel"

Female, 15, QLD (Leung et al., 2022)

"[I] give more emphasis on creating meaningful relationships in youth through sport, church, school, art, work etc"

Female, 17, NSW (Leung et al., 2022)

"More external support such as groups outside of school."

Gender-diverse, 16, QLD (Leung et al., 2022)

"I think being confident enough to reach out to people about how I was feeling instead of keeping it to myself which would cause me to lose control of my emotions."

Female, 16, NSW (Leung et al., 2022)

Turning to formal and informal supports is challenging for many young people.

Again, however, reaching out for support was a challenge for young people. Around a third (31.2 per cent) found it hard to 'turn to friends and family if you need help' and one in four (27.7 per cent) found it hard to 'turn to services/organisations' (Leung et al., 2022).

One in 10 high school students in WA felt they could not talk to their parents about their problems (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Where to next?

Friends and relationships are an important source of support during adolescence. While young people recognise the value of connections, reaching out and fostering these social supports can be a challenge, especially for young people who are gender-diverse. In terms of policy implications, there is an opportunity to create dialogue and improve understanding of why young people are finding it challenging to reach out and connect with their peers, and what supports are needed to help facilitate this.

Safety at home

While most young people feel safe and supported at home, family conflict is a common concern.

Most (97.2 per cent) young people aged 15 to 19 live with their parents or guardian (Leung et al., 2022). Nine in 10 do not feel worried about having a safe place to stay and seven in 10 listed parents as people they would go to for help with important issues (Leung et al., 2022). Three in four respondents reported their family got along 'extremely/very good' or 'good' (73.9 per cent) (Leung et al., 2022).

However, relationship challenges were the third-top issue of personal concern among people aged 15 to 19, reported by one in five respondents (Leung et al., 2022). Of those, two in three reported these challenges related to their family (Leung et al., 2022). About half of students in Years 7 to 12 worry that someone in their family will be fighting (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). While most respondents felt their family got along well, about quarter responded 'fair' (17.3 per cent) or 'poor' (8.8 per cent) (Leung et al., 2022).

The content below contains quotes that some readers may find distressing.

Concerns about family violence are common among adolescents, with gender-diverse young people experiencing concerns about family violence much more commonly than their peers.

At the most concerning end of the spectrum, 8 per cent of young people were 'extremely' or 'very' concerned about domestic/family violence (Leung et al., 2022). Among Year 7 to 12 students, 3 per cent never or rarely feel safe at home (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Family violence and conflict are more commonly reported among gender-diverse young people. Extreme concerns about domestic/family violence (15.3 per cent) and family conflict (33 per cent) were almost double for gender-diverse respondents (Leung et al., 2022). One young person pointed out that the rejection of gender-diverse young people by their families is not acknowledged or accounted for as a form of abuse:

"If an LGBTIQ+ person is trying to escape somewhere abusive, there's often nowhere to go. No short-term housing, no long-term housing. Bigoted families aren't just going to turn around and change their ideas ... People don't see this as harm to a child, they'd still think your parents would be willing and able to care for you. But conversion therapy ... It's child abuse"

Transgender advocate, WA

(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Family violence can have far-reaching implications for young people in terms of their mental health, education and access to material needs including accommodation and food.

“I think it’s important to recognise, as well, that we weren’t all just feeling like: ‘I don’t want to go to school.’ I was abused by my stepfather and I’m the oldest of seven kids and I got to a point where I felt I had to move out or he was going to kill me. So, I needed to either pay rent, get food and eat, or stay in school. So, it’s not like we wanted to drop out because we didn’t care. We did care”
Student in alternative education program (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Alcohol and drug use contribute to experiences of family violence for some young people.

“At home, people are drunk all the time. Too much argument, too much fighting, I get hit sometimes”
Aboriginal high school student, NT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“Parents are probably in a different state of mind where they don’t care as much as they would if they were sobered up, they would probably behave in a better way. And kids are probably scared to go home because maybe after a bit of alcohol or a hit of whatever drugs the parents can find, it gets them a little angry or abusive, and the kids don’t want to go home”
High school student, TAS (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Young people with lived experience share their views on family violence:

“[Safety is] locks on the door. That no one is scared of other people in the house”
High school student, QLD (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“trapped ... parents don’t make you feel protected”
High school student, Karratha, WA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“Violence has just been a part of my life since I was born. I’m used to it. My first instinct is just to get my younger brothers out of the house, the main thing is to keep them safe”
High school student, TAS (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“When it’s about protecting children, no one follows through as seriously as they would when it’s about protecting adults. For it to be as serious as it is for adults – that’s what would provide more safety for us”
High school student, SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Community Safety

While most young people feel safe in their communities, gender-diverse young people, young people with a mental health condition and females tended to have lower perceptions and experiences of safety.

More than half (60 per cent) of young people aged 13 to 18 surveyed in Queensland reported they feel safe in their community (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Gender differences were apparent, with males more likely to report feel safe in their communities (70 per cent) compared with females (60 per cent) and gender-diverse young people (42 per cent). Similar findings were seen in Western Australian high school students, with female students in Years 7 to 12 less likely to report feeling safe all of the time (21.3 per cent compared with 36.9 per cent of males)(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). No data was available for gender-diverse students in this survey. Young people with a mental health condition also tended to report lower perceptions of safety.

“I’m a girl and I’m teenage, so I guess it’s kind of expected now for me to feel a little unsafe when I’m out. I guess people have the power to make me feel somewhat unsafe” Female, 14, Western Australia
(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Young people expressed a desire for communities to be made to feel safer:

“I’d work on making it a safer community so I can feel safe to go on runs early in the morning or late in the afternoon. I find that there are many creepy people [...] in the area and many of my friends and I constantly talk about feeling unsafe in the city, the streets, neighbourhoods, parks, shops, stores and transport stations.”
15-year-old, Western Australia
(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

“Just to let you know: many young girls in this area clutch keys in case something happens, hold deodorant to spray in a predator’s eyes. Fix this. We want to be safe and not taught that we have to be careful”
15-year-old, Western Australia
(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Of secondary school students surveyed in WA, almost half (44 per cent) of those in Years 9 to 12 had been physically harmed by someone on purpose, with a third (33 per cent) of these being harmed on purpose by an adult (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Females were twice as likely to report being harmed by an adult than males and were more likely than males to be harmed at home (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Young people with experience of homelessness

More than one in 20 Australians aged 15 to 19 years has experienced homelessness.

A significant proportion of young people have experienced challenges around safe accommodation. One in eight young people had at some point spent time away from home because they felt they couldn't go back, and one in 20 had experienced homelessness (no fixed address, or living in transitional accommodation) (Leung et al., 2022).

Young people in adolescence experiencing homelessness often fall into a service gap, where 12 to 15-year-olds are too old to secure suitable foster-care placement, and specialty accommodation providers frequently will not cater to people under 16 (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

Young people with lived experiences of homelessness share their experiences:

"[My biggest challenge was] probably getting kicked out of home and being homeless at the age of 17, trying to find support and figuring out how to get my life back on track with no job and only a bag of clothes"

Female, 18, WA (Leung et al., 2022)

"I got kicked out and stuff, and my dad left me with nothing, no money, no nothing. I didn't know where I was going to live. And the train station was like, an hour walk from my house, and there was no bus port or nothing. I just had the pair of clothes I had on that day. So, I was living with my friends for a few months. What's the point of having an accommodation service if some of it is overfilled? They say: 'Oh, call back and see if there's room.' But what if there's no room? ... Maybe you should have a system that everyone can turn to. If you don't have a place to live at, what's the point of living?"

17-year-old, SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"How the hell are you supposed to get somewhere if you don't have anything or anywhere to go? I feel trapped"

13 year-old, Western Australia

(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020)

Young people in contact with the child-protection system

The content below contains quotes that some readers may find distressing.

The Children's Report, published by the Australian Child Rights Taskforce, aimed to gather the voices of children and young people aged 4 to 24 at high risk of having their rights breached (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018). This includes young people with lived experience of abuse and neglect, homelessness, the child-protection and/or juvenile justice system and those with incarcerated parents (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018). Of these consultations, some powerful messages emerged relating to the child-protection system and out-of-home care.

Many young people feel their needs are not being met by the current child-protection system.

Some young people commented on feeling ignored by the child-protection system. As one young advocate with lived out-of-home care experience stated:

"[the government] turns a blind eye. They don't want to know what goes on. They do know, but they don't want to know"

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

A recurring theme was the lack of understanding of young people's needs and the inability for the child-protection system to meet these needs. For example, young people's desire to be placed with their siblings was not met.

"... people sitting at their desks making decisions about our lives and they have never once, I'm assuming, set foot inside a residential care home or a foster care house, spent a week there every day for eight hours. Live it. I dare you"

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"They don't even bother looking at whether it's a good fit – is this actually going to work? They just turn around and say – this place can take this child, here you go"

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"I'm one of nine. Nine. And I couldn't be with even one of my siblings"

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)



Young people describe significant harms associated with out-of-home-care placements that are unstable or unsafe.

Some young people commented on the challenges of unstable placements or living in a residential care facility with rotating shift workers:

“I’ve been an adult since I was nine. I didn’t have the option of being a kid’

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“I look at my little sister in residential care, and it breaks my heart. I would still parent her, even though we had carers. And they were like: ‘No, you can’t keep doing this, you’re not having your own childhood.’ But you’re not giving her a childhood by chucking her in with carers that rotate, eight-hour shifts, on and off”

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“Personally, I was put in four different homes before I even found one, so that’s going to mess with a kid’s head, you know?”

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Some pointed to the lack of safety of young people while in placement, one young person indicating they would have been better off staying with their parents despite their hardships:

“I’m traumatised from residential care. I would have been better living with my heroin addict mum, you know what I mean? Residential care was nothing to me. There are other traumatised kids with you, with workers that abuse you in care. No, I want none of that. You know the paedophile bloke here [name removed]? He looked me in the eye and told me I was too old to rape. So, that’s residential care for you”

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Aboriginal young people with lived experience of out-of-home care highlight the impact of historical trauma and emphasise the importance for Aboriginal leadership, working in partnership, and culturally appropriate care.

Young Aboriginal people with experience of out-of-home care emphasised the importance of recognising the impact of historical trauma and pointed to Aboriginal leadership and culturally appropriate care as a way forward:

“What needs to be taken into account is the mistrust relationship between government and Aboriginal people. So, they need to get Aboriginal leaders within their communities to work in partnership to build trust within these organisations ... It’s not about pointing the fingers and saying you guys are doing this and doing that. We need to work in partnership, together, on the same level ... And children is everybody’s responsibility. So, to have kids unsafe just isn’t okay. One child unsafe is too many”

Young Aboriginal advocate for children living in out-of-home care, NSW
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“It just comes down to invasion, it really does. Like, Australia hasn’t acknowledged its history. And until that happens, people are still going to be living in intergenerational trauma. Like, it’s in our DNA ... Our children are still getting taken at a higher rate, just like back in the day. That in itself is actually ridiculous. It’s actually at a higher rate now. The stuff we’re talking about has been going on for far too long, you know what I mean?”

Young Aboriginal advocate with lived experience of out-of-home care, NSW
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“It doesn’t just come out of a textbook. They need to be aware of what culture is to us ... They’re not taking into account our cultural care, they’re looking at it from a Western society lens that is just completely not for our people. We aren’t just one person mothering a child. It takes a community to raise a child.

Our everyone is involved”

Young Aboriginal advocate with lived experience of out-of-home care, NSW
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

One Aboriginal young person pointed out the potentially devastating impact of permanent-care orders if Aboriginal children were placed inappropriately:

“Permanency changes are going to rip away the essence of a child’s identity and a sense of who they are, a sense of community and family, if they’re getting placed with carers outside of community or non-Indigenous carers or people that don’t hold a respect for their culture and who they are as a person. There’s going to be no accountability to meet those cultural needs. That whole essence of understanding who you are as a person is just going to disappear”

Young Aboriginal advocate with lived experience of out-of-home care, NSW
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Young people in contact with the youth justice system

The content below contains quotes from people with lived experience. Some readers may find this content distressing.

People who allegedly commit a crime when aged 10 to 17 may be dealt with under the youth justice system. Each state and territory in Australia has its own youth justice legislation, policies, and practices, but the general processes by which young people are charged, and the types of legal orders available to the courts, are similar. On an average day in 2021–22, 4,536 people aged 10 and over were under youth justice supervision, either in the community or in detention (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). First Nations young people were about 19 times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be under supervision.

The Australian Child Rights Taskforce asserts among many practical failures to appropriately consider the best interests of Australia's children, one of these is a punitive approach to youth justice that fails to consider detention as a last resort, limits support for rehabilitation or the use of diversionary strategies, and permits incidences of cruel and inhuman treatment in youth detention facilities (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

Young people with experience with the youth justice system highlighted the distinction between their behaviour, their context, and who they are as people.

"People think that I am bad. I am not bad. I did wrong, but I am not bad"

Aboriginal child detained in Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, NT
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"People make bad choices, and they learn from their mistakes. Some people do bad things because they've been through a hard time.

Everyone has issues – no one doesn't"

Aboriginal child detained in Banksia Hill Detention Centre, WA
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"I grew up with a lot of alcohol and family violence ... I was running from home, smoking weed at a young age. Up to no good basically. Just trying to get away from the life I was living ... I wanted to feel wanted and accepted and fit in with people"

Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

"I went in and out of primary school. Three different schools which was hard. Going in and out of one to another. Didn't have interest in school, I didn't do much school. I was always getting bullied. I didn't get much education.

[I needed] more support at school [like] teachers or tutors or I don't know. To keep me off the streets and away from bad crowds"

Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

Young people highlighted their need for support in exiting the youth justice system.

"I hate it in here. I am not going to come back.

I am not, but I need people to help me"

Aboriginal child detained in Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, NT
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"I need more support before ending up in custody. Don't wait till I'm on my last leg"

Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

Young people drew attention to the overlapping systemic failings between the child protection and juvenile justice system:

"When an out-of-home care kid goes into juvenile justice, and they're looking at release, they won't release them unless they've got a placement to go to. But because they're teenagers and they're troubled, there's no one that wants them. So, what happens? They're just stuck there"

Young Aboriginal advocate, lived experience of out-of-home care, NSW
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Aboriginal young people share their experiences of youth justice

In a powerful piece by the Koorie Youth Council, Ngaga-Di (Hear Me): Young Voices Creating Change for Justice, stories from Aboriginal young people were collected around Victoria (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018).

Over six months, Koorie Youth Council engaged with four community sites (including rural, regional, and metro) and two youth justice custodial centres to meet 42 children and young people currently or previously under youth justice supervision. Children were invited to tell their stories to help enable a "state where Aboriginal children can thrive in their culture and communities." (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018).

"This place [youth justice centre] just makes me want to hurt myself. I've got cuts all up my arms. I had to go to hospital once for self-harm"

Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

"[On isolation] get fed through a slot. Shit. It's fucked. It's beyond anything. The food comes out stale and hard. It's not somewhere you want to be.

It's fucked. It's the worst experience of my life. It's definitely not a way to live. It has a massive impact on you. It's weird"

Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

"If they [police] talked to me, they would have gotten [sic] more through to me than throwing me around and spraying me and doing all kinds of things. They would have gotten through talking to me ... I got thrown around and

bashed up a bit for resisting. I was always pretty out of it until the station and then I would come to. And I would be locked up"

Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

The way forward for First Nations young people in contact with the justice system requires love, belonging, a positive role model, strong connections to culture and country, and community support.

Ngaga-dji (the report's title, Hear Me) sets out a vision for a Victoria that enables Aboriginal children to thrive and the path to making it happen. Through yarning justice and gathering stories across Victoria, children and young people clearly expressed what is needed: love, belonging and someone to look up to. These stories "show us that when governments create systems that truly support the self-determination of our communities, children and their families can live free from the justice system" (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018).

"Knowing it's alright to talk to someone ... I can go back to [cultural service] and get vulnerable and tell them how I'm feeling and potentially it saves my life. Coming from backgrounds where it's not safe to talk about your feelings. It looks weak. It's not what men do ... just going through the community men, the elders, and matching them with the positive role and not being so destructive. My family want to talk to me today where they didn't before"
Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

"It feels good to be heard in Koori Court[1]. They're not just listening to my lawyer, but to me, and that's the way it should be"
Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

"With Koorie Youth Justice I have cultural support. I feel like I'm part of a community, like someone wants me and I am someone. I feel respected, and people are trustworthy. There's support, and I have someone to talk to even if there's not a crisis. First time I don't feel like a piece of shit"
Participant, VIC (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)

A consultation with people aged 8 to 25 years with or at risk of contact with the young justice system identified connection to culture and country and community supports as the most important things to keep them strong (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2022).

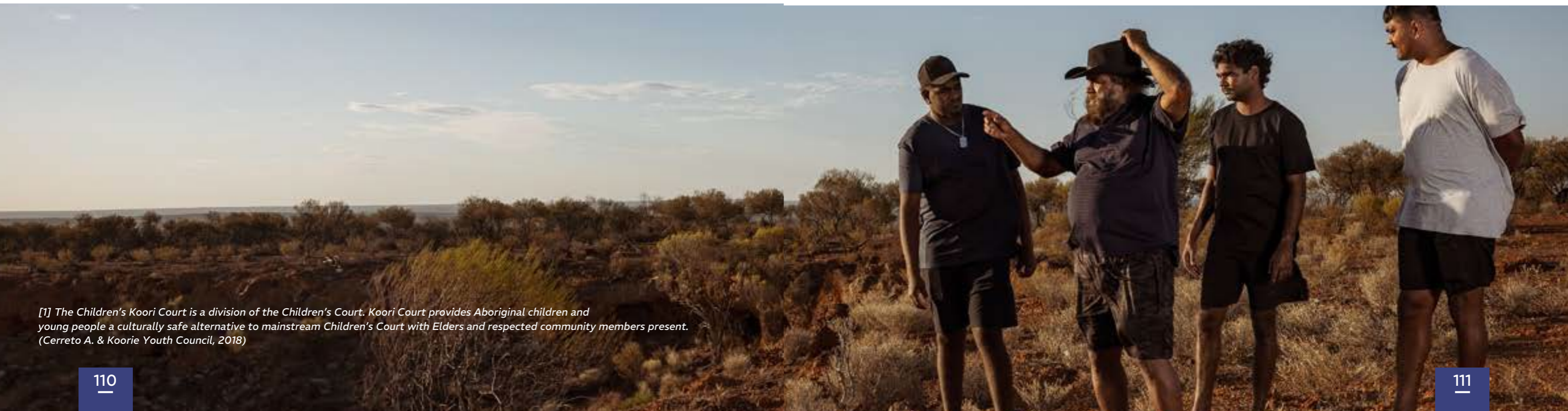
One young participant suggested nighttime community supports to help prevent crime:

"... you know what would really be good for the young youths, like, to stop them from getting into like ... is something for night time, 'cause when it comes to day time, we've got everything, we've got YETI, we've got all the support that we need ... we've got stuff during the time, and during the day time we hardly do crime in the day time, but when it comes to night time, it's more openly available, where there's not much stuff there out there for us. So, things like maybe YETI, maybe, but a night time YETI, where like there's a big basketball in the middle, and then onto the side you have like a little gaming room with ... what's that ... you know, like garage band or something."
-18-year-old female (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2022)

First Nations young people with experience of the youth justice system, and the organisations that serve them, have asked for culturally safe, tailored services to support their wellbeing, in particular (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018):

1. Give children services that work – by funding culturally safe, trauma-informed services that reach children when and where they need support
2. Keep children safe and strong in their culture, families, and communities
3. Address disadvantage to build strong communities that are supported to nurture children in their culture
4. Support Aboriginal communities to design and lead support systems
5. Create just and equitable systems through a whole-of-government approach, embedding the guiding principles of self-determination, youth participation and culture, family, Elders, and communities

[1] The Children's Koori Court is a division of the Children's Court. Koori Court provides Aboriginal children and young people a culturally safe alternative to mainstream Children's Court with Elders and respected community members present. (Cerreto A. & Koorie Youth Council, 2018)



Recommendations for Adolescence: Valued, Loved & Safe

Young First Nations people with experience of the child-protection system highlight the impact of historical trauma and call for Aboriginal leadership, working in partnership, and culturally appropriate care within the child protection system.

Based on what young people have told us, we recommend stakeholders work to:

Reorientate the child protection system to be child-centred, strengths-based, holistic, and collaborative.

The overwhelming message from young people in the child-protection system was of feeling disempowered. Specific actions include:

- children and young people in contact with the child-protection system have dedicated opportunities to express their views on matters that affect them, and these views be given due weight in accordance with their developmental stage and maturity as aligned with the UNCRC
- develop a uniform, integrated national child-protection system aligned with 'public health' models and is based on children's rights and their recovery, as recommended by the Australian Child Rights Taskforce (2019).

Equip all young people with the skills they need to feel connected to and supported by their family, friends, and community.

- Young people are experiencing high rates of loneliness and are struggling to turn to friends and family support despite valuing them highly. Young people have suggested ways to improve their own connectedness including:
- increasing the diversity of their social and recreational networks
- having more meaningful conversations with family and friends
- investing in and nurturing important relationships with people in their lives.

Recommendations for Adolescence: Valued, Loved & Safe

Address gendered violence experienced by young people at home and in the community.

Specific actions include:

- understand and address the drivers of increased violence experienced by young females and gender-diverse young people, who are much more likely to experience family violence or being harmed at home
- recognise and address the far-reaching implications of family violence on mental health, education, and access to material needs
- ensure adequate access to youth-friendly accommodation support in instances where young people are not safe to return home.

Young First Nations people with experience of the youth justice system have asked for culturally safe, tailored services to support their wellbeing.

Specific recommendations include:

- give young people services that work by funding culturally safe, trauma-informed services that reach children when and where they need support
- keep children safe and strong in their culture, families, and communities by addressing disadvantage to build strong communities that are supported to nurture children in their culture
- community-designed and led youth support systems – by supporting Aboriginal communities to design and lead support systems
- create just and equitable systems through a whole-of-government approach, embedding the guiding principles of self-determination, youth participation and culture, family, Elders, and communities.

Governments, for-profit organisations, and philanthropy prioritise investment in addressing climate change and nurturing sustainable natural environments as a top priority for young people.



Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Positive Sense of Identity

Most young people have a positive sense of self. However, a positive sense of self drops on entry into adolescence and continues to decrease throughout high school, with marked gender differences.

A survey of students in Western Australia found 90.3 per cent of students in Years 4 to 6 felt good about themselves. This dropped to 71 per cent of students in Years 7 to 9 and 62.3 per cent of students in Years 10 to 12 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

There were differences in sense of self based on gender, with male students in Years 7 to 12 more likely than female students to report they were happy with themselves (81.6 per cent vs. 60.9 per cent), felt good about themselves (80.3 per cent vs. 56.9 per cent) and were able to do things as well as most other people (83.2 per cent vs. 70.2 per cent) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

No disaggregated data was available in this study for gender-diverse young people.



Socioeconomic disadvantage, historical trauma in the case of First Nations young people, and racism were identified by young people as drivers of negative sense of self.

Young people specifically mentioned socioeconomic disadvantage as a source of negative sense of self. For example, young people from disadvantaged areas reported feeling **“worthless”, “irrelevant” and “unappreciated”** (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

A young Aboriginal person spoke of the impact of historical trauma on sense of self and culture, and the importance of listening as a means of restoration:

“When Australia was invaded, they cut off the land, which was food resources, then they cut off family, then they cut off culture, connection, and spirituality. And then, what do you have left? Like, you’ve got nothing. So how do you bring that back? You bring that back by listening to what we say. We know what works for us”

Young Aboriginal advocate, NSW (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Young people who are culturally and linguistically diverse spoke of their identity being unfairly defined by their skin colour, and of the negative impact of racism and discrimination (see next section) on their sense of self:

“Psychologically, for a child, if you’re getting that treatment, it makes you feel like a thief, it’s very demoralising to get followed. Most of the time they just stereotype it as you’re a person of colour, you’re here to steal”

Young person, SA (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

“Skin colour is such a, honestly, it’s stupid the way we hold it to such a high level. Because it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just the way the sun has affected us because we come from different countries, from different areas of the world. But all of a sudden, our skin colour determines everything about us? ... I don’t try and think too much about it, it’s very, it’s sad but you just sort of accept it because you’re so used to it”

High school student from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, Yarra, Vic (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).



Community & Belonging

Young people value their communities yet expressed mixed views on their experiences of community and belonging.

Many young people reinforced the importance and value of communities:

“The community is a great place for people my age because everyone is close-knit and feels like a family, as everyone knows everyone.”

Female, 16, QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

“The community is a great place for people to live in as there are many venues for people to socialise and relax.”

Male, 17, QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

At an Aboriginal forum on youth wellbeing, Aboriginal high school students spoke of the importance of positive role models and safe, inclusive communities to support young Aboriginal people’s wellbeing (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018b).



Most adolescents report feeling they belong in their communities.

However, about four in 10 do not feel they belong, with differences across age and gender. Younger adolescents and males were more likely to respond positively to questions about community and belonging than gender-diverse young people, older adolescents, females, First Nations young people and people living with a chronic physical or mental health condition.

Surveys in Western Australia and Queensland of young high school students indicated the majority (56.9 per cent to 59 per cent) agreed they felt they belonged in their community (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021) and about two in three (65.2 per cent) secondary school students feel their neighbours are friendly (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

However, a significant proportion did not agree, and differences were seen across gender and age. Of people aged 13 to 18 surveyed in Queensland, males were more likely than females to feel they belonged and were listened to, that community members helped each other and adults were friendly to young people (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Both males and females were more likely than gender-diverse young people to respond positively to these survey questions (see Figure below) (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

Some indicators of belonging and connection appeared stronger among rural and remote students compared with students in metropolitan areas.

A 2021 survey of students in Western Australia found students in remote areas were more likely to hang out with friends, be active outdoors every day, and know where to go for support. The survey found similar proportions of students in remote, regional, and metropolitan areas reported feeling supported by their family and their friends (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Communities could be improved for young people by creating more youth-friendly spaces for recreation and socialising, especially for older adolescents.

About half (44 per cent) of young people aged 13 to 15 surveyed in Queensland agreed there were enough fun places for young people in their community (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Similar findings were noted in a survey of adolescents in Years 7 to 12 in Western Australia, again with about half (49.4 per cent) agreeing there are lots of fun things to do in their area (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Younger adolescents tended to respond more positively to questions about having fun things to do, with about a quarter (24.5 per cent) of students in Years 7 to 9 agreeing there is nothing to do in their area compared with 38 per cent of students in Years 10 to 12 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). This trend was also seen in Queensland young people (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

Participants feelings about their community by gender

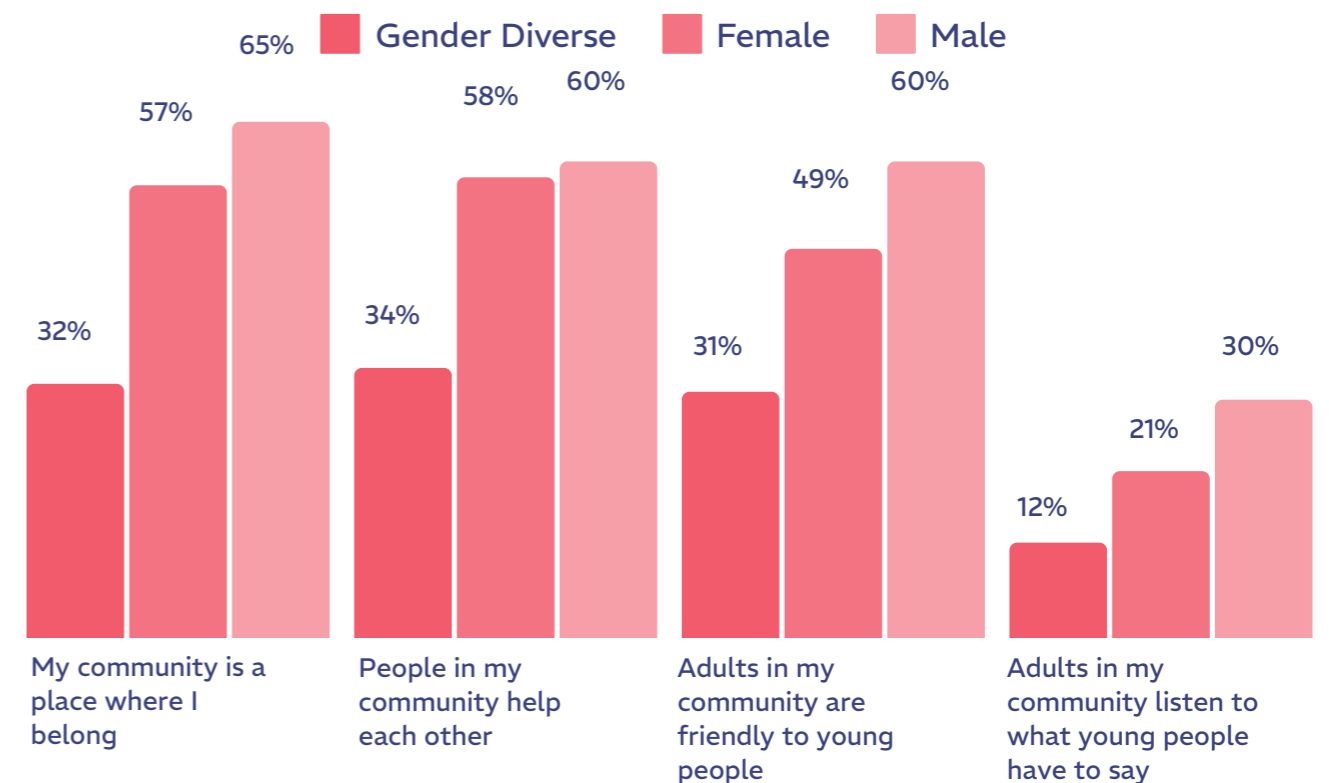


Figure 8: Percentage of survey participants who agreed with statements about their communities. Extracted from Voices of hope: Growing up in Queensland 2020 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Equity and Discrimination

Equity and discrimination are of significant concern for young people. Young people continue to experience racism and discrimination based on their age, gender, and mental health.

The most recent *Mission Australia Youth Survey* identified equity and discrimination as the second- most important issue in Australia, above mental health and below the environment (Leung et al., 2022). More than a third (35.9 per cent) of young people aged 15 to 19 nominated equity and discrimination as a top national concern, with more than a quarter (27.1 per cent) having experienced discrimination in the last year on the basis of race, gender or their mental health (Leung et al., 2022).

“You know how they say that Australia’s a free country? Yeah, except for the prejudice and discrimination”
High school student, Ipswich, QLD (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

Young people described being treated differently “because you’re young” (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018). Similar concepts were echoed in a video report by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in the Northern Territory, which asked young people what adults thought about them (Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2022b). Responses included phrases such as “troublemaker” and “bad”.

Young people also described being treated differently because of their race:

“I’ve also experienced the same thing. For me, I went to the shop to buy something. And the lady at the counter asked to check my bags. Said it happens to everybody. There was a lady behind me with a purse, she didn’t get checked. It happens a lot”
Young person, SA (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

“I’m black, I’m African, I’m a woman, and I’m Muslim. I’ve been in public before and been told that I have a bomb in my headscarf, been called a ‘terrorist’. So, you’re left with this societal perception of all the negative connotations that come out of your identities and sometimes it can lead to not being able to find the best job, or sometimes walking down the street you get a few stares ... It’s the society that we live in, but these things can really halt an individual’s potential”
High school student, Yarra, Victoria (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

A survey of young people in Queensland aged 13 to 18 indicated First Nations young people were less likely to feel adults in their communities were friendly to young people (46 per cent of First Nations youth responded adults were friendly to young people compared with 52 per cent overall) (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

Young people experience discrimination in formal settings, including by health services, at school and through employment.

“Slurs are so normalised that there are very few times that kids get pulled up on it. Someone complained to the school about how much slurs were being used. The school then at assembly made a point of not saying the slurs but in doing that, the teachers were saying all the slurs in front of the whole school”
Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“The phone interview is all good and they are very nice, but once you arrive, they are shocked and don’t expect you to be black and Muslim. And it’s like ‘okay, are you going to give me the job or not?’ And they usually don’t; you can feel the vibe”
Young person, SA (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Gender-diverse and sexually diverse young people describe experiences of discrimination within the health system:

“My current GP is very transphobic and even asked me when I identified as a lesbian if ‘the gay phase was over’”
Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Young people express specific concerns about police discrimination.

Young people raised specific concerns about discrimination towards them by police based on their clothing or ethnicity. For example:

“[There’s a] double standard with police or getting in trouble. Like, if you’re wearing a baggy hoodie at night, you’re getting pulled up, even if you’re just walking”
Young person, Mount Gambier, regional SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“The police abuse their powers. Because they’ve been given it, so they feel like they need to use it”
High school student, Brisbane, QLD (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“There is a lot of racism. They do all these courses and things to try and make the officers aware, but the stories I’ve heard, they target people”
High school student, Brisbane, QLD (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“In Victoria especially it is a big problem between the police and the African community. One time while I was visiting my cousins in Victoria, it was New Year’s, we went to party. On the way home we were on the train, and all of a sudden it shut down and a bunch of police just entered from all the entrances. Somebody had called, they stopped the trains because they had lost their phone and thought we had stolen it.”
Young person, SA (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Young people noted the effect of police discrimination on safety:

“If a group of people feel threatened by the police, they’re so much less likely to go to them for help when they need to”

High school student, culturally and linguistically diverse, Yarra, VIC

Some young people reported feeling they needed to alter or hide themselves to be accepted:

“You can’t be yourself if you want to be included”

High school student, Ipswich, QLD (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“You can be yourself, but you have to accept the risk”

Young person, Perth, WA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Young people express concerns about the treatment of asylum seekers and offshore detention.

“Australia pays so much money to have these island prisons. I understand that we can’t just let anyone in, but we can’t just leave them. There is so much money being spent on these prisons that instead they could be trying to spend on learning about these people, and supporting them, and helping them.”

High school student, Yarra, VIC (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“The government should look after every young person. It doesn’t matter what country they come from, all people are the same. If they are young, the government should take care of them to make sure they don’t have too many troubles”

Asylum seeker, 16, Sydney NSW (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“We had to call for help. We needed clothes and food. We needed everything, like money. It would be much easier for the NGOs if the government took a part in helping. Housing is the main thing. People can live without food for a few days, but you cannot stay outside without a home.”

Asylum seeker, 16, Sydney NSW (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)



Being Gender-Diverse

Gender diversity is relatively common among young people.

In the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey, 4.3 per cent of the 18,800 young people aged 15 to 19 surveyed reported identifying as gender-diverse (Leung et al., 2022). Gender diversity encompasses young people who “do not conform to their society or culture’s expectations for males and females” (Telfer, Tollit, Pace, & Pang, 2020), including those whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth and those who identify as non-binary (i.e., neither exclusively male, nor female).

Gender-diverse young people spoke of a variety of challenges of being gender-diverse that largely centred on fears of rejection by their family and community.

Gender-diverse young people expressed fears about not being accepted by their family or community due to their gender identity:

“I’m terrified – mostly of non-acceptance. I’m bisexual, I’m binary and I’m terrified that maybe one day my family is going to find out about my gender identity. I’m terrified that employers won’t accept my presentation. This is the most comfortable I can be in my own body and even though it’s not perfect, this is the closest I can do, but this is not socially accepted. I can’t live as my true self without all these fears of financial and social repercussions. I just live in a constant state of uncertainty, which is probably why I’m so stressed all the time”

Young LGBTIQ+ advocate, Perth, WA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Gender-diverse young people also spoke of having to hide their gender identity in a variety of settings, including employment. For example, young people spoke of:

“[going] back in the closet”

Young LGBTIQ+ advocate (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“forced to lead a secret life”

Young LGBTIQ+ advocate (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“[having] an LGBTIQ+ friendly resume, and a ‘safe’ resumé”

Young LGBTIQ+ advocate (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Gender-diverse people also spoke of the challenges of being understood by their family:

“When I first came out, my parents said: ‘Well, you can still be you. Why do you have to change your body? Change yourself?’ My response was: ‘I have to. It’s not an option. Do you want a dead kid, or do you want a trans kid? Those are your options”

Young transgender advocate, Perth, WA
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Gender-diverse young people recognised the advances in Australia and their relative privilege compared with international settings, but also recognised room for improvement:

“We still live in a fairly progressive country. If this is the best we can get in Australia, then I’m happy to live here. But it could be so much better, so much better improved”

Transgender young person, Perth, WA
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)



Recommendations for Adolescence: Positive Sense of identity and Culture

Support all young people to nurture a positive sense of self, recognising adolescence as a period of a diminished sense of self which compounds with age and female gender (noting that no comparable data was available for gender-diverse young people).

Specific actions include:

- addressing sources of diminished sense of self, including socioeconomic disadvantage and discrimination based on First Nations identity and ethnicity.

Address discrimination experienced based on age, gender, ethnicity, First Nations identity, mental health conditions and socioeconomic disadvantage in education settings and by the health and justice systems.



Access to Essentials

Most young people enjoy access to life’s essentials, such as housing, food, and communication devices.

According to a survey done in WA, most (92 per cent) high school students have their own bedroom and almost all (97 per cent) Year 10 to 12 students own a mobile phone (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Students in rural and remote regions had lower access to handheld digital devices and the internet.

A small group of young people in Years 7 to 10 consulted within NSW via focus groups indicated phones, computer and internet at home were essential items to have access to (Saunders et al., 2018). There was a discussion and agreement that a phone was less a ‘need’ and more a ‘want’ for young people aged 12 to 14, but once 15-years-old, a child considered a phone a vital resource. Internet access was regarded as vital for learning and was accessed via public wi-fi by students if they could not get access to it at home (Saunders et al., 2018).

Poverty continues to have tangible impacts on a significant number of young people. Access to enough food, ability of families to pay bills, and ability to participate in school excursions are all areas of concern.

A significant percentage of high school students indicated challenges accessing enough food, paying bills, and needing charitable financial assistance:

- 8 per cent said there is enough food for them ‘only sometimes’ and 1 per cent said there is ‘never’ enough food (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)
- 5.9 per cent said they/their family could not pay bills or car expenses (Leung et al., 2022)
- 6.4 per cent said they/their family sought financial help from family, friends, or charity (Leung et al., 2022)
- one in 10 students did not have enough money to go on school excursions or camp (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Financial challenges were nominated as the third-greatest barrier to achieving work or study goals among Australians aged 15 to 19 (Leung et al., 2022). Similarly, a Queensland study of secondary students aged 13 to 18 indicated financial barriers (including cost of education, living expenses, travel costs and family financial issues) were the most common barrier to achieving their plans for beyond school, nominated by 16 per cent of young people (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021).

“I think most young people with a middle-class background in Australia are living a pretty good life. But for young people of a lower class, Aboriginal kids, kids in the outback ... they don’t have near the same rights as me. This needs to be changed”
High school student, ACT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Some young people spoke of profound direct experiences of poverty, such as needing to steal food to survive.

“I got cut off Centrelink for eight weeks and I basically had to steal. I stole the whole time I was pregnant, it was horrible and I, like, I don’t have a criminal record like, I’m like generally a good girl but like, I had to do it to survive”
16 year-old, Western Australia
(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020)

“A lot of family struggle about rent, food bills. So [kids] try and help their family like stealing ... it’s not good, you know”
16 year-old, Western Australia
(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020)

“...even though I was very young, I went through enough misery to last a lifetime. First we didn’t have anywhere to live, after when I started school, everybody teased me, I didn’t have any friends, my accent was different, I was an outsider. I didn’t belong”
16 year-old, Western Australia
(Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020)

Young people with vulnerabilities (including those with complex needs, disability and experience of maltreatment, and First Nations young people) identify safe accommodation and access to basic material needs as the most important services and supports to keep them safe.

A consultation undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission targeted four priority population groups:

- 1.Children and families with complex needs
- 2.First Nations children and young people experiencing disadvantage
- 3.Children and young people with a disability or who are carers of someone with disability
- 4.Children and young people with experience of maltreatment, including those with out-of-home-care experience.
(Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Around 100 young participants aged 13 to 17 were asked: ‘What are the three most important services and supports that you think could help children and young people and families to be safe?’. The top three responses were:

- 1.A safe place to go when needed (75 per cent)
- 2.Help with basic needs (like food and clothes) (53 per cent)
- 3.Mental health services (39 per cent)

Children and young people living with a disability and First Nations children and young people selected the same responses and in similar proportions (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Access to Support Services

Young people value services with friendly people, that are easy to get to, and treat everyone equally.

The top three most important helpful qualities of services identified by young people aged 13 to 17 were (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021):

1. Friendly people (58 per cent)
2. Easy to get to (47 per cent)
3. Treating everyone equally and with respect (40 per cent)

First Nations young people identified the same top-three qualities in similar proportions, while young people living with a disability placed greater emphasis on accessibility (Easy to get to = 48 per cent) and affordability (No or low cost = 44 per cent) with equality and respect coming in third (Treat everyone equally and with respect = 42 per cent) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The top three barriers to service use by among vulnerable adolescents are cost, accessibility, and trust.

The top three reasons for not using services and supports identified by young people aged 13 to 17 were cost, accessibility and trust (It costs too much = 30 per cent, Too hard to get to = 25 per cent, You can't trust them = 20 per cent) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

On the other hand, First Nations young people identified 'They don't listen to us' (28 per cent) as the top barrier, while young people with disability identified listening as the second greatest barrier (33 per cent). Cost and accessibility were the other top issues identified by these groups (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).



Employment

Employment is valued by young people, but many are struggling to compete in the job market.

A small group of young people in Years 7 to 10 consulted within NSW considered jobs at their age important to gaining independence and flexibility in how they spent money. They were also focused and thinking about life post-school, and the occupations and employment opportunities that might be available to them (Saunders et al., 2018).

A quarter (25.9 per cent) of young Australians aged 15 to 19 were not employed but were looking for work while about half (53.3 per cent) were employed (Leung et al., 2022). Young people face multiple challenges in securing employment, including competition with experienced candidates and transport challenges (Littleton & Campbell, 2022):

"The market is now over-saturated with skilled individuals with 10 years more experience than you. You've got nothing to offer. You can't even look at an entry-level job without needing experience these days, which is pathetic: it's an entry-level job!"

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

"My local public transport's useless and without a car, green slip, rego... it is hard to get to some jobs"

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

Young people with disability can face a variety of additional barriers to finding employment.

"I guess the real impact of COVID is that it just made it that much harder as a disabled youth to get a job because not only am I a young person, I'm one that's in a wheelchair, so then I have all these other requirements"

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

"It would be great to have more entry-level jobs, for young people that aren't [able to carry out] physical labour jobs. So, for example, I have chronic fatigue syndrome and I find it hard to get a job. I'm at university, but I'd really like to have a casual or part-time job, using skills that I have, but that aren't physical labour jobs or something where I have to be on my feet such as retail or hospitality. So, I don't know how that would work ... but like more accessibility, with basic skills, something that you don't need to have a graduate degree for"

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

School-based career counselling offers an opportunity to support transition into employment.

Young people in NSW identified accessibility of information as an important barrier to employment (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). Quality career guidance can boost education and training completion rates by improving the match between young people and their chosen path. It can strengthen social mobility by reaching young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and providing networks and advice that may not be available at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Young people have identified that school-based career counselling provides an opportunity to support the transition into employment (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). Career advisors situated in schools can access at-risk young people and help reduce rates of post-school disengagement. However, many young people are still missing out on the benefits and support offered by in-school programs and career advice (Littleton & Campbell, 2022).

“[Having a] careers advisor ... [and] also resources are really useful, like websites that help decide, make decisions on what field you can work in. They have quizzes and things like that, decided based on your interests”

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

“[It’s important] just letting people know that there are resources and stuff out there for them because I know a lot of people that I know personally don’t know that there’s career advisors and stuff like that around that can support them and help them through.”

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

“After school there’s not a lot of support out there. [Not] all young people know about support that they can access to help them gain employment, so having a career advisor/job skills person [with whom young people can] work together closely will build on success stories where young people are supported throughout and after school”

Young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

Recommendations for Adolescence: Material Basics

Based on what young people have told us, we recommend stakeholders work to:

Support equitable access to safe accommodation and basic material needs as priority areas for vulnerable young people.

Support all young people to engage in sufficient employment.

Specific actions include:

- enhancing school-based career counselling
- fostering opportunities for flexible employment that are inclusive of people with diverse abilities.



Proportion of year 4 to 12 students saying their health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor



Figure 9: WA Speaking Out Survey

Mental health

The content below contains quotes that some readers may find distressing.

Mental health is a top personal and national concern among young people aged 15 to 19.

Mental health was a recurring theme among many of the people consulted in this age group. In the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (2022) of 15 to 19-year-olds, mental health was the third-most frequently nominated issue of national concern (33.9 per cent of respondents) and the second-most frequently nominated issue of personal concern (27.7 per cent of respondents). Almost four in 10 young people were 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about mental health on a personal level (Leung et al., 2022).

"In the past three years, my count of how many people I've lost to suicide is up to seven. ...They were aged around 15 and 16. I've got scars all over myself from self-harm. I've tried to commit suicide a couple times, nearly succeeded last year, but I didn't.

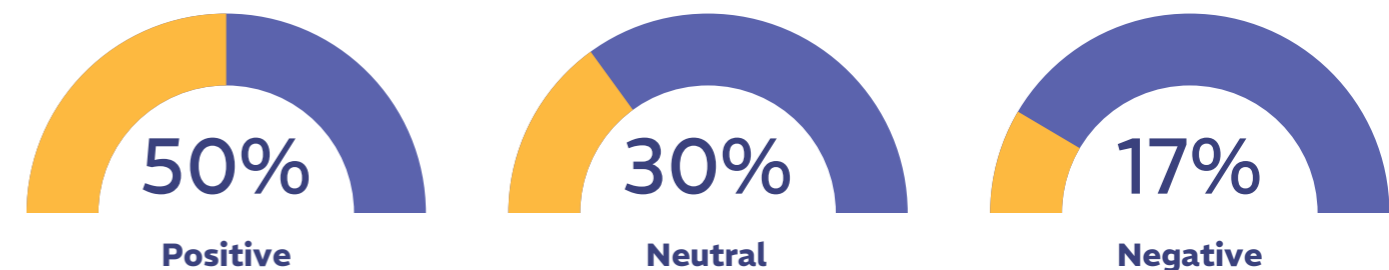
With most of the adults I know who've dealt with me, none of them saw it coming or thought that I'd do it, but my head was just in that space where I was just that low that I didn't think I could get out of it"

17-year-old, ACT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Gender differences in mental health and positivity about the future were pronounced.

Males were much more likely than females to rate their mental wellbeing as excellent or very good (42.1 per cent) compared with females (22.8 per cent) and gender-diverse young people (12.5 per cent).

About half of young people aged 15 to 19 feel positive about the future, about one third feel neither positive nor negative, and a smaller proportion (17.3 per cent) feel negative or very negative about the future (Leung et al., 2022).



This finding was similar between males and females. However, gender-diverse young people tended to feel positive less commonly, with respondents split roughly evenly between feeling positive (29.7 per cent), negative (38.5 per cent), and neither positive nor negative (31.8 per cent). Positivity has been on a slow downward trend over the last three years, with prior surveys finding slightly higher percentages of young people feeling positive or very positive about the future (49.9 per cent in 2022, 51.6 per cent in 2021, 55.5 per cent in 2020).

Stigma was a barrier to young people seeking help for mental health concerns from both professional services and their informal supports.

Multiple consultations identified stigma and shame as barriers to people seeking help for mental health concerns (Leung et al., 2022).

“They don’t trust people that they don’t know. People probably try to talk to someone that they trust but that’s an issue, so they bottle up all their feelings until they can’t take it anymore – some kids are scared that they might get called weak because they have mental health problems”

Young person, Tasmania (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“The most important issue for young people is a lot of them not having the confidence to speak out about their mental health.”

Male, 15, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Stigma and shame were identified as the top barriers to accessing mental health services in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey:

“I have never been to therapy so I think if I have the courage to go, that would maybe help”

16-year-old, QLD (Leung et al., 2022)

Stigma and shame were not limited to accessing health services and professionals, but were also a barrier in disclosing their concerns to parents, teachers, and school counsellors:

“I could talk to my parents about it but I am afraid of how they will react”

15-year-old, female, VIC (Leung et al., 2022)

“There is such a stigma around men’s mental health. If I ever admit to being sad or reach out, it is used against me and I feel weak, this is painful for me”

16-year-old (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)



Stigma and shame for mental health conditions can be compounded in culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Stigma and shame around eating disorders was an issue, especially among some culturally and linguistically diverse young people (Nguyen et al., 2021):

“Individuals from diverse communities are suffering in silence, especially where mental health and eating disorders still remain taboo and stigmatised”

Young person (Nguyen et al., 2021)

Some young people wanted more open discussion of mental health issues in their families and communities to help reduce stigma.

“Having a social group, a community of people and leaders who openly talk about mental health and specific places to access mental health support is really helpful.”

Young person, Vic (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“Families should get taught more about mental health because they don’t see it as an issue and don’t understand what we’re going through. Adults in general could start talking about these topics and then students might open up and think they aren’t alone”

16 year-old, WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Young people and their families recognised the opportunity to reduce stigma and enhance mental-health-sustaining knowledge and skills in the education system.

“Education/information at school – helps to reduce stigma ...We sometimes had a speaker come to school who acknowledged mental health but didn’t give concrete or specific examples”

Young person, VIC (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“Both children and parents/guardians and grandparents asked for support for mental health and wellbeing to be built into daily activities and programs at schools rather than just having stand-alone sessions”

Young person (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022)

“I think it’s important that schools put more effort into dealing with bullying and mental health issues”

17-year-old, WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

“Having more discussions around mental health, maybe more of a focus on it at schools. More teenagers go through mental health issues than you think, and no one discusses it –everyone hides their issues”

16-year-old, female, QLD (Leung et al., 2022)

Young people called for more accessible, welcoming, and inclusive mental health services.

In The Children's Report, young people described being "patronised" by the mental-health system and described it as "intimidating" (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

"I feel like, if we had better mental health care for youth, it would be that the people working in the area would be a lot more welcoming. Because most of the time when you do go to places like a mental ward or if you go to a psychologist and it doesn't work out, the thing that you're most likely going to be is afraid. So, then I don't want to go back there because I've had such a bad experience. We need something that we're not afraid of."

High school student, alternative education program, QLD
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"Getting professional help for mental illnesses like depression and anxiety etc, is not easy. There's a lot of awareness about seeking help if you need it but getting help is actually inaccessible and expensive. I know many people who want help and need help but are unable to get it."

Female, 16 years, QLD (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Young people expressed a desire to improve their mental health literacy.

Young people wanted to know more about how to identify and respond to their mental health symptoms:

"I just felt I wasn't worth it. It's an empty feeling – a feeling like you're not worth being alive. I found out it was anxiety around Year 10. Before that, I thought I was broken, I thought there was something wrong with me. I didn't know what it was and I didn't know who to bring it up with"

High school student, ACT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

"Manage my time better but also learn that it's ok to take a break and not be studying all the time ... Learn some coping techniques and strategies"
(In response to the question 'What more would help young people address mental health challenges?')

Female, 16, NT (Leung et al., 2022)

Young people were concerned about the impact of social media on mental health.

Another concern raised by young people was the impact of social media, particularly influencers, on body image, eating habits and food (Nguyen et al., 2021). One-in-five female students in Years 7 to 12 surveyed in WA said they often go without eating or sleeping because of their mobile phone (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Diet and Exercise

Concerns about healthy eating and exercise decrease during adolescence compared with childhood.

Young people tend to prioritise healthy eating and exercise less through adolescence compared with childhood. More than 30 per cent of high school students reported they cared 'very much' about eating healthy food compared with 50 per cent of Year 4 to 6 students (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Around 54 per cent of high school students reported caring 'very much' about staying fit and healthy compared with 64 per cent of Year 4 to 6 students (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

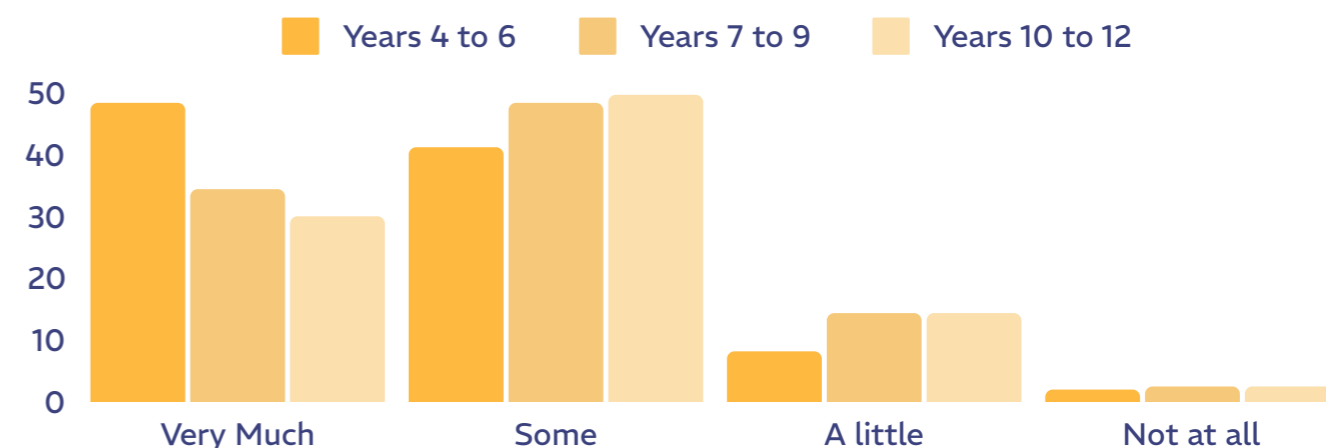
Female students, especially those entering their senior high school years, are less likely to prioritise exercise than male students.

Female high school students overall were twice as likely as male students to report not exercise (5.8 per cent vs 2.8 per cent) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). Male students were more likely than female students to report exercising vigorously at least three times per week (73 per cent vs 54.2 per cent) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

In Years 7 to 9, the proportion of students reporting that exercise was 'not really' an important part of their life was roughly even between males and females. However, female high school students in their senior years were much more likely to report that exercise was 'not really' an important part of their life compared with female students in their junior years (10.9 per cent of female student in Years 7 to 9 vs 21.3 per cent of female students in Years 10 to 12) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Importantly, specific demographic groups were not disaggregated from this data, such as young people living with a disability and gender-diverse young people who may experience additional barriers to engaging in sport or physical activity. Additional information on factors influencing uptake of exercise and healthy eating could provide information on how to enhance healthy lifestyles among adolescents.

Proportion of year 4 to 12 students saying they care about eating healthy food



Vaping

Vaping is a rapidly growing emerging issue for young people.

Recent research among young people in NSW shows 32 per cent of 14 to 17-year-olds have vaped at some stage in their lives (Watts et al., 2022). In 2022, the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People did a study asking young people what they thought about current responses to vaping and how to better respond to the issue (Connolly, 2022c). Young people recognised that vaping is a problem, and many of them would like to quit vaping.

Like alcohol and other drugs, many young people identified vaping as a way to cope with stress, mental health, and social challenges.

A strong theme in responses of young people was that greater efforts should be made to address the reasons students vape, including stress, poor mental health, a poor sense of identity, and peer pressure.

“It can be a coping mechanism, and most people don’t want to be addicted but they are. So, stop treating kids with nicotine problems like they are stupid and can stop anytime, treat them like an adult with a drug problem or alcohol addiction because it’s the same thing”

Female, 15, SA (Connolly, 2022c)

Young people call for specific areas of support around vaping.

When consulted, young people identified supports they would find useful when navigating issues around vaping. These included:

- a greater focus on adults selling vapes to children
- education on how to navigate social pressures
- education on the health effects and risks of vaping
- information on where to go for support if they are concerned about addiction.

“There’s not any serious campaigning about its long-term effects apart from people I’ve seen on TikTok talking about how they ended up in hospital for vaping”

Female, 17, SA (Connolly, 2022c)

Young people recognised the power of other young people – rather than adults – in disseminating information about vaping.

Young people suggested empowering young people themselves to become advocates or ‘messengers’ for important information around vaping, who were considered more credible than ‘authority figures’.

“They’re trying but they aren’t thinking the way we think”

Female, 15, SA (Connolly, 2022c)

“Trying to get people to snitch isn’t good for that person or people they’re snitching on”

Female, 16, SA (Connolly, 2022c)

Drugs and Alcohol

Most young people agree that alcohol, cigarettes, and other drugs should not be used by people their age.

Three-quarters of high school students surveyed in Western Australia agreed people their age should not use cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana or other drugs (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Attitudes towards recreational drug use relax in the senior high school years, particularly towards alcohol and marijuana.

Nearly 90 per cent of students in Years 7 to 9 agreed alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs should not be used by people their age compared with 58 per cent of students in Years 10 to 12 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Among the older students, alcohol and marijuana were the most widely accepted with 34.4 per cent and 25.5 per cent responding it was okay for people their age to use alcohol and marijuana respectively (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Cigarette and other drug use was less widely accepted, endorsed by just 13.5 per cent and 7.6 per cent of older high school students respectively (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Very few younger high school students endorsed use of any of the substances, with about one in 20 responding that it was okay for people their age to use alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana or other drugs (ranging from 4.4 per cent to 7.6 per cent) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

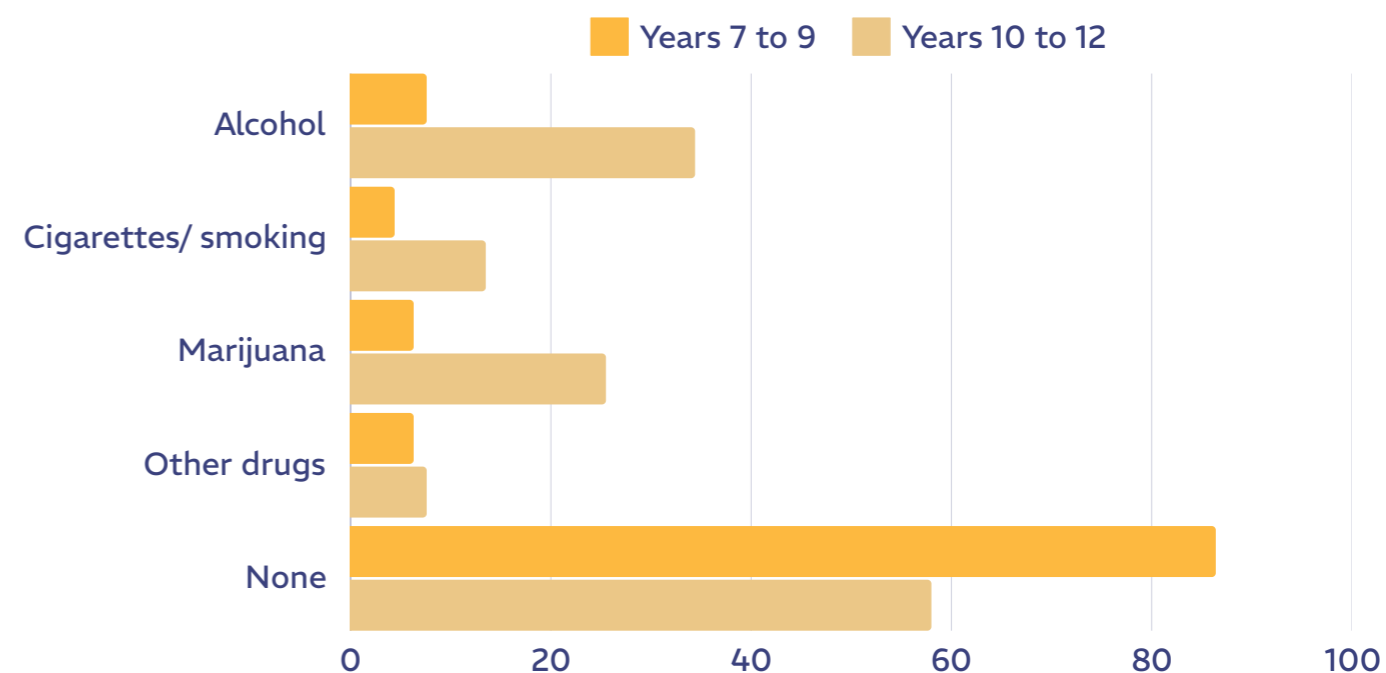


Figure 10: Proportion of year 4 to 12 students saying they think it's ok for someone their age to use varying substances by year group, 2021

Some young people use substances as a way of coping with stress.

Some respondents spoke of using drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism for other problems such as mental health issues and family life:

“Everyone should be able to have someone to [talk to] mental health issues about, but some people don’t, and I am grateful I do. Some kids I know do cope with drugs and alcohol, which is not something anyone my age should have to resort to”

14-year-old, WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

“I struggle with smoking addiction, problems, alcohol use. A lot of self-confidence issues, self-esteem issues, family problems”

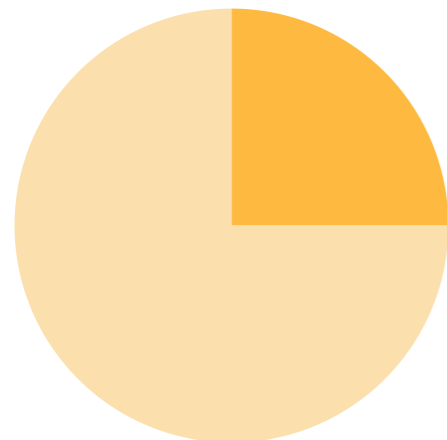
12-year-old, WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021)

Most young people feel they know enough about the health impacts of alcohol and cigarettes but have less confidence in their knowledge of other drugs.

A survey of Western Australian high school students found nine in 10 students in Years 7 to 12 felt they knew enough about the health impacts of cigarettes (91 per cent) and alcohol (88.9 per cent) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). About seven in 10 of those students reported having learned some or a lot about alcohol (75.5 per cent) and cigarettes (69.9 per cent) at school.

However, knowledge about marijuana and other drugs, and learning about these topics in schools, was lower than knowledge and learning about cigarettes and alcohol. More than a third (38.5 per cent) of students were unsure of, or felt they did not know enough about, marijuana, and 31.2 per cent felt this way about other drugs (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). About half the students reported they learned some or a lot about marijuana and other drugs in school (47.7 per cent and 55.2 per cent respectively) (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

A large proportion of young people don’t know where to go for help with smoking, alcohol, or other drugs.



A survey of Western Australian high school students in Years 10 to 12 found about a quarter were unsure where to go if they needed help with substance use (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

Health Information and Services

Young people described a variety of barriers to accessing health services. Cost and unsuitable opening hours were the most common, affecting one in two and one in three young people respectively

Several reports explored barriers to accessing health services by adolescents and young adults, with some exploring young people’s ideas about solutions to overcoming these barriers (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018; Kang et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2022).

A survey of 1416 young people in NSW aged 12 to 24 (with intentional over-selection of marginalised groups) found the following barriers to accessing health services (Kang et al., 2018):

- cost (45.8 per cent)
- opening hours mean I need time off to study or work (31.7 per cent)
- I would feel embarrassed (27.8 per cent)
- difficulty getting there (23.7 per cent)
- I would have to ask my parents/carers to take me (22.1 per cent)
- I would feel judged (20.3 per cent)
- the gender of the doctor/health professional (18.9 per cent)
- I worry about confidentiality (15.3 per cent)
- I don’t have my own Medicare card (12.2 per cent)
- I don’t know which service(s) to go to (11.7 per cent)
- for language or cultural reasons (5.9 per cent)

Unfortunately, disaggregated data for adolescents compared with young adults was not provided, but the authors found statistically significant associations with age. Embarrassment, concerns about confidentiality lack of a Medicare card, relying on carers/parents for transport, and not knowing which service to use were more common among adolescents (14 to 19 years) compared with older respondents (Kang et al., 2018).

Embarrassment as a barrier to accessing services was more prominent among middle adolescents and those with diverse backgrounds.

The effect of embarrassment was highest in 15 to 19-year-olds and was especially high among gender- and sexually diverse young people, where embarrassment was a barrier for almost four in 10 respondents (Kang et al., 2018). Similarly, stigma was the greatest barrier to accessing mental health services among 15 to 19-year-olds in the Mission Australia Youth Survey (2022).

Embarrassment was more also commonly reported as barriers to help-seeking by First Nations young people, and young people with experience of homelessness. Aboriginal young people in the Access 3 study were appreciative of access to reduced cost services but felt there was a stigma associated with being Aboriginal (Kang et al., 2018).



Young people were concerned about confidentiality when accessing health services.

Fears about confidentiality were cited through multiple consultations as a barrier to accessing both mental and other health services (Kang et al., 2018; (Leung et al., 2022]).

Under common law in Australia, children under 18 may access and consent to medical treatment without parental knowledge or consent, provided they have the “maturity to understand the nature and consequences of the treatment” (Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2018). This is known as Gillick competence or the mature minor principle.

Yet concerns about confidentiality were the second-most commonly cited barrier (after stigma) to accessing mental health services among 15-to-19-year-olds in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (Leung et al., 2022). Two separate Australian reports found concerns about confidentiality affected about 15 per cent of young respondents aged 12 to 25 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022; Kang et al., 2018). Concerns about confidentiality were significantly higher among gender- and sexually diverse young people, reaching 20 per cent in the Access 3 study in NSW (Kang et al., 2018).

Navigating health services independently can be a challenge for young people.

The Children’s Report noted that confidentiality concerns were linked to reliance on parents and carers for accessing and navigating health services (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

“I just went with my dad ‘cause I don’t know how to go by myself. I still hope to but, like, it’s kinda hard. First of all, there’s health funds, like all that jumbo ... knowing if I’m allowed to, and talking to them about it and stuff. That’s all a bit confusing”

Gender-diverse young person, 15, (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021)

People in marginalised groups suffer even greater marginalisation within the health system.

Multiple marginalisation occurs when a child or young person identifies with more than one group which typically experiences health inequities. A NSW study included the following marginalised groups: living in a rural or remote area, identifying as First Nations, being gender- or sexually diverse, having refugee status, and being homeless (Kang et al., 2018). The same study found that among young people belonging to a marginalised group, 36 per cent belonged to more than one group.

A NSW study of 1416 young people aged 12 to 25 found young people with multiple layers of marginalisation are more likely to miss work or school to care for someone else (young people belonging to no marginalised groups = 8.1%; one marginalised group = 10.1%; two marginalised groups = 28.6%), and more likely to spend time away from school or work due to illness or injury (no marginalised group = 39.7%; belonging to more than two marginalised groups = 52.4%).

Young people belonging to more than one marginalised group describe difficulty in having their needs met by health and related services and call for policies and processes to be considered from an intersectional lens:

“Sometimes people know about disability. Other people know about queer people. Some others know about First Nations communities. It’s so rare to find someone who makes me safe across all my identities”

Young person (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“It is evident that young people experience disadvantage or inadequate access to essential health services due to their intersecting identities. Therefore, it is vital that we use an intersectional lens to examine the processes, policies and structures that result in inadequate health services for disadvantaged young people”

Young people (Nguyen et al., 2021)

Addressing stigma through respectful, strengths-based, inclusive interactions.

Young people’s early experiences of healthcare influence their willingness to engage with healthcare over their lifetime (Nguyen et al., 2021). Young people have described feeling stigmatised based on their age, mental health condition, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity and experience of homelessness (Nguyen et al., 2021). For example, some young people felt that labels such as ‘adolescent’ were associated with being irresponsible, misguided, and misinformed.

Young people call for more inclusive, strengths-based language that is respectful of young people’s unique needs, values and experiences (Nguyen et al., 2021; Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021).

“We want to see a more inclusive way of speaking to young people, especially clinicians when one has to share personal details”

Young people (Nguyen et al., 2021)

“The hospital has really taken up suggestions, especially around language that we use around young people in the hospital. It’s not just children - it’s you know, children and young people, or children and adolescents. Small shifts like that have made a big impact”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)



Young people call for more ubiquitous cultural sensitivity and appreciation for diversity among health professionals, health services and health information to reduce stigma associated with their mental health condition, gender identity, sexuality, and ethnicity. A variety of ways to achieve this were suggested including (Nguyen et al., 2021):

- Increase diversity in narratives about young people’s wellbeing. Specifically, increase the representation of diverse young people in information and resources
- Increase youth-friendly, culturally sensitive information and services. This means having resources that are youth-friendly, engaging, and accessible in a variety of languages. Specific suggestions include using the same language that young people use to describe their wellbeing. Co-design of such resources will help incorporate language and terminology that is clear, helpful, and inclusive
- Improve training for health professionals around cultural diversity, and especially around intersectionality of marginalised groups (i.e. when a young person has multiple layers of marginalisation, such as gender-diversity and homelessness). Young people note the positive impact of having clinicians with similar backgrounds and lived experience who are empathetic and can relate to diverse young people
- Increase awareness and support for young people who experience stigma from their families, communities, or culture. For example, topics such as mental or sexual health may be taboo in some communities
- Increase awareness and support for young people with experience of homelessness who have practical and logistical barriers to accessing care. For example, young people with experience of homelessness have barriers to accessing a phone, a Medicare card and identity documents.

“Sometimes it’s a language barrier or the correct information. What might be seen as a mental health issue there is not seen as a mental health issue back home. In some cultures and languages, there are not specific words you can use when you’re describing mental health”

Young person, SA (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“Might need to be through someone who is qualified in mental health in their own languages (the parents’ languages). It needs to be culturally appropriate ... for example, need separate programs for women away from men”

Young people, SA (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Young people call for a more holistic approach to health.

Consultation undertaken via the WH&Y Commission found young people want policy-makers, researchers, and clinicians to have a better appreciation of the impact of a wider range of determinants on young people’s wellbeing. They also called for a better understanding of how these affect their ability to interact autonomously with information and services (Nguyen et al., 2021). These include the social, political, cultural, and economic determinants. Young people specifically called for information on how to overcome these determinants so they can engage better with health services and health information, and better support their own wellbeing more broadly.

“Focusing on the social determinants of health improves our quality of life and helps decrease the disparities between people”

Young people (Nguyen et al., 2021)

Young people want autonomy, involvement, and choice in their healthcare.

“Involving them into their care, giving them a sense of autonomy and having that choice ... is really important”

Young person, Youth Cancer Action Board Member
(Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

Sometimes young people prefer when a trusted adult speaks on their behalf.

“Listen to the people that work with us, the good ones. Most young people won’t do surveys or talk on phone but when we trust our workers and tell them our stories, they become our voice or support us to use our voice”

Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“Respect us when we delegate someone else to talk to you on our behalf – sometimes we don’t want to talk to you. Particularly when we are in stable placements. We actually do tell our foster or kinship carers what we want and trust them to tell you. They will also tell us what happened after”

Young person (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)



Young people recognise the value of collaborative engagement, including engaging young people directly and their parents or a trusted adult in conversations. This includes young children.

"I definitely have those moments where you feel like they come in and they already have what they're going to do with you ... I guess that's kind of where you feel a bit more neglected or you don't feel like you have the right to speak up about your health and what's going on"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

"Compared to when I was a kid to now, it's definitely so much better, but there's still a lot of way to go.

Occasionally, like a specific personality, they [clinician] just don't really understand how to talk to the children ... Maybe listening a bit more, sometimes it feels like when I'm in and the doctors come in every morning ... already have a decision made before they even talk to me and see how I'm going"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

"I feel like young children could still have something to say ... Kids are going to speak up when some things wrong, no matter what age so I just think in that situation, it should be carefully listened to what they actually say. Then, as you grow up and as you become more alert to what they're saying and have the courage to actually speak up and ask ... Staff could explain and go 'do you know what this means?' and if you say 'no', they can explain it further with you"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

"When doctors walk in, I feel like it shouldn't just be to the patients, though. I know when doctors walk in and they ask me questions, I give the complete wrong answers. That's when talking to the parents I feel like is a good thing so it's not just focusing all the energy on to the patient, rather than the parents but finding a nice balance of getting everything they need to know"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

Young people also want their views to be considered by service providers.

As one young person living with a disability said:

"I don't feel safe when support workers who work with me make decisions for me. I am reliant on them for so many things. They need much better training about decision-making. There's problems with my legs but not my brain about being able to make my own decisions"

Young person with disability (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Young people call for the inclusion of young people in health research, policy, and practice.

Young people call for dedicated spaces to share their experiences and opinions about their health and wellbeing. They feel this will enable: the development of policies and services that align better with their needs and interests; the generation of research that will more accurately capture their current challenges; and services that are more welcoming and less daunting (Nguyen et al., 2021).

"Often research fails to engage youth in the process, so it falls short of reflecting the true concerns and opinions of youth"

Young person (Nguyen et al., 2021)

"Just as we have specific sectors for health, we should give the same focus and attention for young people's health and decision-making. Why? Because equal access to healthcare and information is the fundamental basis of respect and equity"

Young person (Nguyen et al., 2021)

COVID-19

Young people want acknowledgement of the significant effect of COVID-19 on their mental health and wider wellbeing, including education, employment, and relationships.

A workshop conducted with the WH&Y Commission with 26 young people aged 14 to 23 identified COVID-19 as the first of six health priorities for young people (Nguyen et al., 2021), in addition to around 15 per cent of participants listing it as a top issue of personal concern in the 2022 Mission Australia Youth Survey (Leung et al., 2022). The main messages were in relation to acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on the health and social determinants of the health of young people, including education, employment and employment prospects, relationships and social networks (Nguyen et al., 2021).

"[we] want to understand the state of youth in the COVID-19 context – how has the pandemic impacted their mental health and to what extent?"

(Nguyen et al., 2021)



Recommendations for Adolescence: Healthy

Young people have asked for support in managing their mental health through addressing stigma, improving their mental health literacy, and making mental health services more accessible.

Specific actions suggested by young people include:

- fostering more welcoming, inclusive mental health services, including recognition of specific issues for some culturally and linguistically diverse young people and for whom mental health conditions may remain taboo in their communities
- having more open discussion of mental health issues among families and communities to help reduce stigma
- improving mental health literacy among young people and their families, specifically through reorientated schools to incorporate wellbeing as part of daily learning.

Young people have asked for specific actions to make health information and services more inclusive, youth-friendly, and culturally sensitive.

Specific actions suggested by young people include:

- more diversity in narratives about young people's wellbeing
- better training for health professionals around cultural diversity, marginalisation, and mixed marginalisation. This includes awareness and support for young people who experience stigma from their families, communities or culture, and awareness and support for young people with experience of homelessness
- policy-makers, researchers, and clinicians to take a more holistic approach to health, factoring in wider health determinants and how this affects young people's ability to engage with the health system
- genuine involvement of young people in health research, policy, and practice, from conceptualisation through to implementation
- clinicians to recognise that many young people want autonomy, involvement, and choice in their healthcare, yet may prefer a trusted adult to speak on their behalf.

Young people have asked for support navigating vaping.

Specific actions suggested by young people include:

- education on the harms of vaping
- information on how to navigate social pressures
- information on where to go for help with vaping
- a greater focus on the adults selling vapes to support them around vaping.

Recommendations for Adolescence: Healthy

Young people have asked for specific actions to address their environmental health priorities.

Specific actions suggested by young people include:

- better access to healthy, sustainable, youth-friendly physical environments
- protection from harmful commercial marketing including junk food and vapes.

Based on what young people have said, we recommend stakeholders work to:

Optimise diet and exercise patterns especially among females as a primary prevention strategy to support mental health.

- Diet and exercise are strong protective factors against mental health symptoms, while participating in recreational activities such as sport and exercise can support young people manage stress and address loneliness
- While most young people care about healthy eating and exercise, these become a lower priority during adolescence. Female students, especially those entering their senior years, are less likely to engage in exercise and more likely to report school-related stress and lower psychological wellbeing
- Optimised diet and exercise throughout adolescence is an important lever to enhance mental health and wellbeing more broadly for young people.

Investigate and optimise sleep as a primary prevention strategy to support mental health.

- There is an inherent incompatibility between biological sleep cycles in adolescence and standard school hours
- Sleep has well-established implications for mental health, obesity, academic performance, attendance, behavioural problems, and cognition
- This is a potent potential lever to address population-wide problems, including obesity, mental illness, and improved educational outcomes.

Recommendations for Adolescence: Healthy

Recognise and address gaps in young people’s knowledge of recreational drugs and where to access help.

Develop comprehensive, evidence-based public health strategies to protect young people from exposure to gambling activities and promotions.

Specific actions include:

- legislation to restrict the marketing and availability of gambling products
- evidence-based public education designed to counter normalising messages about gambling

Empower young people to access health information and services.

Specific actions include:

- educating young people on their rights to medical confidentiality, even as a minor
- supporting young people on how to navigate the health system independently, including how to obtain a Medicare card, and providing information on how and where to access help for health issues including mental health, concerns about smoking, vaping, alcohol and other drug use, issues relating to gender or sexuality and sexual health
- addressing stigma through respectful, strengths-based, inclusive interactions with health information, health services and health professionals.



Learning

School Stress

School-related stress is the norm among adolescents.

School-related challenges were the top issue of personal concern for 15to-19-year-olds in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (2022), with similar concerns expressed by young people in surveys of adolescents in Queensland and Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021; Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). School-related challenges identified by respondents included academic pressure, high workload, challenges with teachers and learning difficulties, which were cited by 41.5 per cent of respondents (Leung et al., 2022). In a survey of Western Australian high school students, almost nine in 10 (88.7 per cent) students in Years 9 to 12 reported they were affected by school stress (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

“The stresses that schooling is putting upon kids. The mental illness rate has no reason to be as high as it is, and the majority of people I know link it mainly back to school and other stress that minors have no reason to be under”
Male, 17, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Young people call for specific areas of support in managing stress relating to their education.

Young people have suggested a variety of ways in which they could be better supported around their school challenges, including (Leung et al., 2022):

- more manageable workloads and a more balanced lifestyle, so that they “still have time to yourself to do things that make you happy”
- more understanding by both teachers and parents about the extent of their workloads and associated stress, including both parties putting less pressure and stress on students about their assessments
- practical supports, such as how to be more efficient and effective in their study to help facilitate a more balanced lifestyle, supported development of study timetables, and study time in class to reduce the amount of study needed at home.

“[I’m] becoming increasingly more busy over time, having to manage things such as school, work, driving and outside life. Trying to manage all of these things can be stressful and is still new to me”
Male, 17, VIC (Leung et al., 2022)

Positive experiences at school

While most young people report they enjoy school, a significant proportion do not like school and do not feel they are cared for, believed, or listened to.

In a survey of Western Australian high school students, the majority reports they enjoy learning, feel they belong, like school, and feel that teachers care, believe, and listen to them (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). However, a concerning proportion did not feel this way (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). A quarter (25 per cent) of students in Years 7 to 12 reported they did not like school, and a third of them did not feel that teachers care, believe, or listen to them.

These were notably different from reports of students in their primary school years. Among students in Years 4 to 6, for example, only 9 per cent reported not liking school compared with 25 per cent of students in Years 7 to 12 (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).

COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on education was a prominent personal challenge for young people aged 15 to 19 in the most recent Mission Australia Youth Survey (Leung et al., 2022). Nearly three quarters of young people indicated COVID-19 had a negative impact on their education compared with 62 per cent in the previous year. Online learning was found to be too demanding as the only mechanism for learning. Increased support for the transition back to face-to-face learning was flagged as an opportunity to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on learning.



Sexual education

Young people call for reform of sexual health education in schools to make it respectful, empowering, sex-positive, appropriate for sexually and gender-diverse audiences, and co-designed with young people.

Sexual education in schools was raised in multiple consultations. Concerns were raised by students about the quantity, quality, and relevance of current sexual education in schools. A survey of Year 7 to 9 students in Western Australian found (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021):

- About half feel they do not know enough about pregnancy and contraception (52.5 per cent) or sexual health (47.4 per cent), with an additional one in three (30.2 and 30.4 per cent respectively) reporting they were unsure whether they knew enough
- More than one in four (27.2 per cent) reported having learned 'nothing' about pregnancy and contraception at school, and 15 per cent reported having learned 'nothing' about sexual health
- Of those who did learn about sexual health in school, about one in three (36.7 per cent) found it very or extremely relevant and about half (52 per cent) found it somewhat relevant.

The WH&Y Commission found that "sexual health education, particularly in schools, is ineffective and does not comprehensively reflect young people's lived experiences" (Nguyen et al., 2021). The same consultation called for:

"Sex-positive, culturally sensitive and queer-appropriate educational materials that consider other factors that influence their decision to have sex (for example, feelings, peer-pressure, culture, religion) and practical solutions to address rape culture and social media's expectations of sex"

(Nguyen et al., 2021)

"More and better educative resources are required so that young people learn about the realities of sex and topics such as teen pregnancy and LGBTQIA sexual health"

(Nguyen et al., 2021)

"Reliable information and guidance that is respectful, empowering, and co-designed with youth"

(Nguyen et al., 2021)

LGBTQA+ Inclusivity

Many young people feel unsafe or uncomfortable at school due to their gender or sexuality.

A national survey of health and wellbeing among LGBTQA+[2] young people by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University in 2019 received more than 6,400 valid responses from respondents aged 14 to 21 (Hill et al., 2021). The survey indicated large proportions of LGBTQA+ young people feel unsafe or uncomfortable at school due to their gender or sexual orientation.

More than 60 per cent of participants said they had felt unsafe or uncomfortable in the past 12 months at secondary school due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Hill et al., 2021). Almost two-thirds (63.7 per cent) reported frequently hearing negative remarks regarding sexuality at their school in the past 12 months (compared with 20.2 per cent at TAFE and 15 per cent at university). More than a third (38.4 per cent) reported missing days at their educational institution in the past 12 months because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (Hill et al., 2021). This experience of missing days of education was more commonly reported by trans gender and gender-diverse participants, compared with the rest of the population.

Young people point to strong leadership as a lever to support inclusive cultures at schools.

“Support groups at school are often only able to take place because of the support of a principal. Where you don’t have a supportive principal, it trickles down to all the staff that that isn’t something that’s expected. There needs to be broader education on inclusivity and diversity leadership”

Young person, QLD (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Young people report positive effects of the Safe Schools Program and negative impacts because of defunding.

“Unless you’ve experienced having a trans person or someone at your school first-hand, many don’t actually understand that you need to really cater to what they need in terms of bathrooms and uniforms and stuff... Because my school has been putting education throughout the school on LGBT topics, through Safe Schools and stuff, they’ve put a lot of work into making sure that everyone, well the majority of people, can be open-minded and informed.”

Transgender high school student, Geelong, VIC (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“The Safe Schools Program is now voluntary for schools in Western Australia, it’s only implemented where there has been a suicide. It’s that feeling that the government does not care until there’s a death toll”

Transgender young person, Perth, WA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

[2] Despite considerable efforts, the survey was unable to recruit a sufficient sample of young people with an intersex variation. For that reason, the survey should be considered a survey of LGBTQA+ young people only. (Hill et al., 2021)

Being Culturally and Linguistically Diverse at School

Young people from linguistically diverse backgrounds highlighted the challenges to transitioning to education in English (as a foreign language):

“Because I couldn’t speak English, I couldn’t tell people how I was feeling”

Child from a refugee background, NT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“Just the way that school is set up. It’s difficult enough for someone who speaks English to learn all the content. If you spoke a completely different language and then come here and you’ve been learning English for say, two or three years, going into a system that’s designed in English is very difficult. But I feel like lots of people have just accepted it as the way it is. And I know it’s hard, and it’s meant to be difficult, nothing is going to be easy. But it’s little things like that that sometimes might mean it’s not exactly fair”

High school student from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, Yarra, VIC (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Challenges of Mainstream Education

Some young people spoke of the challenges of fitting into mainstream models of education:

“Nobody doesn’t want to learn – some people just can’t, or it’s a lot harder for them. Sometimes the system just shuts them out and says: ‘You can’t’”

High school student, alternative education program, Canberra, ACT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“Something could go wrong in your life and that’s all it takes. If you miss a turn of school, you’re so behind you can’t catch up. There’s no support and you’re going through so much stuff at the same time, you don’t quite know how to catch back up. It’s like building a wall with bricks – you’ve got your layers of bricks. If you miss, say a couple of months, you got missing bricks in your brick wall and it’s going to come tumbling down”

High school student, alternative education program, ACT (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

While young people living with disabilities are being segregated from their peers:

“When it comes to people who do have disabilities, they’re put in whole different entire classes. They’re not with any of us other students. And they get bullied for it, because of the fact that they’re now away from us, and that they can’t be in the same rooms as us, and they’re now being shifted to another part of the school. A whole area to themselves where they can’t be with us”

High school student, Mount Gambier, Regional SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Barriers to educational goals

Financial barriers, lack of skills and confidence, inadequate grades, and the impact of COVID-19 were the top barriers nominated by young people to achieve their hopes for the future.

A survey of young people aged 13 to 18 in Queensland asked them about their plans beyond school and the greatest barriers to achieving those plans (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). The top barriers to achieving their hopes were:

1. financial barriers, including the cost of education, living expenses, travel costs, and family financial issues (16 per cent)
2. personal barriers, including lack of confidence, skills, experience, and knowledge (14 per cent)
3. educational barriers, including inadequate grades and the impact of COVID-19 on their education (12 per cent)

“Not being able to pay my student fees that aren’t covered by HECS, losing confidence in my abilities, not having my family and friends support my decisions”
Female, 18, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

A difference was noted among participants aged 18 who nominated mental health challenges as their third-greatest barrier (12 per cent) (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Similar findings were noted in the Mission Australia Youth Survey of 15 to 19-year-olds where mental health, academic ability and financial difficulty were listed as the top three barriers to achieving study goals (Leung et al., 2022).

Examples of participants’ responses about their hopes and challenges include:

“I hope to finish university without any debt and to successfully get and hold a job. I hope to become a more prominent force in my community and to become more at home”
Female, 18, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

“My grades, mental health (my headspace) and finance”
South Sea Islander female, 16, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

“Financial issues are a big problem, and I’m still not sure where I want to go with my life so I need some careers help/advice, but don’t understand how to get it.”
Gender-diverse participant, 15, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

“Lack of exposure and confidence, as well as being overwhelmed by so much information that I don’t know what I truly want”
Male, 17, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Recommendations for Adolescence: Learning

Recommendations for Adolescents: Learning

Young people have asked for support navigating school-related stress and the competing demands in their lives.

School-related stress is reported as the top issue of personal concern by adolescents.

Specific requests made by young people include:

- practical supports, such as how to be more efficient and effective in their study to help facilitate a more balanced lifestyle, including assistance with the development of study timetables, and study time in class to reduce the amount of study needed at home
- more manageable workloads and a more balanced lifestyle, so that “you still have time to yourself to do things that make you happy”
- more understanding by both teachers and parents about the extent of their workloads and associated stress, including both parties putting less pressure on students about their assessment.

Young people have asked for increased inclusivity of gender-diverse and sexually diverse students in schools.

Specific actions include:

- using strong leadership as a lever to support inclusive cultures at schools
- capitalising on the positive effects of the Safe Schools Program.

Young people have asked for inclusive and more relevant sexual health education in schools.

Specific actions include:

- sexual health education in schools that is respectful, empowering, sex-positive and appropriate for sexually and gender-diverse audiences
- content that is co-designed with young people.

Based on what young people have told us, we recommend stakeholders work to:

Create learning environments that are inclusive and accommodating of young people’s diverse experiences and circumstances, including challenges arising from their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and living with a disability, or experiencing challenges such as poverty, family violence or homelessness.

Reorientate schools to support young people to thrive across all domains of wellbeing.



Participating

Having a say: overall

Young people consistently reported a desire to have a say in a variety of settings and responded positively when given opportunities to do so.

For example, as stated by an Aboriginal high school student who participated in an Aboriginal forum on youth wellbeing:

“I enjoyed speaking at the forum and being able to speak to the leaders and role models who are making a difference and hearing their ideas”

Aboriginal high school student, Northern Territory (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018b)

“After all, when did we decide that age was equal to wisdom? It is clear that a man can die having known nothing, and children younger than me have seen and known more pain than most of us ever shall. Young people have opinions, and we are the face of the future”

Female, 15, (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021)

Many young people do not feel heard in their families, schools, communities or by government.

Children and young people consistently raised their lack of influence on decisions that affect them from within their family, at schools, in communities and in government (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018). They described feeling:

“Excluded”; “frustrated”; “helpless”; “invisible”; “powerless to make change”

Young people in more vulnerable settings, such as socioeconomically disadvantaged and regional areas particularly commented on feeling:

“Worthless”; “irrelevant”; “unappreciated”

One young person living with a disability pointed out that people’s attitudes are greater barriers than the disability:

“It is often the attitudes of people and the assumptions they make that hold you back, more than it is the actual illness or disability”

Young person living with chronic illness and disability
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Children and young people are more likely to voice their concerns when they are empowered, listened to, and believed in institutional settings (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018).

Young people challenge the presumption that adults understand their views and experiences.

In the same consultation, young people challenged the presumption that adults were able to understand their views and experiences. As stated by high school students in Tasmania and Queensland (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018):

**“Some adults say, ‘I’ve been through what you’re going through’.
But that’s at a completely different time”**

“They were kids, but we are the kids now, and it’s changed”

“They probably haven’t experienced things that we have in their lifetime”

One young person noted the sudden transition from decision-making led by adults to their independence at the age of 18:

**“It’s going from having no say ... and then turning 18 and being able to vote
and now you’re deciding about what happens to the country.
Then it’s a Big Say and a Big Opinion”**

Young person (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Having a say: at home

In a Western Australian survey, four in five students agreed they were involved in making decisions that affect them at home (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021). However, gender differences were apparent. Fewer female high school students reported they were involved in decisions, with 30 per cent reporting they often do not feel listened to if they have something to say. These gender differences were also apparent for freedom to travel to places without adult supervision, with female high school students less likely than males to be allowed to go to places other than school without an adult (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021).



Having a say: in communities

Most young people do not feel listened to by their communities, particularly those who are gender-diverse, who are living with a mental or emotional health condition, older adolescents, and females.

A survey of Queenslanders aged 13 to 18 indicated a significant proportion do not feel listened to by their communities (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Overall, just 23 per cent of participants reported they felt listened to by communities. This varied by age, gender, and mental and emotional health; males were more likely than females to feel listened to (30 per cent vs 21 per cent), just 12 per cent of gender-diverse participants felt listened to, and 13 per cent of those with a mental or emotional health condition felt listened to. Somewhat surprisingly, younger participants were more likely to respond feeling listened to: 31 per cent of 13-year-olds agreed they were listened to compared with 16 per cent of 18-year-olds. This was despite more positive responses by participants that adults in their life were friendly to young people (52 per cent) and that they belonged in their communities (59 per cent).

Having a say: across government, research, and services

Many young people feel it is important the government listens to them.

A survey of children and young people with additional vulnerabilities (complex family needs, family violence, disability or carer, and First Nations young people with disadvantage) found 87 per cent of those aged 13 to 17 felt it was 'very important' that 'the government listens to what you say' (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

"If the issue is about us, we should be able to have a say"

Young person (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

A child living with disability recognised the right of all children to have a say in issues that affect them:

"Every child is supposed to be able to have the same opportunities as every other child. And if for some reason they can't, maybe because they have a special condition, then it is the job of the government to support that child so that they can still have the same opportunities"

Young person living with chronic illness and disability
(Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Yet young people did not always feel visible to government:

"Government-wise, no one exists beyond the city limits"

Young person in Mount Gambier, SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Aboriginal young people spoke of the importance of Aboriginal-led change in both government and non-government settings:

"Before the Parliament creates and decides on a new law, it NEEDS to be approved by the Aboriginal Elders who form the group"

Aboriginal high school student, Perth, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018b)

"I believe there needs to be an Aboriginal-led group to directly influence the government and the decisions it makes"

Aboriginal high school student, Perth, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018b)

"There needs to be Aboriginal-led and run organisations to make change and empower our mob and give knowledge to grassroots mobs"

Aboriginal high school student, Perth, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2018b)



Formal participation in issues that affect them can be rewarding and empowering for young people.

“I think it’s important that young people are valued, their time is valued in the same way as other consumers”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council Women’s and Children’s Hospital Adelaide, SA (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

For example, a young member of the Youth Cancer Action Board at a Victorian adolescent and young adult cancer centre said:

“We don’t get paid for our time, which is completely fine. It’s a volunteer job and I’m more than happy to be part of something that can make a really big change, so, you know instead of being paid for our time, seeing that result of you know, creating a policy that’s going to impact so many young people is a lot better than getting paid”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“Talking about my own experience in a way that’s really helping others ... almost like a silver lining in a way. But also hearing other people’s voices on the Board, hearing others’ experiences and sometimes you share common issues and that’s a really good moment of realisation that you’re not alone”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“A lot of us have been to different healthcare facilities and had different treatments, different ways in which they’ve been looked after, so coming together and discussing those events that we’ve been through and coming to an agreement and saying ‘I’ve been through a similar situation, we can improve it in this way’”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“I wanted the opportunity to give back to an organisation that’s been supporting my whole life”

Young person, Youth Council, Sydney Children’s Hospital Network, NSW (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

Others indicated they applied for positions on the Youth Cancer Action Board because they wanted to use their **“experience to help others”** and **“contribute to making change”** and to give **“back to the hospital that had given so much”** (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021).

“Probably my favourite part of the youth advisory council is just having that potential to like actually help people, especially when we’re actually getting feedback. I think it’s really valuable to know we can actually potentially effect change on that feedback which I think it’s a good feeling and it’s also useful”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Perth Children’s Hospital, WA (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“If every child in the hospital knew about it [the YAC] and knew that they could come to us and tell us their issues, and we can like bring them forth with the amazing power we have and being able to be heard, that’s something that I think is what we need to improve, people actually knowing who we are and knowing that we’re here for them and that we can make changes for them”

Young person Youth Advisory Council, Perth Children’s Hospital, WA (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

Other benefits from participation include a sense of community with those with shared experiences.

“I’m not completely alone in my medical experience because when you have been in and out of clinics and doctors’ offices your whole life, it’s really easy to feel quite alienated from friends or family that haven’t really had to deal with that. It’s nice that we’ve got a group of people who understand that ... there’s a community of people who are just as involved as you are in terms of their health.”

Young person, Youth Council, Sydney

“I wanted to kind of still be connected with the Children’s hospital in a way because I didn’t want to leave that Network and that family”

Young person, Youth Council, Sydney Children’s Hospital Network, NSW (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

Young people find formal participation useful in developing new practical skills.

“I’ve learnt more from the board than I actually thought I would – we learnt things like how to take minutes and follow agendas and things that proper Boards do because that’s exactly what we are. I think that I’ve gained a lot from the Board... Not just from helping others and having that wonderful experience of having to use our voice to help like-minded people”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“There’s a lot of working with other people and other organisations which is really good. You can develop your different skills and things so that was a thing that I really enjoyed about the group”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“I think this platform builds everyone’s confidence and builds self-esteem and communication skills”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Women’s and Children’s Hospital Adelaide, SA (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“You’re exposed to professional language, in a professional setting before you’re in uni... You’re ahead of everyone ... a lot of us I think are going to end up in health, like career... you’re a step ahead because you’ve already had this experience”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Women’s and Children’s Hospital Adelaide, SA (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)



Having a say: in the child protection system

Feeling not seen or heard was common among participants with experience of the child-protection system:

“You guys are sitting here, and you guys are trying to hear our story, [but] ... How many people work for the government? In the youth and child protection sector? A lot of people. But I only see two people in front of me asking for our opinions?”

Young advocate with out-of-home care experience (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

Young Aboriginal advocates for children in the child-protection system held similar views, stating that Aboriginal children and young people are:

“Just another statistic for funding, to be honest”

Young Aboriginal advocate for children in out-of-home care (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

And that addressing their issues is about:

“Ticking a box”

Young Aboriginal advocate for children in out-of-home care (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)



Having a say: in the health system

Young people responded positively to opportunities for formal engagement in health care services.

OnTrak at Peter Mac is a Victorian Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Service with a variety of dedicated mechanisms to facilitate the incorporation of young peoples' voices in healthcare journeys. These include the Youth Cancer Action Board (voluntary) and the Youth Participation and Engagement Internship (full-time paid position) which both require lived experience of adolescent cancer and at age 26 or below.

"At the beginning of the internship, I developed a brochure on the rights of young people about youth participation – what that means, talking about the importance of actually having young people involved in all the decision-making, to get involved with the service. It's meant to be Victoria-specific, the audience is healthcare professionals ... The healthcare professionals that we have given that out [to] have come and said 'Wow I didn't even think about that, I'll certainly be going to OnTrak at Peter Mac or young people to advise on certain things'"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

"The role allows the young person to build skills in the area of youth participation but also to help the service ... In my role I come up with a lot of my own ideas, I think what is best for young people and I put a lot of my thoughts and ideas into projects which then go through management to be approved, but the sort of point of the role is for the young person to build up their skills but to also advocate for young people"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

Young people wanted the consultation undertaken with them to be done meaningfully and not just in a 'tokenistic' way.

"Probably my favourite part of the Youth Advisory Council is just having that potential to actually help people, especially when we're getting feedback. I think it's really valuable to know we can actually make change.

It's a good feeling and it's also useful"

Young person (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

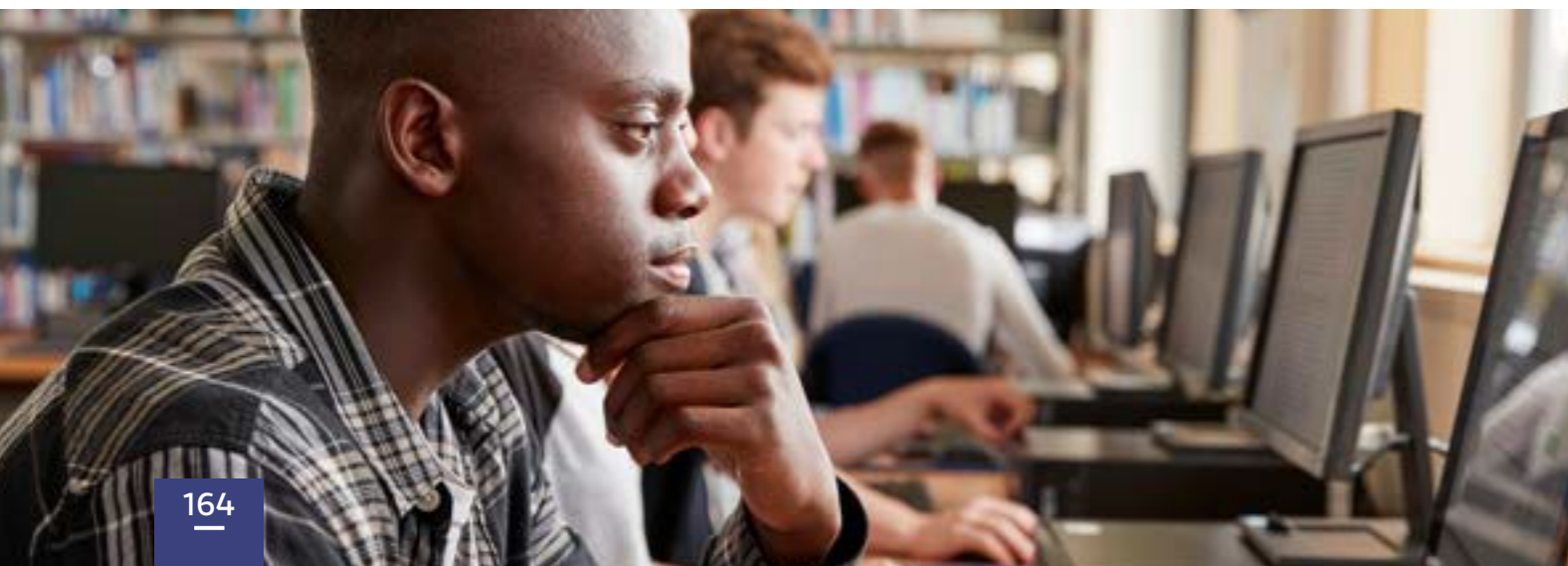
Young people would like to be informed about how their participation and feedback has been used to create change.

"I think it's great that we can participate with other people's projects. However, I feel many of these projects we partake in are quite similar in nature. There is a lack of harmony between projects. We sometimes feel bombarded with many external projects and then we don't really have that time to work on our own ideas. We provide a lot of feedback, but we never hear back from those who ask for our advice. Was our feedback valuable? Does it create positive changes? ... It would be courteous to respond with an update. An update helps me feel like I'm being a part of change and working towards something that can improve the lives of those whose lives are touched by Sydney Children's Hospital. It would motivate me even more and help to sustain the drive in the Youth Council members"

Young person, Youth Council Sydney Children's Hospital Network, NSW
(Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)

"We get to know what happened to our voice. We get the feedback from them. Sometimes it's a hard copy or it's just like verbal ... The projects we work on, you can tell people genuinely want us there"

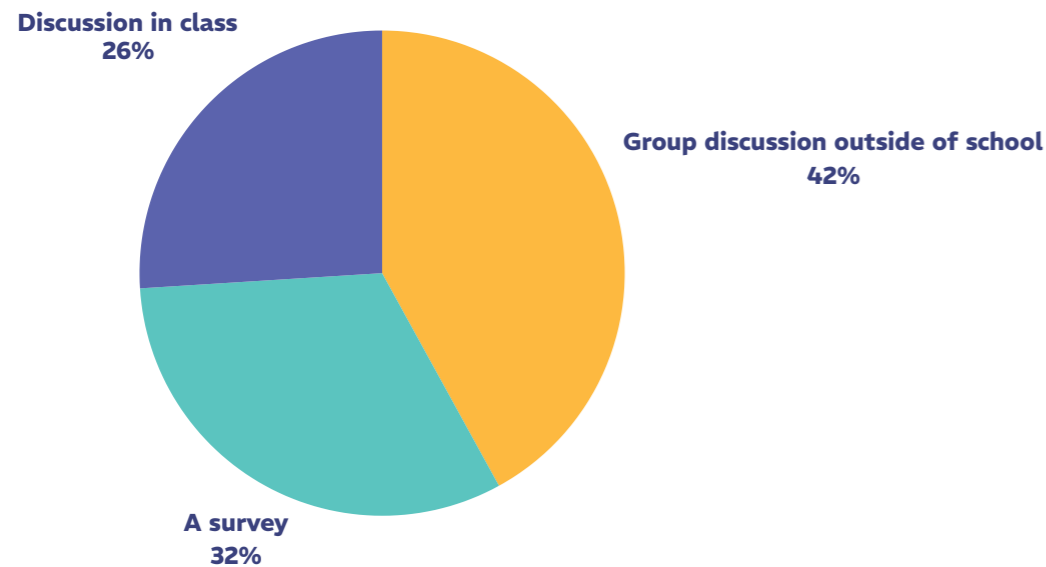
Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Women's and Children's Hospital Adelaide, SA
(Starlight Children's Foundation, 2021)



Having a say: the way forward

Young people have ideas on how they can participate.

In consultations with the Australian Human Rights Commission, young people aged 13 to 17 suggested their three preferred avenues for sharing their views on how to keep kids safe (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021):



Young people call for dedicated spaces to share their views.

Policies, research, and services are developed by adults and, at times, do not align with the needs and interests of young people. In a youth forum hosted by the WH&Y Commission, young people indicated that improved participation through dedicated spaces to share their experiences and opinions will enable services, information, and policies to be better tailored to meet their needs. Particular mention was made of research that may not reflect their current challenges (Nguyen et al., 2021).

“Often research fails to engage youth in the process, so it falls short of reflecting the true concerns and opinions of youth”

Young advocate (Nguyen et al., 2021, p. 15)

Young people appreciate opportunities to develop and drive their own initiatives as well as consult on expert-led initiatives.

“We’ve been trying to change that from Youth Advisory Council to just Youth Council so that we’re doing more than just advising and helping on other people’s projects, so that we can take action ourselves, and others will see us not as someone to talk to about their projects but someone to come to if they were looking for any new projects to work on, and it will help us expand as a group a lot more”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Sydney Children’s Hospital Network, NSW (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

Young people need participation to be meaningful and outcome-focused rather than tokenistic.

“You have to think about how you actually get young people to participate”

High school student in Mount Gambier, regional SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“We weren’t really like sinking our teeth into anything. It wasn’t really something that was like we were directly impacting so a lot of members felt like it was quite superficial”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“... make sure young people’s voices are heard within the hospital setting, and not just be heard but be taken up and embraced by the hospital”

Young person, Youth Advisory Council, Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021).

Young people appreciated reimbursement for incurred expenses to help circumvent barriers to participation.

“For me, I have a physical disability and my bus stop is quite far from my house so catching public transport for me is quite challenging so having that money means if I can’t get dropped off there, I can catch an Uber or I can park there”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

Young people recognise that mechanisms of engagement must be age-appropriate.

For example, when discussing the lower age limit for a hospital youth advisory council, young people made the following observations:

“I don’t think our members should be younger than 13 or 14 ... Personally, looking back on my pre-teen years, I would have found the conversations overwhelming and I would have felt unable to contribute to meetings. I don’t think I would have felt empowered or capable and I don’t want someone to join our committee and feel like they’re not worthy of being there”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

“I joined when I was 12 and it was very confronting. I really struggled to keep up in meetings, it was a very big learning experience for me, but I think I would’ve been able to adjust a lot better had I been a year older. I think that definitely no younger than 13 and certainly no older than 21”

Young person (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2021)

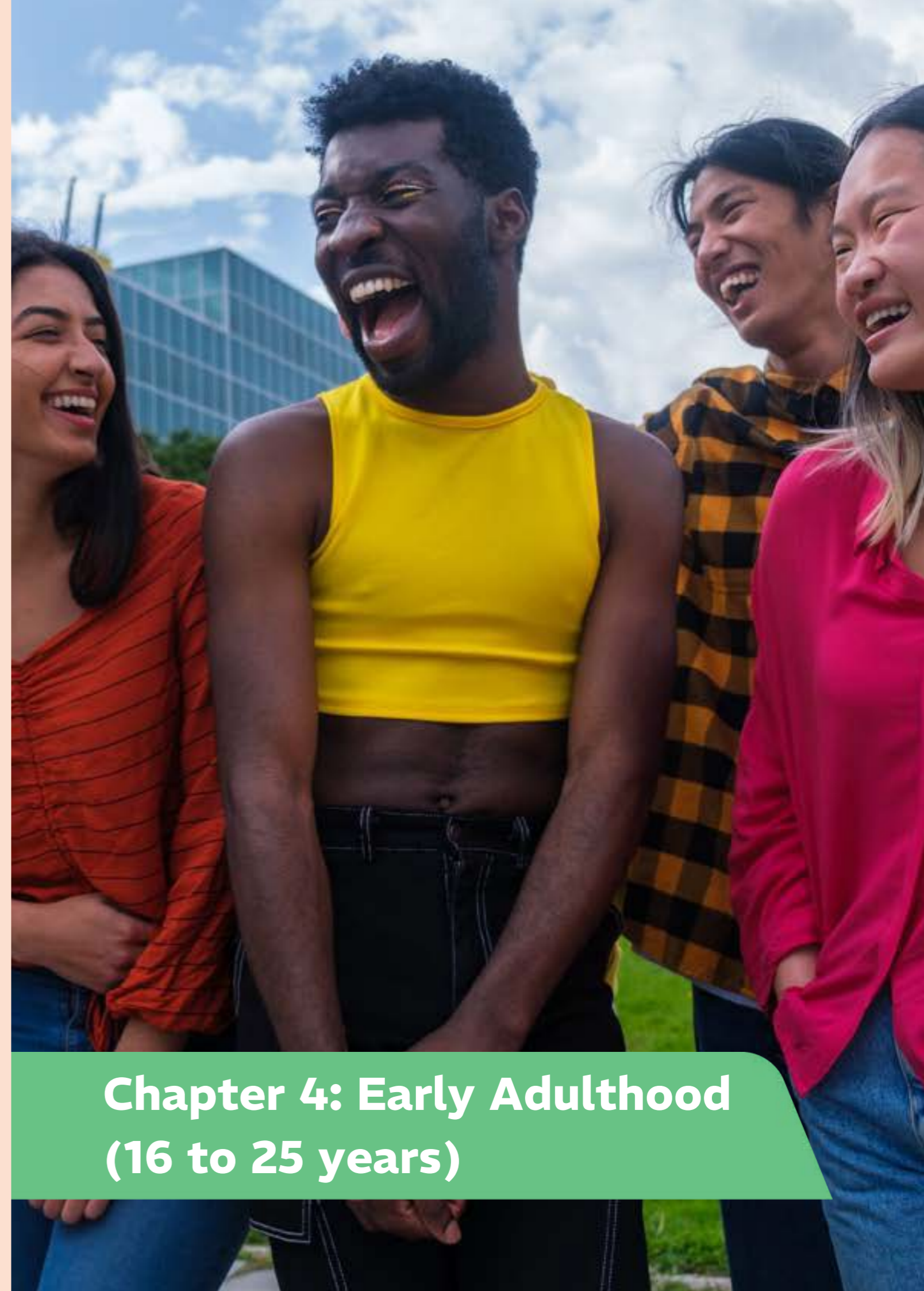
Recommendations for Adolescence: Learning

Young people have suggested a variety of ways to enhance their participation in research design and implementation, policy development and service provision.

Specific actions include:

- Meaningful participation that is not 'tokenistic'
- Feedback on how their participation has been used to create change
- Dedicated spaces to share their views
- A combination of opportunities to drive their own initiatives, as well as support expert-led initiatives
- Young people were happy not to receive payment for their contributions, but appreciate reimbursement for incurred costs such as travel, which can improve accessibility.

Routinely embed the voices of children and young people in communities, research, policy, and services.



Chapter 4: Early Adulthood (16 to 25 years)

Introduction

Adolescence through to early adulthood is a time of remarkable opportunity. The years between the ages of 10 to about 25 mark a period of rapid growth, development and learning as we discover and adapt to the world around us (FrameWorks Institute, 2020).



Our adolescent years - from around age 10 to about 25 - are a period of remarkable growth and opportunity.



We discover, learn from, and adapt to the world around us, forging our sense of who we are and who we aspire to be.



We learn to make decisions, manage our emotions, and create deeper connections with peers and others in our communities.



We also build resilience and develop interests, passions, and meaningful goals that shape our adult lives.

Figure 11: The Core Science of Adolescent Development (Source: UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent, 2020)

Adolescence through to early adulthood, like the early years, is a critical time for brain development. Brain remodelling happens intensively during adolescence and early adulthood, continuing until a young person is in their mid-20s (Raising Children Network Australia, 2021). The neural connections no longer needed are pruned, and the connections that are activated most frequently are preserved and strengthened. It's a case of "use it or lose it". The high plasticity of the adolescent brain heightens the effect of environmental influences. This opens the door to both positive and potentially harmful influences.

During early adulthood, teenage brains make their final transition through to full maturity. Adolescents and young adults are learning to think with the front of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex. This is the part of the brain that responds to situations with good judgment and an awareness of long-term consequences. Changes in this part of the brain continue until age 25 or so. Because the prefrontal cortex is still developing, teenagers and young adults may tend to rely on a part of the brain called the amygdala to make decisions and solve problems especially during periods of stress. The amygdala is associated with emotions, impulses, and instinctive behaviour.

This developmental phase coincides with a variety of transitions, including transition out of high school and into tertiary education and/or employment, transition to financial independence, moving away from home, and often coupled with a change in support networks.

During adolescence and early adulthood, we are primed to learn from, and give back to, our environments in ways that benefit our whole society. However, the social systems that serve young people during this developmentally sensitive period are not always structured to provide optimal support for learning and positive adaptation. In some cases, barriers to successful development – such as poverty, discrimination, and earlier trauma – can reinforce inequities and amplify the risk of negative outcomes (FrameWorks Institute, 2020).

Therefore, adults working to support young people in later adolescence and early adulthood must foster systems to ensure that all adolescents have the support to explore, discover, and become a force for good in our communities and society. When the policies, programs and people that serve adolescents are aligned to meet the developmental needs of this period, we ensure opportunities for today's adolescents that will benefit the communities they will someday lead (FrameWorks Institute, 2020).

There are relatively few studies undertaken with young people aged 16 to 25 that encompass all or most of The Nest domains. One such flagship report is the Australian Youth Barometer, which has conducted two annual surveys of young Australians aged 18 to 24 since 2021. Aside from that, most of the literature reviewed for the 16 to 25-year age-group were either academic studies looking at specific issues impacting specific cohorts in the age-group or other pieces encompassing a broader age-group of children and young people, such as those conducted by various Children's Commissioners. Reviewed together, these have informed consistent themes in the Nest domains for young people aged 16 to 25.

Relationships & Belonging

Young people gain a sense of belonging from a variety of sources, including family, friends, workplace, housing, and recreational activities, and through common lived experiences.

Developmentally, young people in their teens to early-20s have strong links to, and emphasis on, their peer and friendship groups. The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer explored young people’s relationships with family and friends, their romantic partnerships, and their sense of belonging (Walsh et al., 2022). Interviews with the same cohort (18 to 24 years), emphasised friendship groups were the most common source of belonging.

“I used to do improv, and I felt like I belonged there... I was able to contribute something positively in the group, and I was able to make people laugh, I love everyone there... I could be more authentically me”
Non-binary person, 21, WA (Walsh et al., 2022)

“I knew that I had always felt a little bit off about the friends I had, and I just felt like I was trying to fit in. But with these guys, I felt like I didn’t even need to fit in, and I think that was like, I felt like I belonged there because I just felt so comfortable. Like, they are still my friends now”
Male, 20, WA (Walsh et al., 2022)

“When I am in queer spaces, a lot of the time I can feel like I belong there. When I am being respected and understood by the people in my surroundings, I can feel comfortable there”
Female, 24, NSW (Walsh et al., 2022)

“I think that I’m pretty lucky with the people that I’m surrounded with, I guess. I’m really close with my family. I’ve got two sisters, similar age, and my oldest sister, I’ve always just, anything can always go to her, and I never feel like there’s nothing that I can’t tell her, so I feel like, yes, I’ve got like a good support system, and my partner as well, and friends.”
Female, 23, VIC (Walsh et al., 2022)

Participants discussed how relationships and a robust sense of belonging also underscored various domains of their lives, such as the workplace, mental health, housing, and finances. Several noted they felt a sense of belonging and connection with their colleagues in the workplace (Walsh et al., 2022).

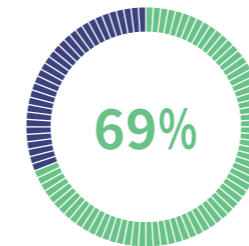
There is room to improve sense of belonging across young people’s communities.

While the majority of young people (60 per cent) said they ‘often’ or ‘very often’ felt like they belonged when they spent time with family, and a similar proportion (57 per cent) felt the same when they spent time with friends, a significant proportion did not (Walsh et al., 2022).

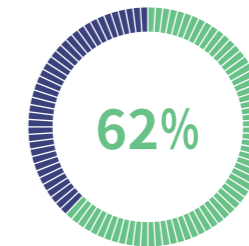
Accessing Services

Young people with vulnerabilities (including those with complex needs, disability, experience of maltreatment, and First Nations young people) identify safe accommodation and mental health supports as the most important things to keep them safe.

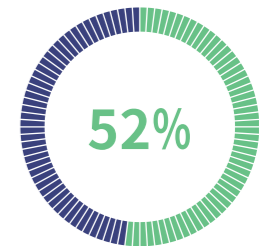
In a study by the Australian Human Rights Commission on keeping Australia’s children, young people and families safe and well, young people aged 18 to 25 engaged in services and supports^[3] ranked the following as the most important services and supports for them (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021):



1. a safe place to go when needed (69 per cent, n=36)



2. mental health services (62 per cent, n=32)

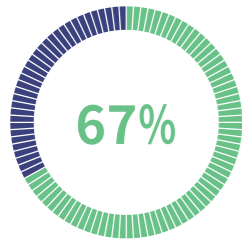


3. help with basic needs (like food and clothes) (52 per cent %, n=27).

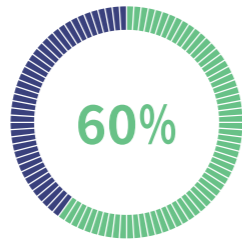
^[3] The study recruited young people engaged in services and supports by organisations such as youth and/or family-support services, family and domestic violence refuges, young parent support services, youth detention centres and drop-in centres.

Treating everyone equally, being easy to get to and friendly people were nominated as the most important qualities of services.

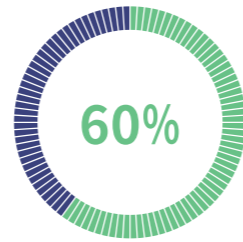
When asked about the most important things that make a service or support helpful, young people aged 18 to 25 ranked the following (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021):



1. treating everyone equally and with respect (67 per cent, n=35)



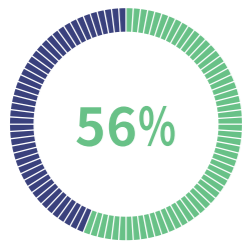
2. it is easy to get to (60 per cent, n=31)



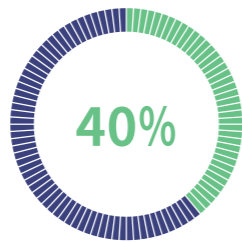
3. friendly people (60 per cent, n=31)

Cost, transport, waiting times and not being listened to were the biggest barriers identified by young people to engaging with the services and supports they need.

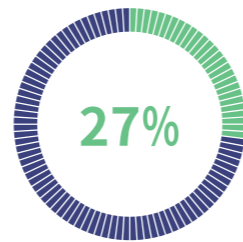
When asked about the most important reasons young people don't use services or supports, those aged 18 to 25 ranked the following (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021):



1. costs too much (56 per cent, n=29)



2. too hard to get to (40 per cent, n=21)



3. a long wait to get in and they don't listen to us (27 per cent, n=14).

"I was supposed to see a psychologist in March and I'm still waiting – about a month ago, I went to [mental health service] and asked the admin for an appointment. They only had appointments if you are really struggling like if you have psychosis or something"

Young parent, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

"We don't need a new program or another service, we need the right money and resources for the programs that are actually working and doing better for the youth and community"

Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

"I had to ask for my own referral to the refuge I heard about"

Young parent, ACT (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

Transitions

Early adulthood is a time of many transitions. Young people have described a lack of understanding of the difficulties they can experience when having to cope with simultaneous changes throughout their lives.

Young people are required to navigate many changes throughout their lives. Transitions experienced in late adolescence to early adulthood by most young people include:

- transitioning out of high school and into further education, training, or employment
- transitioning out of home into independent living
- transitioning to financial independence
- transitioning to self-managed healthcare.

A report by Orygen, the National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health, about supporting young people to navigate life transitions highlights there is little understanding about the frequency, impact and supports required for common transitions (Fava & Baker, 2022).

As the timing and pressures associated with each transition can be impacted by global trends and events, young people are required to navigate unique and unprecedented challenges (Fava & Baker, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to work with young people to understand the impacts of different transitions and to address their evolving support needs. Young people have also spoken of the impacts of broader changes and transitions they have experienced, including changes in friendships and relationships. The report adopts a broad focus on the opportunities that are available to prevent or minimise distress for young people during times of change.

Young people also specify transitions, including:

- transitioning from the paediatric to the adult healthcare system (especially for young people with chronic conditions)
- transitioning out of the out-of-home care system.

While these transitions can be expected, beneficial and rewarding, they can also represent challenging and difficult experiences that have far-reaching impacts. Transitions are often connected or overlap. For example, entry to post-secondary education potentially requires a move away from home, changes to support networks, and becoming financially independent.

Young people have described a lack of understanding around the difficulties they can experience when having to cope with simultaneous changes throughout their lives (Fava & Baker, 2022).



Transitioning out of out-of-home care

The content below contains quotes from people with lived experience. Some readers may find this content distressing.

Young people indicated that they are inadequately supported when transitioning from out-of-home to care to independence.

A critical time for a young person in out-of-home care (OoHC) is the transition to adulthood when, on turning 18 years old, they have traditionally been exited out of the system. This transition to independent living has been highlighted as a challenge, given the expectation that at 18 (or younger), a young person with care experience can live independently and fulfil the obligations of an adult, without the support structures of other 18-year-olds (Fairhurst, 2015). Indeed, poor outcomes for young people who leave OoHC at the age of 18 or younger have been well established – children with care experience are one of the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and traumatised groups in Australia (Barker, Harris, & Brittle, 2022).

“People aren’t even aware of their after-care plans, if they’ve got them, they aren’t aware of the services and support networks”

Young Aboriginal care leaver, NSW (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

“I didn’t know cooking, cleaning, nothing. I was an anorexic. I didn’t know how to chop a tomato. How am I supposed to be independent? You’re kicked out when you don’t know anything. All I knew how to do is make crack, man. Sorry, but they didn’t give me any of those life skills. And you never feel worthy enough for a normal human being, which is somebody with two parents. Even to this day, I’m 21, and I don’t feel normal. And I’ve been out of care for four years. I’m still a gone kid. I’ve broken the cycle, I’m a youth worker now, I’m not on drugs and I’m not a crackhead anymore. But at the end of the day, it still haunts you.

Government life never, ever, ever will get out of your system”

Care leaver, 21, SA (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018)

CREATE Foundation stresses that ‘leaving care’ is a flawed concept. Given the consistently poor outcomes associated with care-leavers globally, the notion of ‘leaving care’ requires a rethink, by removing the threat of a necessary forced ‘transition’ and the anxiety and uncertainty generated as a result (McDowall, 2020).

Support for transitioning from care: , help accessing resources, support for mental health and wellbeing, and guidance for independent living, are among the critical issues nominated by young people with care experience, to improve the care system (McDowall, 2020).

As of 2023, every state and territory government in Australia has agreed to provide young people in foster care with support to the age of 21 (Schubert, 2023), due in large part to the efforts of the Home Stretch Campaign. However, it is known that supports for young people differ between the Australian states and territories, and that accessing housing is problematic. Therefore, it has been recommended that the Australian Government provides support in this area, and governments generally need to commit to making housing stock a priority to give young people a better start to adult life (Home Stretch Campaign, 2023).

Experience of child maltreatment

The landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study was released in early 2023 and is the first nationally representative rate of all five types of child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence) across the population from age 16 to 65 (Haslam et al., 2023).

The survey included 3,500 young people aged 16 to 24, with ‘deeply sobering’ findings.

The rates of maltreatment for today’s young adults are higher than findings for the general Australian population.

More than 40 per cent of young people aged 16 to 24 have experienced multi-type maltreatment and one in four (25.4 per cent) young people had experienced three to five types of maltreatment. Exposure to domestic violence and emotional abuse are the most common types of maltreatment experienced by young people.

Child maltreatment is a gendered problem.

Girls disproportionately experience maltreatment, particularly high rates of sexual abuse and emotional abuse. Girls are 2.4 more times likely to experience child sexual abuse than boys. More than one in three females aged 16 to 24 experienced child sexual abuse (35.2 per cent). For males this figure is 14.5 per cent.

Experience of child maltreatment is strongly associated with the presence of mental health disorders.

The 16 to 24-year-olds who experience child maltreatment are 2.9 times more likely to have a mental health disorder compared with those who did not experience maltreatment. Young people who experience child maltreatment were more likely to experience all mental disorders assessed, with effects highest for PTSD (5.8 times more likely).

The report emphasises that Australia requires a national, coordinated approach to this public health imperative, with Australian Government agencies collaborating with states and territories, through financial resourcing and policy frameworks, supported by a new model of sustainable national governance architecture to ensure child maltreatment is treated as an ongoing national concern.



Climate change, natural hazards, and disaster risk

Many young Australians are deeply concerned about climate change and feel very strongly that Australia is not doing enough to reduce carbon emissions.

In 2020, the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience conducted a youth survey on climate change and disaster risk with approximately 1,500 children and young people aged 10 to 24 (The Red Cross, 2020). Most of the respondents were aged between 16 and 24.[4] There has not been a national consultation with young people on climate change and disaster risk of this scope before (The Red Cross, 2020).

Reviewed by age group, more than 80 per cent of participants aged over 16 indicated that they were concerned or extremely concerned about climate change, compared with less than 60 per cent of those aged under 12 (The Red Cross, 2020).

“The Australian Government plays a pivotal role in supporting each and every resident of this country and to make sure that everyone’s protected from whatever danger that is approaching, therefore, we put a lot of hopes for the government to initiate any action necessary for the sake of climate change and the future”
21-year-old, VIC (The Red Cross, 2020)

“Listen to the Indigenous Australian communities. Listen to the scientists. Take on their advice. Be determined and driven to make each Australian life eco-friendly lives. Work towards introducing new legislation and use renewable energy to reduce the effects of climate change. Consult with children regularly and ensure they are doing well mentally with the natural hazards occurring”
19-year-old, WA (The Red Cross, 2020)



[4] Although there is no breakdown of the results by specific age groups, a pie chart showing the age distribution of participants (p. 10) indicates that around 60% were aged between 16 and 24 years. (The Red Cross, 2020)

These findings were echoed in the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer, in which climate change and the environment emerged as concerns – up to 95 per cent of young people agreed with the need to address climate change (Walsh et al., 2021b). A member of the Youth Reference Group reflected on these results:

“... I think this report also reflects that climate change is a big concern for young people. In our generation, we are going to be most affected by climate change. We all say that it is so difficult not to pollute our planet, but we are already facing sea-level rising, heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, and so on. Governments should take action to combat climate change and protect our environment”
Youth Reference Group member, 18-24 years, (Walsh et al., 2021b)

First Nations young people speak specifically of ‘climate justice’[5], which acknowledges the differential impacts of climate change on people based on age, gender, race, and other factors. They also call for trust in their contributions and involvement in generating solutions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Forum representatives who gathered at the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices Summit) released a Youth Statement articulating First Nations youth priorities, which included climate justice (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023b).

“Some of our pressing concerns are First Nations gender justice, climate justice, our self-determination and our cultural integrity in the digital world”
Wiyi Yani U Thangani Youth Statement (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023b)



[5] Climate justice – united nations sustainable development (May 2019) United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/climate-justice/> (Accessed: 04 October 2023).

Narratives about climate change are impacting the mental health of young people.

Along with the serious threats posed by climate change to population health, young people are particularly vulnerable to climate-related mental health issues. In a study on the link between climate change and mental health among young people (Gunasiri et al., 2022), young people aged 18 to 24 were interviewed to explore mental-health promotion issues related to climate change and promote their participation in nature-based interventions, climate action and empowering social media engagement.

Interviewees spoke about how negative social media stories about climate change serve to worsen young people's mental health, including feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness because they [perceived they] were not in positions to mitigate climate-change impacts:

“... the reality is there's always gonna be negative new stories or things that are [on social media], I guess, back steps to what you are trying to achieve. And I think if you are constantly updated with that, it makes you feel, um, that's when you start to go like, 'Oh great. Like what am I even trying to do? Is it, what I'm doing, is it having an effect?'”

18-24-year-old (Gunasiri et al., 2022)

“... it's a bit intense so I'm trying not to follow it, as much as it's so important, I don't want to like dull my feed out by the negative impacts of climate change”

18-24-year-old (Gunasiri et al., 2022)

“I guess like having the courage to just get rid of that sort of negativity and finding that balance between the negative stuff and realistic issues that you want to be aware of, but not like going too deep down the rabbit hole where you can just sort of get into this doom and gloom sort of mindset and feel like nothing is good”

18-24-year-old (Gunasiri et al., 2022)

Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods co-designed by young people, the study found feelings of hope and mobilisation were apparent through young people's exposure to optimistic climate reports on social media, connecting with nature and through proactive climate action. The authors assert in the future, public health practitioners and climate activists can engage young people in positive climate-related mental health promotion through nature-based interventions and climate action (Gunasiri et al., 2022).

Recommendations for Young Adults: Valued, Loved, & Safe

We recommend stakeholders:

Understand and provide support for common life transitions, including transition from school into post-secondary education or training, financial independence, and self-managed healthcare.

- Work with young people to understand the impacts of different transitions and to address their evolving support needs, including a broad focus on the opportunities that are available to prevent or minimise distress for young people during times of change.
- Respond to an identified gap in the research around building a sense of belonging and supporting social-emotional development in virtual (educational) environments.

Empower young people with lived experience of out-of-home care to transition to thriving independence.

- Among the critical issues nominated by young people with care experience to improve the care system are:
 - Support for transitioning from care, e.g., help accessing resources
 - Support for mental health and wellbeing
 - Guidance for independent living.
- Supporting the age of children leaving out-of-home care to 21 years requires investment in additional services to support this approach across all Australian jurisdictions.
- It also requires government to implement policies to prepare children to transition to independence and invest in quality monitoring of agencies' compliance with these policies.
- In addition to every Australian state and territory government providing young people in foster care with support to the age of 21 years, the Homestretch Campaign (among others) has recommended the Australian Government provide support in accessing housing, and governments generally committing to making housing stock a priority to give young people a better start to adult life.

Recommendations for Young Adults: Valued, Loved, & Safe

Ensure all young people have equitable access to the services they need to keep them safe.

Specific recommendations include:

- service providers that receive government funding ensure that children, young people, and families with disabilities are supported to navigate the services and supports they need
- services for diagnosing disability in children and young people are affordable, accessible, and available to diagnose in a timely manner
- all children and young people, including those in rural and remote areas, have access to a range of safe community spaces outside school, such as libraries, youth clubs and sporting facilities
- community services for children and young people are inclusive and promote cultural safety. Where appropriate these programs should be integrated or co-located with schools to facilitate school engagement.

Prioritise addressing climate change and climate anxiety among young people.

- Government action to combat climate change, protect the environment and do more to reduce carbon emissions.
- Public health practitioners and climate activists can engage young people in positive climate-related mental health promotion through nature-based interventions and climate action.



Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

LGBTQA+ young people

Young people who identify as LGBTQA+ describe experiences that foster a positive sense of self-identity.

A survey of young people aged 14 to 21 who identify as LGBTQA+ asked participants: 'What makes you feel good about yourself?' (Hill et al., 2021). Several themes emerged that speak to the creativity and confidence of LGBTQA+ young people, as well as some of the challenges they are still seeking. In total, more than 4,700 participants wrote short answers describing what makes them feel good about themselves as a young LGBTQA+ person. Key themes that emerged in their responses include:

- value of social connectivity to friends and family
- romantic connection and partnerships
- satisfaction derived from creativity and achieving
- importance of affirmation from within (how I feel about myself)
- being affirmed by others (how I am seen and treated by my social world)
- having an influence on others and effecting positive change within their community.

“When I’m laughing with my friends and I’m able to forget anxiety and depression because I love them and they make me happy”

17-year-old, WA (Hill et al., 2021)

“My boyfriend telling me how masculine I am and pointing out changes from HRT that I don’t notice”

20-year-old (Hill et al., 2021)

“Wearing clothes that are androgynous and affirm my gender (or lack of gender)”

22-year-old, VIC (Hill et al., 2021)

“When people use correct pronouns”

20-year-old, NT (Hill et al., 2021)

These findings offer valuable insight into the activities and practices valued by young people, including those that affirm their sexuality and gender identity, which could form the inspiration for interventions aimed at supporting LGBTQA+ young people moving forwards.

Importance of connection to country and spirituality, and a vision for the future

First Nations young people have expressed concerns about the recognition at a federal level of the importance of connecting to the country spiritually.

First Nations young people have expressed concerns about the recognition at a federal level of the importance of their spiritual connection to country. They have requested a curriculum at school and university level to educate people about the importance of going on country and Aboriginal history and culture. They also called on the government to enact culturally sensitive policies, keeping in mind that they are an integral part of Australia (Murrup-Stewart, Whyman, Jobson, & Adams, 2020).

Values

Many young people express a strong sense of social responsibility.

When consulted about what 18 to 24-year-olds are thinking, what they care about, how Gen Z perceives themselves and how they think others perceive them, the findings suggest that young people are doing their best in what they consider to be difficult circumstances (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023a).

Many young people express a desire to deal with real and tangible issues surrounding the environment, mental health, human rights, and equality. They have high aspirations to achieve change in their lifetime. Despite perceiving their generation as doing more than most about social change, some young adults are critical of themselves and of each other when they feel not enough is being done to make an impact.

“I remember when I was a teenager and I felt so misunderstood in regard to what was happening with my life. Let’s say cyber bullying for example, our gen [generation] is born digital and older gens, parents and grandparents don’t understand, they weren’t born into it and haven’t necessarily experienced it, so the support that you need just isn’t there”

Female, 22 to 25 years, QLD (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023a)



Recommendations for Young Adults: Positive Sense of identity and Culture

Young First Nations people have expressed concerns about their recognition at a federal level and made strong calls for a national space to build meaningful relationships that enable them to create systemic change.

Specific recommendations made by young First Nations people include:

- a curriculum at school and university level to educate people about the importance of going on country, Aboriginal history and culture, and the government to bring about culturally sensitive policies
- young First Nations people want support to come together to speak, be heard and be valued. First Nations young people seek opportunities to connect across their diverse experiences. They specifically seek support for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander National Youth Summit, to be led, designed, and hosted by First Nations young people.

Young people living with disability have called for support for living independently.

Young people with disability want to prepare for a future where they can do things for themselves and live a life separate to their parents.

They have asked that:

- practitioners and carers make strong efforts to provide opportunities for young people with disability to develop agency and independent living skills.

Support all young people to live free from discrimination and violence by improving the experiences of young people who are sexually and gender-diverse.

Specific recommendations to address stigma and violence directed towards LGBTQI+ include:

- community messaging campaigns, programs aimed at embedding positive representation of LGBTQA+ people in media
- efforts to ensure LGBTQA+ inclusion in government policy frameworks and prioritisation in funding areas, such as community-inclusion grants
- efforts to address gender stereotypes and norms that challenge the ability of trans and gender-diverse young people to live openly and safely within their communities.



Food security

Food insecurity is widespread among young adults, experienced by as many as one in two young people.

Food insecurity – where young people do not have sufficient access to healthy and culturally appropriate food – emerged as a significant issue in the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer (Walsh et al., 2021b).

In the past 12 months, almost one in four (24 per cent) young Australians experienced food insecurity. Half went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money at some point during the same period (Walsh et al., 2022). Food insecurity also affects those with full-time jobs and those living in high-socioeconomic areas, but it is often shrouded by the stigma and shame associated with seeking help.

“There have been times when I have been down to my last two or three dollars to last me a week and, most of the time, [that] means that I live off a loaf of bread and some two-minute noodles. Yes, I would say there have been times when I have not been able to eat the food I wanted, if any food at all”

Male, 24, ACT (Walsh et al., 2022)

“I’ll have a week of being able to eat whatever I want to eat and then, you know, next week, I have no money, so I basically just have to live off bread”

Female, 22, VIC (Walsh et al., 2022)

“I just feel that the prices of what fresh fruit and vegetables are at the moment is, like, I don’t even know how to explain it. I feel like if it was to go up anymore, I would rather not eat fresh fruit and vegetables and, I’d rather go to like, frozen stuff”

Female, 23, VIC (Walsh et al., 2022)



Young people indicated they were not always able to eat the food they wanted due to factors such as financial pressures, the influence of medication or access to food that meets their dietary needs. With rising costs of living, some were concerned about their access to fresh fruits and vegetables now and in the future.

Some young people spoke of profound deprivation, and the relationship between poverty and crime.

“Well, most of it was having to break the law, stealing food and stuff cos that’s the only way I could survive at the time”

18 year-old, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020a)

“People don’t help them to get their basic needs and wants so they go out and do it themselves. But otherwise, they just be sleeping on the streets, with nothing, only their clothes. That’s why they just do crime in general, for survival, or the result of people, you know of racism, or family issues, family problems, you know, relationship problems between friends”

18 year-old, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020a)

The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer asserts we can expect rising living costs and salary stagnation to affect more young Australians.

Housing

Most young adults live in their family home and will continue to do so for the next 12 months.

According to the 2022 Youth Barometer, almost half (49 per cent%) of young Australians lived in their family home, one in five (19 per cent) in a house-sharing arrangement, 18 per cent independently on their own, and 14 per cent independently as a family or couple. Young women (58 per cent) and non-binary, gender-diverse or agender young people (47 per cent) were more likely to live in their family home than young men (39 per cent), while Aboriginal and Torres Islander young people (40 per cent) were less likely to do so than other young Australians (51 per cent) (Walsh et al., 2022).

Around 60 per cent of young Australians thought it was 'likely' or 'extremely likely' they would stay in their accommodation for the next 12 months. Less than half (46 per cent) thought it was 'likely' or 'extremely likely' they would be able to afford a place to live during the next year. These perceptions were shared across demographic groups. A few interviewees said the current rental market was a source of housing precariousness (Walsh et al., 2022).

"The landlord sold the house. Because there is a bit of a rent crisis in Hobart, it has been pretty hard for young people to get places"

Male, 20, TAS (Walsh et al., 2022)

Buying a home is an aspiration for many young people, but affordability is a major barrier.

For many interviewees, purchasing a home was a clear goal. However, it was often seen as a goal very much in the future.

"So, I'm not sure quite where I'll end up, but it's definitely a goal, be a homeowner... to, like, have somewhere to call home that you don't have to rely on someone else for"

Male, 23, ACT (Walsh et al., 2022)

A few interviewees said they were currently working towards owning a house or being in a position where they did not have to pay rent, but this was not common. However, more than half (58 per cent) of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will live in a comfortable home in the future. Considering this goal of home ownership, several participants pointed to different factors which they saw as barriers to purchasing a home. This included the competitive nature of the housing market, familial or societal expectations, inflating prices, and uncertainty due to COVID-19.

"Probably in the next five years, I would like to be able to buy a house. I think that in Sydney, it's a very competitive housing market and it's sort of ... the ultimate mark of financial stability, which is a shame ... [because] I think would give me a sense of security"

Female, 20, NSW (Walsh et al., 2022)

"I have been told I have to buy a house ... Then it's like, but I can't afford a house, so I'm expected just to live at home until I save a stupid amount of money to go buy a shoe box. That's not enjoying my life. That's saving up money for the sake of just ticking off that home ownership thing ... It's ridiculous"

Male, 24, NSW (Walsh et al., 2021b)

"I would say right now, we were probably ready, we were ready to buy actually at the beginning of COVID, and what stopped us was the uncertainty around what COVID going to do. Realising what's happened now, it would have been a great time to buy pre-COVID because inflation hit so hard, and I would say, now, we're like looking and going like, 'inflation – so unpredictable'. Like, I'm witnessing a couple of my friends who bought their first home, and their mortgage has completely doubled, and he's having to change jobs, look for other work, they're in negative equity because of how much the inflation has gone up, and so that's like scary"

Female, 23, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022).



Some young people considered home-ownership impossible.

For some, these challenges were so insurmountable that they could not picture themselves owning a house.

“Housing is just so expensive, and the only person I know my age who owns a house, he only owns it because of his parents ... He only owns it because his parents died. That’s not the way I want to own a house”

Non-binary person, 21, WA (Walsh et al., 2022)

The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer suggests more research is needed to understand if young people who are pessimistic about their ability to achieve the goal of home-ownership are generally pessimistic about the future, or about the housing market, and whether it is a response to structural barriers constantly faced by this group of young Australians.

Young people living in the Northern Territory experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness and overcrowding.

Young people living in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) are disproportionately represented in the Northern Territory’s homeless population (NT Shelter & Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023). In addition, the rate of young people experiencing homelessness in the NT is 11.74 times the Australian average. Most of the youth homelessness in the Northern Territory is due to severe crowding.

A project centred on the housing and shelter experiences and opinions of young people living in Mparntwe found the majority of young people consulted believed young people there are more at risk of homelessness than young people living elsewhere (82.2 per cent) (NT Shelter & Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023). Violence, alcohol and other drugs, and poverty were the top reasons young people identified as causes for this increased risk of homelessness.

“You can have 20 people in a house, coming in from out bush. Everyone trying to stay in one house, it’s really a struggle. It counts as homelessness. To be in that position, it’s stressful, it’s hard. To even sleep, you need your own space, your own house, and be more free. You need more support, you need help, help with the housing from Government”

Male, 21, NT

(NT Shelter & Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023)

“When they’re [adults] intoxicated and they just come through whenever they like, it’s just very hard. [It impacts] just going out, trying to take my baby out. What if someone comes in and takes her stuff, my stuff? You don’t have a key to the house and you don’t know who will go in when you’re not there”

Female, 18, NT

(NT Shelter & Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023).

Young people identify a variety of ways to support young people experiencing homelessness, including youth-specific accommodation, investment in affordable housing, and holistic supports addressing poverty and mental health.

“I reckon we need accommodation, nurse in one building. I feel like we need a youth centre with accommodation all in one, all services in one. That would be a good way to stop the homelessness, to re-engage kids in school, in activities, to get them check-ups, you could have like a nurse, a counsellor, all services in one”

Female, 24, NT

(NT Shelter & Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023)

The young people consulted in this project identified youth-specific accommodation and investment in housing as the main ways to reduce the risk of young people experiencing homelessness in the town. Mental health supports, increased safe spaces, more programs for young people, more money and material basics, support and education for caregivers, and increased efforts to make young people aware of existing supports, were also identified as vital (NT Shelter & Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory, 2023).



Employment

Young people undertake a variety of activities, including paid and unpaid employment.

In a national survey of young Australians, 57 per cent were engaged in paid employment, while 15 per cent were not currently working or employed. A significant proportion of young people engaged in unpaid employment (such as housework or caring roles); 15 per cent in a mix of paid and unpaid employment; 11 per cent of First Nations young people in unpaid employment exclusively; and 2.4 per cent of non-indigenous young people in unpaid employment exclusively (Walsh et al., 2022).

Underemployment and unemployment are common.

In a national survey of young Australians, most (61 per cent) had experienced underemployment at some point in the past 12 months, with 41 per cent experiencing underemployment that persisted beyond two months. Underemployment in the last 12 months was more common in rural areas (76 per cent) compared metropolitan (61 per cent) and regional areas (51 per cent). Unemployment followed similar patterns, with 69 per cent of young Australians in rural areas reporting unemployment in the past 12 months, compared with 47 per cent in metropolitan areas and 27 per cent in regional areas. Reasons for unemployment included study commitments, mental health barriers or COVID-related job loss (Walsh et al., 2022).

A large proportion of young people participate in the 'gig economy'.

In a survey of young Australians, 'gig' work was defined as self-employed workers being matched directly with customers via a digital platform (for example Uber Eats) (Walsh et al., 2022). About 56 per cent of young people surveyed had participated in the gig economy in the last year. Young men, First Nations young people and young people living with a disability were more likely to participate in the gig economy.

Most young people had participated in an activity to improve their employability.

Of young people surveyed, 87 per cent had engaged in at least one activity to improve their employability. The most common activities were building interview skills, job application skills, actively seeking advice from caregivers or friends, engaging in vocational work experience, volunteering, and completing short certificates (Walsh et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on young people in the labour market.

A report commissioned by Youth Action NSW states the pandemic exacerbated labour market problems for young people across Australia, and young people in NSW were the hardest-hit (Littleton & Campbell, 2022). More than 80,000 youth jobs were lost in the 2020 lockdown and 96,000 in 2021 – the highest numbers in the country. Young people in NSW not in employment, education, or training (NEET) increased from 71,000 in 2019 to 112,000 in 2020, the greatest increase of any state.

Young people are overrepresented in industries such as hospitality, retail, arts, and recreation services which were hit hardest by the pandemic restrictions and, therefore, had disproportionately negative impacts on young workers concentrated in these in sectors. More than 30 per cent of workers lost employment across the accommodation and food services sectors, which are major employers of young people (Walsh et al., 2021a).

"I think security and stability [are] massive in the context of COVID. The majority of young people are casual and have been hit so hard through COVID... I think that it really emphasises what precarious work is like when a pandemic hits. What stability do you have? You don't"
First Nations young person, NSW (Littleton & Campbell, 2022)

"Young people were disproportionately affected by the job losses from the COVID shutdowns. As often new people in their careers, they were the first to be cut ... our economic futures are no longer as good as they once appeared ... permanent losses in jobs, wages cut, with wage increases the lowest in history over the next five years, as well as forever-increasing asset prices on the rebound. In other words we feel we have had our legs cut from underneath us"
Male, 18 to 21 years, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023a)



Some young people, especially those living with disability, have experienced benefits arising from the COVID-19 pandemic through increased workplace flexibility.

Many also added that COVID-19, and its impact on how workplaces operate, has created many new opportunities for people living with a disability. As one young person said:

“I think it has shown the wider community that [creating flexible workplaces] is possible. They can do it – they just don’t”

Young person with disability
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020a).

Young people living with disability experience additional challenges to employment.

Young people with disability experience the combination of systemic disadvantage by being both young and a person living with disability. Additional compounding factors can include other demographic factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender or sexual diversity, or living in a regional or rural area (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020a).

In the Australian Youth Barometer, young people with long-term illnesses (84 per cent) and physical disability (85 per cent+) were more likely to earn income from gig work compared with young people without a disability (56 per cent). This finding elicits the question of whether such gig work provides flexible options for these young people or exacerbates inequality and uncertainty. More research will help reveal more of the motivations and individual experiences (Walsh et al., 2022).

Young people express mixed views on the usefulness of disability employment services and supports.

At the National Youth Disability Summit in 2020, young people’s opinions on disability employment services and supports were varied. Some described their experiences as **“life-changing”** and **“really, really good”**, while others commented they were **“ineffective”**, **“did not try enough”**, and **“didn’t want to get to know me or my interests or skills”** (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020a).

The way forward.

Calls to action emerging from the 2020 National Youth Disability Summit included:

For governments:

- Increase targeted, evidence-based interventions addressing the negative and misinformed attitudes of employers. The development of these strategies must include the meaningful involvement of young people with disability.
- Provide an adequate safety net for young people living with disability that reflects the contemporary cost-of-living.
- Invest in the research and development of creative employment opportunities for young people living with disability. Include young people meaningfully in research design, implementation, and evaluation processes.

For organisations and employers:

- Review and amend hiring processes to ensure they are safe and inclusive. If unsure, consult youth representative and advocacy organisations for guidance.
- Offer information and suggestions around supports available for young people with disability at work. If unsure, consult youth representative and advocacy organisations for guidance.
- Proactively consult young employees to ask how they may be best supported. Then follow through.
- Use learnings from COVID-19 to offer roles that have working-from-home or flexible-hours options.
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020a).



Career

Young people often link their employment and careers goals to a positive sense of self, belonging, and greater purpose.

About two-thirds of young people nominated 'meaningful work that makes a difference' and 'alignment of the employer's values and your values' as 'very' or 'quite' important characteristics of their work. They also rated high pay and job security of roughly equal importance (Walsh et al., 2022). Being part of a team, having the opportunity to engage with like-minded colleagues, working in their area of passion, and contributing to society were listed as positive aspects of their employment (Walsh et al., 2022).

"I like kids, that's why I decided to be a teacher, so that's also, you know, it's wonderful getting to do something I'm passionate about"

Female, 23, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

"One thing that sort of gets me excited to go to work is the people there ... it's just a nice vibe ... Everyone's just working together and everyone's just nice to each other, and you just feel like you want to be there and, sort of, almost forget that you're working sometimes"

Female, 19, VIC (Walsh et al., 2022)

About half (58 per cent) of young Australians believe it is likely or extremely likely in the future that they will work in a job they like. Young people describe a variety of barriers and enablers to their career aspirations.

Young people frequently linked career aspirations to their identity, often describing careers that enabled them to follow their passion or pursue interests. Barriers identified by young people to achieving their career goals included their university grades, challenges gaining relevant practical experience, the geographic locations of job opportunities (especially in regional areas and those in more niche professions), industry competition, entry into the job market and mental health challenges (Walsh et al., 2022).

"I am quite behind in my university because of mental health. So, because I had a massive depressive episode a couple of years ago, and it cost me, like, a whole year's worth of university, and yes, sometimes I feel like that setback might ... because it's a big gaping hole on my transcript.

So, I'm always sort of anxious about that"

Male, 23, ACT (Walsh et al., 2022)

The most common enabler identified by participants to achieve their career goals was participation in tertiary education. Doing well in this education and gaining relevant experience were also nominated as important enablers (Walsh et al., 2022). Most young people in the same survey had received careers advice (91 per cent). Young people identified the most important source of careers advice were their parents and friends, nominated by 47 per cent and 41 per cent of respondents respectively, followed by teachers (32 per cent) (Walsh et al., 2022).

Financial security

Financial challenges are common among young people.

About half of young people report being able to save part of their income regularly. A national survey showed significant proportions of young people reported running out of money for accommodation, food, transport, clothes, leisure, and socialising. One in five reported running out of money for accommodation and a similar proportion reported running out of money for food. Running out of money for socialising and leisure was more common, affecting about one in three participants (Walsh et al., 2021b).

Young people identify the rising cost of living, housing affordability and stable and sufficient employment as barriers to financial security.

According to the 2022 *Australian Youth Barometer*, how young people think about and manage their finances is changing (Walsh et al., 2022). Some interviewees described how financial security was possible and desirable, but not feasible in the immediate future because they found it difficult to meet expenses such as rent and student fees. Concerns about the rising costs of living, housing affordability and the lack of stable and sufficient employment were prominent.

Findings from the 2021 *Australian Youth Barometer* indicate:

- the rental market is unaffordable for young people, with almost one-third (32.1 per cent) of young households spending more than 30 per cent of their income on rent
- young people aspire to home ownership and security
- homelessness is a prevalent and repetitive problem for young people (Walsh et al., 2021b).

Most young Australians (90 per cent) experienced financial difficulties at some point during the last 12 months, and more than half thought they will be financially worse off than their parents (53 per cent). A similar proportion believed they would probably achieve financial security in their future (Walsh et al., 2022). Financial struggle is not confined to a particular group of young people but is evident among young people from diverse demographic groups (Walsh et al., 2022).



The COVID-19 pandemic was a compounding factor in financial insecurity.

External factors were most mentioned as inhibiting young people's efforts to achieve financial security. These included the rising cost of living and increases in rent or housing prices, as well as a lack of stable and sufficient employment. For some, this was also exacerbated by COVID-19.

"It's hard to kind of make a budget and stick to a budget at the moment, just because of the changing costs of everything, and I guess the uncertainty"

Female, 23, VIC (Walsh et al., 2022)

"I think just keeping my job and keeping that, what do you call it, work schedule routine. If I can just consistently keep getting shifts, I think that would be great, but with my previous job I was getting, like, one shift a week and they eventually just kept going down. I was getting two shifts and it then went down so I think like getting adequate shifts would be my way of getting financially secure"

Male, 19, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

"When COVID initially hit I lost my main source of income, being at the time my work, and it was that weird grey area between when JobKeeper was around, and when people started losing jobs. I was living off whatever money I had for an indefinite amount of time"

Male, 24, ACT (Walsh et al., 2022)

"Even in the early stages of COVID, we're in a recession worse than the GFC and that was felt years after it actually happened, and this is a lot worse and still getting worse. So, like even by the time I've finished a uni degree and looking for a career, there will probably still be offset effects of COVID and some industries will really be struggling, so there'll be like less opportunities. Yeah, and it's just quite scary looking like really far long term"

Young female, NSW (UNICEF Australia, 2021)

As such, a key recommendation stemming from this consultation was for governments to continue to monitor the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery on children and young people, recognising some will require significant longer-term support. This should include close monitoring of any rise in inequity, including in education (UNICEF Australia, 2021).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia, many young people were concerned about their economic prospects, including job opportunities and barriers to entering the housing market (UNICEF Australia, 2021). In the early stages of the pandemic recovery, consultations with young Australians highlighted that with youth unemployment on the rise, and Australia facing a long economic recovery, they were more worried than ever about their prospects.

Public transport

Adequate public transport is a vital part of independence for many young people.

Having access to transport is one aspect of the material basics young people need to thrive. Indeed, not having to depend on parents or carers for transport is critical to many young people's confidence and self-sufficiency, allowing them the freedom and independence they need to live their own lives (Connolly, 2023b). In a study on access to public transport by the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, a range of young people's experiences confirmed the importance of public transport as a vital part of independence (Connolly, 2023b).

"[Public transport] provides a freedom for me to be able to get where I need to be without outside support"

Non-binary person, 17, SA (Connolly, 2023b)

"It's convenient, often cheap and more environmentally friendly than individual travel"

Male, 18, SA (Connolly, 2023b)

Young people raise concerns about accessibility of public transport due to timetabling, routes, safety, and inappropriate behaviour of other commuters.

Young people flagged long waiting times between services:

"I cannot stress enough that it should be easy to catch connecting public transport without waiting 30+ minutes between services. I don't feel that it is easy or accessible to do this at the moment"

Female, 20, SA (Connolly, 2023b)

"... also, on the weekends the train only comes every hour which is a problem for safety because you could be stuck somewhere unsafe for a long period of time without a way out"

Female, 19, SA (Connolly, 2023b)

"I enjoy the independence it has given me since I was a young teenager, and I wouldn't be attending university without it. That said, there have undoubtedly been times where it has been a barrier to my work and study, as I have been utterly exhausted by the process of trying to get home and waiting far too long for a bus to come (or to not show up at all), and events like the Gawler line closure lasted nearly the entirety of my undergraduate degree and severely hindered my ability to commute"

Female, 18, SA (Connolly, 2023b)

Alarming, some respondents reported instances of inappropriate behaviour by other passengers, such as being filmed or followed.

“The things people seem to get away with near the back of the bus is kind of ridiculous, not limited to things like drug use and sexual acts.

I would wish that there was less tolerance for that”

Female, 18, SA (Connolly, 2023b)

The report also draws attention to the plight of children and young people living in regional areas and makes recommendations on improving their connectedness to enable them to access part-time work, participate in recreational activities in their preferred timeframes, or commit to group or team activities that would benefit them in myriad ways (Connolly, 2023b).

These include finding new and creative solutions that address issues of access and affordability in regional areas, that provide greater access to affordable transport, and that allow for sustainable options that can be accessed independently.

Young people recommended a range of practical suggestions to make public transport safer, more accessible and affordable.

Although this research was conducted in South Australia, the recommendations have universal principles that would apply across most metropolitan and regional settings in Australia to improve the wellbeing of children and young people. They include:

- providing visible, well-lit, well-designed protective shelters that don't leave passengers exposed to the elements while they wait, and which ensure they're not 'passed by' when they do use them
- installing technology that enables mobile phones to be charged so passengers of all ages can maintain communication with their support networks and access information about services they need
- increasing security presence and CCTV monitoring on trains, trams and bus services and stations, so younger and more vulnerable passengers always feel safe
- providing more frequent connections between stops, so passengers are not left waiting for long periods or forced to walk extended distances between stops for different public transport services, particularly at night.



Recommendations for Young Adults: Material Basics

Young people have asked for improvement to public transport in terms of safety, accessibility, and affordability.

Specific, practical improvements suggested by young people include:

- providing visible, well-lit, well-designed protective shelters that don't leave passengers exposed to the elements while they wait, and which ensure they're not 'passed by' when they do use them
- installing technology that enables mobile phones to be charged so that passengers of all ages can maintain communication with their support networks and access information about services they need
- increasing security presence and CCTV monitoring on trains, trams, and buses and at stations, so that younger and more vulnerable passengers always feel safe
- providing more frequent connections between stops, so that passengers are not left waiting for long periods or forced to walk extended distances between stops for different public transport services, particularly at night
- improving access to public transport for young people living in regional areas to enable connectivity with those of their own age across their community, allowing them to thrive.

We also recommend stakeholders:

Empower all young people to transition to financial independence by addressing housing affordability and cost of living and supporting them to secure stable and sufficient employment.

Specific recommendations include:

- government to monitor the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery on children and young people of all ages, recognising that some will require significant longer-term support. This should include close monitoring of any rise in inequity, including in education
- better systemic approaches are needed to understand and respond to these challenges beyond the hard work of front-line charities.

Ensure that all young Australians have access to healthy, affordable food.

Food insecurity is a prevalent problem for young Australians, affecting even those with full-time jobs and those from high SES backgrounds. Specific recommendations include:

- better measurement tools to capture the multidimensionality and complexity of the phenomenon
- charities work hard to supply food to those who struggle to access it, but more work is needed to remove the stigma associated with accessing help
- structural solutions to lift young people out of poverty to mitigate the prevalence of food insecurity.



Figure 12: Developmental and healthcare milestones (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021)

Perspectives on health

Young adults see health as multi-faceted, with particular importance placed on mental health and exercise.

Young adults are in a critical stage of life for the encouragement of healthy behaviours, such as healthy eating and exercising. Research exploring the values and perceptions of young adults aged 18 to 24 in relation to health, healthy behaviours and health promotion has found that health is seen as multi-faceted, with particular importance placed on mental health and exercise (Molenaar et al., 2020).

“To me health or wellbeing primarily means physical health, good eating and adequate exercise, but also is inclusive of social health (e.g., friendship connections, relationships with relatives, frequent contact with people and the community) and mental health, such as having time to relax, sleep, maybe meditation, as well as state of mind...”
18-year-old, female (Molenaar et al., 2020)

“Myself and a few of my friends suffer from mental health issues and that has always challenged our ability to achieve our desired physical and mental health. I think about my mental health more than my physical health, because how I feel always overcomes the way in which I take care of my body”
Female, 20, (Molenaar et al., 2020)

“I feel like ‘health and wellbeing’ is different for young adults compared to older people, as I feel like young adults tend to focus more on physical health than the other health aspects. Especially with dealing with pressure to do well at ‘uni/work’ and ‘being attractive’, young adults spend more time e.g. at the gym and food prepping, rather than taking a moment to relax and stress their mind with everything going on, or distancing themselves from everyone else just to achieve their goals”
Female, 19, (Molenaar et al., 2020)



The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer also explores what young adults believe is required to stay mentally and physically healthy. For some, being 'healthy' refers to a broader state of wellbeing, while for others managing stress sits alongside physical health as a key element of being healthy (Walsh et al., 2022).

"It's a combination of factors. I think it's both physical and mental, and I think it is also dictated by our environment. Like, I think, for me, being healthy means that I'm being active regularly. It means that I have access to nature, like, I'm spending time outdoors, and kind of actively appreciating it, and I suppose strong connections as well"

Female, 20, NSW (Walsh et al., 2022)

"Being able to be in a mindset of being content with what I have at the moment, it's not necessarily just physical health; obviously, physical health does come with feeling healthy but also having that mindset of, okay, what I have got is great and living in the moment, not putting too much pressure on myself"

Female, 21, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

The findings indicate young adults have a holistic understanding of health, which calls for holistic research and policy responses. Cultivating spaces that foster connections with family, peers and the physical environment will have repercussions for health (Walsh et al., 2022). Initiatives that incorporate this understanding are more likely to be effective in attracting young people's interest and engagement.



Many young people struggle to prioritise health-enhancing behaviours, citing barriers such as lack of time and money.

However, one study highlights many young adults believe that at their age and health status, adopting health-enhancing behaviours without short-term tangible benefits is not a priority. Further, participants said they often do not prioritise health-enhancing behaviours due to barriers such as a perceived lack of money, knowledge and time, often due to studying, working and perceived effort (Molenaar et al., 2020).

"I think about my health constantly. Yet despite this I continue to do nothing about it. I'm always hoping that once my study workload makes way for a better social life that I will commit to being more fit but I find it hard to put it as a priority, which is frustrating because it should be!"

Female, 18, (Molenaar et al., 2020)

"Whereas when you were a child, your mother or father pick what you eat and do. How it changed over the years ... Well I had to start by paying for it myself, so I had to be a bit more selective on what I did and how much it cost so I didn't get to do or eat everything I did as a kid because I can't afford it"

Female, 23, (Molenaar et al., 2020)

"I think the only difference in young adults is that we're thrown into a world that we are still trying to understand, and I think it can be confusing and difficult to figure out who we are or who we want to be. I'm just hoping as I mature and experience life that I'm able to better understand how to keep myself healthy"

Female, 22, (Molenaar et al., 2020)

The study identified a need for focussed health messages that address the needs and desires of young adults and directly address the barriers they face (Molenaar et al., 2020).

"Rather than that fear factor, maybe promoting the health benefits of fruit and vegetables would be more inspiring. It's easy to say 'vegetables and fruit are good for you', but if a person can see exactly what the food they're putting into their body is going to do, that could be effective!"

Female, 20, (Molenaar et al., 2020)

The health of First Nations young people is interconnected with culture and country.

In a 2023 review designed to understand young Aboriginal people's perspective of their health and wellbeing, an interconnected picture emerged about how Aboriginal youth enact agency in highly racialised, often oppressive spaces (Smallwood, 2023). The review illustrates how disconnected young people have experienced loss, but how they can also rebuild their cultural identity through connection to culture, country, and Elders to forge a way towards resilience and strength holistically. This is demonstrated by a participant:

“She [an Elder] sat me down I was so shocked because she’s like ‘I can feel what your body was doing all day, and we need to talk about it because you are broken’, and I just lost it because I was like, ‘what do you mean? How did you know that? I was smiling and laughing all day’, and then she goes, ‘you don’t understand babe, we’re connected, I can feel every time, I can feel your heart break. . . I felt that”

Young Aboriginal person (Murrup-Stewart, Whyman, Jobson, & Adams, 2021)

Most of the currently available evidence about Aboriginal health and wellbeing is immersed in deficit discourse. In shifting consciousness and awareness of these issues, the writers call for a purposeful shift towards the adoption of an Indigenist, strength-based approach which emphasises the strength and resilience of Aboriginal young people. Clinicians, nurse-researchers and academics can be informed through the emphasis of Aboriginal young peoples’ voices, their strength and resilience in the health and wellbeing space (Smallwood, 2023).



Mental health

Relationships are a vital part of mental health support for many young people.

Participants in the Australian Youth Barometer (2022) discussions suggested a range of strategies that reflected approaches to health more broadly. One commonly cited strategy was gaining support from key relationships, including family, but more often from friends and intimate partners. Being able to talk to someone about difficulties or struggles in their lives without recrimination was important (Walsh et al., 2022).

“Keeping a good circle of friends can definitely keep your spirits up, having people that you can rely on to cheer you up when you’re feeling down and definitely having a good connection with family members ... We [my friends and I] all sit there, talk crap and have a good time, try to have a little stress relief, no talk about work, that kind of stuff”

Male, 19, SA (Walsh et al., 2022).

“[As an inpatient in a private hospital] we played games together, we made jokes together, we watched movies together. Every night we watched a horror movie. It was great. And I also didn’t feel alone ... When I was at this group and I saw that other people my age were still also struggling, and things like that, it made me feel very welcoming and belonging, just the way that we all had each other’s backs”

Male, 24, ACT (Walsh et al., 2022)



Young people invest significant resources supporting the mental health of their friends, including time, financial supports, service navigation and their own emotional wellbeing.

In a study about supporting friends through ‘tough times’[6] conducted by the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University, almost all (94 per cent) 16 to 25-year-olds reported supporting friends with their mental ill-health (Hanckel et al., 2022).

The young people studied spent an average of 3.5 hours a week supporting their friends. Almost 70 per cent said they received more support from peers and friends than from parents/guardians or health professionals (Hanckel et al., 2022).

“You don’t have to have the answers for them, but just listening and letting them know that you are there for them helps”

Female, 18, NSW (Hanckel et al., 2022)

“I learnt the hard way that finding the balance of supporting friends and them becoming dependent on you is hard. At first, I would always try to help in the ways they wanted, but most of the time I wasn’t the one in the best position to help them. It hurt my mental health severely, as I thought I wasn’t worth [it] to reach out for help and I needed to help my friends alone. I have now established healthy boundaries with all my friends in saying I will listen in and offer my advice but you cannot depend on me emotionally for both of our sakes”

Non-binary trans male, 16, NSW (Hanckel et al., 2022)

The same study also found young people: actively sought out information to help their friends or their own efficacy in helping their friends; played a central role in recognising and responding to friends who needed help (including professional help); and often supported their friends beyond the emotional, such as with finance and housing (Hanckel et al., 2022).

Characteristics of effective peer support include:

- identifying if friends are going through a tough time based on observation of changes of behaviour online and in person
- mindfulness of approach when initiating conversations about mental ill-health with friends
- providing indirect support by spending time together or being on ‘standby’
- recognising that cultural backgrounds is an important factor for finding the best kind of support.

According to the *Australian Youth Barometer*, feelings of pessimism and anxiety are prevalent among young Australians, and support is not always available or accessed by those who need it. The researchers suggest three key actions could help to provide young Australians with the tools to deal with negative feelings: increasing the public provision of mental health support for those who attempt to access it; understanding what prevents those who need mental health support from accessing it; and reducing the barriers for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that prevent them from receiving mental health support when they request it (Walsh et al., 2022).

Rates of poor mental health are higher among young LGBTIQ+ people.

Young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and other diverse genders and sexualities (LGBTIQ+) are at particular risk of mental illness (Perry, Strauss, & Lin, 2018) due to greater experience of stigma, prejudice and discrimination.

Indeed, in the *Writing Themselves In 4* survey, 81 per cent of LGBTQA+ [7] young people aged 14 to 21 reported ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of psychological distress, with higher rates among trans and gender-diverse people, compared with cis-gender people (Hill et al., 2021). Additionally, in the 2021 Youth Survey[MB1] , Mission Australia found almost half (45.4 per cent) of young gender-diverse people aged 15 to 19 rated their mental health and wellbeing as ‘poor’, which was substantially higher than the broader population, with 7.7 per cent of males and 18.9 per cent of females rating their mental health and wellbeing as ‘poor’ (Tiller et al., 2021).

Among LGBTQA+ young people, 44.5 per cent reported receiving treatment or support in the last 12 months for a diagnosed mental-health condition (Hill et al., 2021).

In light of these findings, the *Psychological Distress in Young People in Australia Fifth Biennial Youth Mental Health Report: 2012-2020* recommended increased tailored services for non-binary young people and the broader LGBTIQ+ youth community (Brennan et al., 2021).

[6] In the study, young people aged 16 to 25 defined ‘tough times’ in a variety of ways, such as: when “circumstances in your life are dragging/weighing you down”, where you feel like you are “surviving but not living”, your “brain is under strain”, life is “testing your resilience”, and you feel like “giving up” and “life feels like a chore”. Tough times can be “struggling socially, emotionally, financially, or physically”, where “relationships are hard” and you “feel alone or unseen”. Further definitions are provided in the report. (Hanckel et al., 2022)

[7] Despite considerable efforts, the survey was unable to recruit a sufficient sample of young people with an intersex variation. For that reason, the survey should be considered a survey of LGBTQA+ young people only. (Hill et al., 2021)

Mental health is a major concern for many young people with disability.

The Mission Australia 2019 national youth survey found nearly half of young respondents living with a disability had experienced mental-health problems, and one in four was concerned with suicide (Hall, Fildes, Liyanarachchi, Plummer, & Reynolds, 2020)

Following the inaugural National Youth Disability Summit in 2020, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) reviewed, analysed and collated the ideas from more than 250 young people with disability (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b). Some young people shared the way society responds to their identity has a negative impact on their mental health and described structural and systemic barriers faced in accessing support.

“Mental health is a very important part of disability ... But the kind of support that you are able to access is influenced by your age, your gender, your sexuality, your race, where you’re coming from, the kind of socio-economic background you’re from”

Young person with disability (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b)

“I also think it is important to understand that I am multiply marginalised in terms of being a queer person with disability. But I also acknowledge that I experience a lot of privilege as well, in terms of financial privilege, white privilege and also identifying as cis-gender. And I think all of those things are really important when talking about mental health”

Young person with disability (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b)

Young participants who attended the Youth Disability Summit emphasised the need for a mental health system that is accessible, and which empowers them to make choices in their mental health treatments and in their lives overall. This includes options for therapies and wellbeing activities that are accessible and person-centred (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b).

The mental health of young Australians has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer explored the impacts of COVID-19 on young adults and found the pandemic and associated lockdown measures took a toll on Australians aged 18 to 24 with almost one in four (24 per cent) rating their mental health as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Most (85 per cent) reported feelings of worry, anxiety, or pessimism. Almost half (45 per cent) often felt they were missing out on being young (Walsh et al., 2022).

“I think it’s our mental health that is misunderstood the most, it can be misunderstood as a sign of weakness and even selfishness. I wish they understood what it was like to grow up in our generation and that things aren’t as easy as it was back in their day; mental health is a real issue, and depression and anxiety are really illnesses that need to be addressed”
Female, 22 to 25 years, NT (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023a)

Young people with lived experience of suicidality described a range of contributing factors behind it which were frequently described as cumulative and multiple.

The most commonly reported factors reported by young people with lived experience of suicidality were difficulties in interpersonal relationships with others, mental health symptoms, identity struggles (particularly for those who identified as LGBTQIA+), academic pressures and stress, financial and socioeconomic stressors, experiencing traumatic events and the failure of support and interventions (Robinson, Bellairs-Walsh, Thorn, La Sala, & Boland, 2020).

“I was in a relationship for three years, and we broke up ... It was a bit messy. I think that was probably one of like the leading factors – everything felt like it was falling apart”

Female, 23, (Robinson et al., 2020)

Young people described challenges accessing mental health supports and interventions due to complex systems resulting in multiple disengagements, discouragement, and prolonged lack of support.

Young people in the study described often difficult and complex experiences in seeking help with their mental health. They described many ‘drop-off’ points in their access to service and continuation in their care (Robinson et al., 2020). This resulted in long periods without support, multiple disengagements, impeded recovery and feelings of hopelessness and discouragement.

“There was no cushion and there was no assistance, it was just a big old drop-off ... There’s a lot of drop-off points that could’ve made this 10-year journey like four years.”

Male, 18, (Robinson et al., 2020)

“We tend to get treated like, I would say criminal in a sense sometimes, if people are in crisis. For me, I have been probably quite traumatised ... We may be unwell, and we may not be the best person to deal with, but you’ve got to be patient”

Female, 21, (Robinson et al., 2020)

Formal and informal sources were important in helping a young person recover from suicidality, however, these supports need to be better equipped to identify, manage, and respond to young people in ways that are validating and helpful (Robinson et al., 2020)

Improving Health Information and Services

Young people spoke of wanting trustworthy and equitable health care services and professionals that made them feel safe and welcome. Young people with mixed marginalisation were highlighted as a group needing better understanding.

Young people consulted in the 2020 Youth Health Forum discussed the challenges to designing youth-friendly health care services that are accessible to all young people (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021). These were then workshopped to form the basis of recommendations for improving youth access to health services.

Young people spoke of wanting trustworthy and equitable health care services and professionals that made them feel safe and welcome. This was especially so for young people from a marginalised demographic, such as being sexually or gender-diverse, having a disability, having First Nations identity, experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, living in a rural or remote area or being culturally and linguistically diverse (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021).

Young people with mixed marginalisation – where a young person has multiple layers of marginalisation – were highlighted as a group needing better understanding across health and related services.

“Sometimes people know about disability. Other people know about queer people. Some others know about First Nations communities. It’s so rare to find someone who makes me safe across all my identities”

Young person (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“Imagine a 17-year-old, pregnant, black, female young person that had her hair looking really crazy, walk into a place and go: ‘Oh, I need a place to stay’. You don’t get taken that seriously. Like everywhere you go, unless you present yourself like someone that can be listened to, you will be passed around like a ball, like over and over again ... ‘Cause you have to say things in a certain way for you to actually get the outcome”

Female, 21, (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021)

Meaningful and positive representation of young people living with disability was highlighted as a way to increase wellbeing.

Governments need to invest in community interventions, including media portrayal, that target misinformed and discriminatory attitudes and beliefs held about people with disability.

“So I think if we can continue to create more meaningful and positive representation for people with disability, the perceptions of us will begin to change for the better as well ... So It’s sort of like, I guess, like a snowball effect. I feel that representation can be that really important, first kind of leap in terms of making positive change”

Young person with disability
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b)

Choice and autonomy were flagged by many young people with disability as important to enhancing their wellbeing.

“Choice is giving people dignity. Being able to have choices about your own life, like where you’re living – that’s dignified. Having that taken away from you, it doesn’t feel great – it sort of feeds into self-worth and how you see yourself. So, for me, choice is dignity in my life”

Young person with disability
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b)

“Being able to make choices is a huge part of taking control of our lives and just being who we want to be and not what society has pushed us into the corner as”

Young person with disability
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b)

“For me, [having choices] kind of just feels like independence ... reclaiming choices that abled people don’t think we can make. It’s setting our own benchmark”

Young person with disability
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020b)



Young people also spoke of a desire to be empowered to manage their health care needs.

This includes support in navigating health care systems, support transitioning from paediatric into adult health care, developing their health literacy, and participating in digital health care (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021).

Health pathways can be convoluted and confusing – especially if young people are not sure what is wrong, if they do not know who to call or where to go, or if there are barriers that make it hard for them to access the support they need.

“If their websites had a bit more information – ‘...we specialise in this, we’re queer-friendly, we focus on the family...’ and whatever else, so you get an indication from the get-go that you’re picking the right service for you”

Female, 23, (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021)

“[Online hub] – an online website that connects young trans people with gender specialists and queer-specialised GPs. It has helped me find specialists who can support me with my transition. I know other people who have found trans-specialists through [the hub] as well”

Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

With entry to adulthood comes the need for health and medical transitions as young people take more responsibility for their own healthcare. For example, they are more likely to research health information for themselves, find their own doctors, and make their own appointments (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021). One in 10 young people has a chronic physical condition that requires lifelong care. As they approach adulthood, these young people are expected to move from family-centred paediatric healthcare into an adult healthcare system that places a lot of responsibility on the individual.

“The adult hospital environment is dull and boring for young people. You have to deal with multiple departments, doctors who don’t know you, your condition, or your history. Staff seem less caring, everyone is busy and no one coordinates care – it’s impersonal and you feel like a number, not a name”

Male, 23, (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021)

Health literacy is about having the knowledge and skills you need to make informed decisions about your own health. Young people develop their health literacy over many years and with the help of many trusted people like parents and carers, teachers, and health professionals. In recent years, the internet has become a further place for young people to get information about health, to work out whether they need to visit a health service, to research their decisions about which health service to go to, and to directly access online help and support.

“I feel my age group are endowed with the responsibility that comes with adolescence/young adulthood, but are not given the capacity to exercise this ... If I could change one thing about my experience, it would be to have adequate education on aspects of this service seeking process, not just the health risks involved with sexual activity and promoting something like abstinence. I feel this would really help to normalise and encourage young people to seek health services and help, while tearing down stigmas surrounding this issue”

Female, 22, (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021)

A forum of young people by the WH&Y Commission identified several themes in relation to health and technology (Nguyen et al., 2021). Firstly, young people recognise that both current and emerging digital technologies (such as AI) are integral to daily life. Young people in the forum called for several priorities in relation to digital technology and health:

- support in understanding the relationships between technology and health
- empowering young people to protect themselves from risks relating to technology
- using digital technology to enhance support and access to reliable health information
- using digital technology to enhance access to healthcare respectful of their identities and rights

The way forward.

Recommendations to tackle the challenges listed above were offered by the members of the Youth Health Forum for the (then) Federal Minister for Health and Aged Care and Minister for Education, and included:

- navigation support for young people transitioning into the adult health system
- youth-age consistency across jurisdictions
- affordable access for young people aged 14 to 22
- improved access to digital healthcare delivery
- improved access to inclusive delivery for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse young people (Consumer Health Forum of Australia & The Wellbeing Health & Youth NHRMC Centre for Research Excellence, 2021).

Young people with experience of out-of-home care

Many young people with out-of-home care experience say that their health needs, including health education, were not adequately met while in care.

A 2020 study on the experiences of health among young people with a lived experience in OoHC, confirmed the aforementioned, well-established poor outcomes for young people exiting from OoHC at the age of 18 or younger (Smales et al., 2020). The research consulted young adults aged 18 to 27 who talked about the challenge of exiting the OoHC system and moving into independent living and described experiences unique to young people living in care. They consistently said their health needs were not adequately met while in care, nor did they feel listened to, understood nor educated about health-related matters.

Young people leaving out-of-home care face barriers managing their health, including lacking official identification documents, information on their medical background, and the skills to navigate health systems and services.

In the 2020 study, care-leavers described how after ageing out of care at 18 years, they faced a range of health setbacks, such as lacking official identification or medical documents required to access health services, or having to independently organise health care appointments with little help or education. These factors were viewed as barriers to care-leavers accessing appropriate health care services once they had transitioned from OoHC. Care-leavers also identified that these situations would not typically occur for other young people who were raised in the care of their parents.

“... it was incredibly hard because I had nothing from the unit. I didn’t have a birth certificate. I had no identity whatsoever. I didn’t even have access to my own bank account because one of the workers who had set it up had left. It was in my name for them to access it and I was 16”

Care-leaver, 18 to 27 years, (Smales et al., 2020)



After leaving care, some young people had successfully obtained their case files from [child protection], however, many said there was little to no information about their health in these files, and for some, there were physical ramifications for these reporting failures:

“They were never properly recorded, whether I had shots [vaccinations] or not. So, every year, at high school, when we had shots being done, I got chicken pox every year. Even though I said I had had it the previous year.

But there was no actual record of it happening”

Care-leaver, 18 to 27 years (Smales et al., 2020)

Young people leaving care also describe frustrating gaps in their knowledge about basic health topics such as dental hygiene and women’s health.

Care-leavers noted they did not have adequate education or knowledge about specific health topics and were not sure how to find this information. Most said they did not know how to look after themselves or their health correctly and did not know how to access relevant health services.

“I know some of these things might seem stupid to people that have had parents and stuff and people in their life. But a lot of these young people, they don’t have that much education around some things because of the neglect that they’ve received from their parents”

Care-leaver, 18 to 27, (Smales et al., 2020)

It was evident young people were often unaware of the routines and life skills needed for good health and had a poor understanding of normal developmental changes in their own bodies. Two participants described what this looked like in practice:

“I was putting a whole handful of shampoo in my hand. And running it through fairly short hair. I didn’t know how to brush my teeth properly. I basically just put some toothpaste on. Brushed back and forth a bunch. And then spat out. I was cleaning the front of my teeth, just the bases of them.

A lot of that stuff was just me winging it”

Care-leaver, 18 to 27 years, (Smales et al., 2020)

“I didn’t get a lot of information about what was important for health as a female ... like pap smears and all that kind of thing, I know nothing about that stuff. But also general hygiene things around being a female.

That was stuff that I had to learn on my own”

Care-leaver, 18 to 27 years, (Smales et al., 2020)

The authors observe when a young person was succeeding or ‘doing well’, this appeared to be despite, rather than because of, their care experience. Several recommendations were made to help ensure young people in care are honoured in their right to participate, be empowered and respected as experts in their own lives (Smales et al., 2020).

Environmental Health

A forum conducted with young Australians about their health needs identified a desire to be supported by healthy, sustainable, youth-friendly physical environments, have equitable access to health food and be protected from harmful commercial marketing (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Specific priorities identified in the forum included (Nguyen et al., 2021):

- provision of environmentally sustainable, youth-friendly spaces within built environments. Ideally some of these spaces should be separate from adult spaces
- all built environments to be accessible, safe, and appropriate for young people
- provision of natural and built environments to participate in exercise
- equitable access to healthy and affordable food
- protection from marketing of harmful substances, including low-nutrition foods (such as fast food) and vapes.

Recommendations for Young Adults: Healthy

Young people have asked that the significant mental health support provided by their friends and peers is highlighted more.

Specific recommendations include:

- recognising the expertise of young people as supporters, and embracing youth-led approaches to solve youth challenges, recognising the limits of adult-led and top-down approaches
- prioritising peer-based services that tap into formal and informal support structures
- building/enhancing the capabilities of all young people to nurture strong friendships with healthy boundaries, which includes knowing shared responsibility and when to involve outside help, and the availability of such help
- building/enhancing the capabilities of parents and carers on how to cultivate supportive and respectful spaces that encourage openness in young people
- developing services that acknowledge and include friends in the support process.
- addressing the social determinants that lead to tough times, including –but not limited to – poverty, discrimination, racism and homo/bi/trans-phobia and cis-sexism.
- acknowledging, fostering and (where useful) creating public and online spaces where young people feel comfortable supporting each other
- Fund and support critical future research: to better understand specific experiences (e.g. new migrants) and the experiences of those without friends.

Young people have asked for specific design principles to ensure universal accessibility of youth-friendly healthcare services.

- Navigation support for young people transitioning into the adult health system
- Youth-age consistency across jurisdictions
- Affordable access to healthcare for young people aged 14 to 22
- Improved access to digital healthcare delivery
- Services that are inclusive of culturally and linguistically diverse young people.

Recommendations for Young Adults: Healthy

Young people with disability have asked for positive representations of young people with disability and a more accessible and empowering mental health systems to help enhance their mental health.

Specific changes include:

- a more accessible mental health system that provides greater empowerment and more agency to make choices; including options for therapies and wellbeing activities that are accessible and person-centred
- more positive representations of young people with disability to target discriminatory attitudes, thereby creating pathways towards increased wellbeing.

We also recommend stakeholders:

Consciously reject deficits-based discourse around First Nations young people by embedding strengths-based data and language among researchers, clinicians, policy-makers, and other stakeholders.

- First Nations young people have described how they experience highly racialised, often oppressive, spaces in relation to their health and wellbeing.
- Researchers thereby recommend a conscious effort among clinicians/nurses/academics to move away from deficits discourse and towards a strengths-based approach to emphasises the strength and resilience of Aboriginal young people.

Empower all young people to optimise their mental health, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations from the Australian Youth Barometer include:

- increasing the public provision of mental health support for those who attempt to access it
- understanding what prevents those who need mental health support from accessing it
- reducing the barriers for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that prevent them from receiving mental health support when they request it.

Improve rates of poorer mental health among young LGBTIQ+ people.

Recommendations from the Psychological Distress in Young People in Australia Fifth Biennial Youth Mental Health Report: 2012-2020 include increased tailored services for non-binary young people and the broader LGBTIQ+ youth community.

Improve the immediate and long-term health of young people with experience of the child protection system.

Specific recommendations include:

- development of training and/or professional development to upskill carers in identifying, responding, and managing a young person's health needs
- supporting carers to develop and maintain respectful, meaningful, and consistent relationships with YP to improve health outcomes; where carers are attuned to the needs of the YP to help ensure that important health needs will not go unnoticed, nor minimised
- greater emphasis on educating carers (and YP) about preventative health practices and approaches, which may also empower YP by increasing their capacity to better manage their own health independently
- a future work concerning this population, including research, and development of any training, policies, programs, and services, must include YP in the development process to ensure that their voices are being listened to, acknowledged, and informing change, and that YP are better able to self-manage their own health concerns
- future research to adopt a co-design approach that ensures the voices of YP are heard and acted on throughout the whole research process, honouring their right to participate and be empowered and respected as experts in their own lives.

Enhance suicide-prevention efforts.

Given the unacceptably high suicide rates among First Nations young people:

- suicide prevention approaches must be culturally responsive, community led, and address the unique factors that contribute to high suicide rates including intergenerational trauma.

Given a significant number of children and young people experiencing mental illness do not access prevention services or receive any treatment, effective youth suicide prevention requires:

- tailored approaches directly informed by the needs and preferences of children and young people
- young people with lived experience of suicidality describe help-seeking journeys that are complex and strained, therefore many factors associated with service access and continuity of care need to be addressed to improve these experiences
- formal and informal sources were important in helping a young person recover from suicidality, however, these supports need to be better equipped to identify, manage, and respond to young people in ways that are validating and helpful.



Learning

The 2021 Australian Youth Barometer indicates young Australians' engagement in education and training remains high throughout post-school life stages. The proportion of engagement is about 65 per cent among 20 to 24-year-olds (Walsh et al., 2022).

Educational Transitions

Educational transitions represent a key milestone for young people in adolescence, and the early years of adulthood and are associated with high levels of stress.

Orygen's consultations with young people have identified high levels of anticipated stress associated with these transitions, particularly for the transition at the end of secondary education. Part of this stress is related to the unknown – transitioning from friends, routines and familiar environments – and feeling pressure that their choices could impact the rest of their lives (Fava & Baker, 2022).

"If you think about high school from the perspective of a teenager, it's like the end of everything that they've known for their whole life. As soon as you finish Year 12, you get to decide if you want to keep studying. It's completely up to you. Every single thing that you've ever done is going to change, and all of your friends are going to change, and your whole life is going to change"

Orygen Youth Advisory Council member, 18 to 25 years, (Fava & Baker, 2022)

"It was the routine that was the hardest part for me. You have a strict routine throughout your whole primary school and high school years, and then having to choose your own timetable was wild to me. It took me at least six months to feel okay with this weird, flexible routine, and then at least a couple of years to get used to the routine of independent study"

Orygen Youth Advisory Council member, 18 to 25 years, (Fava & Baker, 2022)



The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated stress around school transitions, but also provided benefits in online learning capability.

Research confirms COVID-19 has exacerbated the uncertainty and stress in young people's post-school transitions, and that young people need support to address these concerns (Cutler et al., 2021).

However, others have also highlighted the positives of COVID-19 and the opportunities for future options for young Australians in terms of online capabilities:

“The rapid activation of remote learning and working has provided greater flexibility for students, workers, educational institutions, and workplaces. It allows individuals who are balancing multiple commitments the flexibility to access opportunities such as making an income, maintaining social connections or receiving health care without needing to worry about geographical barriers, particularly those who live rurally or remotely. Policymakers should consider investing and supporting initiatives and organisations to maintain and upscale their online capabilities to ensure all young people have the opportunity to access their offerings”
Youth Reference Group participant, 18 to 24 years, (Walsh et al., 2022)

Young people recommend a variety of supports for transitioning out of school, including through diversifying assessment mechanisms, improving careers education, and consulting with young people.

The Monash Youth Policy and Education Practice has presented changes in the transition from school that young people in their Youth Reference Group (aged 18 to 25) have recommended (Cutler et al., 2021). They summarise the 'problem' as follows:

- COVID-19 has exacerbated the uncertainty and stress in young people's post-school transitions. Young people need support to address these concerns
- how young people are assessed in their final years of schooling bears re-thinking considering changes to schooling during the pandemic
- post-school transitions are not linear. Young people need access to guidance at different points– not always in school.

The suggestions for change are:

- Change 1: Harness young people's curiosity
- Change 2: Diversify how young people are assessed in their final years of schooling
- Change 3: Improve careers education and practical skills acquisition
- Change 4: Use digital technologies to provide post-school opportunities
- Change 5: Increase student consultation.

To understand what is behind these recommendations, the Monash Youth Policy and Education Practice writes:

“Despite combined changes to the labour market, the erosion of linear pathways to careers and technological change, young people's career expectations have scarcely changed over the past 20 years. In fact, the OECD[8] suggests that young people's career aspirations have become concentrated in fewer occupations, with young people across 41 countries reporting that they expect to work in one of just 10 popular jobs” (Cutler et al., 2021)

This suggests young people might be unaware of different types of work in the digital age and that there is a persistent misalignment between young people's career aspirations and the educational qualifications required to achieve them. Harnessing young people's curiosity (Change 1) and improving careers education (Change 3) is crucial here, with the need for a career education curriculum that reflects the ever-changing labour market and emerging careers, such as digital marketing and social-media influencers.

Careers education continues to sit at the periphery of schooling, typically occurring towards the last years of school and focused on all-important final exam scores. Instead, there needs to be improved support for young people and the post-school transitions they undertake, for which digital technologies could play an important role (Change 4).

Alongside this, educators and policy-makers must consider broader factors, such as how we measure success. There is a need to diversify how young people are assessed (Change 2) because the gravity of assessments (including NAPLAN and senior secondary assessments), as well as the ATAR, may be pulling education away from its wider purposes.

“Whilst the ATAR can be important for post-school education, there are many dimensions the ATAR does not measure, such as extracurricular and service activities, which can be formative for life after school.”
21-year-old (Cutler et al., 2021)



[8] <https://www.oecd.org/education/dream-jobs-teenagers-career-aspirations-and-the-future-of-work.htm>

Education as preparation for 'real life'

Young people call for changes to education that empower them to transition to independence and shape a better society, including through practical skill-building and addressing emerging social justice issues.

Young people in the 2021 *Australian Youth Barometer* noted how their education had prepared them for the reality of the 'real world'. Several suggested schools need to focus more on teaching those skills related to school-to-work transition (such as gaining employment), being an active citizen (voting) or financial management (including taxation).

While some recognised education played a role in gaining employment, others suggested this was changing in the current job climate. They indicated their studies were overly theoretical and they desired a greater focus on practical skills to be competitive when applying for jobs (Walsh et al., 2021b).

"It's quite apparent to me that [the job market] is really competitive, and getting grades and going to school isn't quite enough to cut it – I hear – so it makes me feel like I need to get internships and work experiences, that kind of edge, to be competitive"

Female, 21, ACT (Walsh et al., 2021b)

Some interviewees felt their education was not fit-for-purpose in preparing them for work life (Walsh et al., 2022). Only half of young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that their education prepared them for the future (Walsh et al., 2022).

"I think something that needs to be in all schools across the board is having a class related around tax returns, you know, financial stability ... just very basic life skills, information about loans, interest rates ... If I had been taught that in a class specifically for that at school, I think I would have had so much more stability and knowledge around those things"

Female, 22, VIC (Walsh et al., 2022)

"Generation Z was never taught anything to do with financial management throughout school, so it is not surprising that Gen Z is failing to manage their finances"

Female, 18 to 21 years, VIC (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023a).

Some participants also emphasised education played a crucial role in addressing pressing social issues of reconciliation, racism and gender inequality (Walsh et al., 2021b).

"I think [teachers are] pretty much responsible for shaping the generation, educating [young people] to be part of the world and be contributors to society"

Male, 20, SA (Walsh et al., 2021b)

Inclusivity and Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging in educational settings is an area for improvement for young people.

A sense of belonging is confirmed as important to young Australians aged 18 to 24 (Walsh et al., 2022), however, belonging in education settings needs attention, with only 43 per cent of young people 'often' or 'very often' feeling like they belonged when they were at their educational institution. Interviewees spoke of wanting more accepting educational environments. They also wanted greater choice around learning content and its delivery.

"Just the environment was just very, like, open and creative and ... I just really loved that"

Non-binary person, 20, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

"I didn't overly enjoy uni, but that's because I'm not very academic in you know, reading and writing"

Female, 20, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

"I certainly feel like you could expand how education is really conceptualised and structured in a way that does offer a wider breadth of how people undertake their study and how people undertake learning"

Non-binary person, 22, WA (Walsh et al., 2022)

In a study of Australian university students exploring ways to improve student wellbeing, a significant proportion commented on the importance of fostering a more inclusive and caring community among students (Baik et al., 2019).

"I think if you want student wellbeing to be better, you need to make a community of students, not a situation [where] students feel treated like a number and not a person, where most have to commute for hours each day because they cannot afford to live nearby"

University student, (Baik et al., 2019).

"Build upon the existing structure that fosters a sense of community and family amongst the students. For example, allowing cohort mates the option of staying together in the same class in the degree can foster strong student relationships"

University student, (Baik et al., 2019).

A significant proportion of LGBTQA+ young people feel unsafe or uncomfortable in educational settings due to their gender or sexuality.

A national survey of health and wellbeing among LGBTQA+[9] young people by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University in 2019 received more than 6,400 valid responses from respondents aged 14 to 21 (Hill et al., 2021). Just over one in four (29.2 per cent) respondents at university and one in three (33.8 per cent) at TAFE reported feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in their educational setting (Hill et al., 2021). The experience of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in an educational setting was considerably more common among trans men and trans women compared with cis-gender men and women.

One in five TAFE students (20.2 per cent) reported frequently hearing negative remarks regarding sexuality and 15 per cent at university in the past 12 months. TAFE (34.4 per cent) students and one-sixth of university students (17.2 per cent) reported missing day/s at their educational setting in the past 12 months because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (Hill et al., 2021). This experience of missing days of education was more commonly reported by trans and gender-diverse participants, compared with cis-gender men and women.

A key recommendation of the report, *Writing Themselves In 4*, is tackling the stigma directed towards LGBTQA+ communities and violence against them (Hill et al., 2021). The report suggests this could include (but not be limited to) community messaging campaigns, programs aimed at embedding positive representation of LGBTQA+ people in media, efforts to ensure LGBTQA+ inclusion in government policy frameworks and prioritisation in funding areas, such as community-inclusion grants. It could also include efforts to address gender stereotypes and norms that challenge the ability of trans and gender-diverse young people to live openly and safely within their communities.



[9] Despite considerable efforts, the survey was unable to recruit a sufficient sample of young people with an intersex variation. For that reason, the survey should be considered a survey of LGBTQA+ young people only. (Hill et al., 2021)

Young First Nations students recognise the value of inclusive and supportive First Nations units in supporting their wellbeing.

A study of seven First Nations university students aged 18 to 25 explored First Nations student wellbeing using yarning methodology (Durmush et al., 2023). The students were asked: 'What do First Nations youth attending university perceive as the solutions and strategies to enhancing their wellbeing in higher education?' (Durmush et al., 2023).

Providing an inclusive and culturally supportive higher education environment was a major theme for the students. Students' quotes highlight the role First Nations student units have in creating a sense of belonging and place of cultural safety. However, more needs to be done in making the university a place where they feel safe and connected.

"I feel like the ATSI [Indigenous student unit] unit does it pretty well, when Indigenous students come in to welcome them and make them feel supported and safe. That does happen just through the ATSI unit; it would be nice if there was — I don't know. I don't quite know how to phrase that. [Inaudible] change the uni vibe as a whole, because the ATSI unit itself is so welcoming and so nice, so how do you extrapolate that sense of belonging and safety into a whole institution"

First Nations university student, 18 to 25 years, (Durmush et al., 2023)

Young First Nations students suggested a variety of further ways to support wellbeing of First Nations students, including through wellbeing policies, practical supports, employment of more First Nations staff members, and improved cultural competency among existing staff.

One young person spoke of an First Nations wellbeing policy:

"Well, they could have an Indigenous wellbeing policy which looks at all of these different things and strategies they can do to improve wellbeing. Then that in turn will impact successful completion rates and things like that"

First Nations university student, 18 to 25 years, (Durmush et al., 2023)



Practical support, including scholarships and internships were valued:

“I was supported for my scholarship, which was amazing and without that, I’d have to work and that’s been amazing for me. Then also CareerTrackers has been amazing, being able to do the internships and that community and CareerTrackers*[internship program for Indigenous university students] has been incredible. I’ve made lifelong friends and so that’s just been really helpful for my wellbeing and opportunities to achieve. Support has just been amazing”
First Nations university student, 18 to 25 years, (Durmush et al., 2023)

Other themes included:

- incorporating First Nations perspectives and culture within the institution
- employing more First Nations academics and staff
- Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP)
- First Nations student role models
- reviewing higher education institutions’ policies
- revising higher education institutions’ response to Aboriginality
- mandatory cultural competency training for staff and students
- Support services (counsellors).

“It’s also quite frustrating because the change that needs to occur really is an entire revamp of what is currently done. People have found a way to circumvent, and I guess profit from, the system at hand currently. It doesn’t adequately serve the needs of our people because it’s not set up to. It’s set up to create westernised versions of Indigenous people that forgo their ways of really knowing and doing in order for white collar success and white appreciation. It’s not about them maintaining their identity, and it’s certainly not looking to target those who are quite comfortable in their identity or aware”
First Nations university student, 18 to 25 years, (Durmush et al., 2023)

The small sample size of this study was a clear limitation as the findings do not represent the world views and perspectives of the entire population of Australian First Nations young people in higher education and their wellbeing. However, the study highlights the importance of listening to the voices of First Nations young people in higher education and their wellbeing needs.

Supporting wellbeing at universities

A consultation with more than 2700 university students analysed responses to the question: “What can be done to improve student wellbeing?” (Baik et al., 2019). Students made diverse recommendations across a variety of themes, commenting mostly on academic teachers and teaching practices (37 per cent); student services and supports (27 per cent); and environment, culture and communication (25 per cent). Course design, program administration, assessment and student society activities were also commented on by 10 to 16 per cent of students (Baik et al., 2019)

Young people call for more empathy and approachability among university educators, especially more understanding for diversity in student circumstances, including their competing commitments.

Many students felt their wellbeing would be improved if academic teachers – both lecturers and tutors – were more approachable and understanding of diverse student circumstances.

“My general sense of wellbeing would be enhanced if teachers would understand that some students support themselves outside of university, and therefore do not have as much time as those students who live at home and do not work. I am a hard-working student but I only have so many hours in which to try to complete my studies. Teachers, however, sometimes assume in the language they use that everyone is simply lazy and apathetic towards their studies. I do not like to feel pigeonholed in that group just because I sometimes struggle to complete all of the set readings, for example”
Arts university student (Baik et al., 2019)

“I’ve found one of the biggest issues is that teacher/lecturer commitment to student wellbeing has been very shaky. Some teachers care deeply and some not at all, and depending on the commitment of the teacher to that really impacts on the way the class runs, the dedication of the students and the approachability of the teacher”
Law university student (Baik et al., 2019)

“I feel that I would better deal with stress and anxiety if law school was not viewed as an activity in isolation. I often feel like many teachers, faculty, staff and other students do not understand that many students have to work, support family, have children and have massive financial difficulties that infringe on ability to study/deal with stress”
Law university student (Baik et al., 2019)

“The university should try to understand the students and their difficulties and situations individually instead of sticking firmly to the rules and saying that because the other students do this, you must do this too”
Biomedicine university student (Baik et al., 2019)

Young people commented on the importance of strong communication skills among educators, desiring teaching practices that were interactive, clarified teachers' expectations of students, conveyed course material clearly, and facilitated peer-to-peer interactions.

"If teachers would slow down and reiterate information. It often seems like there is an overwhelming amount of material to know and some lecturers don't deliver it in a user-friendly manner"

University student, (Baik et al., 2019)

"If tutors took more time to get to know their students. Even learning their names"

University student, (Baik et al., 2019)

"If lecturers try to be more interactive with students instead of limiting the approach of teaching by simply reading out facts from the slides it would be extremely helpful"

University student, (Baik et al., 2019)

"More activities to encourage students to interact would be extremely beneficial as I find Biomedicine is a course where it is difficult to find friends"

University student, (Baik et al., 2019)

Young people also expressed a desire for variety in teaching activities as well as more individual learning support, such as academic skill development and assessment feedback.

"I feel my general sense of wellbeing would be enhanced if teachers would develop more ways to teach topics with the students, whether it be non-assessed sample quizzes, tests online ..."

(Baik et al., 2019)

Young people call for better promotion of available student services and supports, including around course planning and career options and mental health and stress management supports.

Another common theme was student services and support, predominantly increasing awareness and promoting the use of services, such as counselling, academic skills, and student advisory services, as well as improving the range and quality of services.

"The most effective way to promote wellbeing is to publicise support services and encourage students to utilise them"

Law university student (Baik et al., 2019)

" ... [if] there were more counsellors/psychologists working at the counselling services because it's really hard to get an appointment when you really need one"

Science university student (Baik et al., 2019)

Students also raised the importance of improving advice about course planning and guidance on post-graduate career or study options.

"Student wellbeing would be improved if students would be able to get individual career and academic appointments before they start studies"

Engineering university student (Baik et al., 2019)

"More details about what kind of jobs/career pathways are available after the Bachelor of Biomedicine. We had a few lectures on this topic towards the end of last year, but I felt as though all the speakers somehow 'got lucky' and managed to meet the manager of some big company who offered them employment ... but what about the general graduate,

who doesn't 'get lucky'– where do they go?"

Biomedicine university student (Baik et al., 2019)

Other recommendations related to promoting positive mental health through education about managing stress or hosting mindfulness workshops (Baik et al., 2019).

Online Learning

Most young people engage in informal learning, especially online and through social media platforms.

According to the 2022 Youth Barometer, three-quarters (75 per cent) of young people engage in informal learning opportunities outside of schools and universities (Walsh et al., 2022). Subjects of study were broad and included work-related skills, performing and creative arts, wellbeing, finances, political issues, ICT and coding skills, sex education, and sport, and young people learned these skills from a wide variety of courses.

Young people were more likely to use online and social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, to learn new skills such as coding, crafts, and workout routines. Several supported their learning by using these platforms to ask questions of others online.

“If I was to have something that I want to [learn to] do ... I can ask on Facebook ... and a lot of people will end up answering me and showing me how [to do it].”

23-year-old, woman, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

“I started by looking at ... people that I followed [on social media] in the sport [space] ... from there, I found a lot of people that were doctors and sports scientists and stuff and then I looked at their papers ... I kind of just went up the chain until I would find a lot of journal articles and stuff that taught me a lot of things about the topic.”

20-year-old, man, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)



Recommendations for Young Adults: Learning

Young people have asked for support navigating the stress associated with transitioning from high school.

Specific recommendations from young people include:

- education systems diversify how young people are assessed in their final years of school
- studies be more focused on practical skills to allow them to be more prepared for real life
- education systems improve careers advice.

Young people have asked for help fostering a sense of belonging at their educational institutions.

Specific recommendations made by young people include:

- educational institutions pay more attention to fostering a sense of belonging among their students and build more accepting educational environments, particularly in post-secondary education
- providing more choice around learning content and its delivery
- responding to an identified gap in the research around building a sense of belonging and supporting social-emotional development in virtual (educational) environments.

First Nations university students have suggested a variety of ways their wellbeing can be supported to ensure they have a fair and equal opportunity to participate in and complete higher education.

Specific recommendations made by First Nations university students include:

- universities have inclusive and supportive First Nations units, particularly for creating a sense of belonging and place of cultural safety
- more is done to make universities places where First Nations students feel safe and connected
- First Nations units in universities should target wellbeing by developing wellbeing policies for their students
- universities listen to the voices of First Nations university students and their wellbeing needs.



Participating

Politics

The overwhelming majority of young adults feel it is very important the government listens to them. They also want to be engaged in political processes.

A survey by the Australian Human Rights Commission asked young people how important it is that government listens to what they have to say; almost all participants (aged 18 to 25) said it was very important (96 per cent) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The Raise our Voice in Parliament initiative demonstrates young people are engaged, with almost all (96 per cent) participants in the 2021 post-campaign survey reporting they would be more likely to engage with politics as a result of the campaign, and young women being particularly engaged, with the highest number of speeches submitted (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023).

"I've definitely noticed, a lot of my generation has kind of pushed their way into those sorts of [political] spaces if they didn't feel like they were being heard. I think our voices are definitely out there. There's definitely young people getting their opinions heard"

Non-binary person, 20, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

Many young people feel underrepresented in political systems.

There is a strong sense that young people are not represented, with only one in three respondents reporting feeling represented in Australia's Parliament (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023).

"There are approximately 4 million young people in Australia. Yet only seven members of our Federal Parliament are aged 18-34. This is a failure of democracy"

(Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023)

"It made my day to have my message shared in Parliament by Senator Rex Patrick. I have always wanted to help to make the world a better place for people with a disability. I want to make my family proud and my country proud. I would like to be in the Government, and I would like to be a part of the change."

Male, 20, (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023)

"In 20 years, I hope to see an Australia that acknowledges the genocide and oppression that has occurred to First Nations people ... Australia needs to raise the age of incarceration"

Excerpt from a speech by male, 20, (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023)

Young people called for greater and more accurate representation of their diverse voices in politics.

"Recently [the cost of living] was discussed in Parliament and it was putting down young people and our ability to afford things, and making it seem like we don't know anything about finances ... Thankfully, I think there was a bit of support against that in Parliament, so there's politicians out there that, I would say, are very accepting of young people and understanding of the issues we have, but I think a massive majority of them just think that you know, we live off of our parents or ... we're not independent enough"

Female, 22, Vic (Walsh et al., 2022)

"If people are able to know that they are heard and represented, it really lets people, and encourages people to strive to work towards that ... [and] more younger people are encouraged to get involved directly in politics, whether that is actually signing themselves up for elections, or in other ways"

Male, 24, Vic (Walsh et al., 2022)

"I'm part of a bunch of minority groups that are consistently spoken over [by] people who aren't part of those minority groups"

Non-binary person, 20, Qld (Walsh et al., 2022)



Many young people reported feeling confident to influence and engage in politics.

Importantly, two in three respondents reported feeling confident engaging in politics, and one in two respondents reported feeling confident in influencing federal politics (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023).

“Politicians are among the least-trusted people in the world, and I wonder sometimes why I have such a desire to become one. After having my 90-second speech read in Parliament and being promised by a Senator that they would fight for the change and work towards the future I want to see, I question whether it is an empty promise? Is this a people- or self-serving politician that stands before me? However, every inch of my being wants to continue to engage with the political system so that I can ensure my message is not disregarded, ignored or overlooked, as it already has been for so many years prior. The opportunity that the Raise Our Voice Australia program afforded me to have my speech read on such a scale, has only reignited the fire in my belly”

Speech by a female, 21, read by Senator Larissa Waters (Raise Our Voice Australia, 2023)

Some young people spoke of having little power to create meaningful change in society, largely due to not feeling heard by those in power.

Only a small number of young people felt properly represented in public and political discussions and many raised concerns about perceived generational differences with policy makers, a lack of input in decision-making processes, perceptions they were misunderstood by others, and their concerns were not taken seriously people (Walsh et al., 2022).

“Ultimately, change needs to be across the board and while young people can definitely do certain things and lobby people and advocate for what they believe in, they ultimately can’t overhaul structures or systems that have been designed to maintain and continue the status quo”

Female, 20, NSW (Walsh et al., 2022)

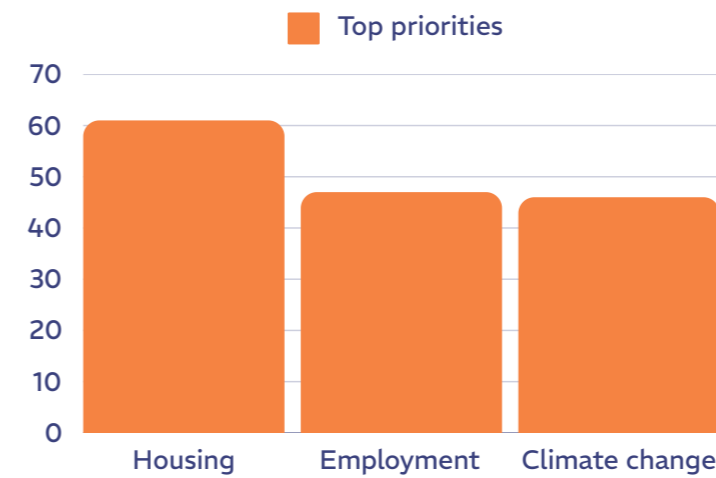
“I’m a bit pessimistic in this way and I think that adults don’t want to be told what to do by youth. It’s ... very hard for the youth of today to make major change without a miracle happening ... I just don’t have high hopes. I just think that adults or the older generations just won’t care ... I hope that kids, through all youth protests or petitions and things like that, would be able to make change. I just struggle to see it being possible on a large scale”

Male, 24, ACT (Walsh et al., 2022)

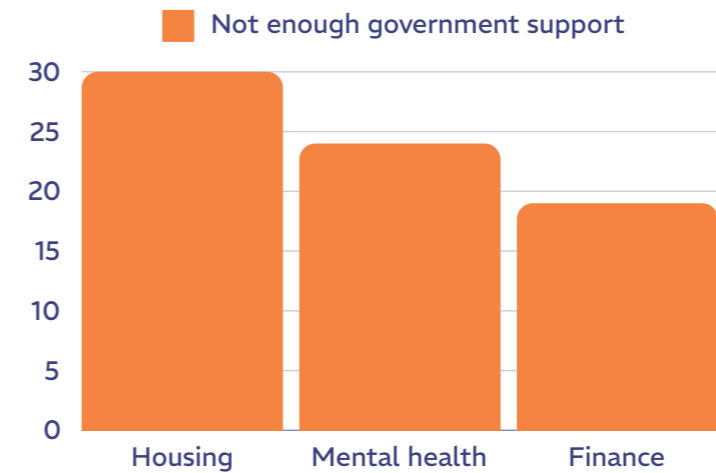
“We aren’t taken seriously ... nobody takes us seriously”

Non-binary person, 20, QLD (Walsh et al., 2022)

Housing, employment, climate, and mental health have been identified by young people as top government priorities.

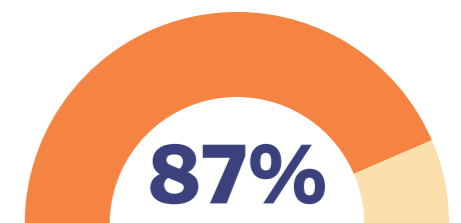


Overall, 61 per cent cited housing, employment (47 per cent) and climate change (46 per cent) as top priorities



Young Australians nominated housing (30 per cent), mental health (24 per cent), and finance (19 per cent) as areas where there was not enough government support for young people (Walsh et al., 2022).

Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of young Australians have volunteered at some point in their lives, with 87 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people volunteering during the last year, compared with almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of other young Australians (Walsh et al., 2022).



Young people have asked for dedicated platforms to share their views in meaningful ways.

Young people living with disability have asked for governments to invest in young people’s skills development and provide platforms across government levels where they can be heard and enact change (Children and Young People with Disability Australia, 2020a).

Listening

Many young people felt it was important young people are listened to.

“The youth advisory committee – they really listen to what people say. LGBTQIA+ sub-committee, any plans and posters always go through the committee first (it is important to get the youth perspective because it is a youth service)”

Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

“Older people and organisations have to, need to, constantly listen to young people, and keep up with changing expectations of safety. Young people shouldn’t keep having to educate the services meant to support them”

Young person, NSW (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021)

First Nations young people have made a clear call for a national space to build meaningful relationships that enable them to create systemic change.

At the historic Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices) National Summit, which brought together more than 800 First Nations women delegates from across Australia for decision-making, innovation and celebration, the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Youth Forum representatives shared their views:

“Our shared history teaches us that this country has built and continues to build systems that were not made for our empowerment. They were void of our ancestors’ voices. Void of our solutions and our priorities. Yet, our Elders and our ancestors continued to show up and challenge those systems. As young people in the 21st century, we inherit the legacy of these systems that continue to fail us ... As the largest demographic of First Nations people, young people deserve the right to speak and be heard. There are so many other youth voices that have not been heard or valued. We want to come together with young women, men, trans and non-binary mob, neurodiverse mob, and mob with disabilities. We deserve more time to connect across our diverse experiences. We deserve a national space to build meaningful relationships that enable us to create systemic change. We seek your support to host the FIRST Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander National Youth Summit that is led, designed and hosted by First Nations young people.

As we step up to drink water from the well, we will not forget who dug the well.

Together we will raise our families and our communities in a new future”

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Youth Forum representatives (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023b)

Young First Nations leaders call for community leaders to hear and trust in their contributions.

These young First Nations leaders in their Youth Statement resolved to “continue to be a part of the solution ... continue to take back our space and have our voices heard” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023b). They also called for decision-makers including First Nations community leaders to listen and trust in their lived expertise:

“We call for your trust in our contributions. We seek not one seat but many seats at your table ... we call upon our community leaders and elders to continue to make space in our own communities' decision-making for young people to listen, learn and contribute.”

Wiyi Yani U Thangani Youth Statement (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023b)

Young people with disability want to feel as though they are being prepared for a future where they can do things for themselves and live a life separate to their parents.

Young people with disability generally live their lives surrounded by adults – parents, teachers, school services officers, therapists, and paid supports. For many, there are very few aspects of their lives that are not influenced by adults. The attitudes of adults who support young people living with disability play a key role in their sense of achievement and their capacity to be increasing their independence (Connolly, 2022a).

In a South Australian study many young people said the requirement for adult assistance to move around the home or school grounds meant they often found themselves excluded from some activities (Connolly, 2022a).

“I want more wheelchair access and I want more elevator access for students at my school. I also want people in politics to be more patient when talking to people with disabilities because they might have speech impairments, or they could very much not talk at all as they might have lost their voice when they were little.

They might have no voice box, or they lost their voice over time”

Female, 18, SA (Connolly, 2022a)

Young people who were finishing school and planning post-school pathways, reported they are not always given an opportunity to be involved in decision-making about their own future. They said sometimes teachers or parents would make decisions about their subject choices and future career or study pathways based on what those adults thought they could achieve or would be ‘best’ for them. They said this was done without any consideration of what their passions, interests and personal goals might be, and that this approach leaves them feeling ill-prepared, disinterested and more likely to withdraw from study and work options altogether (Connolly, 2022a).

“Here is an area we think you’d be good in’ and completely ignore what the person is actually good at”

Male, 21, SA (Connolly, 2022a)

Young people also shared their hopes for their lives beyond having a job or career. Their thinking and goals for the future reflected how much they value family, freedom, and friends. They valued the support received by those around them. In turn, they wanted their family and communities to be supported and wanted more time to do more activities together with members of their family (Connolly, 2022a).

“My mum would like for me to be independent, but she also does a lot for me”
Female, 19, SA (Connolly, 2022a)

Developing independent living skills creates challenges for adults and service providers. It is necessary to balance risks, while also building increasing independence for young people living with disability (Connolly, 2022a).

Social Media

Young people have mixed views about the effectiveness of social media to achieve social change.

Young people acknowledge the addictive nature of technology and social media but believe that, on balance, its benefits outweigh its negatives (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023a). The Youth Barometer indicates most young adults believe social media can assist under-represented groups to amplify their voice and shine a light on important issues, but that social media is also seen to be a distraction from important issues (Walsh et al., 2022).

Some interviewees described social media platforms as echo chambers and as having negative emotional impacts. Despite this, more than half of young Australians used their social media profiles to try to influence social change (Walsh et al., 2022).

A large proportion of young people see the digital world as having different rules and social norms on acceptable behaviour.

Another interesting issue that emerged in relation to social media was that one in five young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that writing insulting things online is not bullying, and one-quarter agreed or strongly agreed that there are no rules online and that they can do whatever they want. Although this is not surprising in relation to the wider research, the findings in this report affirm that the digital divide is not just one of uneven access to technologies, but there is also a divide in behaviours and perceptions of harm (Walsh et al., 2022).

Recommendations for Young Adults: Participating

Recommendations for Young Adults: Participating

Ensure that all Australians, including young people, have fair representation in our democracy through greater and more accurate representation of young people in politics.

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