

# Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing

Policy brief - June 2015

## Family Relationships

### A snapshot

- Relationships between children and young people and their families are among the most important influences on a child's development and wellbeing.
- Families are consistently cited by children and young people as sources of advice, support and love.
- Families have a key role in shaping the way a child or young person develops throughout their lives.
- The quality of family relationships has a lasting effect on the outcomes for children and young people as they grow and mature.

### What is the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia developed the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to monitor and report on the wellbeing of Western Australia's children and young people.

The Framework comprises two reports, the second editions of which were tabled in the Western Australian Parliament on 14 July 2014:

- *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* provides a picture of how children and young people in WA are faring according to 40 key measures of wellbeing.
- *Building Blocks* lists and describes best practice and promising programs from around Australia which have been shown to be effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

This policy brief explores key information from the two Wellbeing Monitoring Framework reports related to family relationships.



## Why this issue is important

Relationships between children and young people and their families are among the most important influences on a child's development and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> For most children and young people, their family is the primary source of security, support and development.<sup>2</sup> As children grow older, the influence of peers increases and forms an important source of support and socialisation.

Consultations with children and young people conducted by the Commissioner for Children and Young People consistently highlight the primary importance of family relationships to wellbeing.

Families have a significant influence on reducing risky behaviours and creating positive wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, particularly at several important junctures in their lives.

The early years of brain development are profoundly influenced by the environment in which the child grows. The quality of a child's relationship with parents and caregivers during this period has a lifelong effect on the wellbeing and development of children and young people.<sup>3</sup>

Adolescence provides another critical transition period for young people where family relationships can have considerable influence on future development and outcomes. Studies have shown protective factors relating to the family, such as caring, connectedness and support, can provide positive outcomes for young people.<sup>4</sup>

## What we know already

The data collected by agencies and organisations does not necessarily fall within the prescribed 0 to 17 years age group for which the Commissioner has oversight. These reports work with data that is reasonably relevant and recent, and so is the best available at the time.

### Concerns of children and young people

Data on children and young people aged five to 25 years who contacted the Kids Helpline in 2012 showed family relationships were the second most prevalent reason for contacting the helpline, behind mental health concerns. This was consistent across age groups, for Aboriginal children and young people, and for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) backgrounds. Overall, 19.4 per cent of contacts were related to family relationships.<sup>5</sup>

The Mission Australia *Youth Survey* for 2013 found that young people aged 15 to 19 years were concerned about family conflict, but other issues such as stress, depression and study problems were of greater concern to them.<sup>6</sup> The Australian Research Alliance on Children and Youth (ARACY) consultation in 2012 found that

'being loved and valued' was rated as the most important aspect of wellbeing by 87 per cent of respondents.<sup>7</sup> The Mission Australia survey also found parents, relatives and friends were cited as the top three sources of advice and support.<sup>8</sup>

## **Informal learning**

Parental involvement in early learning provides important development opportunities for a child and helps to develop the child's social and emotional relationship with parents.

In 2011 over 91.2 per cent 0 to two year-olds had their parents involved in some form of learning activity, and for three to eight year-olds only 2.7 per cent had no parental involvement in learning activities.<sup>9</sup> There was virtually no difference in the likelihood of couple families versus single-parent families in terms of parental involvement in informal learning.

## **Evidence**

Children and young people provide telling evidence of the importance of families and family relationships to them and their wellbeing. In all the Commissioner's consultations with children and young people, they refer to how families and relationships shape their lives and provide them with stability, comfort and love.

"I want to get out...to burn up that energy...but I can come home again and feel completely safe, and feel loved." Girl, 17.<sup>10</sup>

"Family things [are important because they give you] good memories, role models, a safe home...and support." Girl, 15.<sup>11</sup>

"I value family because you can relate to them and it's one of the main instances where you can be friends with someone 20 years older than you and still have a relationship." Girl, 16.<sup>12</sup>

"You always need someone to support you so that they can be there to encourage you when you make mistakes and things like that." Boy, 13.<sup>13</sup>

"Friends and family plays an important role in staying mentally healthy. They support [and] encourage and are someone to talk to and most of all they are people who love you and care for you. So that's why you keep your friends and family close." Girl, 10.<sup>14</sup>

"My main support comes from my family. They support me with decisions I make." Girl, 18.

"I love my mum and brother so much. Although we fight sometimes, I know we always gonna have each other's backs." Girl, 14.<sup>15</sup>



## Programs that have been evaluated as effective in this area

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia's *Building Blocks* edition one and two reports showcase 126 programs that have been shown to be effective at improving the wellbeing of children and young people or that demonstrate promise in this regard. The programs listed below have evidence of successful outcomes in addressing wellbeing.

However, it is not simply the content which makes a program successful. Common themes of effective programs include meaningful community engagement, local design, reciprocity and strong and engaged leadership. Where these are absent, the program is likely to have diminished success, or may even be considered a failure.

- **Bridging the Gap:** Edition 2, page 64. A program designed to encourage Aboriginal families to participate in shared book reading at home. The program had a positive impact on children's self-esteem.
- **Communities for Children:** Edition 2, page 77. A multi-strategy initiative targeting families in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and aims to build family and community capacity and support relationships between families and their communities.
- **Parent Child Interaction Therapy:** Edition 2, page 83. A program of child-directed and parent-directed interaction, designed around parents and children referred from child protection authorities due to possible maltreatment or identified child behavioural problems or stress.
- **Tuning in to Kids:** Edition 2, page 85. A parenting program that uses the principles of emotional socialisation and coaching, designed around helping children learn to understand and regulate their emotions.
- **The Spilstead Model:** Edition 2, page 93. A comprehensive centre-based framework for at-risk families, using a family-centred, strengths-based approach.
- **Exploring Together:** Edition 2, page 107. A short-term cognitive behavioural program for children with behavioural problems and their parents. This program includes a number of elements to address problem behaviours in collaboration with both children and parents.
- **Let's Start: Exploring together:** Edition 2, page 117. An early intervention for Aboriginal children whose behaviour is a concern, and their parents. Based on the Exploring Together program and designed and delivered to have cultural relevance.
- **Strengthening Families program:** Edition 2, page 119. A program for families with young adolescents designed around enhancing family protective and resiliency processes, and teaches relationship skills to parents and young people.
- **Challis Early Childhood Education Centre:** Edition 1, page 12. An integrated and comprehensive multi-agency school and community resource



focused on early learning and family support. It provides programs for children from 0 to 3 years and support programs and services for their parents and guardians.

- **1-2-3 Magic and Emotion Coaching:** Edition 1, page 45. A program to assist parents to deal with difficult behaviour by a signalling system, designed to encourage the development of children's ability to manage emotional reactions to parental boundaries.
- **Bending Like a River: The Parenting Between Cultures Program:** Edition 1, page 46. A parenting program designed to strengthen the ability and confidence of CaLD parents to parent in the Australian context by focussing on key issues relevant to CaLD communities.
- **Early Intervention Parenting Project (EIPP):** Edition 1, page 49. A program that focusses on the needs of families with young children, emphasising the importance of improving parent-child relationships and building positive attitudes.
- **Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops:** Edition 1, page 51. A program designed specifically to assist Aboriginal men engage with and understand their children.
- **Parents and Adolescents Communicating Together (PACT):** Edition 1, page 52. A group program for adolescents and their parents to learn skills for resolving conflict peacefully.
- **Through the Looking Glass (TtLG): A Community Partnership in Parenting:** Edition 1, page 57. This program supports the development of secure attachment relationships between a mother and child, and addresses specific barriers in the relationship that impede development of a secure attachment.
- **Triple P: Positive Parenting Program:** Edition 1, page 58. A suite of training that supports parents and children in developing wellbeing and relationship skills.
- **What Were We Thinking! Psycho-Educational Program for Parents (WWWTT):** Edition 1, page 60. An early intervention program for parents and first babies that aims to extend knowledge and skills in managing the infant's needs and their relationship.
- **Exploring Together Pre-school Program:** Edition 1, page 72. A program for pre-school and early primary children who have behaviour problems and are at risk of developing ongoing mental health problems. A component includes relationship building within families.
- **Parent Support:** Edition 1, page 92. A specialist, home-based service that aims to support parents to be more effective in managing children's problem behaviour.



## Policy implications

Policy and program development needs to recognise and promote that a safe and nurturing home environment is critical to the development of children and young people. Parents and other caregivers, particularly those in vulnerable families, must be supported.

Support to vulnerable families should consider:

- cultural factors
- families with complex needs
- families with either a child or parent with disability
- foster and kinship carer support
- families with challenges such as single parenting, a history of family and domestic violence, and fly-in-fly-out work rosters.

Integrated service delivery is important to enable better access and more effective delivery of services. Funding arrangements and organisational structures should be flexible to assist organisations to better deliver the services that are required and useful to the family. Organisations should base service delivery on a 'no wrong door' approach to ensure families can access assistance before issues escalate, and to minimise the number of families who might fall through the gaps.

This is likely to have flow-on effects to the strengthening of connections in community. A community with strong integration and networks is a protective factor in providing a positive environment for families and the development of relationships.

It is critical for programs, services and interventions to be grounded in a sound evidence base, drawing on principles including:

- clear and measurable objectives
- skills focus
- strengths-based approaches
- delivery by trained and skilled practitioners
- effective monitoring and evaluation systems.<sup>16</sup>

Policies, programs, services and interventions should include support for families with young children from birth to early childhood, and children in the middle years and adolescence. These should include a focus on aspects such as parental relationships and positive role modelling, and comprise both universal supports that recognise the benefits of positive family relationships and secondary supports that focus on particular issues.

Providing systems and services that support parents and reduce stress factors is significant to improving outcomes for children and young people. "Supporting families in the key roles they play is essential to ensure children have both a good start in life and continued opportunities to develop into happy and healthy adults."<sup>17</sup>



Importantly, children and young people have a right to be included in decisions that affect them. Services need to ensure children and young people are able to express their views and be included in decision-making processes to ensure strategies are meeting their needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009, *A Picture of Australia's children 2009*, cat. No. PHE 112, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p.84.

<sup>2</sup> Price-Robertson R, Smart D and Bromfield L 2010, 'Family is for life: Connections between childhood family experiences and wellbeing in early adulthood', *Family Matters*, No, 85, pp.7-17.

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Community Child Health 2007, *Parenting young children*, Policy Brief No 9, The Royal Children's Hospital, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson E, Power L and Allan D 2010, *What works with adolescents? Family connections and involvement in interventions for adolescent problem behaviours*, AFRC Briefing No. 16, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Boystown 2012, *Western Australia 2012*, Kids Helpline.

<sup>6</sup> Mission Australia 2013, *Youth Survey 2013*, Mission Australia, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2012, *The Nest consultation, Findings from consultation with children, young people, parents and other adults conducted between March and September 2012*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

<sup>8</sup> Mission Australia 2013, *Youth Survey 2013*, Mission Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Childhood Education and Care Survey, June 2011*, cat. No. 4402.0.

<sup>10</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.8.

<sup>11</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.8.

<sup>12</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.9.

<sup>14</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2011, *Speaking out about mental health – the views of Western Australian Children and Young People*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.10.

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<sup>15</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People 2013, *Speaking out about disability: the views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Centre for Community Child Health 2007, *Parenting young children*, Policy Brief No 9, The Royal Children's Hospital, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> Baxter J, Gray M & Hayes A 2010, *The best start: Supporting happy and healthy childhoods*, Fact Sheet 2010, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Commonwealth of Australia