Middle Years

Early adolescence or the middle years (from nine to 14 years) is a critical stage in children's development; a period in which major changes occur at multiple levels of a child’s life. Priority must be given to consider how we can better meet the needs of children in the middle years through a coordinated approach to policy and program development.

Demographic profile:

- In June 2010, there were 178,038 children aged 9 to 14 living in Western Australia.¹
- This represents 7.8 per cent of the total population of WA and 33.0 per cent of the population of 0 to 17 year olds in WA.
- 86,032 of 9 to 14 year olds in Western Australia were female and 92,006 were male.²

The importance of the middle years

An emerging body of research³⁴ confirms that early adolescence (the middle years) is increasingly recognised as a critical stage in which major developmental changes occur.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) describes the middle years as being associated with:

- major physiological, neurological, cognitive and psychosocial changes (the transition from primary to secondary school is of particular significance)
- changing relationships with parents and families as they seek greater autonomy and independence from parental oversight and control of their lives
- an increase in the importance and influence of peer relationships (as children seek to establish their own personal and social identity).⁵

Respondents to an ARACY Middle Years survey identified social and emotional development as one of the top developmental challenges facing children as they transitioned into adolescence. Issues associated with children’s physical development were rated most highly while peer relationships, self esteem/body image and transition to independence were also highly rated.⁶
The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identifies that social and emotional development begins in early childhood but emphasises that it continues throughout life, resulting in 'the strength and capacity to lead a full and productive life and to have the resilience to deal with change and unpredictability.'

Relationships between adults and children are of central importance to developing resilience. A recent paper jointly produced by Anglicare Victoria, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Melbourne’s Royal Children’s Hospital’s Centre for Adolescent Health emphasises that ‘connectedness’ to family and to school is central to emotional wellbeing. The paper describes the ‘period of transition from primary to secondary school...as an opportunity to build resilience and self esteem but for some young people it is a time of disengagement from school and a decline in motivation, achievement and self-perception’. Successful school transitions are vital in securing ongoing engagement with school, academic achievement and as a protective factor against mental health and wellbeing concerns.

Family and parents in particular are a vital source of support and advice for children and young people. Parents can play an important role in modelling positive behaviours for their children by involving them in family life and responsibilities, teaching self-reliance and resilience and acknowledging that many of the challenges their children face are normal developmental transitions.

Therefore, it is crucial that appropriate services are available to assist them in this role. The Commissioner’s Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia noted that services do not appear connected or integrated from a parent or user perspective. Further, the number and range of programs available to parents decreases as the child gets older. Although some targeted parenting programs exist that address the needs of specific groups of young people, an environmental scan of parenting supports in Western Australia reveals a substantial gap for services for primary school aged children and adolescents.

A period of heightened risk

Early adolescence is a time during which many children engage in various risk-taking activities. Some of these include disengaging from school, involvement in criminal behaviour and experimentation with drugs and alcohol. It is often also in this later period of childhood – and before adolescence – when established symptoms of mental health disorders begin to emerge.

Examples of challenges in the middle years:

- Young people are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol because of major brain developments taking place in early adolescence.
- People who first use alcohol before the age of 15 are five times more likely to abuse alcohol than those who first use alcohol at age 21 or older.
- Up to half of lifetime mental health problems start by the age of 14.
- Research shows that approximately one in six children and one in four Aboriginal children of primary school age can be identified as being at significant risk of, or having, mental health problems.
- While bullying affects children in both primary and high school, it is often reported more among primary school aged children. Evaluations also show that anti-bullying strategies are more effective if implemented in primary school.
Challenges and issues facing children as they transition into adolescence make the middle years a period of heightened risk, particularly for disadvantaged children and young people, and a key intervention point at which risks can be addressed. Identifying and responding to early warning signs will help to prevent more serious social, emotional and behavioural problems later on.

What needs to happen

Despite these important ‘windows’ for prevention and intervention, the developmental needs of children in their middle years appear to be relatively neglected in Australian policy and practice.\(^20\) This is also the case in Western Australia.

Early years and youth agendas have dominated the policy landscape in recent times. While national frameworks\(^21\) exist for the early years (0 to 8 years) and youth (12 to 24 years), there is currently no strategy that sets out a coordinated approach for the middle years, at either a state or federal level.

The Federal Government recently recognised a need to improve the data around children and young people in their middle years with its investment of $1.5 million over five years in the Social Engagement and Emotional Development (SEED) Survey for eight to 14 year olds. This national middle years’ survey is intended for repeated long-term use and will monitor trends in children’s wellbeing in the middle years among different groups of Australian children and allow international comparison.\(^22\) While this is a welcome investment, it will require a more substantial funding commitment over time.

In September 2009, the New South Wales Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People conducted an Inquiry into the health and wellbeing of children and young people aged nine to 14 years. The Inquiry report concluded that this age group was the ‘missing middle’ in terms of availability of services and support. The committee recommended that a dedicated funding stream for nine to 14 year olds was needed to support children and families.\(^23\)

To build on these national and jurisdictional developments, Western Australia requires a coordinated, collaborative approach to policy and program development for the middle years. The recent Middle Years Forum jointly hosted by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Department for Communities and ARACY was an important first step in developing a response across all levels of government and sectors of the community.

To further progress this work, we need to be better informed about what our middle years children need, what supports already exist and where we are falling short.

And while it is important to recognise the unique issues and challenges facing children in the middle years, it is equally important to integrate middle years’ policy and practice initiatives into the early childhood and youth agendas to build a fuller and more holistic picture of childhood.

To do this, we must think carefully about how we can connect these agendas and develop policy responses for the middle years accordingly. We need to involve and acknowledge all children and young people, their families, schools and the wider community in these discussions. Careful consideration must also be given to how to effectively and meaningfully engage with children and their families who are hard-to-reach or face particular disadvantage.
In summary, we need:

- An informed understanding of the developmental needs and issues facing children in their middle years in Western Australia.
- A coordinated approach to policy and program development. This should have a focus on programs that are proven to strengthen protective factors that support healthy development and/or reduce the risk factors that contribute to adverse outcomes for children in their middle years.
- Funding or service agreements that cater to the needs and interests of children in their middle years and enable evidence-based programs to be sustained.
- An accurate demographic profile of the health and wellbeing of all children and young people, in particular those nine to 14 years.

For more information on this topic, see:

**Commissioner’s Media Release and Website**

www.ccyp.wa.gov.au >what’s the Commissioner doing? >submissions

www.ccyp.wa.gov.au >what’s the Commissioner doing? >areas of action >middle years

**New South Wales Parliament Children and Young People Committee - Final Report of the Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW**

http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ >committees > reports> children and young people> children and young people 9-14 years in NSW (inquiry)

**New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People Submission to the Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW**

http://kids.nsw.gov.au/ >our work for kids >changing laws for kids >Submission to the Inquiry into Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW

**Australian Research Alliance and Children and Youth (ARACY) Middle Years Report**

www.aracy.org.au >publications and resources >middle years >middle years project report

2 Ibid.

3 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) 2011, *betwixt and between*: A Report on ARACY’s Middle Years Project.


5 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) 2011, *betwixt and between*: A Report on ARACY’s Middle Years Project, ARACY, p. 5.

6 [Results of a survey of ARACY members working in service provision, research or policy] Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) 2011, *betwixt and between*: A Report on ARACY’s Middle Years Project, ARACY, p. 12.


8 Resnick M et al, cited in [Presentation given to the Middle Years Forum 1 July 2011, Perth, Western Australia], Bennett D 2011, *The Middle Years: Developmental Challenges for All Concerned*, [unpublished].


12 [Presentation given to the Middle Years Forum 1 July 2011, Perth, Western Australia], Bennett D 2011, *The Middle Years: Developmental Challenges for All Concerned*, [unpublished].


18 Ibid, p. 117.


