

# Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, May 2011

## Children and young people speak out about being acknowledged and involved in decisions

*"Make children feel more important because even little kids need to be listened to."*  
child 11

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research into children and young people's views on their wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> The research revealed that acknowledgement and independence were two important contributors to their wellbeing. Being listened to, having their views respected and being involved in decisions affecting them were seen as important aspects of acknowledgement and independence for children and young people.

### **What do children and young people say about being acknowledged?**

Children and young people wanted the things that are important to them to be acknowledged by adults and the wider community. They also wanted to feel valued and appreciated, in particular by parents, friends and teachers.

A loving caring family meant a 'family that will listen to you' and 'support from your parents, for them to be actually interested in you'. About half of the young people who participated in the research said that within their families they were listened to and had their ideas taken seriously, and that made them feel respected. They said being ignored or criticised by parents, friends or teachers and not having their views respected made them feel not valued or appreciated.

*"Oh, this is a little kid. What's he going to know...he doesn't know anything."* boy 12

Just over half (51.7%) of the children and young people who participated in the research felt that people listened to what they had to say. However, about 20 per cent disagreed. A higher percentage of children and young people from the country than the city felt that people listened to them.

### **What do children and young people say about being involved in decisions that affect them?**

For young people, being involved in making decisions was closely tied to freedom and independence. They talked about wanting the freedom to choose how they spend their time, to make decisions for themselves and to learn to become independent.

Sixty-two per cent of the children and young people wanted more say in decisions affecting their lives – this included a higher percentage of city than country children and young people, girls than boys and secondary school than primary school-age participants. While about 75 per cent of boys said they had enough say in decisions that affected them, only about 50 per cent of girls did.



Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Western Australia

A lot of young people wanted the opportunity to practise making decisions, including making mistakes. About half (48.8%) of participants wanted more opportunity to work things out for themselves.

*"[We] need the chance to mess up and make our own mistakes." girl 15*

Young people felt that being supported to make decisions and learn from their mistakes was a way of increasing their independence and influence as they got older. Some felt their lives were mapped out for them and they had little capacity to influence or control what happened. For some young people, there was a contradiction in not being allowed to make decisions in small aspects of life but, at 14 years-old, having to decide on school subject choices that 'are massive and going to decide your entire life'.

*"[They] tell us what to do, because they don't really think we can make our own decisions at such a young age... maybe they have to make decisions over really big things but we still want more control just for the small things." boy 14*

Young people said they had no influence or control over some of the things that had the greatest impact on them, such as parents fighting or splitting up; illness in the family; how much attention your parents paid to you; the way your parents cared for you; availability of good public transport; facilities and places for young people to hang out together; and decisions made by politicians (e.g. Youth Allowance, cost of university and TAFE courses). Some children and young people expressed concern about environmental issues, including climate change, and for other children and young people.

Children and young people had ideas for addressing these issues. Sometimes they felt unable to influence an issue because of their age or the size of the problem and they expressed frustration that more young people weren't involved.

*"They all just think you're like a little child – you don't know anything – even though you watch the news and you understand all the problems." girl 12*

*"I don't think kids can do much because not heaps of people listen to them or to people our age." boy 12*

## **What do other children and young people say?**

Children and young people want to feel valued, respected, listened to and that their ideas are taken seriously. They want to be involved in making decisions and influencing matters that affect them. They say that these things are important for their wellbeing. This is a consistent message from children and young people whenever they are consulted.

Research by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People into how children and young people understand their wellbeing found that being able to make choices and having influence in everyday life<sup>2</sup> and being involved in and making decisions<sup>3</sup> were important for their wellbeing. Also important was being valued and respected by others.<sup>4</sup>

Australian Childhood Foundation research found that children wanted to feel respected by their parents and to have the ability to participate in decisions that affected them and their lives. They wanted to be listened to by all adults and for adults to pay more attention and give more importance to what they felt, thought and had to say. Being valued and respected by others was important to them.<sup>5</sup> While the children surveyed mostly believed that their parents were interested in them (85%)<sup>6</sup>, 36 per cent believed that generally adults did not care about what young people thought.<sup>7</sup>



Of Western Australian young people responding to Mission Australia's 2010 survey about what they valued, nearly 20 per cent identified 'feeling needed and valued' as being important to them.<sup>8</sup>

## Why are acknowledging and involving children and young people important?

*All people, however young, are entitled to be participants in their own lives, to influence what happens to them, to be involved in creating their own environments, to exercise choices and to have their views respected and valued.*<sup>9</sup>

The term 'participation' is often used to describe the active involvement of children and young people in being informed, expressing their views, having their views listened to and making decisions. For children and young people to be 'participants', both in their own lives and in the broader community, the acknowledgment and support of adults with whom they have contact is critical.

The right of children and young people to be heard, taken seriously and be involved in decisions on matters that affect them in accordance with their age and maturity, in all contexts including family, school, and the community, is fundamental to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>10</sup> However, there are many good reasons to value children and young people's participation:

- They are citizens with an important role in building and sustaining communities. Involving them supports them to actively contribute to their communities and enhances their social inclusion.<sup>11</sup>
- Their participation in family life, schools and communities develops their capacity, self esteem, independence and social competence.<sup>12</sup>
- Their involvement can make sure what is provided for them is relevant, meets their needs<sup>13</sup> and produces better outcomes for them.<sup>14</sup>
- It strengthens their understanding of and commitment to democratic processes.<sup>15</sup>
- It protects them more effectively.<sup>16</sup>

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's review of the evidence on preventing young people's disengagement concluded that feeling valued, connected and having the opportunities and capacity to participate were important for young people now and in the future.

*Young people who feel valued, who are provided with opportunities to participate and have the skills and capacity to participate and feel connected to family, friends and their community – are less likely to experience disengagement. Young people who feel engaged and who are provided with opportunities to participate experience a better quality of life and contribute to creating and building better communities. In the long term, young people who are valued and feel connected have better health and mental health as adults.*<sup>17</sup>

## What needs to be done?

Genuinely listening to children and young people, giving careful consideration to their views and involving them in decisions that affect their lives whether in the family, at school (or other organisations) or in the community demonstrates our respect for them as valued members of our communities. Involving children and young people allows organisations to gain important information that will make their activities and services more relevant to these age groups.



To be respectful and value children and young people their involvement needs to be both meaningful and genuine in its intent. The Commissioner's *Involving children and young people: Participation guidelines*<sup>8</sup> and *Are you listening? – Guidelines for making complaints processes accessible and responsive for children and young people*<sup>9</sup> provide ideas for organisations on how to achieve this.

There are many examples of the ways in which children and young people have been involved in decisions that affect them, whether in the family, school, community or in the development of policy, programs and services. The issues of concern identified in the Commissioner's wellbeing research (family life, recreational opportunities and facilities, being safe, education, stress, alcohol and drugs, the environment and climate change) indicate areas where children and young people can make a significant contribution to their own wellbeing through their participation.

### **Priorities for policy and program development**

- Acknowledge and value children and young people, their ideas and the contribution they are making.
- Acknowledge and respond to children and young people's needs, interests and opinions with the understanding they are not a homogenous group.
- Ask children and young people their views and genuinely listen to and consider what they have to say.
- Involve children and young people in decisions about matters that affect them, both as individuals and collectively.
- Give young people the opportunity and support to make their own decisions.
- Involve children and young people in the work of your organisation, providing opportunities for them to influence the way services and programs are delivered to them.



- <sup>1</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: The views of Western Australian Children and Young People*, Perth, Western Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2007, *Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being*, NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Surrey Hills, NSW, p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2007, *Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being*, NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Surrey Hills, NSW, p. 4.
- <sup>4</sup> NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2007, *Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being*, NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Surrey Hills, NSW, p. 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Tucci J, Mitchell J & Goddard C 2007, *Children's fears, hopes and heroes*, Australian Childhood Foundation, Victoria, p. 28.
- <sup>6</sup> Tucci J, Mitchell J & Goddard C 2007, *Children's fears, hopes and heroes*, Australian Childhood Foundation, Victoria, p. 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Tucci J, Mitchell J & Goddard C 2007, *Children's fears, hopes and heroes*, Australian Childhood Foundation, Victoria, p.15.
- <sup>8</sup> Mission Australia 2010, *National Survey of Young Australians 2010: key and emerging issues*, p. 124.
- <sup>9</sup> Landsdown G 2005, *Can you hear me?: The right of young children to participate in decisions that affect them*, Working Paper 36, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague, The Netherlands, p. 40.
- <sup>10</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, *General Comment No. 12 (2009): The right of the child to be heard*, United Nations.
- <sup>11</sup> Hoffmann-Ekstein J et.al 2008, *Children's agency in communities: A review of literature and the policy and practice context*, benevolent society, SJSC Research Centre & NAPCAN, p. 17.
- <sup>12</sup> Landsdown G 2005, *Can you hear me?: The right of young children to participate in decisions that affect them*, Working Paper 36, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague, The Netherlands, p. 40.
- <sup>13</sup> Burns J et. al 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children & Young, p. 36.
- <sup>14</sup> Landsdown G 2005, *Can you hear me?: The right of young children to participate in decisions that affect them*, Working Paper 36, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague, The Netherlands, p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Landsdown G 2005, *Can you hear me?: The right of young children to participate in decisions that affect them*, Working Paper 36, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague, The Netherlands, p. 18.
- <sup>16</sup> Landsdown G 2005, *Can you hear me?: The right of young children to participate in decisions that affect them*, Working Paper 36, Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague, The Netherlands, p. 40.
- <sup>17</sup> Burns J et. al 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, p. 4.
- <sup>18</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, *Involving Children and Young People: Participation Guidelines*, Perth, Western Australia.
- <sup>19</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, *Are you listening?: Guidelines for making complaints processes accessible and responsive for children and young people*, Perth, Western Australia.