



# Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, February 2011

## Children and young people speak out about families

*"A loving, caring family is what everyone needs."* girl 9

### What do children and young people say about family?

In 2009, the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research<sup>i</sup> to investigate children and young people's views on what was important to their wellbeing. Consistently, children and young people reported that a supportive and loving family was fundamental to their wellbeing. As part of the research, an online survey of more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds found that 'family' was the most important thing in their lives. Fifty-five per cent of the children and young people surveyed said they would like to spend more time with their families.

*"Family things [are important because they give you] good memories, role models, a safe home... and support."* girl 15

*"Good parents are what every kid needs."* boy 16

Families are important to all children. For Aboriginal children this includes extended family. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)<sup>ii</sup> reported in its study on the impact of family on children and young people's wellbeing that 80 per cent of participants felt their family provided a loving and encouraging home environment.

This is consistent with other research, such as the Mission Australia National Survey of Young Australians 2010<sup>iii</sup>, in which about 75 per cent of the respondents ranked family as the thing they valued most. Conversely, family conflict was an issue of significant concern to children and young people in both studies.

*"We [kids] don't like it when our family fights, especially when your mum and dad do because when your dad or mum goes away you don't see them much, only on weekends and that."* girl 10

*"A lot of your friends get down because their families are having issues."* girl 15

### Why are families so important?

The children and young people who participated in the Commissioner's research said that a good family provided them with a sense of belonging, support, safety and guidance.

*"[Parents] help you through the tough times, so you don't get hurt."* girl 10

*"You always need someone to support you so that they can be there to encourage you when you make mistakes and things like that. It's like your parents are there to help you learn from what your mistakes would be and then how to make them better."* boy 13



There is increasing evidence to show that families have a significant influence on reducing risk behaviours and creating positive health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people<sup>iv</sup>. A report on young Australians' wellbeing by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth states that *"Childhood is the most critical stage in human development. Research from fields including neuroscience and economics provides evidence of how childhood and youth can influence a range of outcomes later in life."*

The environment in which a child grows significantly influences the development of the brain, particularly in the first three years of life. It provides an important organic foundation for learning ability, behaviour management and health outcomes, and parents play a vital role in this process. The Centre for Community Child Health reports that *"Of all the factors that operate in a young child's environment, the single most important determinant is the quality of the child's relationship with parents and caregivers."*

The transition period of adolescence is another critical time for effective parenting and during this time parents and caregivers can greatly influence the outcomes of young people.

Brain development is still occurring during adolescence, and that can present challenges for parents and service providers. *"Importantly, those areas of the brain that are involved in impulse control and judgement are the very last areas of the brain to mature. In this way, our ability to think and behave like fully-fledged adults may not occur until well into the third decade of life."*

Research<sup>viii</sup> shows that effective parental monitoring and limit setting during adolescence reduce risk factors and are strongly linked to more positive outcomes for young people. This needs to occur in a way that both maintains a close connectedness to the young person and supports their need to develop autonomy and separate from their parents.

*"Maybe they have to make decisions over really big things but we still want more control just for the small things."* boy 14

The AIFS research concludes that *"...having close, loving and encouraging childhood relationships with parents lays a strong foundation for thriving in young adulthood and may also buffer young people from mental health problems"*.<sup>ix</sup>

Emerging research also indicates that having positive attachments to multiple caregivers lowers even further the risk for negative outcomes.<sup>x</sup> The role of grandparents and others in a caregiving role, such as child care workers, is significant.

Factors associated with parenting that contribute to positive outcomes include parental involvement, responsiveness, warmth, acceptance and consistency.<sup>xi</sup> Social factors, such as poverty, and personal issues, such as mental health problems, can negatively impact on a person's ability to parent effectively.

## How does this affect the way we support families?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>xii</sup> identifies the family as fundamental to the growth and wellbeing of the child and states families need to be supported to provide the right environment for this to occur.

In the Commissioner's research, children and young people said their parents were the most significant factor in influencing their health and wellbeing. Young people also identified parenting strategies that they thought were important.

*"My parents are pretty fair; they follow a nice set of rules. They're not really hypocrites. I like that about them. They sort of see things from my point of view."* boy 15

*"Because I don't think anyone ever learns from anyone just yelling at them... you kind of find it better when they sit down and talk with you about what you have done wrong and how you can fix that up, instead of being stern and angry with you."* boy 13



The findings of the AIFS research<sup>xiii</sup> provide an important insight into what needs to be done to support families. The research asserts that “high quality parenting, as distinct from ‘good enough’ parenting” is necessary for positive development. Therefore, it is not enough to focus solely on reducing risk factors such as child maltreatment. Strengthening positive relationships between caregivers and children is also required.

### **Promoting quality parenting for all children and young people**

Parents and caregivers need support to provide a nurturing and loving environment for their children. The importance of parenting throughout the course of a child’s life should be widely promoted in the community, and it is essential that there is easy access to universal services that can monitor children’s wellbeing, identify issues of concern and provide support to parents to develop strong, nurturing relationships with their children.

The role of multiple caregivers needs more recognition and families should be encouraged to build a network of trusted others who can provide a caregiving role for children and young people.

The influence of family on adolescent risk and protective factors is well established, and parents need to be educated about their value in supporting and guiding young people during this time of transition.<sup>xiv</sup> Support for parents and young people to negotiate the adolescent years, and the provision of early intervention services when risk indicators emerge, are critical<sup>xv</sup>.

In the Commissioner’s research, young people advocated a balanced approach to parenting that would help them become independent and keep them safe at the same time.

*“You need some rules, but you need some freedom.” boy 13*

The difficulty in achieving this balance is often a source of conflict between young people and parents. Supporting parents to develop effective parenting techniques can be done in different ways, however there are a number of consistent factors relating to program philosophy, content, structure and delivery that need to be present to ensure effective outcomes.<sup>xvi</sup>

Consideration also needs to be given to structural factors, such as parental leave provisions, that can help facilitate effective parenting and reduce stress on families.

### **Targeting those at greater risk**

Particular groups, such as children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, Aboriginal children and young people and those living in rural and regional areas, are much more likely to have poorer developmental outcomes.

Young people who are removed from family because of abuse or neglect have the same need for opportunities to develop positive attachments to caregivers and to maintain positive connections with non-abusive family members.<sup>xvii</sup>

Identifying and responding to the needs of children and young people who are at risk is essential to ensure they are provided with the services and support required. Such services need to be integrated to provide better support to families with multiple or complex needs. *“Universal children’s services are seen as unstigmatised platforms from which to reach vulnerable families in holistic ways and reduce risk factors such as poor parent-child attachment and social isolation.”<sup>xviii</sup>*

### **Addressing the needs of families who are experiencing difficulties**

Parents who are already experiencing difficulties need easily-accessible services that can address a complex array of issues in an integrated way. This is particularly important if the cycle of poor parenting, child abuse and neglect is to be broken. Strategies to engage with these families and provide services in an effective, on-going manner need to be explored further, such as intensive home visiting services that are producing encouraging results. *“Parenting skills training in conjunction with social support, stress management, job-finding, money management and treatment for substance abuse is emerging as an effective intervention for parents who have previously abused children.”<sup>xix</sup>*



Service delivery models that integrate universal, targeted and intervention services provide a more effective and efficient service. Through a more flexible and collaborative approach, integrated services have a greater capacity to respond to problems as they arise and provide services in a less stigmatised, more accessible way.

## Priorities for policy and program development

Policy and program development needs to recognise and promote that a loving and nurturing home environment is critical to the development of children and young people, and parents and other caregivers must be supported to achieve this, in particular vulnerable families. This approach to policy and program development should be integrated into the assessment, intervention and outcome measures of service delivery agencies and requires an across-government commitment to prioritise the parent-child relationship.

Service delivery must become more integrated to ensure better access and more seamless delivery, and the flexibility required for such models should be reflected in funding agreements and organisational structures. Staff also need to be supported to work in a more integrated way through appropriate skill development.

Services for parents and care-givers should be evidence-based and comply with the features that the Centre for Community Child Health identified as essential to effective programs. These include having clear and measurable objectives, a skills focus, being 'strengths-based' and delivered by appropriately trained and skilled practitioners<sup>xx</sup>. Programs also need effective monitoring and evaluation systems.

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 in ensuring that children have both a good start in life and continued opportunities to develop into happy and healthy adults."*<sup>xxi</sup>

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

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<sup>i</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People (2010) *Speaking Out about Wellbeing: The views of Western Australian children and young people*. [www.ccyp.wa.gov.au](http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au)

<sup>ii</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies (2010) Family is for Life: Connections between childhood family experiences and wellbeing in early adulthood. *Family Matters*. 2010 Issue No 85

<sup>iii</sup> Mission Australia (2010) *National Survey of Young Australians 2010: Key and emerging issues*. Sydney. [www.missionaustralia.com.au](http://www.missionaustralia.com.au)

<sup>iv</sup> Schochet I, Homel R & Montgomery D (2006) How do school connectedness and attachment to parents interrelate in predicting adolescent depressive symptoms? *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*. 1537 – 4424 Vol. 30 Issue 2 pp 70 - 79

<sup>v</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2008) *The Wellbeing of young Australians: technical report*. Woden ACT [www.aracy.org.au](http://www.aracy.org.au)

<sup>vi</sup> Centre for Community Child Health (2009) Early Childhood. [www.rch.org.au/ccch/index.cfm?doc\\_id=10693](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/index.cfm?doc_id=10693)

<sup>vii</sup> Gluckman P (2010) *Report on Improving the transition: Reducing social and psychological morbidity during adolescence*. Office of the Prime Minister's Science Advisory Committee, New Zealand. [www.pmcsa.org.nz](http://www.pmcsa.org.nz)

<sup>viii</sup> Robinson E, Power L & Allan D (2010) *What works with adolescents? Family connections and involvement in interventions for adolescent problem behaviours*. Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, Briefing No. 16, 2010.

<sup>ix</sup> op cit Australian Institute of Family Studies 2010.

<sup>x</sup> Centre for Community Child Health (2009) *Caring for Young Children: What children need*. Policy Brief No 15. Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. [www.rch.org.au](http://www.rch.org.au)

<sup>xi</sup> Centre for Community Child Health (2007) *Parenting young children*. Policy Brief No 9. Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. [www.rch.org.au](http://www.rch.org.au)

<sup>xii</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)

<sup>xiii</sup> op cit Australian Institute of Family Studies 2010

<sup>xiv</sup> op cit Robinson E, et al (2010)



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<sup>xv</sup> op cit Robinson et al (2010)

<sup>xvi</sup> op cit Centre for Community Child Health (2007)

<sup>xvii</sup> Humphreys C & Kiraly M (2010) Developmentally sensitive parental contact for infants when families are separated. *Family Matters 2010 No \*5*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne pp 49 - 59

<sup>xviii</sup> op cit Centre for Community Child Health (2007)

<sup>xix</sup> op cit Centre for Community Child Health (2007)

<sup>xx</sup> op cit Centre for Community Child Health (2007)

<sup>xxi</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, Canberra

NB: all quotes in this report are from the Commissioner's research into child and young people's views on wellbeing. The report on this research is available at [www.ccyp.wa.gov.au](http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au)

