

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, April 2011

Children and young people speak out about friends

"When you hang out with friends and when everyone is happy around you, it makes you feel happy and good inside." girl 12

What do children and young people say about friends?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research into the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia.¹ Many who participated in the research said good friends were very important and contributed significantly to their sense of happiness. They said they enjoyed 'playing' or 'hanging out' with their friends.

"Playing with your friends...it makes you very, very happy because you've got friends that are there helping you and caring for you." girl 9

While younger children tended to rely heavily on their families for guidance and understanding, many older children increasingly turned to their friends for support. Some young people described their friends as 'everything' and felt that they could share their problems only with their friends, who truly understood them.

"You see your family all the time so it's not particularly special but don't see friends 24/7...someone you can laugh with. They know how to have fun, they know you better than anyone else. They don't judge you – they can relate to you because they are the same age, same interest. That's why you are friends." girl 14

Aboriginal children and young people had slightly different views. While they highly valued their friends, they considered their family to be the most important source of happiness, support and guidance.

Some children and young people said they felt stressed because they had trouble making friends, were bullied or were trying to manage conflict within their social groups.

"You're walking down the street and they mock you. You're like wearing jeans and t-shirt, you're not trying to stand out or anything, and they're like 'oh my god, she's so horrible, I hate her, she's so ugly', and you're like 'I haven't done anything'." girl 14

"I'm terrible at making friends. I don't like having to make friends...I find it just like a job and I get really stressed because I think – I don't want to be mean – but what if they don't like me." girl 11

About 70 per cent of children and young people surveyed for the Commissioner's research said they did not need to go along with their friends to be popular. However, 21 per cent said they were affected by peer group pressure, particularly in relation to alcohol consumption, looking good, partying, studying less and 'doing bad things'. Aboriginal children and young people found peer pressure more difficult to resist.

The Commissioner's research highlighted that good friendships are a major contributor to wellbeing. These findings are consistent with Mission Australia's *National Survey of Young Australians 2010*, in which the majority of WA respondents aged between 11 and 24 years said they highly valued friendships and 75 per cent said friends were a primary source of advice and support.²

"[A good day is] being with friends, goofing around, laughing and being silly." boys and girls 15

Friendships and social networks provide fun and learning for children and young people. Educational settings, such as kindergartens and schools, and social activities, including playgroups, sport and recreational pursuits, play a major role in fostering friendships. Research demonstrates that children who have happy friendships at school are more likely to have success with the academic, social, emotional and physical demands of school life.³

Children and young people are greatly affected when their friends experience conflict or unrest. About 55 per cent of children and young people who participated in the Commissioner's research said they felt upset when their friends did not get along. More than 66 per cent felt worried when their friends had problems. It is important that children and young people are able to access support services, particularly in the school environment, when they are feeling stressed or unhappy about conflict among friends.

"When friends fight, you feel you have to take a side but don't know which. You talk to them, just try to help them get over it." boy 12

As children transition to adolescence, they increasingly prefer to turn to their friends and peers than their parents for support and guidance.⁴ During this time, young people say they trust, feel comfortable with and share values and interests with their friends more than their family.⁵

Peer relationships can shape the views of young people in a different way to their relationships with adults. Their interaction with friends provides them with skills and competencies they need to transition from adolescence to adulthood. The Commissioner's research found that many children and young people seek out peer groups that reflect their own interests and values at a particular stage in their lives. Therefore, particular behaviour patterns may not always be a result of simply 'falling in with the wrong crowd'.

"You need more time with friends because they're the ones you talk to about your problems." girl 12

Peer-based approaches are now becoming widely used in health promotion and prevention strategies. These approaches enable young people to give support to each other, and they acknowledge that children and young people should be involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programs.⁶

Some such approaches include peer education, advocacy, mentoring or mediation. It is important that peers are equipped with appropriate and adequate information in a variety of settings so they can promote positive help-seeking practices within their friendship groups.

Peer Support Australia is an organisation 'dedicated to providing dynamic, peer-led programs which foster the mental, social and physical wellbeing of young people and their community'.⁷ Its Peer Support Program works to complement a number of current school-based initiatives by empowering young people to support each other. In the school environment, they develop skills in resilience, decision-making, leadership, assertiveness and problem-solving.



Students who have participated in the program said that often children and young people were more comfortable talking about problems with people their own age. They said that the Peer Support Program allowed them to help other kids have more positive experiences at school.

Both primary and secondary school students said the program had helped them feel more confident, supported and understood. They said they also learned important values, such as respect, honesty and patience. Secondary school students spoke about feeling more accepted and secure in their new school environment, and said they gained skills they could take into adulthood.

The Commissioner's policy and advocacy work will continue to acknowledge the important role that friends and peers play in the social and emotional development of children and young people.

Priorities for policy and program development

- Facilitate play opportunities in a range of settings where children and young people can create social networks and form friendships.
- Continue support for peer-based programs both in and out of the school environment.
- Ensure that adequate supports are available in a range of settings, particularly the school environment, for children and young people who are stressed or unhappy.

¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian Children and Young People*, Perth, Western Australia.

² Mission Australia 2010, *National survey of young Australians 2010 key and emerging issues*, p. 124, <<http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/downloads/national-survey-of-young-australians/271-2010>>.

³ Kids Life [website], viewed 27 April 2011, <<http://www.kidslife.com.au/Page.aspx?ID=2735>>.

⁴ My Peer [website], viewed 29 April 2011, <<http://mypeer.org.au/planning/what-are-peer-based-programs/what-is-a-peer/>>.

⁵ My Peer [website], viewed 28 April 2011, <<http://mypeer.org.au/planning/what-are-peer-based-programs/what-is-a-peer/>>.

⁶ My Peer [website], viewed 2 May 2011, <<http://mypeer.org.au/planning/what-are-peer-based-programs/>>.

⁷ Peer Support Australia [website] viewed 29 April 2011, <<http://peersupport.edu.au/program.html>>.

