



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



Caring for the future growing up today

Speaking out about wellbeing

The views of Western Australian children and young people



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Alternative formats

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“A good childhood is the key to a good happy life,” – girl 15

Commissioner’s message



In December 2007, I was appointed as the first Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People. The *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* sets out my role, including my responsibility to promote and monitor the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia and to promote the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives. In carrying out my functions, I must also give special consideration to the needs

of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged in some way.

In 2009, I commissioned a research project to ask a broad range of children and young people across Western Australia about their views on what is important to their wellbeing. This is the first time that such a research project has been conducted on this scale in Western Australia.

The research heard the views of nearly 1000 children and young people aged between 5 and 18 from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, geographical and situational backgrounds. The views of the research participants provide a rich insight into the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia. This report has been prepared by my office and provides a summary of the major research findings.

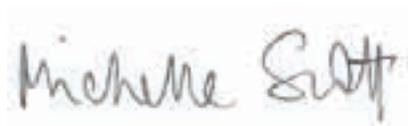
Encouragingly, most participants reported that they were faring well and were positive about their future, but there were clear areas of concern. The importance of a loving, supportive family and support to do well at school were consistent messages. Family conflict, alcohol-related violence, bullying and being safe in public were significant areas of concern.

Children and young people who took part in the research share many of the hopes, needs and concerns of the rest of the community and they also have a unique insight into what needs to be done to improve their own wellbeing.

I will be using the information and ideas provided by the participants to inform my work in advocating for children and young people and promoting public awareness and understanding of matters relating to their wellbeing.

This research is also a resource for those responsible for developing policy, services and programs for children and young people. I encourage Government, service providers and the broader community to consider the views presented in this report and how these views can help better shape our support for children and young people and their families.

I would like to thank all of the children and young people who participated in the research, and the staff of agencies who enabled this to happen, for their willingness to contribute their time and insights.



Michelle Scott
Commissioner for Children and Young People WA



Acknowledgements

In February 2009, the Commissioner for Children and Young People issued a Request for Tender for suitably qualified researchers to undertake a research project to engage children and young people about views on their wellbeing. Nexus Strategic Solutions Pty Ltd in conjunction with Sankey Associates Pty Ltd and Dr Janet Fletcher, Director, Child Study Centre, University of Western Australia, were awarded the contract.

Research team:

- Ms Jan Siggers (Project Leader), Chair, Nexus Strategic Solutions
- Ms Mary Sankey, Managing Director, Sankey Associates
- Professor Janet Fletcher, Director, Child Study Centre, UWA
- Ms Jan Stuart, Director, Nexus Strategic Solutions
- Ms Marie Finlay, Director, Nexus Strategic Solutions
- Ms Maxinne Sclanders, Director, Nexus Strategic Solutions
- Ms Rhonda Murphy, Yarmintali Consultancy and Associate, Nexus Strategic solutions
- Mr Danny Ford, Associate, Nexus Strategic Solutions
- Ms Caroline Adupa, Associate, Nexus Strategic Solutions
- Mr Issihaka Toure, Associate, Nexus Strategic Solutions

Seventeen young people aged 15 and 16 years from Curtin University's annual student leadership program, the Sir Charles Court Young Leaders Program, formed an Advisory Group to the research team.

The Commissioner established a Reference Group to provide expert advice and feedback regarding the research:

- Professor Trish Harris, Emeritus Professor, Murdoch University
- Ms Beth Shaw, United Nations Youth Representative 2008
- Ms Adele Cox, Centre for Aboriginal Medical and Dental Health and Rural Clinical School of WA, UWA
- Ms Jocelyn Jones, PhD Candidate, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (June – December 2009)
- Ms Leah Bonson, Aboriginal Advisor, Commissioner for Children and Young People (February – May 2010)





Methodology

The research comprised three components – a literature review, qualitative research and a quantitative online survey. In conducting the research, steps were taken to ensure its integrity, including approvals from three ethics committees. With the exception of the online survey, active consent was sought from all children and young people, and their parents, to participate in the research activities. The online survey required passive consent through a tick box agreement at the beginning of the survey. Parental consent was not required for the online survey.

The literature review identified Australian and international research conducted on the wellbeing of children and young people, focusing on research that had gathered data directly from children and young people. This information was used to inform the qualitative and quantitative components of the research.

The research comprised a number of different activities to engage with a diverse range of children and young people. These included small focus groups, artwork and storytelling groups, an interactive forum, a photographic activity, a hard copy survey and an online survey. The research explored three questions:

- What do children and young people in Western Australia perceive as important to their wellbeing?
- What do they perceive as barriers to achieving wellbeing?
- What makes it easier to achieve wellbeing?

"Wellbeing" was framed as "feeling good and being able to live life to the full".

The sample comprised 959 children and young people aged 5 to 18¹ from across Western Australia. This was made up of 377 participants in the qualitative activities and 582 respondents to the quantitative (online) survey.

- 67% were from Perth metropolitan area and 33% were from regional and remote locations²
- 51% boys and 49% girls
- 28% were aged 5 to 12 years and 71% were aged 13 to 18 years (10 participants' ages were not known)
- 10% were Aboriginal
- 6% had a disability
- 4% were in foster care.

The research also included children and young people with learning difficulties, chronic health conditions, refugee and newly arrived migrants and young carers.

For the purposes of this report the term Aboriginal is respectfully used to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Where used separately the term children refers to those aged 5 to 12 and young people refers to those aged 13 to 18.

Further information on the research is available on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's website www.ccp.wa.gov.au

1. The research was aimed at 5 – 17 year olds however a small number of 18 year olds who were still attending school also participated.

2. Locations included a regional centre and a remote town in the Kimberley; a town and a regional centre in the South West and a town in the Wheatbelt region.





Summary of key findings

This report presents a summary of the views of children and young people gathered by the researchers. The qualitative and quantitative data has been integrated and the information has been collated into thematic areas. Direct quotes from research participants are used extensively to allow children and young people to speak for themselves.

The research team reported that the research participants felt that children and young people needed eight things to live a full life – a loving and supportive family, good friends, fun and activity, a safe environment, a good education, the basics, acknowledgement and freedom and independence.

Family

Children and young people value a loving and supportive family and believe this is essential to their wellbeing.

On the whole, they enjoy being with their families and want to spend more time with them.

They want to have a good relationship with and be able to talk with their parents and to be treated fairly.

Family conflict and alcohol misuse within the family is a major source of stress for some children and young people.

Friends

Spending time with friends is an important part of relaxing, having fun and socialising and contributes to a sense of belonging.

Good friends are an important source of support and help when dealing with problems.

Supporting friends with problems and fighting between friends can be sources of stress.

Fun and activity

Participation in recreational activities and unstructured play and activity is important, providing opportunities to be with friends and have fun.

Lack of suitable facilities, or difficulties in accessing them, is a consistent problem, particularly in regional areas.

Children and young people want to be involved in decisions that affect them including deciding what facilities are available.

School and education

Children and young people value a good education and want others who are struggling at school to get the help and support they need.

School is an important source of establishing and being in contact with friends.

School is a source of significant stress for some, particularly regarding managing workload and meeting the expectations of others and themselves.

Safety

A safe and caring family environment is central to children and young people's sense of safety and wellbeing.

Bullying is a significant issue of concern for many children and young people.

Feeling safe in public places and on public transport is important to allow them to participate in activities and develop independence.





Summary of key findings - cont.

The basics

Children and young people recognise the importance of having basic needs met, such as food and housing. They recognise and are concerned that some children, here and overseas, don't have these things.

Earning money is an important part of achieving a sense of independence and being able to socialise for some young people.

Money and material possessions are viewed as contributing to happiness but are not seen as the sole source of happiness.

Acknowledgement

Children and young people want to be taken seriously and acknowledged when they do well.

Having their views heard is seen as important to feeling valued and respected.

Young people want greater trust from the wider community.

Aboriginal children and young people want their culture to be acknowledged and supported by the wider community.

Freedom and independence

Children and young people recognise the need for boundaries and rules but want to have more freedom to make decisions about things that impact their lives. They want to be able to take some risks and learn from their mistakes.

Concerns

Children and young people's wellbeing is affected, sometimes seriously, by stress associated with problems such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Younger children are more likely to seek help from parents while young people are more likely to rely on friends for help and support.

Having a trusting relationship, where information is kept confidential, is seen as essential in order to seek help with problems.

The future

Children and young people have a diverse range of ideas about what they want for the future.

Children and young people are interested in and concerned for the welfare of others.

They are mostly optimistic about the future and their ability to achieve goals, particularly if they have a positive attitude and work hard.

Some children identified celebrities and sport stars as their role models, whereas young people nominate people in their lives such as parents, friends and mentors.

Most children and young people feel able to influence life events, but some are frustrated with their inability to influence issues such as protection of the environment.

Some young people believe they need to be better prepared for independence with gradually increased responsibility for decision making.





“A loving, caring family is what everyone needs,” – girl 9

Family

The support of family was considered fundamental to the wellbeing of the children and young people who participated in both the qualitative and quantitative research. In the online survey, the top response to the question, “What are the three best things about your life?” was “family”. Family included reference to brothers and sisters and to pets.

A good family provided a foundation for a sense of belonging, support, safety and guidance.

“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.

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

“We had a family reunion the other day and that was excellent. I love my family. It was great because I now know everyone on my dad's side, and that made me feel good because they're not empty faces,” girl 14.

“I look up to my dad and uncle – the good and the bad. Even when he does some thing bad he tells me... but he expects me to learn from it and be better than him... and I like that,” boy 15.

Children and young people also valued extended family which provided an important opportunity to communicate with older people.

“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.

“I grew up with my grandmother for quite a bit through my childhood and always used to go in the garden with her. She used to grow big, red roses and this [photo] reminds me of fun times I had when I was younger,” boy 16.

Spending time with immediate and extended family was also very important. This was particularly true of Aboriginal children and young people.

“I feel happy when I go to the pool with mum,” boy 7.

“It's fun going out to dinners with my family and just being around all of my family, it's really nice.” girl 9.

“Fishing and camping at the old bridge,” girl 10.

“I have a good time playing backyard cricket with my dad and big brothers and cousins and all that,” boy 16.





Family cont.

More than 55 per cent of respondents to the online survey agreed that they would like to spend more time with their families.

Parents were singled out as particularly important to wellbeing, again providing the love and support that children and young people required.

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

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

"Me and my father are best friends," boy 13.

"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.

Children and young people valued the role of parents in providing guidance and support. They also had particular views on how this was best achieved.

"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.

"Talk to children to help them understand, not shout at them," boy 12.

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

Meeting parents' expectations was also a source of stress for some young people. Almost a third of respondents to the online survey reported that their parents

expected too much of them. Interestingly, metropolitan children and young people were much more likely to report that their parents expected too much of them than those in regional or remote areas.

Family conflict, at times alcohol related, caused some of the most significant tension in children and young people's lives.

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

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

"Sometimes my dad goes a little bit overboard. It's only when he's drinking a lot and he starts yelling at me and I feel really bad," girl 15.

Spending time with immediate and extended family was of particular importance to Aboriginal children and young people. They also reported considerable experience of family conflict, often associated with alcohol abuse. Aboriginal children and young people were also much more likely to have experienced loss of a family member, often multiple members, through death and imprisonment.

"Half of my family have passed away and we had to go, last week, my mum had to go to a funeral for her aunty and before that, a week ago, we had to go to a funeral for my aunty," boy 10.



“Friends are the most important thing to have in your life,” – girl 15

Friends

Good friends were very important to children and young people’s lives, contributing significantly to their sense of wellbeing and happiness.

“Playing with your friends... it makes you very, very happy because you’ve got friends that are helping you and caring for you,” girl 9.

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

“Playing with my mates makes me feel confident, safe, loved,” boy 13.

“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.

“You need your friends... when I can’t be with my friends it’s stressful,” boy 16.

Friends were also an important source of support and understanding and were seen as someone you could talk to about your problems. This was particularly the case for girls.

“I reckon everyone needs one good friend, one person that you can just tell everything,” girl 15.

“You need more time with friends because they’re the ones you talk to about your problems,” girl 12.

“Friends are really important because they just make everyday life what it is and when you’re upset or happy they’re there – they’re always there,” girl 16.

Of the online survey respondents, 85 per cent agreed that they had enough good friends. However, the qualitative research found making friends was significantly difficult for some, with geographical isolation, ethnicity, lack of money, appearance and lack of confidence cited as particular barriers.

“I’m terrible at making friends, I don’t like having to make friends... I find it is 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.

“I think that what other people mostly [worry] about is what other people think of them,” girl 12.





Friends cont.

The importance of friends was also demonstrated through the difficulties children and young people reported when relationships with friends were not good or they were excluded from friendship circles.

"I feel sad when my friends don't play with me and they say mean words about me," girl 7.

"My friend slapped me around the face, then I punched him," boy 8.

"When I try to sort out the problem, they run away," girl 8.

"You stress out when your friends are saying bad things about you," girl 15.

Friends who were experiencing problems or friends who were not getting along with each other were also a source of stress for both children and young people. In the online survey, 55 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, *"I feel upset when my friends don't get along"* and 66 per cent agreed that they worried when their friends had problems. Again, this was particularly common among girls, but was also higher for primary-school-aged children.

"[A bad day] is when my friends are getting into fights and they're not being friends," girl 9.

"I've got friends that don't like some of my other friends so I can only play with some at a time and then some at another time," boy 10.

"If someone is upset we all feel it, if it's one of your friends you think, 'Did I do something bad?'... you feel guilt," girl 14.

In the online survey, only 16 per cent of respondents agreed that they went along with friends to be popular and 21 per cent agreed that they found peer group pressure hard to resist. The issue of peer pressure was posed by the researchers in a forum held in Perth with 40 participants. About 40 per cent of those participants (aged 14 to 17) agreed that they had felt pressured by peers to do some things that they would not have otherwise done. In the online survey, Aboriginal³ children and young people were more likely to agree that they found peer pressure hard to resist. In interviews, there was also a perception that peer pressure became less of an issue as people got into upper high school.



3. Sample size was 544 non Aboriginal and 37 Aboriginal therefore the results should be treated with some caution.





“Kids need time for play ...and so do we,” – boy 16

Fun and activity

Children and young people reported that they enjoyed a wide range of opportunities for fun through structured and unstructured recreational activities.

“I like climbing trees,” boy 10.

“Watching horror movies,” girl 13.

“Going to the bushland and exploring with friends,” boy 10.

“Just, you know, goofing around, playing jokes on each other, just laughing and being silly,” girl 14.

“Beach is good, even just like walking around town, not really looking at shops... just an excuse to walk around and be with friends,” girl 15.

“Dancing [hip hop] and playing basketball in the street,” boy 13.

“[On a good day] I’d probably be at the hockey grounds with all the hockey players, training and getting ready for a big game,” boy 12.

“Just like chilling with friends and stuff, play music if you’ve got some,” boy 16.

Spending time with friends featured strongly, particularly for young people. Recreational activities provided an important opportunity for children and young people to develop confidence, competence and a sense of achievement.

“You feel like you can do anything but it is really you are having fun,” girl 14.

“It’s a good feeling, doing good at sport,” boy 12.

“I’m good at making brownies and cakes, and me and my sister sometimes have fights with flour,” girl 10.

“I’m a swimmer. I like competing. I like that you get to work towards something and then it pays off,” girl 16.

“It’s a dream. Not many kids make AFL and, you know, you’ve played it all your life – you’ve trained to make the team,” boy 15 (who played WAFL Colts).

Spending time alone was also important for young people to relax and take a break from stressors in their lives.

“I crawl out of my window on to my roof. Then you can just be alone and quiet and read where nobody can bother you,” girl 16.

At times, taking risks and alcohol were involved in young people’s recreation. A group of 16 year olds agreed that *“alcohol may be involved”*.

“Chilling at people’s houses and stuff and yeah, as [boy] said, a little bit of stuff we shouldn’t be doing sometimes, just to keep it all thrilling,” girl 16.





Fun and activity cont.

Young people also raised that alcohol (and drugs) when used by some people were also a problem at times, interfering with them having a good time.

"I don't like negative vibes at parties, fights and all that, don't enjoy it. Even with drinks at the beach there tends to be boys brawling and stuff like that. It's just so pathetic," girl 16.

"What they [a particular group of young people] do is, they go to parties and then the parties turn into like fight clubs and they beat each other up," boy 14.

"...And they wreck houses and break stuff and graffiti," girl 14.

Children and young people identified some clear barriers to participating in activities such as lack of facilities, cost, lack of transport, age restrictions and safety concerns. These issues were particularly pronounced in regional areas.

"You go into town with mates and you really just walk in circles," boy 16.

"There's all rude stuff down there... graffiti... that's why we don't go to the park anymore," girl 10.

"It's either you have to be younger than this or older than this. There's a gap in between where there's nothing to really interest you. I think they should have more things for different age groups," boy 15.

"I like sports and riding my bike and going to the park but normally with my cousins or someone, like, I don't go by myself anymore because people have been hanging around down the park, down the road behind Coles," boy 10.

Lack of activities was clearly linked to antisocial behaviour and alcohol and drug consumption by other young people. This was particularly an issue in the more remote and regional areas.

"[Young people who engage in antisocial behaviour, drink alcohol or take drugs] haven't got anything to do with their lives but ruin it," boy 16.

"They [other young people] think it's fun [to go off drinking] and it's not really because anything could happen to you when you're drunk or you could pass out anywhere on the streets," girl 14.

"Most of the people who, like, drink beer and smoke dope and stuff, they don't have anything else to do... they don't know how to have other fun," boy 15.

Children and young people had diverse views about what they wanted in the way of recreational facilities, highlighting the need to involve children and young people in the planning, design and delivery of services and facilities for them.

"We need a youth centre type thing, something kind of cool, not organised by adults," girl 16.





“Going to school every day and getting a good education is not easy... but it would be a good thing,” - boy 14

School and education

There was widespread agreement that children and young people need to have a good education. The participants said that being at school was important to their wellbeing as it gave them an opportunity to spend time with friends. For younger children, the mix of activities was also an enjoyable part of being at school.

“I like school because all my friends are there and we do all these fun games and activities and we get to do news and free play,” girl 6.

“There are three things that make me happy: playing with my friends, the food in my lunch box and the activities at school,” boy 5.

“I like going to school, you see all your friends,” boy 13.

“You get to see all your friends even though you have to do schoolwork and you might not have, like, a great teacher that day, but you still get to do fun stuff in other classes,” girl 14.

The majority of children and young people participating in the research clearly linked doing well at school with getting a good job and having a successful life.

“Be successful in my education... have a successful career,” girl 15.

“You just need to embrace education. Knowledge is power in this world, seriously,” girl 15.

“[I want] to get past year 12... to get into TAFE and hold a good job,” boy 15.

“Every kid in the state [should] go to school so they can get a better education and life so when they grow up they can understand themselves and people will respect them,” boy 16.

Some struggled more with the prospect of achieving this, particularly young people with learning difficulties who found school more frustrating.

“[A good day at school is] getting a good behaviour sheet... and no fights,” boy 12.

One 13-year-old boy who had spent a long time in hospital was also concerned about keeping up with school and achieving his goals.

Aboriginal children and young people in the Kimberley raised different issues in their responses. They focused strongly on the need for kids to go to school in order to have a good life and create a strong culture, but acknowledged that some kids struggled with getting to school every day.

“Make your kids go to school so they can have a strong mind and a strong culture, and so they can learn and write when they get big, and like... because if someone asks to read to them, like any little kids, you won't know how to, or if someone wants you to check their work, like a little kid... you might not write it properly,” girl 9.

“So when you go to the post office when you're big, if they ask you anything, then you can answer straight away,” boy 10.

“Make sure every kid goes to school so that they meet friends and learn things that they should,” boy 11.

School and education cont.

School and stress

"All my spare time has been shut down to study and my parents have reinforced that [and] that's no good because I'm not with my mates, so yeah a lot of it is just stress, very stressful," boy 16.

From about 12 years of age, children and young people frequently mentioned stress and pressure associated with school.

Some young people spoke about their concerns and frustrations with a perceived lack of coordination between subjects creating unnecessary stress for students.

"We have no homework for weeks on end and then we get homework from all of our teachers and it's so hard to complete it all, we're like working all through the night," girl 15.

"I swear they [teachers] just all congregate and say 'all right now, every subject we'll go a test on Wednesday, due Thursday - all right, let's go, and we'll tell you last period'," boy 16.

For others it was the amount of homework that was seen to create stress.

"It would be ok if you only had a little bit of homework, but not the stacks and stacks of work we have to do at home," girl 12.

Although for some this was acknowledged as sometimes self inflicted, borne from a desire to do well.

"I feel sometimes it is my own fault... when I don't study I feel bad because I know really I've let myself down when I really should have been studying," boy 15.

"I think we also put a lot of pressure on ourselves because we have respect for our teachers and we know they are going to be disappointed in us if we don't do what we are supposed to have done," girl 17.

The transition from primary to high school was identified as another potentially stressful time.

"When you get home you're going to have to do work from all the homework. You're just going to be flat out," boy 12.

Some young people also experienced a fear of failing, believing that there was only one chance to achieve the outcome they wanted. This was refuted by others who believed that it was possible to undertake other pathways to university if they didn't get the necessary scores.

"Teachers make it sound so dramatic... that this is your only chance to get in... but we can go back and [do it] again," girl 15.



“On a bad day, you’d be feeling sad, unsafe,” – boy 9

Safety

The majority of children and young people felt safe at home. Of the 582 respondents to the online survey, 81 per cent reported always feeling safe at home. In the qualitative research, some participants had an appreciation that not all children and young people received a basic level of care and safety at home. Some children said that their parents hit them occasionally and they did not like this. Some young people reported feeling upset by parents fighting or when parents got angry with them.

“I’m kind of sitting there thinking, is it my responsibility to do something here? Am I supposed to stop them fighting? I have no one to talk to about it. I might be upset and I’m just kind of sitting there,” girl 17.

Aboriginal children and young people from the Kimberley were more likely to report personal experiences of family violence or neglect in either their family or in other related families. They also reported feeling unsafe at times when funerals were on, particularly if adults were drinking alcohol.

“No one’s looking after the kids and it’s dangerous,” girl 11.

“Some kids are homeless, starving, living on the streets, and abused by parents... they drink and don’t worry about the kids,” girl 16.

Feeling safe in public places and on public transport was also an issue of concern. In the online survey, 42 per cent of children and young people said they often or sometimes felt scared in public places and this interfered with their ability to play outside. This was a particular issue for primary-school-aged children who reported feeling unsafe in public considerably more than young people.

“I like sports and riding my bike and going to the park but normally with my cousins or someone, like I don’t go by myself anymore because people have been hanging around down the park, down the road behind Coles,” boy 10.

“In the olden days, people could just walk around and be safe on the street. We can’t do that now, these days, because there’s like heaps of creepy people out there,” girl 14.

“One time I was walking back from the train station and there was this creepy guy following me... I ran into this shop... I stayed there for three hours until the guy actually left. He was just staying out there,” girl 15.

Safety on public transport was also an area of concern for some. In the online survey, while more than 60 per cent felt safe on public transport during the day this dropped to just 21 per cent at night. Boys in general and Aboriginal⁴ young people felt considerably safer using public transport than girls or non-Aboriginal young people.



4. Sample size was 544 non Aboriginal and 37 Aboriginal therefore the results should be treated with some caution.



Safety cont.

Bullying

Bullying at school was a common issue of concern among most children and young people. In the online survey, 60 per cent of respondents stated that they had been bullied and 44 per cent agreed that they had bullied someone else. Data from the qualitative research suggested the degree and type of bullying was varied and it was not confined to the school environment.



"They push and yell at you, follow you around the playground," girl 11.

"I have had things stolen and broken... I go to an all-girls school and they can be really mean," girl (age unknown).

"It happens when a person is invited into your group and someone doesn't like them so they spread rumours," boy 12.

"For me it's kind of a big problem... I don't get teased at school most of the time. I get teased by kids that aren't in school. Like when I go to local footy in other towns, they always tease me a lot... they try to hurt your feelings," boy 10.

The impact of bullying was serious and ongoing for some but others appeared more resilient to it.

"It hurts but you have to keep going and deal with it," girl 11.

"I got bullied earlier in the year and that put a really bad perspective on my life. I didn't see things as funny anymore," girl 14.

"I'm not forgiving... if I had the chance I would hurt the people who did those things to me," boy 15.

Some children and young people did not think that there was much that could be done about bullying, appearing resigned to it as a part of life.

"This [having rumours spread about you] is just normal, everyday," girl 12.

"There's nothing you can do to stop bullying really and everyone [every bully] is different," girl 15.

Some participants suggested that talking to a teacher or parent could stop problems with bullying, however this did not resolve the issue for others.

"But the bullying doesn't stop... like the parents come and deal with it and the parents leave him and he starts over again," boy 10.



“Money is not the key to happiness but it’s good having it and it goes towards happiness,” – boy 13

The basics

Children rarely raised the issue of money other than in the context of future need or to obtain the things they desired such as lollies, toys and trips to theme parks. Children had compassion for other children, particularly those in other countries who didn’t have enough money for essentials like food. Some Aboriginal children from the Kimberley had direct experience of this hardship or knew of children who did. A few children did worry about managing money when they were older.

“No money and you’re that hungry, no food at home,” boy 10.

“Like how complicated all the bank stuff sounds and like all the mortgages and all the things you have to pay... and some families get stuck and then they get broke,” boy 12.

Young people articulated a balanced approach to the importance of money. They recognised its significance in achieving a comfortable standard of living but also expressed the limitations of money and possessions to create happiness.

“I know a lot of people say that all you need is happiness but it really is not true in today’s economy. You have to have money to survive and if we had more money in our schools and more funding and more scholarships and everything it would just set everyone up a lot better for the future,” girl 16.

“With money you can do funner stuff, but you can still do fun things without money,” boy 15.

“Material things are good but what you really want are the things you know you can’t have, like for that person to stop hating me or that person to stop acting that way and stuff like that,” girl 14.

The capacity to undertake further education was clearly linked to receiving financial assistance, particularly for young people in regional areas who would have to leave home to access courses. Proposed changes to eligibility for government payments was also a cause for concern in this regard.

“It’s going to be hard to do everything money-wise because they’ve cut our Youth Allowance. They only give scholarships to the extremely smart people or the lucky people – we don’t get anything, there’s nothing in the middle. Poor people or poverty-stricken people who couldn’t even dream about it – they get it, but everybody in the middle – us pretty much – we’ve got almost no chance... I might have to take a two-year break [between finishing school and starting university] and you lose so much potency in those two years,” boy 16.



The basics cont.

"That's [further education] the extremely hard path whereas, the easy path, you just go 'oh screw it, I'll become a brickie and get paid lots of money';" boy 16.

"I think everyone has their issues with study and stress and just the pressure of it all, but most definitely money is the biggest factor of it all," girl 16.

Concerns about accessing employment after university and being able to earn enough money were also raised.

"Is there going to be a stable position for me to take? I don't want to go to uni and hop out and there's no jobs... Because, pretty much, I'm going to have to earn double what my parents earn just to be able to live," boy 16.

Part-time jobs

For young people, having their own money was an important part of their ability to socialise and a mark of their emerging independence.

"It makes you feel independent... you don't have to ask your parents," girl 15.

For others, undertaking part-time work was a necessity to contribute towards their support, such as text books or recreational activities, due to limited family finances. Work also provided opportunities to develop confidence and competence.

"I like going to work actually... I am the oldest, apart from my boss... and have to control what they [younger staff] do and I have to take on the responsibility if they make a mistake but I like the way they look up to me, kind of thing," girl 17.

At times combining work and study commitments was difficult.

"I barely had a holiday over the last two-week break. I caught up with my mates once. That's it. I just went to work and did assignments," boy 16.

"You can't hang out with your mates, you can't do any sport and trying to do bloody assignments when you're working and you've got to do housework and everything in between it and that's horrible," girl 16.





“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

Acknowledgement

Children and young people want to be taken seriously and acknowledged for what they have achieved by parents and teachers and the wider community. About half of the online survey respondents agreed that people did listen to what they had to say. Children and young people from regional and remote locations were considerably more likely to agree that people listened to them than those from metropolitan areas.

“Oh, this is a little kid. What’s he going to know...he doesn’t know anything,” boy 12.

Young people also wanted more trust from the wider community and some felt that either too much or too little was expected of them. While children and young people were more likely to believe that adults who knew them trusted them, only 34 per cent of the online survey respondents agreed that adults in general had a lot of trust in children and young people.

“They either expect you to succeed so well or they expect you to muck up and cause havoc,” girl 15.

“They [security guards] are watching you the whole time... it might only be a very small number of people who actually do anything [shoplifting] but they assume that everyone’s like that,” girl 15.

Aboriginal children and young people were considerably more likely to have trust in, and to believe they were trusted by, adults they knew. Aboriginal young people also spoke about wanting more acknowledgment and respect for their culture as it was so important to them.

“They [family] are the people that you love the most in this world and like, just say you had a really good job going and something happened to your family member and then your boss said you can’t go because you’re going to lose your job, then that’s something you have to risk. That bothers me. If I got a good career going - I don’t want to ruin that – but my family comes first,” girl 16.





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

Freedom and independence

Children and young people generally want more opportunities to make decisions about their lives and the freedom to choose how they spend their time. In the online survey, 62 per cent of respondents agreed that they would like more say in decisions and 48 per cent agreed that they needed more opportunity to work things out for themselves.

Comments from younger children often linked freedom to getting out in the open to play in a less supervised or structured way.

“Kids should be free to get out in the open, go by yourself, climb trees and things,” boy 9.

Young people often linked more freedom to supporting them to become independent. They wanted to be supported to make their own decisions and to learn from their mistakes.

“Before you do something you should have some experience of it to know what to expect so you’re not completely oblivious... it’d work a bit better than just chucking you in at the deep end,” boy 15.

“We need the chance to mess up and make our own mistakes,” girl 15.

Young people also said that they needed boundaries and guidelines.

“You can’t let your kids go around doing anything they want... they could cause mayhem... there has to be some sort of boundaries,” boy 13.

“You need guidelines and stuff. You need rules because part of growing up, is like, breaking them, but also to be restricted by them,” girl 16.

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

Barriers to becoming independent included, overly-protective parents, limited money to participate in activities and a lack of safe public transport and places to go. Some suggested that imposing too many restrictions increased the likelihood of someone getting into trouble.

“If you’re too cramped and you’re being told what to do, you don’t want to do anything and you rebel and then you run away and then you get in trouble,” boy 15.

“Sort of be free instead of having your parents telling you to do every tiny thing... so that when you grow up you won’t be naughty and have to go to jail because you would just sort of know how to have your own life,” girl 10.



“One problem at a time you could fix... but with five you can't think where to begin,” – girl 14

Concerns

Children and young people raised a range of issues that caused them concern, often using the term “*stress*” or “*stressing out*” to describe their feelings. Family conflict, problems with friends and issues at school were the main sources of stress. Concerns about issues external to their own lives, such as children living in poverty overseas and environmental issues, were also raised.

More than 35 per cent of the online survey respondents agreed with the statement ‘*I have too much stress/worry in my life*’, with a further 20 per cent saying they were unsure. Family conflict was raised as one of the most significant sources of stress for young people in the qualitative research. Young people particularly were concerned about friends who were going through difficult times. Some said that although they were pivotal in helping their friends, sometimes the situations were complex and they struggled to know how to help.

“Sometimes if friends ask for your advice on something, it really gets you worried... it kind of brings you down for the rest of the week,” girl 15.

“Emotional pain, it's not like a punch up in the school courtyard or something it's really quite complex,” boy 14.

“It's like there's no medicine for it, you can't really treat it, it's not so easy,” girl 14.

“I hate all of the bad things that happen to people, particularly girls that I know – because they tell me what has happened to them – and... I try to do something but there's nothing I can do because there's always something in the way of it,” girl 15.

Accessing help and support

Children and young people identified a range of ways they dealt with problems and stress including exercise or activity, writing thoughts and feelings down, positive thinking and seeking the support of friends or family. Children were more likely to talk to family and young people more likely to talk with friends. Of the online respondents 38 per cent, stated they did not have anyone to talk to or would prefer to keep problems to themselves. This response was considerably higher among boys and Aboriginal young people. In interviews, Aboriginal young people who did have someone to talk to were more likely to approach a family member.

“I talk to my mum and it makes me feel better,” girl 12.

“I talk to my brother – he's younger so he listens,” boy 12.

“I confide in my best friends because they know how I feel,” girl 15.

“I just go out to a boxing day,” boy 14.

“I try not to let it show so that I don't get everyone coming up to me going ‘are you ok’, because you don't really want to talk about it,” girl 14.



Concerns cont.

Discussing problems with parents was difficult for some young people either because they felt their parent did not understand or that they did not want to add to their parents' problems.

"My dad says, 'oh yeah if you have any problems talk to me' but you can't talk to him because he has no useful information... he is so judgmental as well," girl 15.

Young people did raise the issue of speaking with teachers or professional counsellors, however there was some concern as to whether their information would remain confidential.

"I told the school psychologist and my year coordinator and they have helped a lot," girl 15.

"I talk to teachers at school but you kind of get sent from one teacher to another," girl 15.

"If it's really bad they'll think, 'oh we have to call the parents about this' even if you ask them not to," girl 14.

"I don't feel I'd be able to go to a teacher with a problem because I don't know them well enough," boy 15.

"I can't really call Kids Helpline or talk to the chaplain or anything... there are a lot of other people with worse problems than I do," girl 15.

Children and young people also had concerns specific to their situation. Young people with a family member with a serious disability were concerned about the future and balancing caring needs with their own career and travel ideas. A young person who

planned to become a foster carer in the future was concerned about the quality of care provided in foster families.

"I am worried about some foster parents... I know a lot of children have gone into care [and been] worse off than living with their own parents... it makes me really angry... [kids need] stable foster parents or parents and a good school and good friends, good influences. Mainly the parent bit though – really counts that one," girl 14.

Broader global issues such as poverty and environmental issues were also raised as concerns and some children and young people had a number of ideas about how to address them.

"Tell the people cutting down the trees to cut down one or two, enough for paper, but not all the trees because that is how we breathe," girl 9.

"Make sanctuaries for all the endangered species... there's this pygmy possum and it's nearly extinct," boy 11.

"Climate change is an issue that is really considerable for us because it is actually going to affect our generation whereas it is older people who are making the decisions and they are the same people who have been making the mistakes. I think that whole argument that it is economy versus the environment is really false because you can have a green economy and you can make money and you can make jobs through new technology," girl 15.



“It can only happen if you want it to happen and give it a try” – boy 10

The future

Generally children and young people were optimistic about their future and identified doing well in school with getting a good job and having a good life. Aboriginal children and young people in the Kimberley particularly emphasised the value of doing well at school. Of the online respondents, 78 per cent agreed that if they worked hard they would achieve their goals. Those who participated in the qualitative research had a wide variety of ambitions but a consistent theme was a desire to be happy.

“I want to be happy and not trying to be anyone else that anyone wants me to be,” girl 14.

“Just be happy and everyone around me happy with my decisions,” boy 16.

Attitude was seen as very important to achieving personal goals.

“You don't need to be really smart to be happy or have all this knowledge but I reckon you need the right attitude,” boy 15

Some young people struggled with maintaining their motivation to work hard despite knowing that it was important.

“I need a good education, a good job, which is pretty much why I'm trying to try

at school. Yeah I'm not trying at the moment because I can't be bothered but I've been told I need to, so I'm trying to try,” boy 16.

Obtaining a job that you enjoyed was also seen as important to the quality of life achieved.

“One that you enjoy doing...you won't have to go to work thinking, ‘oh I don't want to do this job’,” girl 12.

“Find something you enjoy doing and want to do – look forward to doing it every day – know you are good at it,” boy 15.

Being able to contribute back to the community or look after family was also of importance to some.

“To have a good occupation and earn money to help my parents when they are older,” girl 12.

“Get a job doing something for other people... like help stop global warming but not in a stupid way... actually help,” girl 15.

“Get a job, be happy, have kids, go to uni and help other people be happy as well,” boy 15.

“I want to be a doctor, I just want to help people and set up my own practice in the country, rural people need a heck of a lot more help,” girl 16.



The future cont.

Children and young people who were facing particular difficulties, such as having a disability or being in foster care, hoped for a future with a positive outcome.

"To go back to my real family," girl 10.

"To have a normal life [a job, no fighting]," boy 10.

"To see my real mum again," girl 8.

"To not have cerebral palsy... it is bad," boy 10.

"To be normal... and not be sad anymore," girl 14.

"To be able to accept who I am with my [health problem] and I want people to not define me by it and I want them to see who I am, even though I am different, I want to be successful and have really good lifelong friendships and just a general happy life," girl 14.

Capacity to influence life events

Only 26 per cent of online survey respondents agreed with the statement 'I can't do much to change my life' with 54 per cent disagreeing. Similarly, 48 per cent believed that they could 'make a difference in the world'. Interestingly, considerably more primary school students than high school students felt they could make a difference in the world. The enormity of some issues seemed problematic for some who were interviewed, while others were frustrated that they were not being taken seriously by adults and that created a sense of being unable to change things.

"Well sometimes you think you can change the world and that stuff but then realise you can't," 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

Having the confidence and the opportunity to make decisions were seen as important to being able to influence their own lives.

"It depends on the person and if they have enough confidence within themselves they can control their lives, if not, they go with the flow... you have to wait until you get to a certain point where it's like you're forced to make a decision and take control," girl 17.

"In the family situation of my life – the law prevents my sister and I choosing whether we live at mum or dad's," girl 16.





Conclusion

Of the children and young people who participated in this research most are doing well and have much of what they believe is important to their wellbeing. They generally feel loved and cared for, are happy and confident, and are positive about the future. For the most part they want similar things that adults do – a loving family, good friends, a secure future, enjoyable work, opportunities for recreation and relaxation, to be valued and to receive recognition for what they have achieved.

However, children and young people also have concerns. A number of children and young people are experiencing high levels of stress and are vulnerable to a range of issues that can seriously impact on their wellbeing. These include family conflict, bullying and the negative effects of drugs and alcohol on family and friends. Other significant sources of stress identified in the research were concern for friends having problems and managing pressure at school.

The capacity of children and young people to seek help is limited by physical barriers such as transport and cost and other impediments such as fear, embarrassment, loyalty to parents or others, or a lack of awareness that help is needed or available. Trustworthy and reliable avenues for seeking help and support in difficult times need to be available to all children and young people. The role of friends in providing an accessible source of support and information for young people is a resource they identified. Families are also an important source of support and this role needs to be supported with practical information and skills to enhance parents' capacity to develop constructive, supportive relationships, particularly with their adolescent children.

Schools too have a central role to play in supporting children and young people, particularly when family problems are present. The children and young people who participated in this research expressed some concerns about existing systems of support available in schools and their views need to be taken into account in reviewing these systems. Building the capacity of families and schools to provide the supportive and nurturing environments that all children and young people need for good health and wellbeing should be a priority for our community.

While there was broad consistency on the issues that impact on wellbeing across the diverse range of children and young people consulted, particular groups experienced greater challenges in getting what they needed. Aboriginal children and young people felt connected to their families and culture and wanted this to be acknowledged as vital to their identity and pride. Continuing and expanding existing programs to strengthen culture and communities will be a significant contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people.

In general, Aboriginal children and young people were much more likely to have experienced loss of a close family member, and those from the Kimberley were also more likely to report direct experience of family violence, abuse or neglect. For other children and young people issues such as being in care, having a chronic health condition or a disability presented particular barriers. Ensuring that the particular needs of these children and young people are met is also critical.





Conclusion cont.

A lack of recreational opportunities and facilities was one of the most commonly raised issues by young people. They expressed concerns about the limited activities available and identified a range of barriers that prevented them from accessing activities that did exist. This is relevant particularly in regional and remote areas, and attention to planning for the needs of young people and the required infrastructure to support development of and access to activities is vital. This also provides an important opportunity to engage young people with the broader community and involve them in community decision-making processes.

Importantly, children and young people are not a homogenous group. Like the adults they become, they have diverse needs, interests and opinions. Mechanisms for including the views of children and young people in identifying their needs and developing programs, services and strategies to meet them, are central to the provision of effective responses to the issues that affect them.

Children and young people want to be included in decisions that affect them and understand that this needs to occur within age and developmentally appropriate boundaries. They also see this as important to their ultimate goal of becoming independent adults. Creating opportunities and mechanisms to engage children and young people in decision making at both an individual level and a broader community level is imperative to ensure that decisions made are in their best interests and positively influence their development.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People is required under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* to discharge a broad range of statutory responsibilities, including to research, promote and monitor the wellbeing of children and young people and to promote their participation in the making of decisions that affect their lives.

Many of the findings of this research project link strongly to the current work of the Commissioner such as advocating for increased support for families and a State-wide plan for youth activities, and calling for a greater community focus on children and young people's mental health.

The Commissioner will use the views presented in this report, in combination with other information and research findings, to progress this work as well as other issues raised by the children and young people involved in this project.





Children and young people depicted in this publication did not take part in the wellbeing research project. They are Western Australian children and young people who have provided permission to the Commissioner to use the images.