



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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Dear Ms Craze

A National Contributing Life methodology

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the National Contributing Life survey development and methodology.

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people and their participation in decisions that affect their lives are priority areas of my work.

Introduction

As Western Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People my role is one of broad advocacy. Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 (WA)* (the Act) I have responsibility for advocating for over half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and for promoting and monitoring their wellbeing.

In performing all functions under the Act the best interests of children and young people must be my paramount consideration and I must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I must also give priority, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

Under the Act I must observe a number of guiding principles including:

- The contributions made by children and young people in the community should be recognised for their value and merit.

Caring for the future growing up today

- The views of children and young people on all matters affecting them should be given serious consideration and taken into account.

Under the Act I have a number specific functions including to monitor and review laws, policies, practices and services that affect the wellbeing of children and young people and encourage agencies to seek the participation of children and young people appropriate to their age and maturity.¹

It is with these responsibilities in mind that I provide feedback.

Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia

In May 2011 I tabled the *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*² in the WA Parliament.

My inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (the Inquiry) considered the whole spectrum of children and young people's mental health needs, from the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, through prevention and early intervention to treatment of mental illness.

The purpose of the Inquiry was to report on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people and make recommendations that provided clear direction for action on how to strengthen mental health and wellbeing from pregnancy through to adulthood.

To ensure their views and experiences informed the Inquiry consultations were held with more than 700 children and young people aged between seven and 23 years, including Aboriginal children and young people, children and young people living in culturally and linguistically diverse and rural and remote communities, young carers, children and young people in care, young people with diverse sexuality and gender and young people in juvenile detention centres.

The overwhelming evidence to the Inquiry was that the mental health needs of children and young people had not been afforded sufficient priority and there was urgent need for reform and investment across the continuum of services - promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment - and across all ages - from conception to young adulthood.

The Inquiry found there is a general lack of understanding across the community that children and young people, including infants, suffer from conditions such as anxiety and depression and that these are as real and debilitating as those experienced by adults. It also found that there is a common, and erroneous, assumption that young

¹ *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA), section 19(b)(g)

² The *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia* and other reports referred to in this submission are available at:
<http://www.cyp.wa.gov.au/content.aspx?cId=740>

children need mental health promotion and prevention services while adolescents need early intervention and treatment services. In fact, the full range of interventions needs to be available for all children and young people, as children and young people of any age can be positioned anywhere along the wellbeing continuum.

The Report made 54 recommendations including that there be a community education campaign about the importance of children and young people's mental health and that the views of children and young people are heard in the development of mental health policies, programs and services.

The Inquiry considered evidence from research of the prevalence of mental health problems among children and young people, particularly for those living in Western Australia.

The mental health of children and young people

The Telethon Institute of Child Health Research found that more than one in six WA children aged four to 17 years had a mental health problem,³ and 24 per cent of Aboriginal children in this age group were at high risk of clinically-significant emotional or behavioural difficulties.⁴

Data obtained from the Western Australian Raine Study showed 11.5 per cent of children aged two years, and 20 per cent of children aged five years, had clinically significant behavioural problems, with more than six per cent of children having clinically significant mental health problems at both ages.⁵

The Inquiry concluded that some groups of children and young people are more vulnerable to mental health problems than others including, as noted previously, Aboriginal children and young people. For example, it is estimated that 25 to 50 per cent of children of parents with a mental illness will experience mental health problems, as compared to 10 to 20 per cent of children whose parents do not have a mental illness; that at any given time up to 50 per cent of the children and young people in custody in WA could be experiencing mental health issues; and children and young people in out of home care have a higher prevalence of mental health problems than in the general population of children and young people.⁶

Each of the last three annual health and wellbeing survey's conducted by the Department of Health WA have found that almost a quarter of parents of children aged

³ Zubrick, S, et al 1995, *Western Australian Child Health Survey: Developing Health and Well-being in the Nineties*, Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, p. 35.

⁴ Zubrick, S, et al 2005, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, p. 25.

⁵ Robinson, et al 2008, 'Pre- and postnatal influences on preschool mental health: a large-scale cohort study', *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49 (10), pp. 1118-28.

⁶ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth, pp. 80, 83 & 86.

one to fifteen years believed their child needs help for an emotional, social or behavioural problem.⁷

The World Health Organisation reports that up to 50 per cent of lifetime mental health problems develop before the age of 14.⁸

The high prevalence of mental health problems in children and young people means it is important that the voices of children and young people and their families are heard in the National Report Card through the National Contributing Life survey.

I am of the view that children and young people (and their parents and families) who self-identify as having experience of mental health problems should be involved in the National Contributing Life survey, and is not restricted to those who have a diagnosis or receive a mental health service. This is consistent with the broadness of the concept of 'a contributing life'.

The concept of A Contributing Life

My Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people considered mental health and wellbeing in the broadest possible terms. Mental health was defined in part as:

. . . the capacity to enjoy and benefit from a satisfying family life and relationships and educational opportunities . . .

including

*. . . freedom from problems with emotions, behaviours or social relationships that are sufficiently marked or prolonged to lead to suffering or risk to optimal development . . .*⁹

The Inquiry report concluded that as for adults positive mental health is of great importance to children and young people. Those with mental health problems can experience behavioural issues, a negative sense of self-worth and a diminished ability to cope with life's challenges. This has adverse effects on a child or young person's quality of life and emotional wellbeing as well as their capacity to engage in school, community, sports and cultural activities.

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research found that large proportions of children identified as having mental health problems had their daily lives significantly affected by these problems – including home, friendships, learning, leisure,

⁷ Patterson C, Joyce S & Tomlin, S 2012, *The Health and Wellbeing of Children in Western Australia in 2011, Overview and Trends*, Department of Health, Western Australia, p. 68.

⁸ World Health Organisation 2010, Fact file: 10 facts on mental health, fact 1-10 [website], viewed 22 September 2010, http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/mental_health_facts/en/index.html

⁹ Raphael, B 2000, *Promoting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People. Discussion Paper: Key Principles and Directions*, National Mental Health Working Group and National Community Child Health Council, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, p. 5

relationships, level of distress (for example, eating and sleeping problems) and their ability to do the normal things expected of children their age.^{10 11}

Likewise, in the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being, substantially worse self-esteem and greater limitations in school and peer activities were identified in children with more emotional and behavioural problems than for children with fewer problems.¹²

During consultations for the Inquiry children and young people shared ideas about what contributed to good mental health and feeling well and, conversely to poor mental health and feeling unwell. Some of the questions children and young people were asked included:

- What things affect your mental health?
- What are ways that you keep yourself healthy?
- What mental health problems do children and young people have?
- Who would you speak to or where would you go if you thought you needed help for a mental health issue?
- Do you know what mental health services there are in your area?
- How can the mental health of children and young people be made better?
- How can adults do better to help young people to keep well and support them when they have mental health problems?

In my publication *Speaking out about mental health – The views of Western Australian children and young people* the key themes arising from the consultations are summarised – feeling healthy, positive, loved, acknowledged, connected, informed, sad, pressured, different and bored.

This publication also draws on my wellbeing research which I commissioned in 2009 to obtain the views of children and young people across Western Australia on what they considered was important to their wellbeing. Nearly 1000 children and young people aged between 5 and 18 years participated.

The wellbeing 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?

¹⁰ Zubrick, S, et al 1995, *The Western Australian Child Health Survey: Developing health and well-being in the nineties*, Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, p. 37.

¹¹ Zubrick, S, et al 2005, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, Vol 2, pp. 26, 551.

¹² Sawyer, M, et al 2000, *Mental Health of Young People in Australia: Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being*, Mental Health and Special Programs Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, p. 16.

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

A loving, supportive family, good friends, fun and activity, a safe environment, a good education, the basics, acknowledgement and freedom and independence were among the major factors children and young people identified as essential to living a full life.

For more information on this research see my publications *Speaking out about wellbeing – The views of Western Australian children and young people* and the *Wellbeing Research Report*.

It may be useful to consider the Inquiry consultations and the wellbeing research to develop a children and young people specific concept of 'a contributing life' and the associated discussion questions.

I note the recent release by the National Mental Health Commission of *How did we score: Engaging young people in the development of a National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention* however this research does not appear to address the same questions as your current project, being focused on examining 'young people's experiences in relation to their mental health and wellbeing' and gathering 'ideas and suggestions on how the report card can be engaging and relevant to young people'. Additionally the target group for this consultation was 12 to 25 years.

I am of the view that specific consultations with children and young people (under the age of 18 years) are necessary to develop and trial the concept of 'a contributing life' and the associated discussion questions, to ensure their views are captured by the National Contributing Life survey.

Involve children and young people

To ensure that children and young people's views and experiences informed the Inquiry I undertook the following consultation strategies:

- consultation with my Advisory Committees
- direct staff contact with key organisations working with children and young people to make sure they were aware of the Inquiry and encouraged them to prepare a submission including the views of children and young people
- communications to organisations and professionals to encourage them to include the views of children and young people in their submissions, or encourage children and young people they have contact with to make their own submissions
- funding of a special consultation project.

The special consultation project involved providing a small amount of funding to specific organisations (chosen because of their work with particular groups of children and young people) to undertake the consultations on my behalf. This model of consultation proved very successful and I have subsequently used it for other consultations. It ensures groups of children and young people who are vulnerable or who would otherwise be unlikely to be heard are given the opportunity to participate in a safe and supportive environment.

I have no particular view on the appropriateness or otherwise of the *Life Story Method* however I encourage you to look at ways to adapt this method for the diversity of children and young people's circumstances, particularly in regard to age, maturity and culture. My publication *Involving Children and Young People: Participation Guidelines* provides further information on how this may be achieved.

An example from my own work is the wellbeing research. Methods of consultation included small focus groups, artwork and storytelling groups, an interactive forum, a photographic activity, a hard copy survey and an online survey.

Similarly entries to my *Commissioner for a Day* challenge on the topic of staying mentally healthy included writing, artwork, videos and music.

I note *How did we score: Engaging young people in the development of a National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention* engaged young people through online survey and focus groups. It is my view that reliance on only these two methods will not capture the richness of children and young people's views and experience. As an example I refer you to the stories submitted to the ABC's Heywire competition (<http://www.abc.net.au/heywire/>), which include experiences of mental health.

Other research and publications

In addition to my own publications you may like to consider the following in your development of the National Contributing Life methodology:

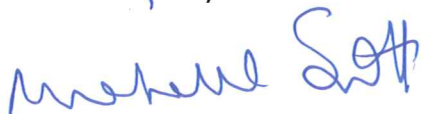
- NSW Commission for Children and Young People: *TAKING PARTicipation seriously* kit <http://kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/participationkit.cfm> and *involving children and young people in research:* <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/resources/publications.cfm?itemID=5794B1AD0A50D8DFE39784F2C3E4077E>
- Commissioner for Children Tasmania: *Involving Children in Decision Making* (under 12 years) <http://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/resources/>
- *Finding their way home: Children's experiences of homelessness:* Research by Tim Moore, Debbie Noble- Carr and Morag McArthur http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/10299/FINALFindingtheirWayHome.pdf
This publication provides a robust discussion of the issues involved in seeking children's views on sensitive topics and their methodology including the involvement of a Children's Reference Group. Both children and separately their parents/carers were involved and the diverse methods used. There is an associated literature review: http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/10300/HomelessChildrenLitReviewExperiences.pdf
- Centre for Children and Young People works collaboratively with organisations, particularly those in regional and rural areas, who may wish to enhance policy and practice related to the wellbeing of children and young people through research and evaluation activities: <http://ccyp.scu.edu.au/index.php/2/>

Recommendations

1. That the National Contributing Life survey and methodology makes specific provision to involve children and young people under the age of 18 years, adapting the methodology to be appropriate to their age and maturity.
2. That the National Contributing Life survey and methodology makes further provision to involve specific groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to mental health problems or who may face barriers to services including those:
 - who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
 - from culturally and linguistically diverse communities
 - from rural and remote communities
 - with parents who have a mental illness
 - who are young carers
 - in out of home care
 - in the youth justice system
 - with disability
 - with diverse sexuality and gender.
3. That the National Contributing Life survey and methodology involves parents and the families of children and young people under the age of 18 years (unless not appropriate) in a way which adds further information to children and young people's experiences.
4. That the National Contributing Life survey and methodology involves children and young people (and their parents and families) who self-identify as having experience of mental health problems, and is not restricted to those who have a diagnosis or receive a mental health service.
5. That specific consultations be conducted with children and young people to develop and trial the concept of 'a contributing life' and the associated discussion questions for the National Contributing Life methodology.
6. That the *Life story Method* be adapted for the diversity of children and young people's circumstances, particularly in regard to age, maturity and culture. This would involve using a wide variety of methods rather than just relying on focus groups and online surveys.

Please don't hesitate to contact Leanne Pech, Senior Policy Officer:
Leanne.Pech@ccyp.wa.gov.au or 08 6213 2210 if you wish to discuss any aspects of
my feedback in more detail.

Yours sincerely



MICHELLE SCOTT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

30 May 2013