

Social and emotional development in the middle years

Report of the 2012 Middle Years Seminar Series

Background

Early adolescence, or the middle years, is increasingly recognised as a critical stage in which major developmental changes occur.

Building on the success of last year's WA Middle Years Forum, the Department for Communities and the Commissioner for Children and Young People, with the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, designed a seminar series held from 10–11 May 2012. The seminars focussed on the social and emotional development of children aged nine to 14 years. Four seminars were held for a variety of audiences including parents, the Aboriginal community, government agencies and not-for-profit organisations.

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Program aims

- to raise awareness about the social and emotional developmental needs of children in the middle years
- to strengthen and promote factors that enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of children in the middle years in a range of settings (including in families, schools and in the wider community).

Keynote speaker Lyn Worsley presented at all four seminars. Lyn Worsley is a clinical psychologist; registered nurse; child, adolescent and family therapist and creator of the 'Resilience Doughnut' model.

The seminar series

1. 'Helping Aboriginal children and young people to grow strong'

Lyn Worsley led an information session and informal discussion with predominantly Aboriginal workers and parents. This session focused on enhancing factors which support children to develop resilience and the use of the Resilience Doughnut model.

2. 'Promoting Resilience: preparing your child to deal with the ups and downs of life'

Lyn Worsley presented at an evening information session for parents and carers of children aged nine to 14 years. The session focused on developing resilience in children and equipping parents to support their children to:

- be positive
- deal with changes and overcome problems
- cope better with stress.

3. 'The Resilience Doughnut – developing and promoting resilience in children and young people'

Lyn Worsley presented a master class to provide practitioners with the skills to utilise the Resilience Doughnut model in their work with parents.

4. 'Social and emotional development in the middle years'

This half-day seminar for government and not-for-profit organisations focused on the social and emotional development of children in the middle years.

The seminar included four presentations and an interactive panel and audience discussion. The presenters and key points of the presentations are presented below.

Summary of seminar presentations



Dr Julian Dooley: Associate Director Sellenger Centre for Research in Law, Justice and Social Change; Head of Social Wellbeing and Technology (SWaT), Edith Cowan University

'Is this really just a phase? The impact of the middle years on social and emotional development'

- A significant portion of neurological development occurs in the early years. Neurological development progresses from the back to the front of the brain, from simple to complex functions. The frontal lobe is the centre of executive functions, such as logic and the control of inhibitions. Typically, frontal lobe development is completed in the mid to late 20s in females, and mid to late 30s for males.
- Erikson's theory of identity development suggests that the middle years are critical for the development of identity, personality and social and emotional development.
- Exposure to different experiences allows a child to develop skills to respond to situations. A challenge for children is that they need the skills developed in the frontal lobe to cope with situations, but these are not necessarily fully developed at the time of exposure.
- There are sensitive periods in neurological development in the early to middle years. Where there is neurological impairment, symptoms only manifest when development begins in the impaired section of brain. This makes diagnosis of impairment difficult during early and middle years.
- There are a number of reasons for children to have reactive-aggressive behaviour. It can result from a traumatic brain injury, development or from hormonal changes. It is a combination of physiological development and social influences, and has significant social impact. Research suggests that aggressive behaviour is 25 per cent genetic, and 75 per cent influenced by family and the social environment.
- There is a need to engage children in different ways to reinforce positive mental health messages and to access resources.
- In the early years, morals are authoritarian-based, and very black and white. Children start to reason in the middle years and challenge authority. Morality is a very complex issue. Exposing children to social dilemmas gives them the experience to begin developing skills.
- Advantages of technology are: enhanced social connectivity and the opportunity for children to engage with people virtually.
- Online information is global and not targeted to particular groups. Middle years children are at great risk of being unable to assess the potential risks to which they are exposed online, due to their stage of neurological development. The egocentric nature of the middle years makes children very vulnerable to online risks, like "friend scams".
- As technology becomes more widely available and normalised in society, children need to be taught how to use technology critically, and how to protect themselves, such as understanding the risks of geo-locating (mobile devices pinpointing and recording user locations) and privacy settings online.

Summary of seminar presentations (continued)



Lyn Worsley: clinical psychologist; registered nurse; child, adolescent and family therapist and creator of the 'Resilience Doughnut' model.
'Building resilience in middle childhood – a strengths based approach'

Keynote presentation

Lyn discussed the concept of resilience as not so much about being 'nice' but about learning to cope with a situation in a positive manner.

Core elements of resilience are:

- development of personal competence
 - coping mechanisms
 - facing adversity.
- Typically, we try to work on weaknesses to make improvements. Focusing on strengths is much easier, and will have flow on effects. Focusing on strengths will facilitate moral development. Looking at successes will encourage optimism and positive solutions.
 - Middle years children progress their learning and moral development by:
 - learning to navigate and negotiate with others
 - developing group skills
 - coping with social situations
 - developing social scanning skills, which enables children to be aware of others and assess people they meet.
 - Neurological development of the frontal lobe is enhanced by repeated exposure to different social situations. It allows children to experiment with responses and gives them feedback. Children need to be given opportunities to try new things and engage in group activities.
 - Optimism encourages opportunity-seeking behaviour. It is a socially learned trait, though it is partially influenced by temperament. The challenge in developing optimism is that the global environment is generally pessimistic.

- Moral reasoning. The stages of moral development are connected with experiences and are linked to relationships.
- A failure to recognise progress through different stages of moral development and the imposition of rules that are not consistent with the developmental stage can inhibit normal healthy development. Progression through these "moral development stages" needs to be facilitated by giving children the opportunity to practice.

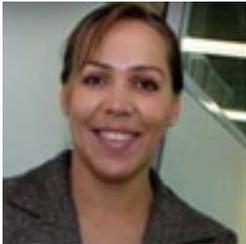
Moral development can be enhanced by:

- discussing motives
- encouraging mateship with integrity
- friendship through caring
- teaching social scanning.

The Resilience Doughnut model is comprised of seven factors which are identified as parent, skill, family, education, peer, money and community factors. The model requires three of the seven factors to be present any one time. Connections between factors can be created to add strength.

Resilience is about having a supportive external environment, and is not linked to particular skills or level of ability. Peer group networks suggest progressive moral development. Accepting this progress as positive will encourage young people's continued moral development. This can be facilitated by using the group perspective to reveal external perspectives. Identifying the strengths of the group will help.

Summary of seminar presentations (continued)



Associate Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker:

Director Pindi Pindi, The National Research Centre for Aboriginal Children, Families and Community and NHMRC Senior Research Fellow, Murdoch University:

Indigenous Racial Identity and Self Esteem (IRISE) project

Professor Kickett-Tucker argues that the lack of cultural development and recognition of Indigenous children in schools is affecting their sense of identity and self-esteem. The IRISE project study is based on a series of tools for exploring racial identity and self-esteem in the Indigenous community.

Main outcomes from the middle years component of study:

- children feel judged by their skin colour
- 1 in 3 children experienced racism at school from their peers
- children with mixed parentage experience more challenges in their peer groups and struggle more with their identity
- children with low self-esteem often lack racial coping strategies when communicating and negotiating with the non-Indigenous community
- children with low self-esteem are likely to become dependent on Indigenous peer groups, where negative behaviour is normalised.

Issues raised in the research:

1. Culture

- schools need to celebrate indigenous culture over the school year
- currently, cultural recognition is tokenistic and only occurs where Indigenous students are identified or during NAIDOC week
- children need to know where they come from
- quality of cultural education is dependent on staff awareness.

2. Sense of Self

- Individuals benefit from an awareness of their Aboriginal culture and heritage
- children are not aware of their rights as Indigenous Australians.

3. Aboriginal Identity

- identity is defined by unseen elements
- local Aboriginal language use is not practiced very much but highly valued by children
- children want to learn and practice their culture. This then provides a positive image of their identity and consequently raises their self-esteem
- Indigenous languages are not included in "Languages Other Than English"
- language increases cultural security and sustainability.

4. Family

- children from broken families which are further disconnected by the system
- many families are socially isolated, and few have male role models
- poverty is a major hurdle for families
- these family challenges are often overlooked in schools.

Racial incidents increase during the middle years as children start to notice external feedback which shapes behaviour, expectations and a sense of belonging. Without support, children define 'normal behaviour' for themselves.

The benefits of celebrating Indigenous culture include:

- higher self esteem
- better school attendance
- better school behaviour
- sense of connectedness
- better academic achievement.

This has flow on effects for the community.

Summary of seminar presentations (continued)



Bill Boylan:

Principal, Tapping Primary School.

'Case Study: A whole school approach to promoting social and emotional competence in children'

The philosophy of the school prioritises social and emotional learning, as academic learning is dependent on this.

Practical approach:

- Staff are appointed on the basis that they can connect well with children.
- Parents have input into their children's learning.
- The focus is not on "behaviour management" but on providing children with opportunities to learn appropriate "pro-social" behaviour.
- Children learn through play which reinforces group learning.

Approach to behaviour:

- Careful use of language enables issues to become learning opportunities.
- Positive relationships with teachers are emphasised.
- Approach based on teaching and supporting strengths and reinforcing positive behaviours.
- Good manners are vital learning for positive behaviours.
- Developing empathy enables children to see and care about the consequences of their behaviour on others.
- Setting boundaries teaches students about appropriate behaviour for a range of situations.

Rewards and punishment:

- Rewards and punishment are manipulative and ineffective, and do not promote intrinsic learning.
- Restitution is used as a tool for learning about consequences for negative behaviour.
- Children identify and choose how they will make restitution – forgiveness is a part of this process.

- Overemphasis on highlighting positives in children's behaviour and achievements provides unrealistic feedback and false expectations.

Characteristics of the group problem solving technique:

- Students have a right to communicate their views.
- Increased communication with peers, and increased awareness of individual views
- Supports students to help each other.
- Fosters respect for others and awareness of the personal and social consequences of children's actions.
- Reinforces relationships and connections between students and teachers.

These approaches need to be explained to parents, so they are supportive of the goals of the school program and help encourage learning.

Main themes from open discussion

Behaviour in the middle years

Schools may use suspension as a way of being seen to be “tough” on problem behaviour but it is not an effective strategy in promoting pro-social behaviour and can lead to unintended adverse consequences.

Engaging in behaviour that leads to school suspension may be used by some students to escape school attendance which further promotes disengagement. The motivation for behaviour needs to be better understood. Consequences for poor behaviour are required, but not through school suspension. A huge culture and policy shift is required to move away from the use of school suspension as a response to anti-social behaviour.

Racial identity and self esteem

According to Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, primary factors contributing to strong racial identity and self-esteem include: strong family support; role models being strong and persistent; and having extracurricular activities that provide an opportunity to integrate into the community. At present, few opportunities for integration are available.

Indigenous students are generally not engaged in non-Indigenous communities. In some communities, this leads to the exodus of young people from communities and undermines family and community support networks.

Research into the needs and circumstances of Indigenous children and families should be clearly focused on improving outcomes for participants and be more inclusive. The Indigenous community is not, and should not be regarded as, homogenous.

Online social networks for middle years

Some children engage better in online networks than others. However, the online environment does carry its own risks and should be promoted as a way of supporting offline social networks, not replacing them. More research is required to identify positive and negative impacts.

Research in the middle years

Current research is failing to build on existing knowledge and further research is required as new issues emerge. Parents and children need support to help navigate and adapt to these changes.

ARACY will be setting up a Resilience and Wellbeing Network to bring together research, policy and practice in this area.

Participant feedback

Overall an estimated 270 people attended the four events, including approximately 64 parents.

More than half the attendees (155) completed evaluation forms and 80 comments were recorded. Top-line data from these evaluations indicates that the vast majority of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- The guest speakers presented relevant information.
- The seminar increased my knowledge of social and emotional development and wellbeing in the middle years.
- The seminar allowed me to network and make professional contacts.
- I would be interested in attending future events that focus on the middle years.
- Overall I was satisfied with the seminar.

A selection of comments from participants is provided below:

‘The seminar was very important for me and full of information I really benefited from it. I think conducting seminars like this will empower parents and carers.’

‘I thought that all of the speakers were fantastic because they were all very passionate about their work and know their topics. I would like to have had them all for a longer period of time.’

‘Really looking on strengths is so important, in our roles we tend to look at problems/ concerns and want to fix them.’

‘Thank you Lyn. I’ve had a particularly hard week with a particular case but the master class has inspired me to move forward with this young person and given me hope that this will work for him!’

‘This seminar was so valuable to me professionally, personally and as a parent and a socially minded individual. I would have loved a week-long seminar.’

Ongoing initiatives

The Middle Years Email Network (the network) was established following the Middle Years Forum in July 2011 and provides members with information pertaining to the middle years, including updates about forthcoming events. Attendees at the 2012 seminar program who expressed interest in joining the network have contributed to the network's expansion.

The Department for Communities will continue to:

- operate as a lead agency within Western Australia promoting and reviewing research, initiatives and activities across the Middle Years
- promote greater family and community awareness and understanding of developmental needs, opportunities and vulnerabilities in middle childhood and early adolescence
- maintain ongoing communication with individuals, service providers, organisations and agencies through the Middle Years email network
- continue to work closely with the 200+ outside school hours services that are monitored by the Department for Communities.

More information

A number of people expressed interest in accessing the speakers' presentations from the agency seminar. Each presentation can be accessed online via the Department for Communities, the Commissioner for Children and Young People, and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY):

- Department for Communities (WA)
 - Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA)
 - Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
- To access more information about the presenters and the organisations they represent, please visit:
- 'The Resilience Doughnut - a model for building resilience in children'
 - The Sellenger Centre for Research in Law, Justice and Social Change - Edith Cowan University
 - Pindi Pindi - The National Research Centre for Aboriginal Children, Families and Community
 - Tapping Primary School