

Why focus on children and young people's engagement in education?

Education is a key influence on a child's life. Early engagement with school and learning assists a child to develop skills to succeed academically and build and maintain social relationships.

Schooling has a strong influence on a child's future pathway into employment and further education.² Children and young people have also identified that getting a 'good education' is important to their wellbeing and future opportunities.

Research shows poor engagement with school may result in poor educational outcomes, diminished employment prospects and, for some, adverse life outcomes, including social exclusion, poverty and involvement with the justice system.³

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have the right to accessible education and should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.⁴

The difficulties some WA children and young people experience in attending school and having a positive educational experience has often been raised with the Commissioner in his discussions with parents and professionals in both regional communities and metropolitan Perth.

When speaking to the Commissioner, children and young people have also expressed concerns that some of their peers do not participate positively in school, which can either mean that some do not regularly attend school and others attend but disrupt learning for fellow students.

To gain a broader understanding of the issues influencing engagement in education, the Commissioner published in 2015 a literature review, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school*.⁵

One of the key issues identified in the literature review was that children and young people's views on school and learning and their experiences of education are largely absent from research on student's engagement and disengagement. Similarly, there is little evidence of students' involvement in shaping the way education is delivered to them – particularly in regard to improving their engagement with school and learning.⁶

When consulted, children and young people identify two factors as most significant:

1. Relationships with friends and teachers
2. Curriculum content and the way it is taught.⁷

International research on resilience led by Dr Michael Ungar (2014 Commissioner for Children and Young People Thinker in Residence) has found supportive relationships are one of the nine factors important for resilience and to protect children and young people from the negative consequences that follow exposure to risk.⁸

In almost every consultation the Commissioner has undertaken with children and young people, education, school, teachers and other school staff have been consistently identified by children and young people as having an important role in relation to their wellbeing.⁹ Through a consultation in 2010, a good education was one of eight things children and young people said was important for their wellbeing.¹⁰ In a more recent consultation, Aboriginal children and young people identified how important it was for them to access education and for barriers to access to be reduced.¹¹

Consultations on youth health, mental health and wellbeing identified the importance of schools, teachers and other school staff for help, advice, information and support.^{12 13}

The literature review found very limited research on parents' views on their child's engagement/disengagement¹⁴ despite there being a large body of evidence demonstrating the significant and ongoing impact parental engagement has on the academic outcomes and social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people.¹⁵ Parental engagement is the focus of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Parental Engagement Project, after parent engagement formed one of the four components of the Commonwealth Government's Students First policy.

Understanding children and young people's views on what factors influence their engagement or disengagement from school and learning is critical to improving educational outcomes for all Western Australian students.