

ask the children



nsw commission for
children & young people

Children and young people speak about the issues important to them

“The type of issues which authorities and the media see as important are often not truly issues that young people see as important.” (Male, 17 years)

Getting kids' views

Most of the 1.5 million children and young people in NSW are happy and satisfied with their lives. The majority are active, sociable, have a broad range of interests, enjoy strong family supports and close friendships and make an important contribution to the community.

Research shows that like adults, children and young people have strong views on a wide range of issues, especially when these issues affect their lives. Children and young people are also keen to express those views when given the opportunity¹ although are rarely, if ever, asked to identify the key issues themselves.

Knowing more about what kids think about issues that affect their lives helps the community and government to understand and make more informed decisions to better meet kids' needs.

With this in mind the Commission has produced the 'Ask the Children' series to make kids' views on different topics available to the public and decision makers. We want to let people know what kids' views are and the changes they want to see in important areas of their lives.

Ask the Children: Kids' Issues is based on the views of 430 children and young people in NSW who were asked to identify important issues in their lives. Most children and young people we spoke with interpreted this as meaning issues that presented difficulties for them.

Footnotes

¹ Kids HelpLine, 1999

² Numbers do not total 430, as the gender of one respondent was not provided.

³ Numbers do not total 430, as the location of the children and young people was missing for 11 respondents.

Who participated in the research?

Of the 430 participants, 315 kids completed a questionnaire and 115 participated in focus groups with the Commission's Young Peoples Reference Group managing the collection of information from the questionnaire.

Two hundred and forty-two (56.3%) of the participants were female and 187 (43.5%) were male². The children and young people's ages ranged between four and 19 years. Participants were drawn from across NSW with 95 (22.1%) living in urban areas and 324 (75.3%) living in regional and rural communities³.

Information about the cultural and linguistic diversity of the 115 focus group participants was obtained. Thirty per cent identified with an ethnic or cultural background other than Anglo-Australian. Of those, the three largest groups were Aboriginal (31%), Lebanese Muslim (25%) and Asian (20%).

It is important to note that the children and young people who took part in this research were not chosen to be representative of all children and young people in NSW.

The research had three parts:

- 1) Children and young people were asked to identify issues of importance in four key parts of their lives – family, school, work and their local community.
- 2) Children and young people were asked to rate the importance of 10 issues that other young people had previously identified as important issues for young people.

- 3) Children and young people were asked to list the three most important issues for them that they would like something to be done about.

Family issues

Children and young people were on the whole extremely positive about their own families.

They expressed that their families were very important to them. Love, support, respect, caring and understanding were identified by many children and young people as essential to family happiness.

Children and young people said that they like belonging to a supportive family, where members trust, understand and respect one another.

“Family means a place where I belong and feel wanted, loved and accepted. Where you can talk about anything and have no inhibitions, or the occasional argument, then know afterwards you fought because the two of you really love each other.” (Female, 16-18 years)

For many of the children and young people, family was viewed as the single most important factor in their lives. While some acknowledged a gradual moving away from their family in their later teen years, most recognised that it is vital to have their family for love and support.

“I would like to think that I’m a new age, independent kind of chick...I have come to a stage where I have to admit that without my family I would be nothing...I am so thankful to have been brought up in such a loving and supportive environment.” (Female, 16-18 years)

There were also some negative issues raised in relation to families.

Parental separation and divorce was an issue raised by the children and young people. Some young people viewed their parents separating as a negative experience, expressing concern that the separation was their fault.

“Sometimes it makes the kids feel like it’s their fault and they’re not good enough for their parents to stay. It’s really unnatural having only one parent, if you’re a guy and you end up living with your mum you can’t talk to your mum about half as much stuff as you could with your dad.” (Male, 15-17 years)

Some young people expressed that the impact of parental separation on young people can be positive, especially when young people were constantly exposed to their parents’ arguing.

“I’m happy that my Mum and Dad are divorced, my parents are both nuts, I’m really glad that I’ve got my step-mum. My parents would have fought so much it would have been so bad for me to grow up in that environment, I’m glad they got divorced ’cause I ended up growing up in a better environment.” (Female, 15-17 years)

Younger children simply expressed a dislike of their parents’ fighting.

“My Dad said he’s gonna go away ’cause Mum was fighting with him and I was getting angry when they were fighting.” (Female, 4-7 years)

Violence and abuse in Australian families was another negative issue raised, with some respondents expressing concern that violent parents would result in their children forming similar behaviour patterns.

“I think a lot of the time people get into the same kind of habits as their parents so if their parents have been violent when they were little they are more likely to do the same when they’re older.” (Female, 15-17 years)

Finally, some of the young people who completed the questionnaire raised the issue of families placing a great deal of pressure on children and young people to do well at school.

“We are not superhuman and they don’t need to say things such as: ‘So, you’re at the business end of school now, big year ahead, you really need to buckle down now’ – duh, it’s called Year 12, we can stress ourselves out enough thank you very much.” (Female, 17 years)

School issues

The children and young people who took part in this research agreed that the most important factor impacting on them in schools is their relationship with teachers.

Children and young people of all ages said that they love having ‘good teachers’ and for many students, they are the best thing about their school. The key quality in a teacher that was repeatedly mentioned was that they made learning fun.

“I reckon a good teacher is willing to actually try to make it fun to learn than just plain old boring copy off the board.” (Male, 15-17 years)

Children and young people indicated that they want teachers who treat them with respect and as ‘people’. Examples of this included listening to them, talking about problems, playing outside the classroom and being lenient on trivial rules.

“I like my teacher ‘cause he listens to what you have to say, he lets you explain.” (Female, 12-15 years)

“I like my teacher because he plays football and soccer and plays out in the playground with us.” (Male, 9-11 years)

Young people saw ‘bad teachers’ as the major contributor to their dislike of school.

According to the young people, ‘bad teachers’ do not respect students and abuse their position of authority in terms of discipline and punishment. Young people indicated that they wanted discipline in class, but they do not want teachers to be condescending or strict on things that they see as trivial.

“Even if you’re not doing anything they pick on you.” (Male, 12-14 years)

“They don’t worry about you learning, they worry about what you’re wearing.” (Female, 12-15 years)

Overall, young people said that they just want to be liked and respected by their teachers. In the words of one young person:

“They should like us, they chose the job so they should like us.” (Male, 12-15 years)

Both questionnaire and focus group respondents raised the issue of a clean school environment as important.

Nearly all children and young people expressed a desire for their school to be cleaner, neater and tidier. In the focus groups, primary school-aged children were mostly concerned about papers on the ground.

“People putting rubbish in the bin instead of on the ground.” (Male, 6-8 years)

Bullying was raised as an important issue by the questionnaire respondents and by the 4-8 year olds who took part in focus groups.

Nearly all of the younger children expressed their dislike of mean or bossy people and bullies. They disliked being called names and other students being mean or not letting them play with them.

“Preschool, I hated it, ’cause they all called me a baby, the other kids teased me, but now they don’t.” *(Female, 4-7 years)*

Important issues that were raised by the young people who completed the questionnaire as impacting on young people in schools were heavy workloads, pressure from parents and teachers to succeed and the resulting stress. Some young people expressed concern that they were not equipped to deal with the stress that they face.

“We have to make life changing decisions really early in life – this puts a lot of pressure on us to choose the right path.” *(Female, 15 years)*

“I think stress is a big issue for young people. Stress is a huge problem for young people, they don’t know how to deal with it and it can make you paranoid, anxious and depressed.” *(Female, 15 years)*

Work issues

Issues raised by the young people in relation to work were overwhelmingly negative.

Lack of opportunities and unemployment were important issues raised by the questionnaire respondents. Unemployment did not arise voluntarily as an issue in most focus groups.

When asked about it specifically, however, young people had varying responses. Many did not see unemployment as a major issue. Some young people said that there are jobs available for people who are willing to work.

However, young people in rural and regional areas voluntarily raised the lack of employment opportunities in rural and regional NSW. They disliked that young people typically have to leave their communities for work opportunities.

“Go to an area with more opportunities for work instead of driving from here to Canberra to get work ’cause there’s not enough work to get.” *(Female, 15-17 years)*

“I reckon we’re gonna leave here” *(Male, 15-17 years)*

“Yeah, for decent jobs.” *(Female, 15-17 years)*

The youth wage was also a work-related issue that was raised by both questionnaire and focus group respondents. Many young people felt that the youth wage is unfair and that payment should be based on work productivity, not age.

“It’s difficult ’cause you work your arse off and the other guy gets paid more ’cause he’s older than you.” *(Male, 15-17 years)*

“It should be something like how long you have been working there.” *(Female, 15-17 years)*

The young people who completed the questionnaire also raised poor working conditions, safety, discrimination and lack of respect by employers as important issues affecting young people at work.

Community issues

Children and young people raised a wide range of important issues in relation to their local communities.

Feeling safe and secure in their communities was a major issue raised by both focus group and questionnaire respondents. It was discussed as an issue on several levels, including violence and crime, wanting more and 'better' police and safe places to play and ride bikes.

Young people discussed vandalism, violence and crime as important community issues that they were concerned about. The majority of older young people felt that improved street lighting and a greater police presence on the streets would make their communities safer, particularly at night.

"I think that the police need to be more present on the streets. I think that in the community I live in, it would go a long way."

(Female, 16-18 years)

"Maybe better lighting at night times, and a higher police presence." *(Female, 16-18 years)*

Children and young people also discussed the importance of having safer parks and public space to play and ride their bikes.

"I think the public spaces could be much more safer than they are." *(Female, 15-18 years)*

"I have a dead end where I always ride my bike...no cars come down there and it's only a skinny road." *(Female, 4-7 years)*

Children and young people of all ages spoke about the lack of entertainment, activities and places for them to hang out as important community issues for them. This was particularly the case for high school aged young people and those living in rural and regional areas.

Most young people felt that there were few places for them to hang out with their friends.

"After the youth centre closes, it's just hanging out at the park and in the streets."

(Male, 15-17 years)

Entertainment and activities that young people indicated they would like to see more of included skate parks, movie theatres (particularly in rural areas), swimming pools, water parks, theme parks; and electronic entertainment centres.

Young people from particular areas believed that their communities now have good facilities for young people following past troubles. Preschool and infant school aged children felt that their communities have lots of great places to go including beaches, parks and farms.

"I like that we're really close to the beach and we always go there." *(Female, 4-7 years)*

"[I like living here because of] all the farms...that there are heaps of cows and I like milking them and I like rounding them up." *(Female, 4-7 years)*

Both questionnaire and focus group respondents mentioned a clean environment as an important local community issue. Young people were concerned about toxic waste and chemical disposal, pollution, rubbish and syringe disposal in their local areas.

"With toxic waste it gets absorbed into the ground and it just spreads and kills off all the plants and wildlife and stuff." *(Male, 15-17 years)*

Many young people also raised the issue of lack of public transport. In particular, young people talked about the lack of public transport at night and that buses and trains are generally too crowded.

“I hate it when nightrider starts, you wait there maybe two hours just for a bus, and then the bus gets packed and you have to wait for another one.” (Male, 15-17 years)

Police-youth relations was a major issue that was raised in the focus groups only.

The majority of young people felt that police unfairly target and hassle them just for ‘hanging out’ in public places including local parks. Many felt that the police spend too much time on moving young people on unnecessarily and not on ‘real crimes’.

“There is nothing to do...we sit down in the park and get harassed by the coppers.” (Female, 15-17 years)

“They should worry more about the real criminals, not the kids that are just mucking around.” (Female, 12-15 years)

“I reckon just generally cops have a bad attitude towards youth, we probably deserve it, but not as much as we get.” (Male, 15-17 years)

Most children and young people indicated that police did not respond fast enough and indicated a need for more police in their local areas.

“We need faster police, when we rang them, it took ages for them to come.” (Male, 12-14 years)

Underneath the negativity, however, many young people expressed respect and gratitude for the job the police do.

“I see them as serving a really beneficial purpose to society. I particularly like the cops who just sort of say ‘hi’ on the trains, and ask what you’ve been up to, or where you’re going etc in a really casual, friendly way, not a ‘you must be up to something’ way. It makes you think they’re really approachable.” (Female, 16-18 years)

In addition to local community issues, the children and young people who participated in focus groups were also asked to identify key issues affecting the wider community, including world issues. Almost all respondents mentioned the ‘War on Terrorism’ as an issue of grave importance.

Young people seemed split in their views about the ‘War on Terrorism’. About half supported both Australia’s involvement in this conflict and our support for the United States position.

“We should go ’cause we’ve been allies a long time and they’ve helped us with problems, ’cause there were Australians killed in the World Trade Center.” (Male, 11-12 years)

The other half of the participants stated that they do not support Australia’s involvement and many feared that our involvement might put Australia at greater risk of similar attacks in the future.

“[War on Terrorism is bad] because they might just put a bomb in Australia and blow everything up.” (Male, 12-14 years)

“Don’t think we should get involved ’cause they’ll bomb us.” (Female, 12-15 years)

The focus group interviews were conducted in late 2001 and early 2002. It is therefore possible that the dominance of war as a key issue was related to the media attention it was receiving at the time, and so its importance may be transitory.

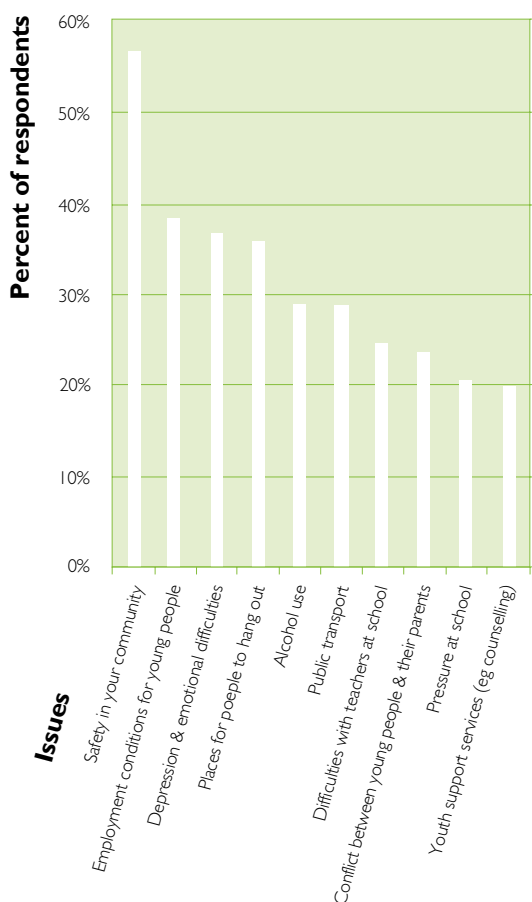
Moreover, the questionnaires were completed in the latter part of 2003, and the ‘War on Terrorism’ did not emerge as a key issue at this time. This lends support to the view that children and young people are affected by a wide range of issues; some of which are time-relevant, while others are perennial.

‘Importance’ ratings

The children and young people who completed the questionnaire were asked to rate the importance of 10 issues that had previously been identified by young people as important.

Ratings were made on a four-point scale from ‘not important’ to ‘very important’. Figure 1 presents the percentage of young people who rated each of the 10 issues as either ‘very important’ or ‘important’.

Figure 1:
ISSUES RATED AS IMPORTANT OR VERY IMPORTANT



Note: the number of children and young people that gave a response for each issue varies.

Figure 1 shows that more than half of the children and young people (57%) rated safety in their community as an important issue. Other issues rated as important by more than one third of respondents were employment conditions for young people (38%); depression and other emotional difficulties (37%); and places for young people to hang out (36%).

Females were significantly more likely than males to rate a number of issues as ‘important’ or ‘very important’, including youth support services (63% vs 44%); conflict between young people and their parents (63% vs 47%); depression and emotional difficulties (75% vs 55%); and pressure at school (64% vs 48%).

The top three issues

Children and young people who completed the questionnaire were asked to choose three issues that they would most like something to be done about. They were also asked to indicate what they would like to see done about each issue. The findings are presented in Figure 2 (see next page).

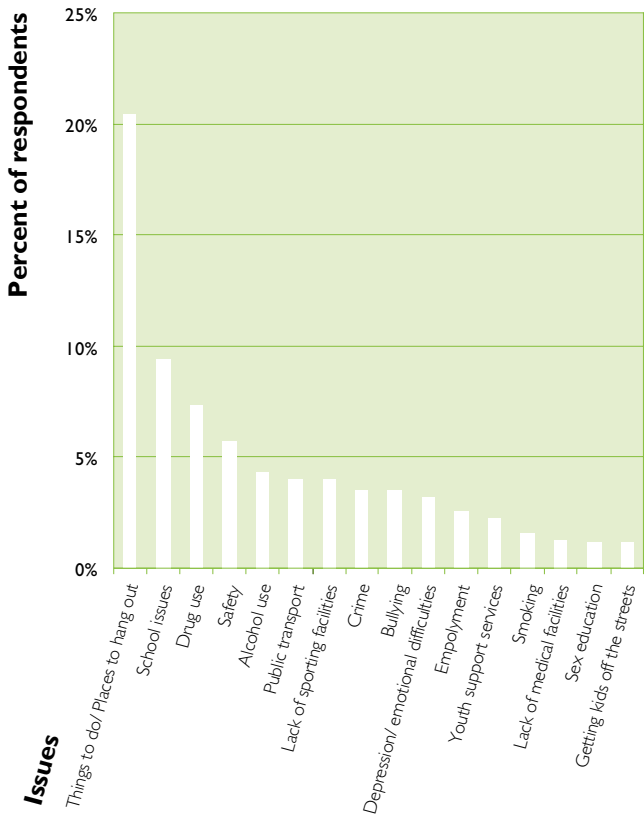
Figure 2 shows that ‘things to do/places to hang out’ was the issue that young people most commonly reported they would like something to be done about (20% of responses).

Specifically, many children and young people felt that there was a lack of activities and entertainment for young people in their area. Suggestions to overcome this included a skate park, an under 18’s nightclub, a movie theatre, and more shops.

School issues (9% of responses), particularly pressures from teachers, workloads, and the HSC, were also raised as issues young people would like something to be done about.

Figure 2:

TOP THREE ISSUES



Note: Almost one quarter of the issues raised were specific to individuals and were therefore not categorised. The issues included eating disorders; pressure to conform to society; and lack of vending machines.

The proportions shown are based on the total responses (N = 627). Responses provided were not assumed to be in any order of importance and were not analysed separately.

Suggestions by young people about how to overcome these problems related to a review of the education system in terms of curriculum, workload, and teacher support.

Drug use, alcohol use and smoking made up 13% of responses combined, with underage use of particular concern. Responses focused on the need for more education in this area.

Safety (6% of responses) was another issue nominated as requiring attention. Children and young people were particularly concerned about their own safety within their community and at school.

Lessons for the future

This research aimed to learn more about the issues that are important to children and young people.

While children raised both positive and negative issues in relation to families, issues raised in relation to school, work and community were more negative.

A number of key issues were repeatedly raised by the respondents.

First, children and young people want to feel safe and secure at school and in their communities. Second, children and young people would like to see more activities available to them and more places to hang out with their friends. Third, young people are concerned about pressure placed on them by their families and teachers.

Our research confirms in part research that was conducted by the Youth Action & Policy Association (YAPA) at the same time that our focus groups were conducted. The young people that were interviewed by YAPA also raised feeling safe and secure in their communities and the desire for more activities and places to go with friends as important issues.

The Commission would like to thank the children and young people who participated in this research and for helping us to learn more about the issues they consider are important in their lives.

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