

Submission

No 7

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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The Committee Manager
Committee on Children and Young People
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000



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A submission by The Smith Family into the Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW

Dear Committee Manager,

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission into the Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW. Over the past ten years, The Smith Family has undergone a comprehensive organisational transformation moving its focus from a welfare-oriented model to one more in line with a leading social enterprise focused on children and education. The overarching purpose of our flagship *Learning for Life* suite of inter-connecting programs is to provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and their families at key transition points (including transitions into employment) throughout the life course. This is achieved through three complementary streams:

- Financial scholarships (which facilitate the participation of disadvantaged children and youth helping them to have the materials needed to allow them to belong in the formal education system from early childhood through primary and secondary school to tertiary);
- Personal Support (which goes hand in hand with financial support and is focused on enhancing the cognitive/academic skills of the individual through formal learning assistance via tutoring, mentoring and coaching); and
- Personal Development (which focuses on developing an individual's social-emotional development through informal learning by participating in extra-curricular activities such as sports and the arts, etc.)

Within these streams *Learning for Life* concentrates on improving essential literacies such as numeracy and comprehension, financial, and ICT.

Our submission into the Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW recognises the Committee's overarching objective of identifying the activities and services which best allow children in these middle years to develop the resilience to take them successfully through adolescence and into adulthood. This submission is concerned with three of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference of particular interest to The Smith Family, namely: (1) the needs of children and young people in the middle years; (2) the extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and disadvantage; and, (4) the extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years.

1) The needs of children and young people in the middle years i.e. between about nine and fourteen years of age.

Children between the ages of 9 and 14 (often referred to as 'middle years') experience a series of significant challenges. It is a stage of life characterised by rapid and pronounced change, for example: puberty; the primary to high school transition; the possible commencement of part/full-time employment; the assumption of heightened levels of family responsibility; greater personal autonomy; and, an escalation in independent

(informal and structured) social interaction. These changes make diverse and complex demands on children, families, teachers and the community.

The elevated levels of self-awareness typically accompanying this period create opportunities to develop crucial life skills such as resilience, confidence and perseverance. However, in unsupported environments and/or disadvantaged settings, heightened self-awareness can provoke and entrench social isolation, reduced opportunity, and potentially cyclic and intergenerational self-esteem problems.

In prioritising the needs of children and young people in the 'middle years', no part of the community is experiencing greater 'needs' as a consequence of inequality and marginalisation than Indigenous Australians.

Poor literacy is one of the most pronounced measures of inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students between the ages of 9-14. Figures for NSW detailed in *The Report on the Review of Aboriginal Education 2005*, reveal that "while many Aboriginal students achieve outstanding results, it is also clear that average measures of performance indicate a significant gap between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers".¹

The report found: "On average, in 2003 many Year 7 Aboriginal students were in the order of 30 to 36 months behind non-Aboriginal students in their reading ability. In addition, 45 percent of the Aboriginal students assessed failed to exceed an elementary level of proficiency in reading compared with 17 percent of non-Aboriginal students."²

School attendance and retention present additional problems, with the rate of Indigenous children leaving school in years 9 and 10 significantly higher than non-Indigenous students.³

With regard to the non-Indigenous population, many children between the ages of 9 and 14 years exhibit low levels of literacy, impeding their ability to successfully navigate crucial transition stages, from primary to high school and, for some, from high school to the workforce. Levels of literacy and numeracy among year 5 (10 year old) NSW students currently sit at approx 93%.⁴ This figure is based on a child's ability to pass a Basic Skills Test and is not an indicator of higher abilities. Socioeconomic factors, culture, location, gender and ethnicity are also recognised as integrated determinants of literacy skills.

2) The extent to which the needs of children and young people in the middle years vary according to age, gender and disadvantage.

2.1) Age: The critical ages of middle childhood are the periods marked by major transition; the most readily identifiable of these transitions is that of the primary-high school progression which typically occurs at age 11 years. Children at this age contend with a major change in their physical environment, accompanied by ongoing pressures on family and communities.

2.2) Gender: The impact of gender differences on 9-15 year-olds is most pronounced in literacy and school retention discrepancies. Nationwide gender discrepancies exist regarding literacy skills tests undertaken in year 3 and year 7. In 2004, "in reading 89 per cent of boys and 93 per cent of girls in year 7 achieved benchmark levels, while for writing tasks, 91 per cent of boys and 96 per cent of girls in year 7 achieved benchmarks."⁵ In 2006, 65.3 per cent of NSW boys continued from year 7 through to year 12, while 75.9 per cent of girls continued.⁶ Again, gender discrepancies

¹ *The Report on the Review of Aboriginal Education*, NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc, Darlinghurst, 2004, p. 3.

² *ibid.*, p. 118.

³ *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁴ "Middle childhood trends in numeracy and literacy, NSW, 1996-2006 (per cent of Year 5 students)", *NSW Commission for Children and Young People* (online), <http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/kidsstats/agegroups/middlechildhood/literacynumeracytrend.cfm>, 2007 (accessed: 21 April 2008).

⁵ "Australian Social Trends, 2006: Boys Schooling", *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, ABS cat. no. 4102.0, 2006.

⁶ "Australian Social Trends, Data Cube: Table 2.1 Education and training, NSW Summary, 1996–2006", *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, ABS cat. no. 4102.0, 2007.

among the Indigenous regarding literacy and retention are more acute than those of the non-Indigenous population.⁷

2.3) Disadvantage: For some children, existing age and gender associated challenges are exacerbated by socio-economic disadvantage. Sociologist Gerry Redmond observes: "Economic disadvantage can lead to [social] exclusion in a number of critical areas, including access to out of school activities and interaction with peers."⁸

4) The extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years.

Shifts in workplace participation, particularly instances where economic pressures compel both parents (or a sole parent) to work full-time, make significant demands on a child's emotional and practical resources. This situation is exacerbated in many low income families where shift-work, erratic working hours, and/or job changes are common. Recent figures reveal "the overall participation rate" of women in the workplace in 2005-06 was 64.5 per cent, while "in 2003, the participation rate for women in Australia with two or more children was 56.2 per cent."⁹ At a stage in which they are gaining greater levels of awareness, many children are forced to abruptly assume heightened levels independence.

The 'home alone' or 'latch key kid' phenomenon is growing, and children aged 9-14 (particularly early high school aged children) typically begin their adaptation to this usually demanding arrangement during this already highly transitional stage of life. While many children cope quite well with this arrangement, it can be a source of great anxiety, particularly when a lone parent or both parents work erratic hours, or, a child is alone without siblings. The absence of support resources for children experiencing event-based stress or developmental issues at school or in other aspects of their lives can also create problems.

Increasing work hours and the concurrent rise in work related stress can also have a detrimental impact on children. Work stress often overflows into the family. Many children feel responsible for their parent's emotions, wrongly assuming they are the reason for heightened levels of stress or conflict. Children typically modify their behaviour to cope with these challenges; however, the impact of these demanding adaptations can be detrimental, eroding a child's ability to exercise positive agency in the home.

In conclusion, The Smith Family recommends the Inquiry examine the needs of children and young people in the 'middle years' in the broad context identified in this submission, yet with particular focus on literacy. Special priority should be given to redressing the lack of activities and services in place to assist young Indigenous Australians in successfully negotiating and excelling through the crucial adolescence-adulthood transition phase.

Yours sincerely



Elaine Henry
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The Smith Family

⁷ "Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators", *Australian Government Productivity Commission* (online), http://www.pc.gov.au/oid/strategic_areas_for_action/positive_childhood_and_transition_to_adulthood, 2007 (accessed: 22 April 2008).

⁸ G. Redmond, "Children's perspectives of economic adversity: a review of the literature", *Social Policy Research Centre* (online), SPRC Discussion Paper No. 149, February 2008.

⁹ *Balancing Work and Family: Report on the inquiry into balancing work and family*, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Family and Human Services, Canberra, 2006, pp. 5-7.