Bridging the Divide:

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR MIDDLE YEARS
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Bridging the divide
Supporting children and young people in their middle years

Final Report

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Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

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About Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Good Shepherd) provides community-based programs, services and research that supports women, girls and children to build their safety and resilience, increase their access to education opportunities and improve their financial security. Good Shepherd strives to make a lasting, positive impact on the lives of women and their families through research into new and emerging social issues.

Our specific expertise is in:

- **Safety and resilience** – supporting women to be resilient provides a buffer between an individual and adversity, allowing them to achieve improved outcomes in spite of difficulties.
- **Financial security** – supporting women to ensure they have access to sufficient economic resources to meet their material needs so that they can live with dignity.
- **Educational pathways** – assisting women and girls to overcome the obstacles in their life that hinder them from achieving their educational/vocational capacity.
- **Outcomes and evaluations** – developing evidence-based program designs across all Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand programs and services.
- **Research, social policy and advocacy** – needs research into emerging issues, identifying effective change interventions for program design, policy analysis and advocacy.

Good Shepherd is part of a global network of services and advocates established by the Congregation of the Good Shepherd, with representation at the United Nations as a Non-Government Organisation with special consultative status on women and girls.

To find out more visit www.goodshep.org.au.

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Children and young people in their middle years (defined here as between the ages of 8 – 12) are being overlooked in policy and program design. Not yet adolescents, but no longer children, these young people are increasingly experiencing complex challenges.

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Good Shepherd) undertook this research to highlight some of these challenges and to identify how to better support this age group. This research included a scoping exercise, a review of recent research literature and the current policy context relating to the middle years cohort,[1] and consulting with a key informant advisory forum – a process that sought insight from a curated group of 43 expert participants representing over 20 cross-sector organisations with experience working with the middle years. Based on this evidence, the report has developed a set of key findings and recommendations in relation to the middle years.

Why this research is important

The 'middle years' are a critical time of development, often setting the trajectory of a person's life course. When children and young people in this age group experience homelessness; are placed in out-of-home care; experience discrimination or stereotyping due to their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status or sexual orientation; are victims of violence; or fail to achieve at school, it can lead to social isolation, poor mental health, and disengagement from school.

Despite the critical nature of these formative years, they are in many ways 'hidden.' When Good Shepherd first started exploring the challenges that children and young people in their middle years experience, through two student scoping projects conducted in 2008[2] and 2011,[3] we found that age-appropriate services are both hard to find and are overlooked as being needed. In the words of one practitioner:

> "I find with the eight to 12 year olds, they're the silent group…The focus is either on the adolescents or the young kids and their behaviours, but the eight to twelves tend to be the children in the middle that aren't displaying a lot of behaviours, they're kind of floating along until they hit adolescence."[4]

One practitioner likened services on offer to babysitting, despite this age group requiring information and guidance for navigating the intricacies of young adulthood, the onset of puberty, transitions into high school, and the increasing complexity of social networking – both online and

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[1] This has been published as a separate document. McGuire, M. (2016). *One Foot in Each World: Challenges and opportunities for children & young people in the middle years.* Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand: Abbotsford. Available at *https://www.goodshep.org.au/media/1434/one-foot-in-each-world_challenges-and-opportunities-for-children-and-young-people-in-the-middle-years.pdf*

[2] Rizza, S. (2008). *Tweenies: To gain an understanding of the service gaps that exists for children between the ages of 8-12.* Unpublished scoping project conducted as part of a Bachelor of Youth Studies, Victoria University.

[3] Close, R. (2011). *Disadvantaged pre-teens and their families: A scoping study for Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service.* Unpublished scoping project conducted as part of a Master's in Social Work, RMIT University.

[4] Ibid.

offline. Perhaps most critically, practitioners said that children and young people in the middle years need safe places to develop their own sense of identity and agency:

> Young people need more social and leisure activities, and spaces that can enable them to speak up so they can develop their own identity and have a chance to make their own decisions. I see young people with a lot of capabilities, but no direction or ability to make important decisions that can have a positive impact on their life.[5]

These scoping projects highlighted that the middle years are being overlooked by virtually everyone. With some isolated exceptions, government policy, programs, practitioners and funding agencies are focussed on either the early years or adolescence.

Literature and policy review

The literature review found that children and young people in their middle years are often deeply attached to family and friends, they are open to new experiences and learning, and often enjoy school and other organised programs. These characteristics mean this is the time of life when children and young people are particularly open to learning how to navigate their world in protective ways, and how to create and sustain positive relationships.

Conversely, the middle years is a time of great transition and upheaval, which is complicated (and at times, enhanced) by the dominance of social media and internet usage. This cohort is increasingly presenting at young people's services with complex issues, which can be driven by gender, socio-economic standing, experiences of family violence or other trauma, and/or having an identity that is Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD). Without proper supports, children and young people in the middle years can start to manifest poor mental health, disengage from education, lose connection with family and friends, and start to engage in risk-taking behaviours.

Key informant forum and workshop

Findings from the policy and literature review formed the basis for a forum, with representatives from the community sector, academia, local councils and education serving as key informants. Together, participants discussed the findings from the report as well as presentations from a range of experts on the challenges and opportunities that children and young people in the middle years represent. The findings from this forum are presented here – in a publication we are calling *Bridging the Divide*, because it's a call to action to better understand this cohort and also to better support them.

Requiring agency and respect

A key theme of the forum findings is one of agency. Children and young people in their middle years are looking for both opportunities and guidance in sharing their views and experiences, as well as in making or contributing to decisions that affect them. In order to do this effectively, they are eager for, and need, appropriate information – including, for example, holistic, age-appropriate sex education. This education should include such topics as gender inequality and stereotyping, respectful relationships, human rights, and body image. In the absence of such information, the

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[5] Ibid.

middle years cohort either fills this gap with unhealthy messaging obtained from 'tween culture,'[6] pornography and other sources, or remains ignorant of very real issues and are unprepared to navigate them when they arise.

Linked to agency is the message of respect. The research indicates that the middle years cohort handles many responsibilities and difficulties. These can include caring duties, providing cultural and linguistic translation for parents, navigating the out-of-home care and homelessness systems, or being subject to early sexualisation and bullying. Supporting this group cannot be done effectively without respecting their experiences and viewpoints, and allowing them spaces and places to safely develop a sense of identity.

Gender

Gender is another important focus of the *Bridging the Divide* report, as the experiences of girls and young women are different to those of boys and young men. Even more concerning, it appears that girls and young women in the middle years are faring less well in key development areas, particularly mental health. This is a recent trend. While it is difficult to identify with certainty why mental health is deteriorating for girls and young women, it may be due to the messaging encoded in 'tween culture,' in which girls and young women are positioned as passive consumers rather than actively engaged in civil society. Added to this is the sexualisation of girls at ever younger ages, and the ready access to pornography which reinforces negative, passive stereotypes about women and girls and – worse still – carries a limiting message about the value of women and girls and condones violence perpetrated against them. And finally, unfounded stereotypes about gendered differences of ability in science and math continue to be perpetuated, which discourages female participation in these critical areas of learning.

Part of a pattern

The findings reported here are part of a greater pattern that is starting to emerge in terms of the experiences of the middle years cohort. In a review that was recently conducted with the Good Shepherd education and counselling services in New South Wales, for example, practitioners reported that they are seeing extremely complex cases and that children as young as eight years old are accessing their services, even though the target population has traditionally been those between the ages of 12 – 18.

Plan International Australia recently published survey findings of 817 Australian girls and young women aged 10 – 17.[7] The responses reinforce the unique difficulties that girls and young women face in Australia. Nearly every person surveyed agreed that girls do not receive equal treatment to boys. Disturbingly, young women's confidence decreases across time, from 56 per cent of 10-year-old girls saying they are confident to only 44 per cent saying they are at the age of 17. Similarly, 75

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[6] Tween culture "has formed, and been formed by…earlier onset of puberty, greater responsibilities in the family and at school, and an increase in personal income… Tweens have emerged as a demographic in their own right as previously adult experiences and interests such as sexuality, popular culture, money, and the occupation of public space are pushed back further and further into youth." Harris, Anita (2005). *In a Girlie World: Tweenies in Australia*, p. 210. In *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*. Claudia Mitchell & Jacqueline Reid-Walsch (eds.). Peter Lang: New York.
[7] Plan International Australia (October 2017). *The Dream Gap: Australian Girls' Views on Gender Equality*. Available at https://www.plan.org.au/~/media/Plan/Documents/Reports/IDG%202017/The%20Dream%20Gap_Final

per cent of girls under the age of 14 indicated they had leadership opportunities, but only 57 per cent of young women 18+ felt this was true for them. When asked what they would like to see change, 50 per cent of girls under the age of 14 wanted gender equality. For those who were slightly older (15 – 17 years), an overwhelming concern – 93 per cent – was being judged by their appearance, rather than their skills, talents and intellect.

Similarly, Women's Health Victoria has recently released *Growing up unequal*[8], focussed on the health outcomes of gender inequality on girls and young women aged 10 – 20. The findings point to gender inequality as the primary driver of physical and mental health differences between males and females in this age group. The way that inequalities manifested were quite diverse: boys and young men, for example, are given more latitude to move around on their own, whereas girls and young women were much more likely to have restrictions placed on them due to safety concerns. Girls and young women do more housework, but are paid less for it, thereby restricting both their time and finances for connecting with their peers. Mental health is significantly poorer for girls and young women in this age bracket compared to their male peers, including rates of anxiety, depression, concerns about body image, and the onset of eating disorders. And finally, girls and young women are at increased risk of poor health outcomes when they are also subject to racism, ableism or homophobia.

It is clear that there are enormous benefits to increasing support for children and young people in the middle years. It is also clear that support must be co-designed; this is a cohort that understands their experiences, wants to be engaged, and is eager to learn how to navigate the world. *Bridging the divide* advocates for supporting the middle years in a way that is enabling and respectful, understanding that the experiences and views of children and young people must remain at the centre.

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[8] Webster, A., Anderson, R., & Barr, M. (October 2017). *Growing up unequal: How sex and gender impact young women's health and wellbeing*. Women's Health Victoria, Issues Paper 12.

Key findings

The key findings for *Bridging the divide: Supporting children and young people in their middle years* are listed here.

1. **There are challenges to navigating gendered social norms.**
   - Girls and young women in their middle years can face particular challenges relating to gender inequality, including early sexualisation and sexual exploitation, violence and issues relating to poor body image.
   - Girls and young women indicate that there is a direct link between lack of holistic sex education (incorporating education on gender equality, respectful relationships, human rights and sexual identity) and poor body image and potential risk-taking behaviour.
   - In recent years, the number of girls and young women with mental health issues has surpassed that of boys and young men, along with an increase in risk-taking behaviours.
   - There is a groundswell of support for promoting the rights and interests of girls and young women. Therefore, it is not just the community sector that is involved. This is a popular people's movement.
   - It is important to help boys and young men interrogate – and redefine – traditional ideas about masculinity and sexuality, including the use of violence and accepting stereotypical ideas about girls and women.

2. **We must involve and respect the experiences of middle years children and young people.**
   o We need to listen to the voices of children and young people and create opportunities for them to tell their own stories, in their own words.
   o It is vital to adopt a strengths-based approach when working with children and young people in their middle years, particularly those who experience intersecting indicators of potential disadvantage, such as having an Aboriginal[9] or CALD background, having disabilities, being homeless or living in out-of-home care. Too often, people overlook the fact that these children and young people often *do* in fact do well and succeed.

3. **The middle years can involve caring responsibilities.**
   o Children and young people in their middle years often take on caring responsibilities in the family. For example, they may have to care for younger siblings or parents.

4. **There are particular needs for Aboriginal children and young people; culture and community are important protective factors.**
   o Aboriginal children and young people in their middle years can experience poverty, discrimination and intergenerational trauma. They are at higher risk of being placed in out-of-home care when compared to their peers.
   o A significant number of Aboriginal girls and young women are at risk of experiencing homelessness after leaving out-of-home care. This puts them at risk of sexual exploitation.
   o Culture and community are important protective factors for Aboriginal children and young people in their middle years.

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[9] We have chosen to use the term Aboriginal given it is the specific experience of Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria which is highlighted in this report.

5. **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) children and young people face specific challenges, particularly if they have recently arrived in Australia.**
   o Identity is a key issue for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The internet has helped facilitate the recognition and adoption of bi-cultural, multicultural and transnational identities.
   o Middle years children and young people who have entered Australia through the humanitarian scheme are likely to have experienced physical or psychological trauma, often with significant educational gaps. As a result, they may have trouble relating to their peers and/or may not be school ready.
   o Children and young people from CALD backgrounds are often placed in the role of cultural and/or linguistic interpreter for older family members. This can cause stress or friction within the family, and may limit the child or young person's ability to fully engage in other activities.
   o Working with families, as well as with the child or young person, is one of the keys to putting CALD children and young people on positive life courses.

6. **Education is a critical issue.**
   o Around one quarter of children and young people in their middle years are not meeting educational milestones. Generally, girls and young women are doing better academically than boys and young men. However, girls and young women are doing worse than their male peers in mathematics, due to a lack of confidence or encouragement.
   o The middle years can be a time when children and young people start to disengage from school. Many children and young people in this age range are struggling with the transition from primary school to high school. For some, their disengagement begins earlier. While there are comprehensive and well-researched frameworks to support early years education transitions, overall the same levels of support are not offered to the middle years.
   o A strengths-based approach to education is important – one that values, and provides future pathways for, a broader range of achievements.

7. **There needs to be more places and spaces for the middle years.**
   o Children and young people in their middle years have reported that they value access to parks, recreation facilities, libraries and public transport. These are critical 'touchpoints' from which to offer programs and support.

8. **Technology, the internet and social media are key influences on children and young people in their middle years.**
   o There are concerns around online safety as well as access to inappropriate content, such as pornography, for children and young people in their middle years.
   o Technological concerns should be balanced against the fact that young people themselves report that the internet opens up opportunities for access to information and the development of social connections.

9. **There are significant gaps in services and support.**
   o The middle years represent a key opportunity for early intervention. This is a period in which children and young people may be most amenable to support.
   o Currently, very few professionals identify as 'middle years' specialists. There is a need to develop expertise for working with this cohort.

o Forging better connections between services will build knowledge and provide better service delivery to children and young people in their middle years.
o There is often a 'funding gap' from the age of 5+ to the teen years.
o Service gaps include targeted activities, clubs, events, mental health services, and support for the transition from primary to high school.
o Intersections of vulnerabilities result in some girls in the middle years being much more prone to violence and sexual assault, and also much less likely to receive justice or appropriate services.
o There is a lack of both federal and state policies to support the middle years.

Recommendations

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand recommends that:

Government and funding agencies

1. State and territory governments should develop evidence-based policies that address the needs of children and young people in their middle years. These policies should adopt a gender lens.
2. Government and funding agencies should prioritise funding of programs specifically designed for children and young people in their middle years.
3. Local councils should further develop public spaces, amenities and programs that are safe, inviting and accessible to the middle years.

Schools

4. Australian schools should continue to develop and implement mechanisms to support students with the transition from primary school to high school, and extend these programs to younger groups that are disengaging early from education (from 8 years).
5. Australian schools should deliver age-appropriate, consistent, holistic, and high-quality sex education (incorporating education on gender equality, respectful relationships, human rights and sexual identity) to primary school and high school students.
6. Australian schools should continue to deliver student-focused education about the internet, which enables students to not only develop their understanding of online safety, but also navigate the opportunities the internet provides for learning and the development of social connections while minimising exposure to harmful or inappropriate content.

Community Sector

7. Community sector organisations should review their service delivery policies with a view to ensuring that all relevant policies are inclusive of the needs of children and young people in their middle years, including the hard-to-reach, those who are from Aboriginal or CALD backgrounds, who experience disability, live in rural and regional areas, have LGBTI+ identities, experience homelessness, are in the child protection system, or live in out-of-home care.
8. Community sector organisations should invest in comprehensive training to ensure practitioners better understand the needs of children and young people in their middle years, particularly those who experience multiple identities or disadvantage, to ensure effective support and appropriate services.

Coordination and mutual learning

9. A coordinating mechanism should be established to increase collaboration across service areas, address research and evaluation gaps, and identify best practice models for working with the middle years.
10. Collaboration across sectors, incorporating community sector organisations, schools, government and local councils, should be focussed on ensuring that services are relevant to the needs of the middle years, including those who are hard to reach.
11. Policy makers, researchers, educators and community sector practitioners should create more opportunities for children and young people in their middle years to voice their opinions in public forums, and to have a say in matters that affect their lives.
12. Further research should be undertaken to inform better service delivery to children and young people in their middle years, particularly girls and young women experiencing disadvantage. Future research should include a focus on prevention and should be informed by the input of children and young people.

⟹ 1. Introduction

With one foot in childhood, and one foot in adulthood, the middle years are sometimes described as an "in between" stage of development. This "in between" status has, too often, led to invisibility as far as service providers and policy makers are concerned. Typically, the efforts of service providers and policy makers focus on children or young people, with little attention directed to those that fall in between. Yet there are good reasons for focusing on the middle years. The middle years represent a period in which protective behaviours can be developed or, conversely, when risk-taking and damaging patterns can emerge. There is also evidence that the middle years are a key period for early intervention. Therefore, investing in the middle years can be a crucial means of steering children and young people towards positive life courses.

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Good Shepherd) has a particular interest in the needs of children and young people in their middle years. This is because the middle years represent an 'emerging' area of need in terms of service responses and policy reform. Good Shepherd is committed to working with, and advocating on behalf of, those members of society who are most marginalised and who fall through the gaps of existing support systems.

To this end, Good Shepherd undertook research to fill these gaps in knowledge.

1.1 Policy context

In Australia, there are a lack of federal and state policies that specifically set out an approach to the middle years.[10] While there are policies for young people and for children, on the whole, polices that specifically address the needs of the middle years are noticeably absent.[11]

One of the few examples of a policy that specifically targets the middle years can be found at a local council level, in the City of Yarra's *Middle Years Strategy 2014-2017*. The strategy has been designed to guide the planning and delivery of services and programs to middle years who live, study and/or visit Yarra. The overarching goals of the strategy are to ensure that:

- middle years children and young people are safe and healthy
- middle years children and young people are connected and valued
- middle years children and young people are engaged in learning
- services are coordinated, responsive and evidence-based.

The strategy sets out specific actions under each of these goals. These actions include: providing diverse opportunities for middle years to learn new skills; working in partnership with schools and community agencies to ensure a coordinated approach to the planning and delivery of services for middle years; and advocating for federal and state policies and programs for the middle years.

In New South Wales, the Advocate for Children and Young People is developing Australia's first whole-of-government strategy for children and young people. The three-year *Strategic Plan for Children and Young People* includes a focus on the middle years (though it is not specifically targeted at this group). The strategic plan will aim to:

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[10] Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 7.
[11] While there is an absence of federal and state policy frameworks relating to the middle years, some educational authorities do have resources relating to middle years schooling. See for example, New South Wales Department of Education and Communities "Middle Years", available at http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/middleyears/.

- result in improved lives for children and young people living in New South Wales;
- cover systemic issues affecting the wellbeing of children and young people and ensuring their participation in the decisions which impact their lives;
- be linked and coordinated with other relevant plans;
- build ownership to achieve change;
- be hopeful and uplifting;
- be tangible, interesting, understandable and repeatable; and
- demonstrate leadership in the way the New South Wales Government intends to work with children and young people.[12]

> *In Australia, there are a lack of state and federal policies that specifically address the needs of children and young people in their middle years. Such policies are required to ensure that the needs of the middle years are recognised, and that they receive appropriate and timely access to education, services and support.*

The New South Wales Government has also developed *Healthy, Safe and Well: A Strategic Health Plan for Children, Young People and Families 2014-2024.* The plan develops a strategy for addressing the health needs of children and young people at all life stages, from pre-conception to young adulthood, and includes a focus on middle years. The plan notes the importance of early intervention, including for the middle years.

This review indicates that there is a significant gap in the policy landscape as far as the middle years are concerned. A more systemic and coordinated policy approach is required to ensure that children and young people are able to access appropriate education, services and support, across their life course. Such policy approaches should adopt a gender lens to ensure that the different needs of girls and young women and boys and young men are taken into account.

1.2 Research questions

The research sought to understand:

1. What is known about children and young people in their middle years?
2. What are the key challenges and opportunities pertaining to children and young people in their middle years?
3. Do certain cohorts of those in their middle years have particular needs?
4. What are the gender dimensions to the needs of this cohort?
5. What are the policy and practice gaps for children and young people in the middle years?
6. How can children and young people in their middle years be better supported?

1.3 Project stages

The research process involved:

- Scoping
- Research and policy review

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[12] Advocate for Children and Young People (undated) "Strategic Plan for Children and Young People", available at http://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/.

- Key informant forum

Stage one: Scoping

In 2008[13] and 2011,[14] Good Shepherd conducted internal consultations with its children, young people and family services practitioners. These consultations explored, from practitioners' perspectives, the particular difficulties that children and young people in their middle years can encounter, and what service providers can do to better address these needs. The practitioners reported that children and young people are presenting at Good Shepherd's services at an increasingly younger age, and with increasingly complex issues. They emphasised that there is a need for more work to be done in this area in order to better understand the issues facing children and young people in their middle years, and what can be done to best support them.

This information was used to inform the research and policy review and enabled gaps in services to be identified.

Stage two: Literature and policy review

A literature and policy review was undertaken to understand what is already known about this group. It was published in 2016 as *One foot in each world: Challenges & opportunities for children & young people in the middle years*.[15]

Stage three: Key informant forum

The findings from the literature and policy review, as well as the experiences and insights of individuals with expertise, were presented on 19 April 2016, at a Victorian cross-sectoral forum titled *Support for Children and Young People in the Middle Years*. It was attended by representatives from the community sector, local councils, education and academia. The forum was an opportunity to consult practitioners about what they saw as the emerging issues for children and young people in their middle years and refine the findings from the literature and policy review about the middle years (contained within this report).

In total, over 20 organisations and 40 individuals accepted an invitation to be involved in the Forum and share their expertise.

Stage four: Final report

All of the data and information gathered throughout these processes was analysed and combined, and forms the basis for this report.

1.4 Methodology

Grounded theory

The project used a grounded theory research approach to gather data about the challenges and opportunities for children and young people in their middle years. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that aims to discover what a phenomenon looks like from the perspective of

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[13] Rizza, S. (2008). *Tweenies: To gain an understanding of the service gaps that exists for children between the ages of 8-12*. Unpublished scoping project conducted as part of a Bachelor of Youth Studies, Victoria University.
[14] Close, R. (2011). *Disadvantaged pre-teens and their families: A scoping study for Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service*. Unpublished scoping project conducted as part of a Master's in Social Work, RMIT University.
[15] McGuire, M. (2016).

key informants in the field. In this case, the project aimed to understand what issues children and young people in their middle years are presenting with, and what the gaps are in service provision for supporting them. This included the perspective of key stakeholders in government, academia, service delivery and education.

Action research

In this project, the 'action' of action research involved holding consultations with practitioners to inform the literature review, and conducting an expert, multi-agency forum to generate additional data. The purpose of the Forum was to workshop the findings from the review, help identify any further gaps, raise awareness of the challenges for children and young people in their middle years, promote collective analysis and action around the issues, facilitate policy change, and encourage positive service initiatives.

1.5 Outline of this report

Section 2 outlines what is meant by the 'middle years' and why it is becoming increasingly important to ensure there is a focus on this cohort. Section 3 investigates the impact of gender – specifically how gendered expectations, early sexualisation, and the consumer 'tweenie' culture is impacting upon boys and girls in their middle years differently.

Section 4 looks at the health and wellbeing of the middle years cohort, and identifies gendered differences. In section 5, we look into the middles years' experiences of violence – including family violence, internet-based violence, and forced marriage. Section 6 looks into educational engagement, and how the middle years is a critical time to ensuring positive educational outcomes. This leads into section 7, in which the service responses (or lack thereof) for this cohort are highlighted.

Sections 8 and 9 document the findings from the key informant forum, highlighting the responses from the experts and the key themes from the workshops.

These findings are brought together in section 10, with a range of recommendations posited to fill the gaps in service and policy for children and young people in their middle years.

▬▶ 2. Understanding the middle years

2.1 What are the middle years?

The middle years are a period in a child's or young person's life that falls between early childhood and adolescence. Children and young people in their middle years are sometimes referred to as "tweens", "pre-teens" or "pre-adolescents". This report has chosen to use the term "middle years" in order to avoid using trivialising and market-driven terminology, and to emphasise that the middle years is not simply a period that comes "before" adolescence. Rather, it is a distinct developmental phase that is accompanied by particular challenges and needs. In addition, "middle years" is the preferred term that has been adopted by recent Australian literature and policy in this area.

In Australia, there is no common definition as to what constitutes the middle years. It has been noted that academics, the education sector and community sector organisations all tend to have different understandings of which age groups fall into the middle years.[16]

For the purposes of this research, the middle years are defined as spanning a period from eight to 12 years of age. This definition is used as it captures the age group that is most likely to fall through the gaps of the existing service system. In addition, it reflects the spectrum of developmental, social and other changes that can be encountered during this period.

> *This report defines the "middle years" as a period that spans from eight to 12 years of age. This is the age group that is most likely to fall through the service gaps, while reflecting the unique challenges and opportunities that are experienced in the middle years.*

2.2 Why focus on the middle years?

Until recently, the middle years cohort has received little attention from service providers, researchers and policy makers. Traditionally, the focus has been on early childhood and adolescence as critical periods of transition and development. However, this focus is slowly starting to change, with increasing recognition of the fact that the middle years is a distinct developmental phase.

Key features of the middle years can include:

- major physical, emotional, neural, cognitive and social development
- the onset of puberty (which, in some cases, can occur as early as eight years old)

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[16] City of Yarra (2014) *Middle Years Strategy 2014-2017*, p 7, available at http://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/services/Family-and-Children-services/middle-years-strategy/; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) *Mapping the Middle Ground: Supporting the Educational Engagement of Young People Aged 10-14 Years. Forum Report*, p 12, available at http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy-publications/publications-listed-by-policy-area/27-education-and-training/46-mapping-the-middle-ground-supporting-the-educational-engagement-of-young-people-aged-10-14-years.

- the development of autonomy and greater independence from parental oversight and control
- changing peer relationships and family and community responsibilities
- the increased importance and influence of peer relationships
- the establishment of key lifestyle choices
- the transition from primary to secondary school
- a period of significant identity formation.[17]

As well as being a period of major developmental and social change, the middle years can be accompanied by heightened risks for this cohort. While many children and young people in their middle years experience good health and wellbeing, others can face significant challenges – including challenges that have traditionally been associated with older adolescents.

2.3 Challenges for the middle years

The challenges encountered by children and young people in their middle years can include:

- disengagement from school
- difficulties transitioning from primary school to secondary school
- bullying
- decline in motivation and achievement
- disengagement from family and/or peers
- experimentation with drugs and alcohol
- increased susceptibility to the effects of alcohol because of major brain developments
- emergence of symptoms of mental health problems
- increased anxiety and low self-esteem
- contact with the criminal justice system
- heightened risk of experiencing violence, particularly for girls and young women (including sexual violence, internet-based violence and forced marriage)
- social and sexual risks associated with the early onset of puberty in girls and young women
- the early sexualisation of girls and young women
- issues relating to gender identity
- the increasing impact of gender inequality.[18]

These findings highlight the increasingly complexity of the challenges faced by this cohort. This is also consistent with practice experience. In a review that was recently conducted with the Good Shepherd education and counselling services in New South Wales, for example, practitioners reported that they are seeing extremely complex cases and that children as young as eight years

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[17] City of Yarra (2014) p 8; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 12.
[18] City of Yarra (2014) p 8; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 12-14; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands (2009) *A Study on Violence Against Girls: Report on the International Girl Child Conference*, pp 17-18, available at http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/violence_girls_eng.pdf; Harris, A. (2005) "In a Girlie World: Tweenies in Australia", *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, ed by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, USA: Peter Lang, pp 209-223, at pp 212-215; Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2011) *Middle Years, Issues Paper Seven*, available at http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/files/IssuesPapers/Issues%20Paper%20-%20Middle%20Years.pdf.

old are accessing their services, even though the target population has traditionally been those between the ages of 12 – 18.

The literature emphasises that the middle years can establish a foundation of behaviours, opportunities and challenges that can impact on school engagement, as well as future occupational and relational success.[19] As Professor Candace Currie has pointed out, it is vital that we examine how we can positively influence the risks, and strengthen the protective factors, for children and young people in their middle years.[20]

2.4 Early intervention

As Currie notes, the middle years are a critical opportunity for early intervention. It is imperative to identify and appropriately respond to problematic patterns and behaviours that emerge in this period in order to prevent these problems from becoming entrenched or escalating in later adolescence.[21]

> *The middle years represent a distinct developmental phase that can be accompanied by heightened risks for children and young people in this cohort. However, the middle years also represent an opportunity for early intervention. With early and appropriate intervention, children and young people in their middle years can develop positive behaviours and attitudes that can influence them in adolescence and adult life.*

It is significant that the middle years, while potentially involving heightened risks, also involves key opportunities to guide children and young people on positive life courses. For example, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has identified specific policy and practice areas relating to the middle years, which, if properly implemented, will help address many of the challenges faced by this group.

On this point, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has identified the need to develop:

- good quality parent/child relationships, to provide a secure base from which the middle years are able to cope with challenges
- an understanding of the increasing role played by peers in the lives of children and young people in their middle years, and how this can be used to promote positive health outcomes, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school
- age-appropriate life skills training and resources (for example, dealing with sexuality, body image, safety, technology, bullying, relationships, drugs and alcohol, etc.)
- the role of teachers with expertise in middle years teaching and learning, as these teachers can be pivotal to children's and young people's successful developmental and educational outcomes

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[19] Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 12.
[20] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast *Measuring the Wellbeing of Children in the Middle Years*, p 7, available at http://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/227.
[21] Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) *The Middle Years: Unchartered Territory? ICRYAN Middle Years Conference Report, 2013*, p 18, available at http://iellen.org.au/images/stories/pdf/middle-years-conference-report-2013.pdf.

- an understanding of the pervasive influence of technology and social media on the lives of children and young people in their middle years and how these tools can be used to promote positive messages relating to relationships, wellbeing, gender, etc.
- support programs specific to the needs and interests of the middle years, with complementary strategies aimed at high-risk and vulnerable groups
- clear policy frameworks, with goals and measures for enhancing the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people in their middle years.[22]

What this makes clear is that children's and young people's pathways are not set in stone. During the middle years, negative developments can occur but, with timely and appropriate intervention, so too can positive developments. This is because the middle years, as well as being a period when problematic pathways can first begin to appear, are a time when children and young people may be most amenable to positive change.[23]

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[22] Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2011) *Betwixt and Between: A Report on ARACY's Middle Years Project*, pp 19-25.
[23] Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008) *Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years in NSW* (Submission), p 4, available at
http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/129f78374f6bccafca2574640 00b7711/$FILE/Submission%20No%2052.pdf.

3. Why gender matters

Much of the emerging body of literature and policy on the middle years adopts a "genderless" approach to the issues at hand. While the literature and policy is better at identifying how traits such as culturally and linguistically diversity and lower socio-economic backgrounds can impact on children and young people, it has been less cognisant of the differences relating to gender. This oversight needs to be addressed. The available evidence on this topic clearly points to the fact that girls and young women can face sharply different—and increasingly complex—issues when compared to those faced by boys and young men. It also emphasises that the middle years is a period when gender inequality can start to noticeably impact on girls and young women.[24]

3.1 Gendered expectations and treatment

Plan International Australia recently published survey findings of 817 Australian girls and young women aged 10 – 17.[25] The responses reinforce the unique difficulties that girls and young women face in Australia. Nearly every person surveyed agreed that girls do not receive equal treatment to boys. Disturbingly, young women's confidence decreases across time, from 56 per cent of 10-year-old girls saying they are confident to only 44 per cent saying they are at the age of 17; similarly, 75 per cent of girls under the age of 14 indicated they had leadership opportunities, but only 57 per cent of young women 18+ felt this was true for them. When asked what they would like to see change, 50 per cent of girls under the age of 14 wanted gender equality. For those who were slightly older (15 – 17 years), a primary concern – 93 per cent – was being judged by their appearance, rather than their skills, talents and intellect.

Similarly, Women's Health Victoria has recently released *Growing up unequal*[26], focussed on the health outcomes of gender inequality on girls and young women aged 10 – 20. The findings point to gender inequality as the primary driver of physical and mental health differences between males and females in this age group. The way that inequalities manifested were quite diverse: boys and young men, for example, are given more latitude to move around on their own, whereas girls and young women were much more likely to have restrictions placed on them due to safety concerns. Girls and young women do more housework, but are paid less for it, thereby restricting both their time and finances for connecting with their peers. Mental health is significantly poorer for girls and young women in this age bracket compared to their male peers, including rates of anxiety, depression, concerns about body image, and the onset of eating disorders. And finally, girls and young women are at increased risk of poor health outcomes when they are also subject to racism, ableism or homophobia.

3.2 Early sexualisation

Haley Kilpatrick, the founder of *Girl Talk* (a peer mentoring program in the United States that pairs middle years girls with secondary school girls), has said that the middle years are:

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[24] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 7.

[25] Plan International Australia (October 2017). *The Dream Gap: Australian Girls' Views on Gender Equality.* Available at
https://www.plan.org.au/~/media/Plan/Documents/Reports/IDG%202017/The%20Dream%20Gap_Final

[26] Webster, A., Anderson, R., & Barr, M. (October 2017). *Growing up unequal: How sex and gender impact young women's health and wellbeing.* Women's Health Victoria, Issues Paper 12.

the years when young girls change from being happy-go-lucky grade-schoolers to really evolving into a self-conscious tween. They have one foot in the world of a child and one foot in the world of a young adult, and they're trying to find their balance.[27]

Finding this balance can be challenging. Girls and young women can be sharply impacted by gendered expectations and stereotypes, including damaging messages relating to body image and early sexualisation. Kilpatrick talks about the impact of these messages:

> She's experiencing growth spurts within a culture that tells girls that being pretty is everything. She's expected to walk the line between looking cute for her parents, pretty to the other girls, and — a totally new thing — hot for the boys. And she's still trying to fit in, all the while hearing contradictory messages from the media, popular culture, and sometimes her family. And she's not even aware on a conscious level that she's engaged in this large-scale juggling act.[28]

An issues paper by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia reports that early sexualisation can have a number of detrimental effects on children.

These include:

- adversely affecting children's cognitive and emotional development
- adversely affecting how children conceptualise gender and sexual roles
- contributing to sexual harassment in schools
- adversely affecting girls' educational achievements and lowering their aspirations.[29]

3.3 Positioning of young women as 'consumers'

Anita Harris notes that early sexualisation can be part and parcel of the so called "tween culture" that is promoted by the mainstream media. Tween culture positions girls and young women in their middle years as sexual, savvy consumers.[30] It is a culture that reproduces the ideal of "white, Anglo girlness". It sends girls and young women mixed messages about their expected social roles by marketing them everything from "children's" toys to "adult" cosmetics. As Harris observes, this type of marketing is aimed at an ever-younger cohort of girls and occurs within the context of an increasingly sophisticated global economy.[31]

Consumerist culture appears to have a greater impact on girls and young women in their middle years than it does on boys and young men in this age group. Haley Kilpatrick, who interviewed more than 100 girls for her book on the middle years, *The Drama* Years, has noted that owning the "right things" is not about status, but rather has become an integral part of "fitting in" for girls and young women. She says that:

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[27] Kilpatrick, Haley, quoted in Healy, Michelle (October 4, 2012), "Girls' Middle-School Years Don't Have to be Drama Years" *USA Today*, available at
http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/wellness/story/2012-04-04/middle-school-drama/54157448/1.
[28] Kilpatrick, Haley with Joiner, Whitney (2012) *The Drama Years: USA*, Free Press, pp 90-91.
[29] Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2012) "Sexualisation of Children", *Issues Paper Nine*, pp 1-2, available at
http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/files/IssuesPapers/Issues%20Paper%20-%20Sexualisation%20of%20Children.pdf.
[30] Harris, Anita Louise (2005) p 210.
[31] Harris, Anita Louise (2005) pp 210-212.

Before we started the book, we thought brand-consciousness, or what I call "materialism madness", was just girls trying to one-up each other about who has what. What we found was that the desire to have these "it" things is really for the girls to blend in. It's not to stand out and say, "Look at what I have."[32]

> *Girls and young women in their middle years can face distinct issues relating to gender inequality and stereotypes, including early and inappropriate sexualisation. They are positioned in 'tween culture' as savvy and sexual consumers, rather than civic participants. More work needs to be done to counteract these adverse influences.*

This positioning of girls and young women as consumers, rather than civic participants, can have adverse impacts on their physical and mental health, wellbeing and educational achievement.[33] It can also adversely impact on how they relate to money, potentially leading to poorer financial outcomes in the future.[34] The pressure to buy the "right things" can be particularly onerous for girls and young women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Clearly, more work needs to be done to counteract the negative effects of this phenomenon, and to give girls and young women opportunities to develop their identities outside of consumerist culture.

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[32] Kilpatrick, Haley, quoted in Healy, Michelle (October 4, 2012).

[33] Harris, Anita Louise (2005) pp 210-212.

[34] A study by WIRE found that women's attitudes towards money are formed during childhood. As girls and young women get older, they feel increasing societal pressure to spend money in order to keep up with consumerism (popular brands of clothing and jewellery and so on). Young women who participated in the WIRE study reported that they wanted to become better managing their money and that they would like to receive financial information specific to their needs and tastes. See WIRE (Women's Information Referral Exchange) (2010) *Young Women and Money: Research Report 2010* available at http://www.wire.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/YoungWomenMoneyResearchReport2010.pdf.

4. Health and wellbeing for middle years

As discussed briefly in the previous section, there are issues particular to the mental health of children and young people in their middle years. These impacts are also gendered, as outlined in this section.

4.1 Mental health and behavioural issues

The middle years are a critical stage in development.[35] They are a period in which health issues can first start to manifest — particularly mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, substance abuse, self-harm and eating disorders.[36]

Children in their middle years can experience the early onset of puberty, which can begin as young as eight years old in some cases.[37] Early onset of puberty is strongly correlated with low socioeconomic households, with a four-fold increase for boys and two-fold for girls;[38] other factors can include high levels of psychosocial stress and obesity.[39]

For these children, there is a complex relationship between the early onset of puberty and mental health. Fiona Mensah and George Patton have reported that poor mental health in children may actually trigger the early onset of puberty. Conversely, the early onset of puberty can in itself trigger emotional and mental health issues.[40] Mensah and Patton examined a cohort of 3,491 children and families from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. Parents in this study reported that their middle years children were exhibiting behavioural difficulties and impaired emotional, social and school functioning. Around 16 per cent of girls and six per cent of boys had reportedly begun puberty between the ages of eight to nine. The study found that boys with an earlier onset of puberty had greater behavioural difficulties and poorer emotional and social adjustment than those boys who had a later onset of puberty. Girls who reached puberty early also had more difficulties in emotional and social adjustment from early childhood, but did not have the increased behavioural problems found in boys.[41] However, girls who experience the early onset of puberty can face other social and sexual risks that stem from gender inequality and stereotypes.[42]

4.2 Gender impacts

Traditionally, it is boys and young men who have been regarded as being particularly at risk of developing mental health issues. However, this pattern has shifted. Candace Currie reports that it is now girls and young women in their middle years who are faring less well than boys and young

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[35] Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2011).

[36] Mensah, Fiona and Patton, George (April 3, 2013) "Growing Up Too Fast: Early Puberty and Mental Illness" *The Conversation*, available at http://theconversation.com/growing-up-too-fast-early-puberty-and-mental-illness-13159.

[37] Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 21.

[38] Sun, Y., Mensah, F. I., Azzopardi, P., Patton, G. C., & Wake, M. (2017). *Childhood social disadvantage and pubertal timing: A national birth cohort from Australia*. Pediatrics.

[39] Kelly, Y., Zilanawala, A., Sacker, A., Hiatt, R., & Viner, R. (2017). *Early puberty in 11-year-old girls: Millenium cohort study findings*. Archives of Disease in Childhood, 102:3, pp. 232-237.

[40] Mensah, Fiona and Patton, George (April 3, 2013).

[41] Mensah, Fiona and Patton, George (April 3, 2013).

[42] Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2011) p 12.

men on most measures of mental health.[43] Unsurprisingly, Currie has also found that girls and young women are more likely to have poor body image when compared to boys and young men. This is concerning given that poor body image can be damaging to girls' and young women's mental health and educational achievement.[44]

Girls and young women in their middle years have also been found to be at a higher risk of developing anxiety and internalising their problems when compared to their male peers. Girls and young women whose anxiety issues are not properly addressed at an early stage have been found to be more likely to experience depression in late adolescence.[45] Indeed, the most recent wave of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) reports that, distressingly, girls aged 14-15 are more than 2 ½ times likely to have thoughts of self-harm than boys, and are nearly four times more likely to inflict harm on themselves. Additionally, they have significantly higher rates of thinking about, planning to, and attempting suicide.[46]

Traditionally, boys and young men have been more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours that can damage their health and wellbeing. However, Currie reports that this pattern has reversed in Western countries. She says that

> this is significant because, it means that girls have got the double burden of mental health issues and risk behaviour issues. So they're both internalising and externalising, which signals something of a concern.[47]

> *The middle years are a period in which mental health issues can first start to manifest. There is evidence that girls and young women in their middle years are now experiencing poorer mental health than their male counterparts. Early intervention is needed to promote better mental health in the middle years, and to decrease the likelihood of mental health problems worsening in adolescence.*

For both girls and young women and boys and young men, risk-taking behaviours are more pronounced when their sense of belonging and connectedness are not strong. The more socially connected this group feels, the lower their risk-taking behaviour.[48] Assisting children and young people to learn how to create and sustain positive, supportive friendships is highly protective for mental health and wellbeing,[49] and may be particularly important for those in the middle years who have a history of trauma – for example, newly-arrived asylum seekers.[50]

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[43] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 7.
[44] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 7.
[45] Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008) p 3.
[46] As reported by Warren, D., Daraganova, G., & Baxter, J.A. *Australian teens doing well, but some still at high risk of suicide and self-harm*. The Conversation, 12 September 2017. Available at https://theconversation.com/australian-teens-doing-well-but-some-still-at-high-risk-of-suicide-and-self-harm-83303
[47] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 8.
[48] Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 21.
[49] Parker, P. D., Ciarrochi, J., Heaven, P., Marshall, S., Sahdra, B., & Kiuru, N. (2014). *Hope, friends, and subjective well-being: A social network approach to peer group contextual effects.* Child Development, 86:2, pp. 642-650.
[50] Oppedal, B. & Idsoe, T. *The role of social support in the acculturation and mental health of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers*. Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 56:2, pp. 203-211.

The literature emphasises that the middle years are a critical period in terms of early intervention as far as mental health is concerned.[51] By providing timely and appropriate support to children and young people in their middle years, we may be able to direct them on a path towards better mental health in adolescence.

4.3 Wellbeing

A national research project is now underway to explore the wellbeing of children and young people in their middle years. *The Australian Child Wellbeing Project* looks specifically at marginalised groups who are in their middle years (a cohort that the project defines as being between eight to 14 years of age). The researchers in the project are speaking directly to children and young people in their middle years to find out what *they* say is important for their wellbeing.

The Australian Child Wellbeing Project has now released its initial findings. These show that children and young people in their middle years prioritise family and friends as being important for a good life. Family and friends have been found to be the top priorities for middle years children and young people in various demographics, including those who are economically disadvantaged, are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, live in out of home care, have disabilities, or live in rural and regional areas. The research also found that children and young people in their middle years report that stress, threats to safety, and bullying are the top concerns that hinder their wellbeing.[52] This project makes a significant contribution to our understanding of wellbeing for the middle years group. Unfortunately, its initial findings are not broken down by gender.

> *Contrary to media representations of the middle years as a sexualised and savvy consumer group, children and young people in the middle years value connectedness, safety and education. Financial security is also a key factor in promoting well-being for this age group.*

The findings from *The Australian Child Wellbeing Project* are supported by evidence gathered by the City of Yarra in Melbourne. In developing its *Middle Years Strategy 2014-2017*, the City of Yarra undertook consultations with early and middle years children and young people and their families in Yarra.[53] Middle years children and young people who took part in these consultations identified that the top three factors that contributed to their ability to lead a good life were:

- family and personal relationships
- personal and public safety
- access to high quality education.[54]

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[51] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 8.
[52] The Australian Child Wellbeing Project 'Research Findings and Resources', available at http://australianchildwellbeing.com.au/research-findings-resources.
[53] City of Yarra (2014) p 8; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 12-14; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands (2009), p 23.
[54] City of Yarra (2014) p 29.

Therefore, while the mainstream media positions the middle years as a savvy consumer group, it appears that children and young people themselves value connectedness, safety and education over materialistic concerns.

This is not to say that money doesn't matter. Children and young people need economic security to fulfil their basic needs. Economic security is also linked to wellbeing. For example, Candace Currie has found that life satisfaction is significantly higher for children and young people who come from more affluent families. Generally speaking, there is a higher correlation between affluence and life satisfaction and perception of health and wellbeing for girls and young women than for boys and young men. Lower socioeconomic status, particularly for girls and young women, means that they are likely to feel that their health is only fair to poor.[55]

Currie reports that, for the middle years, both outcomes and social context are patterned by inequality. This is reflected in the fact that children and young people from more affluent backgrounds report better social relations with their parents — again, this is particularly so for girls and young women. [56]

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[55] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 9.
[56] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 9.

5. Experiences of violence

Girls and young women in their middle years can face a heightened risk of violence. The Australian Personal Safety Survey 2012 found that 32 per cent of girls and young women under the age of 15 have experienced physical or sexual abuse. It is worth bearing in mind that these statistics capture reported cases of violence only and, therefore, the actual prevalence rates may be higher. The survey also found that girls and young women who have experienced abuse before the age of 15 face a greater risk of going on to experience intimate partner violence.[57] Women's Health Victoria reports that younger women (aged 18 − 24) are experiencing significantly higher rates of physical and sexual violence than women who are older.[58]

5.1 Who is at greater risk?

There are some groups of girls and young women who are at particular risk of violence. There is evidence that girls and young women with disabilities experience violence at a higher rate and for longer periods of time than those in the general population. Girls and young women with disabilities can also encounter significantly higher barriers to reporting violence and to receiving appropriate services and justice responses to their experiences of violence.[59]

Immigrant and refugee girls and young women can also face a heightened risk of violence. This can be as a result of their experiences of dislocation, racism, disempowerment relating to age, and sexism from both within their own communities and broader society.[60]

Males are the most common perpetrators of violence against girls and young women. This holds true for both family violence and stranger-perpetrated violence.[61]

> *Girls and young women in their middle years can face the risk of experiencing violence, including sexual violence, internet-based forms of violence and forced marriage. The risk of violence can be heightened for girls and young women with disabilities, and those from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Boys and young men can also be at risk of experiencing violence. Men are the most common perpetrators of violence against girls and young women, as well as against boys and young men.*

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[57] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) "Personal Safety, Australia, 2012" available at http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/A3CBE4BE7E950349CA257C3D000D8677?opendocument.

[58] Webster, A., Anderson, R., & Barr, M. (October 2017).

[59] Woodlock Delanie, Healey Lucy, Howe Keran, McGuire Magdalena, Geddes Vig and Granek Sharon (2014) *Voices Against Violence Paper One: Summary Report and Recommendations* (Women with Disabilities Victoria, Office of the Public Advocate and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria).

[60] Jiwani, Yasmin (2005) "Tween Worlds: Race, Gender, Age, Identity, and Violence" in Mitchell, Claudia and Reid-Walsh, Jacqueline (eds) *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, NewYork: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, at p 175.

[61] VicHealth (2011) "Violence Against Women in Australia Research Summary" available at https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/violence-against-women-in-australia-research-summary; Sinha, Maire (ed) (2013) "Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends" available at http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11766-eng.htm.

5.2 Boys and young men

Efforts to prevent and address violence against girls and young women in their middle years must also consider the impacts of violence on boys and young men. While the majority of victims of family and sexual violence are female, males can also suffer this abuse. This is confirmed by the Australian Personal Safety Survey 2012, which found that 14 per cent of boys and young men had experienced physical or sexual abuse before the age of 15.[62] In some instances, due to entrenched norms around masculinity, sexual violence against boys and young men may not be identified.[63] Men represent the majority of perpetrators of violence against boys and young men.[64] There is also evidence that, in the absence of appropriate support, boys and young men who experience violence can go on to become perpetrators of violence.[65] Therefore, a key strategy for preventing violence against women involves providing timely and appropriate support to both male and female victims.

Research indicates that holding rigid gender stereotypes is a predictor of perpetrating violence against women, and efforts to challenge traditional conceptions of masculinity and the acceptance of gender roles has a positive impact on reducing violence against women.[66] Research conducted by Our Watch, which surveyed 2,000 12- to 24-year-olds, found that a significant portion of young people hold dangerous attitudes about the use of violence in a relationship.[67] This is bolstered by 2013 findings from VicHealth, which found that the attitudinal support for violence against women is higher amongst young people (aged 16 – 24 years) than amongst people aged 35 – 64 years. Their research indicates that amongst young people, 31 per cent held 'high' tolerance for violence against women; for males only it was higher, at 38 per cent. This compares with 22 per cent combined scores for older males and females, or 30 per cent for older males.[68]

This indicates that the middle years is a critical time to promote an understanding of gender equality, healthy relationships, and to address rigid views of gender stereotypes. This is true for both boys[69] and girls.[70] The Victorian Government's commitment to implementing an age-appropriate, holistic curriculum across schools, Respectful Relationships, has great potential to reduce violence against women and girls in the state.[71]

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[62] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012).
[63] UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands (2009) p 125.
[64] White Ribbon "What About Violence Against Men?" available at http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/resources/what-about-men.
[65] UN Women, "Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Causes and Protective and Risk Factors", available at http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/300-causes-protective-and-risk-factors-.html.
[66] Peackock, D. & Barker, G. (2014). Working with men and boys to present gender-based violence: Principles, lessons learned, and ways forward. Men and Masculinities, 15:5, pp. 578 – 599.
[67] Hall & Partners and Open Mind (May 2015). The Line campaign: Summary of research findings. Available at http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/193456465?selectedversion=NBD54841599
[68] Harris, A., Honey, N., Webster, K., Diemer, K., & Politoff, V. (2015). Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey for respondents 16-24 years. Victorian Health Foundation: Melbourne.
[69] Lundgren, r., Amin, A. (2014). Addressing Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence Among Adolescents: Emerging Evidence of Effectiveness. Journal of Adolescent Health, 56:1, pp. S42-S50.
[70] Amin, A. & Chandra-Mouli, v. (2014). *Empowering adolescent girls: developing egalitarian gender norms and relations to end violence*. Reproductive Health, 11:75. Available at https://preview-reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1742-4755-11-75
[71] Kearney, S., Gleeson, C., Leung, L., Ollis, D., & Joyce, A. (2016). *Respectful Relationships education in schools: The beginnings of change*. Final evaluation report. Our Watch: Melbourne.

5.3 Internet-based violence

The internet is now a key tool for learning — both inside and outside of the school. However, the internet can expose children and young people to violent and abusive materials and situations. It can facilitate online solicitation or "grooming" of children and young people for purposes that may lead to exploitation and violence. Cyber-bullying and "sexting", which occur in conjunction with the proliferation of mobile phones, may also expose children and young people to harm.[72] Additionally, easy access to online pornography exposes children and young people in the middle year to negative portrayals of sex and relationships, promoting misogyny and violence against women.[73] The growing influence of the internet is an issue that research and policy makers are still coming to grips with. More efforts are needed to involve the middle years in research, prevention initiatives and education on internet-based violence.

5.4 Forced marriage

Research by Good Shepherd and Domestic Violence Victoria has revealed that some Australian girls and young women are at risk of experiencing forced marriage.[74] Forced marriage is against the law in Australia. Forced marriage is in itself a form of violence and is also accompanied by other forms of violence, such as sexual assault, forced social isolation and economic abuse, and disruption to or cessation of education. Boys and young men can also be victims of forced marriage. However, girls and young women are affected by this problem to a far greater degree and with more intensity. In Australia, there have been reported cases of girls as young as 12 being illegally forced into marriage.[75] Further work needs to be done in Australia to understand forced marriage and to develop appropriate service responses and prevention initiatives in this area.

Available at http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/health/ourwatchrespectfulrelationships.pdf

[72] UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands (2009) p 17.

[73] Lim, M. S. C., Carrotte, E. R., & Hellard, M. E. (2015). *The impact of pornography on gender-based violence, sexual health and well-being: What do we know?* Journal of Epidemiological Community Health. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Megan_Lim/publication/277408461_The_impact_of_pornography_on_gender-based_violence_sexual_health_and_well-being_What_do_we_know/links/56afdc3808ae9ea7c3adacb9.pdf

[74] McGuire, M. (2014) *The Right to Refuse: Examining Forced Marriage in Australia*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service and Domestic Violence Victoria, available at https://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/Right_to_Refuse_final_report.pdf.

[75] Noone, R. (February 10, 2014) "Child Bride, 12, Was Married in Her Father's House", *The Daily Telegraph*, available at http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/child-bride-12-was-married-in-her-fathers-house/story-fni0cx12-1226822034647?nk=ddd665ef03516c4f9f2f5a2b25eda562-1449540827. See also Millar, S. (July 14, 2014) "Girls as Young as Ten Being Forced into Marriage; 14 Million Child Brides Married Every Year" *News Corp Australia Network*, available at http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/relationships/marriage/girls-as-young-as-ten-being-forced-into-marriage-14-million-child-brides-married-every-year/news-story/e3d6841ceaa1dd1494da469d580641ec.

➤ 6. Educational engagement

The middle years are a time when children and young people are at risk of disengaging from education.[76] Girls and young women in particular can begin to change their view of themselves as learners and start to doubt their own potential.[77] Other middle years students who can be at risk of disengagement from school include those:

- from Indigenous backgrounds
- with learning difficulties
- from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- from families under stress
- living in remote locations.[78]

A joint study by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems and Victoria University examines educational opportunities for students in Australia and contains a focus on the middle years. The study reveals that 28.4 per cent of Australian students have not developed the core skills they require to access educational opportunity in their middle years. According to the study, boys are more likely than girls to be below the benchmark for reading at Year 7, but are more likely than girls to meet the Year 7 benchmark for numeracy.[79] These findings are concerning and indicate that more work needs to be done to ensure that students are equipped to meet these crucial educational benchmarks.

6.1 Transition from primary school to high school

The transition from primary to secondary school is reported to be a particularly sensitive period in which students are expected to adapt to two vastly different educational systems.[80] Students move from an educational setting in which they have a close one-on-one relationship with their teacher to a less individually focused system that places more of an emphasis on academic competitiveness.[81] It has been acknowledged that teachers require better support to identify risk

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[76] Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 18.

[77] Blair, Heather (2000) 'Genderlects: Girl Talk and Boy Talk in a Middle-Years Classroom' *Language Arts* 77(4) 315-323 at p 315.

[78] Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion: Every Child, Every Opportunity*, available at https://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/postcomp/effectivestrategiesreportprint.pdf; Campbell, Lea; McGuire, Magdalena; and Stockley, Ché (2012) *I Just Want to Go to School: Voices of Young People Experiencing Educational Disadvantage*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services, available at http://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/I_Just_Want_To_Go_To_School_Executive_Summary. pdf.

[79] Lamb, Stephen; Jackson, Jen; Walstab, Anne; and Huo, Shuyan (2015) *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015: Who Succeeds and Who Misses Out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems and Victoria University, p vi.

[80] Note that the Department of Education and Training in Victoria provides online resources to assist students with the transition from primary to secondary school. See Department of Education and Training (undated) "Moving from Primary to Secondary", available at http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/secondary/Pages/default.aspx.

[81] Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008) p 2; Lamb, Stephen et al (2015) p 15.

factors for educational disengagement among the middle years and to assist with their smooth transition from primary to secondary school.[82]

Researchers and education authorities are undertaking work to explore how to enhance educational engagement among the middle years cohort. For example, Victoria University and the Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley Local Learning Employment Network have produced a report, *Questions of Engagement: Improving the Learning Experience of Students in Years 5-8*. The researchers on this project conducted consultations with middle years students to investigate their motivation and engagement with their schooling. The consultations revealed that there are certain "boosters" that promote and support individual educational engagement, and conversely, certain "guzzlers" that undermine and restrict engagement. These are outlined below.

"Boosters" that promote individual student engagement include:

- self-belief — the idea that effort will lead to success
- valuing school as important
- learning focus — wanting to understand lesson content
- a commitment to planning educational tasks, including revision and study
- persistence.

"Guzzlers" that undermine and restrict individual engagement include:

- anxiety around learning and performance
- failure avoidance (for example, using excuses in order to avoid the chance to fail)
- uncertainty control — where students cannot identify reasons for success or failure
- self-sabotage — lack of application or planning around learning tasks and assessments
- lack of motivation — giving up on school or putting little effort into learning.[83]

The findings of the *Questions of Engagement* report are supported by a large-scale study conducted by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems and Victoria University. The study has found that individual qualities such as persistence, conscientiousness and a sense of self-efficacy as a learner can impact on the educational engagement of students in their middle years.[84]

6.2 Systemic barriers

In addition to these individual factors, students' educational engagement can be adversely affected by systemic factors, as well as factors that are simply beyond their control. Research by Good Shepherd, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services identified that these systemic and "outside" factors can include:

- Bullying and violence at school.
- Unequal access to learning experiences (for example, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often cannot afford to access the same opportunities as their more well-off peers).
- Inadequate learning assistance within and outside of school.

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[82] Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 23.
[83] Victoria University Melbourne and Maribyrnong and Moonee Valley Local Learning Employment Network (2014) *Questions of Engagement: Improving the Learning Experience of Students in Years 5-8*.
[84] Lamb, S. et al (2015).

- Being deprived of a "voice" or consultation about educational needs.
- Not being adequately recognised as an individual with distinct learning and other needs.
- Schools' lack of understanding of the range of issues that students can face (for example, mental health issues, bullying, living in out-of-home care, poverty, abuse from parents).[85]

While the study by Campbell et al dealt specifically with young people, it is reasonable to assume that many of the aforementioned factors could also apply to children and young people in their middle years.

> *The middle years are a time when children and young people are at risk of disengaging from education. Educational engagement can be adversely impacted by individual factors relating to the student, as well as broader and systemic factors that are outside of the student's control.*
>
> *Over a quarter of Australian students have not developed the core skills they require to access educational opportunity in their middle years.*
>
> *Children and young people in their middle years may encounter difficulties in the transition from primary to secondary school. Teachers need more training and assistance to support those in the middle years who are at risk of educational disengagement.*

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[85] Campbell, L.; McGuire, M.; and Stockley, C. (2012) p 21.

7. Service responses

This section outlines the need for services that specifically target the middle years. It sets out principles for good practice that can guide the development of such services. It also identifies a need for services that address the particular needs and challenges of girls and young women in their middle years.

7.1 The need for services for the middle years

Despite the growing evidence that the middle years require formal support, there are significant gaps in services for this group.[86] Traditionally, services have focused on addressing the needs of the early years (zero to eight years) and young people (12 to 15 years).[87] These traditional categorisations mean that children and young people in their middle years often miss out on support at a critical time in their life.[88]

This gap was identified in the report, *Building the Scaffolding – Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, which includes a focus on the middle years. The report confirmed that many local councils and service providers are now finding that much younger children present at young people's services and that this had led to many of them extending services to a younger age group. As one research participant noted in the report:

Youth services are seeing more and more children in [the middle years] presenting with issues that were present for teenagers only a few years back. Youth services and the sector are not adequately resourced to deal with this age group.[89]

Building the Scaffolding indicates that there is a need for services that are specifically targeted at middle years children and young people. Key gaps in service provision for this cohort include the lack of:

- recreational facilities, events, clubs and groups
- capacity to support middle years with challenging behaviours and specialist mental health needs
- targeted mental health services
- support for the critical transition between primary and secondary school
- support for children with disabilities
- early intervention programs, such as anger management, conflict resolution and behavioural management programs
- parenting programs for parents of the middle years
- programs that address the specific cultural needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- programs that address the different needs of girls and young women, and boys and young men.[90]

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[86] Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 9.
[87] City of Yarra (2014) p 3.
[88] Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 7.
[89] Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding—Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, p 67.
[90] Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding—Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, p 68.

In each case, services and programs for the middle years should have an underlying focus on prevention and early intervention. As this report has discussed, the middle years are a crucial period when risks can be identified and addressed at an early stage.[91] The identification and response to early warning signs (such as disengagement from school) are crucial to preventing more serious problems later on.[92]

> *Traditionally, services have focused on the needs of the early years and young people. Consequently, there are significant gaps in services for the middle years group.*
>
> *Young people's services are now seeing increasingly younger children present at their services, with increasingly complex problems.*

7.2 Principles for good practice

More evidence is needed about "what works" in terms of service delivery to children and young people in their middle years. Currently, there is very limited research available about age-appropriate, best practice models for providing services to this group. Work also needs to be done to develop a common, cross-sectoral approach to the middle years that can be shared between children's, young people's and family services, and schools.[93]

While there is a lack of evidence in this area, the literature does offer general principles that can provide a starting point for designing and implementing services for the middle years. These principles indicate that there is a need for:

- age appropriate programs that are specifically targeted at the middle years
- service and educational staff who are trained to work with the middle years cohort
- services that address the family context of the middle years
- better integration between family and young people's services
- services that address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse middle years
- services that take into account the different needs of girls and young women, and boys and young men in their middle years
- services and programs that focus on prevention and early intervention initiatives for the middle years by supporting healthy development and addressing the risk factors that contribute to adverse outcomes.[94]

The literature also emphasises that a collaborative and inclusive approach to the planning and delivery of new services and programs is required to ensure that they are evidence-based, localised and responsive.[95] More specifically, the report, *Tweens & Teens, Support for the Middle Years*, notes that in order to plan effective services for the middle years, it is necessary to:

- conduct research and scan the environment to identify local needs

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[91] City of Yarra (2014) p 9.
[92] City of Yarra (2014) p 9.
[93] Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 10.
[94] City of Yarra (2014) p 9.
[95] City of Yarra (2014) p 9; Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 7; ARACY Webcast Measuring the Wellbeing of Children in the Middle Years, p 7.

- conduct consultations with middle years to find out what kinds of programs they would like made available to them
- incorporate feedback from the middle years cohort and the evidence of best practice when developing programs
- investigate what partnerships need to be put in place
- consider how to monitor and review programs
- consider how to promote and report on programs.[96]

> There is a need to develop evidence-based, age-appropriate services for the middle years cohort. Effective service planning should involve consultations directly with children and young people themselves.

7.3 Services for girls and young women

This report has identified a particular need to address the challenges faced by girls and young women in their middle years. There is evidence that girls and young women in their middle years are now faring less well than their male counterparts in terms of mental health and risk-taking behaviours.[97] They can face particular challenges in relation to low self-esteem, poor body image, and experiences of violence. Girls and young women who disengage from school at an early age are also at particular risk of facing financial hardship in later life.[98] This is because, without a sufficient education, they can bear the brunt of the stark economic inequalities that continue to exist between Australian women and men.[99]

However, there is hope. While the research in this area is limited, there is evidence that early intervention can be effective.

One of the few large-scale support programs that targets girls and young women in their middle years is *Girl Talk* in the United States. *Girl Talk* is a peer mentoring program designed to help girls and young women in their middle years to develop self-esteem, build leadership skills, and recognise the value of community service. As part of this program, young women in secondary school are trained to become mentors to girls in their middle years. An evaluation of *Girl Talk* found that mentees reported that their participation in the program resulted in tangible benefits. Mentees said, for example, that their participation in the program improved their:

- self-confidence
- ability to make healthy choices

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[96] Waverley Council (2011) Tweens & Teens, Support for the Middle Years: Supporting Young People's Connection to Activities Project (SYPCAP) p 8.

[97] Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 9.

[98] Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding—Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, p 41.

[99] Australian women, on average, earn 18.2 per cent less than Australian men, and retire with less than half the superannuation balances and payouts of their male counterparts. See Workplace Gender Equality Agency (May 26, 2014) 'National Gender Pay Gap Rises to 18.2%', available at https://www.wgea.gov.au/media-releases/national-gender-pay-gap-rises-182; McGuire, Magdalena (2013) 'Show Me the Equality: Women, Economic Security and Human Rights', *Good Policy* p 11 available at http://www.goodshepvic.org.au/Assets/Files/GoodPolicy%20Dec_2013_04_02.pdf.

- leadership skills
- school grades and study habits
- ability to get along with their families
- ability to deal with peer pressure
- courage to say "no" to risky behaviours such as using drugs, smoking and drinking alcohol.[100]

The evaluation also found that the program had positive benefits for the young women who were mentors (and middle years girls who take part in the program as mentees are encouraged to consider going on to become mentors when they are in high school). Young women who were *Girl Talk* mentors reported that the role improved their:

- public speaking skills
- leadership skills
- confidence and self-esteem
- interpersonal skills
- organisational skills.

Many of these young women said that, while being a *Girl Talk* mentor was a big responsibility and time commitment, they enjoyed the role, and particularly enjoyed feeling that they were making a positive difference to someone else's life. They also said that being a role model meant that they were more mindful of their own behaviour and the example they set for younger girls.[101]

> *There is a need for services and programs that address the particular challenges faced by girls and young women in their middle years. There is some evidence that peer mentoring programs can be effective with this group.*

Haley Kilpatrick, the founder of *Girl Talk*, has emphasised the importance of identifying what girls and young women can do to help themselves and each other. She says that:

> there are three things girls can incorporate into their lives that don't require too much time or a lot of money, but they help with the challenges girls face. They help keep girls' minds off the drama and also serve as a source of confidence and validation. Each of these is invaluable, but when they're used in tandem, they can be transformative.

According to Kilpatrick, the three things that, if put in place, can greatly assist girls and young women in their middle years, are:

- **An Anchor Activity.** This could be a sport, a musical instrument, theatre, art classes, babysitting, a school club, environmental activism, and so on. The activity simply needs to be something that the girl or young woman actively enjoys and that takes place outside of school so that she has a break from its "drama" and social pressures.

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[100] Century Council (2013) *Girl Talk Program Evaluation Research Report* [mentees] pp 5-12 available at http://responsibility.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Girl-Talk-Evaluation-Report_Middle-school-participants_FNL2.pptx.

[101] Century Council (2013) *Girl Talk Program Evaluation Research Report* [mentors] pp 3-14, available at http://responsibility.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Girl-Talk-Evaluation-Report_High-school-leaders_FNL-2.pptx.

- **A Helping Hand.** This is the chance for the girl or young woman to be a part of something larger than herself, to connect to a larger world, to instill gratitude for what she has, and to allow her to see the reality of others' lives. This could be a weekly or monthly volunteer commitment. However, Kilpatrick notes that the emotional gains that volunteering offers are much deeper if the volunteering is a regular priority, not just a one-off activity.
- **An "Adopted" Older Sister.** This is a positive role model that the middle year girl or young woman can look up to. According to Kilpatrick, it is "someone who's recently been in [the] girl's shoes and can both relate to her, so she doesn't feel as alone, and advise her on how to handle whatever she's going through."[102]

The middle years has not traditionally been recognised as a critical transition time, which has led to a dearth of suitable programs and supports and the funding and policy strategies to sustain them. Children and young people in the middle years face many points of transition, increasing interface with an adult world, and the onset of puberty. When layers of greater disadvantage of multiple identities overlap with these issues, there is increased risk for disengagement with school and healthy relationships and an uptake in risk-taking behaviours. However, the middle years are also unique in their openness to experiences and commitment to friends and family, which makes this cohort particularly well-placed to benefit from thoughtful programs that incorporate best practice models and input from children and young people themselves.

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[102] Kilpatrick, Haley with Joiner, Whitney (2012) pp 30-31.

8. The response from experts

Given that understanding the needs of children and young people in the middle years is an emerging issue in Australia, the *Support for Children and Young People in their Middle Years* forum adopted an exploratory approach to this issue. The cross-sectoral forum brought together a range of professionals in a collaborative environment to learn and share knowledge about the middle years (see Appendix One for the forum program). These included representatives from community services, culturally and linguistically diverse services, Aboriginal services, homelessness services, out-of-home care services, government, local council, academia, schools and Local Learning and Employment Networks. Please see Appendix 3 for a full list of organisations and agencies in attendance.

The forum included a range of presentations from practitioners who work in the community sector, local council and academia. These presenters are listed below in their order of appearance.

- Dimity Fifer, CEO, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Magdalena McGuire, Researcher, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Zoe Condliffe, Campaigns Officer, Plan International Australia
- Kathy Landvogt, Head of Women's Research, Advocacy and Policy (WRAP) Centre, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (as MC)

There presentations are found at Appendices Two, Three and Four.

There was then a panel discussion involving:

- Garry Miller, Principal Practitioner, Child Protection, Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria
- Sue-Anne Hunter, Program Manager of Aboriginal Children's Healing Team, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
- Jen Jackson, Research Fellow, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University
- Rupert North, Coordinator Youth and Middle Years, City of Yarra
- Soo-Lin Quek, Knowledge and Advocacy Manager, Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY).

In addition to hearing from the presenters, the forum participants had the opportunity to engage in workshop discussions to share their knowledge about children and young people in their middle years.

This section highlights the key themes from the presentations and panel discussions.

Aboriginal children and young people

There are distinctive needs for middle years Aboriginal children and young people that must be considered when developing policy and programs. Participants highlighted that some of these that should be considered are:

- Aboriginal children and young people are at a higher risk of being placed in out-of-home care when compared to other children and young people. This is because of the disadvantages that they face, including poverty and discrimination.
- It is vital to foster a rich cultural life for Aboriginal children and young people and to maintain their connections with family and community when they live in out-of-home care.
- A significant number of Aboriginal girls and young women are at risk of leaving out-of-home care and experiencing homelessness. This puts them at the risk of sexual exploitation.
- It is important to engage with older Aboriginal girls and young women and ask them what type of supports they would have liked to receive when they were younger.
- VACCA prefers to place Aboriginal children in schools with a high proportion of other Aboriginal children. This is because they do better academically and emotionally in a more culturally-welcoming environment.
- Intergenerational trauma can be a significant problem for Aboriginal children and young people in their middle years. Families need to be included in addressing these issues.
- As a result of colonisation, there has been an emphasis in Aboriginal communities on survival rather than education. This means that getting families involved in their children's education can be a challenge. Parents may have also experienced trauma and discrimination as part of the education system, which places another level of complexity that needs to be worked through. It is important that schools develop specific strategies to include family and community in education for Aboriginal children and young people.
- It is important to keep Aboriginal children and young people connected to culture and community. Culture is a protective factor for Aboriginal children and young people.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse children and young people

Coming from a culturally diverse background and/or having English as a second language presents unique challenges and opportunities for working with the middle years cohort. Participants identified some these critical factors as:

- Engaging with families is the key to putting children and young people from CALD backgrounds on positive life courses.
- Identity is a key issue for children and young people from CALD backgrounds. They may have bi-cultural or multicultural identities, with some stating they have 'a foot in each camp', culturally speaking.
- The growth of the digital age has contributed to the emergence of transnational identities. For example, there may be a Lebanese girl who was born in Australia who does not identify with girls here, but with girls in Lebanon. The internet has facilitated this exchange of information.
- While all girls can be affected by so-called white 'tween' culture, girls from CALD backgrounds may be particularly negatively impacted by it. They may ask: 'What can I do to fit into the idealised image of a girl?'

- The Centre for Multicultural Youth works with children and young people who have come to Australia though the refugee and humanitarian program. These children and young people are more likely than others to:
    o have witnessed or experienced violence,
    o have a history of disrupted or inadequate schooling,
    o lack social connections and feelings of belonging,
    o have caring responsibilities,
    o experience compromised feelings of safety, and/or
    o come from fragmented families.
- As a result of what they have been through, a lot of these children and young people have quite adult outlooks. Many, particularly girls and young women, have experienced or witnessed violence. Due to these traumatic experiences, they may have difficulty relating to their peers at school, and struggle to have a sense of belonging. They can fear for their safety in public places, schools and in the home.
- Families have often been split up. If there is no father present, a male child may take over as the head of the family. At times this leads to the use of male adolescent violence in the home, if the son takes on the perceived characteristics of the 'male head' in the family.
- Younger members of the family also often provide language and culture translation services to parents or other adults, helping them to navigate the various systems and agencies to access support.
- It is important to create spaces for CALD children and young people in their middle years to tell their own narratives. CMY supports children and young people who are aged 12-25 years to develop the skills to tell their stories in public forums.

Education

The middle years represent a key milestone in terms of education. Research by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems indicates that 28 per cent of children and young people in their middle years are not meeting educational milestones.[3] If children and young people in their middle years are not performing well academically, this adversely impacts on their self-confidence. Some of the key considerations outlined by participants in relation to education pathways for children and young people in their middle years are:

- It was noted that this research is limited in that it only drew on available data such as the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data. Measures such as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) are not available for the middle years. Effectively, this means that middle years' developmental gaps can remain hidden.
- Generally, **girls and young women are doing better than boys and young men academically**. However, girls and young women are doing worse than boys in mathematics, due to lack of confidence or encouragement from adults or peers, which is often grounded in gender stereotyping. This is concerning because, without these numeric skills, girls are cut off from some career paths.[103]

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[3] Lamb, S., Jackson, J., Walstab, A., and Shuyan Huo, S. (2015) *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015: Who Succeeds and Who Misses Out.* Centre for International Research on Education Systems: Melbourne. Available at www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/reports/educational-opportunity-in-australia-2015-who-succeeds-and-who-misses-out/.

[103] Ibid.

- The middle years is a period when young people transition from one school to another. Appropriate support during this transition – or in fact, earlier that that – is critical to keeping children and young people engaged in their education.
- Children in out-of-home care can struggle in the education system, and the transition from primary school to high school are particularly difficult. Often, there is a need to 'play catch up' around the middle years, with many children disengaging by Years 5 to 7.
- A strengths-based approach to education is important, as some of the measures for educational outcomes are quite narrow. It is important not to valorise particular educational pathways, as this can obscure the achievements of children and young people who might not be academically inclined, but are nonetheless contributing value to their communities. This recognition of broader possible pathways needs to start in the middle years.
- There are transitional issues for children moving from primary school (where they are usually quite well supported) to high school. There needs to be better communication between primary and high schools. There also needs to be better links between support services and schools.
- Overly rigid rules such as 'three strikes and you're out' can trip children up, causing irreparable damage. There needs to be more opportunities for children and young people to have another chance. In this respect, it is important to make the system fit the child, rather than forcing the child to fit the system.

Education about sex and relationships

An essential element of preventing family violence and to ensuring young women's sexual health is access to appropriate information and education about sex and safe relationships. Participant's highlighted the following in relation to this theme:

- There is a tendency to neglect age-appropriate sex education programs for children and young people in the middle years, as many educators and other professionals are uncomfortable or afraid of doing so. Professionals can be concerned that the middle years are too young for sex education, and that sex education will 'put ideas in their heads', resulting in children and young people engaging in risky sexual behaviours. However, forum participants stated that this is rarely the case. Children and young people in their middle years have expressed a need for a holistic approach to sex education, incorporating positive relationships and positive body image. A thoughtful, age-appropriate policy response is needed.
- Appropriate, thoughtful sex education will also reduce the reliance on pornography and other unreliable or damaging sources of sex information by children and young people.

Child Protection

Many children and young people in their middle years with particular vulnerabilities are involved in the Child Protection system. This system is thus critical to supporting this cohort. Participants highlighted:

- Good Shepherd's *One Foot in Each World* report highlights some of the issues that child protection practitioners struggle with every day, including the sexualisation and sexual exploitation of children and young people.
- In primary school, children under child protection can form attachments to their teacher. This may not be the case in high school.

- Often, people lose sight of the fact that children and young people under child protection *do* in fact do well and succeed. Too often, the focus is on the crisis and not on the capabilities and strengths of the child or young person.

City of Yarra initiatives

There are few, specific strategies in place to work appropriately with children and young people in their middle years. One that was highlighted, however, was that developing by the City of Yarra, a local government area in Victoria. These included:

- There was a recognition that significant investments had been made in both the early years and for young people, with fairly well developed policies for these age groups. However, the council area included 2,500 children and young people in their middle years who were not captured by council's children's or young people's policies.
- During the course of developing the policy, the City of Yarra consulted children and young people directly. Children in their middle years reported that parks, recreation facilities, public transport and libraries were important to them. However, there were significant barriers to participating in local programs, including the costs of these programs and the lack of age-appropriate facilities. In addition, children and young people identified safety concerns in public places, including violence and public drunkenness.
- It is important to develop places and spaces that are inviting and accessible to the middle years. For example, a traditional playground is not appropriate for this age group, and yet neither are youth-friendly spaces. The City of Yarra has developed an 'adventure playground' that is targeted at the middle years. They have produced a video, *Reversing the Telescope*, in which they attended the adventure playgrounds around Melbourne and interviewed children and young people in their middle years about their experiences.[104] Libraries are also a space that can run age-appropriate activities for the middle years, such as homework classes.

Caring duties

An emerging theme was that of those in their middle years also acting as carers. Many children and young people in their middle years are responsible for younger siblings. During the school holidays, libraries are overwhelmed with children and young people coming in with younger children in their care. Often, they stay at the library until the evening.

Early intervention

The middle years are a key opportunity for early intervention. Children and young people in their middle years 'are like sponges'. Zoe Condliffe found that, when implementing support programs in Cambodia, the younger girls were very receptive to the new programs, whereas the older girls were more reserved.

Developing the skills of professionals and carers

There is a need to develop the expertise of practitioners who work with the middle years. Currently there is a lack of training for practitioners who work with the middle years, and this is not

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[104] City of Yarra (2013). *Reversing the Telescope*. Available at www.vimeo.com/62328652.

recognised as an area of expertise. There are 'children's workers' and 'youth workers', but no 'middle years workers' as such, which was identified as gap. The ways in which this could be realised, as outline as panel participants were:

- Teachers and other professionals need to understand how overlapping identities can increase vulnerability or marginalisation for some populations. For example, it's important to understand the specific needs of Aboriginal and CALD children and young people, or those with a disability, or those who are in out-of-home care. Practitioners should not lower their expectations of these children and young people but rather understand how these intersections influence how they might engage and the barriers they might experience.
- Training on how to work with trauma is important for professionals working with the middle years.
- Sometimes practitioners can be overwhelmed by the problems they encounter for children and young people, and they do not know where to get help. Better communication between different services would help address this.
- Professionals need to prioritise the voice of children and young people, particularly as it pertains to their own situation and wellbeing. Panellists identified that something as simple as checking in with the child or young person to see how they are going is often neglected.

Technology and social media

The rate of technological change is very rapid, including social media platforms and use. Out-of-home carers struggle to keep up with technological and cultural changes facing children and young people in their middle years. Participants highlighted that:

- Assistance should be provided those in their middle years, and the people who support them, to navigate changes in technology and social media.
- Social media and digital devices are a key influence on children and young people. Often, adults may try to take control of their children's access to the internet and to technological devices such as computers and phones; however, this can be difficult, and may have negative consequences, such as social isolation.
- Plan International Australia has undertaken consultations with girls about digital safety. The overriding response was that adults had a tendency to overact about digital safety. The girls that were consulted said that, from a young age, they have been told about cyber safety, and that internet access allowed them to learn about other things. The girls recognised that the internet opens up a space where anyone can be harassed or bullied. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the internet can enable children and young people to expand their horizons, offering access to information and connections with their peers.

Poverty

Poverty has enormous impacts on the development of children and young people, and therefore needs to be central in discussions about the middle years. It is important to be aware of the ways in which poverty intersects with issues for children and young people from hard-to-reach groups, including those from Aboriginal or CALD backgrounds, and those who experience disability, live in rural and regional areas, have LGBTI identities, experience homelessness, are under child protection, or live in out-of-home care.

Gaps in services

Consistent with the findings from the initial practitioner conversations in 2008, panel participants highlighted the gaps in services for the middle years. They highlighted:

- Too often, the middle years fall through the gaps of existing services.
- There is often a lack of funding for programs targeted at children and young people between the ages of 5 and the teen years. There is also a lack of frameworks in how to work with this age group.
- VACCA is seeking to make contact with young people who are about to leave out-of-home care, particularly young women, in order to find out what challenges they faced when they were younger. This will give VACCA a better idea of the gaps in services. It is important to identify and understand the gaps, even if it is just internally, in order to better address them.

Research and evaluation

Finally, there is a lack of research about the middle years. It is important to do more research in this area, and to evaluate 'what works' for this age group.

9. Workshop outcomes

This section of the report provides a summary of the small group workshop discussions relating to the middle years (see Appendix Five for workshop discussion questions and Appendix Six for the list of organisations that participated in the workshops).

Definition of the middle years

There was discussion about what was meant by the 'middle years'. Specifically:

- Some people queried whether 8 to 12 years of age was an appropriate definition of the 'middle years'. They raised the point that younger children also present with complex issues, and that these younger children are also falling through the gaps of existing services. It was suggested that children as young as five years old can be regarded as being in their middle years.
- People emphasised the importance of devising and using a consistent definition as to what constitutes the middle years. Currently, there is no agreed-upon term for this group, and, as one participant pointed out, 'no one feels it is their area of expertise'. The lack of a consistent and recognisable definition of the 'middle years' contributes to the invisibility of this cohort.

Education

Consistent with other findings, participants highlighted the importance of education. Key observations were:

- Teachers have a role to play in identifying children and young people in their middle years who are at risk of difficulties such as educational disengagement.
- It is important to think about ways to build resilience in children and young people in their middle years in order to better assist them with the transition from primary to high school.
- Unlike primary school, there are too few mechanisms in place in high school to engage with parents.
- Students with disabilities can encounter unique difficulties in the education system, particularly during the transition period.
- It would be helpful for mainstream schools to explore and understand how programs targeted at the middle years have operated in schools that have trialled them.
- The Victorian Auditor General has produced a report on education transitions. The report found that, while the Department of Education and Training had implemented a comprehensive and well-researched framework to support early years education transitions, the same levels of support were not offered to the middle years. Additionally, the report found that the educational outcomes for middle years students are mixed. It recommended that better support systems be put in place for middle years students to assist them with their education transitions. Students with disabilities, from CALD backgrounds, and from Aboriginal backgrounds were in particular need of support.[105]
- After-care and holiday-care programs can be a natural gateway to engaging with children and young people in their middle years, providing opportunities to have critical

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[105] Victorian Auditor-General (2015). *Education Transitions*. Available at www.audit.vic.gov.au/publications/20150318-Education-transitions/20150318-Education-transitions.pdf.

conversations with them. These programs also provide spaces in which practitioners could engage in meaningful learning and leisure activities with and for children and young people in their middle years.

- It is important when looking for ways to better support children and young people in their middle years to not to place too much pressure on schools. Schools are often seen as a 'one stop shop' for solving problems for children and young people. The expectations of schools are, perhaps, too high. Other spaces need to be created in which children and young people are offered support outside of the school setting.

- It could be helpful to have a middle years 'champion' within each school who could ensure appropriate, targeted supports are provided for this cohort.

- Parent engagement in children's education is a key protective factor for students in their middle years.[106]

- Some examples of good practice in education include:
  - o The Berry Street education model, which seeks to integrate practice which improves wellbeing into everyday academic instruction. This includes ensuring that the position descriptions of teachers reflect this more holistic approach.
  - o The City of Port Phillip and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's collaborative practice framework. The framework is underpinned by a literature review, and builds on trusted relationships between stakeholders.
  - o Mahogany Rise Primary School program assesses the vulnerability of children who are entering school. The school then partners with local services to deliver support to these children before they start primary school.
  - o Doveton College has a community school hub, early learning centre, and other supports for students from prep to year nine. The college places an emphasis on parental engagement.
  - o Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) have trialled a middle years development index, a government initiative which is a self-report tool on the five dimension of social and emotional development, connectedness, school experiences, physical health and wellbeing, and constructive use of after school time. Survey results can assist schools to identify where there are areas that need addressing across the student population, or the need for more targeted supports.[107]
  - o The Inner Northern LLEN also ran the Joining the Dots project between 2012-2017, designed to identify and support best practice in primary- to secondary-school transitions in the City of Yarra.[108]

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[106] Good Shepherd has conducted research about parental engagement in schools: Maury, S. (2013). *Uplift: An empowerment approach to parent engagement in schools*. Available at http://www.goodshep.org.au/media/1224/uplift_report.pdf.

[107] See Middle Years Development Institute Australia. *Students' Wellbeing: Results from the Middle Years Development Instrument, Whittlesea cohort, Year 8 (2014 cohort).* Availabe at http://inllen.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Victoria-Whittlesea-Group-Cohort-Yr-8.pdf

[108] See http://inllen.org.au/joining-the-dots/

Homelessness

Participants highlighted that it is important to think about the needs of children and young people in their middle years who are homeless, or who are at risk of homelessness. Homelessness affects children and young people at an increasingly younger age.

- For example, children as young as 11 years old are now couch surfing because they do not have a stable home. Additionally, homelessness amongst families – especially single-parent families – is on the rise.[109]
- Educational disengagement is a major challenge for children and young people experiencing homelessness. Research indicates that, despite experiencing homelessness, parents can be highly attuned to how important education is for their children. Homeless parents are committed to maintaining school stability for their children. Participants estimated that one school move can result in six months of educational disadvantage for homeless children.
- In practice, the basic survival needs of homeless children often need to be met by schools that are not necessarily resourced to provide these additional supports.

Strengths-based approach

There was a consistent theme that when working with children and young people in their middle years, it is important to adopt a strengths-based approach. When discussing this, it was highlighted that:

- This approach posits the idea that all children and young people have the capacity to thrive and to experience healthy development. It seeks to identify and maximise resources that already exist in the child's environment.
- A strengths-based approach reminds us that the person is not the problem.
- Practitioners should ask children and young people what they think the solutions are to the problems they are facing in their lives.
- Practitioners working from a strengths-based approach should build trust with the child or young person, be consistent, and refrain from attempting to 'push too fast too soon'. It is important to let the child or young person drive the relationship as much as possible. Part of this involves ensuring that the child or young person is involved in decision making as much as possible. Children and young people should also be made aware of their rights and responsibilities.
- It is important to be aware of power imbalances between adults and children or young people and take practical steps to address these differences. For example, sitting down to talk to the child or young person at their level rather than standing above them is a physical cue of respect rather than dominance.

Families

In supporting this cohort, support must also be targeted to the families of the middle years. Specifically:

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[109] See Homelessness Australia (January 2016). *Fact Sheet: Homelessness and Children.* Available at http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/sites/homelessnessaus/files/2017-07/Homelessness_and_Children.pdf

- Children and young people need adults who are positive role models and supportive mentors to help them make sense of the world.
- Families of children and young people in their middle years need better supports, particularly those families from marginalised or at-risk backgrounds.
- Caring issues are key for many children and young people in the middle years cohort. Participants emphasised that if practitioners are seeking to engage middle years children and young people in their programs, they have to be open to younger siblings attending as well. While Carers Victoria, for example, work with young people who are carers, many middle years young people and children do not identify as carers, even though they have caring roles.
- The critical role of families and communities in the lives of middle years children and young people is also highlighted The City of Yarra Middle Years Strategy.[110]
- Families and friends of children and young people in their middle years play a key role in maintaining their wellbeing. Practitioners need to take this complexity into account when working with the middle years cohort.

Early Intervention

The middle years is a critical time to developing protective behaviours. This was because:

- The middle years is a period when children and young people are receptive to new information and ideas. This openness can dissipate as young people enter their teen years.
- Primary school represents an opportunity for early intervention with middle years children. Currently, this opportunity for early intervention is not being capitalised on.

Girls and Young Women

When discussing challenges and opportunities for children and young people in their middle years, participants outlined that:

- Girls can develop body image issues as young as 8 years of age. It is important to enable girls and young women to foster healthier attitudes to their bodies.
- Girls and young women in their middle years often have different experiences of school to those of their male peers. They can experience challenges around early sexualisation, and pressures to conform to stereotypical ideas of femininity relating to personal appearance, behaviour and academic performance. These pressures can adversely impact on their health and wellbeing, friendships and family relationships, and educational engagement and attainment.
- In the middle years cohort, boys and young men are emerging as both victims of, and perpetrators of, violence.
- It is important to help boys and young men interrogate – and redefine – traditional ideas about masculinity and sexuality, particularly in terms of media representations of 'what's normal.'
- Boys and young men need better support to help them deal with conflict in non-violent ways.

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[110] See City of Yarra Middle Years Strategy 2014 – 2017. *Victorian Child Friendly Cities and Communities Advisory Group*. Available at http://bit.ly/2vzmLCC

Internet

There can be challenges and opportunities raised through use of technology and the internet. Those raised were:

- Some people raised concerns about online bullying. They said that it is important to take into account the intersectional nature of these experiences. For example, children and young people from CALD or Aboriginal backgrounds can be racially abused online. This was also highlighted in the panel discussions.
- Participants also emphasised that the internet holds both threats and opportunities for children and young people. The potential to benefit from education and social connection, for example, should be protected and promoted for children and young people when limiting exposure to the harmful effects of internet use.
- There are widespread parental fears around technology and the internet. It was noted that parents cannot actually cut their children off from the internet – they will always be able to get access to it, through friends or even through school. The key issue is educating children and young people about the internet so that they can develop protective behaviours around its use.
- It was noted that some newly-arrived CALD parents have little information about technology. This puts them at a disadvantage in terms of educating their children about the safe use of technology. In addition, many schools email information to parents, rather than sending it in the post. It is important not to assume that every family has internet access in the home or is computer literate. Educating families about technology would assist them in passing this information to their children.

Services

Most services for young people start at adolescence, while children in their middle years often miss out on services.

- There was a view that service providers exhibited a lack of courage when designing and implementing services. Too often, services were designed on the basis of old-fashioned views and values that limited innovation. In order to implement better services for children and young people in their middle years, service providers need to be more flexible in their thinking, and employ principles of co-design in order to capture the needs and wants of this age group.
- Given the limited resources that practitioners face, services need to get better at sharing knowledge and resources. Services should not operate in silos.

Research, Evaluation and Advocacy

Many of the key points discussed by participants were noted to have a specific application for research, evaluation and advocacy; including:

- There is a lack of research about the middle years. One of the key issues relating to the middle years is lack of visibility, and more research would help address this. Some participants noted that Good Shepherd's report and forum have gone some way to addressing this lack of visibility.
- There is a need to develop, and evaluate, evidence-based strategies to support children and young people in their middle years.

- The early years sector has been successful in advocating for funding for this cohort of children. We need to develop a similar advocacy strategy for middle years children and young people.
- The middle years needs to be a continuous area of focus. This is not an area of need that practitioners can just 'dip in or out of'.

Changes in Practice as a Result of the Good Shepherd Forum

Forum attendees were asked whether they would make any changes to their practice as a result of attending the Good Shepherd forum. On the whole, people confirmed that they would.

- Some people said that their organisations did not work directly with the middle years but, as a result of the forum, they would question the rationale for this and advocate for this to change. Other people said that the forum reinforced their interest in the area of the middle years. They said it was valuable to hear the different perspectives of the panel members, and that the report, *One Foot in Each World*, provided them with an evidence base for their practice.
- A couple of people indicated that they would critique their organisations' policies with a view to ensuring that they better take into account the needs of children and young people in their middle years, including the needs of girls and young women.
- Some people indicated that they would try to work more collaboratively to 'join up' services so that children and young people in their middle years did not fall through the gaps.

10. Conclusion

The 'middle years' represents an emerging unmet area of need in Australia. As this report has highlighted, children and young people in their middle years can experience a range of challenges, including difficulties transitioning from primary to high school, caring for parents or younger siblings, being subject to early and inappropriate sexualisation and sexual exploitation, and being denied the opportunity to have meaningful input into decisions that affect their lives.

In seeking to understand the issues for children and young people in their middle years, it is important to adopt an intersectional approach. An intersectional approach means being aware of how other traits and characteristics can intersect with age to create additional complexities and needs. As this report has noted, intersectional issues for children and young people in their middle years can include gender inequality, Aboriginality, CALD backgrounds, disability, LGBTI identities, homelessness, being under child protection, and living in out-of-home care. Adopting an intersectional approach does not mean assuming that these children and young people are inherently 'lacking' in any way. Rather, a strengths-based approach should be adopted when working with, and seeking to understand the issues for, these children and young people. Each and every one of these children and young people have their own abilities and their own capacity to make positive contributions to their families and communities.

Recognising the agency of children and young people in their middle years is a key theme of this report. Children and young people in their middle years are active learners and contributors, and as such should be provided with opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and agency. This includes fostering opportunities for those children and young people who may not be regarded as high academic achievers as framed by existing benchmarks and milestones. We need to recognise – and nurture – the skills and knowledge that these children and young people do have, and develop better ways to ensure that these positive traits are recognised and accommodated in the education system.

Good Shepherd's forum about the middle years adopted a collaborative approach to learning and sharing knowledge, and drew on the expertise of a diverse range of professionals and representatives from specialised services, including the community sector, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Aboriginal services, homelessness support, out-of-home care, government, local council, academia, schools and Local Learning and Employment Networks. This collaborative approach serves as a model for moving forward on this issue. Good Shepherd believes that developing better ways to support the middle years is something that can only be done in collaboration. We need to continue to foster cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships between community sector organisations, schools, government, local councils and other relevant agencies. We also need to get better at working in collaboration with children and young people themselves. This involves listening to their voices and ensuring that they play integral roles in the development of services that affect their lives.

It is vital that, as practitioners, researchers and policy makers, we create more opportunities for children and young people to develop and use their voices, to share their opinions in public forums, and to tell us about what support mechanisms they believe would make a positive difference to their lives. Recognising and facilitating the agency of children and young people in their middle years needs to be a key priority for adults who come in contact with them in professional and personal capacities.

Increasingly, children and young people *are* exercising agency, and carving out a place for themselves in the virtual world of the internet. While the internet opens up potential dangers for children and young people, it also provides new and exciting opportunities for learning and for creating connections with others. As adults, we need to listen to children and young people when they tell us about the benefits that the internet brings to their lives, and work collaboratively with them to assist them in developing protective behaviours for safety navigating virtual spaces.

In addition to the virtual realm of the internet, children and young people need to be afforded with physical spaces of which they feel some ownership and in which they can co-construct their environments, affirm their identities, create and sustain positive relationships, use their voices, and exercise their agency. Local councils are already doing some important work in this area, and should continue to do so.

It is also important to recognise that systemic factors (such as gender inequality and sexism, racism, ableism and so on), can impact on the ability of children and young people to develop and exercise their capabilities and agency. Therefore, as well as developing programs and strategies that seek to foster the individual capabilities of children and young people in their middle years, we also must implement strategies that seek to address systemic discrimination.

It is Good Shepherd's hope that, moving forward, practitioners who work with children and young people in their middle years will be more attuned to their needs, better equipped to engage in dialogue with them, and better able to foster the voices and agency of this group.

This this end, we suggest the following recommendations.

Government and funding agencies

1. State and territory governments should develop evidence-based policies that address the needs of children and young people in their middle years. These policies should adopt a gender lens.
2. Government and funding agencies should prioritise funding of programs specifically designed for children and young people in their middle years.
3. Local councils should further develop public spaces, amenities and programs that are safe, inviting and accessible to the middle years.

Schools

4. Australian schools should continue to develop and implement mechanisms to support students with the transition from primary school to high school, and extend these programs to younger groups that are disengaging early from education (from 8 years).
5. Australian schools should deliver age-appropriate, consistent, holistic, and high-quality sex education (incorporating education on gender equality, respectful relationships, human rights and sexual identity) to primary school and high school students.
6. Australian schools should continue to deliver student-focused education about the internet, which enables students to not only develop their understanding of online safety, but also navigate the opportunities the internet provides for learning and the development of social connections while minimising exposure to harmful or inappropriate content.

Community Sector

7. Community sector organisations should review their service delivery policies with a view to ensuring that all relevant policies are inclusive of the needs of children and young people in their middle years, including the hard-to-reach, those who are from Aboriginal or CALD backgrounds, who experience disability, live in rural and regional areas, have LGBTI+ identities, experience homelessness, are in the child protection system, or live in out-of-home care.

8. Community sector organisations should invest in comprehensive training to ensure practitioners better understand the needs of children and young people in their middle years, particularly those who experience multiple identities or disadvantage, to ensure effective support and appropriate services.

Coordination and mutual learning

9. A coordinating mechanism should be established to increase collaboration across service areas, address research and evaluation gaps, and identify best practice models for working with the middle years.

10. Collaboration across sectors, incorporating community sector organisations, schools, government and local councils, should be focussed on ensuring that services are relevant to the needs of the middle years, including those who are hard to reach.

11. Policy makers, researchers, educators and community sector practitioners should create more opportunities for children and young people in their middle years to voice their opinions in public forums, and to have a say in matters that affect their lives.

12. Further research should be undertaken to inform better service delivery to children and young people in their middle years, particularly girls and young women experiencing disadvantage. Future research should include a focus on prevention and should be informed by the input of children and young people.

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➡ Appendices

Support for Children and Young People in their Middle Years:

GAPS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

A forum hosted by Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

Tuesday 19 April 2016, 1 – 4.30 pm

Queen Victoria Women's Centre, 2010 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne

Background

We know that children and young people in their middle years (aged 8 to 12 years) have specific developmental, social and educational needs. The middle years can establish a foundation of behaviours, opportunities and challenges that go on to influence individuals in adolescence and adulthood. There is evidence that the middle years represents a key opportunity for early intervention. In spite of this, many children and young people in this cohort fall through the gaps of existing services. More information is needed about the emerging issues for children and young people in their middle years, and how we can best provide them with the support they need to set them on positive life courses.

This forum represents an opportunity to consult with policy makers, practitioners and researchers about the issues they have identified for children and young people in their middle years. Following the forum, Good Shepherd will produce a summary report that outlines the key points made at the forum.

Agenda

Session	Time	Topic	Who
Session 1: Introduction / context	1.00pm	Aboriginal acknowledgment Introduction	Dimity Fifer, CEO, Good Shepherd
	1.20pm	Questions	Participants
	1.25pm	Overview of 'One Foot in Each World', literature and policy review about the middle years	Magdalena McGuire, researcher, Good Shepherd
	1.35pm	Questions	Participants
	1.40pm	Launch of 'One Foot in Each World'	Zoe Condliffe, Plan International Australia
	1.45pm	Afternoon tea	
Session 2: Panel discussion	2.00pm	Facilitated panel discussion	Kathy Landvogt, Good Shepherd
		The City of Yarra middle years policy	Rupert North, City of Yarra, Victoria
		Research on educational engagement and the middle years	Jen Jackson, Victoria University
		Issues for CALD middle years	Soo-Lin Quek, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Victoria
		Issues for Aboriginal middle years	Sue-Anne Hunter, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
		Issues for young women and girls	Zoe Condliffe, Plan International Australia
		Issues from child protection	Garry Miller, Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria
		Facilitated panel discussion, followed by questions and answers from audience	Kathy Landvogt, Good Shepherd All panel members
Session 3: Workshops	3.05pm	Workshops	Participants
	3.50pm	Summing up of the day and close	Good Shepherd

APPENDIX 2: GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN THEIR MIDDLE YEARS, DIMITY FIFER, GOOD SHEPHERD AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND

Background

I want to start today's session by playing you a video, which is part of the #LikeAGirl campaign.[111] It highlights some of the challenges that girls and young women face in developing and maintaining their self-esteem in the middle years and beyond.

The video made me think of my dreams for the next generation of girls – that is, to never have their hopes squashed because of their gender.

Good Shepherd welcomes you all to today's forum. All of you have a key role to play in today's proceedings. The forum represents an exercise in collaboration. I invite you all to think about how we collaborate and add value to our work.

The #LikeAGirl video highlights that the movement to promote the rights of girls and young women is growing. It is not just the community sector that is concerned with these issues. Corporate players are becoming involved in this space. There is a groundswell, a popular movement, taking place.

Good Shepherd's Work with the Middle Years

The middle years is a unique developmental period in which children and young people move through a complex physical, emotional and social web of changing hormones and expectations. It is a period in which they begin to grasp their place and identity in an adult world.

Good Shepherd works with children and young people in this age group through a range of support services. Our family services programs offer peer-supported groups for young women and counselling for young people who have experienced trauma or personal difficulties. Our mentoring model, Community Friends[112], consists of a diverse group of trained mentors who support young people to attain their personal goals and become connected to community. Our ENGAGE program in the west of Melbourne provides a self-directed approach to working with middle years young people, many of whom have now reached adulthood and in turn provide support to other newly arrived young people. Our School Focussed Youth Service, also in the West, supports schools in transitioning young people and their families from primary to secondary school.

Our practitioners speak compellingly about the strengths of this age group. These strengths include curiosity, honesty, kindness, humour, hope, capacity to adapt to change, to manage their own lives and a resilience in the face of some really tough experiences.

We see young people take on caring responsibilities within the family – babysitting, household duties, caring for elderly relatives and supporting parents to learn a new language and adapt to cultural change. Their teachers and other significant adults may not be aware of these responsibilities. Too frequently, this age group experiences challenges such as:

- difficulties managing school work-loads,
- peer-to-peer and social media bullying,
- exposure to sexualised advertising,

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[111] See #LikeAGirl campaign video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs.

[112] Unfortunately this innovative and highly effective program has since been discontinued due to lack of ongoing funding.

- being subject to confusing messages about adult responsibilities without the corresponding skills, practice or permission to make decisions,
- social isolation, and
- emerging mental health concerns.

The WRAP Centre

Research underpins and enhances all of Good Shepherd's approaches and services. Good Shepherd has been undertaking research and advocacy relating to emerging and unmet needs in Australia for over 25 years. The Women's Research, Advocacy and Policy (or WRAP) Centre drives this work. The WRAP Centre advocates for systemic change based on research into emerging and unmet needs and proposes more effective interventions to addressing these needs.

'Emerging needs' often fall between established policy and program areas. The 'middle years' represents one of these emerging needs.

Other emerging needs that Good Shepherd has recently conducted research into include 'under-recognised' areas of family violence such as economic or financial abuse and forced marriage (the latter of which is an issue that disproportionately affects girls and younger women).

Often we work in formal partnerships, and we always seek to collaborate for collective impact. We have observed that, in order to explore emerging needs, we need to be open to cross-sectoral partnerships, and hold definitions of our 'core business' lightly, while holding firm to our mission. Emerging needs, by definition, fall between silos and existing systems, and yet they are at the core of our purpose.

Some of this 'frontier work' is quite a challenge in the current environment, as all of you would know. We find that working together to carve out new policy and practice spaces is a strategic necessity. When it comes to engaging decision-makers in the issue of concern, we need wide expertise and many voices.

This collaborative spirit drives the forum today, and we appreciate that each of you here are bringing your knowledge to share in this same spirit. We hope that this forum will generate ideas about how to go forward: concepts that can inform innovative services, better policies and perhaps further research if we need it.

One Foot in Each World

I'll now talk a bit about the *One Foot in Each World* report. We set out to do a general study about the challenges facing children and young people in their middle years. We wanted to find out more about the general needs of the middle years – including boys and young men, and girls and young women.

Here at Good Shepherd we have a particular interest in the needs of women and girls and, in the course of doing this research, we came across some very stark and sometimes quite troubling findings in relation to girls and young women in their middle years. I will not go through all of those findings now, but I will point out some that really struck me.

Traditionally, we have always thought of boys and young men as being the ones particularly vulnerable to mental health issues and risk-taking behaviour. However, there is now evidence that this trend has shifted in Western countries. There is evidence that girls and young women are faring less well than boys and young men on most measures of mental health. They are also more likely

than boys and young men to engage in risk-taking behaviours that can damage their health and wellbeing and this is of great concern to us.

Girls and young women in their middle years can also be particularly susceptible to early sexualisation that is part and parcel of the so-called 'tween culture' promoted by the mainstream media. This culture positions girls and young women in their middle years as sexual, savvy consumers. Our report finds that the positioning of girls and young women as consumers rather than as active civic participants can have negative impacts on their physical and mental health, their wellbeing and their educational achievement. This consumerist culture can also negatively impact on how girls and young women relate to money, potentially leading to poorer financial outcomes in the future. We need to do more work to counteract the negative effects of this phenomenon and to give girls and young women opportunities to develop full identities outside this consumerist culture.

Even though the research did not set out to focus exclusively on girls and young women, the work of Good Shepherd adopts a strong gender lens. It is because of this lens that we were attuned to the issues emerging for girls and young women. This is not to say that boys and young men in their middle years do not have pressing needs. They do, and these needs should be addressed. However, the research does suggest that gender inequality starts to impact on girls in their middle years in some distinct and concerning ways. Gender inequality adds to the complexity of working with girls and young women in their middle years. We also need to think about how gender inequality intersects with other traits, such as Aboriginal identity, cultural and linguistic diversity, disability, and sexuality. We'll touch on some of these issues during the course of today's presentations, and in our afternoon workshops.

I'll sum up by saying that we want to see young people located at the front and centre of all relevant service delivery, research and policy decisions. We want to identify and remove the obstacles that stand in the way of them living a full life.

APPENDIX 3: ONE FOOT IN EACH WORLD REPORT – A SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH, MAGDALENA MCGUIRE, GOOD SHEPHERD AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND

The middle years are a period in a child's or young person's life that falls between early childhood and adolescence.

In Australia, there is no common definition as to what age group constitutes the middle years. Academia, the education sector, and the community sector all tend to have different understandings of this age group. In the *One Foot in Each World* report, we define the middle years as spanning a period from 8 to 12 years of age. We chose this definition because it captures the age group that is most likely to fall through the gaps of the existing service system. In addition, this definition reflects the distinct developmental, social and other changes that children and young people can encounter during the middle years period.

Until recently, the middle years cohort has received little attention from service providers, researchers and policy makers. Traditionally, the focus has been on early childhood and adolescence as critical periods in a child's or young person's life. However, it is now recognised that the middle years are a major period of developmental and social change, and can involve complex challenges for children and young people. For example, the middle years are a time when many children and young people can start disengaging from school. It can also be a time when children and young people start to experiment with drugs or alcohol, and when they first exhibit signs of mental ill health.

Our review of the literature also revealed some important findings in relation to gender. We found that girls and young women in their middle years can face specific challenges relating to gender inequality, including sexual and domestic violence and early and inappropriate sexualisation.

The middle years is also a period in which children can experience the early onset of puberty. In some cases, this can occur as young as 8 years old.

Traditionally, boys and young men have been regarded as being more at risk of developing mental health issues. However, there is some evidence that this pattern may have shifted, at least in Western countries. Girls and young women in their middle years are reported to be faring less well than boys and young men on most measures of mental health. They are also more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours that can damage their health and wellbeing.

Girls and young women can face a heightened risk of sexual, family and domestic violence, when compared to their male counterparts. There are some groups of girls and young women who are at particular risk of gender-based violence. For example, girls and young women with disabilities have been found to experience violence at a higher rate and for longer periods of time than those in the general population. They can also face greater barriers to reporting and receiving appropriate justice outcomes in respect of this violence. Likewise, immigrant and refugee girls and young women can also face a heightened risk of violence, as can Aboriginal girls and young women. Our research also revealed that girls and young women in their middle years may be at risk of some particular types of violence that need to be better understood, including forced marriage and internet-based violence.

In Australia, there is a lack of federal and state policies that specifically address the needs of the middle years. Of course, we do have policies that address the needs of children, families and young people. However, on the whole, policies that focus on the middle years are noticeably absent. And it seems that Australia's not unique in this respect. This also appears to be a gap in the international context.

Our report identified that key gaps in service provision for this cohort include a lack of recreational activities, clubs and events. There is a need for mental health services targeted at this group. And while some great work has been undertaken in the area of education, there is still a need for more specialist expertise in this area, to support students with the transition from primary school to high school.

Our report also found that there's a need for services that address the gender-specific needs of girls and young women in their middle years.

We need more evidence about the middle years, and today's forum represents a key step in that direction. In today's forum, we are very keen to hear from the forum participants and to draw on your expertise. We would like to hear about what you think are some of the key challenges facing children and young people in their middle years, and what needs to be done to provide better support to this group.

APPENDIX 4: LAUNCH OF ONE FOOT IN EACH WORLD LITERATURE REVIEW, ZOE CONDLIFFE, PLAN INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

As a community development practitioner who has worked almost exclusively with young people, it is refreshing to see a report that specifically addresses the middle years. This group, which is made up of children of about 8 to 12 years old, is often neglected in public discussion and policy.

As the *One Foot in Each World Report* establishes, the middle years is a formative time in a young person's life, and can also be full of difficult transitions and challenges. It is a time when young people are going through puberty and entering high school. Young people are at risk of disengaging from their education, and this is when we start seeing mental health issues manifesting.

One of the most important contributions made by the *One Foot in Each World* report is its focus on gender. Girls and young women face increasingly complex issues relating to body image, bullying, mental health problems, sexual abuse and unhealthy relationships. One of the most frustrating things about working in the field of gender equality, as I do, is to see that these issues do not start once a girl turns 16 or 18. These issues begin well before girls become young women.

This report highlights that gender inequality starts to noticeably impact girls in their middle years. Yet our policies, services and educational curricula do not reflect this. And our girls have noticed. Over the last few months, as part of my work with Plan International, I have conducted several focus groups with girls and young women in Australia. The purpose of these focus groups was to find out what they feel are the most important issues to them. Time and time again, I listened to girls and young women talk about the lack of appropriate sex education. They said they had not received education about body image, abusive relationships, media objectification or gender roles, but that they wished they had.

The groups of girls we consulted raised concerns about the objectification of their bodies. They said they felt their bodies were stigmatised and were highly conscious of sexualised advertising, which contributed towards what they felt was pressure to have the perfect body. As one focus group participant said, 'Who would want you if you don't look like that?' They said they suffered from slut-shaming and felt pressure to look the same as everyone else.

These girls and young women made a direct link between poor body image and lack of sex education. They told us that they turned to Wikipedia, the internet and pornography to get information about their bodies. They said that at no point in their schooling had they been given any information about sex beyond how to avoid getting pregnant or catching sexually transmitted infections. They told us they had not received enough or any education about sexual orientation. The girls and young women were also very aware of gender norms that exist in society, and brought up career choices, language in the media and gender stereotypes as issues that are relevant to them. It is key that I point out that these girls were acutely aware of the lack of relevant and age-appropriate sex information they were getting from school programs.

As part of a survey we launched in 2014 for Plan International's *Because I Am A Girl* campaign, 40 per cent of girls and young women said they believed that sexual attitudes in Australia are getting worse, with almost one-third saying they regularly saw advertising or other media that made them feel uncomfortable. As *One Foot In Each World* addresses, the growing tween consumer culture leaves girls increasingly vulnerable to societal pressures.

So we asked the girls what they would like to see changed. They told us they want better sex education in schools, so they can learn how to have a positive relationship with their body. They specifically said they would like to see sex education become constant and continuous, throughout

their schooling. They told us it is important that education about sexuality, gender and body image begins in primary school and early high school. They believe that if this were the case, things would be more positive for them now.

A couple of years ago I went into a classroom in regional Victoria as part of a program I developed to work with girls to educate them about objectification and abusive relationships. What struck me was that I could walk into a school where the girls had never had a program such as the one I was about to run, and find a classroom full of girls with a million things to say on the matter. These girls were bursting to speak about their experiences. They were full of anecdotes about all of the times they had been harassed, or treated differently from the boys at school or at home. And these examples were not all recent; they had been happening since at least the middle years. Children are being affected by these issues at younger ages than ever. The oversight of not addressing gender in regards to the middle years needs to be addressed – and soon.

This report highlights that girls and young women are disproportionately affected by many issues relating to health and wellbeing and educational engagement. However, the report found that most literature adopts a genderless approach to the issues at hand. It is not enough to only start addressing gender inequality when it presents at an older age, because, as this report highlights, many of the patterns have already been established in the middle years.

It is no longer sufficient to introduce these educational tools in the teen years. Education needs to start at the beginning, with age appropriate programs that address the fact that children are growing up faster than ever, and norms and patterns that are formed in the middle years will impact what happens later on.

APPENDIX 5: WORKSHOP QUESTIONS AND KEY ISSUES

Workshop Questions

- What do you see as the key issues facing children and young people in their middle years (aged 8 to 12 years)?
- What are some of the key challenges involved in providing support to this group?
- Do you see a need for services specifically targeted at children and young people in their middle years? If so, what types of services?
- Is there a need for targeted research and/or advocacy around the needs of this group?
- What needs to change in order to provide better support to children and young people in their middle years?
- Is there anything that you would do differently in your work as a result of the issues you've heard about / discussed in today's forum?

Key Issues

- The middle years are a distinct developmental phase in which children and young people can develop protective behaviours or, conversely, start to engage in risk-taking behaviours.
- Children and young people in their middle years can face various social, behavioural and developmental challenges, including the early onset of puberty and disengagement from school.
- Children and young people in their middle years may encounter difficulties in the transition from primary to secondary school. Teachers need more training and assistance to support students in their middle years who are at risk of educational disengagement.
- The middle years are a period in which mental health issues can first start to manifest. There is evidence that girls and young women in their middle years are now experiencing poorer mental health than their male counterparts.
- Gender has a significant impact on the challenges and needs experienced by children and young people in their middle years. In particular, girls and young women can face distinct issues that stem from gender inequality and stereotypes, including issues relating to poor body image, mental health problems, poor wellbeing, low self-esteem, educational disengagement, early sexualisation and experiences of violence. More work needs to be done to understand how best to intervene in, and prevent, these issues.
- Children and young people in their middle years prioritise family and friends as important for a good life.
- Economic security is important to the wellbeing of children and young people in their middle years. Higher levels of affluence can influence life satisfaction and perceptions of health and wellbeing, particularly for girls and young women.
- In Australia, there is a lack of state and federal policies that specifically address the middle years. Such policies are required to ensure that the needs of children and young people in the middle years are recognised, and that they receive appropriate and timely access to education, services and support. Any such policies should contain a focus on gender.
- Middle years children are presenting at young people's services at an increasingly younger age, and with increasingly complex problems.

Support for Children and Young People in their Middle Years:

Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities

Tuesday 19 April 2016, 1 – 4:30 pm

Agencies in attendance at the Forum

Presenters and panellists

- Dimity Fifer, CEO, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Magdalena McGuire, Researcher, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Zoe Condliffe, Campaigns Officer, Plan International Australia
- Kathy Landvogt, Head of Women's Research, Advocacy and Policy (WRAP) Centre, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (as MC)
- Garry Miller, Principal Practitioner, Child Protection, Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria
- Sue-Anne Hunter, Program Manager of Aboriginal Children's Healing Team, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
- Jen Jackson, Research Fellow, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University
- Rupert North, Coordinator Youth and Middle Years, City of Yarra
- Soo-Lin Quek, Knowledge and Advocacy Manager, Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY).

Attending agencies

- Anglicare Victoria
- Berry Street
- Brimbank City Council
- Campaspe Cohuna Local Learning and Employment Network
- Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
- Centre for Multicultural Youth
- CREATE Foundation
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Djerriwarrh
- Hands on Learning
- Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network
- Inner Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network
- Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network
- Jesuit Social Services
- Launch Housing
- MacKillop Family Services
- Monash University
- Mornington Peninsula Shire
- Muslim Women's Centre
- Plan International Australia
- SEED Workshops
- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- VICSEG New Futures
- Victoria University
- Victorian Council of Social Services
- Yarra City Council