



# Good Policy

NEWSLETTER OF GOOD SHEPHERD YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICE SOCIAL POLICY AND RESEARCH UNIT

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## Finding better ways for young people to participate and flourish

by Robyn Roberts, CEO, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service

Youth, adolescent, teenager, juvenile, pubescent, young person, tweenie. What a multitude of descriptors there are to describe this important transition stage from childhood to adult, often used pejoratively and, arguably, gendered. How well is this age and stage understood and appreciated for its potential and promise rather than dismissed as a difficult and misunderstood phase in life all must pass through?

And how well do we support and value young people and what they bring in terms of their thoughts, opinions and actions?

Emma Somyden Davey's article inside this edition challenges us to reconsider some of the assumptions we have around young people's participation in the community. She argues that these assumptions 'diminish the potential of organisations to work effectively in partnership with young people' and 'devalue the capacity of young people to be drivers of change'. In the community sector we have a genuinely held commitment to providing young people with participation opportunities and to hearing their voices. But do we always get it right?

Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service's commitment to working with the most vulnerable young people drives us to be part of initiatives such as the collaborative project, Esther's Voice. On this topic Dr Lea Campbell's article provides insight into her experience of using digital storytelling to 'add the voices of young people to the education debate' with the hope of ultimately informing the development of educationally sound policies for all. The education debate is certainly raging.

One aspect of the debate in which Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service is an active advocate is regarding the financial exclusion of students from education. *Leave No Child Behind* in this edition examines under-investment in public schools coupled with the increasing financial contribution required of parents for the education of their children. What does this mean for financially

disadvantaged families and what impact does this have upon a disadvantaged young person's access to education?

Arguably one of the most vulnerable groups of young people is those aged between 16 and 18 years leaving alternative care arrangements, such as out of home care. An article by Associate Professor Philip Mendes suggests a number of structural initiatives that could 'add to the capacity of our system to meet the needs of all care leavers'.

Finally, the tweenie or pre-teen, an age demographic once thought just to be the creation of savvy marketers, is an emerging subset of young people with their own particular needs in relation to wellbeing that do not fit neatly into either children's or adolescent services. What needs to happen on both a policy and practice front to best serve the wellbeing needs of pre-teens? How can the potential and promise of this group be harnessed?

Much of this edition of Good Policy is focused on what needs to change to provide better opportunities for young people to participate and flourish. One part of the answer surely lies in education. Schools certainly play a big part in the lives of most young people and are well positioned to play an important role in more broadly supporting the needs of young people. The opportunity for the community sector to partner with schools to support the developmental as well as educational needs of young people is essential and this will be an area of renewed focus for Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service into the future.

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# Improving the life chances and opportunities transitioning from out-of-home care

by Philip Mendes  
Monash University

Only about 2700 young people aged 15–17 years across the nation (with fewer than 600 in Victoria) leave out-of-home care each year. Some do very well and achieve prominence in sporting, political and public life. But too many continue to rely on Australia's income security, health and welfare, homeless, criminal justice and other crisis intervention systems.

The reasons for their disadvantage are very simple. Firstly, many have experienced and are still recovering from considerable physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect prior to entering care. Secondly, many young people have experienced inadequacies in state care including poor quality caregivers, and constant shifts of placement, carers, schools and workers. Thirdly, many care leavers can call on little, if any, direct family support or other community networks to ease their involvement into independent living.

In addition to these major disadvantages, many young people currently experience an abrupt end at 16–18 years of age to the formal support networks of state care. That is, the state as corporate parent fails to provide the ongoing financial, social and emotional support and nurturing offered by most families of origin.

## Leaving Care Model: A Normative Commitment

The pathway for achieving better outcomes for these young people is well known. The **first** necessary reform is improving the quality of care, since positive in-care experiences involving a secure attachment with a supportive carer are essential in order to overcome damaging pre-care experiences of abuse or neglect. This involves providing holistic preparation in the form of stability and continuity, an opportunity if at all possible to maintain positive family links which contribute to a positive sense of identity, and assistance to overcome educational deficits.

Foster care placements, small children's homes and residential care

with a therapeutic orientation appear to be most successful in addressing young people's emotional and educational needs.

The **second** component is the transition from care for young people aged from 16–21 years. This includes both preparation for leaving care, and the actual moving out from the placement into transitional or half-way supportive arrangements. This transition needs to be less accelerated, and should instead become a gradual and flexible process based on levels of maturity and skill development, rather than simply on age.

Care leavers cannot reasonably be expected without family assistance to attain instant adulthood. It is not possible for them to successfully attain independent housing, leave school, move into further education, training or employment, and in some cases become a parent, all at the same time. Rather these tasks need to be undertaken sequentially. As reflected in the 'focal model of adolescence', they need to be given the same psychological opportunity and space as all young people to progressively explore a range of interpersonal and identity issues well into their twenties.

An effective leaving care model would arguably include:

- no discharge at 18 years or under unless mature enough to live independently
- preventive programs to stop exit into youth or adult justice system, and ongoing support for young people on juvenile justice orders, or in custody.
- guaranteed stable and secure housing; no exit into homelessness services or the Supported

Accommodation Assistance Program

- support for physical and mental health needs, including ongoing therapeutic support if necessary to overcome experiences of abuse and trauma
- holistic support for substance abuse issues
- assistance to achieve positive educational outcomes including generous bursary for higher education
- assistance via opportunities for training and work experience to achieve positive career/employment outcomes
- assistance with social supports and renegotiating family and other relationships
- specialised programs of support for young parents
- additional assistance for Indigenous care leavers to address cultural and identity issues
- additional support for disabled young people
- ongoing support for unaccompanied asylum seekers, and
- financial assistance to access appropriate furniture and household items and pay advance rent and bond if necessary.

## Care leavers cannot reasonably be expected without family assistance to attain instant adulthood.

The **third** component is ongoing support after care until approximately 25 years of age. This may involve a continuation of existing care and supports and/or specialist leaving care services in areas such as accommodation, finance, education and employment, health and social networks.

This ongoing support reflects messages from life course theory which emphasise that transitions to

# s for young people

independence vary according to the diversity of life experiences, and that care leavers should not be expected to conform to normative ideals of maturation and timing. The research evidence suggests that effective after-care interventions can facilitate 'turning points' that enable young people to overcome the adverse emotional impact of earlier traumatic experiences.

Victoria has made some progress in recent years as reflected in the introduction of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* which obliges the state to assist care leavers up to 21 years of age. The government has established mentoring, post-care support and flexible funding support for young people transitioning from care or post-care in all eight regions, but more still needs to be done.

Post-care supports that are currently available may be sufficient for those who leave care in an organised and effective manner with stable and ongoing support from carers, family and community groups. But the real test of the policy is its ability to meet the needs of those care leavers whose circumstances and behaviour are particularly challenging.

For example, what happens to young people who receive a 12 month youth justice sentence shortly before their 18th birthday? What about those who wish to commence further or higher education when they are 20 years old? What about those who leave care at 16 years of age to return to their family, but then experience a family breakdown when they are 17 and a half years old?

What about those difficult young people who refuse to engage with leaving care planning when they are 16 years old, but return to seek post-care assistance at 19 or 20 years old? What about those who have serious substance abuse problems when they turn 18 years old? And what about those who have become young parents, and face investigations of their own parenting skills by child protection authorities?

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**...care authorities should aim to approximate the ongoing and holistic support that responsible parents in the community typically provide to their children after they leave home until at least 25 years.**  
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In my opinion, three structural initiatives would add to the capacity of our system to meet the needs of all care leavers. The first would be the introduction of the **Corporate Parenting** philosophy which underpins the UK model of support. This concept refers to the responsibility of state authorities to introduce policies, structures and roles that actively compensate children and young people in care for their traumatic pre-care experiences, and to offer them the same ongoing nurturing and support as typically experienced by their peers who are not in care, in order to maximise their ambitions and achievements. It emphasises a shared responsibility between different departments such as education, health, and child welfare. The term 'corporate' refers to the fact that organisations are involved in parenting children and young people in care, and the need to ensure that structures are in place to support the individual carers who parent within that system.

Secondly, I would like to see the introduction of a **national leaving care framework** similar to that used in the UK. A national framework would arguably address a number of key weaknesses of the existing Australian system such as the wide variation in policy and legislation between the states and territories (and even within individual jurisdictions), and the absence of support for young people who shift from one jurisdiction to another. It would also improve opportunities for national benchmarking, and place pressure on poorer services to improve their standards via the introduction of

a Guidance and Regulations document that would clarify the obligations of all service providers to care leavers. It is also evident from the UK experience as reflected in the introduction of the *Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* that national legislation is likely to increase the profile of leaving care, and drive improved resourcing and higher quality of service provision.

Thirdly, we need to establish a **National Data Base** similar to that of the UK. This database should be freely accessible on the internet which would allow us to monitor the progress of care leavers; measure outcomes in key areas such as education, employment, health, housing, parenthood, substance use, social connections, and involvement in crime; and analyse differences in the effectiveness of various states and territories and NGO policies and programs.

In summary, care authorities should aim to approximate the ongoing and holistic support that responsible parents in the community typically provide to their children after they leave home until at least 25 years. Providing adequate supports for care leavers in Australia is relatively cheap given the small number of care leavers in any one year, and will provide substantial social and economic gains for both the young people concerned and Australian society more generally.

Associate Professor Philip Mendes of Monash University is the Director of the Social Inclusion and Social Policy and Research Unit in the Department of Social Work at Monash University. He is the co-author of *Young People leaving state out-of-home care: a research-based study of Australian policy and practice* just published by Australian Scholarly Publishing, and he recently commenced a study in partnership with seven NGO partners titled *Young people transitioning from Out-of-Home Care in Victoria: Examining interagency collaboration, leaving care plans and post-care support services for dual clients of child protection and youth justice*.

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# Making space for possibility: partnering with young people seeking to engage



by Emma Somyden Davey

Community Engagement Manager, Mission and Justice Office, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

**This year Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand collaborated with Volunteering Qld, an organisation with a strong focus on young people and engagement, to co-curate the innovate symposium, an event that attracted change makers of all ages from sectors including government, community, and social entrepreneurs.**

At least a third of the participants were under the age of 25, and three of the five core organiser/facilitators were young women aged 25 and under. A key question posed was: **'How do organisations work with the enormous energy of a new generation seeking serious engagement?'**

## **Assumptions made and myths busted**

In order to answer this question, it is important to reflect on some of our assumptions about young people's engagement. Two prevailing assumptions that may impact on an organisation's capacity to develop good policy and practice in working with young people are the 'deficit perspective' and the 'young people won't engage' assumptions.

The 'deficit perspective' proposes that adult contributions are of greater value than those of young people. Some say that this perspective is most common in government organisations. It underpins participation models like the 'youth advisory council' where young people's involvement is controlled and confined to their role as 'youth representative'.

The thinking here is that young people are 'adults- or citizens-in-training', and that they require adults to structure a space in which they are trained to become active contributors to society.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to be frustration in some sections of the community sector that young people are 'difficult to engage' and cause management issues for organisations, through their perceived unreliability, disengagement, and short commitment spans. This is despite episodic volunteering being on the rise right across age groups and despite the fact that there are strengths and benefits to short term project-based commitments.

Not only do these assumptions diminish the potential of organisations to work effectively in partnership with young people, they also devalue the capacity of young people to be drivers of change. Further, contrary to these assumptions, there is no question that young people are already engaged. In fact young people have the skills, tools, and knowledge to choose how they can engage and where they would like to engage.

The following are some significant trends in young people's engagement:

- Young people have a greater commitment to issues rather than institutions, giving rise to short term issue- and project-based involvement.
- Youth-led organising and social entrepreneurship is on the rise – reflecting the desire of young people for direct engagement without the need for an organisation to mediate (or control) their experience.

- New media is emerging as a key avenue through which young people naturally participate in the world, including how they choose to make an impact (for example, organisations like GetUp!).
- Young people are attracted to engagement that is human-centred, flexible, fluid, and relational.
- The level of 'values' integrity within an organisation – the connection between how values are stated and actioned – is a key influencer in whether a young person will be attracted to and engage with that organisation.<sup>2</sup>

In this new space, how do organisations respond and critically adapt to the ways young people engage?

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## **Young people are attracted to engagement that is human-centred, flexible, fluid, and relational.**

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### **What works? Useful models for practice.**

Research shows that the most effective approaches to engaging young people's participation is where the following elements are embedded into policy, organisational structure, and day to day activities of an organisation:

- activities led by young people
- purposeful projects with real impact
- strong elements of creativity and fun, and
- new media platforms (eg. Facebook, blogs) that support online and offline social and task interaction, and allow users to generate their own content.<sup>3</sup>



Tal Fitzpatrick, Leadership Program Coordinator, Natural Disasters Resilience Project and Mark Creyton, Director – Education, Research and Policy were co-facilitators at the Innovate Symposium.

#### A REFLECTION ON GOOD SHEPHERD'S FIRST YOUNG CHANGE MAKER

**Good Shepherd is an international organisation founded in the social vision and audacity of one young woman – Rose Virginie Pelletier, or St Mary Euphrasia as she became – who, on observing the social challenges of her time, was searching for a way in which she could make a lasting impact.**

**Consider what it may have been like to be a young change aspirant in 19th century France at a time of deep social conflict. For a young woman in that time and place, what would have been the opportunities and challenges in creating social justice?**

Volunteering Qld have produced two reports (co-authored with young people) that explore young people's experiences in youth-led organisations,<sup>4</sup> and the experiences of organisations seeking to move beyond traditional practices that involve young people as volunteers.<sup>5</sup> This research informed the development of a five principle framework for engaging young people:

1. **Culture** – looks at organisational culture and values and asks how young people and their contribution are generally perceived by staff.
2. **Linking** – examines what effort has been made to match the young person with the right role, and how this role links with their life goals.
3. **Engaging** – looks at meaningful involvement for young people in the organisation.
4. **Belonging** – looks at how the young person sustains a sense of belonging to the organisation, and creates social relationships – including through the use of new media platforms.
5. **Leadership** – includes how the organisation balances boundaries

with making space for young people to take on leading and creating.

Some further critical questions are:

- What opportunities do we create for young people to be involved in and initiate organisational decision making and policy development?<sup>6</sup>
- Do young people have a means to participate in final decision making?<sup>7</sup>
- How can we engage young people who experience marginalisation?

#### Young people and Good Shepherd

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (GSANZ)'s strategic plan directs the Community Engagement team to grow the number of young people and volunteers who are engaged in the mission and spirit of Good Shepherd. In 2012 we want to:

- seek out stories that illustrate how Good Shepherd agencies are leading the way in policy and practice in terms of young people's participation and youth-led engagement
- consult with the network on how GSANZ can support good practice

- initiatives on engaging young people and volunteers, and
- re-visit and explore a Good Shepherd Youth Participation Charter.

Our team is new but we envision a future rich with the participation of young people and volunteers in partnership with agency staff and Sisters. We believe that young people and volunteers play a vital role in building a strong network of Good Shepherd people.

Please contact me on [emmad@goodshep.com.au](mailto:emmad@goodshep.com.au) to discuss this paper, be directed to Volunteering Qld resources, or to have a chat with the Community Engagement team on young people's participation or volunteer involvement.

#### Notes

- i For more information on the innovate symposium go to: <http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au/home/index.php/nonprofits/innovate/innovate-symposium-recap>

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# Leave no child behind

by **Rathi Ramanathan and Kathy Landvogt**  
Social Policy and Research Unit, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service

**What are regarded as essential parts of the public education system – information technology, lockers, diaries, sports, camps and excursions – are increasingly being funded by parent contributions. What makes this particularly worrying is that parent contributions are not voluntary. They are in fact a growing expectation of government schools in their efforts to compete with private schools.**

This gradual move to double dipping from both parent contributions and government funding has become well accepted and remains largely unchallenged. Yet this is a huge burden for many struggling families who are juggling rising costs of living and the growing expectations of what their children need to simply keep up with peers from higher income families. This trend is also undermining the social contract that assures every child the free and quality education that is their ticket to opportunity. When parents cannot pay, children miss out on items essential to their education.

There are many push factors to this trend, but the most pronounced is the under investment in public schools that has led to widening educational outcomes between students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds. This has also led to a gradual decline in the relative performance of many government schools. Disadvantaged students are now two to three years behind in their schooling, an increase of about six months since 2006.<sup>1</sup>

We have welcomed the Federal Government's review into school funding,<sup>2</sup> and urge that the mechanisms for school funding ensure public funds go to where they are most needed, to

address the underlying causes of the widening inequities between public and private schools.

The *2010 OECD Education at a Glance* report<sup>3</sup> shows that Australia consistently ranks nearly bottom of the OECD nations in public expenditure on public schools, at last count 26th out of 28. Yet Australia provides much greater levels of public funding to private schools than most other OECD countries. Notwithstanding the dominant role of state governments in funding public schools, this imbalance in federal funding breaches principles of fairness especially when the evidence so clearly points to the need to invest more in educating disadvantaged students, not less.

With the gradual decline in relative levels of federal public funding, government schools have resorted to increased parent payments to both recover the loss of public funds and to keep up with the rising costs of education. This trend was documented 15 years ago in a Senate Committee, along with its impact on disadvantaged students. That study

## When parents cannot pay, children miss out on items essential to their education.

described a range of terms – levies, subject contributions, materials and services charges, fees – applied to the growing income stream from parents that were not, in effect, 'voluntary contributions'.

Another worrying trend which reflects the market ethos of promoting competition and choice is the policy of 'selectivity', where schools can choose students. Just as much as parents choosing schools, selectivity leaves some schools with higher concentrations of students carrying poor academic records. These then become poorer schools, less able to raise parent

payments yet with the more challenging and resource-intensive students to engage and educate.

The combined impacts of increasing parent payments and selectivity have led to a two-tier system in government schools, directly contributing to the

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widening gap in educational outcomes between children from different SES backgrounds. As public funds supporting private education make non-government education ever more attractive to parents who can choose, and as students therefore move away from government schools, the resource base (students and dollars) of government schools reduces further, making them still less attractive in a competitive marketplace.

## Recommendations

- Funding models for school need to take into account the school's ability to generate its own income, whether it is at the level of tens of millions as in non-government schools, or the one million that luckier public schools can raise.
- There is a need to define an accepted 'basket of educational goods' in order to cost the basic educational entitlement and ensure each student receives it.
- More disclosure by public schools on what parent payments fund is required. Costs involved in core curricula must be publicly funded and what is discretionary be fully transparent for parents to make an informed decision on whether they want to pay – this will be made easier for schools when they are adequately funded.



In conclusion, there must be reform of education funding distribution to ensure public funds go to where they are needed most. While recognising the challenges involved, we contend that this is a critical time for government action to break the nexus between low socio-economic status and low educational outcomes, and to reverse the downward spiral of disadvantage in parts of the government school sector. A more equitable formula for funding will place education as a common good at the core of all considerations.<sup>4</sup>

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### About *Good Policy*

*Good Policy* is the newsletter of the Social Policy and Research Unit of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service. We aim to bring the latest news of research and policy developments in areas of importance to our supporters, colleagues, service partners, interested donors and funders, responding to the ongoing interest in the policy voice and research outcomes of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service. Thank you to all contributors and supporters.

*Good Policy* is a free newsletter, which generally comes out twice a year. Back copies available or visit our website [www.goodshepvc.org.au](http://www.goodshepvc.org.au). All feedback is welcome.



by Dr Lea Campbell

Research Coordinator, Esther's Voice

# Digital storytelling: voices of disadvantaged young people on their education experience

## Educational disadvantage is a widely acknowledged phenomenon and often defined as a regrettable feature of the Australian education system.

A series of national initiatives – among them the Disadvantaged Schools Program, the National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-economic Status School Communities and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) goals for increasing educational participation – have been rolled out. At school level, breakfast programs and Educational Maintenance Allowance have been instituted to address some very basic student needs. To be sure, many committed students, educators, parents, principals, advocates, authors, policy makers and community organisations continue to try and make a difference. However, combined actions during the last decades have not ameliorated educational inequities significantly. The issue seems to be one of naming, but not owning the problem.

Esther's Voice, a collaborative project of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Jesuit Social Services and MacKillop Family Services, posits that the nation still suffers from a substantial lack of understanding and insight into the complexities of the lives of children and young people inside and outside of schools. Esther's Voice wanted to add the voices of young people to the education debates. This was not some naïve appeal to 'voices' as a stand-alone measure to authenticity in education policy, but an attempt to get down to business and start a substantive conversation around, and engagement with, the messiness of daily school life as experienced by young people from the margins.

Esther's Voice did not intend to perpetuate the mainstream-margins and exclusion-inclusion dichotomies. Whilst disadvantaged students are obviously marginalised, face real hardships and suffer the consequences of our collective neglect and lack of will, there should be no illusion that the mainstream is well-served by the current education system. In fact if anything, one could hypothesise that young people who are disadvantaged are seismographic readers of the smaller and larger shifts in the education landscape. They have acute knowledge of the contradictions and know how the ground shifts, in many cases way before the rest of the students do. Another way of seeing this is to say that schools which serve disadvantaged children are 'condemned to innovate'<sup>1</sup>. So how would we capture disadvantaged young people's voices of their schooling? With digital storytelling!

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**For some young people it was the first time people had cared to sit down, listen and respect their experiences at school.**

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What is it? Digital storytelling means turning a series of digital photos into slides with a piece of software and adding a digitally recorded voice-over, effectively creating a movie two to four minutes long. The most obvious considerations for the feasibility of this digital storytelling project were research ethics, budget, staffing and method.

These had to be broken down into staff liaison, audio-visual and stationery equipment, young people's literacy and preparedness to participate, computer access, location, format of delivery, materials (non-identifying photos), story writing process, food, drinks, marketing and finally artistic and legal advice.

We researched the numerous ways in which our digital storytelling project could operate. After considering the strength and weakness of each approach, it was decided to run a series of six hour, fully catered workshops on weekends with no more than five participants and intense staffing of up to five staff members at a local arts studio. We recruited participants from Esther's Voice member organisations' programs. Furthermore, participants would tell their stories and simultaneously learn digital storytelling skills. Young people participating would receive a thank you voucher and a certificate of attendance, spelling out all the skills they had attained.

Staffing was crucial. The backbone and major organisational support were the workers from participating programs who had good prior relationships with the participants and would approach only those young people they judged strong enough to participate, albeit with support. Workers from the programs attended the workshops and were able to debrief if need be. Additionally, a storytelling facilitator and a technician were employed for the project. A graphic designer helped with certificate design, poster production, email circulation and publication layout.



# Intaged erience

After seeking ethics approval from the three Esther's Voice organisations and the Department of Human Services, the young people and their parents/guardians had to undergo a dual consent process. The first part of this process was to consent to participating in the workshops. The second was to release the story for use to Esther's Voice, retaining their rights as authors and owners of their stories. Recruiting was perhaps the most difficult and time consuming part and it was often not clear until the day of the workshop how many participants we would actually be able to secure, even though transport was organised prior to the day (personal pick-up and offer of free tickets/taxi). It was somewhat unrealistic to produce most photos beforehand so we resorted to Flickr photos with creative commons licence. The workshops had to be very tightly structured to be able to warm up, write up, produce voice-overs, instruct software use, search creative commons pictures, save their links, eat, drink and break regularly, keep up their motivation to stay on task and most importantly allow all sides to be authentic and real. There was no script, no creative boundary nor set expectations as to what the stories should look like or talk about, however, most were 300-400 word mini-essays.

The workshop mixture of structure and great flexibility meant that breaks were possible and could be taken at any time, literacy and personality issues could easily be catered for and the participants could really choose how they wished to engage and what stories they were telling. For the researcher, it

was at times overwhelming to listen to their stories and humbling to witness their resolution in sharing them.

At the end of the workshop, some participants commented that the process was well worth their time

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### Audio-visual methods will become a more prominent form of engagement for and with young people in future policy and research work.

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and thanked staff for the trouble they had gone through to organise the workshop and allowing them to make their voices heard. They related to this new digital medium immediately and felt empowered to be listened to. They clearly appreciated expressing their viewpoints in an uncensored way. One female participant even chose to write a poem instead of a short story. She then decided to create a song for her poem and this made her digital story especially powerful. For some young people it was the first time people had cared to sit down, listen and respect their experiences at school. This sense of validation was very gratifying for all involved.

After the workshop the stories went to postproduction (timing of photos, voice-over alignment and so on). Esther's Voice is still seeking second consent from some and is therefore not at liberty to share its findings, although a report is currently being prepared for publication. Overall, it is Esther's Voice's belief that audio-visual methods

will become a more prominent form of engagement for and with young people in future policy and research work because it is attractive and intrinsically meaningful method for them to share their lived experiences. The power of stories, written by young people, stemming from their experiences and made by them will, hopefully, create a sense of presence of their lives amongst us that perhaps research reports, statistics and policy analysis have so far failed to produce. We hope that their stories stimulate the collective imagination to produce educationally sound policies for all.

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# Enhancing pre-teen wellbeing

by Jacinta Waugh and Rachel Close

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## Pre-teens need a stronger focus for policy and practice. Compared to the early childhood and adolescent years, we have some catching up to do.

The literature provides different age ranges for the pre-teen group, spanning the years from age 8 to 14. Many programs allow 12 year olds to use their services while focussing primarily on young people who are older than 12 years. At the other end of the age scale, pre-teens are excluded from programs designed for the early childhood years of 0 to 8. In this article we are mainly concentrating on the needs of those in the 8-12 years age group. Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service's Social Policy and Research Unit recently started exploring the issues, service gaps and service responses needed for this group.

### Developmental tensions: family and peer relationships

Caught between childhood and adolescence, pre-teens are often considered too old to be treated as children but not yet mature enough to be given the responsibilities of teenagers. The developmental indications can be misleading in these years. As we know, pre-teens often show significant physical development. But we cannot assume a corresponding rate of development in the emotional and cognitive areas of their lives.

Competing forces are often at work in these developmental years. Pre-teens are becoming more responsive to their peer groups at the same time as they are starting to establish personal identities of their own. They are placing a greater value on friendship while experiencing an emerging sense of self. More apt to assert their own independence, less tolerant of parental guidance, pre-teens nevertheless remain heavily reliant on the support and protection of family. Family wellbeing and resilience are therefore

significant factors in the wellbeing and resilience of pre-teens.<sup>1</sup>

The pre-teen years need to be understood in a context of changing social norms, especially as they relate to family and childhood. Some of these norms seem to be implicated in the ambiguities mentioned above. Ruth Zanker has found, for instance, that pre-teens are given greater access to money (albeit small amounts) by parents and greater inclusion in family spending decisions.<sup>2</sup> While this trend demonstrates their added independence, it also underscores the fact of their continuing need for family support.

### The interaction between societal influences and developmental changes

For the past thirty years, alongside an economic liberal agenda, Australian culture has become progressively more consumerist. Emphasis is placed on achieving fulfilment through our interactions with the market, i.e. buying things. In addition, the never-ending development of technology has given more people faster access to more information, ideas, commodities and opportunities. Consequently, many pre-teens are arguably more 'connected' than ever before.<sup>3</sup> The interaction between developmental changes and accelerating technological innovation exposes them to more pressures than pre-teens of previous generations.

Furthermore, marketers can see pre-teens ('tweenies' is predominantly their commercial name) as the perfect new consumer group to target – they have the ability (money and desire) to own the 'right' products and fashion.<sup>4</sup> Aspects of their social and emotional development that can make pre-teens particularly

appealing to advertisers include the exploration and development of their identities, their tendency to seek differentiation from the family, and the increasing influence that peers tend to have over each other.<sup>5</sup>

### More apt to assert their own independence, less tolerant of parental guidance, pre-teens nevertheless remain heavily reliant on the support and protection of family.

This is something of a generalisation, of course – it would be wrong to assume that pre-teens unquestioningly consume or accept what is presented to them by the media.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, there is a likely mismatch between a marketer's sophisticated way of targeting emotions to sell a product and a pre-teen's cognitive and emotional maturity. Moreover, research suggests that the negative effects of the emphasis on consumption are more acutely felt by those already experiencing disadvantage. Big name brands, for example, are often used by this age group to create social meaning and a sense of belonging. This can be harmful for those pre-teens who are socio-economically disadvantaged and can ill afford the 'right' and usually expensive brands. It can contribute to the phenomenon of 'in' and 'out' groups, bullying and social exclusion.<sup>7</sup>

### School: an opportune site for service intervention and support

Community work that develops leadership and team work skills is one way to combat bullying and social exclusion. Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service does just this with the Grade 4 and Grade 6 children at a Melbourne primary school. The 9–10



year olds in Grade 4 do ten weeks of personal development, learning about leadership, teamwork and recognising their own strengths. The children put these into practice by then working alongside each other to fulfil a social action project goal that they have set for themselves. Through doing the project they experience the difference they can make in their own community, and new friendships are formed as they begin

to value the contribution that everyone can have.

Then in Grade 6 the next program prepares these same children for the transition to secondary school. The universal approach of including the whole class in these programs has been found to be a non-stigmatising and effective way of instilling a substantial sense of purpose and group cohesion. Parents and teachers report reduced

bullying and an overall positive cultural change in the school. The children report new friendships and discover the benefits of teamwork. Subsequently, the local secondary school reports that the students from this primary school are confident and supportive of each other. Most importantly it reports the children from this school cope better with their transition from primary to secondary school.

continued ➤

This community work model is validated by a 2011 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) report on the middle years, which states that: 'Research confirms that peer-led programs are effective in promoting positive outcomes for children particularly easing the transition to secondary school, building friendship groups and reducing bullying behaviours'.<sup>8</sup> In short there is sound evidence that these strategies work.

### The interaction between developmental changes and accelerating technological innovation exposes them to more pressures than pre-teens of previous generations.

Nevertheless, the risk of disengaging from school is elevated in these years of school transition and developmental change. This has long term implications for educational achievement and employment prospects.<sup>9</sup> At the very least, disadvantage should not be the reason for disengagement. Yet for many, a decent educational experience has become increasingly difficult with the shifting policy and practice context of 'user-pays'. Taking the standpoint of the least advantaged is an effective way of re-examining how social and economic conditions influence learning. For instance, awareness tools such as low-income awareness checklists could assist teachers, principals and the local community to take practical steps in enhancing the educational experience of socio-economically disadvantaged students.<sup>1</sup>

#### Other wellbeing programs

There are programs available that address issues which impact on pre-teens, however, very few specifically target the needs of this age group. In particular, our study found a significant gap in safe and affordable recreational activities as well as after school and holiday programs that are inexpensive or cost free. This is important if good quality social, educational and recreational opportunities are to be offered to pre-teens across the socio-economic spectrum. They also need to be accessible for those pre-teens who have the potential to or who have

already disengaged from school. Furthermore, recreational activities away from computer and media technology contribute to a more healthy balance of diverse social experiences. Other service gaps found included advocacy and mental health services for this age group.

All of these programs can enhance the emotional and social (mental) health of pre-teens. Mental health is, after all, not just about the absence of a mental illness but is a goal in its own right.<sup>10</sup> Social policy must create or strengthen existing programs that focus on social activities for pre-teens and should include better access for pre-teens to mental health services and early intervention.

#### Partnerships: a holistic approach

Partnerships are one way to provide a holistic response to meet pre-teens' unique developmental needs. The partnership agreement between the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian community sector recognises that collaboration on issues of mutual concern is the best way to achieve quality social and educational outcomes for young people, especially the disadvantaged or vulnerable.<sup>11</sup> Schools are in a good position to know the developmental and educational needs of pre-teens, while the community sector is well versed in socioeconomic disadvantage and vulnerability of families and children.

Sharing this expertise would greatly improve the capacity of schools and community services to meet the needs of pre-teens.

Partnerships within community services are also important because pre-teens do not necessarily fit comfortably in either family support services or youth services. Our study found that greater collaboration between these service areas is needed if pre-teens' needs are to be met in an effective, holistic way.

#### Conclusion: points for further consideration

Pre-teens are an overlooked age group and it may be well worth considering whether pre-teens belong to their own discrete category with their own particular needs. At face value there seems to be support for this view,

for example a NSW Parliamentary Committee recently recommended a separate funding stream for the middle years.<sup>12</sup>

For the moment though, the more pressing issue is the evident paucity of age specific services. Pre-teens are expressly excluded from early childhood programs and as good as excluded from many adolescent services. At the very least a lot more attention must be paid to the needs of this age group.

#### Notes

- i The Standpoint Project is a collaborative research project involving Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Victoria University's School of Education and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development looking at ways in which schools can better support the learning of students from low income families

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- 10 ARACY ibid, p. 29
- 11 <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/directions/commpartnership.htm>
- 12 NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People. (2009) *Children and young people aged 9-14 years in NSW: the missing middle*. Volume 1, Report No. 5/54. September 2009

## NEWS

### News from Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand



Good Shepherd  
Australia New Zealand

- Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand has established a Mission and Justice Circle, bringing together a network of Good Shepherd organisations.
- To facilitate and further build upon the leadership role of Good Shepherd in Australian microfinance space, the Boards of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service and Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, by mutual agreement, decided early in 2011 to establish a new independent microfinance entity to grow microfinance into a flagship program. Good Shepherd Microfinance was established as a company on 1 July 2011 that will sit as a separate organisation alongside Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service within the Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (GSANZ) network. This new approach will enable Good Shepherd to build programs and develop new microfinance responses to community need.
- In October Anne Manning was elected as the new Provincial Leader of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Anne and the new Province Leadership Team will officially take up office on 4 February 2012.
- Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand has contracted the Social Policy and Research Unit to undertake research documenting Good Shepherd's work over the years with Indigenous communities.

### Fringe lending forum with Mr Bill Shorten

On Wednesday 9 November, the Minister for Financial Services and Superannuation and Assistant Treasurer, the Hon. Bill Shorten MP, met with financial counsellors from the western and northern suburbs at our St Albans office to discuss the small credit contract regulation proposed by the Minister and the impact of payday lending on vulnerable consumers. The Minister and local MP Maria Vamvakinou, the Member for Calwell, spoke about the reforms. Peter Gartlan, Executive Officer for the Financial and Consumer Rights Council, facilitated questions and addresses from financial counsellors and researchers.

Emily Mohan, a financial counsellor with Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service speaks about people's experiences with fringe lending.



## NEWS

### Policy submissions

Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service has made the following policy submissions:

- submission to Federal Government School Funding Review (March 2011)
- submission to Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry (April 2011); and on behalf of the Respite Care Consortium and in collaboration with Berry Street, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service gave a verbal submission to the Inquiry on the benefits of the preventative nature of respite care to help protect vulnerable children (July 2011)
- submission to the Review of the Human Rights Charter (June 2011)
- submission to the Inquiry into Family Violence and Commonwealth Laws Response to Family Violence – Commonwealth Laws Discussion Paper (September 2011)
- written and verbal submissions to the Federal Parliamentary Inquiry on proposed national consumer credit legislation (October 2011).

### Conference Papers

#### Educational Dimensions of Poverty

Kathy Landvogt presented a paper at the ACOSS National Conference in March 2011 that advocated for proactive funding changes to reduce the impact of socio-economic status on educational outcomes.

#### Supporting Economic Participation and the Family Economy Labour Market Participation and Welfare Reform: The Labour Market and the Family

Tanya Corrie presented a paper at the Australian Social Policy Conference in July 2011.

#### Microfinance and the Household Economy Financial Inclusion, Social and Economic Participation and Material Wellbeing

Tanya Corrie presented a paper at the Financial and Consumer Rights Council Conference in September 2011.

### State government and community sector partnership

Kathy Landvogt, Manager of the Unit, was recently appointed co-Chair on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's Victorian Community Sector Partnership Research and Evaluation Working Group. This continues our advocacy to improve educational participation and attainment for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

### New publications

#### Women and Money DVD – Multilingual Version (July 2011)



Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service and Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre launched the multilingual version of the *Women and Money: stories, struggles and solutions* DVD.

This interactive DVD presenting real-life scenarios of financial crises including tenancy issues, family money arguments, unexpected expenses and the impacts of financial stress on children and young people, is now translated into Arabic, Sudanese Arabic, Burmese Chin, Burmese Karen, Dari (Persian), Vietnamese and Cantonese.

It is available free to community organisations.

#### Caught Short: Exploring the role of small, short-term loans in the lives of Australians, Interim Report (September 2011)

This is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project and is in partnership with RMIT University, The University of Queensland and National Australia Bank. The interim report was launched by the Hon. Bill Shorten MP on 23 September.

### **Filling the Gap: Service model, integrated post crisis response for women and children who have experienced family violence (April 2011)**

Funded by the Reichstein Foundation, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service partnered with McAuley Community Services for Women to produce a new model to improve the service system for supporting women and their children fleeing family violence.

'Filling The Gap: Integrated Post Crisis Response for Women Who Have Experienced Family Violence' makes recommendations to address a number of long-standing gaps in existing service provisions which make it harder for many women leaving situations of violence to rebuild their lives.

It was developed in consultation with a reference group comprising a range of key sector stakeholders as well as policy and practice experts in the field of family violence.

We released the model for comment from the family violence sector in July. We now look forward to drawing upon its recommendations to help create momentum for change.

### **Microfinance and the Household Economy: Financial inclusion, social and economic participation and material wellbeing (October 2011)**

This report was launched by the Hon. Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to celebrate the opening of Anti-Poverty Week in Victoria.

The research was produced by Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service's Tanya Corrie (pictured below at the launch of the report). The research found that people living on and below the poverty line are good money managers, but must constantly juggle finances to make ends meet. People interviewed for the research reported that getting a small loan gave them the confidence and breathing space to embark on a course of education, training and employment or simply look after the needs of their family.



## NEWS

### Just completed projects

#### Microenterprise

Funded by Consumer Affairs Victoria, this report examines the availability of micro-lending for business in Australia, the interaction with the consumer credit market in micro-business financing and the potential role and paradigm for community service organisation providers.

#### Disadvantaged pre-teens and their families: a scoping study for Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service

RMIT Masters of Social Work student, Rachel Close, has recently completed a project examining the needs of pre-teens. The study also examines the service gaps and service responses necessary for disadvantaged children between the ages of 8–12 years.

#### Social Media and Advocacy scoping study

RMIT Masters of Social Work student, Aurora Elmes, has recently completed a project examining how social media might be used effectively to further Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service's work in structural advocacy and promoting social justice.

#### The Financial Education Needs of CALD Communities: Developing a model

Monash medical students, Angela Hehir and Michael Moso have recently completed a project identifying potential models for community education programs on financial wellbeing for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

#### Developing Effective Local Financial Service Networks

Funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, this research is an examination of service networks in the areas of City of Yarra, Cairns, Western Sydney and Thursday Island. It describes community-based financial support pathways and how they interact through formal and informal service networks. The report will be published early 2012.

## Who's who in the Social Policy and Research Unit

The Social Policy and Research Unit farewells Marilyn Webster who after 10 years of working here has moved to the Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. The unit warmly thanks Marilyn for her enormous and impressive contribution to Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service's social policy and research efforts and wishes her well in her new position as the Centre's Director of Policy and Research.

While we farewell Marilyn, we cordially welcome Kathy Landvogt who has recently been appointed to the position of Manager of the Social Policy and Research Unit. We know that Kathy will be a great asset to Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service in this role.

We will soon farewell Jacinta Waugh from the Unit after her 12 month secondment. She will return to our St Albans office after making a significant contribution to the team.

<b>Kathy Landvogt</b>	Manager
<b>Barry Pullen</b>	Policy Consultant
<b>Tanya Corrie</b>	Social Policy Researcher
<b>Jacinta Waugh</b>	Senior Project Officer

In the past six months we have also had the following people working in our Unit:

<b>Amelia Dutton</b>	Administrative and Research Support
<b>Rathi Ramanathan</b>	Project and Research Assistant
<b>Barbara Moy</b>	Consultant
<b>Clare Shearman</b>	Consultant
<b>Michael Woods</b>	Consultant
<b>Rachel Close</b>	Student and Consultant
<b>Aurora Elmes</b>	Student
<b>Angela Hehir</b>	Student
<b>Michael Moso</b>	Student

We are Good Shepherd. Our mission is shaped by our inheritance of the vision, courage and audacity of Saint Mary Euphrasia Pelletier and the Good Shepherd tradition she began. Ours is a vision for promoting a world of justice and peaceful co-existence. Ours is the courage to embrace wholeheartedly innovative and creative ways of enabling people of all cultural, religious and social backgrounds to enjoy the fullness of life, which is the right of every human being. Ours is the inheritance to boldly challenge those structures and beliefs that diminish human dignity. We work to ensure the value of every human being, the communities that enable us all to thrive and the integrity of the environment that guarantees both.

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