

One Foot in Each World:

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES
FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE
IN THE MIDDLE YEARS
APRIL 2016

Author: **Magdalena McGuire**



Good Shepherd
Australia New Zealand

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Challenges and Opportunities for Children and Young People in the Middle Years

April 2016

Written by

Magdalena McGuire

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

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PO Box 182
Abbotsford VIC 3067
info@goodshep.org.au
www.goodshep.org.au

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
Dr Kathy Landvogt, Head of Women's Research, Advocacy and Policy (WRAP) Centre
Kathy.Landvogt@goodshep.org.au

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About Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (Good Shepherd) is a community services organisation that aims to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage with a focus on women and girls.

We are part of the global Good Shepherd network working to create just and equal communities where women and girls can live full, safe lives.

We provide a range of integrated community-based programs and services that support individuals and families at vulnerable times in their lives.

Our areas of specialisation are:

- **Safety and resilience** - providing support and counselling to individuals and families who face challenges such as financial insecurity, exclusion, isolation and violence. We offer family, youth and housing support services; domestic and family violence, refuge and recovery services; and community houses.
- **Educational pathways** - providing alternative education programs and an independent school to support young people who are disengaging from mainstream schools. Our kindergarten supports children's early learning and relationship development.
- **Financial security** - providing financial coaching and counselling to support people, particularly women, to improve their financial knowledge, capability and economic security. .

A central part of our purpose is to challenge the systems that entrench poverty, disadvantage and gender inequality. We do this through research, advocacy, building knowledge and evidence, and social policy development.

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Key findings

This report is based on a review of recent literature and policy relating to the middle years cohort (which, in this report, is defined as spanning a period from eight to 12 years of age). Based on this evidence, the report has developed a set of key findings about the middle years.

The key findings are that:

- 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.
- 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 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 focus on gender.
- Middle years children are presenting at young people's services at an increasingly younger age, and with increasingly complex problems.

- There are significant gaps in services for children and young people in their middle years. There is a need for age-specific services that focus on prevention and early intervention, and for services that address the challenges faced by girls and young women in their middle years. Services targeted at the middle years should be designed in consultation with children and young people themselves.
- The middle years represent a key 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.

Planning the way forward

This report identifies key initiatives that should be put in place to ensure that children and young people in their middle years receive appropriate and timely support, and that their needs are explicitly recognised and addressed by schools, service providers and policy makers.

In particular, there is a need to:

- Develop national and state policy frameworks that specifically address the needs of the middle years, including the gender-specific needs of girls and young women and boys and young men
- Build the expertise and capacity of the workforce that supports children and young people in their middle years
- Develop stronger links between children's, family and young people's services
- Develop stronger links between schools and the community sector
- Undertake consultations with service providers, education authorities and other relevant practitioners to scope the emerging issues for children and young people in their middle years
- Encourage service providers to develop policies and plans that cater for the needs of children and young people in their middle years
- Facilitate smoother transitions from primary school to secondary school
- Implement initiatives that address educational disengagement among children and young people in their middle years
- Invest in research about the needs and challenges facing children and young people in their middle years
- Invest in research that specifically addresses the needs and challenges faced by girls and young women in their middle years
- Develop age appropriate, evidence-based services and programs targeted at the middle years, including services and programs that specifically address the needs of girls and young women in their middle years

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 has a longstanding interest in the needs of children and young people in their middle years. In 2008, Good Shepherd undertook work to explore the service gaps that exist for this age group. Following this, 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. The practitioners 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 report builds on Good Shepherd’s previous work relating to the middle years. It seeks to make a contribution to the evidence in this field by providing a snapshot of recent literature and policy about this topic. The key findings from the recent literature and policy are outlined in the following sections of this report.

Findings from the literature

This section of the report outlines the key issues that were identified in the literature on the middle years.

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.¹

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.*

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.

¹ 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>.

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)
- 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 formation²

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.

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 inequality³

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.⁴ As Professor Candace Currie has pointed out, it is vital that we examine

² City of Yarra (2014) p 8; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 12.

³ 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.ccp.wa.gov.au/files/IssuesPapers/Issues%20Paper%20-%20Middle%20Years.pdf>.

⁴ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 12.

how we can positively influence the risks, and strengthen the protective factors, for children and young people in their middle years.⁵

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.⁶

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, 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 (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
- 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 years⁷

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.⁸

⁵ 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>.

⁶ Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) *The Middle Years: Uncharted Territory? ICRYAN Middle Years Conference Report, 2013*, p 18, available at <http://iellen.org.au/images/stories/pdf/middle-years-conference-report-2013.pdf>.

⁷ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2011) *Betwixt and Between: A Report on ARACY's Middle Years Project*, pp 19-25.

⁸ 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/0/129f78374f6bccafca257464000b7711/\\$FILE/Submission%20No%2052.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/129f78374f6bccafca257464000b7711/$FILE/Submission%20No%2052.pdf).

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.

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 diverse 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.⁹

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

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

⁹ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 7.

¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹ Kilpatrick, Haley with Joiner, Whitney (2012) *The Drama Years: USA*, Free Press, pp 90-91.

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 aspirations¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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” has become an integral part of “fitting in” for girls and young women. She says that:

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.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶ It can also adversely impact on how they relate to money, potentially leading to poorer financial outcomes in the future.¹⁷ 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.

¹² Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2012) “Sexualisation of Children”, *Issues Paper Nine*, pp 1-2, available at <http://www.ccp.wa.gov.au/files/IssuesPapers/Issues%20Paper%20-%20Sexualisation%20of%20Children.pdf>.

¹³ Harris, Anita Louise (2005) p 210.

¹⁴ Harris, Anita Louise (2005) pp 210-212.

¹⁵ Kilpatrick, Haley, quoted in Healy, Michelle (October 4, 2012).

¹⁶ Harris, Anita Louise (2005) pp 210-212.

¹⁷ 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>.

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.

Mental health and behavioural issues

The middle years are a critical stage in development.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

As this report has noted, children in their middle years can experience the early onset of puberty, which can begin as young as eight years old in some cases.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 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.²² However, girls who experience the early onset of puberty can face other social and sexual risks that stem from gender inequality and stereotypes.²³

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 reportedly 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 men on most measures of mental health.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, Currie has also found that girls and young women are more likely to have poor body image when compared to boys and

¹⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2011).

¹⁹ 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>.

²⁰ Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 21.

²¹ Mensah, Fiona and Patton, George (April 3, 2013).

²² Mensah, Fiona and Patton, George (April 3, 2013).

²³ Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia (2011) p 12.

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

young men. This is concerning given that poor body image can be damaging to girls' and young women's mental health and educational achievement.²⁵

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.²⁶

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.²⁷

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.²⁸

The literature emphasises that the middle years are a critical period in terms of early intervention as far as mental health is concerned.²⁹ 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.

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.

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

²⁵ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 7.

²⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008) p 3.

²⁷ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 8.

²⁸ Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 21.

²⁹ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 8.

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.³⁰ 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.

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.³¹ 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 education³²

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.³³

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.³⁴

³⁰ The Australian Child Wellbeing Project 'Research Findings and Resources', available at <http://australianchildwellbeing.com.au/research-findings-resources>.

³¹ 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.

³² City of Yarra (2014) p 29.

³³ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 9.

³⁴ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 9.

Children and young people in their middle years prioritise family and friends as important for a good life. Economic security is also important to their wellbeing. Higher levels of affluence can impact on life satisfaction and perception of health and wellbeing, particularly for girls and young women.

Violence

Who is at risk?

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.³⁵

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.³⁶

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.³⁷

Males are the most common perpetrators of violence against girls and young women. This holds true for both family violence and stranger-perpetrated violence.³⁸

³⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) "Personal Safety, Australia, 2012" available at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/A3CBE4BE7E950349CA257C3D000D8677?opendocument>.

³⁶ 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).

³⁷ 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*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, at p 175.

³⁸ 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>.

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 15.³⁹ In some instances, due to entrenched norms around masculinity, sexual violence against boys and young men may not be identified.⁴⁰ Men represent the majority of perpetrators of violence against boys and young men.⁴¹ 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.⁴² Therefore, a key strategy for preventing violence against women involves providing timely and appropriate support to both male and female victims.

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.⁴³ 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.

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.⁴⁴ Forced marriage is against the law in Australia. Forced marriage is in itself a form of violence and can be accompanied by other forms of violence, such as sexual assault, forced social isolation and economic abuse. 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.⁴⁵ Further work needs to be done in

³⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012).

⁴⁰ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands (2009) p 125.

⁴¹ White Ribbon “What About Violence Against Men?” available at <http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/resources/what-about-men>.

⁴² 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>.

⁴³ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and the Government of the Netherlands (2009) p 17.

⁴⁴ McGuire, Magdalena (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.

⁴⁵ Noone, Richard (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, Sarah (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->

Australia to understand forced marriage and to develop appropriate service responses and prevention initiatives in this area.

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.

Educational engagement

The middle years are a time when children and young people are at risk of disengaging from education.⁴⁶ Girls and young women in particular can begin to change their view of themselves as learners and start to doubt their own potential.⁴⁷ 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 locations⁴⁸

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

into-marriage-14-million-child-brides-married-every-year/news-story/e3d6841ceaa1dd1494da469d580641ec.

⁴⁶ Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 18.

⁴⁷ Blair, Heather (2000) 'Genderlects: Girl Talk and Boy Talk in a Middle-Years Classroom' *Language Arts* 77(4) 315-323 at p 315.

⁴⁸ 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.

than girls to meet the Year 7 benchmark for numeracy.⁴⁹ 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.

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ It has been acknowledged that teachers require better support to identify risk factors for educational disengagement among the middle years and to assist with their smooth transition from primary to secondary school.⁵²

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 learning⁵³

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

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ 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>.

⁵¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008) p 2; Lamb, Stephen et al (2015) p 15.

⁵² Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 23.

⁵³ 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*.

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.⁵⁴

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
- 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)⁵⁵

While the study by Good Shepherd 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 middle years at risk of educational disengagement.

⁵⁴ Lamb, Stephen et al (2015).

⁵⁵ Campbell, Lea; McGuire, Magdalena; and Stockley, Ché (2012) p 21.

Policy context

This section highlights that there is a lack of policies in Australia that specifically address the needs of children and young people in their middle years. It outlines existing policies that are relevant to the middle years cohort.

Relevant policies

In Australia, there is a lack of federal and state policies that specifically set out an approach to the middle years.⁵⁶ While there are policies for young people and for children, on the whole, policies that specifically address the needs of the middle years are noticeably absent.⁵⁷

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 partnerships 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:

- 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
- demonstrate leadership in the way the New South Wales Government intends to work with children and young people.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 7.

⁵⁷ 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/>.

⁵⁸ Advocate for Children and Young People (undated) "Strategic Plan for Children and Young People", available at <http://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/>.

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.

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

Services

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.

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.⁵⁹ Traditionally, services have focused on addressing the needs of the early years (zero to eight years) and young people (12 to 15 years).⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹

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.⁶²

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

⁵⁹ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 9.

⁶⁰ City of Yarra (2014) p 3.

⁶¹ Inner City Regional Youth Affairs Network (2013) p 7.

⁶² Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding—Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, p 67.

- Programs that address the different needs of girls and young women and boys and young men⁶³

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.⁶⁴ The identification and response to early warning signs (such as disengagement from school) are crucial to preventing more serious problems later on.⁶⁵

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.

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.⁶⁶

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 outcomes⁶⁷

⁶³ Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding—Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, p 68.

⁶⁴ City of Yarra (2014) p 9.

⁶⁵ City of Yarra (2014) p 9.

⁶⁶ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc (2010) p 10.

⁶⁷ City of Yarra (2014) p 9.

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.⁶⁸ 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
- Conduct consultations with middle years to find out what kind of program they would like to participate in
- Evaluate the feedback from the middle years and develop the program based on this feedback and the research
- Investigate what partnerships need to be put in place
- Consider how to monitor and review the program
- Consider how to promote and report on the program⁶⁹

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.

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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ Waverley Council (2011) *Tweens & Teens, Support for the Middle Years: Supporting Young People's Connection to Activities Project (SYPCAP)* p 8.

⁷⁰ Currie, Candace (2014) in ARACY Webcast, p 9.

⁷¹ Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2013) *Building the Scaffolding—Strengthening Support for Young People in Victoria*, p 41.

⁷² 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.

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
- 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 alcohol⁷³

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.⁷⁴

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:

1. **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.

⁷³ 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.

⁷⁴ 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.

2. **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.
3. **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.”⁷⁵

This report has identified 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.

⁷⁵ Kilpatrick, Haley with Joiner, Whitney (2012) pp 30-31.

Conclusion

The middle years are a cohort that is presenting to services with increasingly complex challenges, at an increasingly early age. Both girls and young women and boys and young men in their middle years can experience a range of challenges that include disengagement from school, early onset of puberty, mental health issues and engaging in risk-taking behaviours. However, girls and young women can face distinct challenges that stem from gender inequality and stereotypes, including issues relating to body image, mental health, wellbeing, self-esteem, education, early sexualisation and violence. More work needs to be done in order to understand these issues and to develop an evidence base relating to how best to support girls and young women in their middle years.

There continue to be significant policy and service gaps for children and young people in their middle years. These gaps need to be addressed as a matter of priority. This is particularly so given that the middle years represent a key opportunity for prevention and early intervention. That is, by providing timely and appropriate support to children and young people in their middle years, we may be able to prevent more significant problems from developing, and to help set them on positive life courses. This type of early intervention represents not only a good economic investment, but a vital social investment as well.

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