



Australian
National
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COMMUNITIES MATTER CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

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'Communities Matter: Children's Views on Communities in Australia'

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Graphic design by Emma Butz

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CONTENTS

The beginning	1
Thank you from the researchers	2
Our hope	3
This report	3
About the research	4
Who participated in the research?	5
What were the research questions?	5
What happened during the research?	6
What happened next?	8
Why aren't children's names alongside quotes and posters?	8
What children said about communities	9
What is a 'Community'?	10
The Community Jigsaw	11
Relationships: people and relationships are the heart of the community	13
Family	15
Time with parents	16
Friends	17
Good neighbours	19
Caring people	20
Community get-togethers	20
Being listened to	21
Safety	23
Positive interactions	25
No violence	26
No bullying	27
No drunkenness	27
Good places	29
Home	29
Inclusive places	30
Good environment	32
Resources	33
Financial security	33
Public services	33
School	35
Photo gallery	36
Thank you	39

The beginning

About five years ago, back in 2008, a group of researchers began to wonder: What do children think about the communities they live in? What do children like and value about their communities? What would they like to change?

Adults often talk about communities. Many people, including those in government who make decisions about our country and our lives, say it is important to have 'strong communities'. But we don't often hear what people aged between eight and twelve years think makes a community strong.

And so, the group of researchers decided to ask children what they think about the communities they live in. We decided to ask children what they think makes a strong and supportive community, for children and for adults.

We began a research project, which turned into a long and very exciting journey for us. We wrote a proposal to the Australian Research Council, asking for funding to talk with children about communities. It took us a long time to write the proposal, but it was successful – so we were very happy! Then we talked with organisations working in communities, with people who work for government, with school principals and with teachers, and with many other adults who think communities are important. We read many books and articles. We wrote about the kinds of things we wanted to discuss with children – this was called our 'research protocol'. We sent the research protocol to the Australian National University ethics committee, to make sure our research would be of high quality and would treat people with respect and dignity. Finally, we were able to start the most exciting – and most fun – part of our research journey. We began to talk with children.

Over three years, between October 2010 and December 2012, we spoke with 108 children across six different places in the eastern part of Australia. The children we spoke with were aged between eight and twelve years when we first met them.

This booklet has been written for two reasons. First, to tell the children who participated in the research about the results. We wanted them to be able to read about the things other children said, and to see their own ideas in print. Second, to tell children, who were not involved in the research but might be interested in what other children said, about the results. This booklet is written mainly for children, but we hope that adults also read it, and take notice of the things children told us.

Not all the children who participated in the research agreed on every issue. Sometimes there were very polite but very strong points of disagreement. We found that the children who participated in the research knew how to debate and disagree in a positive and constructive way.

The 'findings' or results of our research are the things that most children thought were very important. Sometimes, an issue was very important for children in one community, but not for children in other communities because communities are often very different from one another. If you participated in the research and your views are different from those presented here, it does not mean your views are not important. It certainly does not mean that your views are wrong. It simply means that your views are a bit different from what most children who participated in the research thought. But they are still your views and they are still very important.

Thank you from the researchers

There were four researchers who talked with children during this research:



Sharon Bessell



Tahira Jabeen



Yu Wei Neo



Hannah McInness

We were all based at The Australian National University (ANU) at the time of the research. Sharon is still at the ANU and is still doing research with children. If you want to talk more about this research, you can contact her.

Sharon's email address is sharon.bessell@anu.edu.au

We want to say a huge THANK YOU to all the children who participated in the research, who were generous enough to give us their time, and shared their amazing ideas and experiences with us. Sometimes the experiences children shared were very positive, sometimes they were funny, and sometimes they were very difficult and sad. We felt privileged to hear about both the bad and the good – and to learn from children how they think communities can be better and stronger.



We also want to say thank you to the teachers and principals at the schools where we did the research, and to the mums and dads who supported their children's participation in the research.

Jan Mason, from the University of Western Sydney was also a member of the research team, although she didn't talk directly with children. The Australian Research Council provided funding for the research. The Benevolent Society and NAPCAN also provided funding and support. We want to say thank you to them too.

Our hope

Before we started the research, we were absolutely sure that children would have interesting things to say about their communities. Now we know just how much children have to say, and how important their ideas are. Adults sometimes see things differently from children – so only asking adults what makes good, strong communities is not good enough. It is important to ask children too. We found that sometimes children have fantastic ideas and very serious concerns that adults might not think of. Children are part of communities, so children should always be able to have their say about the things that make a good community – and about the things that are not so good.

We hope that every adult who hears or reads what children had to say about their communities will take notice and think carefully about children's ideas and messages. We hope that adults will work together, and work with children, to make communities in Australia strong and supportive places for children.

We also hope that children are able to be and feel part of their communities. We hope that Australia can become a place where children's ideas and views are listened to and valued, and where all children feel part of their community.

This report

This report has two main sections. The next section describes how the research was done. The final section discusses what children told us.



ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Who participated in the research?

One hundred and eight children participated in this research, over about three years. The children were aged between eight and twelve years when they first participated in the research. Because research can take a long time, some of the people who participated might be about fifteen by the time this booklet is published. Their ideas about what makes a good community will probably have changed now that they are older and are doing different kinds of things. This research is about the views of children in what is sometimes called ‘middle childhood’. Children in this age group are not always listened to – despite the great ideas and important experiences they have. Some of the children who participated in this research said that there is not enough for children in ‘middle childhood’ to do in their communities:

The children who participated in this research came from six communities across eastern Australia. We talked with children at their schools.

“There’s not much for kids of our age. There’s lots of stuff for little kids, like the little kiddie rides at the playground; and stuff for teenagers to do. But there’s not nothing for us in our middle age ”

girl, aged 11

What were the research questions?

We wanted to know how children define ‘community’, what they think makes a good and supportive community, and what they would like to change. We wanted to know these things in the hope that people who make policies and deliver services will listen, and act on the things that are important to children.

Our research was shaped by the following questions:

- How do children define, describe and value their communities?
- In what ways do children participate in their communities?
- How do children engage with and contribute to networks within their communities?
- How do children contribute to and benefit from social capital within their communities?
- What do children wish to change about their communities?
- What would make community strengthening interventions successful from children’s perspectives?

What happened during the research?

The research was based on the belief that children have the right to share their views if they wish to do so and those views should be respected. The research was based on the following principles:

- All children's views should be valued and respected
- Children are experts on their own lives and know a lot about their communities
- The research should be a good experience
- Children's ideas, views and experiences must be taken seriously
- Participation by children must be entirely voluntary
- Children must be free to stop being part of the research at any time, or to choose not to take part in specific activities
- The research should be a safe place where children could share their views freely

The research with each group of children began with the researchers explaining what the research was about and asking children whether they would like to be involved. Before the research began, children had told their teachers or principles they were interested in being involved and their parents had given their consent. It was still important that children were able to hear more about the research and decide whether or not they wanted to be involved.

The first research activity was a group discussion about what community means, with lots of ideas shared about what a community is. Then we used a range of activities to explore what makes good communities and what needs to change. The activities were:

Map-making

Children were invited to draw a map of their community, highlighting the following things:

- the places they like to go;
- the places they prefer to stay away from;
- the things they like to do;
- the people who are important;
- the people they prefer to stay away from (if any).

The researchers then talked with children about their maps and what was good and or not so good about the various places and people on the community maps.

Poster-making

Children were invited to make a poster with a key message about what makes a good community, what needs to change or what adult decision makers need to think seriously about. Some children made posters individually and some worked in groups. Some children made more than one poster.

Researchers then talked to children about their messages to make sure we understood them. The children who wanted to then shared their posters and key messages with the rest of the group.

Written Messages

Children were invited to write on pieces of paper the things they most liked about their communities and the things they most wanted to change. Children wrote these messages individually and privately and discussed them with the researchers but not with other children.

Drawing

In this activity, children were asked to draw pictures of what a happy and safe community would look like. The drawings were then used as the focus of a discussion about what makes a good community and how children see their role within it.

Final issues discussion

The research ended in each school with a group discussion, including children and researchers, about the issues raised. This discussion highlighted the most important issues. The aim of this discussion was not to agree on everything, but to make sure the researchers understood the important messages and issues.

Not all children took part in all activities – sometimes they preferred to just be involved in only some activities.

What happened next?

Most of the discussions between the researchers and the children who participated were recorded on an audio recorder. We then had someone type up all the recordings, so the researchers had a written record (called transcripts) of the things children said. After that we read all the transcripts and looked for the common themes, and the important messages. We also looked for differences between children and between communities. This is the analysis. There were about 2,000 pages of transcripts, so it took us a very long time to do the analysis. Part way through the analysis we returned to some of the children to check that we were on the right track.

Then, finally, we started writing this booklet and other reports. We have also been talking with people who make policies and deliver services to let them know what children said was good – or not good – about communities.

Why aren't children's names alongside quotes and posters?

One of the tricky issues in research is 'confidentiality' – that is the idea that people should be able to give their ideas without worrying that someone else will find out what they said. This means that people are able to say things without worrying they will get into trouble, be laughed at, or feel silly later. But of course, some people say, 'well those are my ideas and I want my name to be next to them – I don't care about confidentiality.'

In this research we have not named children or their communities, because we wanted everyone to feel able to say anything they wanted. We also knew that the research would take a long time, and sometimes people change their minds and don't want to be named for something they said a year or two ago. For these reasons, we only say whether a quote is from a boy or a girl and how old that person was at the time of the research. Some of the posters do have people's first name.

Our concerns about confidentiality do not mean that your ideas belong to anyone but you – and the contribution of everyone who participated in this research is very important. The first names of the children who participated in the research are at the end of this booklet.

The researchers involved in the research feel very proud to have been part of it – and we hope the children who participated also feel proud of the amazing ideas they contributed.

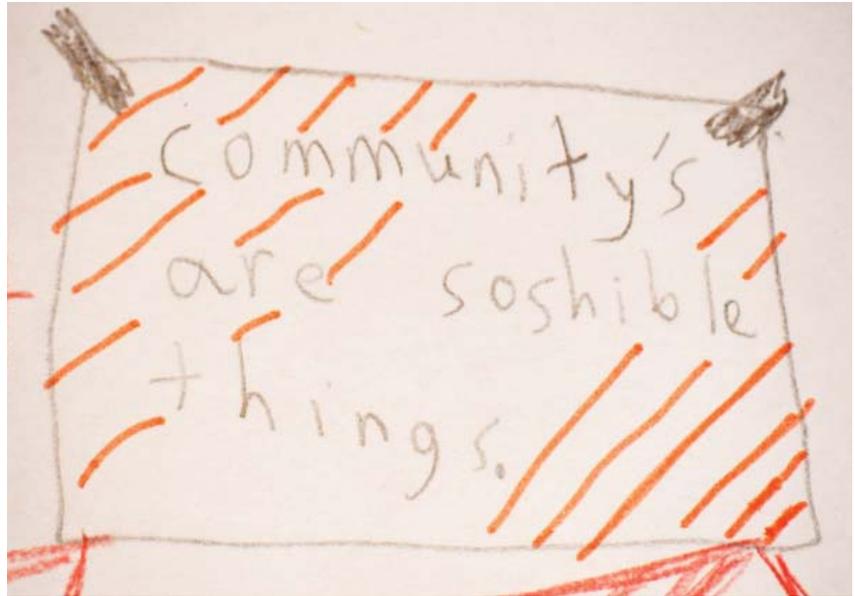


WHAT CHILDREN SAID ABOUT COMMUNITIES

What is a 'Community'?

We did not begin this research with our own definition of community. Instead, we asked children what community means to them and how they define community. After talking with children about what community means to them, we came up with the following definition:

Community is a social space within which people are personally connected and known to one another. Within this social space, people provide friendship and support to one another and work towards common goals. Respect and kindness are very important. In times of severe difficulty or crisis, communities need to be supported by helping professionals, such as police and ambulance services. The people who make up a community can be diverse.



When we describe community as a 'social space', we mean that a community is often built around a particular place, but it is more than the place alone – it is about people and relationships between people. Most children defined community as something social.



Communities should be fun...

...but are even more important in hard times.

'A community is a place where people live and come together and have fun.'

'Community is more important when things are not fun – when things go wrong community is really important.'

While many children described their community as being around their homes, some also said they had communities in other parts of Australia or in other countries. A lot of children had family members or friends living in other countries, and described these people as part of their community too. One school had a relationship with a school in Africa, and several children said the school in Africa is also part of their community.

The Community Jigsaw

The children who participated in this research had lots of ideas about what makes a good community. There is not one, single thing that makes a community a good and supportive place to live, and strong communities have several positive characteristics.

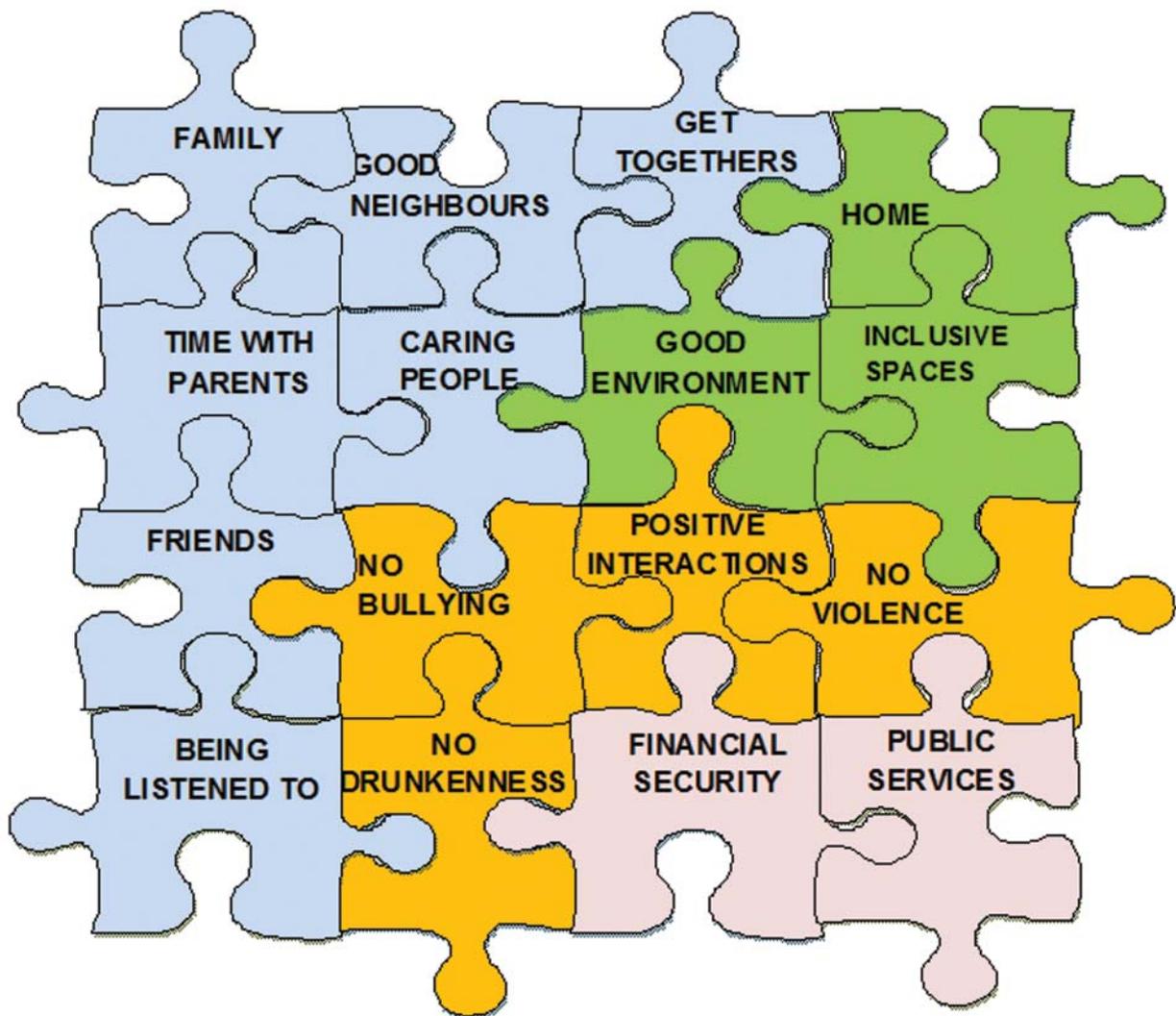
One girl, who was ten when she took part in the research, described a community as being like a puzzle: you need to have all the pieces in place to make it work. From this idea, we developed the Community Jigsaw Puzzle, which includes all the pieces that most children said were important. When all the pieces of the puzzle are in place, a community is a strong, supportive place for children and also for adults. The more pieces that are missing, the less supportive a community is. We like the idea of the Community Jigsaw Puzzle, as it helps people (children and adults) think about the good parts of their communities and the things that need to be improved. We hope the Community Jigsaw Puzzle helps people (and especially adults) work out how they can make communities great places for children.

**“ A community is like a puzzle,
you need to have all the bits
to make it work. ”**

girl, aged 10

There are four big themes that make up the community jigsaw. They are:

- RELATIONSHIPS
- SAFETY
- PLACES
- RESOURCES



RELATIONSHIPS:

PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE HEART OF A COMMUNITY



Most children who participated in this research thought that people and relationships between people are the most important part of community. Caring, supportive relationships were considered to be at the heart of communities.

I reckon the community should be a place where people can bond together instead of being separated. Like I think a community should have things that bring all of the people that live around together

girl aged 10

A community is a family of people

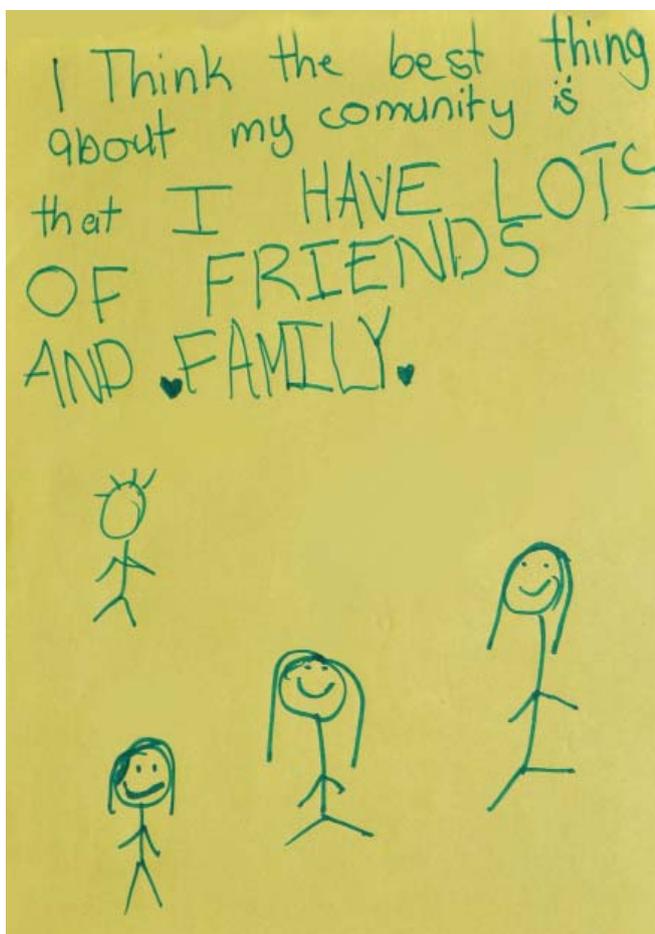
boy aged 9

I think community is people helping out each other

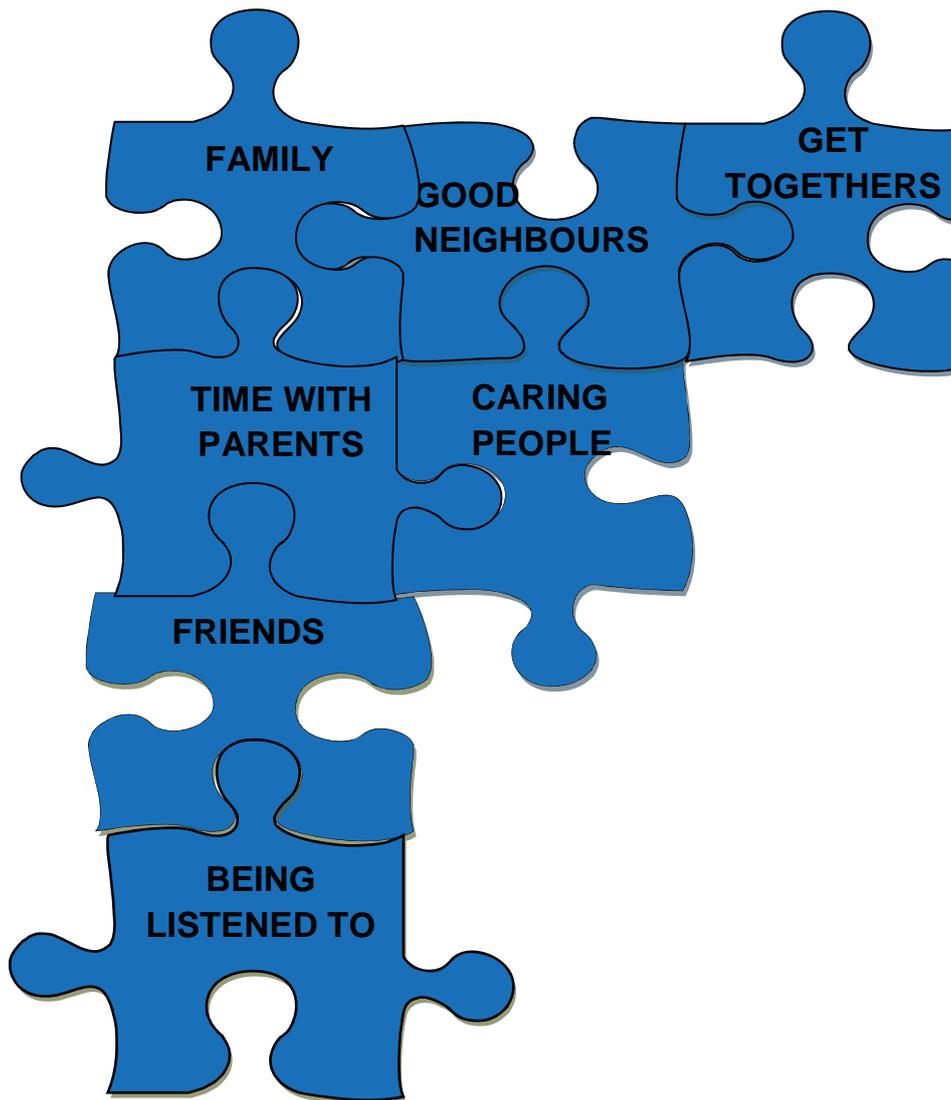
girl aged 8

To me it means the people in your local area and the community work together and try to make it better.

boy aged 9



Under the big theme of relationships, most children who participated in this research identified seven puzzle pieces that are important.



Family

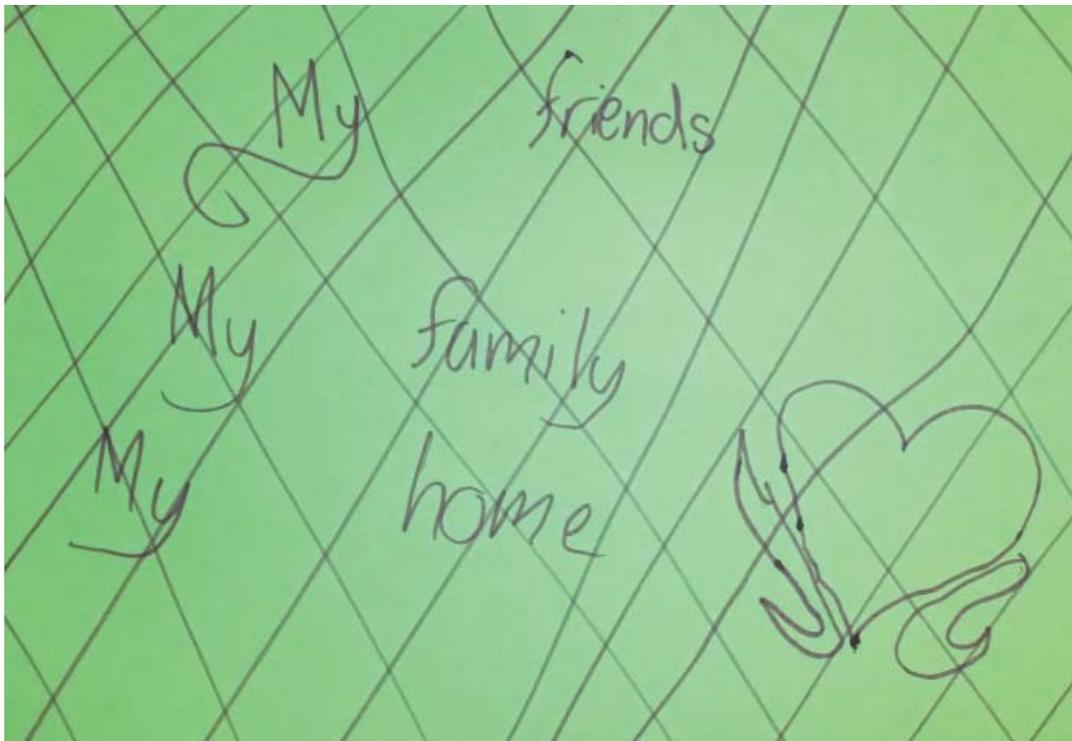
Most children said their family was the most important part of their community – and the most important part of their lives. Almost all children said having a loving caring family is important. Many children described their family as the centre of their community.

A lot of children said they sometimes fight with their brothers and sisters – but their brothers and sisters were still very important as playmates and as ‘someone to be there for you’.

‘Friends and family are most important .’

‘Family is definitely the best .’

‘My mum is like really funny. She is like, she just cherishes us, she like, loves us a lot.’



Not everyone had a good experience of family – many children wanted their parents to spend more time with them, to listen to them and to talk with them.

‘My parents don’t even listen to me and my sister. We literally have to talk to each other about our problems. Like...hello !’

‘I just want my dad to care about me .’

Many people think that family is about adults looking after children. The children who participated in this research said it was important for adults to care for children, but they also described the ways in which children care for and support other members of their family. Some children spent a lot of time looking after younger brothers and sisters – and some looked after their parents at least some time. Some children worked in family businesses or did housework. Girls were more likely to do housework than boys.

Time with parents

Most of the children who participated in this research said it was very important to have time with their parents. Several children said it was difficult for them to be involved in their communities if their parents weren't involved.

More than half the children who participated in the research said that they did not have enough time with their parents.

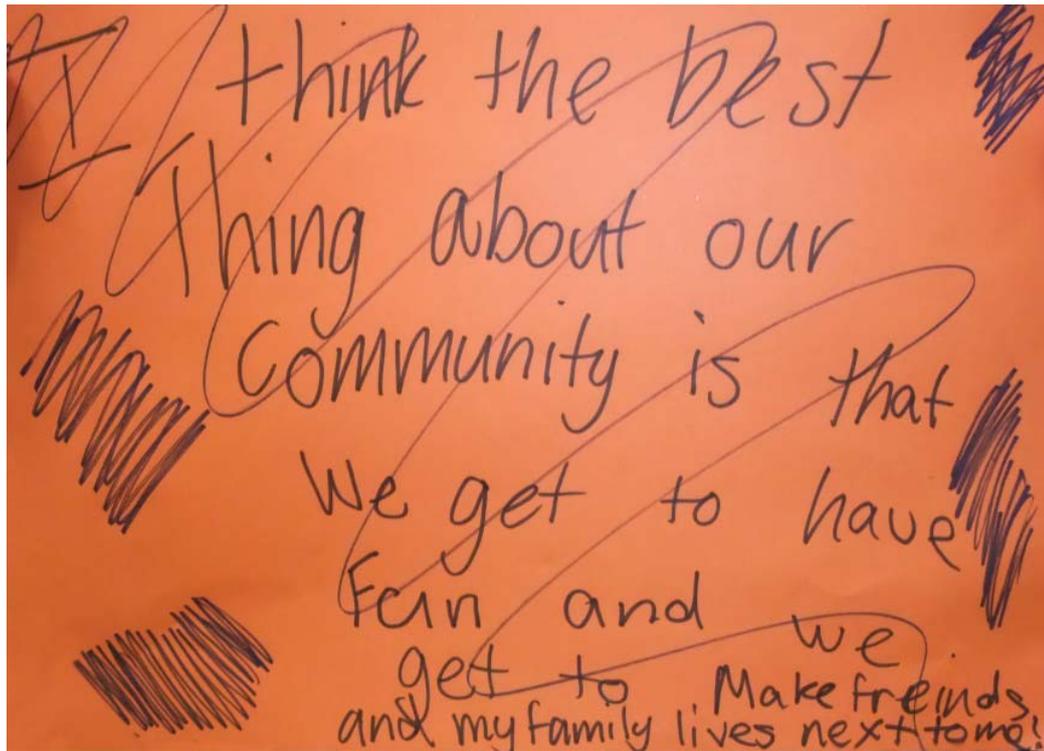
What stops children having enough time with parents? Children said there are two main reasons:

1. Lots of parents are really busy. Some children said their parents (especially dads) worked very long hours in their jobs. When parents work long hours they don't have much time for their children – and when they are at home, they are too tired to do much. Some children said their parents (especially mums) were really busy not only working in their jobs but also cooking, cleaning and looking after little brothers and sisters. All of that didn't leave much time.
2. Some children said their parents like to socialise with other adults, rather than spending time with their children. Some children said their parents like to go to clubs or pubs, and prefer not to have their children with them. Some children said they were left in the children's rooms of clubs while their parents socialised. A lot of children who were regularly left in children's rooms at clubs described them as boring, and places they prefer not to have to go to. Some children said their parents or their parents' friends drink a lot of alcohol when they socialise. Many of these children said adults are not nice to be around if they drink too much alcohol and get drunk.

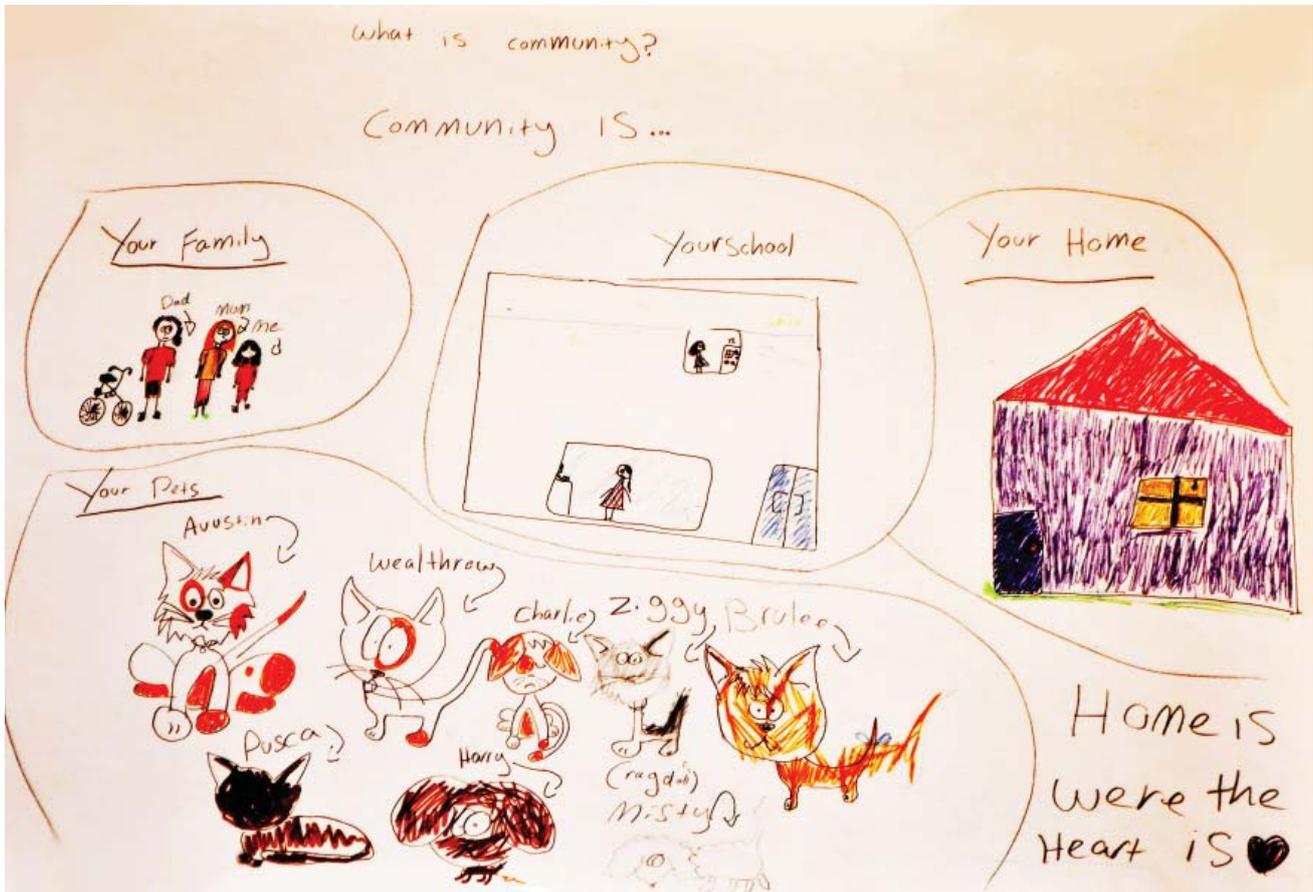
Friends

Friends are a very important part of the community. School is the place where children are most likely to make friends – and most children said friends are the best thing about school.

A lot of children said that friends make a community fun – and explained that it is good to have friends living close by.



Some children described not only having human friends, but also animal friends. Pets can be an important part of the community.



Good Neighbours

The children who described feeling safe and happy and having a strong sense of community usually knew their neighbours and had lots of supportive and friendly people around them. This research suggests that good neighbours are important. Good neighbours watch out for one another, are friendly, and sometimes share food or other things. Children who knew their neighbours and got on well with them described feeling safe and happy because they knew there were people looking out for them.

A lot of children said that it was important to have other children living nearby or as part of the community, as that made a community fun. One 11 year old boy said 'It would be great if every house had at least one kid.' However, children don't always get along or want to play together – and some children described having people the same age as them living close-by who were not friendly or, sometimes, behaved in ways that were scary (such as swearing, calling names, or being physically violent).



Caring People

Many children said that it is not only the people you know who make a community strong and supportive, it is also the people you meet daily but don't know well, such as shopkeepers and bus drivers. These people can make children feel safe and welcome in the community – or they can make children feel unwelcome and uncomfortable. Some children described bus drivers or shopkeepers being rude or ignoring them – and that made them feel bad. Some children described people driving past in cars and yelling rude comments, and a small number of children said drivers had thrown things at them. This made children feel very bad and very unsafe.

On the other hand, friendly shopkeepers or bus drivers, who said 'hi' and smiled, created a more positive environment. A lot of children also said that adults are important, and it is often adults who make children feel safe and welcome in a community.

There was a very strong view that everyone in a community should be treated with respect, no matter how old – or young – they are.



Children had a very important message for adults:

Adults can make a big and positive difference in a community by being kind and friendly towards children.

Community Get-Togethers

Many children who participated in the research said they enjoyed shows, fetes and community celebrations that bring people together. A large number of children said they would like to have more of these events in their community.

Being Listened To

Most children who participated in this research said in strong communities everyone is included and respected. For many children this meant having the opportunity to have a say on what is happening in the community.

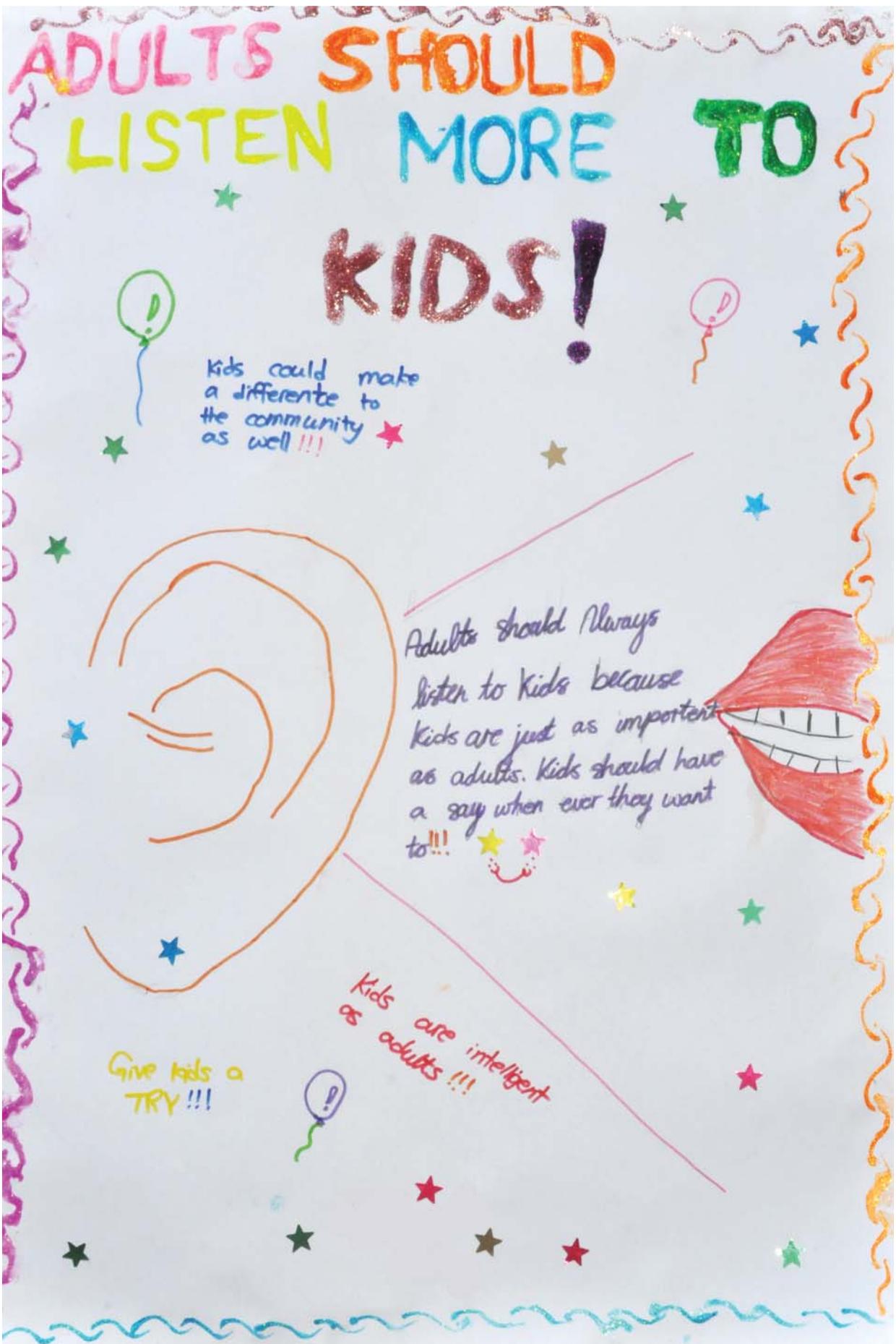
Sadly, the majority of children who participated in this research did not feel that they were listened to within their community – even when they had something important to say.

This is something that adults can change!



A great idea: Community Suggestion and Feelings Boxes

One girl, who was 11 when she participated in the research, said there should be two suggestion boxes at shopping centres: one where people (and especially children) can post ideas about how to improve the community and one where they can post how they feel about their community.

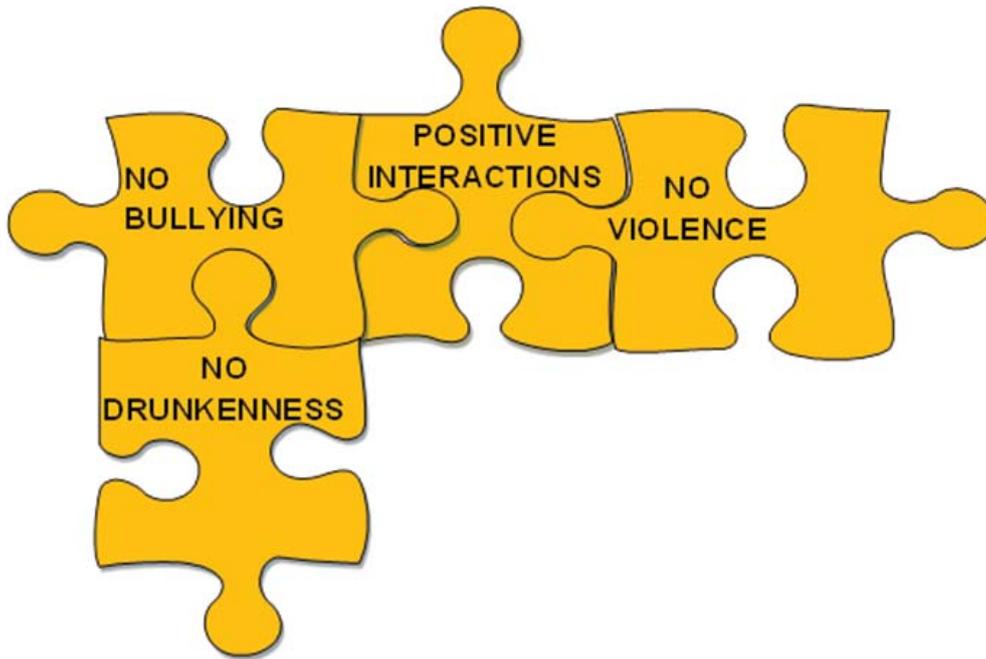


SAFETY

Almost every child who participated in this research said that feeling safe in the community is very important.



Lots of things make a safe community, but children said that four puzzle pieces are very important.

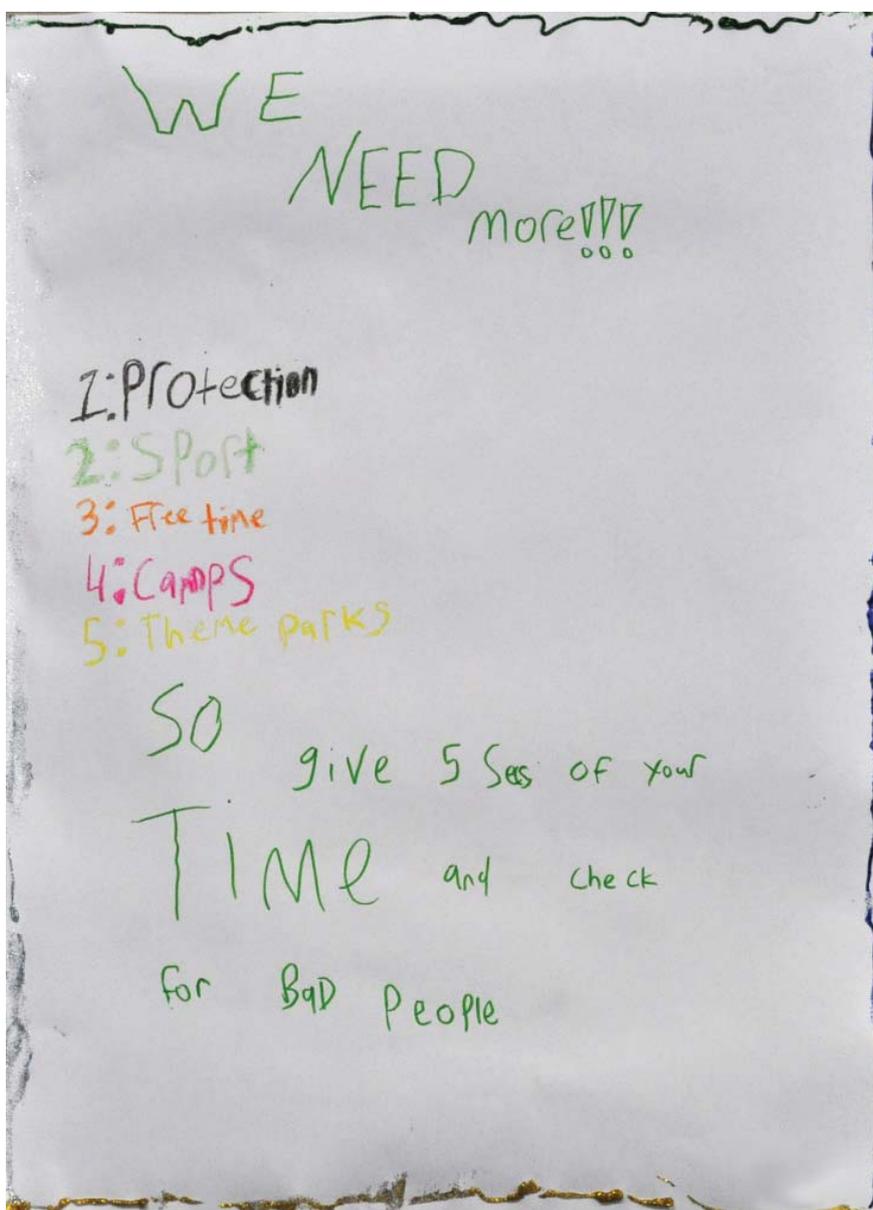


Positive Interactions

Relationships with other people were important to how safe children felt in their communities. Children said they felt safe when their day-to-day interactions with other people were friendly and when people in their community were supportive. Children also felt safer when they knew a lot of people in their community, because knowing people meant they had someone to turn to if they had a problem.

Several children said they thought adults should look out for children and make sure they are safe – even if they don't know them well.

'It feels safe because I know my community – I know them very well and I know that they'll never hurt me or never do something bad. For example, there's no strangers in our community – I know my whole neighbourhood so it's OK. I ride my bike sometimes and say hi to my neighbours.'



No Violence

Communities that are free from violence made children feel safer. Some children said that people (often adults) behaved violently in their community, for example fighting or swearing. This made children feel very unsafe.

Children also felt very unsafe when people drove cars in dangerous ways. Some children thought this was a type of violence. Speeding, doing burn-outs and doughnuts, and road rage all made children feel very unsafe. In some communities, children felt so unsafe they did not want to go onto the street.

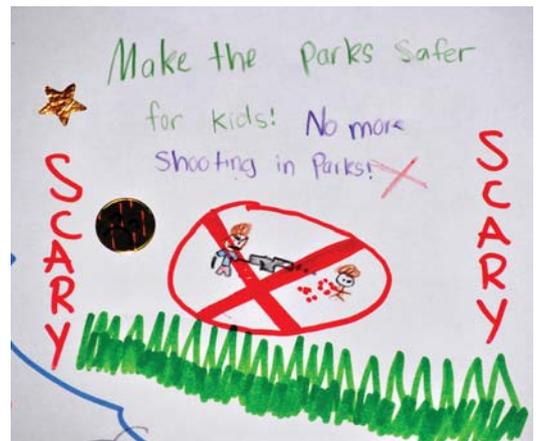
'I like some of the speed limits. Especially near the schools – the school is safer when there are lolly pop people and when they [police] patrol the streets.'



The message was very clear:

Adults need to stop this kind of behaviour.

Children who lived in communities that are free from violence felt much safer and much happier.



No Bullying

When children spoke about bullying, it was usually at school – although some children spoke of being bullied in other places in their community. Bullying made children feel unwelcome and unsafe. Almost all children who participated in this research said bullying was a serious problem that makes communities, and particularly schools, bad places to be.

No Drunkenness

A lot of children who participated in this research said they sometimes or often saw drunk people (sometimes teenagers, but usually adults) in public places. Children said that drunk people were very scary and often behaved very badly. They also said that drunk people are unpredictable – you never know what they might do next. Most children said that adults are more likely to be violent or to swear and be aggressive when they are drunk.

Some children also worried that adults would hurt themselves when drunk, especially if they tried to drive a car.



The message was very clear:

Children do not want adults to get drunk. Drunken behaviour makes children scared. When adults drink alcohol, they should do so responsibly.



No drinking alcohol
because it is not
good for your body.

~~They~~
Adults can harm other
people.



Stop

No drinking

drinking

now!!!



stop drinking!!!

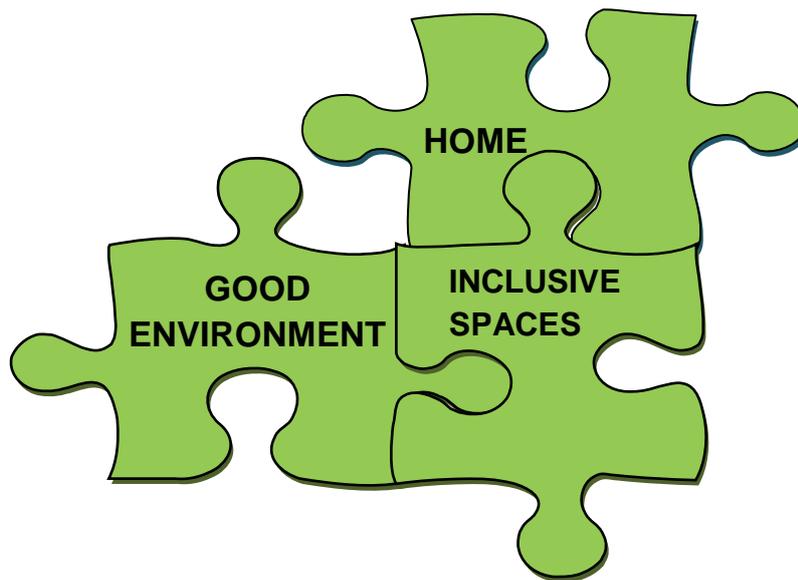
now



GOOD PLACES

Most children said places are important in a community – and many children described great places in their own communities.

Most children said three puzzle pieces are important.

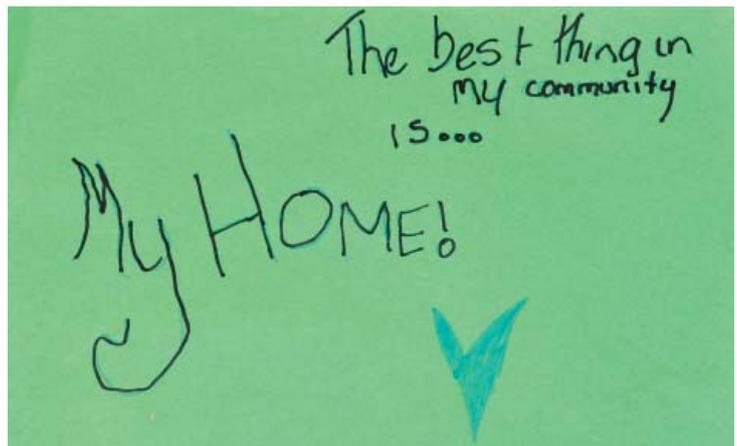


Home

Home was the most important place for most children who participated in this research. Most children described home as being the physical centre of their community.

Many children described their home or part of their home, such as their bedroom, as their own special place. But some children said they did not feel very safe at home.

Children said having good neighbours and being in a friendly street helped to make home a good place. Being close to fun places, such as parks and playgrounds, also helped to make home a good place.



Inclusive Places

Children said that good places are places where everyone feels included and welcome, regardless of age.

Children said that fun places are very important in a community. Parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, and cinemas were some of the fun places that children talked about.



A lot of boys said they loved skate parks, and many boys wished there were more skate parks in their community.

Girls were less likely to enjoy skake parks, but wanted more fun, safe, inclusive places to play and hang out. A lot of girls said there were not enough places to play once a person turns ten or eleven years.



Boys and girls wanted fun, welcoming places for people of their age. Many children said there are more fun places for adults, teenagers and toddlers, than for people in their age group (between eight and twelve years). A lot of children said they wanted to use play equipment in their local parks, but it was often designed for very little children not for them. The children who participated in this research wanted equipment that is exciting and challenging.



A great idea:

We need more exciting play equipment for eight to twelve year olds!

Good Environment

Most children who participated in this research said that a 'good environment' is important in a community. A good environment has:

No graffiti

No graffiti – especially graffiti that uses rude words

'There is a lot of graffiti with swearing and rude words around – and I think it is so sad that some little children learn to read like that,'



No litter

Most children were very annoyed when litter made their communities look ugly. Most children said cigarette butts and dog poo are especially disgusting. Children were particularly concerned about broken glass because it is dangerous.

Play equipment in good repair

Parks and playgrounds are very important to children, but they are not fun – and can be dangerous – if the equipment is broken or in poor repair.

Footpaths

Footpaths are important. Footpaths allow children to move around their communities by walking, riding bikes or scooters. Some children said the footpaths in their communities are in poor repair and unsafe to use – especially on bikes or scooters. In some communities there were no footpaths, very narrow footpaths, or footpaths only on one side of the road. In some communities, cars parked on footpaths so children could not use them.

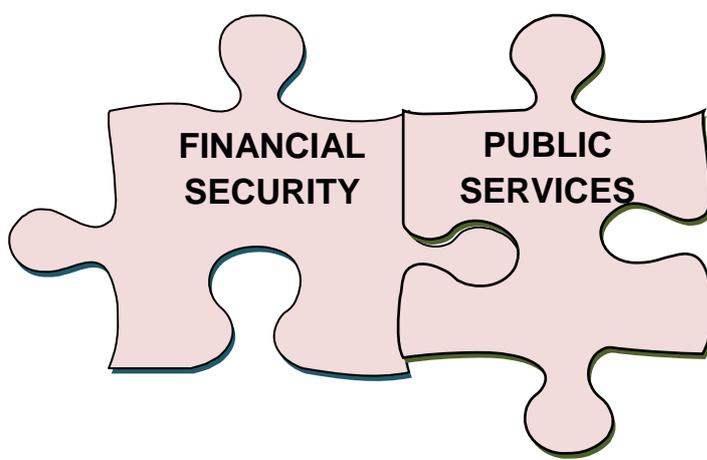


The message was clear.

People who design and develop communities must build proper footpaths.

RESOURCES

Resources, both money and the things we have access to, make a difference to children's experience of community. Many children described two puzzle pieces as important: financial security, or the amount of money their family has; and public services, or the things governments provide for people (like hospitals, schools or roads).



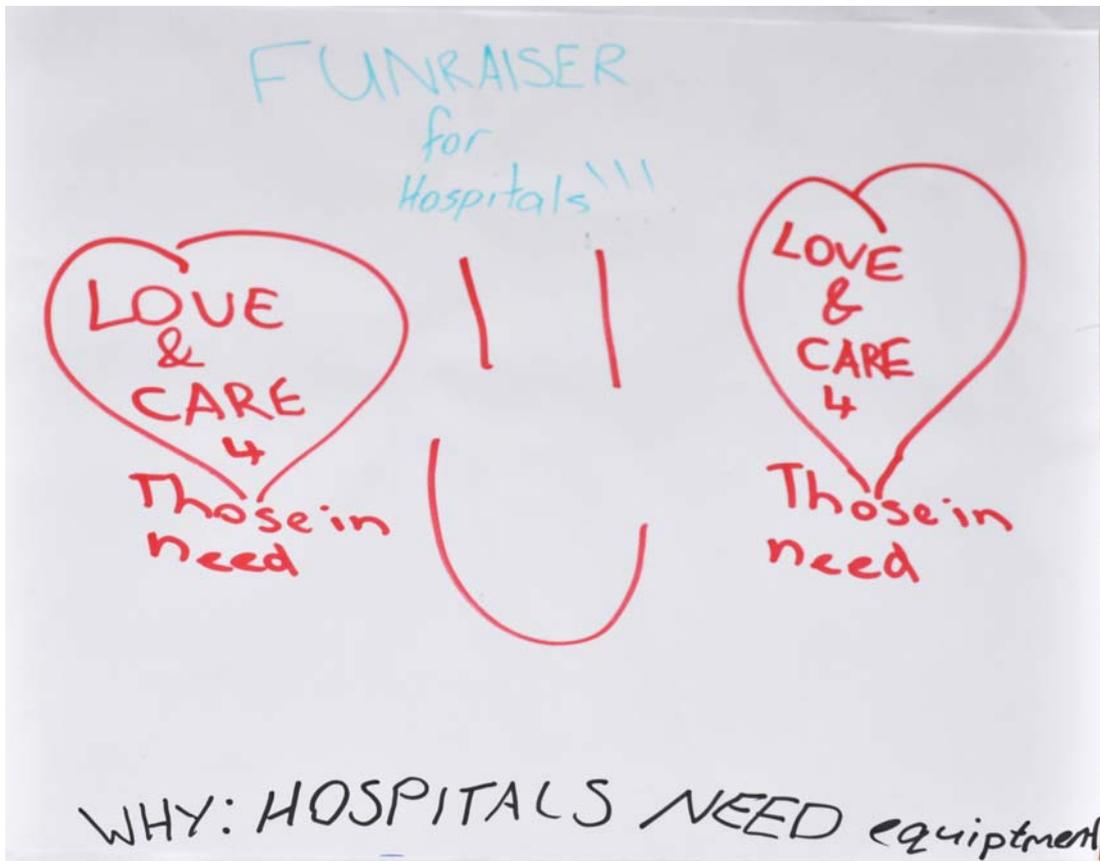
Financial Security

The financial position, or the amount of money families have, made a big difference to the ways children described their experience of community. Some of the children who participated in this research are from families where there is not very much money. Some children said that they were not able to play sport or take part in other community activities because they cost too much money. While some community activities are free or cheap, things like sport, dance or music often cost a lot. Some children said they did not ask their parents about taking part in some activities because they knew their parents could not afford to pay and they did not want to make their parents feel bad.

Public Services

A lot of children who participated in this research were concerned about things like health care and safety on the streets of their community. Many children said there should be more hospitals and that people who are sick or injured should not have to wait too long for medical care. Several children said they would like to see more police in their communities, to make sure everyone is safe.

Several children were concerned about homelessness and said that the government should make sure everyone has a safe place to live.



SCHOOL

Children had different views about whether school is part of their community, a community on its own, or not part of the community.

Some children said that school is not really part of the community because teachers go home to their own community at night.

Others said school is definitely part of their community – and an important part.

Most children agreed that school is good when:

- There are good friends
- Teachers are kind and caring and listen to children
- There is no bullying – or bullying is dealt with by teachers
- Children feel safe
- The school yard is clean and people don't leave behind litter or dog poo after the weekend.
- There is play equipment and fun things to do in breaks

All the children who participated in this research said school is a big part of their lives, and most said it is important. Most children said that while school is important, other parts of the community (outside school) are very important too. Most children said that community is much more than just school.



School is important, but community is more than school.

THINGS I LIKE ABOUT MY COMMUNITY



THINGS I DON'T LIKE ABOUT MY COMMUNITY



THE MAIN THING ABOUT COMMUNITIES IS TO HAVE...

a place to go where you feel happy, safe and comfortable.

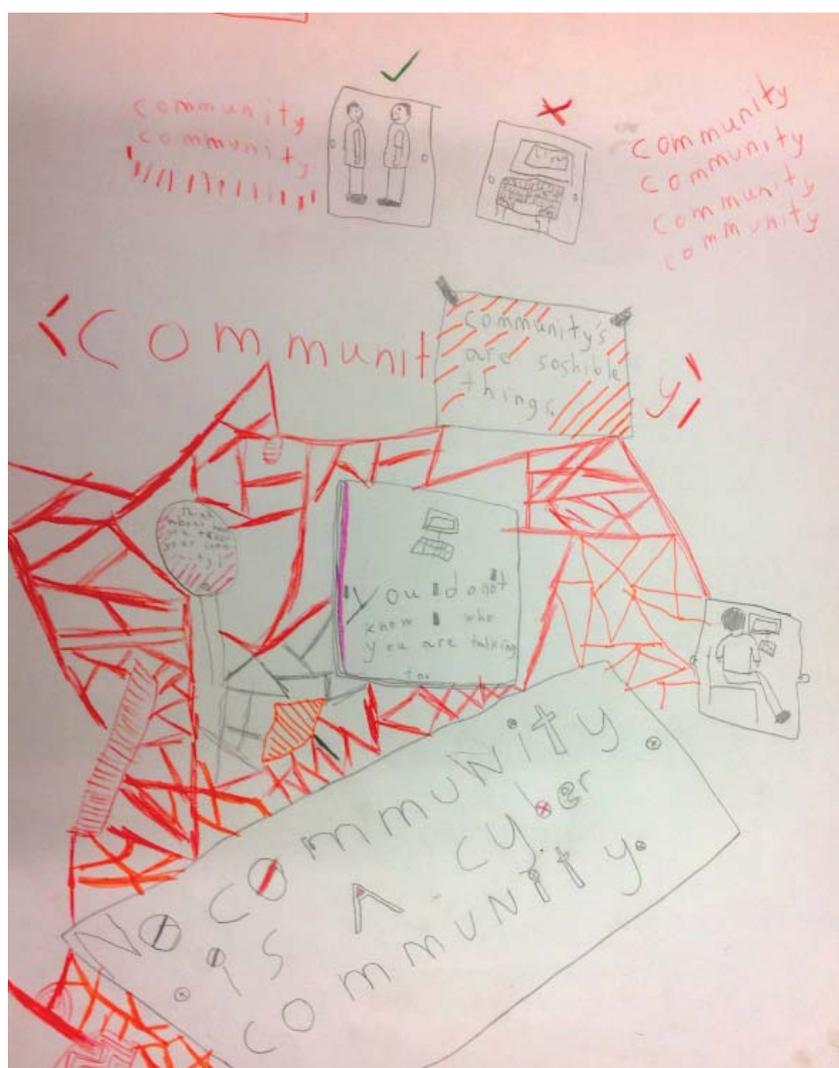
Like a nature reserve

and

friendly people that you love to spend time with.

like friends and family





AN ENORMOUS THANK YOU TO:

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