

Key Findings from Phase One Report



The ACWP is being conducted by a consortium of researchers at Flinders University (Adelaide), the University of New South Wales (Sydney), and the Australian Council for Educational Research (Melbourne), in order to understand what is important for young people's wellbeing from children's own perspectives. In the first phase of this project, researchers talked to about 100 Australian young people (aged 8-14), most of whom belong to groups often considered to be marginalised. These include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people with disability, young people in regional and remote Australia, economically disadvantaged young people, and young people in out-of-home care. Groups of young people considered to be in 'the mainstream' were also included for comparison. Findings from these discussions are being used to design and conduct a nationally representative survey of wellbeing among young people aged 8-14 years, to be piloted in early 2014 and rolled out nationally in July-September 2014. This survey will provide important information for policy makers, service providers, schools and researchers about Australian child wellbeing.

In the focus groups and interviews, young people were asked to discuss what is important in their lives. In all groups we talked to 'family' was nominated most frequently as the primary 'domain' concerning young people's wellbeing. Other domains frequently mentioned included friends, school, health, community, feeling good about yourself, and money and material goods (though these domains often meant different things to different groups of

young people). Issues such as bullying, guidance and rules, stress, and learning were discussed as domains that could emerge across a number of different primary domains such as family, friends, and school. An overview is provided below of the findings from the phase one research, organised into the seven primary domains and illustrating the interaction of those domains for wellbeing that can cross-cut between them.

Family

Family was ranked consistently by young people in each group as the most important domain for their wellbeing. Definitions and perceptions of family structures differed, but all young people emphasised relational and functional aspects of family life. Some young people saw their family as their immediate nuclear family, while others included grandparents or family members such as step-siblings in other households. The Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse groups consistently referred to extended family networks including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles, and cousins. Children living in out of home care did not refer to foster carers as family but referred to parents and siblings. Many young people nominated pets as family members or friends (particularly those with disability or in out of home care). Relational aspects of family life that concerned love, support and having fun were emphasised, and some raised concerns about fighting (between parents or siblings), and bullying by siblings which could extend (or cross-cut) into school experiences. Reciprocal care was a feature of family life in several groups (especially among Aboriginal young people and young people with disability), with several young people perceiving both the provision and receipt of support as enjoyable, and as an integral part of their wellbeing.

Friends

Friends were ranked very high by young people in four groups as sources of wellbeing, and less highly by young people in three groups (including young Aboriginal people; young people with disability; and culturally and linguistically diverse young people). Many young people referred to ‘good friends’ and ‘bad friends’, where ‘good friends’ stood up for you and provided trust, closeness, and support; while ‘bad friends’ could turn their back on you or bully you. Most young people developed and maintained friendships at school, and many (particularly young people with disability and young people who were economically disadvantaged) counted their pets as friends. In contrast to most cohorts, friendships were

problematic for young people with disability, who often struggled to establish and maintain them due to perceptions of being viewed as different. Consequently, some young people with disability prioritised friendships within their extended family, such as cousins – a preference also noted by some Aboriginal young people.

School

School was generally ranked in the middle by young people in the mainstream; out of home care; culturally and linguistically diverse; and regional and remote groups, otherwise quite low by young people in the disability; economically disadvantaged; and Aboriginal groups. Young people however generally agreed on the benefits of school: to gain an education with a view to securing a satisfying job in the future, and as a social meeting place to develop friendships. In contrast, young people with disability viewed school as a precarious place that they associated with bullying and exclusion. Some young people reported being stressed or anxious about school as a result of pressures associated with excessive amounts of homework. Many young people said that they felt safe at school, and in transit to and from school, because of rules in place to control students' behaviour. However many school rules, such as those for uniforms or 'out-of-bounds areas' were questioned or labelled 'silly rules', to be endured with a degree of suspicion. For culturally and linguistically diverse young people, school was a place for cultural integration and practicing English skills. While young people in all groups viewed school as a place of learning, some young people (especially those in the Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse groups) also viewed learning as occurring at home or within their communities.

Community

The concept of 'community' seemed confusing for many young people and was ranked quite low by most, except by young people in the culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal groups. For others, the mention of 'online communities' helped to stimulate ideas– which as one person put it, could 'be people you know of' but might not know intimately. For others, community encompassed different groupings, relationships, and domains spanning family and school, the local council, and sporting clubs. The culturally and linguistically diverse group were unique in having a global conception of community, and their narratives at times included themes of war, peace or cultural conflict which, if pursued

further, could relate to the cross-cutting domain of stress or anxiety. For young people in the Aboriginal group, concepts of community strongly merged with concepts about family, particularly emphasising the value of intimate kinship networks and learning about culture (values also noted by culturally and linguistically diverse young people, but less so by other groups).

Health

Many young people regarded health as important for their wellbeing. Most ranked the health domain in the middle, behind family, friends and school. Young people talked about health in terms of exercise, diet, nutrition and weight. There was much discussion about ‘healthy food’ and ‘junk food’. Sport, fitness, personal hygiene and mental health were all discussed, where an understanding of mental health emerged strongly among young people in the culturally and linguistically diverse; disability; Aboriginal; and mainstream groups. Challenges particular to each group’s culture and issues of ‘fitting in’ were particularly related to mental health issues, except for the mainstream group who expressed proud notions of championing individuality over exclusive cliques, but were more concerned than other groups with the domain of stress due to homework and exam pressure. Health was generally viewed in individual terms. However a more collective conception of health was evident among young people in the Aboriginal group, where the health of each family member was viewed as important to the wellbeing of all. Among young people in the Aboriginal group, health was particularly associated with access to material resources and the effects of inadequate nutrition.

Feeling good about yourself

Most young people did not rank feeling good about yourself highly, yet this does not mean they did not consider the domain important, but perhaps intuited feeling good as a natural consequent to seeking positive experiences in their lives (having fun, or engaging in sport, for example). The domain could be viewed as operating across several other domains including family, friends, health and safety— where stress and bullying (resulting in not feeling good about yourself) became obvious barriers. Young people with disability were focussed on sensations and activities, where eating chocolate, playing computer games, going on holidays or watching fire engines were given as examples of feeling good. However young people

from most other groups differed by focussing on everyday collective activities, such as playing with friends, competitive sport, or feeling connected to family (such as laughing with parents and siblings during dinner). Doing well at school, such as achievement awards and ‘desk prizes’ were mentioned, as was the mainstream group’s notable regard for each other’s individuality, and ambition (or future-orientation) also seemed to influence many young people’s self-esteem. The young Aboriginal cohort expressed definitive futures for themselves – ‘because if you don’t feel good about yourself you’re not going to get anywhere in life’ – which included the self-sufficiency to be gained by ‘going into the mines’, and another’s desire to become a singer. In each case, their ambition also related to the young person’s community, where elder family members, or other Indigenous role models, strongly influenced their outlook. Significantly, the domain was not ranked highly by the Aboriginal group, which may reflect the young people’s connectedness to their extended family, where narratives about community made frank mention of health concerns and economic disadvantage. Culturally and linguistically diverse young people also felt good about participating in their culture, though instances of racism were also mentioned as barriers to enjoyment.

Money and material wellbeing

Most young people did not rank money highly as a source of wellbeing. Money was seen as important for gaining access to the ‘basics’ such as food, shelter and clothes, rather than for the accumulation of material items such as computer games, iPods, and other ‘non-essentials’. However, Aboriginal young people rated money quite high in their understanding of wellbeing. This appeared to be connected to their experiences of economic disadvantage (perhaps more so than the economically disadvantaged group), where they referred to potentially serious consequences of inadequate nutrition and shelter. They recounted specific strategies for coping with economic adversities such as not asking for, or expecting, birthday presents. Young people in the mainstream and regional and remote groups on the other hand discussed money in terms of ethics — to address wider social inequalities like poverty and homelessness.

Designing and conducting the survey

Many of the findings reported here are consistent with other Australian and international research on young people's wellbeing. However it is in the details and the ways young people draw linkages between the domains which is important for the design of a new survey. Survey design (phase two of the project) involves matching existing validated questions from previously successful questionnaires to the emerging issues of these findings, building on accumulated knowledge and experience. Ultimately, the new survey will aim to capture young people's wellbeing (based on their own perspectives) while also providing a crucial element of international comparability. Work on a computer interface for the survey has begun, and will be one of the major tasks for the remainder of 2013. Phase three of the Australian Child Wellbeing Project will conduct a pilot survey across 20 schools in early 2014, with the main survey being conducted across 460 schools from mid-2014 (phase four of the project), prior to producing a final analysis and report for the project.