

## ARACY submission to DEEWR regarding the National Youth Agenda

This submission was developed by ARACY with contribution from Professor George Patton, Centre for Adolescent Health, University of Melbourne.

### PART 1: General comments about scope and process

1. **Ideally, a national youth strategy would sit within a broader developmental pathways framework that integrates the policy needs of the early years, the middle years and youth.** Child development occurs along a continuum and as such this needs to be reflected in government policy. This is supported by the ARACY Conference declaration (September 2009<sup>1</sup>), which states that what is required is an integrated policy framework that reflects that continuum at the same time as addressing the particular differences pertaining to developmental points along it.

2. **A national youth agenda needs to be complemented by a strong ‘middle years’ agenda.** The antecedents of many problems we see in teenagers have earlier roots. For example, between 10-14 years of age, there are major ongoing changes in brain development, which not only increase adolescent vulnerability to adverse influences but also afford opportunities for effective, positive interventions. This critical period is relatively neglected in targeted policy and service provision initiatives, despite the fact that the transition from primary to secondary school education poses significant developmental challenges for young adolescents.

Newly acquired data, based on a sample of 8000 10-14 year old students, suggest that programs to prevent youth violence and antisocial behavior were more likely to be effective if they started in primary school and were sustained as children moved through their teenage years. A range of risk factors operating at both an individual level and in the child’s social environment significantly increased the likelihood that the child would also have recently consumed alcohol as well as engaged in violent and antisocial behaviour. The study findings suggest that a proportion of adolescents are already engaging in unhealthy and risk-taking behaviours at high levels and that an opportunity exists to focus intervention strategies on the early adolescent years (ie, before these behaviours become an entrenched pattern in the young person’s life). Of particular concern is the reported high level of alcohol consumption amongst 11 and 12 year old children, particularly given the established association between alcohol and violent behaviour, indicating that programs and education targeting risky drinking need to be delivered in both primary and secondary school years. A copy of the report and other documentation relating to ARACY’s “Preventing Youth Violence” initiative is available [here](#).

3. **A national youth agenda needs to integrate with the boarder social inclusion agenda.** It is critically important that the youth agenda integrates with the Governments social inclusion agenda, to ensure the needs of socially isolated and disadvantaged young people are appropriately met. This is particularly important for those children and young people who become part of the child protection

and out-of-home-care system, who are enormously over-represented in the juvenile/youth justice systems and/or homelessness. There is a high risk of intergenerational transmission unless a strong primary and secondary prevention response is progressed.

4. **The process for developing the agenda must be truly collaborative from the outset.** While there appear to be many avenues for young people to contribute to the agenda (eg via ReachOut, national online youTHINK event, etc), there does not appear to be a strong process in place for those who are currently working *with* young people or those wishing to progress sustained and/or systemic change to improve the wellbeing of children and young people. While some consultation on the development of a youth agenda has commenced through the ‘National Conversation’, this approach is limited and the timelines too tight for considered debate about the complex issues that need to be resolved. By comparison to the early years agenda (which did involve an excellent process of consultation and development), the current consultation process runs the risk of being superficial, if the national Conversation is not complemented by a more considered and collaborative approach. We would be keen to work with the Office for Youth to progress this approach with our 1,000+ members.
5. **It is important to set targets for child and youth wellbeing.** This was one of four main priorities in the ARACY Conference declaration, echoing similar statements and declarations since at least 2005<sup>ii</sup>. COAG and other government initiatives have set targets in other areas, including early childhood. We would argue that setting wellbeing targets for young people across a spectrum of life domains is just as critical.
6. **A national strategy needs to acknowledge prevailing attitudes about young people – positive and negative, and include strategies for addressing negative attitudes.** Recent research on a wide demographic of 1500 adults commissioned by ARACY (to be released shortly) reveals four dominant frames about children and young people, two of which are particularly pertinent to the youth agenda.
  - The first is that young people (especially ‘twens’, teenagers and young adults) are seen as being powerful and capable. For example, compared to many adults, or children from previous generations, today’s young people are more technically savvy, are more worldly, more independent, have more money, have more opportunities, are more aware of their rights than ever before and ‘have never had it so good.’ The perception that young people have sufficient resources and benefits to be responsible for themselves - at a much earlier age than ever before – flies in the face of evidence about adolescent brain development and social and emotional maturity. Children are developing faster physiologically – but this does not match their socio-emotional development (George Patton)<sup>iii</sup>.
  - The second is that “teenagers and young people *are* the problem”. There are powerfully negative frames in which young people are described in terms of: lacking respect, being too materialistic, lacking commitment, lacking direction, lacking hope, lacking self-respect, being

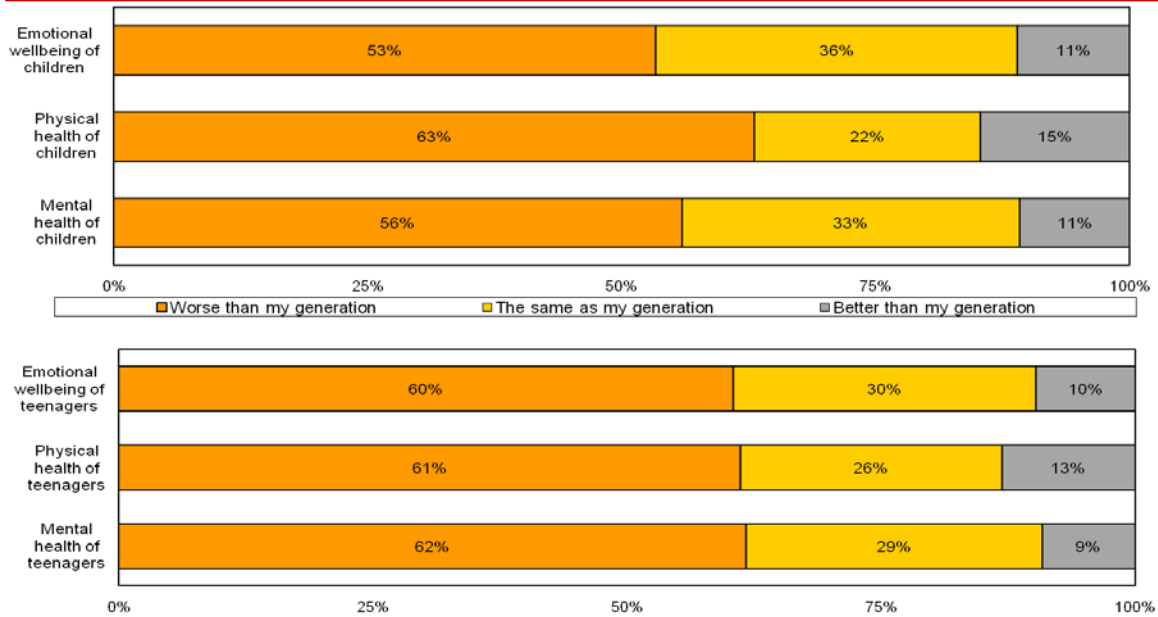
selfish, being image/brand obsessed. It is particularly problematic when this frame is combined with the heightened sense of agency outlined above as 'young people have the power'. The combination of these two frames leads to conclusions (and conversations) in which children and young people are seen as being responsible for the problems they create and face. This is exacerbated by widespread negative stereotyping of young people by the media.

- The third is that young people have it easy (in a material sense). In other words 'never before have there been so many opportunities for children and young people', 'they have never lived through hard times (always had enough food and money)', 'never before have they had so much given to them (by adults and society)'. As a result, suggestions that children or young people need to be given more created a strong negative response from many respondents and this needs to be considered in a campaign designed to 'value' children more.

This research presents a major problem for the youth agenda. Firstly, the proposition of giving young people 'more' may be negatively received if the community believes they already have 'enough' in a material sense. Paradoxically, adult respondents indicated that the same changing external factors (eg increased individualism, increased competition, increased materialism, and the influence of the media and marketing) that led to young people being perceived as 'having it all' are also responsible for a decline in their emotional and physical wellbeing. When asked if they think the wellbeing of young people has improved or worsened over the past 20 years, the respondents indicated that they are much worse off (see figure 1 below).



## Teenagers, and children under 12, are seen to be worse off than previous generations



Qu. 2 Compared to when you were young how do you think Australian children aged 12 years and under are faring in terms of their mental health, physical health, and emotional wellbeing compared to children of your generation? Qu. 3 Compared to when you were young how do you think Australian children teenagers aged 13-18 are faring in terms of their mental health, physical health, and emotional wellbeing compared to teenagers of your generation?

15

This is then tied with the fourth frame:

- That childhood is not what it should (or could) be. The external societal factors affecting adults were also seen to be affecting the quality of childhoods. In particular, there was a sense that children are growing up too quickly and that they are losing their childhoods, and missing out on the opportunity to 'just be kids'. An important part of this was the competition for influence that parents face from the media, marketing, the internet, children's peer groups. This combination of factors is seen to be leading to the 'adultification' of children at earlier ages than before.

Transition to adulthood has become more complex over recent years. Development of the youth agenda therefore needs to take into account these wider societal issues which have a significant impact on many of the problems being faced by young people.

### **7. The agenda will have much greater impact if it includes a strategy for broader social change.**

ARACY believes that outcomes for Australia's children and young people will not dramatically improve in a culture where 'wellbeing' translates to economic prosperity and individual gain. Policies and programs

currently tend to be developed and delivered in a programmatic and compartmentalised way, with wellbeing, if it is defined at all, defined in terms of prosperity and individualism rather than social, emotional and communal coherence. Maintaining the status quo will be at best unhelpful and at worst harmful to children.

A new world economy is envisaged by Kevin Rudd; a world where '*extreme capitalism and excessive greed*' no longer dominate (The Monthly 2009). To improve child outcomes, the new world economy and the dominant community frame or 'myth' must be one that empowers and values children, families and all people to be equal parts of the economic and social algorithm.

The Commission of the European Communities (2009)<sup>iv</sup> details the need for a dual approach towards meeting the needs of young people, which includes:

- investing in youth: putting in place greater resources to develop policy areas that affect young people in their daily life and improve their wellbeing; and
- empowering youth: promoting the potential of young people to renew society and contribute to its values and goals. This involves increasing youth participation in the civic life, supporting youth organizations and a variety of forms of "learning to participate", and encouraging participation of 'non-organised' young people by providing quality information. This can be achieved through primary prevention strategies including social marketing.

ARACY has made representation to the Australian Government on the need for a greater focus on primary prevention and social change, and how to facilitate such change. Based on the best advice and evidence available, a large scale strategy, under an umbrella 'brand' (such as *beyondblue* in the case of mental health and depression), can lead to a re-aligning of societal attitudes conducive to positive child and youth wellbeing. Enabled through the use of social marketing, such a strategy would lead to, for example, increased demand for work situations that are supportive of the needs of families, decreased pressure from parents for their children to "achieve", compete and be productive (in an adult sense), a decrease in the imperative some parents feel to provide opportunities (ie over-scheduling of children's lives) in order for their children to succeed in an increasingly competitive world, and increased sense of community responsibility for the wellbeing of children and young people.

ARACY urges the Office for Youth to refer to this evidence-informed strategy as a means of progressing the social change required, to add traction to the positive agendas being progressed, and is eager to work with the Office to do so.

## **Part 2: Comments on the national Strategy's 'core priorities':**

Although the framework uses such words as 'empowering' and 'enabling', there is also a subtle implication much is expected of children and young people, and not necessarily with their own benefit in mind. While we have made some suggestions, below, we feel that for these priorities to resonate closely with the needs as well as aspirations of children and young people, they need to be formulated and owned by them.

- a) empowering young people to build their own lives for the future – strongly supported
- b) enabling young Australians to accept full responsibility for their lives, their actions and their behaviors – not supported. While personal responsibility is critically important, this goal assumes that young Australians have the capacity, knowledge and skills to be personally responsible. Suggest replace with “*enabling young Australians to learn responsibility for their actions and their behaviors*”
- c) building resilience in young Australians to negotiate the great life challenges that lie ahead – strongly supported
- d) building a healthier, safer and more productive Australia – supported with suggested changes. The current goal places value on the young people as productive units of society, rather than being valued in their own right. With the above research in mind, suggest “*building a healthy, safe and productive society that places the needs of children and young people as central*”. This should be the first and most critical goal.
- e) empowering young Australians in their schools, their TAFEs and their Universities to shape their own futures - supported
- f) supporting young Australians within their families - supported
- g) mobilising young Australians within their communities - supported with one change “*mobilising and supporting..*”
- h) enabling young Australians to participate safely and confidently online - supported with changes. One wonders why the priority is focused on participation online. This should be much more general, suggest deletion of online and replace with “*active participation at all levels of the community where decision-making affects their lives*”.
- i) equipping young Australians with the skills and personal networks they need for transitions to employment and/or further training and education - supported
- j) strengthening early intervention with young Australians to help prevent any problems getting worse and to help young people lead positive, productive and healthy lives. While there is a need to strengthen early intervention, the best investment is actually in strengthening intervention at an earlier age (eg see point 2 above – antecedents for violent and antisocial behavior, and binge drink start much earlier so interventions need to start much earlier).
- k) establishing clear-cut legal consequences for behaviors that endanger the safety of others. – not supported. There is no evidence to suggest that it is lack of knowledge about the legal consequences of actions that perpetuate complex anti-social behavioral problems. Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest that an increasingly punitive and legal approach to address antisocial and violent behaviors works. What does work is providing avenues for participation, training where required for such participation, consideration of the impact of decisions on their lives by actively involving youth in such decision-making, asking them what are the issues, using positive approaches such as in the report ‘Teen voice 2009 The untapped strength of 15 year olds’<sup>v</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> [http://www.aracy.org.au/index.cfm?pageName=ARACY\\_conference#documents](http://www.aracy.org.au/index.cfm?pageName=ARACY_conference#documents)

<sup>ii</sup> For example, *MJA* editorial by George Patton et al (2005); the Adolescent Health Conference 2006 (supported by ARACY); the National Youth Conference (2006); and the Multicultural Youth Issues research conducted by ARACY (2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Pubertal Transitions in Health. *The Lancet*, [Volume 369, Issue 9567](#), Pages 1130 - 1139, 31 March 2007

<sup>iv</sup> An EU strategy for youth. Communication from Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Brussels, Commission of the European Communities, 2009(<http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2009:0200:FIN:EN:PDF>)

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.search-institute.org/system/files/TeenVoiceReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.search-institute.org/system/files/TeenVoiceReport_FINAL.pdf)