

## Play critical to teenage health and wellbeing new report finds

Commissioner releases new report 'Press Play' on the findings of a survey of South Australian young people aged 13 – 18 on the importance of play in their lives. While much research focuses on the importance of play for young children, rarely is the importance of play for teenagers examined.

Young people said "they feel happiest when they are doing the things they like to do, in the ways they want to, where they want to". They said the best thing to do when you have free time is to 'hang out' followed by 'sport', 'being active', and 'playing games that involve making and creating things'.

The report summarises the findings of a survey of more than 500 young South Australians identifying what activities young people define as play, as well as what barriers prevent them from participating in more play. These included having too much homework and not nearly enough 'play' time embedded into delivery of their school learning agenda.

The young people surveyed said the top five barriers to play they face are: not having enough time; not having enough money; limited knowledge of what is available; lack of confidence to try new things; and permission and support from parents.

They said play is much more important to them than just 'a way to occupy their time' or to 'avoid being bored'. Play is one of the few ways they experience the world beyond the direction and moderation of adults.

Play also allows young people to participate in risk-taking behaviour that helps develop the cognitive and social skills they need to navigate the adult world. Given the importance of young people attaining these skills, it could be argued that play actually becomes increasingly more important as children get older.

When asked about practical every day barriers to play young people said they often felt too tired and too busy with school, homework and other commitments to actually engage in play. They also frequently expressed concern and inequity around the scarcity of community sport and recreational facilities designed specifically for teens, observing most facilities are designed for adults or young children.

Listening to music was identified as an essential play activity, along with more opportunities to attend events or cultural festivals to make connections, build relationships, and participate in the community which all help to satisfy a sense of belonging and connection to community that young people seek.

Young people said a lack of transport and easy access to facilities and activities along with parental attitudes towards safety and the demands of schoolwork, including the high priority placed on academic achievement, prevents young people from participating fully in their right to play.

Young people consistently said they want more opportunities for play while they're at school; that their experience of school and overall engagement with the learning agenda would be vastly improved if teachers took a more playful approach to its delivery.

Young people said it would help if they had less school work to complete at home, and that involving them in the co-design of spaces and places for them would be smarter.

They said they enjoy playing outdoors as well as indoors and that both have benefits. They also said that they're tired of hearing adults complain about time spent on devices, saying they would play outdoors more if there were designated places they could go, and that being made to feel welcome in public spaces is very important to their sense of belonging and feelings of worth and respect.

Press Play includes three key recommendations from young people aimed at addressing the barriers to play they experience at the individual, community, cultural and systemic levels. The first is for master planners, transport and urban designers to incorporate strategies that address barriers to play for 13-18 year olds. The second, that public and environmental health bodies work with local communities to raise awareness of the links between play and wellbeing for young people, and the third, that local Councils engage young people to provide input on how to increase health and wellbeing outcomes for those their age through play.

Governments, civic society and business all have an obligation to build the youth-friendly infrastructure young people need in order to fulfil their need and right to play. But rather than make assumptions about what this should be, we need to consult directly with young people to find out what it is they want us to build, and how they wish to be supported and enabled to participate more in play.

Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children & Young People, Helen Connolly  
"If young people are to develop their identity, creativity, self-confidence and connections, it is essential to look at how we can structure society to provide young people with more play time, including time to determine how and where they would most like to spend it. If we want critical and creative adult thinkers in our communities, then it is essential that 'playfulness' be embedded in the lives of young people now. The ways in which young people want to spend their leisure and play time are entirely different to the ways in which earlier generations chose to do so. We need to recognise these differences and work to create the infrastructure that supports young people alive today to play in the ways they wish to. Young people themselves recognise their health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked to having opportunities for play and leisure. By creating more opportunities for young people to enjoy play and leisure we will be providing them with the genuine community connection they seek."

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