



What SA Kids Have Told Us About Health

Commissioner for
Children & Young People
March 2021

Children and young people told us that being healthy is important to them. They're clear about how healthy kids feel, what they're able to do, and what foods keep them healthy. A healthy kid is happy, can do anything, is excited and strong. A healthy kid plays sport, has fun, is active and plays. A healthy kid eats healthy food including fruit and vegetables, and sometimes has treats.

The majority of young people see major health concerns being those related to their relationships with peers, partners and families. These include self-harm, bullying, family and domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and family stress. They describe these as having a direct impact on their health. Cost of living pressures can mean they often don't have the same healthy food options as others.

Many young people frequently raise issues of health care affordability, including the cost of treatment and travel to appointments, and how letting small issues escalate into major ones was often unavoidable because of the costs involved.

We heard that for many children and young people who are struggling health is a big issue, and that free health care is virtually non-existent and highly inaccessible. They talked about waiting lists that were often 'months and months' long, and their perception that poorer quality health care is available to them.

We heard that children experiencing poverty are often 'predisposed to anxiety/depression' but cannot afford treatment for these conditions.

Many of the participants talked about wanting and needing to go to the doctor or dentist, but that all their 'health stuff' is something they simply cannot afford to do.

Young people have told us about the difficulty they have affording hygiene items such as period products, deodorant, toothpaste and soap.



Photo by Anika Huzinga

Sexual Health

Young people said that sexual health and sexual education is very important to them. They want to be treated as the young adults they are and be engaged in frank, age appropriate discussions about sex, consent, and safety. Some young people felt judged or not taken seriously by school teachers and counsellors. Some said that they were asked intrusive questions, while others felt that they were not listened to during discussions about sexuality. Young people indicated that issues of consent are not adequately addressed in current sexual health curriculum, and that the curriculum is largely hetero-normative and marginalises queer experiences.

Young women also identified a need for female-centric spaces for teens to talk about health problems, as they didn't always feel comfortable with male doctors or counsellors. Many LGBTQI+ youth also expressed a desire to learn more about diverse sexuality and how to stay safe. Additionally young people said they want to learn more about how to navigate relationships and intimacy. Finally, young people said they needed to know more about how to recognise abuse in their relationships and those of their peers, and what to do about it if such a situation should arise.

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Mental Health

Children and young people have indicated that the main health concern they have is that of mental health.

Young people of all ages were worried about their own mental health as well as the mental health of others; they talk about the impact and the barriers to getting what they described as the 'right help'. Many young people have spoken about friends being suicidal, parents suffering depression, and struggles of stigma, lack of understanding, embarrassment and isolation. It is recognised that 'mental illness at a young age can affect schooling and other factors which influence opportunities over a person's lifetime – moreover, most mental illnesses experienced in adult life have their onset in childhood or adolescence'. Further, it affects the more vulnerable groups, including children from a lower socio-economic background, out of home care and those that have been abused and/or bullied.

The two most prevalent issues young people have raised is the ongoing level of stigma in relation to mental health, and the second is their role in supporting their mates who have significant mental health issues. Many young people are trying to support peers whilst often dealing with their own issues. These informal support networks can often be overstretched but young people talk about real barriers in getting adult help. Young people said that in their situations they are most likely to turn to their parents for help rather than to their school or health professionals.

They told us mental health support in schools is hard to access and ill-equipped to respond to students' needs. They felt that schools simply aren't prepared to deliver the kind of mental health support that young people need.

*'I was an A grade student and then started having mental health issues. All I was told was "[it] sucks to be younger, get yourself fixed because year 11 and 12 are important, you don't want to **** that up." Like I could just control my mental health like that.'*

Young people discussed only receiving mental health support when things reach a 'critical level.' Whilst schools do offer young people an opportunity to seek assistance by talking to a school counsellor, young people felt limited resources often made this inaccessible, particularly due to shortages such as 'one counsellor for a whole public school.'