

What Kids Say About Citizenship





The Environment



Civics and Leadership



Volunteers

Introduction

Wouldn't it be great to know what children and young people think – what they really think; what matters to them, what worries them, what they want for the future? When we talk about things like health, wellbeing, learning, play, work and the environment, what do these things mean to children and young people? What challenges are they facing?

The easiest way to find out what children and young people think is to ask them, and in my role as South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People that's what I do. Information contained in this guide has been sourced from many conversations, discussions and consultations with children and young people of all ages and backgrounds living, studying and working throughout South Australia.

Many of us make decisions and take actions that affect children and young people's lives every day. We do this as parents, carers, community leaders, professionals, service providers and elected and appointed public representatives. What we decide and do, colours and affects how children and young people experience the world, as well as how they understand their place within it.

The following guide provides insights into what children and young people think about citizenship. Young people have told the Commissioner they want to have more conversations with adults about the big picture issues. They want to be listened to and taken seriously. They want to see adults take action on climate change to protect the environment for future generations and they want to learn how they can be leaders in their own right. They want to learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and how to advocate for change on the issues that matter to them most. They're also keen to learn about volunteering opportunities so they can help others while they develop their skills and networks.





The Environment

Children and young people are living with the knowledge that they are growing up in a world that will be environmentally worse off than it was for previous generations. They see the importance of a healthy environment, and want to see policies and actions reflect this.

Under Article 24 of the UNCRC, children have the right to good quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment, to stay healthy.

Having clean air, water and food is crucial for children and young people to ensure they can reach developmental goals. Current policies and practices are putting the environment at risk, leading to an increased risk of contaminated food, air and water, increasing the burden on the health sector. Young people know that the cleaner and healthier the environment is, the healthier people are, and the more productive they are.

Children and young people in South Australia see the degradation of the environment as a huge threat to their future. They want urgent action taken on climate change, a greater focus on renewable energy, and the elimination of fossil fuel dependency. They are worried about pollution and plastics, and the impact they're having on the environment and on their own health.

Key to children and young people's interest in the environment is their sense of justice. They recognise that poorer people, remote communities, and Indigenous people, will be most affected by the impacts of climate change. Conversely, they see that they might also benefit most from the development and introduction of renewable energy technology that reduces or eliminates our need for fossil fuel.

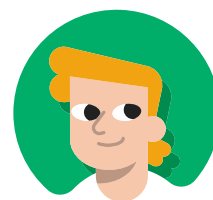


'SA looks very nice now I would like it to stay like that for [the] future. This is very important because when I was little I used to always go to the hills with my family on walks and bike rides. I want others to have the same opportunities as me.'

Young people are living with the knowledge that they are growing up in a world that will be environmentally worse off than it was for previous generations, through no fault of their own. They recognise the benefit of green spaces and of building liveable cities. They want access to natural spaces for play and wellbeing, and they want to be involved in community effort that is focused on protecting these places and spaces for future generations.

They are deeply protective of their ability to be outdoors, and want more parks and recreational facilities that take advantage of the largely sunny weather South Australia provides.

Children and young people said that they recognise the impact of climate change and pollution on their local community. They include together with this, an increased incidence of obesity and chronic disease. They have many ideas about how to address this, and they want the tools to empower them to do so themselves. They also want to know how to access services that will help them to become more active and healthy while they are young.



'[We need] ... education on how to be environmentally friendly. Without a healthy and clean environment, future generations will not be able to live life to the fullest.'



'The government needs to consider our future. They need to start having a positive impact on the environment, because at this rate, our job in the future will be to live with the impact that past generations have left on our Earth. The government needs to address things such as climate change and realise this isn't science fiction – it's real life and if we don't do anything about it soon, it will be too late.'



'Nature and fresh air – I've always liked going outside, [to] parks, [the] beach, being around everything that's natural and not man made and made of concrete, I like being around the colours. Everything is so bright, everything feels so fresh in your imagination but in real life ... it makes me feel like I'm escaping from everything in that moment. Nothing else bothers me. Nothing from the past. It's just the sun and the plants.'



Things I can do as an adult to make a difference to children and young people's citizenship

- **Being informed on the health impacts of climate change.** A wide range of health organisations including the World Health Organisation, AMA and RACGP, all have statements on this critical area. Health professionals play an important role in public health awareness and advocacy in this space.
- **Advocating for healthy environments** in communities where you live or work: green spaces for play and wellbeing, access to healthy, fresh food, and the use of renewable energy technology.
- **Advocating for physical health choices** such as 'active transport' (biking or walking) and the infrastructure to support them.
- Remembering to factor in the '**exercise prescription**' for physical and mental health, and highlighting that it doesn't need to involve organised sport, costly equipment or a pool or gym fee, but can make use of free natural spaces for joining in family activities or running, walking or hiking.
- Discouraging providers from promoting their products and services in **wasteful** ways, such as through hard copy materials that are merely discarded.
- Celebrating nature where possible by making use of **outdoor views**, with plants, flowers and nature themed artwork.



Civics and Leadership

Young people want to be engaged and heard on the big picture issues of our time – the issues that will shape their future. They want to make informed decisions, to have a fair go in their start on life, and to have more opportunities to be leaders in their own right.

Young people in South Australia want to stay in the state, particularly within the communities they are connected to, but they don't see decision-makers taking their future prospects seriously. Many see their peers leaving for opportunities interstate and overseas.

They want to be engaged on the big-picture issues that will affect them well into the future, such as climate change, the environment, and job creation. Young people told the Commissioner that they see themselves as a generation for change, and if given the chance, they could have a positive impact on the world and its communities, including, in particular, their own local communities.

Young people's capacity for finding creative, innovative solutions to both big and small problems is enormous and should be taken very seriously. They are seeking programs which foster their innate curiosity and encourage them to take risks, build things, and use their imagination. They want to know where to take their ideas in order to develop them further.

Young people know that the educational and employment opportunities they have early in life affects their ability to achieve their dreams later. They want adults to help

them get a 'foot in the door', so that they can make a start and have a fair go. They also want healthcare, mental health support, and other facilities that will enable them to approach their own futures from a solid standing of personal wellbeing and confidence.

Many young people feel unprepared for voting. Despite this, they emphasise how important voting, and other aspects of civic life, are to them. They want more education on the legal and legislative systems, their rights as citizens, employees and taxpayers, and how to participate in the world of politics and news. They feel that they are left to 'figure these things out on their own' once they become a legal adult, and they want this education to happen during school, along with other 'life skills' they feel the education system is overlooking.

Alongside this education, many want the voting age to be lowered to 16 years, and their ability to make political choices recognised. Others, however, want the voting age to be kept at the same level, or even raised by a year or two, as a result of feeling inadequately prepared to vote.

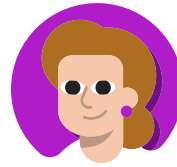
A common theme among young people in general is a feeling that their voices aren't being heard or taken seriously by political representatives. They have told us that the adult population who can vote, aren't taking their needs and views into account. They want the ability to determine their own future.

Young people want more opportunities both to be leaders in their own right, and to be around mentors and leaders from whom they can learn. Most of the young people the Commissioner spoke to did not feel they could relate to politicians or other authority figures, although some did mention the power of a particularly good teacher or principal they looked up to.

Young people told the Commissioner that they want their leaders to engage with them directly, and to treat them with mutual respect and understanding. They want opportunities to become community leaders and to have a positive impact on the lives of others. The degradation of the natural environment, and what this may mean for future generations, is of particular concern to them.



'Sometimes kids do have good ideas, but just get told they're only ideas, [because] sometimes adults think we are not as wise or as experienced.'



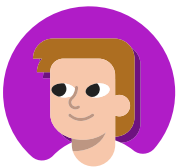
'If we are able to empower the young of SA then they will believe in themselves and create a snowball effect and make the world a better place.'



'Voting laws – bring the age to vote down. But before this is done, people need to be educated on the political topics they will be voting about.'



'I believe there should be more inspirational/influential leadership courses in school. Students need to learn choices, and decisions start with them. It is their choice.'



'Comprehensive civics education – what are taxes, what is voting, how do I vote, what is the point of democracy, why should I care?'



'More support and encouragement through face-to-face contact within schools. I think local politicians need to directly approach and speak to young people about issues that concern them, when making decisions.'

Things I can do as an adult to make a difference to children and young people's citizenship

- Community services and health providers are often seen as leaders and role models in the community. **Your interactions with young people can make a big difference to children and young people** feeling heard, respected and understood (eg talking 'to' and not 'down to' children and young people).
- Thinking about what you can do to help a young person get a 'foot in the door' to **opportunities**.
- **Celebrating the achievements of young people** and considering what you can do to foster leadership, ideas and potential.
- Supporting **groups and services** that support young people to develop their potential.
- Providing and encouraging **avenues for feedback and ideas from young people** in the practice or workplace (eg waiting room suggestion box or email address) – and following through!
- Providing **clear and accessible information** about health services, the health system, including the rights of young people. The system can be confusing – consider what can your workplace do to make it less so?
- Does your workplace do enough to **support and promote the rights of young people**? If not, think about what changes can be made. Ask staff to make suggestions and then action them.



Volunteering

The opportunity to volunteer is valued by young people, both as a way to help others and to develop their own life and work skills. But many young people are not sure how to go about volunteering or face barriers to accessing volunteering opportunities.

Helping others, doing something positive and being an active member of their community is considered very important to children and young people.

Children and young people see volunteering as a way to develop life skills that prepare them for adulthood and make them 'work ready'. They want to be equipped with skills they need to become active and informed citizens. However, there are challenges that make it difficult for some young people to start or to continue volunteering, while others don't know how or where to begin.

Many children and young people find it hard to access information about volunteering opportunities that are available and suited to their situations and interests. Nor do they feel confident or informed enough to become involved. They talk about having a place they can visit – either offline or online – where they can learn about volunteering options and opportunities relevant to them and that the information supplied is targeted, relevant and easy to find and understand.

Efforts to promote volunteering to children and young people should highlight the multiple short-term and long-term, personal and community benefits volunteering offers. Any promotion of volunteering should emphasise the link between individual interests and volunteering opportunities, as well as where volunteering might lead, including any links to paid employment.

For many children and young people, the financial cost of transport and a lack of flexibility around volunteering times can be significant issues as can a lack of acknowledgment from organisations for whom they volunteer.

They look for these organisations to provide them with support and to provide them with guidance either from other young people or young leaders who can act as role models to younger volunteers. They also want to feel as though organisations are willing to support their individual circumstances so that they don't jeopardise paid employment opportunities and are not required to travel huge distances at their own expense, costing them time and money they don't have.

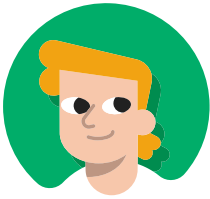
These issues highlight the need for clarity around expectations. If the barriers of cost and access in relation to time, money and transport are not understood and adequately addressed, they can fuel misconceptions and age-based discrimination, which further impact on opportunities for children and young people to participate in ways that have potential to add meaning, wellbeing and life and work skills to their lives.

Children and young people are often defined by their age rather than by their diverse identities shaped by the interests and roles they have in other areas of their lives, that include being leaders, learners, team members, athletes, thinkers, creatives, activists, advocates, coaches, students, young carers, friends, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, pet carers or even young parents. Age restrictions, a lack of experience, and stigma about being 'too young' lead some children and young people to fear that organisations will not welcome them as volunteers or that their efforts will be rejected or go unappreciated.

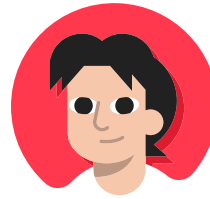
Some young people describe volunteering as something not only done without any form of payment but also done 'without any form of acknowledgement'. The success of any efforts made to promote or sustain volunteering amongst young people will fall short without any real action to support young volunteers to feel valued and appreciated.

The barriers to volunteering also impact different groups of young people in different and unequal ways. The Commissioner has heard from children and young people living with a disability, those living in regional SA, from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and those who are not engaged in education or employment. They highlight that the barriers are even greater for these groups of children and young people.

Many young people have emphasised the need for schools to provide information about volunteering, as currently this is not happening in a consistent or widespread manner. For children who are disengaged with schools, the information should come through other organisations that work with children and young people.



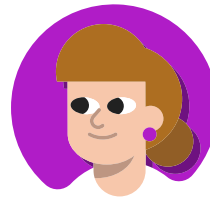
'I am someone who would love to volunteer and try to make a difference except I don't have the courage or knowledge to.'



'Seeing what positive results your work brings, a sense of purpose, learning skills that help you give back better and meeting like-minded people.'



'A lot of places or people only accept people who are 18 or older, and it needs to have time to mix in with school life and not be too much.'



'Coming from regional SA, we don't have very much exposure to bigger, better opportunities and we have to travel at least 7 hours to get to the next major city which costs a lot of money so I think we should have more government help to fund learning [opportunities] etc, or just in general.'

Things I can do as an adult to make a difference to children and young people's citizenship

- Having **information** to hand about volunteering opportunities for young people in your local community.
- Using your personal networks to encourage and support **volunteering opportunities your community**, as well as at your workplace.
- Considering, supporting and **advocating for volunteering opportunities** for young people.
- **Designing any relevant volunteering programs** with input from children and young people, to match their interests and needs, providing them with accessible information that is child and youth friendly.
- **Treating each child and young person as unique** and not labelling or discriminating against them because of their age. Recognising and respecting young volunteers.