

What Kids Say About Safety





Kids Doing It Tough



Bullying



Helpers

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 their safety, including the need for more support for those kids they see doing it tough. It includes ideas and suggestions for ways to address bullying and emphasises how important it is to children and young people that they are believed by helping professionals. They want helpers who they can trust, as well as clear, unbiased information that they can rely upon.





Kids Doing It Tough

Children and young people want people who are 'doing it tough' to have the same quality of education and opportunities as others. They are concerned about costs of living, and a range of social issues that include domestic violence and inequality.

South Australian children and young people have told the Commissioner that they want those who are 'doing it tough' to have the same quality of education and opportunities as those who are more well-off. The cost of education is a big issue for many children and young people, especially those who come from households that are struggling both financially and emotionally. They worry about whether their parents or guardians can afford to get everything they need for education, school sport, or extra-curricular activities such as learning a musical instrument, or taking singing or dancing lessons, and this affects their own well-being.

For young women living in poverty, a more urgent need for accessible hygiene products emerged in the Commissioner's consultations with young people, as many struggle to access the basics they need on a monthly basis.

Many children and young people are worried about the cost of living. They talk about the high cost of education (including uniforms and books) competing against the cost of basic utilities, such as electricity, water and food, medical bills and housing.

Children and young people understand that education and formal qualifications are increasingly vital in the modern world. They know that to succeed and follow their dreams they will need experience and training, and they are hungry to take on any challenges they can, as early as they can. However, many young people said that the opportunities to gain qualifications are unequal and, in some cases, inaccessible to some – and that this is not fair.

According to Mission Australia, one in six South Australian children and young people experience homelessness (*Young People's Experiences of Homelessness*, 2018 report). Many young people experiencing homelessness and housing stress are not visible in data on homelessness, as they are couch-surfing, or living in otherwise precarious situations, rather than sleeping rough. These young people say they feel let down by schools and social services, which don't recognise that their needs are different to those of an adult experiencing insecure housing.

Some young people feel that they have been inadequately educated on 'real world' issues, such as what to do if they find themselves in a dangerous home situation. They called for mandatory subjects in high school that deal with issues of family abuse and homelessness. They have also told us that there are not enough homeless shelters, Housing SA properties, and other services specifically for children and young people, particularly culturally diverse and LGBTQI+ youth.

Young people with experience of drug and alcohol abuse feel that there isn't sufficient support for youth with complex needs, and in particular that rehabilitation centres feel unsafe and unwelcoming to children.

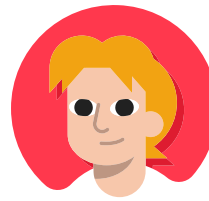
Many children and young people are also carers in their own right, either as young parents, or carers to a disabled or ill parent or sibling. These young people need particular support, but repeatedly say they feel invisible. Among their concerns are a lack of access to medical care, whether due to geographical isolation or poverty; reduced ability to spend time on school work compared to their peers; and a lack of understanding as to their challenges and responsibilities.

Some of these young people suggested counselling should be made more readily available to young carers and parents. Others struggled to complete homework on days they had to take on a caring role. Most asked for extra support for their child or the family member they were caring for.

Children and young people have consistently said they want all children and young people to have the same opportunities. They emphasise the need for role models of all genders, and for non-tokenistic inclusion programs. They are concerned about a range of issues that impact on people's abilities to access opportunities and the necessities of life, and they see a need for increased education on issues such as domestic violence, and equality and gender identity, among others.



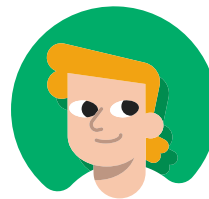
'For a lot of females in poverty, menstrual products are inaccessible. Schools have implemented strategies to assist this such as free sanitary products in schools, however this introduces the problem of isolating those who don't usually have access to those things as they are the people accessing the free products.'



'Introduce a class in all schools for important things i.e. how to detect abuse in family or relationships. Where to go if homeless. How to make a resume, taxes etc. We don't learn about real life things, therefore when situations occur we are unaware and more vulnerable.'



'Teachers can get angry at you for having other commitments outside of school, which causes you to drop those out of school commitments just to be able to deal with handling school.'



'Many people don't understand [what] people like us go through, the genuine difficulty it can be for some and the true setbacks that young carers face in school, social life and overall life.'

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

- Considering what **barriers** – cost and otherwise – young people who are doing it tough may face to accessing services, and supporting and advocating for services to be as **accessible and affordable** as possible. Promoting values of equity of access, and support for people who are facing difficulties to get the assistance they need.
- Remembering young people **may be leading complex lives**, with challenges beyond what you may imagine. Be a trusted adult in whom they can confide.
- Being **non-judgemental, and open to difficult conversations**. Being informed. Understanding government systems and support services, and referring young people and families who are facing difficulties to resources, aid and services, where helpful.
- Having **information** available and promoted for young people facing challenges such as homelessness, family violence, drug or alcohol abuse, or as carers.



Bullying

Stopping bullying is one of the top priorities children and young people have raised with the Commissioner.

Bullying has been recognised by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as a form of 'mental violence'. This type of mental violence can affect children's health, wellbeing, safety and security. Furthermore, if children and young people cannot spend time with their friends and enjoy themselves, this can also violate their right to leisure and play.

Bullying behaviour encompasses a broad range of conduct; however, it most often includes a power imbalance and repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical or psychological harm. Therefore, bullying can be at varying levels of severity and can range from 'normalised' social behaviour to that which is life endangering.

Bullying on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status can impact on a young person's sense of safety as well as on their mental health. Online bullying can infringe young people's right to privacy and violate their right to protection from attacks on their reputation. Bullying also affects young people in the workplace.

The Commissioner learned through consultations for her Bullying Project undertaken in 2018, that children and young people's views and descriptions of bullying behaviours are consistent across school sectors, school type and locations. They describe most bullying as negative interactions about issues related to belonging and identity, exposing intimate personal information, commenting on physical appearance, intelligence, race and sexuality, as well as 'slut shaming' and making family slurs.

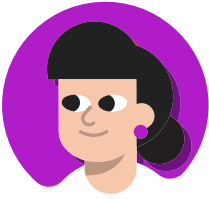
Children and young people describe bullying behaviour as incorporating verbal abuse, physical acts and emotional/psychological behaviour. Bullying behaviour is influenced by gender, age and socio-educational factors. Children and young people describe bullying as occurring most frequently face-to-face, while bullying through technology – phone, text, and social media – is generally done in addition to face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face bullying is described by children and young people as occurring at school, in public spaces and at sporting facilities.

Notably, children and young people across age groups, genders, school sectors and locations overwhelmingly spoke about the need to have empathy for the bully. They identified bullying behaviour as a combination of individual situations, peer relationships, and relationships at home.

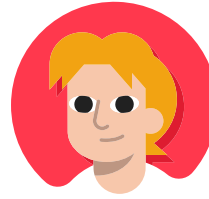
Key findings of the Commissioner's Bullying Project are:

- Whilst there must be consequences for bullying behaviour that impacts on others, a focus on punishment alone can be ineffective and create more negative outcomes. Effective responses need to be situational, child-specific, and have a restorative focus.
- Community responses to bullying must include strategies to increase adults' awareness of the impact of their behaviour on children's bullying.
- Children and young people acknowledge that the roles of bully, victim, and bystander are interchangeable, and therefore responses to bullying should involve all children and young people.
- Children and young people require specialised assistance at school to learn the practical skills to challenge bullying behaviour amongst friends.
- Effective anti-bullying strategies should involve children and young people in the design and delivery of a range of peer-led intervention programs.
- Strategies to address bullying need to take into account social contexts and cultural differences of children and young people, to ensure appropriate and measured responses that are relevant to specific groups.
- Bullying occurs across multiple online and offline environments, therefore effective bullying strategies should focus on supporting the development of skills and strategies that are effective in any setting.

Find out more in the Commissioner's *The Bullying Project* report at ccyp.com.au/ccyp-reports



'Bullies can change, they just need good role models for them to follow.'



'...not only does not having friends make you more vulnerable it makes you an easier target.'



'...bullying is getting worse in my opinion because people are more scared to speak up about problems.'



'Talking to your parents doesn't always work as school bullying has changed over the years so they don't really understand as they haven't been to school for a long time so they don't know how it feels.'

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

- Understanding **how common and distressing bullying can be** for children and young people, and openly asking questions about what is happening at school.
- Being aware of **self-help resources and supports** that children and young people can access confidentially.
- Being aware of ways to assist families in **reporting** serious bullying, both online and offline, to relevant authorities including schools, police and the eSafety Commissioner.
- Developing **protocols for communicating with schools** with respect to school issues affecting children and young people's health and wellbeing.



Helpers

Young people want to be believed and listened to about their own experiences when they talk. They report not being listened to, being dismissed by authority figures, or having their needs disrespected. Children and young people want someone they can trust, along with clear, unbiased information they can rely upon.

Many children and young people feel that they are not truly being heard by adults; that they are seen as either a child to protect or a risk to control, rather than thinking, feeling individuals with much to offer. Young people have their own ideas and want them to be heard and implemented. They told the Commissioner that they often feel tokenised by political systems that are not truly engaging youth on issues that affect them.

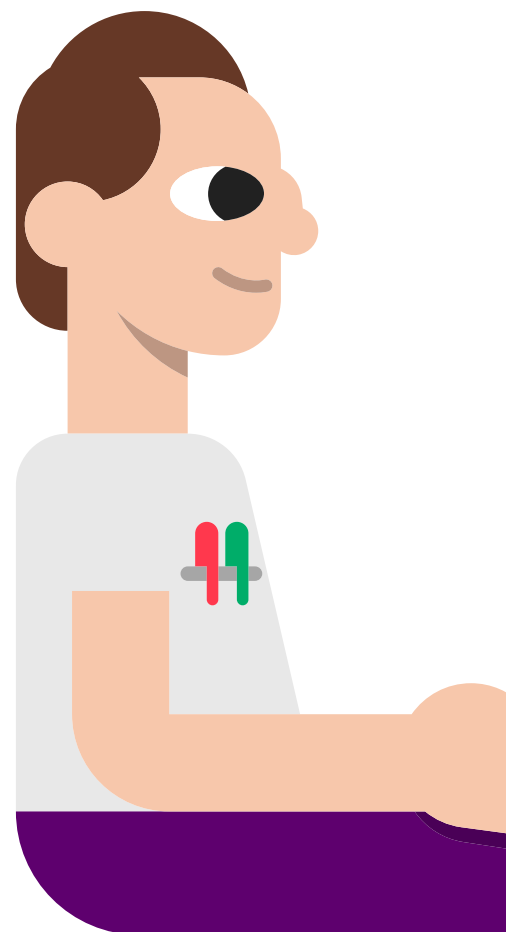
In her consultations the Commissioner heard stories of authority figures not listening to children and young people, or disregarding their needs, such as a police officer speaking over a child directly to their parent, or mental health care workers and school counsellors not taking their concerns seriously. Many said they feel like they are their parent's 'possession' in the eyes of the law. They want the ability to make their own decisions where possible, about their education, health care, and political beliefs.

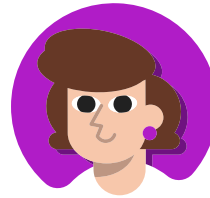
Children and young people come into contact with many helping professions throughout their lives, including teachers, counsellors and doctors. Others have more specialised involvement with mental health professionals, lawyers and police.

Whatever the circumstances, children and young people overwhelmingly want someone they can trust, and to be able to access information that is clear, simple, detailed and unbiased. Ideally this information should also be tailored to the age of the child. Older children were very clear they did not appreciate being given information aimed at a five-year-old.

There is a dearth of advocacy and legal support specifically provided to children and young people, particularly in relation to family law. Children and young people have said they want specific supports when their parents separate such as:

- access to people they can turn to, at school, or at a local sports club or other organisation where kids hang out.
- a website and app that children and young people can access offline that explains what they need to know about separation and divorce, including where they can go for support and help.
- a kid's family law hotline - that provides access to specialists in family law who are trained to talk to children and young people about their situation.
- more support groups with other children and young people who find themselves in similar situations.
- a dedicated socio-legal support organisation to advocate for children and young people.





'Train GPs better in mental health, because I have been to three different doctors and had incredibly bad experiences with them and felt very belittled.'



'More education on mental health to help get rid of the stigma and know how and when to seek help. Better school counsellors. Professions should take students seriously and be private.'

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

- **Listening to young people and speaking with them directly**, not just through a parent or caregiver. Believing them: they are the experts in their own lives.
- Supporting young people to **make their own decisions**, where possible, and helping them to be and become informed, engaged and empowered decision-makers about their health and health care.
- Providing **information** that is clear, simple to understand, detailed where appropriate, unbiased, and age-appropriate.
- Having good general knowledge of **legal matters** that may impact on children and young people.
- Having **information** available on advocacy and legal support resources or services, and support groups, that young people can refer to, access or join.
- Having **policies that support the rights of children** and young people.