

## SNAPSHOT

# Putting the pieces in place: Children, communities and social capital in Australia



Children are often assumed to benefit from strong communities. Yet we know very little about children's views on what makes a strong, supportive community or about children's place and roles within Australian communities.

The Children, Communities and Social Capital research, of which this is a summary, explored in depth what children in middle childhood (aged 8-12) think about their communities, how they experience 'community' on a daily basis and what vision they have for their communities. The findings provide important insights into communities from a child's standpoint, and how they might be improved. It also demonstrates children's capacity to engage in detailed discussion about such issues.

The research was conducted by Dr Sharon Bessell from the Australian National University and Emeritus Professor Jan Mason from the University of Western Sydney, in partnership with The Benevolent Society and NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect).

The full research report and a report for children are available - see back page for details.



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## Key Points

- Children in the middle years, aged 8-12, had important insights into their communities and how they could be improved.
- Children identified four overarching elements of strong communities: relationships, safety, physical places and resources.
- While there are many positive aspects of children's experience of community, the majority of children also described being treated in a rude, dismissive or hostile manner by adults in their communities.
- Many children spoke of being disconnected from adults in their community, including their parents. Time with parents was a critical issue. Children who described spending more time with their parents were more likely to speak more positively about their communities.
- The majority of children did not feel that they were listened to within their community.
- Children living in the disadvantaged communities were far more likely to be exposed to negative elements of their community, such as public drunken behaviour.

### Key Points

- Many children did not feel safe within their communities, especially children living in disadvantaged areas. Fear and distrust of unfamiliar people, car related aggression, and alcohol-fuelled anti-social or violent behaviour made children feel highly vulnerable.
- Children from better off families were more able to be shielded from the negative elements of community and generally were more likely than those in the disadvantaged communities to feel safe, to know their neighbours and to be on friendly terms with adults. However, children in one of the communities – the most advantaged one – were less likely to know their neighbours as their time outside school was very busy with organised activities.
- A child's standpoint is different. Adult perceptions of the strength or inclusiveness of a community should not be used as a proxy for children's perspectives and experiences.

### INTRODUCTION

What do children in Australia value about their communities? And what changes in their communities would children like to see? These questions underpinned the Children, Communities and Social Capital research project, of which this is a summary.

Children are often assumed to benefit from strong communities. Yet we know very little about children's views on what makes a strong, supportive community. Indeed, we know very little about children's place and roles within Australian communities.

The research explored in depth what children in middle childhood (aged 8-12) think about their communities, how they experience 'community' on a daily basis and what vision they have for their communities. The research was premised on the belief that it is not possible to understand the ways in which communities support, or fail to support, children without asking them.

### AIM

The aim of the research was to draw on children's views and experiences, to bring a child-inclusive perspective to community-focused theory, policy and practice.

It aimed to contribute to the development of child-responsive and child-inclusive community strengthening and social inclusion policies, initiatives and services.

### METHODOLOGY

More than 100 children from six communities in eastern Australia participated in the research. The communities are in middle ring and outer suburbs of metropolitan areas and one is 2-3 hours from a major city. Four of the communities are classified as disadvantaged on key socio-economic indicators. Four are culturally and linguistically diverse.

The researchers ran a series of workshops using participatory methods<sup>1</sup> to engage with the children. These included:

- an initial group discussion exploring what community meant to the children and which aspects of their communities they valued or disliked
- children drawing maps of their community, which were used to stimulate discussion
- children creating posters with a key message about what makes a good community and what might need to change
- children writing messages about they liked about their communities, and drawing pictures of what a safe and happy community would look like
- a final discussion, highlighting the most important issues.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Child-Centred Research Workshops: A model for participatory, rights-based engagement with children'. Developing Practice, Issue 37, Spring 2014 forthcoming, for more details about the methodology.

Follow-up sessions then provided the children with an opportunity to respond to the researchers' interpretation of their discussions.

Interviews were also conducted with teachers, school principals, service provider representatives and policy makers. Five workshops were held to discuss the findings and help shape the policy implications. Participants included scholars working in childhood studies, staff from the partner organisations and government officers from a range of state and Commonwealth agencies.

## WHAT CHILDREN SAID

### How children defined community

The most common aspects of their definitions included:

- people who know and support each other
- people helping each other in times of difficulty, including emergency professionals
- acceptance of diversity.

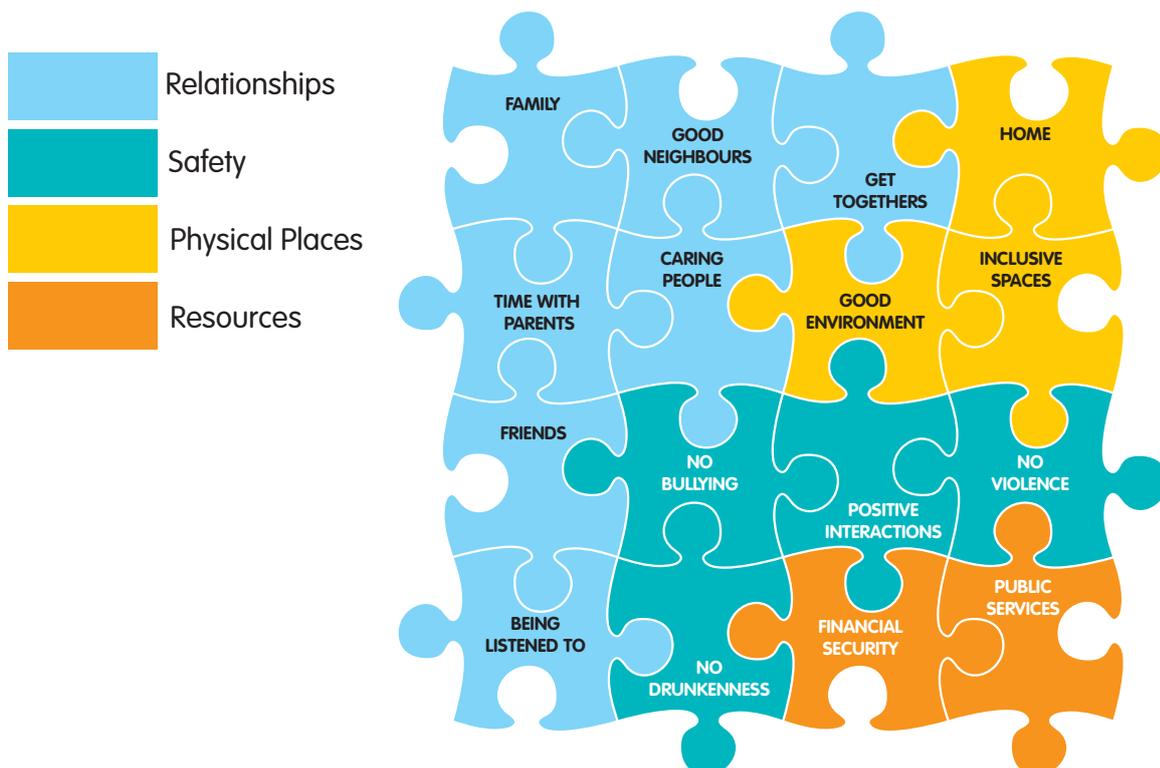
*I reckon the community should be a place where people can bond together instead of being separated. Like I think a community should have things that bring all of the people that live around together. (Girl aged 10)*

### The community jigsaw

From the analysis of the children's workshops, the researchers created a community jigsaw as a graphic representation of the elements of a positive community identified by the children. The jigsaw comprises four overarching aspects of communities, each one consisting of several sub-categories.

*A community is like a puzzle, you need to have all the bits to make it work. (Girl aged 9)*

## The Community Jigsaw



### Relationships

Relationship formed the basis, or the very heart, of community. Most children said their family was the most important part of their community and their lives, although not everyone had a good experience of family.

Most children said that time with parents was very important and many wanted their parents to spend more time with them, to listen to them and to talk with them. More than half said that they did not have enough time with their parents. This was because their parents were very busy or preferred socialising with other adults instead and, in some cases, preferred going to pubs or clubs.

Some children spent a lot of time looking after younger siblings or helping in family businesses and some looked after their parents some of the time.

Adults could make a big and positive difference in a community by being kind and friendly towards children. Children who knew their neighbours and got on well with them described feeling safe and happy because they knew there were friendly and supportive people looking out for them.

Children said that the people they met daily but didn't know well, such as shopkeepers and bus drivers, were also important. These people could make children feel safe and welcome in the community – or unwelcome and uncomfortable.

There was a very strong view that everyone in a community, old or young, should be treated with respect. Respect included being listened to. The majority of children did not feel that they were listened to within their community, even when they had something important to say.

Many of the children said they enjoyed shows, fetes and community celebrations that bring people together locally. A large number said they would like to have more such events in their community.

### Safety

Almost every child said that feeling safe in the community was very important. Children said they felt safe when their day-to-day interactions with other people were friendly and supportive. Children also felt safer when they knew a lot of people in their community because it meant they had someone to turn to if they had a problem.

Communities that were free from violence made children feel safer. Several children had experience of people behaving violently in their community, for example fighting or swearing. This made them feel very unsafe.

Children also felt very unsafe when people drove cars in dangerous ways, and some thought this was a type of violence. Speeding, burn-outs and road rage all made children feel very unsafe. In some communities, children felt so unsafe they did not want to go out onto the street.

A lot of children who participated in this research said they sometimes, or often, saw drunk people (sometimes teenagers, but usually adults) in public places. Drunk adults made children scared. They were unpredictable, often behaved very badly and were more likely to be violent, to swear and be aggressive. Some children also worried that adults would hurt themselves when drunk, especially if they tried to drive.

Fears about safety were amplified by stories that the children had heard from adults and other children, TV, movies and news media, about the threats posed by 'strangers'.

### Physical places

The physical environment in which they lived was important to children's experience of and connection with community. Home was the most important place for most children and was the physical centre of their community. However, some children said they did not feel very safe at home.

Children said that good places were ones where everyone feels included and welcome, regardless of age. They wanted more fun and welcoming places suitable for their age group (8-12). Many said they wanted to use play equipment in their local parks, but it was often designed for very little children. Many boys wished there were more skate parks in their local community. Girls were less likely to want skate parks but said there were not enough places to go once a person turns ten or eleven years.

Children said the quality of the environment was important. A good environment had no graffiti – especially rude graffiti – and no litter, cigarette butts, dog poo or broken glass. Play equipment should be in good repair.

## Resources

Resources were seen as important in contributing to, and often shaping, children's experience of community. There were two elements to resources: their family's financial circumstances and public services such as hospitals, schools and roads.

Some children said that they were not able to play sport or take part in other activities because they cost too much. Some said they did not ask their parents about taking part in certain activities because they knew their parents could not afford to pay and they did not want to make their parents feel bad.

A lot of children who participated in this research were concerned about health care and safety on the streets of their community. Many said there should be more hospitals and that people who are sick or injured should not have to wait too long for medical care. Several children said they would like to see more police in their communities, to make sure everyone is safe.

Several children were very conscious of the cost of housing and were concerned about homelessness, saying that the government should make sure everyone has a safe place to live.

## KEY FINDINGS

The findings provide important insights into communities from a child's standpoint. They also demonstrate children's capacity to engage in detailed discussion about key issues.

### Relationships, respect and inclusion matter

While there were many positive aspects of children's experience of community, the majority of children who participated in the research also described being treated in a rude, dismissive or hostile manner by the adults in their communities. Many children spoke of being disconnected from the adults in their community, including their parents. Parents' long working hours, time burdens, injury or illness, or/and a preference for socialising with other adults were all reasons given by children for the limited time they were able to spend with their parents.

This is highly relevant for children's experiences of community, as many children described their parents as

actual or potential catalysts for their own involvement in their communities. However, it is important to emphasise here that children's insights indicate that lack of time with parents is not just a consequence of parental choice. Social factors including financial pressures, (adult) peer expectations and social and labour market policies, were often crucial determinants of how families structure their time.

Children who described spending more time with their parents were more likely to speak positively about their communities.

While the most intimate relationships (usually with close family) were central to children's sense of community, so too were other relationships. Children who knew their neighbours and had positive daily interactions with people around them (both adults and children) were more likely to feel safe, included and respected within their communities. Supportive and respectful relationships, including intergenerational relationships, are essential to children's positive sense of community.

A significant number of children said they spend a large amount of time doing homework, which had a negative impact on the time available to engage in community activities.

### Many children do not feel safe

Many children reported not feeling safe in their community. This striking finding was far more likely to be the case for children living in areas identified as 'disadvantaged'.

Three factors were particularly significant as to why children felt unsafe. Firstly, children – particularly in the disadvantaged communities – were fearful and distrustful of people with whom they were not familiar. This limited the extent to which they felt safe being out and about on their own.

Secondly, children felt threatened by car-related aggression and violence. This creates streetscapes that are exclusive of and hostile to children.

Thirdly, and very importantly for children, excessive use of alcohol in public spaces – and the drunken and often violent behaviour that accompanies it – made children feel highly vulnerable and damaged the potential for children to feel safe and included in their communities.

### Socio-economic status makes a difference

Children living in the four disadvantaged sites were far more likely than those living in the more advantaged sites to describe being exposed to negative elements of their community.

This research found that children whose parents had more resources were better able to be shielded from the negative elements of community, such as anti-social or dangerous behaviour, the ways cars are driven, and public drunkenness.

Children in the advantaged communities were far more likely than those in the disadvantaged communities to feel safe in their community. They were also less likely than children in the disadvantaged communities, to encounter public drunken behaviour.

Children in more advantaged communities were more likely to know their neighbours and to be on friendly terms with adults, which was important to their sense of safety. However, while children in the most advantaged community described feeling safe in their community, they indicated that they were often quite disconnected from their local community. They described very busy schedules that allowed them little time to get to know the people living near them or to be involved in their community outside of school.

### Children were ambivalent as to whether school was part of their community

Children who participated in this research considered school to be a very important part of their lives, but some described it as an institution rather than part of the community. School friends, however, were generally considered to be central to children's communities. School was variously described as part of the community, as a community in and of itself, and as separate from community. This raises important questions about policies that assume school is the most important – or only – aspect of a child's community.

### A child's standpoint is different

This research demonstrates powerfully that adult perceptions of the strength or inclusiveness of a community should not be used as a proxy for children's perspectives and experiences. A child's standpoint also challenges us to confront the ways in which communities are hostile towards children and create for them a sense of distrust or threat.

At the same time, many of the issues raised by children are likely to be important for adults as well, such as concerns about public violence and public drunkenness, and the importance of public services.

For communities to be safe and supportive places for children, it is crucial that their perspectives, experiences and priorities are listened to and taken seriously. Solutions for adults are not always solutions for children.

An example is the way that the provision of children's rooms by many clubs and other venues serving alcohol and providing gambling, works differently for adults and for children. While children's rooms are presented as 'family friendly' and as a means of keeping children happily occupied while parents socialise, a significant proportion of children in this research who used such rooms had a different view. They described children's rooms as boring and exclusionary; something to be endured while adults have fun. The issue here is not the children's rooms per se, but the way in which children are excluded by adult forms of socialising.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A number of policy implications arise from the research. These are put forward to encourage and contribute to debate about the ways in which communities could better support and include children and reflect their vision of strong and positive communities.

#### Relationships

- Labour market policies and workforce participation requirements placed upon parents (such as Centrelink requirements for people on allowances), should take account of the centrality of time spent with parents to children's sense of community, not only in the early years but also in middle childhood.

- Planning and design processes should take greater account of creating entertainment and recreation spaces (including clubs and similar venues) that are genuinely child-inclusive. Clubs and similar venues should ensure that there are limits on the length of time parents can leave children in 'children's rooms'.
- Broad-based community events should be supported, with particular attention to making them inclusive of children. They should be alcohol-free or should severely restrict its availability.
- Local, place based initiatives designed to create familiarity between neighbours, including children, should be promoted by both government and non-government agencies.
- Measures and indicators of social inclusion, social capital and/or community strength/support should explicitly include data relating to children in middle childhood.
- Agencies such as the Human Rights Commission and Children's Commissioners at federal and state levels should give greater attention to promoting social attitudes that value and respect children.

## Safety

- Governments at all levels should recognise that excessive use of alcohol by adults, and associated drunken behaviour, has a direct and negative impact on children's sense of safety and inclusion in their communities, and respond accordingly.
- State and local governments should act to curb excessive public use of alcohol by adults. This should include providing resources for closer monitoring of alcohol-serving venues by licensing bodies and law enforcement agencies; and greater promotion, funding and enforcement of Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) requirements.
- Greater attention should be paid to the social impact of licensing new alcohol-serving venues and of extending the trading hours of existing venues, especially in residential areas. Social impact analyses should be seriously undertaken, rather than be tick-a-box exercises. Social impact analyses that focus on the impact on children should be developed and implemented.

- State and local governments should develop and strengthen strategies to make public spaces such as parks safe and attractive for children, including for those in middle childhood. More resources should be allocated to maintaining parks as alcohol-free, drug-free, clean spaces where communities, families and children can socialise.

## Places

- Children should be consulted in the planning and design of public spaces, in line with child-friendly city principles (such as those of UNICEF: <http://www.unicef.org.au/Discover/Australia-s-children/Child-Friendly-Cities.aspx>).
- Planning processes should take greater account of gender differences in boys' and girls' uses of public spaces, with particular attention to fun and inclusive places for girls in middle childhood.
- Public spaces for children should take account of the needs and preferences of children in middle childhood for places that are inclusive and safe, but also fun and exciting, with scope for engaging in high energy play/games.
- New suburbs and estates should be built with adequate footpaths to allow children to move safely around their neighbourhoods. Attention should be given to maintenance of paths in existing suburbs.
- Place-based services should be assessed to ensure they are genuinely inclusive of and accessible to children.
- Communities for Children and similar initiatives should identify children as 'stakeholders' and consult them on the types of services needed in the area.

## Resources

- Federal, state and local government initiatives that provide services focusing primarily on early childhood should be extended to provide for children in middle childhood, as appropriate to their needs.
- Any proposed cuts or expansions to services, such as police, hospitals and family benefits, should be assessed for their impact on children.

## School

- Initiatives to build strong communities should recognise that school is only one aspect of children's communities and not rely exclusively on schools.
- If the role expected of schools is expanded to include community strengthening and building, individual schools must be resourced adequately to do so.
- The development of school curricula at national and state levels should consider evidence on the negative, as well as positive, aspects of school homework, and on the impact of homework on other aspects of children's lives and development.

## Acknowledgments

This research was undertaken by Dr Sharon Bessell, Australian National University, and Emeritus Prof Jan Mason, University of Western Sydney, in partnership with The Benevolent Society and NAPCAN. It was made possible by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant and the support of the partner organisations. The researchers would also like to thank the many others who contributed – research colleagues, school principals, teachers and government officers. But most importantly our thanks go to the children for their enthusiastic participation, commitment and remarkable insights.



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