

Towards an agenda for children in the middle years in NSW

Introduction

This paper is intended to prompt discussion about the need for a coherent agenda for children in the middle years. It provides a brief background on what we know about the middle years of childhood and what has been happening at the NSW Government level to date. It also provides a rationale for building a middle years' agenda and suggests some possible objectives to guide this work.

About the middle years

In Australia the middle years of childhood (9-14 years) has not attracted the same research and policy attention as the early years of childhood (0-5) or older young people/youth (15+).

This is changing, with increasing awareness of the science which tells us that the middle years of childhood is a critically significant developmental period.

Aside from the profound physiological changes associated with puberty which typically occurs at this time, major changes take place in the brain that relate to an individual's capacity for abstract thought, understanding consequences, managing emotions and decision-making.

This is also the time when children make some of the most crucial transitions in their lives (for example from primary school to high school, or starting work for the first time) and generally become more independent of their families as friends and others in the community assume greater importance.

Understanding what children in the middle years are experiencing encourages us to be open and sensitive to their particular needs and desires.

Why is the Commission leading work in the middle years?

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (the Commission) is committed to this work because we are concerned about inequalities in measured outcomes among children in the middle years and about wider social and economic factors that we believe could have a detrimental effect on the opportunity for children to enjoy 'good childhoods', including as a platform for growth into capable adults.

The community and government also need to know more about what is happening to children in the middle years and how children can best be supported during this period of development. One important way this should happen is by talking with children in the middle years and understanding their lived experiences.

What has happened to date within the NSW Government?

In 2009 the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People delivered its inquiry report *Children and Young People Aged 9-14 Years in NSW: The Missing Middle* (the Report).

The Report amply demonstrated the gaps in research and policy thinking and in programs and services for this age group. The Report contained 59 detailed and wide ranging recommendations and charged the Commission with advocating for the recommendations and coordinating work across the NSW Government.

As part of its direct responsibilities for recommendations relating to the sharing of knowledge and practice, the Commission hosted three seminars in 2011 which looked at the physical, emotional and social development of children in the middle years and the particular risks they face.

At the end of 2011 and in light of a newly elected government the Commission and relevant agencies reviewed the Report's recommendations and agreed that work should now focus on a smaller number of priority areas, including the development of a coherent overarching agenda for the middle years. (The list of proposed priority areas is included in the materials for the Roundtable).

How does work on the middle years of childhood relate to the Commission's work for all children and young people aged 0-17 years in NSW?

While the middle years of childhood warrants close and particular attention and policy and program responses clearly need to be adapted to different age groups, the boundaries between different stages of development are fluid and vary according to the individual person.

Ultimately an integrated but variegated plan for children 0-17 years in NSW makes sense. It will therefore be important that a middle years' agenda complements and strengthens agendas for the early years and youth, and builds support for a continuum of effective investment in better outcomes for all children aged 0-17 years. The Commission is in a strong position to develop with others a shared agenda for the middle years that connects with these other agendas.

What story do we tell about children in the middle years?

Aside from thinking about objectives (see following section) the major consideration in trying to focus this work relates to the story we tell about what is happening to children in the middle years in NSW and, in simple terms, what aspects of the story are good or bad.

These stories are a mix of what we know empirically about children's well-being (remembering that there are many gaps and that what we choose to measure and give weight to are ultimately political decisions) and the internal picture most of us have of an ideal childhood, and how these things are played out culturally.

In a recent article Eckersley argues that there are essentially two alternative stories about the health and well-being of young people.ⁱ

The first is the conventional one which says that 'young people's health is continuing to improve in line with historic trends, and most young people say they are healthy, happy and enjoying life. For most, social conditions and opportunities have got better. Health efforts need to focus on the minorities whose well-being is lagging behind, especially the disadvantaged and marginalized.'

The second story says that 'young people's health may be declining – in contrast to historic trends. Mortality rates understate the importance of non-fatal, chronic ill-health, and self-reported health and happiness do not give an accurate picture of well-being. Mental health and obesity-related health problems and risks have increased. The trends are not confined to the disadvantaged. The causes stem from fundamental social and cultural changes of the past several decades.'

Eckersley makes the point that it matters a great deal which of these stories is the more accurate because 'stories inform and define how governments and societies as a whole address youth health issues.'

There is of course a third story that combines elements of each of these stories. For example, many more children and young people are obese now than they were a generation ago and this phenomenon is not confined to the disadvantaged, but the problem is nevertheless disproportionately worse among children and young people from poorer backgrounds.

Questions

- ***What story would you tell about what is happening to children in the middle years in NSW?***
- ***Thinking about these stories, where do you think an agenda for children in the middle years should focus?***
- ***What should be the short term goals and actions?***
- ***What should be the long term goals and actions?***

Objectives and measures of success

One of the challenges in developing an agenda across such a large and heterogeneous group is setting objectives to focus work.

The Commission has suggested an overriding objective for work in the middle years should be to ensure that all children aged 9-14 reach their full potential.

One way of describing this objective more precisely (and drawing on Sen's capability approach) is that children should have the freedom to develop their capabilities so that they can lead a life in line with his or her conception of what a good life is.

The capability approach emphasizes the actual ability of a person to choose to do the things in life that they have reason to value, such as to live to old age, engage in economic transactions, or participate in political or community activities (called substantive freedoms by Sen).ⁱⁱ

Capabilities mean a person's opportunity and ability to generate valuable outcomes for them, taking into account relevant personal characteristics and external factors.

Someone could be deprived of such capabilities in many ways, for example by ignorance, lack of financial resources, or because of a belief that prevents a person from being able to understand the true nature of a situation or what a 'good life' could be. Under a capability approach, poverty, for example, is understood as capability-deprivation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The following three scenarios show how a capability framework can be applied.

Scenario 1: An eleven year old girl understands that it is important to see a dentist every year to keep her mouth healthy. She also understands that she needs shelter, clothing and food to be healthy and enjoy school. While she values these things she does not have the capability (substantive freedom or choice) to achieve them both because her family does not have enough money for her to both see the dentist and keep her housed, clothed and fed. She therefore does not visit the dentist and is capability-deprived in this respect.

Scenario 2: A ten year old boy lives in a family with sufficient financial resources to provide him with adequate shelter, clothing and with regular dental check ups. While he is well clothed, fed and housed, neither he nor his family understands the importance of regular check ups for good oral health. He therefore does not visit the dentist and is capability-deprived in this respect.

Scenario 3: A fourteen year old girl lives in a family with sufficient financial resources to provide her with adequate shelter, clothing and with regular dental check ups. She and her family understand that it is important to see a dentist every year to keep her mouth healthy and that she needs shelter, clothing and food to be healthy and enjoy school. However, neither she nor her family particularly values good oral health and would rather spend their money on other things. She therefore does not visit the dentist and is not capability-deprived in this respect.

Some of the features which might make the capability approach helpful in thinking about the development of children in the middle years are that it:

- **focuses on people as ends in themselves (rather than treating them merely as means to economic activity)**
- **recognises human heterogeneity and diversity**
- **draws attention to group disparities (such as those based on gender, race, class, or age)**
- **embraces human agency and participation (by emphasising the role of practical reason, deliberative democracy and public action in forging goals, making choices and influencing policy)**
- **acknowledges that different people, cultures and societies may have different values and aspirations.** ^{iv}

Sen argues that governments should be measured against the concrete capabilities of their citizens – that is the extent to which citizens have a real choice in how to generate valuable outcomes for themselves.

What these capabilities are, Sen says, should be developed and weighed by each society through reasoned public debate as this process leads to a better understanding of the role, reach and significance of particular capabilities. ^v

He also argues that in the event of a conflict between values or traditions, it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what capabilities should be chosen. ^{vi} **This idea is particularly important for the Commission, which has a legislated function to promote the participation of children in the decisions that affect their lives.**

Nussbaum on the other hand has developed a set of ten core capabilities which she thinks should be supported by all democracies.

These are:

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

2. Bodily Health. Being able to have good health, be adequately nourished and have adequate shelter.

3. Bodily Integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place and being secure against violent assault.

4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way, informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth.

5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us; to grieve; to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger.

6. Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life.

7. Affiliation. Being able to live with others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another.

8. Other Species. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. Control over one's Environment.

- **Political.** Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life.
- **Material.** Being able to hold property and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others. In work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers. ^{vii}

The capability approach is only one of many possible ways of thinking about objectives in relation to the development of children in the middle years. The brief overview presented here is for the sole purpose of stimulating discussion about what the objectives of a middle years agenda might be and how they are conceptualised.

Questions

- ***Is a capability approach useful in thinking about the development of children in the middle years?***
- ***Which capabilities are relevant to the development of children in the middle years?***
- ***Could government performance be measured against capabilities?***
- ***What would be the implications of measuring government performance against children's capabilities in these areas, for example in how we approach the care and education of children in the middle years?***
- ***Are there more useful ways of thinking about objectives and measures for this work?***

ⁱ Richard Eckersley (2011): A new narrative of young people's health and well-being, *Journal of Youth Studies* , 14:5, 627-638

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia (2012), Capability Approach, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capability_approach, accessed 5 April 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ Wikipedia (2012)

^{iv} David A Clark (2005): *The Capability Approach: Its Development, Critiques and Recent Advances*, Global Poverty Research Group Working Paper Series 32, Institute for Development of Policy and Management, University of Manchester, UK, p.5

^v Amartya Sen quoted in Clark (2005), pp. 7-8

^{vi} Amartya Sen quoted in Clark (2005), pp. 7-8

^{vii} Adapted from Wikipedia (2012)