

7 June 2017

Megan Mitchell
National Children's Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission
Level 3, 175 Pitt St, Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Commissioner,

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission and attend the roundtable for the Young Parents and their Children project.

About ACYP

The role of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is to advocate for and promote the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people aged 0-24 years in NSW. ACYP's mandate is to consult with children and young people and promote their participation in the making of decisions that affect their lives; promote the provision of information and advice to assist children and young people; make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, reports, policies and services affecting children and young people; and conduct and monitor research on issues affecting children and young people. ACYP is also responsible for preparing, in consultation with the Minister, a 3-year strategic plan for children and young people in the State.

General Comments

ACYP commends the National Children's Commissioner for leading a national dialogue to advance the wellbeing and rights of young parents and their children. ACYP acknowledges that young parents and their children are a vulnerable group. As indicated in your introductory letter, teenage motherhood is associated with significant health and social problems for the mother and the child. Young parents are less likely to attain the level of education and employment of their peers who delay child rearing and there is a higher rate of social and economic disadvantage across the life span for young parents. While young parents are often highly motivated to care and provide for their children, they often face considerable obstacles which may prevent them from initiating change and maintaining positive outcomes for themselves and their young family.

It is important to note that it is not only age but a combination of factors which leads to poorer outcomes for young parents. A strong contributing factor is their level of disadvantage prior to becoming parents¹, compounded by the stigma and discrimination they may face in service systems and the broader community, and a subsequent lack of opportunities in many life domains, including education, employment and housing.²

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to become young parents than their peers, including those from a lower socio economic background, those who are underachieving or disengaged from school, those who have been in the Out of Home Care (OOHC) system and Aboriginal young people. Young parenthood is also disproportionately common among young people in custody.³

While much of the research and policy concerning teenage parenting and parenthood has concentrated on the negative outcomes, there are, of course, young parents who overcome difficulties and thrive.⁴ ACYP encourages a strengths-based approach that acknowledges the challenges faced by young parents but does not dwell on the negative and lead to further stigmatisation.

Consultations for the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People

The 2016-19 NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (the Plan) was launched on 26 July 2016, following its endorsement by all NSW Government agencies.

In developing the Plan, ACYP held consultations with over 4,000 children and young people across NSW of diverse ages, backgrounds and life experiences, including young parents. Regardless of age or background, children and young people were clear that they wanted to be safe, connected, respected, healthy and well, with opportunities to thrive and have their voice heard in their communities. This is reflected in the Plan's goals and themes.

While ACYP did not ask consultation participants to reveal whether they were pregnant or had children, a number of young people talked about their experiences as young parents, particularly in our targeted consultations with children and young people who had experiences of homelessness, out of home care and juvenile detention. For example, they spoke about difficulties with public transport, including expensive bus fares and poor treatment by bus drivers and others. They also raised issues such as footpaths in their communities that were not well maintained or wide enough for a pram, and government departments that were difficult to deal with. For example, they felt that Centrelink needed to be easier and more user friendly, particularly for those under the age of 16

¹ Cunnington, A. (2001). What's so bad about teenage pregnancy? *The Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care*, 27, 36–41.

² Butler, K. et al. (2010). *Experiences and Aspirations of Younger Mothers: Report for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs*. Institute of Child Protection Studies. Canberra.

³ Indig, D. et al. 2009 *NSW Young People in Custody Health Survey: Full Report*. Justice Health and Juvenile Justice. Sydney.

⁴ Shaw M., Lawlor DA, Najman JM, **Teenage children of teenage mothers: Psychological, behavioural and health outcomes from an Australian prospective longitudinal study** *Social Science and Medicine* 62: 2526-2539

who struggle to access financial support if their parents are not providing for them. They also noted the lack of programs for homeless young couples, who are generally unable to stay at the same refuge, and that there is insufficient emergency and ongoing housing support for young parents.

When asked what the NSW Government should focus on, the young parents we spoke to said that they wanted to be listened to by FACS and police; that they needed more financial assistance and autonomy at a younger age to support themselves to become independent; and that the government should prioritise affordable housing, including rental and shared accommodation options.

Consultations with Children and Young People Experiencing or at Risk of Homelessness

In consultations undertaken with children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, young parents informed ACYP about the barriers they experience in accessing safe and stable affordable accommodation within the private rental market. These barriers include the high cost of rent and low income; tenuous employment status (typically either part time or casual); poor or no rental history; and general lack of experience navigating the rental market. Young people also report experiencing discrimination from real estate agents during the application process. Young parents report that when caseworkers advocate for housing on their behalf, their outcome is more likely to be successful.

For young parents who are not ready or too young to live independently, there are barriers within the refuge system with a lack of services being able to accommodate partners and families.

Consultations with Regional Children’s and Youth Service Providers

In ACYP’s consultations with over 500 people who work with children and young people in six regions of NSW, parenting was raised as a significant issue for vulnerable families, as was domestic and family violence. Participants highlighted the need for strengths-based education in the perinatal period, including antenatal visits and classes to build attachment and reduce trauma. Parenting skills and healthy relationships education were seen as fundamental to building resilience and positioning young people to succeed. There was also a call to increase positive media about the role of dads.

Participants discussed the locational disparity in service offerings and the lack of transport options for young people in rural and regional areas. Many noted the need for spaces that provide soft entry points for young people to seek assistance on a range of issues, but which are not identified as “support services” so they can access information and referral pathways discreetly and without feeling stigmatised. Participants also emphasised the importance of times of transition in a young person’s life, and the need to offer targeted support through these transitions, particularly for young people leaving out of home care.

A particular concern was keeping young people engaged with education and learning and setting them up for rewarding employment in the future. Participants felt that children and young people experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability are not supported to identify educational aspirations and

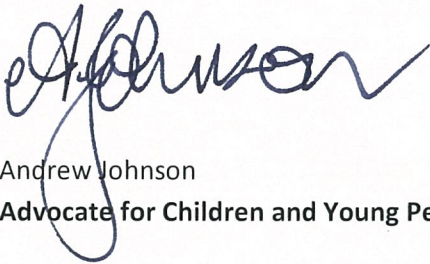
may be channelled into non-academic streams. There was a call for greater support in mainstream educational settings as well as broader range of alternative educational opportunities. Participants also called for improved employment pathways for young people, particularly in regional areas.

Conclusion

It is important that young people have the information and support to make positive choices in their lives, including comprehensive sex and relationships education and access to appropriate supports across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention and crisis response systems. While support must be appropriate for young parents, providing this support through universal services can reduce the stigma that can prevent young parents from seeking assistance. Young parents have reported that programs which provide consistent, respectful and positive support, have links to education and employment pathways and assist with securing and maintaining safe and appropriate housing are helpful. Building on the strengths of young parents and connecting them to the necessary supports at the time in which they need them will increase their capacity for safe and effective parenting, increase the likelihood they will be economically secure and improve their health and wellbeing.

Thank you again for your invitation to contribute to this project and I look forward to seeing you at the upcoming roundtable.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Johnson
Advocate for Children and Young People