



Mental Health

A more equitable, comprehensive and coordinated approach is needed to ensure services and programs that meet children and young people's mental health and wellbeing needs are available wherever they live in Western Australia.

Importance of child and youth mental health

Positive mental health and wellbeing is essential for personal wellbeing, constructive family relationships and the ability to participate in the community. Being mentally healthy is important for children and young people so they are able to realise their potential, cope with stresses and be involved with family and other aspects of community life.ⁱ

Mental health problems can result in behavioural issues, a negative sense of worth and lack of coping skills. This affects a young person's quality of life and emotional wellbeing as well as their capacity to engage in school, community, sports and cultural activities – and eventually the work place.

Mental Health facts

- 1 in 6 children and young people have a mental health problem ⁱⁱ
- 25% of parents/carers think their child needs special help for emotional problems ⁱⁱⁱ
- Aboriginal children and young people are at higher risk of mental health problems ^{iv}
- Australian children rank 13th out of 23 OECD countries and Aboriginal children rank 23rd of 24 countries in the area of mental health^v

Need for mental health services

It is a fundamental right of all children to have access to appropriate health care, including mental health care. This means creating safe and supportive environments; providing information, skills development, counselling and health services; and considering vulnerability and risk.^{vi} Children and young people also have rights to prevention, assessment, diagnosis and treatment as described by the national Mental Health Statement of Rights and Responsibilities.^{vii}

In the five years since 2003, the Western Australian population of children and young people 0–14 years grew by 26,800 or 6.7%,^{viii} yet mental health service delivery has not expanded to meet this growing need. Metropolitan, regional and remote communities consistently identify a lack of appropriate, coordinated mental health services for children and young people.

There is significant shortfall in the capacity of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to meet demand for those with severe mental disorders.^{ix} Waiting times for mental health services can be considerable in metropolitan regions and are even longer in regional and remote areas.^x Some regions of the State do not have all types of services.^{xi}

Priority mental health areas for children and young people

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.** A large gap exists between the emotional and behavioural health of Aboriginal children and young people and those who are non-Aboriginal.^{iv} Funding programs and services to 'close the gap' is a COAG priority. Aboriginal children and young people, especially those living with major trauma including grief and loss, abuse and neglect,^{xii} should have access to culturally appropriate, community-based mental health services.
- **Young people in the justice system.** There are significant numbers of young people in the justice system with mental health issues. The Auditor General's Report (2008) identified a lack of structure or process to ensure mental health problems are identified and treated, including for those on remand or referred to juvenile justice teams.^{xiii} Government agencies that have contact with young people in the justice system must work together to manage the complex problems associated with young people's offending.
- **Children and young people in care.** Children and young people in care experience high rates of mental health problems.^{xiv} These children and young people need a comprehensive health plan that details their access to mental health assessments and the necessary services delivered by appropriate specialist agencies.
- **Children and young people experiencing domestic violence or who have parents with mental illness or alcohol or other drug problem.** Adult services must take a child-centred approach, identifying and responding to the needs of the children of any adults using their service. A move towards child-centred services starts by listening to the views of children and young people and delivering their needs by improving policies, procedures, and collaboration between agencies.

What needs to be done

Policies, programs and services for children and young people must be based on their rights as citizens now, not just in the context of ensuring they have healthy and productive adult lives.

- **Adequate services to reflect need.** Policies, programs and services should be provided at a level that reflects identified need across the spectrum from universal promotion and prevention, to targeted early intervention and clinical services.
- **Recognise early years – early intervention and prevention.** The early years are particularly important to a person's future mental health and wellbeing. Newborns, young children and their parents/carers need access to high quality, universal, well coordinated services, including child health nurse visits and parenting programs.
- **Involve children and young people in mental health services.** By actively incorporating children and young people's views, programs and services will more effectively meet their mental health and wellbeing needs and be more relevant to them.

i Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, *The Wellbeing of Young Australians: Technical Report*, ARACY, 2008, p.58.

ii Mental Health Division, *Infancy to Young Adulthood: A Mental Health Policy for Western Australia*, Department of Health Western Australia, 2001, p.3.

iii Daly A, *Health and Wellbeing of Children in Western Australia, July 2007 to June 2008, Overview and Trends*, Department of Health Western Australia, 2009, p.47.

iv Zubrick S. et al. *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2005, p. 25.

v Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, *The Wellbeing of Young Australians: Report Card*, ARACY, 2008, p.4.

vi United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. *General Comment No 4: Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child* 2003.

vii Commonwealth Department of Community Services and Health, *Mental Health Statement of Rights and Responsibilities*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009

viii Australian Bureau of Statistics, *3235.0 - Population by Age and Sex, Regions of Australia, 2008: Western Australia*, ABS, 2009.

ix Infant Child and Youth Mental Health Executive Group, *New Strategic Directions for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services 2010-2020*, Draft Research Document, Perth, 2009, p. 10.

x Hon. Helen Morton, Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for Mental Health, Legislative Council, Tuesday 10 November 2009, p. 8587.

xi Hon. Simon O'Brien representing the Minister for Health, Legislative Council, Tuesday 7 April 2009 p. 2684.

xii Western Australian Coroner, *Report into the deaths of 22 Aboriginal people in the Kimberley*, 2008.

xiii Auditor General, *The Juvenile Justice System: Dealing with Young People under the Young Offenders Act 1994*, Office of Auditor General, 2008, p. 24-26.

xiv Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists., *Position Statement 59: The mental health care needs of children in out-of-home care.*, 2009.