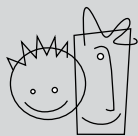


# ask the children

## I want to work

In NSW today, work is a positive thing for most children, far removed from the Dickensian world of child labour and offering opportunities to learn and grow. So it's important to understand their work experience.



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In 2003, the NSW Commission for Children and Young People surveyed almost 11,000 school children in Years 7–10 from all school sectors to learn more about children's experience of work.

In 2007, a follow-up study of school children in government schools was conducted to support the Commission's policy work on implementing recommendations arising from the first study, including the regulation of children's work.

This follow-up study included 1,567 children aged 12–16 years from 16 schools.

Our research found that the nature of children's work changes as they get older and much of it falls outside the usual definitions of formal work or is characterised in ways that make it different to the work of adults. Deciding what formal work children want to do when they grow up is one of the big journeys that children undertake.

### The nature of children's work

Through their work, children learn they are needed, that they have important roles to play, that they can do things of value to others and that doing these things helps others recognise and appreciate them. Within the context of their life-course, this work is important to self discovery.

For children, the consequences of work relate to mastery, competence and responsibility as well as to developing capacities for independence, interdependence and mature dependency and self discipline. Work provides another environment for testing boundaries and exploring the possible, of

discovering and confirming what they value, like and want as well as their ability to realise these values and aims. It is largely a positive experience.

Children need encouragement and support as they move into and explore this important part of their lives to get the most from work experience.

Opposition to children working is usually based on the idea that work invariably conflicts with schooling. This issue is more complicated than often presented because work is not always in conflict with schooling.

Our analysis of time spent on activities such as being with friends and family, doing chores around the home and homework (using our own data as well as data collected through TIMMS<sup>1</sup>) suggests that children who work in formal employment do not on average spend less time on homework. In fact, they are more likely to be generally more active across a greater range of activities, including those relating to homework and extra-curricular school activities.

### From informal to formal work settings

Trying to understand the world of work for children within frameworks developed for adults can be misleading. The work of children (including formal work) is complicated by factors particular to them.

### **Working for family and friends**

Among these factors is that much of the work of children is performed for their family. They are very likely to work for a parent or relative, domestically (such as gardening or laundering, either as chores or more clearly as an

entry into 'business' and work') or within a family business. Lots of children also work for community, sporting and church groups, such as in coaching or refereeing sports, performing in plays or dance or minding children for their local church.

"When baby sitting I took care of my little sister, I have cooked for and made breakfast for my family. I have helped my dad do chores like washing the car and putting out the bins. Lawnmowing. I have taught my sister maths."

"Sweeping, cooking, helping with shopping, helping with putting clothes in correct place and sorting, general cleaning (all for certain sums of money)"

"Asking people if they wanted their car washed"

"In my work I usually go across the road and mow the lawn for them. I have been offered a job at another person's house. Mowing the lawn, gardening, washing the car, etc."

"I volunteered at a church by looking after kids and doing art with children"

'Work' emerges in children's lives within the family dynamic. It is initially primarily a family activity. Work gradually extends to an activity involving neighbours, the community and finally the formal world of work. While various domains of life might be clearly separated for an adult, such as into 'work', family, sport, religion and other personal leisure activities, they are less articulated and differentiated for children.

From 12–16 years a dramatic shift towards this differentiation occurs. 'Work' grows from its beginnings as a family activity, increasingly acquiring more of the characteristics common with adult work.

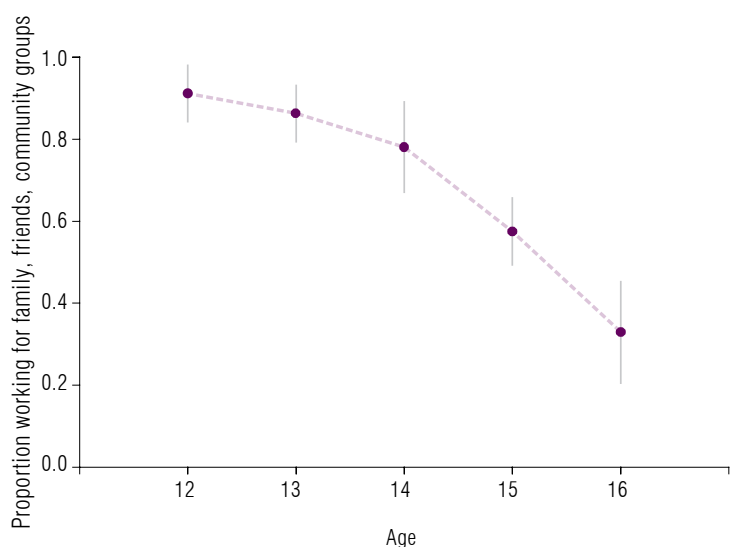
As a child grows, family dynamics change to be more inclusive of them as a contributor and participant. The transition from 'work within the family' to 'work within a labour market' includes transitions from familial understandings of how the family 'works together' to formal economic and legal contractual relations. This is a fundamental psycho-social shift. Along with these transitions, the need and appropriate mechanisms for regulation also shift.

## Working for others

While our 2007 sample was not strictly representative, we believe it is still revealing and reasonably indicative of the general work experiences of children in New South Wales. It suggests only a minority of children work for a business (between 19 and 37 per cent) compared with working for their family, relatives, neighbours, their school, community or sporting groups or for themselves.

Whether a young person works for a business or not varies substantially by age. Few 12 year olds work for a business (between two and 16 per cent). Only at around age 16 years does working for a business become common. Still, many 16 year olds (between 21 and 45 per cent) still work primarily for their family, neighbours or a community group.

**Figure 1: Proportion of children in the 2007 study who work for family, relatives, friends or community groups by age**



## What work means to children

As the nature of work changes, working relationships change – primarily in the shift to greater formality. Shifts in the psycho-social meaning of work are connected to this as well as the language of work.

Younger children are less likely to talk about 'work' the way adults do because their experience and understanding of work is different and the ways that work fits into their lives is different. Much of the adult language of work remains incomprehensible to older

children too, because it refers to things beyond their experience and developmental capacity to comprehend.

These differences in meaning and comprehension can make communicating with children about their work difficult. The qualitative components of our research in 2003 and 2007 strongly affirm this. For example, many participants couldn't really say 'who they worked for' as they struggled to understand if the question asked who the primary beneficiary of the work was ('myself', 'family' or 'a business'), as opposed to who their 'employer' was ('myself', 'family' or 'a business').

Besides the ambiguity of the question, much of the adult language of work is still vague and abstract to children. 'Employer' and 'employee' can be difficult terms. 'A business' is not necessarily easily understood. Even when given the response option of working for 'a business' many bypassed this and answered 'Other' instead. They then described 'Other' as 'newspaper people', 'Luckys pizza', 'Georges Fruit Barn' or a 'hair salon'.

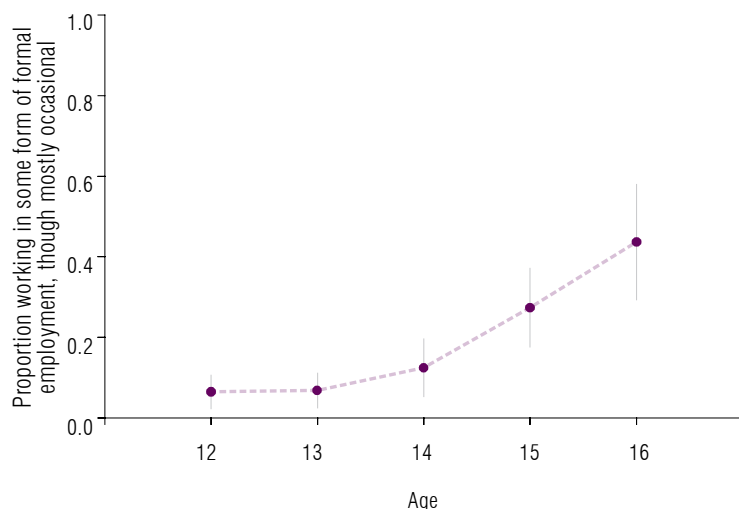
The more specialised language of work is even harder for children to adequately comprehend, leading readily to substantial miscommunications when asked about their work, including about working conditions that might be regulated.

## ☞ The impact of age

As children move into the formal world of work, the job opportunities are not great. Those opportunities are functions of both the skills of children, which are mostly undeveloped, and the local labour market for young workers.

While overall only a minority of children aged 12–16 years engage in formal work<sup>2</sup> (between 10 and 23 per cent) formal work becomes more evident as children get older. While between two and 10 per cent of 12 year olds undertake formal work, this rises to between 30 and 58 per cent of 16 year olds, depending on where they live.

**Figure 2: Proportion of children in some form of formal employment, if only casual**



## ☞ Common progressions of work

When we examined school children aged 12–16 years working in the formal labour market we identified common progressions.

### 12 year olds

At aged 12 years, the main kind of formal work undertaken appears to be sports-related. Estimates are that between one and six per cent of 12 year olds coach or umpire a sports activity ranging from modball to tae kwon do. Sports are a major entry point into formal work.

“Well I have to put the panflets all together in one and dilever them or babysit young boys and refferr touch football games.”

“My job is umpiring junior netball games (\$10 a game)”

“I normally coaches 4–6 year olds how to play netball. I also umpired games of netball from the ages of 4 yrs to about 45 yrs of age”

The likelihood of working in sports and recreation declines in older age groups of children and eventually becomes very rare.

The other formal work appearing at aged 12 years is newspaper and pamphlet delivery either for a local newsagency, a newspaper publisher or a pamphlet delivery service (although only around one per cent of 12 year olds are involved).

“Delivering pamphlets around my neighbourhood”

“I have done delivery to letter boxes”

“Deliver papers two days a week”

### **13 year olds**

For 13 year old children, the likelihood of delivering newspapers and pamphlets increases two-and-a-half times compared with 12 year olds. This is the primary formal work of 13 year olds.

### **14 year olds**

Age 14 years is a time of more substantial change. Employment in fast food and sales work become significant categories of work. However, only a very small proportion of children are involved (between two and eight per cent are employed in accommodation and food services and a similar proportion in sales work).

### **15 year olds**

For 15 year olds the likelihood of employment in sales more than doubles (to between five and 15 per cent), while the likelihood of employment in a fast food outlet almost trebles (to between seven and 18 per cent).

### **16 year olds**

At age 16 years the likelihood of employment in fast food again increases, but at a lower rate (about 50 per cent more likely compared with 15 year olds). A similar increase occurs in the likelihood of working in sales while delivering newspapers and pamphlets also continues as a significant form of employment (with between two and 10 per cent).

Other types of work that appear more regularly for 16 year olds are agricultural work, factory processing, clerical and administrative, shelf filling, other services and technical trades.

### ***Factory processing includes:***

“Just working, labouring in a box factory, taping boxes, stacking etc”

“Making cases for instruments, computers; gluing lamanae, constructing cases, clear all tables”

### ***Agricultural work includes:***

“Put crate on ute, drive to fruit trees and go down all rows and pick up fruit, then drive back to the shed.”

“Fixing the header tracks for dads boss in holidays”

“Moving through paddocks picking up horse poo”

### ***Other services include:***

“Restraining racquets, help out on the farm.”

### ***Clerical and administrative work includes:***

“Had to file commissions letters at under cover wear for 3 days. Order them alphabetically, then by state and then by city (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane etc)”

“Unfolding and sorting voting papers; tidying up; stacking a trailer”

### ***Fast food work includes:***

“Serving customer, cooking burgers, cooking deep fried stuff, cleaning afterwards, packing up”

“I work at KFC cooking chicken, I also have moved furniture for my neighbours, for a small fee, and built a bridge and house for my father also with a small fee”

“Cook food, prepare it, clean, wash-up, stocking supplies”

### ***Sales work includes:***

“Serving customers, mechanical work, general cleaning, stocking shelves, organising and ordering parts”

“Serving customers, banking, cleaning and stocking”

“Serving customers, making shop look presentable, making price tickets for products, returning items in incorrect departments to the right place”

#### *Technical and trades work includes:*

“Setting up lighting/sound equipment. Making sure the performers sound/lighting requirements, operating complicated sound/lighting equipment and loading/unloading trucks”

“Promote and maintain websites online”

These kinds of work could most usefully be covered by a regulatory framework.

The critical turning point appears to occur at aged 14 years, though it is only at aged 16 years that substantial proportions of children are working with this degree of formality, and they work primarily in fast food preparation and sales.

### **The flexible nature of children's work**

It was common for the 1,567 children in our 2007 sample to hold a number of ‘jobs’ simultaneously. For example, in a single week they might mind the neighbour’s children, coach Modball, collect balls at the local golf club, help stock shelves in their parent’s shop and deliver pamphlets. These tasks involve different levels of formality.

“I serve customers at a counter and sometimes I clean or stack things when not many people are buying things. Also, at home I care for animals and help on the property.”

“Serving at restaurant, cleaning before it opens and after, letter boxing pamphlets in my area. House duties.”

“Serving customers, cleaning shop, doing the mail, unpacking and putting away new deliveries”

“I work at McDonalds, I normally serve customers, make their drinks and collect their food and money. I also teach piano once a week”

“Make pamphlets then deliver, this takes a fair bit of time. I work as volunteer at Landcare Kyogle. It is physical work - plants, trees, pulling weed exc.”

“Caring for neighbours 2 young kids; helping a plumber on a construction site; mowing neighbours lawns, cleaning cars”

Only in fast food and retailing is work likely to be described by children as being on ‘fixed days at a fixed time’ (for food services, between 25 and 42 per cent of jobs are likely to be described this way; for retail sales between 35 and 53 per cent ). It is highly likely other types of work are casual or one-off (between 90 and 97 per cent).

This has implications for a regulatory framework for children’s work. A formal, complex system is inappropriate for one-off, short-term work. A simpler set of rules or standards may be more appropriate.

Adults might describe children’s experience in the more formal world of work as fragmentary, transitory, shifting and temporary. While that might be judged as ‘bad’ for adults the same judgement should not be made for children. Work of this nature may benefit children, providing opportunities to explore their world and potential within it. Flexibility in work, informality and easy accessibility may all be prime qualities of working conditions for children.

### **Wanting to work**

A sizeable majority of 15–16 year olds in our sample said they had wanted to work (including in formal work) over the previous 12 months (between 70 and 89 per cent).

From among the personal and family characteristics of these children, wanting to work is mostly but not strongly associated with language background.

Children from English-speaking backgrounds are approximately 20 per cent more likely to want to work than children from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Household structure also influences their desire to work. Children living with both parents are approximately 15 per cent more likely to want to work than those living with single parents. This is interesting in light of the common view that young people's income is often critical to the household budget, as household income is significantly lower in single parent households. This issue could benefit from further research.

Children living in more remote areas were 26 per cent more likely to want to work than in urban areas. Children living in areas with relatively high median household incomes were 15 per cent more likely to want to work than children living with relatively low household incomes. These estimates account for the influence of local community characteristics including educational levels, proportion of Aboriginal population, median household income and geographic remoteness.

Wanting to work was also associated with higher levels of youth employment. Children living in areas with relatively high youth employment were 26 per cent more likely to want to work than children in areas with relatively low youth employment.

Youth employment itself relates to various community characteristics, though not strongly so. In particular for 15–16 year olds, youth employment is associated with community education levels and geographic remoteness.

Youth employment is 85 per cent higher in more remote areas (after controlling for the other factors), 20 per cent higher in areas with higher educational levels and 46 per cent more likely in areas with relatively low proportions of Aboriginal population compared with communities with relatively high proportions. This finding that young people have higher levels of employment (after controlling for other factors) in more remote areas merits further research.

## ☞ Trying to find work

While survey participants aged 15–16 years said they wanted to work, how many actually tried?

We found most 15–16 year olds in our sample (between 62 and 87 per cent) of those who said they had wanted to work (including in formal work) also said they had tried to find work over the past 12 months. Whether they tried or not was associated with the same factors as wanting to work.

Among the personal and household characteristics, trying to find work was associated with household structure. Children living with both parents were 15 per cent more likely to try and find work than children living with a single parent. Children from English-speaking backgrounds were more than 25 per cent more likely to try than children from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Among the community level factors, children from areas with relatively high median household incomes were 18 per cent more likely to try to find work when they wanted it than children in low income areas. Children living in more remote areas were 40 per cent more likely to try and find work if they wanted it than children living in urban areas (after controlling for the other community level factors).

Children living in areas with relatively high levels of youth employment were nearly 40 per cent more likely to try to find work than children living in areas with relatively low levels of youth employment.

Again both these findings could benefit from further research.

## ☞ Getting a job

Our 2007 sample suggests that about two thirds of children aged 12–16 years (between 64 and 71 per cent) had engaged in some form of work (including formal work) over the previous 12 months. Among the personal and household characteristics examined, whether they had worked or not was associated with the single factor of language background. Children from English-speaking backgrounds were 50 per cent more likely to have worked than children from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Among community level factors, working was associated with median household incomes and geographic remoteness. Children from areas with relatively high median incomes were 40 per cent more likely to have worked than children from low income areas. Children living in remote areas were 70 per cent more likely to have worked than children in urban areas.

These 2007 results are consistent with what we found in 2003. Children from areas with relatively high youth employment were 70 per cent more likely to have worked than children from areas with relatively low youth employment.

A significant proportion of children who tried to work failed to get any (between three and 16 per cent). Among personal and household factors, we found the higher the proportion of adults working in a household the lower the likelihood of failing to find work. Children from non-English speaking backgrounds were nearly four times more likely to fail to find work.

It is not clear to us how employment in a household affects children, but an ancillary analysis suggests it is an important factor and related to household needs. These needs might impel or inhibit children from working, possibly through role modelling or in other ways that parents' beliefs and expectations about work are transferred to their children.

When both parents in a household work the effect of an empty household may influence children's decision to find work (there is nothing to do at home, so I might as well work too...).

Children from communities with relatively low median household incomes were nearly six times more likely to fail to find a job when they wanted one compared with children living in areas with relatively high median household incomes. Children in urban areas were many times more likely to fail than children in remote areas.

Children living in areas with relatively low youth employment were more than six times as likely to fail to find a job when they wanted one compared with children in areas with relatively high youth employment.

Between a third and a half of children who tried but failed to find work said it was because they couldn't find anything they thought they could actually do. Many of the remainder said they wanted work but weren't working because they didn't know what kind of work they wanted to do.

Our sample suggests a major problem was transport (affecting between 46 and 89 per cent) which made work simply too difficult to get to. Of those children actually offered a job which was not taken up, well over half said they couldn't take the job because of transport difficulties.

## Summary of findings

To understand and respond appropriately to the work performed by 12–16 year olds, there needs to be an acceptance that much of their work falls outside the usual definitions and understandings adults usually apply.

There is a need to recognise that the nature of this work changes across the life-course of children. Central to understanding the work of children is that it usually begins informally within the family before extending to neighbours and the local community and finally into the formal world as children grow and mature.

Work is a positive activity for most children. It provides opportunities to learn and to develop competence, independence and interdependence. Far from conflicting with school, it may complement and support children's learning.

We found that wanting to undertake formal work is one thing, actually determining what kind of work to do and then going out and getting it is something quite different. The inexperience of children greatly influences their ability to do this on their own.

Children need regulatory support to compensate for their inexperience and other disadvantage in employment and they need support to make their transition from family (and school) into the world of work and employment. Inexperience also means children need relevant, accessible information and advisory services about all things to do with work.

Finding out what formal work children want to do is one of the big journeys they need to take. The journey needs to be constructive from the start. Career counselling at school might provide support for older students but is strongly focused on adult careers. Much of the journey happens before then and involves shorter-term decisions such as what work do I want to do as a 14 year old — what can I do, what are the formal and informal work opportunities available to me at this age and where can I get help to get that work?

Our research suggests we need to build a better understanding of the informal labour market. We need to support children into and through the transitions of the formal labour market. The kinds of formal work children can do and where that work is located must be better identified and support provided to enable them to access work, including by providing better and safer public transport.

## Where to from here?

The Commission will continue working with agencies to improve the resources available to support young workers, their parents, teachers and employers. Our work with partners to improve regulations that govern the work of children will also continue. These partners include WorkCover NSW, the NSW Office of Industrial Relations, the NSW Department of Education and Training, TAFE NSW, the Commonwealth Workplace Ombudsman, the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, employer groups and unions.

## About our research

For more information about this research visit [www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/ourwork/researchkids.cfm](http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/ourwork/researchkids.cfm)

The Commission thank the children and young people who generously gave their time and shared their insights. They helped us to learn more about their world.

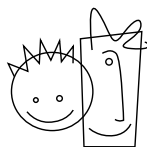
This *Ask the Children* was prepared by staff at the NSW Commission for Children and Young People.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> TIMMS is an international database comprising student achievement data in mathematics and science as well as student, teacher, school, and curricular background data.

<sup>2</sup> Formal work is defined here to exclude work undertaken for the immediate and extended family. It is work that doesn't involve an employment agreement with an enterprise (mostly excluding work for friends and neighbours), and work that does not involve a monetary exchange (excluding, for example, all forms of voluntary work, or work solely for some other material benefit).



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