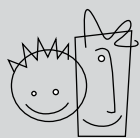


ask the children

Children speak about being at school

Children identify schools as a critical influence on their well-being.

To understand the role of school in children's well-being and to enable children's views to contribute to education policy and practice, the NSW Commission for Children and Young People has considered in more detail interviews it conducted with children and young people in its 2005 research about what well-being means to them¹



nsw commission for
children & young people

Being at school

Children spend a significant part of their lives at school: five days per week, most weeks of the year for up to 13 years. It is important that we understand the role that schooling plays in their well-being.

“Just ‘cause we are there like every day, it plays like a big part in our lives. It is what we do every day. Go to school.”

‘Being at school’ is not simple or straightforward for children and young people.

Schools are not all the same. Each has a unique environment within which children seek to fit. Negotiating this school environment is part of their daily lives, fluctuating across the day and across the life-course of school and influenced by personal characteristics and the school environment.

This presents children with a continuous stream of opportunities and challenges that children negotiate with variable support from the school community.

School in the lives of children

Childhood and adolescence are periods of significant transformation. Many challenges faced in these years occur in the school environment and it can be a fearful and exhilarating time.

“I only had 200 in my school. In my whole school, my whole primary school was the same size as my year which I found very, very hard to adjust to. I had 20 people in my year to 200. So I was a bit, it was a big, it was a big move to me. I think high school was very, very hard.”

The challenges this transition presents also provide opportunities for reflection and applying new knowledge and skills that comes with development:

“Yeah, sometimes like you see people go like they don’t solve problems in the right way. Like at primary school. Then maybe think well in High School I’m going to have so many more problems maybe I could, I should change the way I solve things and I do. So change parts of you that you don’t like, that is what I found.”

“In year 7 like you could make friends really easily and if you did something bad in your primary years like you can change it and you can fix up your life. It is like a new start and I found that really good.”

What helps children feel good at school?

Not surprisingly, the children and young people we spoke with in our 2005 well-being research talked about many of the same things as children we consulted about education in the same year². They needed to participate in school decisions and be part of supportive friendships with other students. They required supportive relationships with teachers and needed to experience success, recognition and achievement, to enjoy learning and feel confident and comfortable with themselves.

Children also spoke about what undermines their well-being. They identified bullying and exclusion on a regular basis as well as falling behind in class with insufficient support for them to catch up. The pressure of expectations of others as well as study and homework affect their well-being.

These key themes, the promoters and inhibitors of well-being at school, are explored in more detail below.

Participating in school life and school decisions

Children want to be listened to at school. They want adults in the school community to take them seriously and to act on issues that concern them. When this doesn't happen children can feel misunderstood and powerless:

Researcher: "Okay. So what can teachers do to look after children's well-being?"

Child: "Listen."

[Excerpt from group discussion]

The importance of being involved in decision-making in school was also identified by children in the study. They consistently said that decisions affect them directly, they bring a different perspective to adults in the school community and they have good ideas. When participation was discussed, children thought all students had a right to be involved, not just a select few:

Child: "I think it is a good idea. 'Cause I reckon kids should have a good say in everything. Because they are like kids are the future. Yeah."

Researcher: "Mmm, and is there anything particularly you would like to have a say in?"

Child: "No not really I like how it is really but"

Researcher: "Mmm, and are you getting enough say at school do you think?"

Child: "Probably because I'm one of the captains. Yeah, so"

Researcher: "So you try to think of better ways to get kids to have a say?"

Child: "Yeah, um, we've had a meeting since the beginning of the year and we've been thinking like just, I don't know, getting kids if they want to have a say to put it in a box or something and captains read it and decide. And teachers do too."

[Excerpt from group discussion]

When their ideas are recognised as contributing to the school community, students learn skills required to resolve issues and feel valued. Continuing directly from the discussion above:

Researcher: "And do the teachers give the captains a fair go in terms of they listen to what you have to say or are they"

Child: "Well um, sometimes if captains are not talking sense or anything they won't listen and take it seriously but like [name], he is the Captain and we sort of had an idea to get more bins in the playground and when we went to see the Principal about it she loved the idea and we ended up having to write a letter to the Mayor to ask for one. We haven't heard yet because it was only like three weeks ago."

[Excerpt from group discussion]

Supportive friendships

Schools provide the opportunity to establish and maintain friendships. For many students this is the best part of attending school. Friendships play a key role in their experience of happiness at school.

"I get to see my friends every day. Like, when they come into the school gate, like I'm happy to see them because I can play all kind of games with them."

"Having great friends. Um, running around at lunch and recess. Talking to other people. They, they give you someone to talk to if you need someone to play with. Give you someone to care for."

"But with school you get to see all your friends at once."

"Yeah, I like school better than just staying at home in your holidays. Cause you get very bored. And at least you are with your friends all the time and you can do activities and different stuff to do."

"When I get to school I wait for them [friends] because I come really early. And um, I talk to some other people in my grade and then when they come, we start to chat and talk and it makes me feel really comfortable. And it makes me feel like I'm going to have a good day today."

While the kind of support children need changes as they grow and develop the importance of friendships to provide support is ever present. Friends help with academic performance as well as with the sometimes stressful nature of assignments and exams:

"Um, like I just ask my friends and they answer. And then we help each other and it works. Like when they are really stuck on something, like oh we are not allowed to tell each other but when he's really stuck like um, the teacher just lets the person next to them like teach them how do to it when they don't know. So like that is how I get by sometimes and stuff."

“When I’m um, doing something and I tell them they support me like when I don’t know how to do something they always help me out. When I’m stuck on a question they help me out. They help me understand it.”

“If you didn’t have friends at school like you wouldn’t be really learning much.”

“Yeah, as I said before like at the moment we’ve got so many assignments and so much work and stuff that goes towards our school certificate and sometimes you just feel so stressed out at things and um, having your friends there to, to share that experience with you yeah, it is really good.”

Support in facing the challenges of life and to grow in meeting them is important for all children. For many, friends provide the understanding others might not. Their friends are on the same journey and probably best understand ‘what I am going through’:

“I think that it is more emotional support. A lot of the time my friends will ring me up and ask oh ‘how do you do this?’ and ‘how do you do that?’ and yeah I’ll help them with that or they will help me and stuff but I think mainly for me it is the emotional support. I need that from them.”

“And it is good to have friends you can talk around when you are sad and like have feelings that you’ve got are sad you can see your friends and they see how you feel. And they can help you up when you fall down or in trouble.”

“We you can go and hang out with them and just have a good time when you are with them and if there is something that I can’t tell my mum or something like that I can tell my friends and know that they will be able to understand what I feel and everything.”

In practical ways, friendships provide the means through which participation in activities including non-classroom activities occurs. It is through this participation that they feel included:

“When like other kids like ask them to join in with them in activities and stuff. Like it makes them feel better.”

“I think it shows team work and um, that you can work together to achieve a goal... Makes you feel proud and um it doesn’t always mean you have to win but if

you don’t win you usually have fun and it is not about winning. It is about having fun.”

“Because if you have no friends you wouldn’t like you won’t have anything to do. Like if you had if you borrowed a ball from the sport shed at our school and like and you are like kicking it up in the air and then like it bounced on a rock or a clump of dirt and it went somewhere else you would have to go chasing it. There wouldn’t be anybody else to help you go get it.”

“If they are lonely and they want to play then probably the group of friends say yes because they feel like he’s like that person is lonely and they need some friends to play with...Yeah it makes me feel happy that the other person is not lonely anymore and they feel comfortable around you.”

On the other hand, not having friends creates barriers to participation and can lead to isolation and feelings of loneliness and sadness.

“Yeah because um friends make you happy and if you don’t have friends you are lonely and you have nothing to do and you will be sad.”

“It is like friends are like your family. And if you don’t have friends you will be so lonely at school. Like when you go out to play and there is no-one to play with you. And all the other friends, all of the other friends are playing with someone else. It is like if you don’t have friends you never have friends.”

For many years we have known that teasing and bullying can undermine a child’s well-being and schools have sought to address the issue through school-based approaches. One of the ways children avoid being teased or bullied, and cope with it when it happens, is through their friends.

“Um, well generally you know if you, if you don’t have a group to hang out with then really you know you are open to be picked on by anyone.”

“Like some of the kids that don’t have any friends they get pushed around and that, but if you have friends um, some of the people saying that you could help them so they do.”

“Like once you have friends then all the bullies and that, they don’t push you around or anything because they think that once you have friends then they are going to stand up for you.”

Friends can immediately intervene and help with developing effective strategies; they can rally round and can offer protection.

“You turn to like your friends and they will like stick up for you so, they spoke to the person who’s bullying you. Or they might like, they might be like a few people bullying and if they have and if the person that’s bullied gets all their friends then like, they might out number them or something.”

“Um, if I was to be bullied in the future I would tell a lot of people about it and um, stay with them.”

“Um, they can help me with questions as well. And sometimes they can help me solve my problems when I’m in a fight or something like that.”

“If you had a friend it would have been better than by yourself because, ‘cause, like friends they can help you um, get away from other things. They can think of more ideas of how to do it.”

Supportive teachers

Teachers also play an important role in supporting children to meet the challenges of life. Their words and actions can build confidence in children and young people, promote learning and meet their needs for safety. Positive, supportive relationships with teachers make for a positive school experience:

“Go and talk to teachers if I’m not feeling happy. And the teacher I had last year I went and talked to her about a problem and she straight away went and fixed it for me. And so I was really happy about that. I want her this year as well because she is teaching Year 6 as well. So I hope I get her.”

“I think you also have to have a small kind of bond with your teacher. Because if I didn’t like teachers that I had I don’t think I would have learnt nearly as much, or learnt it, well, probably would have learnt it but not happily.”

In contrast, when relationships with teachers are not working the morale of children and their interest in learning, school performance and engagement with school can be strongly impacted:

“Yeah I think if you have a good teacher that you enjoy having, it makes learning a lot funner. Because I’m not

mentioning any names but one of my Years I just didn’t enjoy my teacher at all and I couldn’t, I just couldn’t, I just didn’t pay attention. I just didn’t enjoy it at all. I hated school. But now I love it.”

“Yeah, like we can’t choose who we want to teach us at school for example. And it’s kind of upsetting because we might get this teacher that we really, really don’t like and we’ll be really unhappy all through the year.”

“Because if the teacher, um, if you walk into a class room and the teachers are like glaring at you, straight away it is like you are not going to be bothered to do anything for them because like they haven’t sort of been like ‘hey how are you?’ sort of thing. They are like ‘get to work now!’ And you are like ‘no!’ Yeah you don’t want to do anything for them.”

Providing a safe and supportive environment is the core business of any school and children look to teachers to provide this. When it comes to dealing with the day-to-day incidents of bullying, some children talked about teachers not always supporting a bullied child:

“I know how the teachers they says stop doing it but then in lunch they keep doing it. So I know it is no use to speak to the teachers.”

“Like the teachers, like I was bullied sometimes and our teacher doesn’t care um because he is a lot of sporty person and yeah a lot of people chose you because you are different or you can’t do sport or anything and I think it is a big problem because people don’t think it is bullying but it is.”

For some children, changes in teaching staff affect learning:

“Then Year 3 I had like I had another good year because I had a really nice teacher. And then like I started year 4 like I started going down because we changed to 5 teachers this year....I want to have one teacher. If I have one teacher I can get like really smart. But if we keep, if we keep getting teachers, like getting different subjects and all that oh I can’t do that. That is hard for me.”

From the perspective of children and young people we spoke with, a ‘good teacher’ is competent, kind, fair, caring, fun, happy to engage with them, does not show favouritism or bias and does not regularly get angry or lose control with students:

“Like one that is not too strict but they still care about learning.”

“They have variety in their lessons.”

“They will be nice to you.”

“They understand and they care and they understand you want to learn.”

“I think a teacher has to have their heart in it. Um, or any job I think you do. You have to have your heart in it. Anything that you do in life you have to have your heart in it for it to be worthwhile.”

“Who doesn’t choose the good people and the bad people.”

“And about teachers bad is that some people hate teachers, like my teacher I don’t like her because she always gets angry at everybody.”

“I reckon a good teacher stands for so much.”

“I think he is a good teacher because he creates self-esteem. He makes people feel good about themselves, because they’ve achieved something. Cause he sort of helps you achieve it.”

Opportunities to learn, succeed and be recognised

Children really value opportunities to learn and want to participate and be responsible for learning. Learning presents tasks that may be challenging and meeting them can be fun – children have a natural curiosity and drive to explore:

“I’m really happy there because I can learn lots. Get to know about each other. Our friends and get to play sports.”

“Cause like if you go to school you get a good education.”

“You can use it for useful things like how to count things that is like really big.”

“We can have fun, educational and learn.”

Not all teaching approaches are conducive to learning and some are more conducive than others. Many children, especially the younger children we spoke to wanted learning to be interactive, creative, fun and to offer some choice. Positive learning experiences provide enjoyment as well as supporting their ability to feel good about themselves and their subjects.

“It is like the way he teaches. Before I never used to like maths we didn’t have any variety, now I like maths we have a good teacher. Sometimes we have fun days, ‘cause like there is a room that we go up to every fortnight or something and you can play stuff and still learn. It is interactive and you have choice over it.”

“Their way of teaching. Like they make things fun then you will want to learn but if they are like constantly boring and you get bored then you won’t want to learn.”

“And also sometimes the way they talk. Like some teachers will come in and be like oh blah, blah and they will be loud and you can understand them and you want to listen to them but if some teacher just like na, na, na, na and you are just like um...tuning out now.”

“Like if it is a morning when you are going on an excursion or something, like you are extra happy because yahoo you are not going to class today and um, it is like school who cares and you are all happy because you’ve just like got your whole year and you are not at school or you are not at home or whatever. You are out and you are doing fun stuff. School does work but you don’t realise it.”

Children have different learning styles and different abilities. Some children find learning a struggle and if this is not recognised and addressed they can fall behind in their academic achievements. For many children this can lead to a negative view of themselves as learners, feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, embarrassment and ultimately to feeling that the school system is rejecting them.

“It feels like you’re like you are the only one that can’t do it and you feel really sad and empty. And you yeah, you feel like you feel unhappy and you feel like you can’t, you can’t, you just can’t do it. Sometimes you feel sick because you are like so unhappy.”

“Yeah, yeah you kind of like you feel all of a sudden you feel like hot because you know you can’t do it and like you get butterflies in your tummy.”

“It is a little bit hard because sometimes you feel like embarrassed because um you are not keeping up and you would feel embarrassed because the other kids would hear and then they would start laughing at you because, because you weren’t keeping up.”

Some children look to the future and see educational success as a way to ensure future success, including securing a good job and income.

“Like how well you do is going to reflect on the rest of your life because the majority of your life you are going to be working and if you don’t do well in school you are not going to have a good job and you are not going to be happy.”

“I think that is what everyone is doing now. You do things for your future. You don’t necessarily do things for now. You are doing things for the future. Like when you work you are working so you can secure a future.”

“Well I’ve only got a few more years left and I’d like to get a good job so you know like you know you don’t want a crappy old job working as a cleaner or whatever. You would like something like a professional kind and get a lot of money and live life and instead of kind of you know bad kind of jobs.”

Being valued and respected for who they are and what they achieve is important to children. Receiving positive recognition for their achievements at school is vital in developing a positive sense of their abilities and who they are:

“One best time is um, um there was this Zone Athletics in Year 4 and um, I came 1st in 100 metres and I made it to the Zone. People cheered me on and said I was good at running. It makes me feel like even though if I came last at least I had fun for like it makes me feel like I made it and like I don’t care if I don’t it makes me feel like good inside.”

“Cause everyone, people say that everyone has got a talent and like I’m not good at nothing. Like I failed like last year I failed like most of my subjects and I’m not good at reading or writing. Not good at languages and everyone reckons I’m good at dancing so I like it.”

“You feel confident when you try doing something and you’ve achieved it and you feel confident that you can do it again and again. And I think it is good to feel confident.”

☀ Acceptance and support to be who you are

The children we spoke with wanted their school community to be accepting of who they are and their differences. Some children spoke about how schools work to promote this environment:

“Because it also helps children to like believe in something and helps and support them in what they are doing and learning about their background, the culture and their religion.”

“The reason why we took it [photo] of the school with the flag is because like it express like we live in Australia and that is what, and that is what we are.”

Many children spoke about being teased or bullied because of their appearance, ethnicity, age or academic performance:

“Yes, but then the bullies get angry about people who get higher marks.”

“It is about what we do at school. Like me and [friend] mostly gets top marks at school and the sporty people don’t and they tease us about that yeah.”

“And there was this girl, she was in Year 6 and she bullied me about how I was littler than her and how like I wasn’t real good at sport.”

“That is a big problem for me. From school because I, I was born in Australia but then some people other people from other different cultural people they come to me and say ‘cause they didn’t know me and they just came past me and say ‘ching chong char’, like that because they think I’m Chinese. But then I didn’t say anything. I was just like oh I was born in this country. But I didn’t say it in their face. I just said I was born in this country there is no difference about that.”

“Yeah he came this term and he was from China. Oh this I don’t like it because there is a lot of people there is a lot of boys in our class and they push him and they push him into chair and he has a sister and they are twins and she gets bullied too.”

The pressure applied by the peer group to persuade some children to change their attitudes, behaviour or morals so they 'fit in' a particular group is a challenge for many children. While they are aware of the consequences of giving in to this pressure, particularly the effect it has on their own identity and their choices in life, some find it difficult to defend against:

"Um you know how you have like the popular people? They'll start doing like something with their hair style or wearing some accessory or something and then the other people that they um like in a way pick on they will be like oh OK I will do that so that I can feel more welcomed into that group. So they can like see like she's not, or that person isn't out of the group."

"Um, yeah, we have a girl that wants to be a ballerina and everyone was teasing her because she is really skinny so she started eating like junk food and some of us were like well there is no if you want to do this so don't do what other people want you to do."

"I'm not that sensitive but I think it varies in my group 'cause it's pretty big like it's got different grades in it as well. Whereas like other groups in our school, most of the seniors, they're all in like cultural groups 'cause they don't feel like they can be comfortable with others and they're all like different and they're not very associated with, in the same sense of like liking people and looking alike."

Other children spoke about the importance of support from others to cope with the pressure and to meet the challenge to 'be you' and act with self-integrity:

"I think if you know within yourself I can. I can do it and you believe that you believe in yourself. You come to [the] realisation that yeah you know I'm okay I can do it and um, you find that strength but I think you need the people around you to help you."

"I don't know. I think in my school um particularly in my group of friends we've got kind of over the years now we're older we've got ourselves a name in the school and no one really questions like out of the kids, or students, no one really questions what we do and what we wear to school."

☰ Not being bullied

Children and young people report that being bullied at school is among the worst experiences that can occur at school. Children describe its severe impacts on their self-esteem, morale, school performance and happiness.

"And now everyone here like they are always teasing me at school so sometimes I don't feel that welcome at school because people always tease me and all that. I like, I get really sad and emotional and I try, it is hard for me to ignore it because it happens like every day."

"Well if someone is bullying you, you are not feeling very good."

"It was like as if no-one wants to be with you and um, you think that they are just avoiding you because you don't look nice or you don't do your work properly or you are not smart enough."

"Well I feel kind of wrong because I'm asking myself what am I doing wrong?"

"Sometimes you feel I don't know, like you don't feel well because you get teased around and all that."

Children's major strategies for managing being bullied include ignoring it, using the support of friends, not telling anyone (because they do not expect adults can help or they feel embarrassed) or seeking help from adults (teachers and parents).

"They would either discuss it with their teacher or friends or um, they would either make that choice by themselves and keep it quiet."

"I don't think they actually tell anyone. Except for maybe their closest friend. They don't tell teachers and they just keep it bottled up. And then sometimes once they've just had enough they lash out."

"Not my Mum because I feel embarrassed to talk to anyone. The only person that I talk to sometimes is the Principal. And I sometimes talk to her and another time well um, just to my friends. They cheer me up and all that."

The pressure for academic achievement

Children and young people identified several pressures of school that undermine their interest in learning and cause regular stress. These include the pressure of tests, exams and assignments:

“My major stress in life is schoolwork. That is my major stress. Schoolwork is the most stressful. Um, well I’m a freakaholic. I often, if I get major exams and assignments, often instead of just tackling them I will often put them off until I sort of freak out over them and then stress out and then often break down and have Mum having to you know say it is okay, it is okay.”

“Just school and it does become a big pressure on you and all the assignments and schoolwork especially. They are very high on assignments.”

“And the amount of it, it is like not actually the work it is like the amount of it. Like they will give you an assignment right that we’ve been given at the [same] time for all of the subjects. So it is not as though you only have the one to work on for a month, we’ve had like seven to work on for a month.”

Pressure can come from teachers and parents and from children themselves. For some children pressure can be good because it keeps them focused, but too much pressure can be counterproductive, no matter what the source.

“Well some kids could get affected by getting like too stressed out. Getting like, cause some people like pressure themselves like to do well just say they have strict parents and wanted to do well they will stay up all day and night and try and study and do well but like in the long run that is not good for you.”

“Parents like you know stress kids about their school work and things like that and like, like we’ve got our school certificate this year and like my parents are going on and all this. So it is like stress. Yeah and they are not with me like to know what is happening. Cause like you know you should like trust your children. Like that they are doing the right thing for their own good.”

“Like cause we are in the top class year. And um, they like say oh you are in the top class so you should achieve this and this and this, the teachers.”

“When you have all this homework and you just can’t stand it then you get really stressed ‘cause you are like ‘how am I going to hand in all this work in time?’”

“Halfway through the day your brain just stops because all my classes are like double periods. You are not meant to concentrate on the same thing for more than 40 minutes and the teacher’s like ‘sit down, shut up and get your work done’, but I don’t know what I’m doing. You have to concentrate all day and then you have to go home and do like 2, 3 hours of homework.”

Homework was almost universally resented by the children we spoke with. For many, this resentment is associated with the impact homework has on has on their life outside school, particularly their free time to do other activities:

“Leave school at school. Don’t bring it home. Home is for family. No homework. If no homework there is more time for physical activities. You do enough at school.”

While the logic behind homework is usually to provide the opportunity for students to apply what they have learned in class independently or to prepare students for what they are about to learn or participate in, it can create daily conflict between a child and their family:

“My Mum tells me to do my homework. She says I must do it all the time. I don’t mind her saying that but sometimes it is a bit annoying when you’ve done some and then she tells you to do it and you say you’ve done it.”

Homework causes anxiety and emotional exhaustion for some children:

“They might like um, have like loads and loads of homework to do and they can’t do it and they don’t tell anybody and then get really worried.”

“The fact that you have to get your homework in on time. You have to stay up late to do your homework and then when you wake up in the morning and still it is there, and having to wake up even earlier.”

Summary of findings

For children, school is a continual process of negotiating their way through lessons, classrooms, playgrounds, friendships and teacher-student relationships. At times this is exhilarating and enjoyable, other times it's stressful and dispiriting. As children revealed in our research, being at school is not a simple or straightforward activity.

Children and young people want to learn and they understand the immediate as well as longer term benefits of successful learning. Children engage in learning when it directly relates to them and when they feel a teacher respects them and is passionate about teaching and learning. It is what teachers know, how they act and what they care about that is important to children.

Linked to positive schooling experiences are the supports offered to children and young people to enable them to meet life's challenges. Support helps them develop their values, sense of self and confidence to be who they are. A school culture that minimises negative influences such as bullying and discrimination is fundamental in this.

Children value school and enjoy the challenges and opportunities it presents. Our research found that children's enjoyment of school is linked to the relationships they have with other students and teachers. Positive relationships lead to feelings of inclusion, acceptance and self-worth. Negative relationships lead to isolation, sadness and not feeling safe and supported.

About our research

For more information about this research visit www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/ourwork

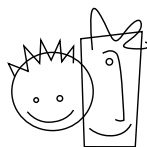
The Commission thank the children and young people who generously gave their time and shared their insights. They helped us to learn more about their world.

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

Notes

¹ NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005. *Ask the Children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being*.

² NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005. *Ask the Children: Children and young people speak out about education*.



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Published June 2009 | ISBN 978 0 7347 7173 5 | ABN 29 128 672 511

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