

ask the children



nsw commission for
children & young people

It's about "feeling good"

Children and young people talk about health.

"I feel comfortable with who I am in this world and that in the end affects my health because I am happy." (female, 16)

Who did we speak with?

Between August 2005 and February 2006 the Commission spoke with more than 200 children and young people aged 4–18 years about health and what health means to them. We spoke with children and young people in schools, youth advisory councils, hospitals, and disability services.

The Commission presented these thoughts and ideas in its submission to the NSW Health Department's Health Futures Planning Project.

What is health to children and young people?

"Health is not about whether you are sick or not, it's really about whether you are feeling good or not." (male, 15)

Many of the children and young people we spoke with said being healthy was about well-being and not just the absence of illness, disease, and injury. It was about "feeling good". Younger children spoke about nutrition and exercise while older children focussed on emotional health.

"Not being fit and being overweight as well as having too little to eat is unhealthy." (male, 13)

"I usually think about an apple—an apple a day keeps the doctor away." (female, 9)

"Older people's concerns might be cancer, sickness, hospitals, ambulances... to us, it's not just about physical stuff, it's about being happy and just general well-being." (male, 17)

Children and young people appreciated that most people are born healthy and that on the most part, children and young people are generally healthy.

"I don't go to a GP. I haven't been sick for 2 years. I get the flu and I get over it" (female, 16)

Who keeps kids feeling good?

Kids identified parents, families, friends and others with whom they had strong supportive relationships as the people who maintained their health. To kids, these people were their "frontline" health providers.

"Mum and Dad, teachers... They take you to the doctor, give you medication when you need it. Give you the right sort of food to eat. Make you walk" (male, 9)

If they were sick or injured, most kids went to their parents first, though sometimes it was their teacher, grandparent or sibling.

If they were feeling down or upset, young people with strong relationships with a parent or other family member turned to them.

"Dad, sisters (are) really strong emotionally and we help each other through tough times." (female, 17)

Others turned to friends, particularly if it was an issue they didn't want to talk to their parents about.

"Friends play a major role providing ease and support." (male, 17)

Depending on the issue, some said they would "deal with it myself", consult the internet, pray, or talk to someone they didn't know. Some young people reached out to doctors if they felt they needed to.

"If I had a rash in a private place I would not go to my family doctor, maybe he would tell my parents. I would go to a doctor I don't know" (male, 16)

While most kids get support from their families or friends, for some these relationships are troubled or shaky, leaving them vulnerable.

"Sleeping is hard because of noise fighting, arguing, pressure, smoking cigarettes and parents work late." (male, 17)

"It is hard when there is nobody to talk to, or you don't feel comfortable talking about it because the person you are talking to does not agree with you." (female, 16)

☀ We are all responsible for keeping kids feeling good

"Children, young people and their families should be helped to look after their own health." (female, 15)

Children and young people said that a holistic approach was necessary to keep them feeling good.

Kids recognised they live within families who are part of a wider community. They attend school, and have different sporting, social, and work commitments. They interact with the built and natural environment and are affected by the economy and other forces such as the media. They said they are bombarded with conflicting messages about health and what will make them feel good.

"Adults in professions such as medical, teaching, sports coaching, the media all impact on kids' health in some way or another. It's important they understand kids and what affects us." (female, 17)

"On this really annoying road, there is a Subway restaurant and directly across the road there is a McDonalds. So what are you going to pick first?" (male, 16)

The health care system needs to develop strong and active partnerships with children themselves, with families, schools, child care services and use them as

allies in maintaining children and young people's health and well-being.

Kids recognised the importance of investing in children and young people's health.

"How will services handle the waiting lists when they are already long now and there will only be more people and maybe new diseases? The way to combat that is to have preventative techniques so you don't have people getting sick and having to wait for operations." (male, 17)

Kids emphasised the need for their caretakers to have the time and resources to maintain their health and keep them feeling good.

"There's no time to go to the doctor. Mum doesn't take me to the doctor unless I'm bleeding to death and vomiting my guts up everywhere" (male, 9)

"A good PDHPE teacher makes all the difference—we had a really open teacher who was happy to help and answer questions." (male, 13)

People such as employers indirectly have an impact on kids' health and have a key role to play in keeping kids feeling good.

"Career-focussed parents are ignorant of their children's health. They are tired, and not around as much. There needs to be more consideration by employers for parents who have kids to take care of." (female, 13)

Strong support from the health system and wider community is particularly important for vulnerable children and families under severe stress.

"I've been on the run from my parents and their bullshit. They'd cracked my foot and I had nothing but the clothes on my back and my mobile. I went to the doctor's to have it looked at and possibly fixed but couldn't as I didn't have a Medicare card or the \$50 to see a doctor so I was turned away without a second thought and now I have a permanently damaged foot and go through agony after certain things." (female, 17)

☀ Where do kids go when they need expert medical care?

While most children depend on those close to them for their health and well-being, there are situations when they must engage with the health system. So while supporting their 'front-line' supporters is important for preventive health care, children and young people also need services which provide for their needs when they are sick, injured or in trouble emotionally.

Firstly, kids wanted there to be a more of a focus on their needs as kids. Kids need to be treated according to their age and maturity. They are not just small adults.

"I like the nurses who take care of me and have a magic wand that puts all the kids to sleep." (female, 5)

Children, young people, and their families need help to manage their own health. Young people say that they understand the difference between a healthy choice and an unhealthy one, and they have the information they need to distinguish between them. When they make unhealthy choices, it is often not for lack of knowledge but because they don't have the means (money, transport, confidence, equipment) to make healthy choices or because they actively choose the unhealthy option, having weighed up the potential good and bad effects.

☀ Services provided for children and young people need to be close and appropriate.

"Having good access to a service, good transport. On a main bus route. The receptionist knowing about the closest public transport, making sure the young person is informed about how to get there." (female, 16)

☀ Services and treatments need to be affordable.

"A lot of young people can't afford to pay to go see a service. That makes young people nervous, thinking "I've got no money, how am I going to pay?" (male, 17)

"Quite often it is too expensive to buy medication. So if I feel better I will save the rest for the next time I get sick. I know it's wrong but I (and all my friends) do it all the time." (female, 15)

☀ Services need to be available to children and young people.

"Young people have school, TAFE, whatever and by the time you finish at 3.30 you can't get there in time." (male, 16)

☀ Kids said that privacy and confidentiality are essential.

"I would be too embarrassed to go there...I wouldn't want someone to see me going there." (female, 15)

☀ Kids are looking for health care providers who can talk to them—directly, clearly and without condescension.

"What makes them good? Warm hands, understanding, someone who will listen and explain well. Not too emotional—you don't want them upset." (male, 16)

"I like it when our doctor talks to me, but mostly he talks to mum and gives me a lolly at the end." (female, 6)

"I have a spina bifida doctor I see every couple of years. I enjoy seeing her cause she's thorough and she's friendly. She treats you like a person, not an object. She takes time out to listen to you." (female, 17)

Children and young people said that cultural issues needed to be addressed when dealing with children and young people; not only the individual child or young person's cultural needs, but also broader needs such as intergenerational issues between parents and children.

"My mum doesn't speak good English so he (the GP) talks to me too" (female, 12)

Children and young people are communicating in ways that may be unfamiliar or awkward for most health practitioners and other adults. Children and young people said that health professionals and decision-makers need to keep in touch with young people, make messages meaningful and present health information in new and interesting formats.

"People are reluctant to pick up a pamphlet with all their friends watching. They don't want all their friends watching and hassling them." (male, 16)

"More messages about health, on TV, on the Internet and, like, MSN" (male, 14)

"I try and self-diagnose on the internet" (male, 17).

Want more information?

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People has written a submission to NSW Health's Health Futures Project on what children and young people believed was important to improve their health and wellbeing. The submission is available on our website at **www.kids.gov.au**.

March 2007

"Healthy and happy children make healthy and happy adults. If children aren't happy, then the world will end." (female, 14)



nsw commission for
children & young people

© **NSW Commission for Children & Young People**

Level 2, 407 Elizabeth Street Surry Hills NSW 2010 Tel: 9286 7276 Fax: 9286 7267 www.kids.nsw.gov.au