



Policy Platform: Young People and Families

Youth Coalition of the ACT

Family dynamics have a strong influence on the way young people see themselves, others, and the world; and influence their relationships, behaviours and their wellbeing. The Youth Coalition recognises that families have an integral role in the lives of young people and in contributing to their development, identity and participation in the community. A national 2009 survey found that 75.6% of young people identified family relationships were highly valued.¹ Of the 1376 respondents to the 2012 *Rate Canberra* survey conducted by the Youth Coalition, 71% of young people lived at home with their parents.² The issue most highly rated as important or very important to young people was family relationships (83%).

Families are often diverse in structure, and the Youth Coalition supports the notion that families may be comprised of a range of individuals, including GLBTI people, and that families may include biological and non-biological connections. The Youth Coalition recognises that young people and families have the right to define their own family parameters. In addition, families include a range of cultural norms and expectations.

Research indicates that the proportion of 'intact couple families' (families in which the original parents remain partnered) decreases from 81% of all families in which the youngest child is aged 0 - 4 years old, to 65% of all families where the youngest child is aged 15 – 17.³ This indicates that over their childhood and adolescence many young people are likely to experience significant change in their family circumstances whilst still living at home.

In addition, young people are now more likely to remain at home with their parents to an older age, particularly young males.⁴ The most commonly cited reasons for this included finances, followed by convenience and enjoyment of living at home.⁵ These later transitions further emphasise the importance of supporting young people in the 18 – 25 year age-bracket, possibly in a different family context.

Young people are often dependent on their families for economic, emotional and social support, and families offer a range of protective factors. However, some families may experience risk factors, such as abuse and neglect, alcohol and other drug use, incarceration, and chronic illness, which may result in the family having limited capacity to support young people. It is vital that families are able to access support to build upon protective factors, and identify and address risk factors early. The Youth Coalition also recognises the role that at least 10% of young people in the ACT play in supporting families as carers for parents or siblings.⁶ There is a need for support services to target both parents and young people who need support to continue their role as carers.

The 2009 national survey found that 24% of young people identified that they were concerned about family conflict.⁷ Families may experience a range of challenges and experience unsustainable pressures. These may include unavoidable circumstances

such as illness or unemployment as well as systemic issues relating to inadequate income support or social isolation. Article 18 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* specifies that parents should receive appropriate assistance in raising children, including child care, and that they should receive adequate levels of support through programs and services that ease the burden on families in times of need.⁸ The Youth Coalition strongly advocates that families be supported through early intervention and prevention programs before families reach crisis point and require tertiary intervention.

The Youth Coalition particularly acknowledges the circumstances of children and young people that have had experience of the Out of Home Care sector. Young people must be supported in their individual circumstances and given wraparound service delivery, as many have experienced significant upheaval and disadvantage.

The Youth Coalition supports the concept of 'family-aware youth work practice', developed by Jesuit Social Services. This concept of youth work supports workers to maintain a central focus on the young person, whilst optimising outcomes for young people by identifying, recognising, legitimising, responding and facilitating ongoing family connections; through working in a family-aware context.⁹

The roles of some services within the youth sector have been broadened to include family support, meaning that workers are finding that the practice of youth work is evolving. The parameters and frameworks of each role vary greatly, and there is a need for further discussion about how the range of workers can best support children and young people and their families in this changing environment.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT and Families ACT have worked in partnership as joint peaks in the new Children, Youth, and Family Services Program, and liaised with government on a range of matters in the best interest of the youth and family sectors. The development of a Practice Framework for Vulnerable Children, Young People and their Families is an important guiding document that will facilitate collaboration between agencies in the joint sectors. Other strategies such as a Workforce Development Strategy should be implemented in order to ensure solidarity and continued upskilling of the current workforce.

In considering young people and families, the Youth Coalition recognises that some groups of young people, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural young people and young people from a refugee background may have unique experiences and definitions of family. This requires services and systems to be responsive, flexible and competent in working with diverse families and their needs.

With 45% of females giving birth to their first child while under the age of 25 (compared with 24% of males becoming parents under the age of 25), the Youth Coalition also reinforces the need to ensure that young parents receive adequate supports. Young parents may experience a range of challenges, such as negative stigma, discrimination, and social isolation.

In addition, many young parents experience disadvantage through leaving education early, having no or limited qualifications, unemployment or low paid work, inadequate housing, and becoming dependent on income support.¹⁰

Federal changes to income payments and other arrangements relating to young parents and compulsory education, training or employment have been initiated recently. A thorough independent evaluation of these measures is encouraged, to

ensure that the policy does not continue to disadvantage a vulnerable group in society.

Commitments:

1. Advocating for the development and use of a broad and inclusive definition of family, particularly for GLBTI people and diverse cultural groups; and for services and systems to be responsive, flexible and competent in working with diverse families and their needs.
2. Advocating for the provision of a range of preparation, parenting and life skills training options for young parents, which give appropriate support relating to their specific circumstances.
3. Supporting youth services and programs to work in a 'family-aware' youth work practice context.
4. Advocating for the provision of a range of flexible, independent housing options, including short term housing for young people to support them to remain connected to their families.
5. Advocating for better intersectional linkages between Care and Protection, housing, youth services and family support services to promote holistic service provision for young people and their families.
6. Recognising that families are the first point of support for young people, advocating for the provision of practical support for families to ensure their child's engagement in education, training or employment.
7. Advocating for the active involvement of young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth policy and service delivery frameworks relating to them and their family.
8. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their individual care planning and case management involving their family.

¹ Mission Australia (2009) Insights into the Concerns of Young Australians: Making Sense of the Numbers, Snapshot 2010

² Youth Coalition of the ACT (2012) Rate Canberra 2012: Findings from the survey of Young People aged 12-25 in the ACT.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (Accessed 2010) Family Characteristics and Transitions 2006-07, Australian Government, Canberra

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (June 2009) Home and Away: The Living Arrangements of Young People, Australian Government, Canberra

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (Accessed 2010) Family Characteristics and Transitions 2006-07, Australian Government, Canberra

⁶ Mary Gays (2002) A Lifetime of Caring: ACT Schools-based Young Carers Survey; Marymead Child and Family Centre, Canberra

⁷ Mission Australia (2009) Insights into the Concerns of Young Australians: Making Sense of the Numbers, Snapshot 2010

⁸ United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child

⁹ Strong Bonds Project (Accessed 2010) Family-Aware Youth Work Practice, Jesuit Social Services, Victoria

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003), *Australia's Young People: Their Health and Wellbeing*