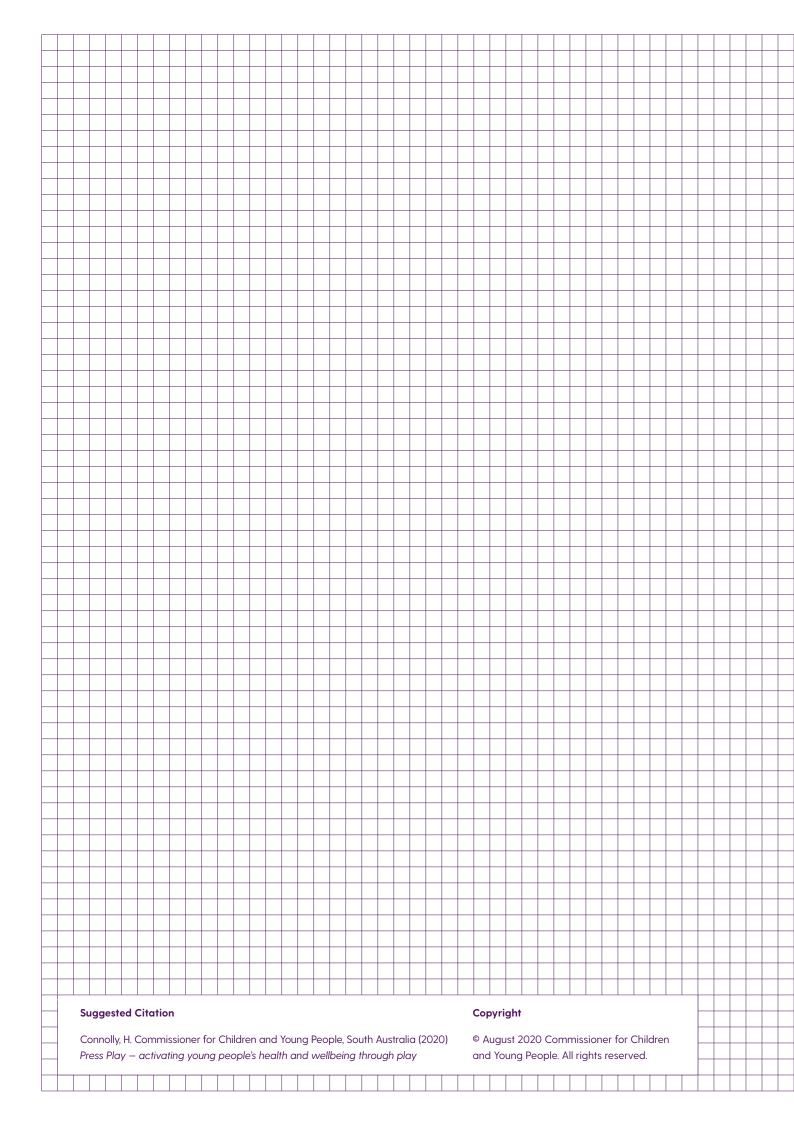South Australian
Commissioner
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Press Play

Activating young people's health
and wellbeing through play

Commissioner
Y for Children &
Young People

Contents

Commissioner's Foreword

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate is to promote the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in our State.

I advocate for the views, aspirations and rights of children and young people to be affirmed, promoted and protected, working to give children and young people a 'voice' across society.

I also seek to influence and identify the responsibilities and roles that public, civic and commercial sectors of our communities have in relation to children and young people's needs, advocating for them to be positioned 'front and centre' in policy, practice and service delivery.

Since commencing as Commissioner, I have heard firsthand how many young people in South Australia lead happy, active lives, and feel respected by adults. They value their family relationships, including those they have with family pets, and they value their friendships, school education and learning, along with their culture and ethnicity. They also value the

opportunities they have to participate in their communities and look for opportunities to contribute positively where they can.

An enduring theme in many of these conversations is their desire to be more engaged in their communities. They want adults to support them to feel hopeful for the future by finding out what's going on in their lives, including committing to standing up for their rights when they are are not being upheld.

One of these rights is encapsulated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 sets out a specific right for *'all children to have rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'.*

Further, Article 27 of the UNCRC states that *'children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical needs, and the government, through public provision of play spaces, should help families who cannot afford to provide this to their children.'*

Between early childhood and primary school, we tend to lose sight of the importance of play for young people, instead viewing it as an activity that is only relevant to young children. We encourage teenagers to put their toys
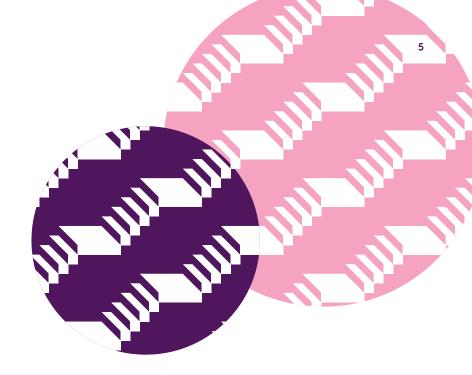
'The truly great advances of this generation will be made by those who can make outrageous connections, and only a mind who knows how to play can do that.'

Nagle Jackson, Artist

away and to spend their time learning about life through school and activities that remove opportunities for play and free time. We do this without realising that by doing so we risk impairing their cognitive development and their capacity to learn the social skills they will need to successfully navigate their way into the adult world.

Play is critical to young people's health and wellbeing. Young people have a developmental need to play. They also have a right to play, and as the adults in their lives we are required to uphold this right by addressing any barriers to play that they face.

Governments, civic society and business all have an obligation to build the youth-friendly infrastructure young people need in order to fulfil their need and right to play. But rather than make assumptions about what this should be, we need to consult directly with young people to find out what it is they want us to build, and how they wish to be supported and enabled to participate more in play.

'Press Play' not only examines the importance of play in young people's lives, it also looks at strategies that can be devised to address barriers to play at the individual, community, cultural and systemic levels.

These strategies are focussed on removing barriers to play relevant to young people alive today. They are not tied to old ways of thinking about play. Nor are they based on past assumptions and experiences of play. In the same way that the world has changed, so have definitions and experiences of play.

The ways in which young people want to spend their leisure and play time are entirely different to the ways in which earlier generations chose to do so. We need to recognise these differences and work to create the infrastructure that supports young people alive today to play in the ways they wish to.

Young people are the experts in their own lives. They have told me consistently and repeatedly that they want to have their opinions heard, their ideas taken seriously, and for both to be acted upon; in fact this is their right. My role therefore includes advocating for their involvement in co-designing services and initiatives that are directly aimed at them.

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

Introduction

Most of us understand that play is significant to the social and emotional development of small children, but far fewer of us understand the importance of play for young people, or the significant role play has in the development of a young person's creative brain.

This is the part of the brain we use for more complex thinking and problem solving. As we get older and life becomes more complex, we increasingly rely on this part of the brain for organisation, critical thinking, reasoning and understanding, confidence, self-identity and independence.

Given the importance of young people attaining these skills so they can successfully transition into adulthood, it could be argued that play actually becomes increasingly more important as children get older.

If we want critical and creative adult thinkers in our communities, then it is essential that 'playfulness' be embedded in the lives of young people now.

The link between imagination and increased learning and play is already well understood in the business world. There are a number of cutting edge companies that are already well-known for having embedded playfulness into their work-places. They adopted this strategy to increase productivity and job satisfaction, targeting play-based wellbeing activities to help break down barriers between people, improve relationships and build trust. These forward thinking businesses clearly see the link between play and the development of creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, self-awareness and critical thinking, and with it the benefits employees who possess these skills brings to their business.

Despite the knowledge we already have around the importance of play and its capacity to build creative thinkers, most of our current education environments have almost exclusively prioritised formal approaches to teaching and learning. We actively prioritise 'purposeful' approaches over 'learner centred playful' approaches so much so that finding time for play in school is almost non-existent outside the early years of learning.

For young people themselves, the value of play for their wellbeing, educational attainment and development of life skills, is well understood. Young people consistently tell us that fun and play are what they want at school. It is through play that they test their limits, explore new possibilities and learn new things most effectively. They know their experience of school and their overall engagement with the learning agenda would be vastly improved if teachers took a more playful approach to its delivery.

Play for young people is so much more than just a way to occupy their time. It is one of the few ways in which they know they can experience the world beyond and independent of the direction and moderation of adults.

For young people play is an important part of discovering who they are and what they want to become. It aids in their transition from adolescent to adult because it is the part of their lives that exists outside school and work. It is often done on their own terms rather than something for adults to organise on their behalf, or arrange around their schedules and commitments.

Young people also report that as they transition to adulthood they are more focussed on thinking about their future. They understand that as they mature they have to think more about the consequences of their actions, as well as the kind of person they want to be and what they value most. This transition to adulthood and independence is a process through which young people gain more freedom and flexibility. They need more opportunities to help them determine what they're good at, what they enjoy most, and what they are passionate about, while participating in risk-taking that helps them to learn and develop the relevant skills. Participation in play in all its forms, offers young people these opportunities.

Given the importance of play, we must validate, preserve and protect young people's right to participate wholeheartedly in it, no matter what age they are. However, in the current climate, it would be naive to assume that resources for play will be prioritised just because 'it is the right thing to do'.

We need a fundamental shift in the way we think about play and the ways in which we involve young people in designing services and opportunities that will promote it. This includes finding ways to include them in decision-making, adopting a 'joined-up' approach at the local level to create the kinds of liveable cities and communities we envisage, with their input.

Critical to this liveability is addressing the structural barriers to play that currently exist, including the impact that transport and access to facilities has, parental attitudes towards safety, and the demands of schoolwork and the priority on academic achievement in young people's lives, that prevents them from participating fully in their right to play.

By providing opportunities for young people to meet, play and interact regularly in supportive, stimulating and stress-free environments that they themselves have helped design, we will be meeting our obligations under the UNCRC.

Providing opportunities for young people to experience fun and joy, to have rest and leisure, to have more opportunities for engagement in play and recreational activities, and participation in cultural life and the arts, made accessible and relevant to their age and interests, will benefit society as a whole.

Policy and decision-making that impacts directly on young people is made every day. It is important that in this work we find ways to embed playfulness, so that young people can see play is a lifelong activity in which everyone is encouraged to participate – not just something you do until you turn thirteen.

By extending and involving young people in the design and delivery of programs and infrastructure that supports and promotes opportunities for play, we will be embedding playfulness in our communities for the benefit of us all, thereby enabling the healthy development and wellbeing of young people into adulthood.

Conversely, if we don't focus on removing barriers to play for young people, we run the risk of creating a generation who will not have had enough opportunities for play and therefore lack the wherewithal for healthy development and wellbeing. This will have a knock on effect into adulthood that will ultimately impact poorly on South Australia's social and economic future.

Recommendations

1

Master planners, transport and urban designers incorporate **strategies to address barriers to play** for 13-18 year olds.

2

Public and environmental health bodies work with local communities to **raise awareness of the links between play and wellbeing** for young people.

3

Local Councils **engage young people to provide input** on how to increase health and wellbeing outcomes through play.

Key Messages

Play is critical to the health and wellbeing of young people aged thirteen to eighteen.

Young people have a developmental need and right to play.

Barriers to play can be individual, cultural and systemic, and therefore require diverse strategies to address.

Developing more playful communities and youth-friendly infrastructure is the business of Governments, civil society and the business sector and will benefit from input by young people themselves.

According to the 500 young people who were surveyed about play, the best thing to do when you have free time is to 'hang out'. This is most commonly done with friends and family, but can also be done with a boyfriend, girlfriend, or a pet, and includes 'going out with', 'catching up with', 'eating with' and 'shopping with' a preferred companion.

The top 5 barriers to play identified by young people were:

Not having enough **time** to play.

Not having enough **money** to play.

Not **knowing** what is available.

Lacking in **confidence** to try.

Needing to seek **permission** and support from an adult.

Findings

This report aims to amplify the voices of young South Australians to understand how young people want to play. It aims to identify the barriers they face to doing what they like to do in their free time, whether this free time is spent at home, at school, within sporting clubs, or within community organisations involved in the design and delivery of play and leisure activities.

Many reports on play focus on young children. They generally source content from adult perspectives and through the observation of children's play. Reports on play and how it is undertaken by those who are over the age of twelve are less common. Similarly, reports on how young people themselves view and describe play are rare. This report seeks to bridge this gap and to bring the voices and opinions of young people and their ideas and opinions on play to the fore.

The material contained in this report has been sourced via conversations undertaken with young people living throughout South Australia. They have taken place in regional towns and in metropolitan centres where young people from all walks of life have freely described the benefits of play, as well as their concerns about the lack of opportunities there are for play.

Face-to-face surveys on play were undertaken by more than 500 young people aged 13-18 years of age. The surveys asked young people what they like to do, where they like to be, and who they like to be with when they have free time. They were also asked if there was

anything that prevented them from engaging in play activities, or from using their free time in ways they would like.

Their responses revealed how important play is to young people. It is through play in its various forms that young people engage with their peers, neighbourhoods, cities, towns, and with the world around them. Young people want to be able to do their favourite things in their own local communities, saying they feel happiest when they are doing the things they like to do, in the ways they want to, where they want to.

They say this most often includes doing activities that involve watching or playing music, experiencing or being involved in plays, theatre, dance, arts and crafts, street art, drawing, painting, making things, going to art galleries, reading, writing, and poetry. They also talk about the importance of being able to attend events or cultural festivals as a means of social engagement, of making connections, building relationships and participating in their community, thereby fostering their sense of belonging, as well as their overall health and wellbeing.

Young people said that sport is very important to them, and that this can include not just playing sport, but also getting involved in activities around sport, such as going to clubs or games as spectators, being part of a recreation group that walks, surfs, or cycles as examples, or that participates in other sport orientated activities and hobbies such as chess, archery or esports.

Young people use a variety of words to describe their free time. They describe play as 'mucking about', 'chilling with friends', and 'hanging out'. Whatever it's called, when asked to explain why play activities are important, young people are clear that free time is about so much more than just being entertained, or finding ways not to be bored.

When asked general questions about what would make their lives better, young people spoke about their desire for their communities to provide them with more recreational activities, more art galleries and more places for young people to gather, to exhibit and to share their art, hobbies and skills. In regional centres in particular, young people look for a greater variety of movies to be screening at the local cinema, for more

local music festivals and events to be held, and for more clubs and classes to be made available to them at affordable prices.

They also frequently discussed their concerns around the scarcity of community sport and recreational facilities designed specifically for young people, observing that most of the community infrastructure currently available or being built is designed for adults and/or younger children – not them.

When asked how they like to spend their free time, young people talked about engaging in activities that are enjoyable, spontaneous, expressive, and of their own choosing; those based on their own interests and ideas. They also spoke about how play improves their overall health and wellbeing, and how it makes them feel good about themselves and their lives.

They talked about how good it is just being with the people they care about in unstructured and relaxed ways. Gathering with friends can be fun and frivolous, involve a structured game, or just provide them with the opportunity to talk and hang out together.

'**Riding skateboards, scooters and bikes** is important because it keeps you fit, gives you something to do and meet new people every day.'

'**Gaming** is an opportunity to meet people who enjoy what I enjoy even if we never say a word.'

'Support for young people **using public spaces for movement** – parkour and freerunners aren't vandals, we're out training in public because we love the sport – greater support for girls and young women to become involved in sport.'

'**Singing is important** to me because I can get lost in the music. I can forget everything that's happening in the world. Every hurtful word, every stressful assignment disappears when I sing. Nothing matters but that moment.'

'**Drama** opportunities give students a chance to meet new people and break out of their comfort zones.'

'**Employ local artists** to create pieces
for landscape architecture in new spaces,
have shelters for rain and shine, seating on the
ground and benches, under 18 events around
the city to bring people together with bands and
other groups performing in the space.'

'You see less young people in the city
because there is less reason to be there.
[Where are the] **designated places** for street
art or young people to express themselves.'

'It's hard for youth to consume/share their music
because **a lot of music is shared in places that
only adults can attend**. Young artists can't share
their art because the consumerism is targeted
towards adults, with 18+ age limits. This makes it hard
for young people to express their [music and] art.'

Understanding the Role of Play

The contribution that play makes to the health and wellbeing of young people cannot be underestimated. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one in four young people in Australia experience a mental health condition or mental health issue as a direct response to what is happening in their lives.

We know that the emotional and mental health and wellbeing of young people is just as important as their physical health and wellbeing. Good mental health allows young people to develop the resilience they need to grow into well-rounded, healthy adults.

According to the Mental Health Foundation of the United Kingdom, having time and the freedom to play indoors and outdoors, is one of the top 5 activities that contributes to maintaining good mental health in young people. In 2010, research into play in the United States found that there is a direct correlation between the decline of free play in the lives of children and young people, and an increase in anxiety and depression.[1]

If we already know this, then it shouldn't be too much of a leap to see the importance of embedding play and playfulness into our communities. It will be beneficial for us all, but particularly for young people who face increasing mental health issues and illness. These will likely continue to worsen if their opportunities for play and leisure are further diminished.

However, despite the years of research supporting the importance of play, decision makers and community leaders still do not prioritise projects or build infrastructure that will encourage and support young people to engage in play. In fact, because so much of a young person's life these days is regulated and defined by adults, there is not much room left for young people to enjoy free time at all.

If young people are to develop their identity, creativity, self-confidence and connections, it is essential to look at how we can structure society to provide young people with more play time, including time to determine how and where they would most like to spend it.

From what young people have said, when they are not hanging out at home, or at a mate's place, they want to spend their free time in places where they feel welcomed. These are usually places and spaces where they can physically connect with their peers, share experiences, and develop and learn new skills. Young people have said they don't mind whether this is done online or offline, as long as

it can take place somewhere they feel safe, and where they can be supported to take risks and develop their sense of self.

Without exception, in every South Australian community where young people have been consulted, they raised the importance that they place on the opportunity to create dedicated spaces over which they have a sense of ownership and belonging. They report that they often feel marginalised in public spaces, and that they believe groups of young people 'hanging out' is generally viewed by adults as being disruptive or troublesome. This combined with the culture of 'moving young people on' whenever they get together, means they are often made to feel unwelcome or excluded in their own communities; thereby missing out on the connection that they are actually seeking.

Young people want to be able to hang out safely in malls, fast food outlets, retail and civic spaces, as well as in more natural outside spaces that have been built with them in mind, ideally with their input. They have repeatedly said that what they want is for adults to hear and understand that the 'places and spaces in which they want to hang out' are those that have been specifically designed for them. Key to their design success is the ability to get to them independently of adults or other peers.

These youth-friendly places and spaces also need to foster diversity and inclusiveness, be free of alcohol and drugs, and be filled with the things they enjoy most: music, food, and a variety of youth-focused activities that are affordable, or better still free.
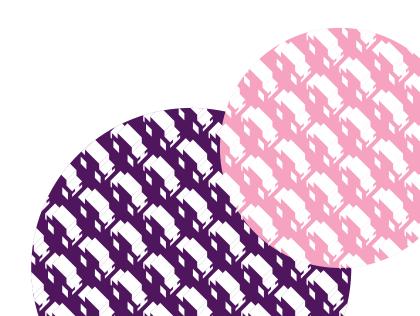
Young people need adults to recognise how integral music is to their daily lives. Music helps them to relax, de-stress, and to express their creativity. In fact, young people believe music is such an important part of Australian youth culture, that they want as many opportunities as possible to experience creating, listening to, and enjoying it with their friends and peers.

When their interests are supported, they report more optimism and positivity about the future, as well as that of their local community. Ultimately young people want to play in the ways they decide and to be supported to do so.

For a growing number of young people this includes more opportunities to play digital games, viewed both as a great way to play, and as an important way to connect with peers. In addition to the recreational value that gaming and eSports offers young people, many have said that gaming is becoming a vital part of youth culture, offering many young people a great way to relax, to express their frustrations, build their skills, and make friends across the world. The importance young people place on involvement in gaming and eSports as a recreational activity is increasing, with a call for more gaming clubs to be organised and operated in local communities in the same way traditional sport and recreational clubs are.

Young people want to play in spaces that support inclusion and diversity, as well as safety. They also want to be involved in the co-design of the spaces and places in which they want to be.

Playing What, Where, and Who With

According to the 500 young people who were surveyed about play, the best thing to do when you have free time is to 'hang out'. This is most commonly done with friends and family, but can also be done with a boyfriend, girlfriend, or a pet, and includes 'going out with', 'catching up with', 'eating with' and 'shopping with' a preferred companion.

4 best things to do

Hang out

Play sports

Be active

Play games, make and create

4 best places to be

Home

Friend's place

In nature

City, mall, shops

4 best people to be with

Friends

Family

Pets/animals

Myself

Playing sport is the next best activity young people like doing in their free time, with soccer, football, cricket, netball, basketball and tennis all identified in this category. Young people said that in addition to organised sport, playing sport also includes informal games where young people come together in a local park to shoot a few hoops, kick a ball about, or run amuck with a pet or two.

Being active outdoors is also very important to young people. Many described outdoor activities such as hiking, surfing, walking the dog, bike-riding, skating, horse-riding, exploring, fishing, climbing trees and camping, as activities they like to do regularly and which they consider very important to their health and wellbeing.

Young people also said that indoor games were also very important and included examples such as playing board games or card games, making and creating their own games, developing avatars and characters, making videos, singing, listening to music, making or playing music, cooking, reading, writing, and drawing and arts and crafts.

The number one response young people gave regarding the best place to 'hang out' was 'at home'. Home was seen as an important 'comfy' place to be, where you could play games and relax at the same time.

The best places to hang out outside of home included the beach, a friend's house, the city, the park, and a local oval or playground. Many young people described the natural environment and 'outdoors' as an ideal place in which to spend time. They described activities such as being 'out hiking in the wild', 'out fishing with the boys', 'up a tree', 'in water' or 'in a national park' as great free time options.

While many young people were focused on the familiar spaces and places they know across their communities or cities (eg. Rundle Mall), others described a time when they were on holiday and

seeing other cultures 'around the world' or sightseeing in 'another city' and how interesting and enjoyable this free time activity was.

> *'Outside – on a mountain/up a tree'*
> *'Anywhere outdoors and peaceful.'*
> *'My room or in the trees.'*
> *'Anywhere with my best friends.'*
> *'In a calm environment.'*
> *'Wherever other people are. Rundle Mall is good.'*

Young people overwhelmingly want to spend the majority of their free time with their friends and mates, particularly their closest or best friends. Prioritising their free time to spend it with girlfriends and boyfriends also was mentioned by a few.

Spending free time with family is also important, including time spent with parents and siblings, as well as with members of their extended family such as grandparents and cousins. Many young people also expressed how highly they value their relationships with their pets.

> *'Friends who I wholly trust or someone close to me.'*
> *'People I love.'*
> *'People I can learn from.'*
> *'Friends, family, good listeners' 'People that are not negative.'*
> *'Friends who play video games with me.'*

Young people commonly reported the importance of balancing the time they spend with others with quality time spent on their own. Many young people said they see 'free time' as the time they spend relaxing and reflecting on their own lives in their own homes or room, and that they might do this by meditating, napping, watching Netflix, or doing yoga. The importance of just 'chilling' was a dominant theme that came up throughout the consultation conversations.

Barriers to Play

South Australian young people live in a world characterised by rapid and unprecedented civic, social, technological, environmental and political change. Uncertainty and complexity underpin their experiences and values, their culture and identities, and their individual and collective sense of self.

Play, like many other aspects of their lives, has been influenced by this changing environment. As so-called 'digital natives', today's young people have grown up in a technology driven world that has impacted on every aspect of their lives, including how they access information and services, where they exercise their freedoms, the types of pressures they experience, the opportunities available to them, and the way they choose to participate in and identify with local, national and global communities.
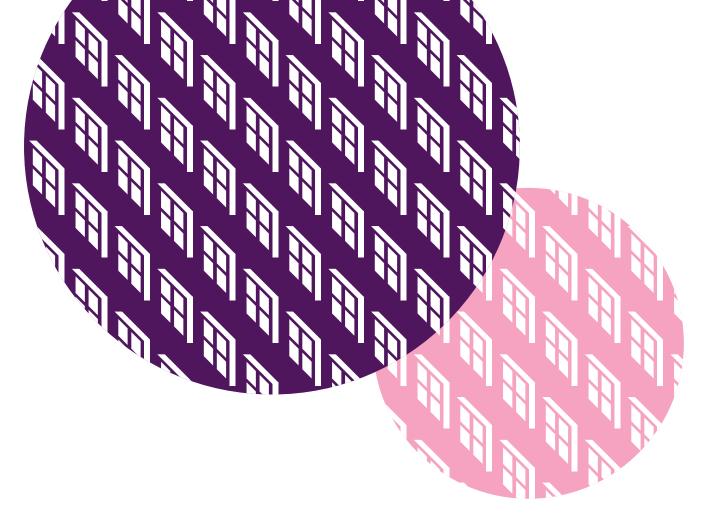
Their relationships cross continents and their identities are diverse and fluid. They both literally and figuratively see the world differently to previous generations. Consequently they have different expectations of how they should learn and of the kinds of jobs they want or could do. Not surprisingly they also have different ideas, aspirations and expectations around how they wish to spend their leisure time.

Their expectations and experiences of play, like all aspects of their lives, is influenced by a variety of individual factors that include age, ability, class, gender, ethnicity and geographical location, with various barriers to play reflected across these differentiating factors.

For example, young people identified not being able to independently get to places as a significant barrier to play. In fact, 'access' and with it 'transport' are considered to be a critical factor in determining whether young people can participate in free time activities on their own terms.

The main transport barriers that young people raised in relation to their capacity to participate in free time activities included the following:

— the cost of transport

— the availability of public transport

— poorly thought out travel routes; and

— the inability to mix and match public transport. For example bicycle riding – you can't take your bike onto a bus, and taking your bike onto a train costs more.

Access to transport that is not reliant upon their parents being available is critical to a successful transition from childhood into young adulthood.

For some young people living in regional areas, the general lack of public transport available to them, and their inability to independently move within and between towns, has a significant impact on their capacity to engage in play activities that enable them to develop socially and emotionally.

This lack of transport options often collides with a lack of activities being available so reaching an activity often requires travelling further. This makes access to transport even more of a necessity.

That's not to say that young people living in regional areas don't have any access to opportunities to play. They frequently say that one of the most positive aspects of living in the country is the freedom and opportunities they have to muck around in nature with less surveillance from adults.

What they say is that as they get older they become more and more aware of what they are unable to access in their regional areas. If more events and activities were held nearer to their homes, they would not be dependent on coming into Adelaide for entertainment and this would make a huge difference to the quality of their lives.

A local youth club/space is generally high on their list of wants, but they also want culture and festivals, art and film, to come to where they live. Many regional young people want their local councils to think beyond a skate park as a symbol of youth culture. They want to be recognised as citizens who have more depth and diversity than one or two single activities such as skateboarding or shooting hoops at the local basketball ring implies.

By contrast, young people in the city reported experiencing greater barriers to accessing or engaging in activities that are outside. They say they spend more time indoors because there are not enough opportunities for them to participate in activities outdoors. This encourages them to engage in solitary or online activities such as listening to music, digital gaming and esports, or viewing social media and interacting more with friends online.

They speak about the lack of safe spaces that are available in city areas for young people to engage in outdoor play. They frequently remind us that, like regional young people, building a skate park or basketball court in their local neighbourhood does not mean their diverse leisure and recreation needs are being met.

Although there are many more options available to them in urban areas, many young people reported that whilst they see the cultural spaces in the city of Adelaide as being activated, these are not able to be readily accessed by them. They walk past lane way activations that offer music, food and alcohol that is either not aimed at them, or legally available to them.

'You see less young people in the city because there is less reason to be there. [Where are the] designated places for street art or young people to express themselves.'

Young people said they largely feel shut-out because of the lack of music culture made available to young people within Adelaide and the regions. In regional areas, young people said they want music venues that are much closer to where they live. In both places, young people want venues that are not structured around drinking. They also said the cost to attend events that are aimed just at young people is often prohibitive. They want more free and affordable (cheap) festivals and concerts, specifically organised for young people rather than for 'families' who have young children.

Whilst young people have an offline life, they also have an online life. They often talk about the concerns they have about their online life being overlooked and ignored by adults. In fact, young people across South Australia reported their frustration with adults whose commentary around their exposure to the online world invariably concludes that all the issues young people face, be they physical or mental, are always attributed to their over-reliance on digital devices.

Whilst conversations about leisure, recreation and play commonly revert to conversations about young people choosing to spend their time indoors and on screens, this view fails to adequately address the myriad of issues that influence young people's play and recreation

choices offline, and the differences within groups of young people for whom access to play and recreation is particularly difficult.

Barriers to play for young people have evolved over many years. They have been heavily influenced by the cultural and social changes that have taken place over several generations. For example, activities such as playing cricket in the street or riding bicycles around the neighbourhood are no longer the norm and are now 'frowned upon' by adults and parents because they're seen as unsafe or interfering with traffic flows.

Similarly, young people gathering in parks is viewed more as threatening behavior than community building or accessing facilities. This leads to communities in which young people must seek permission to gather in public places independently of adults, or only gather in designated spaces, which are limited.

Young people are acutely aware of the lack of tolerance there is toward them gathering in public spaces. Other generational differences in relation to what is considered appropriate for young people to 'do' in their free time include:

— an increased emphasis upon and valuing of a young person's academic results at the expense of other activities and achievements

— an over-heightened concern for safety with more risk-averse attitudes prevalent amongst parents and carers

— an increase in housing density that has lead to smaller front and backyards and less open spaces close to home in which to enjoy free time; and

— a greater dependency on transport to participate in activities that were previously more local and community based.

Furthermore, young people are concerned about the impact the increasing cost of living is having on them and their families. We know that young people's ability to engage and be included in leisure and recreation activities is being eroded as a result of rising poverty levels and greater socio-economic inequality.

As young people have told us again and again, when there is financial stress within a family, actually getting enough money to survive and meet the basic needs is and must be the priority. Everything else is a luxury. This means that play is seen as a 'luxury' and becomes another right young people from low income families are at real risk of being excluded from.

Likewise young people with disabilities are 'vulnerable' in relation to their play rights. They describe having very few opportunities to be included in leisure and recreation activities, with much of the focus on programs more often than not directed at young children living with disability.

Young people who face more specific barriers to play due to living with communication, sensory and cognitive disability are rarely if at all considered. Most of the barriers to play they experience move beyond individual barriers and choices to their capacity to engage in leisure and recreational activities reflected through more structural barriers to play.

When asked about the practical every day barriers to play they experience, young people reported feeling tired and being too busy with school, homework and other commitments, making it difficult for them to find the time and motivation to focus on spending time doing the things they enjoy.

Most respondents recognised that school was an important part of their daily lives and viewed homework as something 'that has to

be done'. However, there was a real sense that 'excessive amounts of homework' often left little time for other things, particularly physical activity and play.

> " *'Sometimes I have to skip sports trainings to finish homework.'*

> " *'School work, no time, not enough balance.'*

Another key reason for not having enough 'balance' or time to spend it doing what they really want to do was being 'too busy' or having too many 'other commitments', including casual or part-time work, extracurricular activities, or family obligations and caring responsibilities.

> " *'Time outside of school is limited with homework, part-time job and tutoring.'*

> " *'I don't really have free time as I'm always either helping out my family or at school.'*

Cost was identified as one of the top five barriers preventing young people from spending their free time in the ways they would like. Many described the costs associated with organised sport or other hobbies as 'too expensive' for them and their families, including purchasing of equipment, uniforms, classes and club or gym memberships.

Others talked about being unable to afford to go out with friends because they are unable to find work. While many young people enjoy hanging out in free public places like ovals, playgrounds and parks, there was a desire across all ages for more affordable membership options and access to organised activities specific to young people.

'Money like for equipment and going to clubs and lessons'

Many young people reported not knowing what activities, opportunities or places are available to them. Even some of those who knew of places where they could go to hang out, or be active, talked about the issues getting to and from these places. The main issues with transport included that travel times were too long because they lived 'too far away', that their parents were working and unavailable to help with transport, or that public transport was too expensive or not available. These issues were particularly challenging for those who live outside metropolitan areas.

> " *'School and homework - also living too far away from recreation facilities transport doesn't come to my house.'*

> " *'I live in a rural location so it is more difficult for me.'*

Young people said that a lack of confidence was another major reason that stopped them from doing the things they enjoy. Many young people described a fear of embarrassment, pressure and judgment from others about their skills, fitness, coordination or 'not being good enough' as reasons not to participate in play or free time activities.

Others were concerned about their weight and how their body felt and was perceived by others, particularly in swimwear and active wear. Some respondents, mostly young girls, mentioned ill-fitting school uniforms and having their period as key barriers to their motivation and participation in activities, particularly physical activity.

'Not being as good at activities as I'd like. Scared of judgement due to low skill level.'

'Mainly just embarrassment, I don't like standing out.'

'I'm just lazy - no motivation. I like to relax, I don't want my body to show in gym wear or bikini.'

Not having permission or support from parents or family was given as a main reason preventing young people from using their free time in the ways they would like. Many described 'strict' parents and parental 'expectations', 'supervision' or 'other priorities', including 'chores', 'family problems' or 'family obligations' and 'caring responsibilities' as reasons they could not participate in play.

'My parents don't like me having fun two days in a row. Also I can't afford going out to eat with friends because I can't find a job.'

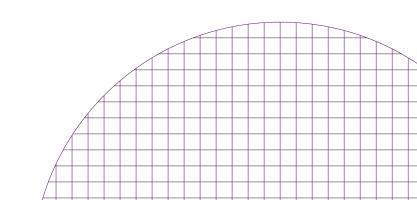Young people consistently raised 'support from friends' as an important part of motivating them to participate in play. The social aspect of organised activities whether physical or other, was central to a young person's enjoyment of that activity. Some described that 'not having friends who enjoy the same things' or 'not knowing anyone interested in the same sport' impacted on their own motivation and confidence to participate in that sport or activity.

Some young people described a lack of motivation to participate in play or free time activities. Although a few respondents linked this to having a lack of confidence or limited energy, motivation levels were most commonly linked to feeling tired, being too busy, and not having enough free time. 'Being busy' and 'being lazy' commonly appeared in the same response as having 'too much homework' and 'being too tired'.

Both physical and mental health issues, including problems with sleep, had an impact on how young people spent their free time, particularly their commitment to physical activity. Past physical injuries and fear of future injuries, plus social anxiety, general anxiety and stress often linked to family life, school commitments and extracurricular commitments, also impacted on young people's capacity to participate in play and free time activities. Young people who live with disability explained how facilities were not built for them, and that this made it harder for them to engage in physical activities.

Social media, video games, and other digital platforms such as Netflix and YouTube are popular ways for many young people to play. These online activities enable them to connect socially and learn while they're being creative and relaxing. For some respondents, however, spending 'too much time' on these digital platforms was also a barrier to participation in offline activities.

What Needs to Change

Building young people's sense of belonging within their local community comes by investing in the things they care about. Young people have given us clear direction around what they need to relax, play and engage in leisure activities.

They have told us we need to promote the 'everyday freedoms' of young people and that this involves opportunities for them to have input into the design of facilities and services aimed directly at them.

They have also told us that they enjoying playing outdoors as well as indoors and that both have benefits. Participating in casual or informal unstructured activities can be just as beneficial as participating in organised ones, and that being made to feel welcome in spaces and places is very important to their sense of belonging and feelings of worth and respect.

Not only do young people want to be welcomed in museums and art galleries and other leisure venues, they also want to see their art, music, literature, theatre, dance and sporting activities made available, and they need this to be made accessible and affordable and within easy reach of where they live.

In response to the survey question about what would help them live a more active life, young people said they would like to see more 'community sports' activities made available to young people along with 'more dance class' and

'more facilities like clubs, parks and gyms' aimed specifically at them, with their input into how they are designed and run.

They want to gather in youth-friendly places that are comfortable and welcoming, where innovation is encouraged and where moderate risk-taking is seen as a way of learning. They want places where they can simply 'be' and 'hang out' without fear of being 'hassled, judged or moved on'.

The importance of youth-friendly infrastructure in supporting young people's development and making them feel valued as important members of the community cannot be overestimated. When young people see investment of this kind being made for them, they see it as validation of their own worth and rightful place within their community.

Many young people want opportunities that are 'fun', 'engaging' and 'more appealing'. They want greater recognition of the social aspects of play, with many describing the importance of 'having people that I know with me' as being paramount to their enjoyment levels.

'I found when I was swimming for fitness, I'd barely do two laps. When I swam for fun, I could swim for a long time.'

Access to affordable activities was one of the top three things young people said would help them to 'live a more playful life'. Many reported that 'having more free opportunities to play or engage in physical activity' and 'making it less expensive' would increase their participation.

Suggestions around how this could be delivered, included lowering the cost of gym memberships for young people, or offering classes and sports programs aimed at young people at reduced rates. Reducing the cost of transport was amongst the top four things identified as a barrier, including the need to make access to transport 'easier', 'better' and 'more reliable'.

'Ability to participate in sports for free.'

'Having more things that are safe for me and more money.'

'Making cheaper sports and transport to get to the places for the activities.'

'Although the sports voucher program is commendable, it only covers one semester's worth of sport.'

Others talked about providing more specific opportunities to encourage girls to be more active. Many young people recognised that having support from others, particularly from members of their family, was central to their motivation and ability to participate in play or leisure activities. They recognised that having more opportunities required greater support from others, particularly parents and families, but also peers and teachers, and the broader community. They also recognised the importance of taking an inclusive response to addressing barriers to play amongst young people, regardless of cultural or socio-economic background, as well as gender, skills, or fitness levels.

'Cultivating a culture that doesn't shame people who were unfit to start with and not focusing and glorifying athletes. Normalise sports 4 regular people.'

'More opportunities for girls without pressure put on by boys and teachers.'

Greater support for having 'more time' for play and leisure and being given more independence to participate in play and leisure activities was rated very highly. One of the most popular suggestions young people gave to increase free time and opportunities for play, as well as improve mental health, was to be given more time at school to complete homework.

Many wanted to 'be more organised' and 'more motivated' saying that achieving a better balance between homework and their other commitments was central to their ability to achieve this. They also said that having more sleep and eating healthier food, including what food is available at the school canteen, would help.

Providing more information aimed at young people and their families about the benefits of participating in sport and play, including the kinds of opportunities and activities available (particularly opportunities outside of school) was also thought to be a good way to boost motivation and confidence.

'Convincing families that sports are good for young people and decreasing the amount of school work.'

A great place to start is on the issues young people have identified as a priority, namely:

— Community Infrastructure
— Affordable Activities
— Support for Participation

Conclusion

This report highlights that young people in South Australia are experiencing a number of fundamental barriers to play. If we do genuinely want every young person to be enriched by the experiences that play, the arts, sport, and culture offers, no matter where they live, or what ability or income level they have, we need to commit to removing these barriers.

Under the Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017 government, community and business all have a duty to not only safeguard the welfare of young people, but to also promote it. However, this obligation does not currently translate into an enforceable duty to provide youth-focused facilities and activities. Nor does it allow for or encourage input from young people themselves.

With the current pressure on public budgets, it is easy to prioritise other important areas over removal of barriers to play for young people. However, by doing so we risk delaying or limiting the development of our young people – the leaders of tomorrow.

For young people to reach full maturity and contribute to society in the ways we hope and envisage, they need us to support and invest in youth friendly infrastructure and opportunities that enable them to play more. This includes shifting our mindset to ensure play and leisure activities are prioritised. Much can be achieved without huge cost, and designing and building youth friendly infrastructure with direct input

from young people themselves will ensure we spend precious resources on delivering what young people actually want.

Choosing not to address the lack of opportunities for young people to enjoy a range of leisure activities will continue to be at the detriment of our local and regional communities. It will also limit the potential that exists to create a positive and cohesive South Australian society that supports young people to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood and all that that entails.

It is in all our interests to find ways to work on removing barriers to play that young people have identified, and which are preventing them from participating in activities they find fun.

Young people themselves recognise their health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked to having opportunities for play and leisure. By creating more opportunities for young people to enjoy play and leisure we will be providing them with the genuine community connection they seek.

Endnotes

1   www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201001/the-decline-play-and-rise-in-childrens-mental-disorders

Who are we?

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner promotes and advocates for the rights, development and well-being of all children and young people in South Australia. The Commissioner is committed to advocating for children and young people's involvement in decision-making that affects them, giving particular consideration to the needs of vulnerable and at-risk children and young people.

A key objective of The Commissioner for Children and Young People is to position children and young people's interests, development and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life and to advocate to decision makers to change laws, policy, systems and practice in favour of children and young people.

In the Commissioner's work she listens to the views of children and young people, collaborates with them and represents their diverse voices in the public arena with a special focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard. Much of her advocacy is directed by the experiences and issues that children and young people talk about and have asked her to focus on.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says Children and young people have a right to have a say on all issues that affect them and for their views to be taken seriously. By improving our children and young people's participation in decisions that impact on them, we can strengthen our democratic institutions and structures and build a strong state for the future of all children and young people.

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