“KIDS HAVE BIG THOUGHTS TOO”

Life transitions: what children say about change
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With thanks to the participating children and their schools, and the support of ACT Education Directorate.

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ACT Human Rights Commission 2018

PACYP C Legislative Remit

On 1 April 2016, the offices of the Public Advocate (PA) and the Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) were brought together as part of the restructured ACT Human Rights Commission. Broadly these two independent statutory roles involve legislative responsibility for protecting and promoting the rights and interests of people in the ACT who are experiencing vulnerability, and for consulting with children and young people in ways that promote their participation in decision-making.

While the role of Children and Young People Commissioner is obviously a targeted one with a focus on ensuring that relevant stakeholders listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people, the role of Public Advocate extends to all persons within the ACT whose situation or condition gives rise to a need for protection from abuse, exploitation or neglect, or a combination of those things.

The responsibilities of the PACYP are underpinned by a range of functions including advocacy (individual and systemic), representation, investigation, and monitoring. Some of these functions are specific to children and young people, and others encompass people with complex disability needs, including those with mental health conditions and/or forensic patients.

Overarching these functions is a strong focus on ensuring that the PACYP’s monitoring and oversight functions (and the recommendations that we make to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, and practices) contribute to improvements in the accessibility, responsiveness and quality of supports and services that are available for persons experiencing vulnerability.

In the role of Children and Young People Commissioner, I have a number of responsibilities including, but not limited to, promoting children and young people’s rights, and encouraging and supporting people who provide services for children and young people to continue to improve those services.

Notably, I also have the responsibility to consult with children and young people themselves, to hear what they have to say, and to make sure their views help improve services. The ACT considers the views of children and young people to be so important they have included the need to engage them directly in legislation. Amongst other things, the ACT Human Rights Commission Act 2005 states that:

*In exercising the children and young people commissioner’s functions, the commissioner must endeavour to —*

  *a) consult with children and young people in ways that promote their participation in decision-making; and*

  *b) listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people...*

This report is a direct product of exercising these functions.
As Children and Young People Commissioner for the ACT, I have the privilege of spending time with children and young people and finding out about things that are important to them in their lives.

Approximately one quarter of all Canberrans are aged under 18 so the importance of hearing what children and young people have to say about both the here and now, and the future, should not be under-estimated.

Something we emphasise when engaging with children and young people is that they are the experts in their own lives. This is, of course, true for all of us however we rarely think about our lives in this way. Nor do we think often enough about the importance of meaningfully engaging children and young people in the business of building a better Canberra.

It is important to recognise that meaningful engagement is more than just asking children and young people what they think about an idea that we, as adults, have come up with. As this report tells us, ‘kids have big thoughts too’! They are capable contributors and impressive innovators... but we will only reap the benefits of their expertise if we value them and take the time to really hear what they are telling us.

Their words and actions are only part of this picture... we need to understand the message behind the words because their messages are more often than not nuanced by the unique perspectives they bring by virtue of being children and young people who see and experience the world differently to the way we do as adults. And if we, as adults, fail to take an inquisitive active listener role, we may not fully understand what children and young people are telling us.

Investing in processes that harness the expertise of children and young people in being children and young people ‘right here, right now’¹ in 2018 will help us make sure that the Canberra of tomorrow is both child-safe and child-friendly... a place where children and young people are confident that they will be taken seriously about things that matter.

I hope this report gives you some insights into how children experience change and what we can do to support and empower them in doing so. I also hope it stimulates your thinking about how you might engage differently with children and young people, both personally and professionally, and, in doing so, work toward a Canberra in which children’s rights, protection and participation go hand in hand.

Jodie Griffiths-Cook
Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner

In 2017, the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) consulted with nearly 120 children, listening to their views about change, the life changes they see as significant, and the things that help them most when life is changing. The children had a lot of ideas about change, seeing it as both an opportunity and challenge. They talked about big changes that had already happened in their lives, and changes they could see ahead.

Significant changes for children ranged across life domains. The changes they most often identified as significant related to moving, whether moving homes or changing schools, and changes to the special people around them, either friends or family. Children identified many supports available when life is changing, both internal resources (like attitude) and external sources (like significant relationships). Parents and friends were the people that children turned to most. Time out to do things that they like was also an important support.

Children had lots of practical ideas about how adults could better support them when life is changing. This included getting involved in the activities and interests that children have, giving concrete strategies and advice, and adults talking about their own experiences. Children were highly attuned to power imbalances in the way they are treated, and had clear messages for adults about mutual respect.

The findings of this consultation are important for parents, educators, service providers, policy makers, and any adults involved in supporting children through transitions. Transitions are key times when people seek services and support, and can be instrumental turning points in life pathways.

Transition resources and services will only be effective if they address the issues that children themselves consider important, and are targeted towards the supports that children themselves identify they need.
Transitions are important times for everyone, often involving a change in environment, relationships, roles and expectations. Transitions are times of opportunity when potential can be explored, but are also times of uncertainty when vulnerability is increased.

Given that people often access social services at times of transition, it is ‘fundamental to professional practice that we understand not only the potential impact of transitions as people move through their life course, but also how we might effectively support them to adjust and grow through change’.  

Understanding how children and young people experience, interpret and respond to transitions is important to interpreting how their life paths unfold, and how they can best be supported.

Transitions have been described as a period of ‘adjustment and recalibration’, as children and young people move from one life stage or life situation to another. Existing literature points to protective factors that can assist children to negotiate transitions positively. These include strong relationships with parents or carers, internal and attitudinal coping resources, self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-regulation, connection to community, and adult guidance.

A sense of empowerment and meaningful participation are important in navigating transitions, with a key factor being the meaning attributed by the individual to the transition. Longitudinal research has found that three types of events tend to become significant turning points in the life course:

1. Life events that either close or open opportunities;
2. Life events that change a person’s self-concept, beliefs, or expectations; and
3. Life events that make a lasting change on the person’s environment.

The first two of these, in particular, can be influenced by an individual’s sense of their own experience, and the meaning they ascribe to transitions. In this context, the agency that an individual has in relation to the changes that occur in their life is important.

Given that transitions are such key points in the life course and that an individual’s interpretation of a transition is integral to its long-term effects, the CYPC sought to understand how children and young people themselves understand transitions: which changes they see as significant, and what helps them most with those changes.

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The CYPC undertook to consult directly with children and young people, to add their knowledge and expertise to the existing information about transitions. Ultimately the consultation aimed to improve children and young people’s wellbeing and life trajectories by improving the services and resources that support them.

To that end, the CYPC was interested in answering three questions:

- What do children identify as the biggest changes in their lives?
- What do children say helps them most at these times?
- How could these supports be improved?

The consultation aimed to identify ways to improve supports for children and young people, through listening to their views and expertise. The CYPC was keen to work collaboratively with relevant agencies that also have an interest in improving supports for children and young people. In particular, schools and the Education Directorate are already doing a lot of work in relation to education transitions. The CYPC therefore co-designed the consultation with children in a school setting, and enlisted the support of the Education Directorate to then conduct the consultation in schools across the ACT.

The consultation focussed on children in years 5 and 6 of primary school, being at a developmental stage where they are able to reflect on experiences and also being poised for the transition to high school. Smaller parallel projects have given insight into the transition experiences of high school and college-age young people.

A co-design project was undertaken in partnership with Macquarie Primary School in November-December 2016, shaping CYPC’s understanding of how children in mainstream contexts approach talking about transitions.

The Children and Young People Commissioner, Ms Jodie Griffiths-Cook, and Senior Advisor, Ms Lisa Fenn, initially met with Macquarie Primary Principal, Ms Wendy Cave, and Deputy Principal, Ms Sophie Bissell, to discuss the project. There was agreement that the project met the mutual aims and underlying philosophies of both the school and the Human Rights Commission and, most importantly, was an opportunity to be embraced for the students.

The design phase was undertaken by Lisa Fenn and jointly facilitated by Sophie Bissell and Lisa Fenn over three sessions. Each session lasted for an hour and a half. Twenty year five student leaders participated.

From the outset it was clear the children engaged meaningfully with the concept of ‘change’. Most embraced the activities and discussions, both at an abstract level and as applied to personal experience. The project yielded important insights for the consultation design,
including that: children view change as both an opportunity and challenge; they understand both external and internal factors that may influence how individuals feel about and respond to change; they see themselves as both agents of change and affected by change. The children were able to talk about change, to articulate the supports they found most helpful in times of change, and to describe what they were looking for from adults.

Consultation activities were developed and refined with the children, including activities building upon children’s spontaneous responses. A report on the design phase of the consultation was provided to Macquarie Primary. A participant version was also produced, reporting back to the participants what was learnt and how the project would proceed.

**WORKING WITH THE EDUCATION DIRECTORATE**

The CYPC presented findings from the design phase at the Education Directorate’s Transitions and Careers Professional Learning Day in 2017. Contact was made with relevant staff in both the ‘Learning and Teaching’ and ‘Student Wellbeing’ branches of the Education Directorate, and the project plan was provided.

The CYPC sought the agreement and support of the Director-General, Education, to roll the consultation out across ten (10) ACT primary schools. The Director-General endorsed the consultation noting that:

_Incorporating student’s views and ideas about change from the findings of your consultation project will no doubt provide insights for the Directorate to enhance existing transition support programs and services. We know that when students experience successful school transitions they are more capable, adaptable and resilient to manage transition points later in life._

**WHO PARTICIPATED?**

Ten (10) ACT primary schools from across the education networks were randomly sampled and invited to participate in the consultation. Staff from the Education Directorate’s ‘Transitions and Careers’ team contacted school principals endorsing the project, and CYPC staff followed up to make arrangements. Six (6) schools took the opportunity to participate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ainslie School</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnython Primary</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaleen Primary</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison Primary</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mawson Primary</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Rogers Primary</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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_Natalie Howson, Director-General Education, correspondence 12 April 2017._
Two CYPC staff facilitated the consultation sessions; for most, this included the CYPC and an advisor, although a few were conducted by two advisors. Continuity and consistency in method was ensured by having the advisor responsible for design, Lisa Fenn, present at all sessions. Each consultation involved two sessions, the first a shorter ice-breaker/rapport-building session, and the second a longer consultation session including evaluation. The sessions were held within a week of each other.

**SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONSENT**

The first session (around 1 hour) provided an opportunity to explain the purpose of the consultation, and for everyone to get to know each other and get a feel for the interactive consultation methods.

Facilitators gave an overview of what the CYPC is and does, and explained the consultation. The facilitators explained that children are the ‘experts’ in ‘being a kid today’, and that they wanted to learn from that expertise. The facilitators explained that there were no ‘right or wrong’ answers in the consultation, and that everyone could have different views and that was okay. Facilitators explained that participation in the consultation was completely voluntary and that children could leave at any time. A ‘break out’ space with books and other activities was also made available in the consultation room, and children were welcomed to use that space if they wanted to opt-out for a while and re-join later.

A ‘getting to know each other’ ice-breaker activity was undertaken. Everyone introduced themselves, and described what superpower they would have if they could, and had the opportunity to contribute to a group tower-building competition. The ice-breaker deliberately: gave a feel for the interactive/fun nature of the consultation methods; provided an opportunity to position the children as experts; enabled reflection on difference and demonstrated that all views and opinions were welcome; and demonstrated the facilitators’ interest in listening and learning.

Everyone then participated in an activity in small groups, putting a range of technological developments and human rights developments into chronological order. This activity introduced the ‘change’ concept as a non-threatening, external framework and linked this to the underlying work of the Human Rights Commission. It was again a chance to interact, and to learn together in a participative way.

**SESSION 2: CONSULTATION AND EVALUATION**

The second session (1.5 hours) formed the main consultation session. Facilitators began with a recap of the project, a reminder about voluntary participation and explaining that there were no ‘right or wrong’ answers, and that the CYPC was there to learn from the children.
The first activity was a brainstorming session in small groups. Participants were asked to write or draw a list of ‘small’ changes that happen in life, and a list of ‘big’ changes. The instructions were deliberately non prescriptive; the children’s self-directed responses being a source of insight as to how they viewed change. Facilitators moved among groups, joining in the conversations about changes and whether they were ‘big’ or ‘little’. Each group presented back to the group as a whole.

In the second activity, a facilitator used an oral storytelling methodology to talk about life paths and share from her own life story. The children were then invited to complete a life journey activity sheet. Children were prompted that the story could be real or it could be imaginary, it might begin in the past or it might begin in the future. It was entirely up to the children what they wanted to include and how they wanted to show it. Participants were invited to find their own space and complete this activity on their own.

Having thought about change in a personal context, the third activity focussed on the support and enablers that exist during times of change, and asked children about which ones they find most useful. Twenty different kinds of support, identified from existing literature and the co-design project, were listed on sheets of paper and placed around the room. Each student was given five coloured sticker dots and asked to vote for the supports they found most useful, by putting their stickers on the relevant sheets. Facilitators then guided a group discussion looking at which supports had the most dots, and which had the least, and probing for further thoughts.

The final consultation activity was a facilitated discussion about the advice that children would give to adults about how adults can better support children during times of change. The topic was introduced under the heading ‘what adults need to know’ and focussed on the question ‘What are the most helpful things that adults can do to support you when life is changing?’ The facilitators took the role of active listener, reflecting back the children’s views and questioning for clarity and to check understanding, but not to recast, reframe or challenge their opinion.

After the group discussion each student was invited to complete an evaluation form. The facilitators particularly sought critical and constructive feedback, asking the children to ‘help us get better at our jobs.’

Participants were also given a postcard, with the prompt words “Dear Jodie…” on the back, and were invited to write the Commissioner a message about any topic they wished.
Facilitators thanked the children for focussing on the concept of ‘change’ in the session, and said they also wanted to make sure participants had an opportunity to raise topics that they considered particularly important.

At the conclusion of the session each student was given a ‘Children and Young People Commissioner’ branded pencil set and rubber handball as a thank you for contributing their time and expertise. The pencil sets were the same ones that had been used in the tower building ice-breaker at the commencement of session 1, neatly closing out the consultation. The thank you gifts were not given out until after the evaluations were completed so as not to influence the participants’ responses.

VARIATIONS

There were some minor variations to the consultation format due to logistical constraints. In one school, the sessions were combined into a longer, single session format. In another school, only one facilitator was able to attend the first session, with the CYPC introducing herself via video link. Both facilitators attended the second session in person. In one school, given the nature of the group, the ‘what do adults need to know?’ activity was conducted individually, in pairs and small groups, with written responses, rather than as a whole group discussion.

Schools varied in their staff involvement in the consultations. In some schools an educator or other staff member participated in the consultation activities, or remained present in the room as observers. In other schools, staff introduced the facilitators to the students and explained where they would be and that they were available if required, but did not remain present for the sessions.

RISK MANAGEMENT

The CYPC office is very conscious to identify and address any risks to children’s wellbeing presented by our consultations. An identified risk of potential significance in relation to this consultation was that the process of talking about change/transition may raise difficult or traumatic experiences for individual children. A process for managing this risk, including actions to be taken before, during and after the consultations, was developed and articulated in the project plan. The risk management strategy was included in the documentation provided to the Education Directorate prior to the roll-out of the consultation.

Information letters were provided for schools to distribute to the parents or carers of participating students. A welcome and information letter was also provided by facilitators to the participants themselves.

Facilitators were alert to any signs of risk throughout the consultations. A follow-up conversation was had with one participant and an agreed support utilised. Two children were offered alternative activities during the life journey activity, given their behavioural disengagement from the task; the reasons for disengagement were not divulged or probed.
ICE-BREAKER SESSIONS

All children participated in the ice-breaker activities and most appeared to have fun sharing about superpowers and participating in the tower-building challenge. Some children were eager to go first, others wanted to wait until the tower was already high and felt extra challenging for them. Some children enjoyed watching and preferred not to build, many others wanted a second go. The activity enabled reflection and conversation about how individuals can all feel differently about the same activity, and the ways we can support one other.

In the timeline activity it was clear that the children engaged meaningfully with the concept of ‘change’. The groups working with human rights developments were just as engaged as the groups working with technological developments. There was conversation between children both about the process (of working together, sharing information, resolving differences of opinion) and the content (how and why things used to be the way they were, changes that had occurred, and how social changes had been brought about).

In every session, as groups undertook the timeline activity, they engaged in discussions about where ‘the future’ belonged: last in the chronological order, or first. Some children reasoned that all the technological and human rights developments had begun at some point in time, and at that point in time everything was ‘the future’. Others argued ‘the future’ was everything to come, from the present time on. Some children wanted to place ‘the future’ at each point in the chronology, reasoning that as each development occurred a new future opened up.

The consistent repetition of these conversations across the school groups provided a pertinent insight into children’s unique perspective and context. They are embedded in change and bring fresh perspectives to the concepts of past, present and future.

BIG AND LITTLE CHANGES

Many common topics emerged in brainstorming about ‘big’ and ‘little’ changes. All groups engaged in discussions and debates about what makes a change ‘big’ or ‘little’. Nearly everyone agreed that changes could be ‘big’ for one person and ‘little’ for someone else, and that is completely normal and okay.

In their discussions, children talked about some of the reasons that people may feel differently about how big a change is, including whether they have experienced it before (and whether that had gone well or not), whether there was anyone to help them, and what kind of personality they had.
Across all groups, the 10 most commonly identified ‘big changes’ were:

- significant grade change (like starting primary school, starting high school or going to college)
- puberty
- moving house
- death of someone close, like a family member or friend
- personal changes, like changing your appearance or personality
- getting a job, losing a job or changing jobs
- getting a partner or getting married
- a new sibling or family member
- major health issues, like being diagnosed with a serious illness or having an operation
- moving to a different state or country

There were over 150 little changes listed covering many things including minor injuries, a new school year at the same school, trying a new game, different hairstyle, outfits, trying different foods, doing chores, having a birthday, a relief teacher, changes in the weather, etc.
CHANGES ALONG LIFE’S JOURNEY

There was a strong response to the life journey activity, with most children participating in writing or drawing a journey. Many were true accounts, others imaginary, and some a mixture of both. Children depicted changes and events with words, pictures, cartoons and symbols. Some created a structured comprehensive timeline, others clearly emphasised significant turning points. There was a mixture of focus on life to the present point in time, and projecting into the future.
A content analysis was undertaken, coding the themes represented in the journey stories. The life changes most commonly identified by children are shown in the graph below.

When compared with the ‘theoretical’ changes that children brainstormed in groups, the life journey activity brought up other changes that children considered important enough to include in their own stories.

In particular, friends was a common theme, with both making and losing friends something that almost half the children included in their stories.

Pets were mentioned much more in children’s individual journeys, than in the brainstorm.

Quite noticeably, in their own stories, around a third included specific achievements, such as hitting their first six in cricket, winning a competition, learning a new skill, or getting new technologies such as their first computer or phone.
Children both reflected on their lives and projected forwards. They identified experiences and feelings. They identified what they were proud of, and what was hard. They articulated who was relevant to them and who and what affected them. In short, they had a wealth of knowledge to share.

**WHAT HELPS KIDS THE MOST?**

Each of the 20 supports named in the literature and co-design project were identified by at least some participants as being helpful for them when life is changing. Friends were by far the most popular source of support, followed by ‘spending time doing things I like’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of support</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My friends</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time doing things I like</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help from Mum or Dad</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to other people who have gone through it</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying new things</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help from other people in my family</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People encouraging me</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling ok about myself</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were noticeable differences across the school groups. In one school, 70% of participants considered their teachers to be a helpful source of support when life is changing, down to only 7% at another school. In one school, 82% of participants considered their parent/s to be an important support, down to 22% in another school. In all schools, ‘friends’ and ‘spending time doing things I like’ rated highly.

Notwithstanding that the number of children consulted in some schools was small, these are notable differences pointing to the potential for schools and school communities to learn from one another in supporting students during times of change.

WHAT DO ADULTS NEED TO KNOW?

A facilitated conversation asked children ‘What are the most helpful things that adults can do to support you when life is changing?’; this was introduced under the topic ‘What do adults need to know?’. The children were again affirmed as experts in their lives, with the facilitators interested in hearing their views. Facilitators posited “You are experts at being kids and so you are the only ones who can tell us what that’s like.”

The unfolding conversations, while different in content and ideas, followed a markedly similar pattern. Children were at first tentative to put forward views, but once it was established that the facilitators were listening reflectively, and asking questions only to clarify their understanding and ensure they heard correctly, not to challenge or reframe the children’s views, then many ideas were forthcoming.

This suggested that children were not used to being taken seriously in giving advice to adults, and were accustomed to having their views interrupted, redirected or corrected rather than heard and taken on board. Common themes were identified in the discussions and are outlined below.
MUTUAL RESPECT MATTERS

Mutual respect was a dominant theme in what children are seeking from adults. Respect was canvassed in terms of language and tone, actions, outcomes, capacities and abilities. Children wanted adults to respect their views and ideas, just as they felt that children are expected to respect adults. They were clear that the ideas and strategies that adults use to support children could only help if they were embedded in a relationship of respect. Some examples of the views children expressed about mutual respect included:

- Some adults use fear and control. There is a power difference and some adults use it. Adults need to be respectful.
- Parents tell you what to do/don’t do, but then they don’t do it themselves. Adults need to do what they say to do.
- There needs to be more justice; they need to hear my side of the story. I feel I can’t win; it’s always my fault.
- We have "equal thoughts": don’t just think that adults have the big thoughts. Kids have big thoughts too.
- Do what you say. If you say you’re going to pick me up at a certain time, be there and don’t get caught up in work.
- No back chat from adults.
- Not being insulted/confronted/shouted at.
- Don’t be a hypocrite.
- Don’t push a child over their limits.

TIME IS IMPORTANT

Time was a really important issue for children, but not in a simplistic framing of ‘more’ or ‘less’ time. The participant’s comments speak to the need for adults to have a nuanced understanding of each child and their context, to know when and for how long to engage, particularly around potentially challenging topics, thoughts or feelings.

Some children were looking for more time with adults to get into things properly. Some comments focussed on adults helping at the right time, when children themselves were ready. Some children wanted adults to respect the time that they needed to themselves. Children were highly aware of the multiple demands on adults’ time. Some examples of what children said adults need to know about time were:

- Be patient: some people take longer than expected to do things.
- Teachers need to have more time, to have 1:1 time with students.
- Let us concentrate on the thing we are doing until we are finished.
- Talk to me when I am ready.
- Let me spend time with just you.
- Give a bit of quality time.
- Make time to talk about it properly.
CHILDREN WANT TO BE KNOWN AND UNDERSTOOD

It was clear that children feel adults can support and help them best when adults get to know them. Children want support from adults that are interested in what they are into, what they need, and how they respond to the things that happen in life. Children want adults to really ‘get it’, to understand their personal context and not just give generic advice.

Some of the things children said about adults getting to know and understand them were:

- Try and live in our shoes. For example, getting that I’m upset and need some time to calm down.
- Adults need to know what the problem is, they can’t help you if they don’t know what the problem is.
- Adults need to get you and know where you’re coming from.
- They need to know you and know what you’re like.
- Be interested in what I’m saying.
- Actually LISTEN to my fab music.
- Kids are active and play around, so we need to go outside!
- Don’t just say “it’s all going to be ok”, get it and talk about it.
- Kids get bullied and don’t tell parents. Kids get upset and angry, it affects them, parents need to understand.
- Pretend that you like me, even if you don’t.
- When there’s an interest we have, adults could get involved in it, even if it’s not their thing. We have to do what adults do even if we don’t like it.

CHILDREN ARE CAPABLE AND NEED ADULTS TO SEE THAT

Many of the views that children shared were about adults needing to recognise that they are capable, that they have ideas and want to try them out. Children wanted support from adults, but they wanted the chance to work things out for themselves too. These opinions reinforced some of the themes arising in conversation after children voted with sticky dots on the supports that they found helpful. It had been noted that some of those supports were external, but that others were internal and could be driven by children themselves.

Some examples of what children said about being viewed as capable were:

- Adults direct and control too much. They should guide instead of directing and controlling.
- Adults need to think long term. Sometimes it’s better to let us make a decision and live with the consequences.
- Listen to our ideas and why it’s important. Take it seriously.
- They need to let us try things.
- We are smarter than we look, let us do things ourselves.
- Let me try new things.
- Let us have a say.
- Let me explain my side of the story, let me try to sort it out first before you help.
LISTENING AND TALKING NEEDS TO BE DONE WELL

Listening and talking was a strong theme that intersected with the concepts of time and mutual respect. Sometimes adults talk too much, sometimes they don’t talk enough. Children felt it was really important to talk at the right time. They needed adults to listen properly and understand.

The participants themselves identified that different children need different things: some want to talk about changes a lot, others prefer not to.

Again, it was a signal that children want adults to know them individually, and to respond to their own specific needs and style.

Some examples of what adults could do that related to talking and listening were:

- Listen to both sides of the story.
- Adults can jump to conclusions, even police, not just parents. Adults need to listen properly.
- Listening and enough time. Being patient.
- If there's been a problem at school and it's been resolved, stop talking about it. I just want to forget about it.
- Other young people do want to talk about it. You need different things for different kids.
- Talking about my problems when I need a conversation.
- A talk on the couch.
- Less long chats, more short chats.
- Talk to us when WE want to.
- Listen to me.

BE ENCOURAGING AND POSITIVE

Children said that how adults talk to and treat them was integral to helping and supporting them. They spoke about adults needing to be positive and encouraging, as well as ‘keeping it real’.

Some examples of what children said in this area were:

- Saying positive things about me.
- Be nice.
- Be supportive.
- Being encouraging.
- Being proud of us when we try. Even if it didn't work out.
- Don't make unnecessary drama.
- Use the right words and positive words.
- Adults need to be trustworthy and supportive.
GIVE CONCRETE GUIDANCE AND SHARE

Children found it helpful when adults gave them concrete ideas to work with. Actual suggestions of what they could do to deal with a change or issue. Children also wanted adults to share how they had experienced and dealt with changes. Some of the suggestions children made were:

- Give me ideas.
- Help me relax when I’m stressed.
- Help me to know what to do.
- Advice on how to get through it.
- Help me when I don’t have ideas.
- Our school doesn’t have systems for when people aren’t brave enough to talk about it. They expect us to be brave, instead of supporting us and making it easier.
- Parents might have gone through it as well. It would help if they think back to what they did.
- Teachers could share their opinions and feelings more.

OTHER THINGS

As well as the dominant themes described above, children had a range of other practical advice for adults about how to support them. These included suggestions like:

- Give me lots of hugs.
- Stop telling bad jokes and embarrassing us.
- Make sure I have comforting things around me, like teddies and people that love me.
- Adults need to look after their own mental and physical health.
The CYPC consults with children and young people to hear what they have to say, to promote their participation, and to help ensure that services for children and policies that affect children are as good as they can be. This involves making sure that the findings of consultations get to relevant audiences.

In addition to this report, the findings of this consultation have already been disseminated in a number of ways:

- Lisa Fenn presented preliminary findings at the Family Relationships Services Australia’s 2017 Child Inclusive Practice Forum
- The findings of the consultations were reported to each of the four ACT Education Network Primary to High School Transition team meetings
- Jodie Griffiths-Cook has spoken about the consultations in meetings and other forums that have included government, non-government and community stakeholders from sectors such as Early Childhood, Education, Child Safety, Youth Justice, Health (including Mental Health), Housing and Homelessness, Disability, etc.

Ethical research acknowledges that participants own their information and experience, and works in partnership with participants. As such CYPC was committed to reporting back and being accountable to the children involved. A report was written for the children who participated in the consultation, summarising what was heard, and inviting further input if anything had been interpreted incorrectly. A copy of that report was also provided to participating schools. The report back to children is available at www.hrc.act.gov.au

The results of this consultation are relevant to parents, educators, support workers and any adults involved in supporting children during transitions. It gives important information to anyone developing transition support materials and resources. Such materials will only be effective if they address the issues that children themselves consider important, and are targeted towards the supports that children themselves identify they need.

While a range of materials already exist to support children and young people during times of transition, these materials tend to focus on transitions occurring in a single domain of life (such as education or family) rather than acknowledging children’s whole-of-life experience.

It was apparent from the consultation that children look at and experience change in the context of their whole life, and that support resources and services that acknowledge the interlinkage of different domains will be most successful.

The checklists on the following page are informed by what children said in this consultation. They can be used to assess whether supports and resources are responsive to children’s needs.
CHECKLIST FOR TRANSITION RESOURCES

✔ Do the resources recognise that children have skills, previous experience and ideas to draw on when coping with change? Do they help children to identify these capabilities in themselves?

✔ Do the resources offer support and ideas for the people that children most commonly turn to – that is, other kids (friends) and parents?

✔ Do the resources affirm and support things that most children do to help themselves – such as spending time doing things they like, and turning to their friends?

✔ Do the resources encourage adults to listen first, before acting or making suggestions?

✔ Can the resources be used where and when children want to engage with them?

✔ Can the resources be tailored to individual children and their context?

✔ Do the resources give concrete ideas and suggestions?

✔ Do the resources share real stories and examples?

✔ Are the resources framed with a positive and encouraging outlook?

✔ Do the resources point children to available sources of support?

✔ Are the resources fun?!

CHECKLIST WHEN SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH TRANSITIONS

✔ Get to know each child as an individual, with interests, abilities and ideas

✔ Find out and be interested in what else is going on in a child’s life, not just the apparent transition

✔ Be flexible with time. Allow plenty of it but be guided by the child as to when, and for how long, they want to talk/share/engage

✔ Listen to the child’s perspective. Take the time to understand what they are thinking and feeling

✔ Recognise that time for a child to do things they like is important during times of change

✔ Look for ways to incorporate, or independently support, a child’s friends and parents in supporting that child

✔ Be positive and encouraging

✔ Share from your own life and experiences

✔ Be respectful in tone and approach. Don’t shout! Do listen!

✔ Look for capabilities to affirm in each child

✔ Recognise your own needs and be open to seeking your own support
While many of the ideas in the checklists may sound easy, they can require ongoing skill development and can be a challenge to existing ways of working and relating. For some adults they might mean a fundamental shift in how they relate to a child. A few examples of how these checklists might translate to practice are provided below.

What does it mean to ‘offer support and ideas for the people that children most commonly turn to – that is, other kids (friends) and parents’?

In this context, supporting children in the transition from primary school to high school might include a school changing its focus on how it delivers supports. It could include complementing high school open days with ‘helping you listen to your child’ parent education/support groups. Or it might include equipping student leaders with information to support their peers.

‘Share from your own life and experiences’ and ‘Be respectful in tone and approach’ require a level of personal reflexivity and communication skills that need to be fostered.

In this light, transition supports might look like targeted counselling for adults and parenting support. It could include modelling of personal sharing by principals and executive teachers.

‘Be flexible with time’ has practical implications for families and children with busy schedules and extra curricula commitments.

It might mean families thinking about what modifications they can make to their schedules, particularly during times of change. It might mean supporting parents to communicate effectively with employers, service providers and other family members, including partners and children, about their commitments and priorities.

Perhaps most fundamentally, ‘Get to know each child as an individual, with interests, abilities and ideas’ requires a community response: every child needs a network of interested adults that know and care about them.

CYP&C commends these checklists to agencies and service providers, both to audit their existing transitions supports and when developing new resources and services.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Thank you to all the children who participated in this consultation, from design to the final session. Together their views and ideas have provided a wealth of knowledge and expertise to guide the adults of Canberra in supporting children with the changes that matter to them.

The Children and Young People Commissioner is happy to discuss the findings of this consultation and engage further in taking the children’s ideas forward, so please get in touch.

As service providers, policy and law makers, educators and community members, when we change our practices we show that we genuinely listen to children, we similarly demonstrate that we are serious about our intent to create a child-safe and child-friendly community.
What was your overall view of the session?

- very bad = 0%
- bad = 1%
- ok = 21%
- good = 44%
- excellent = 35%

Did you enjoy participating in the session?

- no = 4%
- not sure = 21%
- yes = 75%

Did you have a chance to express your views?

- no = 5%
- not sure = 25%
- yes = 70%

Did you feel that Lisa and Jodie/Brianna listened to your views?

- no = %
- not sure = 14%
- yes = 81%
What did you like most about the session?

Building the tower and introducing each other
Talking about what adults need to know
It was good I know and talk about stuff like this
The group work and putting forward our ideas
That I got to speak out about my problems with the way I get treated as a kid
I liked the most about the sessions is I liked how we drawn about my life journey
Getting with each other sharing ideas
Talking about what adults need to know was immensely satisfying
Being able to relate to other people
It’s entertaining and it helped me know new people
The group work and putting forward our ideas
That I got to speak out about my problems with the way I get treated as a kid
I liked the most about the sessions was that I was learning about how other people feel
about change and being able to express myself.
That Lisa and Brianna let us have a choice between participating and not
Learning about what changes in life
I liked that I could share my ideas, and the tower
Building the tower and introducing ourselves
I love brainstorming about the big and small changes with some people I have never talked
to! It was fun sharing ideas with everyone.
Being listened to about my opinion and thoughts without stress

Building towers
Cup stacking
Doing the life journey
Timeline
Timeline
Voting on what helps
The life journey
The time lines
Tower
The towers
Writing our ideas down
Not sure
Not sure
The big and little changes
The big and little changes
When we were listened too!
Building the towers
They understand us
They were all fun
Making the tower
The freedom in what I said to adults
Talking about how life is going with us
The tower and the journey story thing

Voting on ‘what helps’ with sticky dots
The towers/out of class
That we got to interact
Getting out of class
Doing the life journey
Easy to do
The towers and working in groups
The chance to talk
Everything!
Talking about how I feel
Doing it with others
Voting on ‘what helps’ with sticky dots
Talking about change was good
Writing our stories
That they listened
I could express my views
Lots
The talking
Don’t know
Being able to express myself
Doing it with classmates
I liked the brainstorm thing
Building the tower
At the end where we share about what adults, parents etc might be nicer or to just listen to you
I liked how it was a judgement free zone and you could express yourself and ideas freely
I like how the activities were fun and we can finally be heard. I also like coming to miss out on a bit of class
The fact that I got to express my opinion on change

**What did you like least, or thought could be done better?**

The tech/hr activity was a little confusing, I didn't know why we were doing it
Life journey thing because not many people remember what happened
I think we could have more time doing this other than class
I think everything was really good and I can't think of anything bad
I enjoyed all of it and don't know what could be done better
I didn't most enjoy the life journey very much. I like the story, but not my favourite doing the writing because we didn't get to share!

| Not much | Story time |
| The time line | Not sure |
| Nothing | I don't know |
| More space to write | Nothing |
| Talking about what adults need to know | The technology and human rights timelines |
| The timeline | More active |
| Talking about what adults need to know | Doing the life journey was boring |
| None | Maybe the timelines |
| I don't really know | I liked everything |
| The long time on the floor | I think we could make talking to adults better |
| Time line was ok | Nothing |
| Less talking more doing if anything | If we get more time out of class |
| Nothing :)! | A bit more activity when doing the voting |
| Nothing :)! | Nothing |
| Nothing really | Nothing! :) |
| Doing the "life journey" | Nothing |
| Nothing | Doing the life journey |
| Having a better table setup | Nothing |
| Not sure | Nothing |
| Doing 'what helps' with sticky dots | Nothing, all was good |
| Not sure | I do not know |
| Not sure | I am not sure |
| Nothing | Nothing |
| Not that much | Talking about change |
| Not sure | Managing time |
| Not sure | The story was too sad |
| Not sure | Brainstorming |
| Everything was pretty equal | |

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DEAR JODIE...

Twenty seven children wrote individual messages to the Commissioner. The concerns and topics they raised included technology use; school; having a say and being heard; money; identity; marriage equality; career opportunities; discrimination; being included; life in Canberra; demands of parents’ jobs; children’s wellbeing; being treated with respect.

These messages are used by the Children and Young People Commissioner to provide input to discussions about issues that matter to children and young people, and also guide the Commissioner’s forward work plan.