



# TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

## – A DISCUSSION PAPER

### INTRODUCTION

The Government's vision is for all young people to grow up safe, healthy, happy and resilient and to have the opportunities and skills they need to learn, work, engage in community life and influence decisions that affect them.

To make this vision a reality for young people, the Government will be guided by a National Strategy for Young Australians to be developed in consultation with young people, their parents and families, the broader community and experts in the field.

This discussion paper proposes a framework for the Strategy and asks some important questions about the Strategy. It includes discussion questions which are designed to:

- identify areas of need for young people
- stimulate discussion around the seven priority areas
- generate ideas for action which would support young people in each of these areas.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

#### Who are young people? What do we know about Australia's young people?

Young people aged 12-24 years in Australia number 3.5 million with twenty-eight per cent of all Australian households including a young person<sup>1</sup>. Young people are a diverse population group with three per cent identifying as Indigenous and twenty per cent born overseas<sup>2</sup>. Most young Australians live in major metropolitan areas with their families. Almost one per cent of young people aged 12-24 were homeless on Census night in 2006<sup>3</sup>.

As roughly twenty per cent of the Australian population young people contribute to Australia's productivity and to our communities. Recent research commissioned by the Office for Youth indicates that the majority of young people are doing well across a range of areas<sup>4</sup>. Most young people have completed year 12. This is important because year 12 completion has a positive impact on later life outcomes for young people, particularly around employment<sup>5</sup>. This in turn has flow on effects to social, community and health outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Muir, K., Mullan, K., Powell, A., Flaxman, S., Thompson, D., and Griffiths M. (2009) *State of Australia's Young People*, [www.youth.gov.au](http://www.youth.gov.au).

<sup>2</sup> Muir et al. (2009) *State of Australia's Young People*, [www.youth.gov.au](http://www.youth.gov.au).

<sup>3</sup> Muir et al. (2009) *State of Australia's Young People*, [www.youth.gov.au](http://www.youth.gov.au).

<sup>4</sup> Muir et al. (2009) *State of Australia's Young People*, [www.youth.gov.au](http://www.youth.gov.au).

<sup>5</sup> Foundation for Young Australians (2009) *How Young People are Faring*, [http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/FYA\\_HYPARReportWEB.pdf](http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/FYA_HYPARReportWEB.pdf).

## What do we know about how young people develop?

Over the last decade there has been widespread recognition of early childhood as a time of critical brain development. Investment by government at that stage greatly benefits both the individual and society.

There is growing awareness that adolescence and early adulthood are also important times for brain development. Research shows that the adolescent period of brain development is just as significant as development in the early years (0 to 6)<sup>6</sup>.

Brain development during adolescence primarily occurs in the areas that govern learning and socialisation. The areas of the brain responsible for impulse control, decision making, planning and emotions undergo significant changes, reaching full maturity at 25 years<sup>7</sup>. Research indicates that interventions in later childhood and adolescence can improve skills such as perseverance and self control<sup>8</sup>. Later positive life outcomes including maintaining employment and avoiding involvement with the criminal justice system are heavily contingent on the development of these skills<sup>9</sup>.

This research suggests that youth, like early childhood, is a time of key importance in an individual's development, and that the benefits of focussed efforts to supporting young people to develop positively are significant – both for the individual and for Australian society.

## Why do we need a focus on young people?

All young people are important. They are important now and they are central to Australia's future. The period from adolescence to adulthood is a time of new opportunities and significant change. It is marked by transitions and challenges where young people are expected to take more responsibility for themselves, their relationships and decisions about their lives that shape their future prospects.

Transitions are hard for some young people and a challenge for all. While most young people ultimately negotiate them successfully, the high levels of mental illness and psychological distress evident amongst young people is indicative that there is a need to further support all young people in making these transitions. Currently one in four young people aged 16-24 years experience mental health disorders, the highest of any age group<sup>10</sup>.

The challenging and important nature of the transitions required of young people, coupled with the brain development that occurs at this time, suggests that for optimum developmental outcomes, young people need to be supported by communities and institutions that are understanding of their needs and offer a range of effective and targeted supports.

## Why a National Strategy for Young Australians?

On 3 September 2009, the Prime Minister announced the Government's intention to develop a National Strategy for Young Australians. The Prime Minister has identified three key reasons for developing a Strategy:

1. one in five Australians are under 25, and make a strong contribution to Australia, our economy, our culture, our sport and our nation

<sup>6</sup> Lenroot R. and Giedd J. (2006), in Victorian Government (2008) *Vulnerable Youth Framework* viewed 21 September 2009 [http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/251733/vyfdiscussionpaperweb\\_smaller.pdf](http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/251733/vyfdiscussionpaperweb_smaller.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Giedd, JN. (2006) in Victorian Government (2008) *Vulnerable Youth Framework* viewed 21 September 2009 [http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/251733/vyfdiscussionpaperweb\\_smaller.pdf](http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/251733/vyfdiscussionpaperweb_smaller.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Heckman, J. and Cunha, F. (2006). *Investing in our Young People* <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/061115.education.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Heckman, J. and Cunha, F. (2006) *Investing in our Young People* <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/061115.education.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Muir et al. (2009) *State of Australia's Young People*, [www.youth.gov.au](http://www.youth.gov.au).

2. this generation is facing new challenges (changing social and family structures, changing skill requirements etc)
3. there are specific areas of concern that require transparent national action (e.g. binge drinking, mental health and violence).

The Australian Government recognises that it is only one player in supporting young people. State and local governments, schools and educational institutions, service providers and researchers and academics all contribute to the development of young people. Most importantly, the central role of families and communities in providing the environment for young people to develop emotional, social, vocational and decision-making skills needs to be acknowledged and supported.

A National Strategy will set out the Australian Government's vision for young people and provide a framework to bring together all those interested in the wellbeing of young people; other levels of government, service providers, researchers and academics interested in young people, plus importantly young people themselves and their parents and families to work towards meeting this vision.

Investing in improving outcomes for all young people will not only help the individuals concerned but also deliver social, workforce and community benefits to the whole nation. A National Strategy will guide and direct government investment in young people to ensure it best addresses their needs.

#### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

- What role do you think the Australian Government should have in supporting young people?
- What would you expect to see in a National Strategy?
- How do you think the Government should make a National Strategy happen?
- How do you think the Government should communicate the National Strategy?

## **OUTLINE FOR A NATIONAL STRATEGY**

### **Vision**

The Government's vision is for all young people to grow up safe, healthy, happy and resilient and to have the opportunities and skills they need to learn, work, engage in community life and influence decisions that affect them.

This vision is deliberately universal in nature and is underpinned by an understanding that young people are diverse, with a range of experiences, circumstances and capacities. The Government recognises that for its vision to become a reality for all young Australians, action under the Strategy must meet the needs of all young people, including a targeted focus on those who require the most support.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What do you think is important for young people?
- How can we make this vision a reality?
- What are some practical ideas to help communicate this vision to young people?

### Goals

The Government's suggested goals for young people are:

- empowering young people to build their own lives for the future
- enabling young Australians to accept full responsibility for their lives, their actions and their behaviours
- building resilience in young Australians to negotiate the great life challenges that lie ahead
- building a healthier, safer and more productive Australia.

The Government views these goals as a more detailed breakdown of the vision – providing more specific outcomes for young people.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- How can we make these goals achievable?
- What is already happening in your community that helps young people achieve these goals?
- Is there an area you can identify where young people are not meeting these goals? What can we do to prevent this?

### Core Priorities for Action


To support this vision becoming a reality for all young people, the Prime Minister has identified seven core priorities.

These core priorities include settings like families, communities and educational institutions where young people live out their lives.

They also include some important principles like prevention and responsibility that potentially have important impacts on what the Government does in the other priority areas.

The core priorities as identified by the Prime Minister are:

- empowering young Australians in their schools, their TAFEs and their Universities to shape their own futures
- supporting young Australians within their families
- mobilising young Australians within their communities
- enabling young Australians to participate safely and confidently online

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- equipping young Australians with the skills and personal networks they need for employment
  - strengthening early intervention with young Australians to help prevent any problems getting worse and to help young people get their lives back on track
  - establishing clear cut legal consequences for behaviours that endanger the safety of others

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

- What do these core priorities mean to you?
- What do you see as the big challenges for you/young people in these areas?
- What do you see as the greatest needs within these areas?
- What do you think should be done for young people within these areas?
- What works for young people in these areas?