



Our Time

How young people spend their time after school and how they want to spend it

A research project conducted by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2012 Young People Advisory Group

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the insight, enthusiasm and dedication of the 2012 Young People Advisory Group. YPAG members played a central role in refining the research questions and drafting the survey. They were responsible for all aspects of data collection, and undertook this in their own time. They provided insight into the analysis and guidance around the development of this report.

The YPAG 2012 members were: Abbey, Angus, Brandon, Chris, Evanna, Jaida, Joel, Lachlan, Lauren, Nami, Oliver, and Sarah.

The Commission would also like to thank the YPAG member schools for their considerable support for the research. These schools were Byron Bay High School, Byron Bay; Cerdon College, Merrylands; Holy Spirit College, Bellambi; Rouse Hill Anglican College, Rouse Hill; Scone High School, Scone; and St John's Park High School, Greenfield Park.

A final acknowledgement goes to Zeah Behrend, Trish Malins, and Samia Michael for their contribution to the development of this research.

Foreword

Our Time is an exciting piece of exploratory research undertaken by the Commission's 2012 Young People Advisory Group (YPAG) to find out what young people do after school each day, what they would like to do and what, if anything, stops them.

The YPAG is a group of twelve young people drawn from six schools across NSW to give advice to me on issues affecting children's lives and to tell me what is important to them and other young people in their communities.

This research was the major piece of work undertaken by the 2012 YPAG. These talented young people discussed the research topic, agreed its aims and methods, undertook research in the field and assisted the Commission to make sense of the results. Each member enthusiastically embraced their role as researcher and their accomplishments speak for themselves. This innovative project reflects the value of child led research and the knowledge and relevance children and young people can bring to the process and knowledge outcomes.

One of the research aims was to look more closely at a poorly understood part of the lives of children in NSW – what children in the middle years of childhood (9-14 years) do with their time after school and what they would like to do.

The middle years of childhood has been a priority area of work for the Commission since a 2009 NSW Parliamentary inquiry identified gaps in knowledge about this age group and gaps in services and supports. Many of the recommendations of that inquiry concerned children's after-school activities.

With over a thousand questionnaires completed, twelve one-on-one interviews recorded and two focus groups conducted, the 2012 YPAG has gathered rich information indeed about the lives of young people after school hours.

This richness underscores an obvious point: that finding the right balance between responsibilities such as homework or housework, opportunities to play music or sport, and time to spend with friends, family or by themselves, will vary from child to child. Where children live and the resources available to families can also make a significant difference to the options available to them.

The 2012 YPAG has bridged this diversity and has made four practical recommendations that I commend to parents, schools, community groups and governments.

My sincere thanks go to our 2012 YPAG members Abbey, Angus, Brandon, Chris, Evanna, Jaida, Joel, Lachlan, Lauren, Nami, Oliver, and Sarah, and to my research and policy teams for providing guidance and support.

This research has raised some important questions that the Commission intends to pursue as it continues to work, in partnership with government and non-government organisations, and the wider community, on the lives of children in their middle years.

Megan Mitchell

Commissioner for Children and Young People

Kids said they would like to:

“... run around,

... play with friends,

... hang out,

... go to basketball,

... play piano,

... swim in my pool when hot,

... help with dinner,

... walk the dog or do some sport,

... go to the park with friends,

... play outside,

... have more relaxing time.”

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Introduction

Background

The middle years of childhood – from 9 to 14 years of age – are a time when children make some of the most crucial transitions in their lives. Children undergo the physical changes associated with puberty as well as rapid social and intellectual development. It is also the time when children move from primary school to high school and generally become more independent of their families, as friends and others in the community assume greater importance in their lives and begin to take greater risks.

The middle years of childhood has been a priority for the Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') since the 2009 Parliamentary Inquiry into children aged 9 to 14 years in NSW. The inquiry highlighted the importance of after-school activities, which are thought to be critical to children's healthy development and engagement. The time spent between school and home is an opportunity for children to participate in activities that build personal competence and confidence, and more generally to explore their broader world.

A key priority for joint work following the Inquiry is to drive collaboration between school and outside-of-school education, care and recreation services to promote the development of all children aged 9-14 years. Yet, there is limited research evidence about how children in the middle years spend their time after school, and what they would like to be doing.

This exploratory research, conducted by the Commission's 2012 Young People Advisory Group (YPAG), seeks to add to the evidence base that is informing the development of a middle years agenda for New South Wales.

Research questions

This research explored the following questions:

1. How do children in the middle years spend their time after school?
2. How would these children like to spend their time after school?
3. What, if anything, prevents them from doing what they want to do after school?

About the Young People Advisory Group

The YPAG is made up of twelve young people aged 14–16 years from six schools across NSW.

The YPAG gives the Commission insights into the issues that are important to children and young people in New South Wales. YPAG members help shape the recommendations the Commission makes to promote the interests of the children and young people of NSW.

Methodology

The research methodology and research tools were developed by the YPAG in conjunction with Commission staff and other experts.

Data was collected by YPAG members at their six schools, and in some cases in other schools in their local area. Parents were informed of the research through school newsletter articles and asked to indicate if they did not want their child to participate. All children gave written consent prior to participating.

Survey

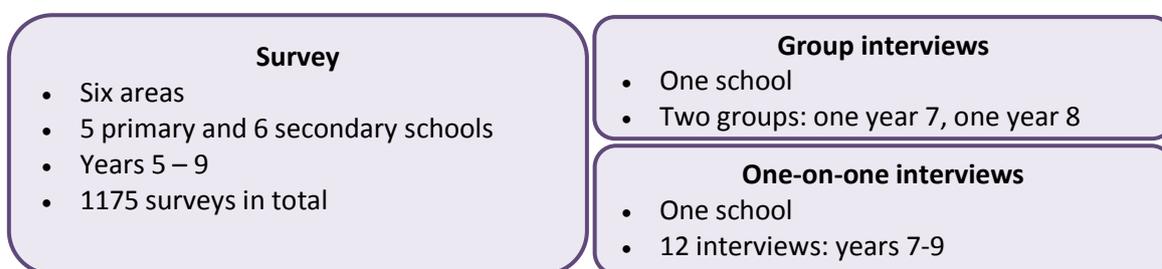
The primary data collection method used in this research was a short survey. The survey asked children to write down the activities that they usually did after school day; the activities that they would like to do; and the barriers, if any, that prevented them from participating in their desired activities (Appendix 2).

YPAG members, with the assistance of their school support teacher, identified and arranged classes to visit. YPAG members selected classes that they thought would provide a demographic mix representative of children in their area. Surveys were administered during class time.

In total, 1175 surveys were collected across the six areas. The number of surveys collected in each area ranged from 103 to 335.

Interviews

YPAG members were asked whether they would also like to experience conducting qualitative research. Members from two schools chose to undertake face-to-face interviews. Twelve one-on-one interviews were conducted at one school, averaging 3 minutes in length. Two group interviews were conducted at the other school, averaging 10 minutes in length. The interview questions mirrored those included in the survey.



Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken by Commission staff with advice from YPAG members. Open-ended responses to the survey questions were coded and analysed numerically. Data from the interviews were used to help interpret the survey data where possible.

Limitations of the research

The survey used open-ended questions to capture the breadth of experience of the children involved, which suited the exploratory nature of the research. However, some analytical issues arose from this design. Participants were not prompted, and the level of detail recorded varied among children. The level of participation in activities may be under-estimated as a result. It is not possible to infer how time was spent outside of listed activities, or to identify the amount of time spent on each activity.

Data has not been disaggregated based on area (e.g. metro vs. country), or based on demographic characteristics other than age and sex (e.g. cultural background), since the research was not sampled to represent those groups. In general, the figures given in this report should be read as indicative only.

Demographics

The research was conducted in six areas of NSW, based around the schools that YPAG members attend. The six YPAG member schools in 2012 were:

- Byron Bay High School, Byron Bay;
- Cerdon College, Merrylands;
- Holy Spirit College, Bellambi;
- Rouse Hill Anglican College, Rouse Hill;
- Scone High School, Scone;
- St John’s Park High School, Greenfield Park.

These schools comprise three government schools, two Catholic schools, and one independent school. Two of these schools are in regional areas, three are in the Sydney metropolitan area, and one is in the Wollongong metropolitan area. The data in this report has not been disaggregated by school or location for confidentiality reasons.

Although convenience sampling was used, the diversity of these schools and the areas in which they are located means that the research canvassed a diverse range of NSW children.

Survey

Sex

Female participants (690) outnumbered males (482). This is because one of the six YPAG member schools is an all-girls school. In the other five areas, the sex ratio was relatively even.

Age

Survey participants ranged in age from nine to 15 years, with a mean of 12.6 years. Though 14 was the intended upper age limit, some classes also had 15 year old students. Data from these students have been included in the analysis.

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status

Sixty-four participants (6%) indicated that they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Ethnicity

Over a quarter of participants (27%) stated that they spoke a language other than English at home. This is greater than the figure for all children aged 9-15 in NSW (18%)¹. Arabic/Lebanese was the most common language, followed by Vietnamese.

A similar proportion of participants (28%) indicated that their mother was born overseas. This is similar to the NSW-wide figure for children in this age group (30%)¹. The most common country of birth was Vietnam, followed by England and Lebanon.

Face to face interviews

There were eleven group interview participants in total, ranging from 12 to 14 years old, with an even sex mix. The twelve individual interviewees were between 12 and 15 years old, and all were female. They were chosen by their YPAG peers.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants

Demographics	n	%
Sex		
Male	482	41
Female	690	59
Age (years)		
9	14	1
10	77	7
11	155	13
12	245	21
13	325	28
14	258	22
15	95	8
9-12 years	491	42
13-15 years	678	58
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander		
Yes	64	6
No	1098	95
Language other than English at home		
Yes	318	27
No	849	73
Mother’s country of birth		
Australia	810	70
Other	329	28
Don’t know	27	2

¹ Commission calculation based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census.

Section One: What do children do after school?

There was a striking range of activities mentioned by the children who took part in the research. In all, the number of different activities mentioned in survey responses numbered well over one hundred. These activities were coded into seventy different *types* of activities, and further categorised into *activity groups*.

Overall, on average, each person mentioned undertaking 3.7 different types of after-school activities during the course of their week. Females listed a greater variety of activities than males, averaging 4.0 per week compared to 3.4 for males. The older age group listed slightly more than the younger age group, averaging 3.9 compared to 3.6.

Current after-school activities: all participants, at least once a week

<p>Individual sports/active activities 62% of all participants spent time doing individual sports and other active activities at least once a week.</p> <p>The most common sports, in order, were dancing, swimming, and skateboarding.</p>	<p>Homework and study 53% spent time on homework, study, or assignments.</p> <p>Children who did homework averaged 3 days of homework per week.</p>	<p>Team sports and training 44% spent time playing team sports.</p> <p>Soccer was the most common, followed by football (various codes) and netball.</p>
<p>Restful activities 38% spent time on restful activities.</p> <p>This included chilling, reading, and 'doing nothing'.</p>	<p>TV/DVD 33% said they watched TV or DVDs.</p> <p>TV shows mentioned included the News, Home and Away, and Pretty Little Liars.</p>	<p>Computer/electronic media 25% listed computer, electronic media and games (e.g. wii).</p> <p>Call of Duty (COD) was particularly popular.</p>
<p>Cultural/group activities 24% undertook cultural activities.</p> <p>Playing music was the most common, followed by shopping.</p>	<p>Time with family/friends 18% mentioned spending time with family and friends.</p> <p>Friends were mentioned about twice as often as family.</p>	<p>Personal/household tasks 17% spent time on personal and/or household tasks.</p> <p>This was most commonly chores, followed by personal grooming.</p>
<p>Tutoring/private lessons 14% had tutoring or private lessons.</p> <p>Tutoring was slightly more common than music and other private lessons.</p>	<p>Communication 8% said they spent time on communication activities.</p> <p>This was mostly texting, emailing, and using social networking sites.</p>	<p>Work/volunteering 1% said they worked or volunteered.</p>

Base: All children (n=1175).

Note: Percentages reflect the proportion of participants who said they did an activity at least once during the week.

Do after-school activities differ by age and sex?

There were some clear sex and age differences in the types of activities that participants did each week.

Girls were more likely than boys to:

- Do homework or study (60% vs. 42%).
- Watch TV or DVDs (35% vs. 28%).
- Do restful activities (42% vs. 34%).
- Spend time on personal or household tasks (20% vs. 14%).
- Mention communication activities (11% vs. 3%).

Boys were more likely than girls to:

- Do team sports/training (52% vs. 39%).
- Spend time on the computer or playing electronic games (32% vs. 20%).

*"Saxophone practice,
play computer"*

Male, 10 years

*"Help my mum make
food, eat, do homework
if there is any"*

Female, 14 years

*"Ride my BMX, go to my
dad's or mates"*

Male, 14 years

*"I play piano, play with
my dog, watch a little TV,
clean my room if messy,
help with dinner"*

Female, 12 years

*"Ride my horses, watch
TV, play with brother"*

Female, 13 years

*"Play with ipod, friends,
footy"*

Male, 11 years

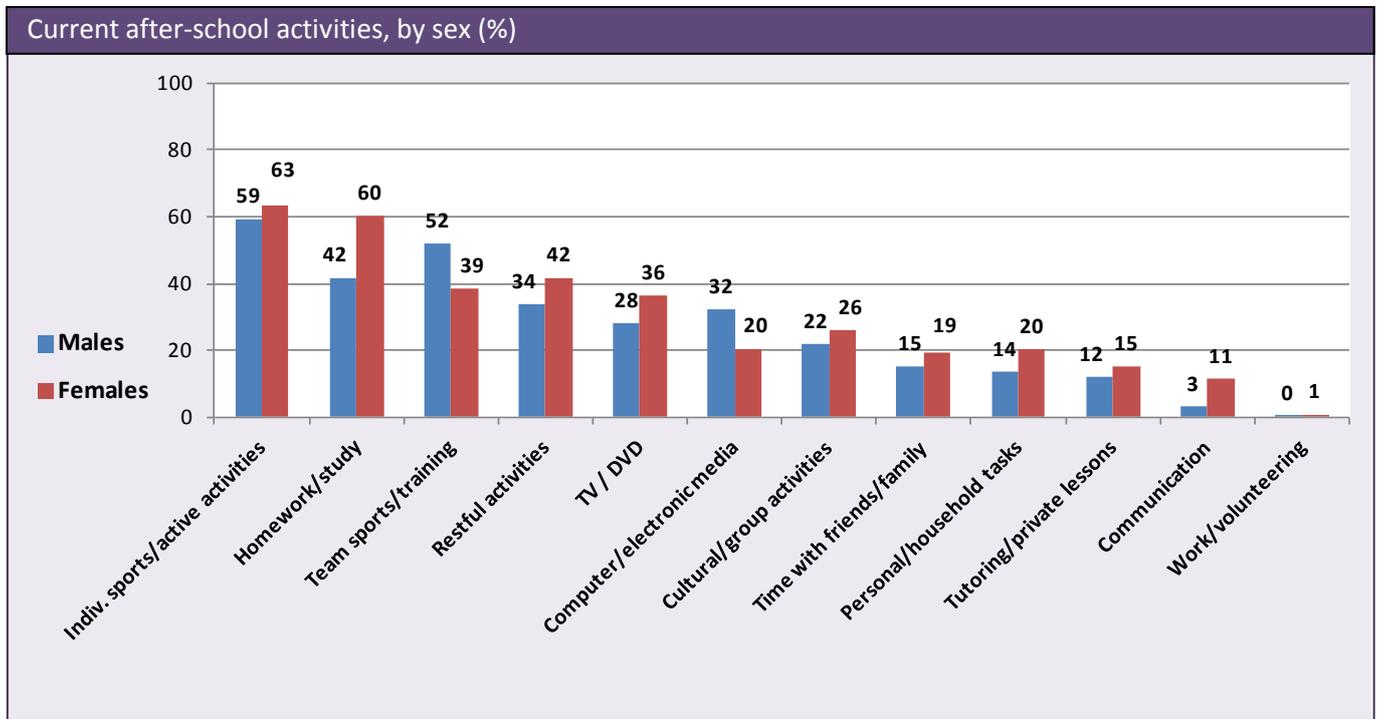
Younger children were more likely than older children to do:

- Team sports or training (55% vs. 36%).
- Individual sports or active activities (68% vs. 57%).

Older children were more likely than younger children to do:

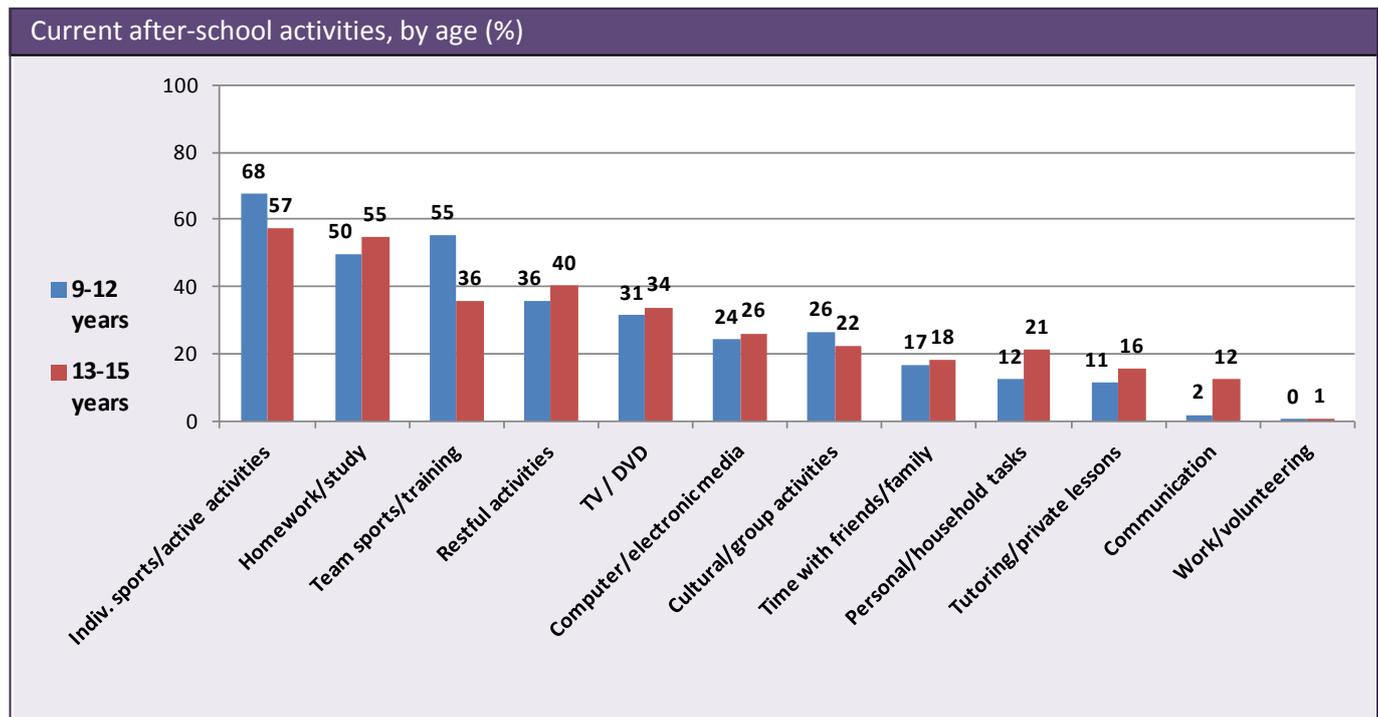
- Personal or household tasks (21% vs. 12%).
- Homework or study (55% vs. 50%).
- Tutoring or private lessons (16% vs. 11%).
- Communication type activities (12% vs. 2%).

Do after-school activities differ by age and sex (continued)



Base: All children (n=1175).

Note: Percentages reflect the proportion of participants who said they did an activity at least once during the week.



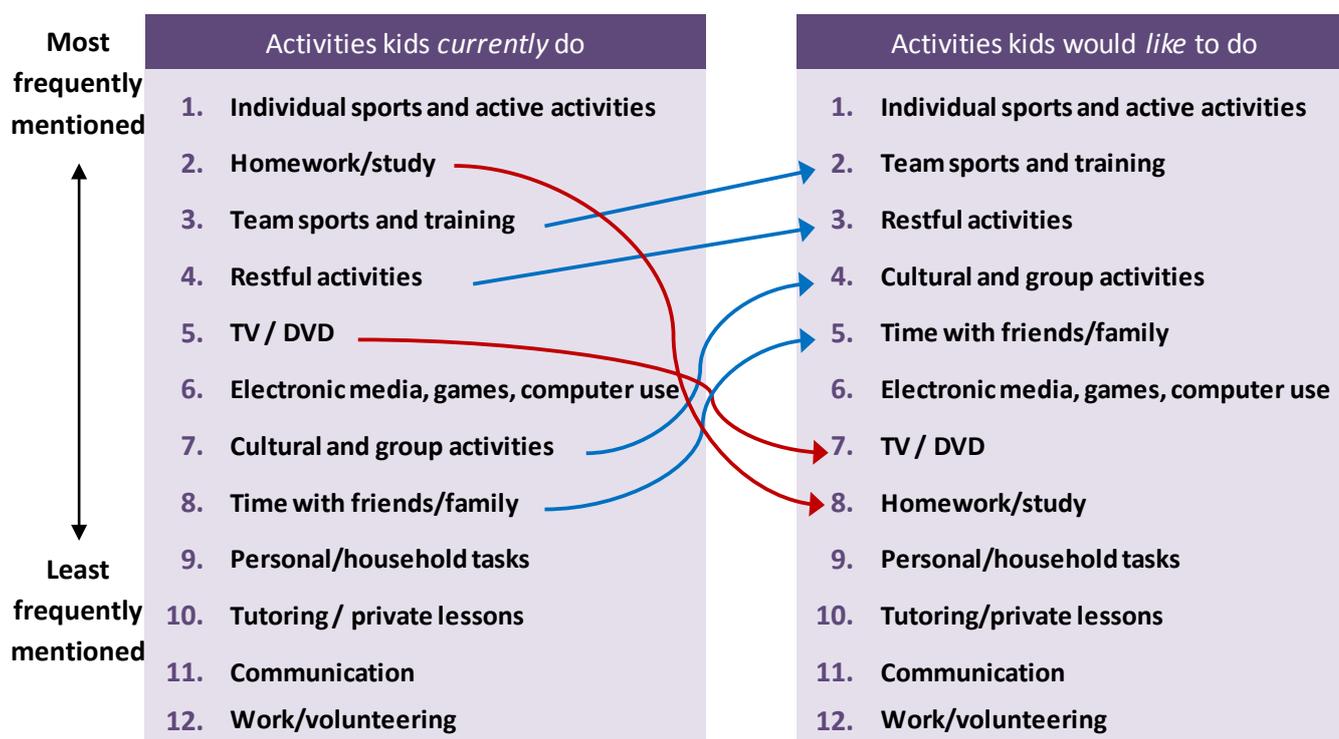
Base: All children (n=1175).

Note: Percentages reflect the proportion of participants who said they did an activity at least once during the week.

Section two: What would children *like* to do after school?

Children were asked to record the activities that they would *like* to do after each school day. Again, a wide variety of activities were listed. The percentages recorded are not directly comparable to the percentages recorded for activities that children *currently* do, because participants mentioned fewer activities on average for this question. This was assumed to be due children’s interpretation of the question, rather than reflecting a desire to do fewer activities.

The table below compares the activities that children would *like* to do relative to activities they currently do, based on the frequency with which they were mentioned.



This comparison of activities reveals minimal differences between the types of activities that children were currently doing, and those they said they would like to do. **Individual sports and active activities** were both the most common activity children currently do, and the most common ‘like to do’ activity. **Team sports and training** and **restful activities** were in the top four in both tables.

The biggest difference between the tables is with **homework**, which was the second most frequently listed *current* activity, but was far less popular as a ‘like to do’ activity. **TV/DVD** was also lower in the list of ‘like to do’ activities than it was in ‘current’ activities.

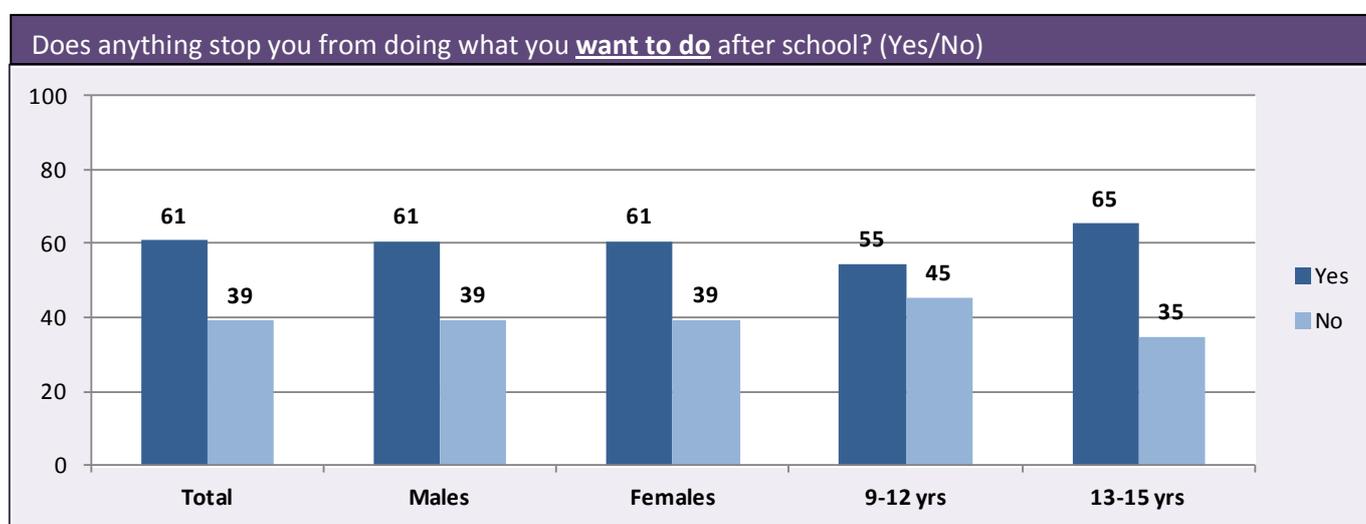
Activities that were more popular as a ‘like to do’ activity than their rank in the ‘current’ activity list were **cultural and group activities** and **time with friends/family**.

There were no notable differences in this pattern based on sex or age groups.

Section three: What prevented children from doing their preferred activities?

Children surveyed were asked whether there was anything that stopped them doing the things that they wanted to do. Overall, almost **two-thirds (61%)** of children surveyed said that something stopped them doing what they wanted to after school.

There was no difference in the proportion of boys and girls who said that they felt stopped from doing what they wanted after school (61% for each). Older children were more likely than younger children to say that something stopped them doing what they wanted to do (65% vs. 55%).



Base: All children (n=1175).

What prevents children from doing what they want?

The children who indicated that they felt stopped from doing the things they wanted to do were asked to write down why this was. There was often considerable overlap in responses: for example, children might experience difficulties with transport (e.g. “I can’t get there”) due the location of facilities (e.g. “beach is too far away”). Responses were coded based on the dominant theme. Some children reported multiple themes, meaning that the figures below cannot be directly aggregated.

- Homework** was cited by almost two-in-five (**39%**) of children who felt stopped from doing what they wanted. Comments suggested that homework was a barrier where it reduced free time available for more desirable activities. Several participants remarked on having ‘too much’ homework, or feeling pressured because of it.

“Homework, if I didn't have to do so much I would be able to do more sports in the afternoon, instead of having 3 more hours of school work”

“I stopped doing karate because I had too much homework ” – Female, 12 years, group interview

2 A **conflicting schedule, timing, or doing other things (16%)** was the second most common type of reason given by children who felt stopped from doing what they wanted to do. Comments suggested some children felt they were doing 'too much', while others wanted to do more but couldn't due to problems with scheduling or a lack of time. Some children also linked a lack of time directly to the length of their school day.

"...not much light after school, [I] get home at 4.30pm"

"I do too much during ballet throughout the week so I don't have time to do anything [else]."

3 **Parents** were reported as a reason by about one-in-six (**15%**) participants. Most of these participants did not elaborate on why their parents were a barrier.

"Mum!!"

4 Being '**not allowed**' (**9%**) was the fourth most common reason given. Some responses reflected acceptance of these rules, while others suggested clear frustration.

"Mum thinks I shouldn't play electronics during school nights"

"Mum and dad don't let me out with friends alone unless it's a birthday party etc."

5 **Cost** was reported to be a barrier by about one-in-fourteen (**7%**) participants. Some children linked affordability to their family's financial circumstances.

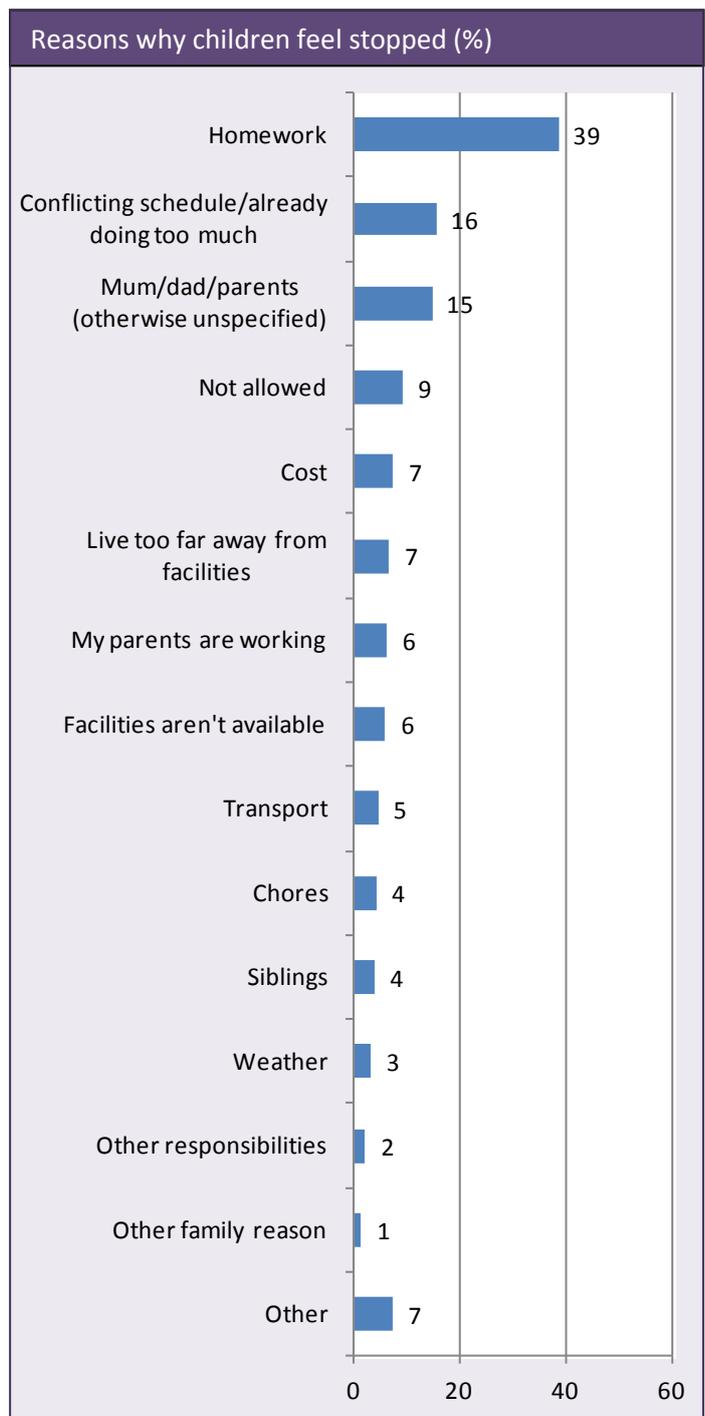
"the pool [is] way too expensive to go every day and a pass for a year is \$100 and my dad can't afford it"

"Mum doesn't have enough money to send me to singing or dance lessons. I have two younger brothers and a single mum, so mum has to do things for them as well."

6 **Location and availability of facilities** was mentioned by a number of participants. **7%** said that they lived too far away from the facilities required, **5%** said transport was an issue, and **6%** said that there were no facilities available to them at all.

"there aren't any skate parks near me closest is one hour away."

"I can't play 9 a side AFL because it's in Sydney"



Base: Children who said that something stops them doing what they want (n=687). Multiple responses allowed.

Do the reasons why children feel stopped differ by age and sex?

The reasons why children said they were prevented from doing the things that they wanted to after school were generally similar for boys and girls, and for both age groups. The top three reasons – homework, a conflicting schedule or doing too much, and parents – were common across all groups.

Homework was given as a reason by a greater proportion of girls than boys (40% vs. 36%). This may reflect the fact that a greater number of girls report doing homework each week than boys. There was limited difference between the two age groups in the proportion who gave homework as a reason, despite the fact that a greater proportion of the older children reported doing homework.

A **conflicting schedule/doing too much** was also given as a reason by more females than males (17% vs. 13%). The older age group was slightly more likely to cite these reasons than younger children (16% vs. 14%).

Parents were listed as the reason by slightly more boys than girls (16% vs. 14%), and more older children than younger children (16% vs. 13%). Conversely, girls were slightly more likely than boys to say they were **'not allowed'** (10% vs. 8%), as were younger children compared to older children (11% vs. 8%). Girls were also more likely than boys to say that their **parents working** stopped them doing what they wanted (8% compared to 6%).

Cost was reported as the reason by more girls than boys (9% vs. 6%), and by a greater proportion of older children than younger children (9% vs. 5%).

Similar proportions of boys and girls, and children of both age groups, reported that they **live too far away from facilities** (6-7% for all groups). Other differences were small. Boys were more likely than girls to report that **facilities aren't available** in their area for the activities that they want to do (8% vs. 5%). **Transport** to their desired activity was listed as an issue by more girls than boys (6% vs. 3%), and by more older children compared to younger children (5% vs. 3%).

Top 10 reasons why children feel stopped, by age and sex (%)					
	Total (n=687)	Males (n=360)	Females (n=585)	9-12 years (n=257)	13-15 years (n=429)
Homework	39	36	40	38	39
Conflicting schedule/already doing too much	16	13	17	14	16
Mum/dad/parents (otherwise unspecified)	15	16	14	13	16
Not allowed	9	8	10	11	8
Cost	7	6	9	5	9
Live too far away from facilities	7	7	6	7	6
My parents are working	6	4	8	5	7
Facilities aren't available	6	8	5	6	6
Transport	5	3	6	3	5
Chores	4	5	4	6	3

Base: Children who said that something stops them doing what they want (n=687). Multiple responses allowed.

What activities did these children want to do?

Children were not asked to identify the specific activities they felt prevented from doing. However, it is possible to investigate this to a limited extent by comparing the activities of choice of those children who felt stopped from doing what they want, compared to those that did not.

Children who said they were prevented from doing what they wanted were **more likely** than others to want to do:

- Individual sports and active activities; and
- Cultural groups and activities.

This information should be interpreted with caution as children may have only said they were prevented from doing one of the multiple activities that they listed. However, the activities do indicate the types of things that children would like to do more of if given the opportunity. Popular activities in these categories included laser-tag, surfing, and shopping.

YPAG member recommendations

YPAG members developed the following recommendations based on these findings:

1. **Parents** should initiate conversations with their children about the types of things that children would like to be doing.
2. **Schools** should consider the role of homework in children's lives, as well as what other opportunities they can offer for the development of their students outside of school hours.
3. **Schools** could also consider making their facilities available to students and **community groups** outside of school hours. **Government** could assist with coordinating this.
4. **Local governments** should consider how they can improve the accessibility of facilities and transport for children, to enhance the opportunities available to them after school.

Their recommendations suggest that the issues highlighted by the research align with a key area highlighted by the Middle Years Inquiry: that it is important that children, parents, schools, local communities and government work together to enhance and balance opportunities for children to participate in positive social, educational and recreational activities outside of school.

Discussion

This exploratory research has investigated the ways in which children in the middle years spend their time after school. It also identifies, from the perspective of children, what they would like to do and some of the barriers that prevent them from these things.

In all, children reported that they spend time on a diverse range of activities after school. Children's preferences for how they would like to spend their time are equally diverse. Nonetheless, there are some clear themes apparent in the research, and these are discussed in the section below.

Being exploratory in nature, the research has also raised a number of further questions worthy of consideration as an adjunct to the recommendations made by the YPAG.

Changes associated with age

The age groups presented in this report are roughly equivalent to late primary and early high school. Children transition to high school at around 11 or 12 years. Differences between the younger (9-12 years) and older (13-15 years) children seen in this research likely reflect a combination of both developmental differences and life changes associated with the transition to high school.

There are two major differences of note. Firstly, a comparison of the types of current activities undertaken shows older children have higher rates of participation in activities that may involve higher levels of responsibility (homework, personal/household tasks, tutoring), and lower rates of participation in sports and other active activities. This finding is consistent with recent ABS Survey data, which found that 9 to 11 year olds were more active than 12 to 14 year olds². The second major difference is that older children were more likely than younger children to feel 'stopped' from doing what they wanted to do after school (65% compared to 55%).

There are many possible explanations for this. It could be that the freedom these children previously experienced has been curtailed by their emerging responsibilities, or that their growing desire for independence makes them assess existing constraints differently. Nonetheless, these data raise an important issue for children in the middle years, namely where the optimal balance lies between emerging responsibilities and time spent on other activities (e.g. sports) that promote wellbeing.

Do emerging responsibilities in the middle years come at the expense of time spent on other activities that promote personal development?

'Busy-ness' of children lives

Children in this study undertake a range of after-school activities during the course of their week. On average, each child spent some time on activities that fell into three or four different categories. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, a *conflicting schedule or doing too much* was the second most common type of reason that children gave about why they felt stopped from doing what they wanted after school. 'Not having enough time' was a common refrain.

²Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) *Children's participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities*, Cat. 4901.0, April 2012. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4901.0~Apr+2012~Main+Features~Sports+participation?OpenDocument>

Spending time across a variety of activities can give children the opportunity to develop personal competence across a range of areas. It may also assist them to develop general time management skills. However for some children in the study, it appeared that this 'busy-ness' was unwelcome: comments about preferring to 'do nothing' may be a reflection of this. It is concerning that some children in this research express stress about being 'busy', given that the demands on their time are likely to intensify through high school.

To what extent is being 'busy' or feeling time-poor normalised in children's lives?

How can we best equip children to manage any pressures that arise from undertaking multiple activities?

Agency

The two issues discussed above touch on another area for consideration, namely children's capacity to choose and manage the way in which they spend their time. Previous research conducted by the Commission found that children view personal agency as fundamental to their well-being³. Children want the power to make choices in their everyday lives, and to be involved in and make decisions that affect their lives. Having some control allows children to learn to act responsibly, solve problems, and develop a sense of self. Other research indicates that children's capacity to exercise autonomy is important to the development of sophisticated cognitive abilities associated with self-regulation, like balancing risk and reward, thinking ahead, and anticipating the consequences of decisions⁴.

The majority of children surveyed in this research (60%) stated that they were not able to do the things they wanted to do. 'Parents' and 'not being allowed' were among the top four barriers that children felt prevented them from doing what they wanted. This is suggestive of a general tension between boundaries set by parents and children's capacity to act independently.

The hours after school provide a space in which children can potentially organise and manage their own time, outside of a classroom structure. Children's sense of agency over how they spend their time is important to their sense of wellbeing and to their cognitive development. Boundaries set by parents provide children with a safe space within which they can exercise their independence. However if too restrictive, they may curtail this realm of development.

To what extent do children manage their own time after school?

Do boundaries set by parents shift over the 'middle years', to allow children to exercise their growing independence?

³ NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2007). *Ask the children: Overview of Children's Understandings of Well-being*. NSW Commission of Children and Young People, Surry Hills, NSW.

⁴ Steinbeck, L. (2011). *Demystifying the Adolescent Brain*. Educational Leadership, April 2011.

Homework

Homework was the most common reason why children felt unable to do all that they wanted to after school. Though adult readers might expect to hear, and readily dismiss, that children don't want to do homework, this preference should be given due consideration.

Research literature is equivocal regarding the benefits of homework for academic achievement, particularly among younger children⁵. Given homework is one of the most common things that children spend their time on after school, it is worth considering whether the benefits of this outweigh the lost opportunity for participation in other activities.

A second point of interest regards the sex difference recorded in undertaking homework after school. A far greater proportion of girls said they do homework than boys (60% compared to 42%). This might be partly explained by the particular mix of schools involved (which included a girls-only school). However, it could also reflect real sex differences in study habits, or differences in boys' and girls' perceptions of the relevance of homework. Evidence shows that boys are more likely than girls to disengage from education, and that this disengagement typically begins in the middle years. A lack of engagement with homework may be an early precursor to this.

*What role should homework have in the lives of children in the middle years?
How does it contribute, positively and negatively, to their development?*

Desire for (face to face) social interaction

The research suggests a preference among children to undertake activities that were socially rather than individually oriented. This can be seen through a comparison of what children would *like* to do relative to what they *currently* do. The activities that children listed more frequently in the 'like to do' question than the 'current activity' question were all social – *team sports/training, time with family or friends, and cultural or group activities*. Surprisingly, *TV / DVD* was listed relatively less commonly in the 'like to do' question than the 'current activity' question, perhaps being seen as a 'default' rather than an 'ideal' way of spending time.

This desire may reflect the increasing importance of social relationships for children the middle years, as they broaden their focus from their families to friends and the wider community. This period is associated with significant developments in social cognition and self-awareness, and changes to the neural networks that underlie these areas. Positive social interaction plays an important role in fostering healthy development to occur⁶.

*What can schools and parents do to enhance the opportunities for children to
spend time with their friends, family, and others?*

⁵ Horsley, M. & Walker, R. (2012) *Reforming homework: practices, learning and policies*, Palgrave Macmillan, South Yarra.

⁶ Blakemore, S. (2010). *The Developing Social Brain: Implications for Education*. Neuron 65, March 25.

Children tend to see individual rather than structural barriers

The most common barriers that children identified related to their personal or family circumstances. Homework, personal scheduling, and parents were the top three barriers identified. Children less commonly identified barriers that could be classified as structural or environmental in nature, such as cost, location, and transport.

However, it is possible to interpret these structural barriers as personal ones. Children's experiences of barriers like cost and transport are likely to be mediated by their parents, through the rules they set and the encouragement (or discouragement) they give. For example, 'my mum won't drive me' is an individually-oriented statement that may reflect broader issues about the accessibility and availability of facilities and transport in that child's local area, or other demands on parents' time.

Structural barriers may also limit children's ideas and expectations about the activities that they could aspire to, such that these are 'taken for granted' and not reflected in survey responses. This interpretation is supported by information given by YPAG members from outside of Sydney, who advise that the availability of facilities and transport are significant issues for young people in their areas.

Finally, the seriousness of some of these barriers should not be underestimated. In particular, some children stated that difficult family financial circumstances narrowed the range of opportunities available to them. This comes in contrast to the many activities listed by other children, some of whom reported feeling overly busy.

In all, it is positive to note that the most common things that children felt stopped by were those things that they may be able to exert some control over. However, it is important not to lose sight of real structural barriers that may impede children's opportunities for participation in activities that promote their general wellbeing and development. This gives rise to a final question that should underpin and resonate throughout all our efforts to improve the experience of children in the middle years:

How do we ensure that all children have opportunities to participate in positive after school activities, regardless of their family circumstances or geographic location?

Appendix 1: Being a young researcher

This research was unusual in that it was undertaken by young people with their peers.

The 2012 YPAG undertook the research in collaboration with Commission staff, as part of their role to represent the views and experiences of their peers. YPAG members played a central role in refining the research questions and drafting the survey. They were responsible for all aspects of data collection, and provided insight into the analysis and guidance around the development of the final research report.

The research project was a joint learning experience for YPAG members and Commission staff. At the conclusion of the research, Commission staff spoke to YPAG members about their experiences and their advice on the support young researchers require. This section outlines YPAG members' reflections, in their own voices.

What are the best things about doing research?

Making a difference

It gives you a feeling when you get the results, a good feeling inside.

You're doing something for all the kids in the state.

I like to feel like you're helping people, finding out new things.

I feel important, and know that what I'm doing is actually making a difference. And once you get something in statistics, like 'such and such percentage' you kind of, understand that it is actually happening. I like seeing the end results of the research.

Community involvement

It was cool being the link between the people who organise the survey and the people who take it, so being the ones who actually go out there and find out... it's just really cool knowing that you're the one that brings it all together.

It was good that we got involved, that we could actually do the research. And that it took us to meet other people around our local community.

Probably the first thing is, a bit of fun, going out and collecting data, going around to different schools and finding out about different demographics and stuff like that. Also it was good dealing with different people.

Research can be interesting

It's quite different to what I expected it to be. I expected it to be quite boring to be honest. It's actually really fun to do. The skills that I've learnt have helped me in school assignments when I'm online and have to look for certain information. It helps a lot.

We had a big input into firstly the research questions that were set and also going around and collecting the data. We had a critical role in doing the surveys and carrying out the research.

Going out there was fun, going to the different classrooms was fun. But it was also really interesting to see how it all came together, like the ethics of it and how important it is to make sure every question's right, that was really interesting to learn about.

What did you learn?

Research design

The research questions in themselves were so broad. It was all about having to narrow them down and make them as easy as possible to understand. There was so many different things we wanted to find out and we had to work out exactly what it was you wanted to find out otherwise it was too broad.

I've learnt that it's really hard to phrase things, and what sort of questions you're going to ask, and it's not just straightforward there are so many avenues and ways to do research, you can't just get the whole population.

I've learnt the whole ethics part of it. I know that if we hadn't have done all the ethics training that we did my surveys would be so unethical, and they wouldn't, you know...comply. And even the wording choice, I wouldn't have given that a second thought, but the amount of thought that goes into how it's worded and whether it's better worded this way, it just blew my mind when I found out how specific everything has to be.

The different types of research, how to go about doing them, the different things that you have to consider and look at, it's made me realise that there's a lot more effort than what I thought there was into conducting research or conducting a survey.

How like stating a question one way could imply something else. If you ask the question one way you could trick them into answering a certain way and I hadn't really realised that.

I think it made me respect people who do research a lot more.

What were the main challenges?

Research with children

Especially with the younger students, actually communicating the questions and what we wanted to find out. Like year 4 and 5, you wouldn't go any lower than year 4. The best year was probably about year 7 or year 6, just because they understood it a bit better.

Year 8 or year 9 they probably didn't take it as seriously as they should have, and then year 4 it starts getting to a point where it's hard to communicate to them in a way that they'll understand about the research.

Working with such young people...they're not much younger than us, but it makes all the difference. Having to explain things over and over again and making sure they get it, and encourage them to ask questions because they don't particularly know us but they know of us. So just that whole barrier of working with quite young children was really hard.

Being ethical

One of the challenges was trying to be ethical through our surveys and stuff. Another problem I had was actually getting the kids to do it, to do the survey. Because sometimes they didn't tick 'yes' for all the boxes.

Also with the teachers, the teachers were pretty much like "do it", and we had to stop them from saying that.

Encouraging peers to take the research seriously

Some of the kids that you came across...getting them to put down serious answers instead of stupid things.

Also when you actually have to get them to do it. Because it is completely their own choice, and you have to tell them that they're allowed to not do it if they like. But with most of the classes that we did, as soon as we said that, at least four of the kids dramatically dropped their pens. So it was quite hard to find the line between encouraging them to do it and leading them to do it.

We had a bit of a problem with that, mainly with the older years as soon as they read that it was optional a lot of them decided that they didn't want to do it.

What support do young people need to do research?

Training from experienced researchers

...and training of course. You need both, you need to be shown how to do something, and then time to practice and develop that skill. So training is definitely needed before you actually go and do research, because it makes you think of things that you would not have normally thought of, so I think that's important as well.

I think people that know what they're doing, like we had with this, because if we had professional researchers come in and say 'you need to do this, but not this', they really spell it out for you, and that was really helpful.

It was really good when we were actually at the Commission and we were all helping to write a survey, it helped having professionals there to conduct us and lead us in a certain way so that we actually knew what we were doing, rather than just...because it was entirely a group process.

If we didn't have people explain all the levels of research, we probably would've done something like that you completely couldn't have done professionally.

Encouragement and reassurance

As well maybe encouragement, being told and encouraged to do the work and participate and give your opinion, I think that's important and that's an important support that's needed.

Help and guidance, you need someone like an adult there to help keep them on track, because you can get pretty lost. Some reassurance that they're doing the right thing.

We had support teachers we could go back to. So it was good having that reassurance that someone was there.

Practical support from adults 'on the ground'

I think it's good that we've got a support teacher at school to guide us...so we can say to the teacher and say 'look, this has come up, what do I do about it?' and they're able to help us to a certain extent.

Our support teacher was really helpful. Basically he helped us plan assemblies, he talked to the principal, he got permission and everything, and arranged the rooms so we could conduct the survey. He helped print things off, he helped keep the kids in line and everything, and for that entire time he was there for us and we would have almost daily checkups with each other.

Our principal actually...to get the primary schools to do it, she invited us to one of their meetings, of the area's principals. We got to print out what we were doing and basically we did a lot of the research and stuff but our principal made sure that was organised and got us to know the people we needed to know.

They respond better to authority. They'll be more willing to go along with us there, they'll be happy to ask us questions, but for the select kids who were a bit apathetic about it, having the teacher there didn't force them to do it but encouraged them because they had the authority.

Just because we're younger and don't have access to the resources you need, we need teachers and people with more authority to help you get...like printing and transport and getting people to actually comply with doing it.

in your answer)

These questions are about how you spend time after school, up until 7:30pm.

8. In the table below, please write in what you **usually do** after school each day. Even if you go home and do nothing, let us know.

Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	

9. What would you **like to do** after school? Please fill in the table below. (It might include the same things you do now or it could be different.)

Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	

10. Does anything stop you from doing what you **want to do** after school? (*tick a box*):

Yes No

If **yes**, tell us what stops you (*write in your answer*):

THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART IN THE SURVEY!

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