

Youth are not children

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Retiring after 18 years as ACYS manager and publisher, and previously YSA editor, Sheila Allison leaves with a final reminder.

Babies born in 1989 – the year I began my work at the Australian Clearing-house for Youth Studies – entered adolescence around the time of 9/11 and probably don't remember a time when the terms 'terrorism', 'climate change', 'internet' and 'texting' were not in common use. While these '89 babies still qualify as 'youth', under the common definition of youth as 12- to 24-year-olds, they are now legally old enough to vote, drink and buy alcohol, buy and smoke cigarettes, serve in the armed forces, drive a car and get married. They have probably been sexually active for some time; have experimented with drugs; have experienced mental health problems, or are close to someone who has; have worked at a number of part-time jobs; may now be working or studying fulltime or juggling the two. They are now, in short, adults, and have to manage their lives as do the rest of us. However, their perspectives, their emotional and financial resources, their life and work experiences, and even brain development equip them differently for negotiating their present and future lives.

There are some parallels at each end of the adult spectrum. At the same time as these young adults are tentatively making their way into the world of work, my baby boomer generation is tentatively making our way out. As the '89ers move from part-time to full-time work, we boomers consider the merits of going the other way. As they consider the financial and lifestyle implications of staying in the family home or going into a share house, or maybe going overseas, we think about the financial and lifestyle implications

of selling up and downsizing, or maybe hitting the road. They are not ready or financially able to be wholly independent, while we can't bear the idea of being anything else – ever – which raises issues of insecurity for us as we face the realities of looming old age.

It is important that our society has policies, programs and services in place at both ends of the adult spectrum that will assist in our life transitions, including through the periods of youth and ageing. We will always need policies and services – backed by information and research – in key areas such as education and training, getting into and out of the workforce, maintaining health and securing appropriate housing.

We baby boomers are lucky. Barring catastrophe, we have the numbers and probably enough economic influence to see that our needs are met when we are (or admit to being) aged. There is even (at the time of writing) a Department of Health and Ageing. Youth, however, are not so lucky.

In recent years there has been a trend away from designating 'youth' as a policy and service category separate from children. While we previously had a federal government department with 'youth affairs' in its title (the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs 1996–2001), that no longer exists, and our long-lived (nearly 25 years) federal government branch, the Youth Bureau (through which ACYS is funded), is now located within the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (Again, this is at the time of writing, which is pre-federal election.)

The state governments used to have offices of youth affairs, but we

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now have the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (ACT); Office of Children and Youth Affairs (Tasmania); Office for Children and Youth (WA); Office of Children and Young People (NSW); and Division of Children, Youth and Families (Victoria). The same is true for recent non-government initiatives: the collaborative organisation ARACY, founded in

2002, stands for Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

This recent lumping together of children and youth, the C&Y component of so many acronyms, is concerning. The rationale for it may be well meant, it could even be seen as 'efficient', and in some cases it brings young people into a picture that may have previously excluded them. Also in some specialist areas, like law, one umbrella can logically cover both children and youth.

There is, of course, no point in having hard-edged, age-based delineations between children, adolescents, young people and adults. As Johanna Wyn and Rob White (1997) say: "The assumption that age is the central feature characterising young people gives insufficient weight to difference, process and change ..." (p.13). And the UN Programme on Youth (n.d.) states: 'Within the category of "youth," it is also important to distinguish between teenagers (13–19) and young adults (20–24), since the sociological, psychological and health problems they face may differ.'

There is also a case for moving the young-adult marker back even further. In advocating a specialist youth mental health model, Patrick McGorry, Executive Director of the ORYGEN Research Centre at Melbourne University, writes:

A qualitatively different clinical approach is required for adolescents and young people, one which tends to look forward into their future life rather than backward into childhood. This notion of responding to young people after puberty more as young and emerging adults, rather than as children or adolescents, has recently been characterised in detail by British child and adolescent psychiatrist Philip Graham (2004), who argues the age of 14 years is the best demarcation zone.

But no matter how fuzzy or overlapping the edges of these categories are, we need to acknowledge 'youth' as a period of

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life deserving of study and support, a period that looks at both the present and future of that generation.

It is a truth universally acknowledged (in the youth sector at least) that a research or welfare program using the endearing image of a young child in its campaign will have greater public appeal than a campaign typified by a 20-year-old injecting drug user with piercings and tats. The latter is more likely to attract headlines than funding. But, of course, most youth issues are neither so dramatic nor 'pathological'; they simply exist in an inevitable way and require systematic attention. Particular issues flare and recede, like home-

lessness when the Burdekin Report came out in 1989, but they occur in the same key areas of life that concern us all. When the population group affected is young people, they deserve information, research and solutions that are designed specifically for youth, just as we need to provide for children and the aged. If we increasingly place youth under an umbrella that includes children, are we in danger of overlooking, or 'selecting out', the issues that are primarily young-adult in nature?

My concern as I retire and leave the youth field, is that without youth-specific focuses, the programs, policies, research and other efforts mounted under the C&Y umbrellas can too easily overlook both the hard, unappealing issues as well as the more mundane matters that challenge the upper half of the 12- to 24-year-old population. A Macquarie Fields or Cronulla riot is, thankfully, a rare event. But we can take it as given that we will always have a population of young Australians experiencing problems regarding work, health, transport, accommodation and other matters that don't make headlines or attract attention. That's normal, and we need firmly entrenched youth research, policy and service bases from which to acknowledge those issues and serve that sector.

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