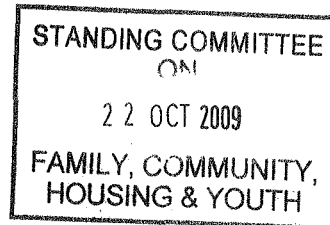


*Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians*



House of Representatives Standing Committee  
on Family, Community, Housing and Youth  
Parliament of Australia  
PO Box 6021, Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT 2006

20 Oct 2009

*To The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth,*

**A submission by The Smith Family in response to the Standing Committee's 'Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians'**

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Standing Committee's 'Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians'. The Smith Family recognises the Standing Committee's overarching objective to help shape government action to address youth violence and inform policy responses to minimise its prevalence and impact on young Australians, their families and communities. To this end, we commend the Australian Government for taking the opportunity to investigate this critical issue.

While The Smith Family's suite of *Learning for Life* literacy and mentoring programs does not directly address the issues of youth violence and anti-social behaviour, it employs a preventive/early intervention approach to building capacities for social participation, wellbeing and social inclusion. Through our Research>Policy>Practice iteration, we have acquired a depth of knowledge about disadvantaged Australian children, families and communities.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, this submission will address two of the Inquiry's five Terms of Reference:

- *TOR 4: Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians*
- *TOR 5: Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I.

## **TOR 4: Social and economic factors that contribute to violence<sup>2</sup> by young Australians**

### **Broader socio-economic risk factors that contribute to youth violence**

Environmental factors play an important role in creating conditions that can contribute to a culture of violence among young Australians. Socio-economic status has been consistently found to be an important contributing factor to violence in many studies. Depressed economic conditions coupled with individual cases of unemployment and limited economic opportunity contribute to higher levels of violence in general and in particular for young people living in disadvantage.

The media also may contribute to the perception of violence as a normative behaviour, reinforcing and sensationalizing violence as an appropriate and justifiable problem-solving strategy.

Disenfranchisement of some young people in society has resulted in a lack of meaningful and substantive relationships with adults, both individually and within the larger community. This lack of connection may contribute to feelings of alienation and disassociation from mainstream society, thus increasing risk for violent and delinquent behaviour.

### **Individual level factors that contribute to youth violence**

The majority of research has focused on individual level characteristics or behaviours, viewed within a developmental framework. The earlier the onset of problem behaviours, the higher is the risk for continued aggression and violence.<sup>3</sup> Aggressive behaviour during childhood (from ages 6 to 13) appears to consistently predict later violence among males, though research results for aggressive females are less consistent.

Individual level traits and a lack of psychological and social skills have been identified as risk factors. These include low self esteem, a lack of a sense of purpose, belief in a positive future, commitment to education and learning, and a low sense of control over one's environment. Limited strategies to deal with problem solving through critical thinking or seeking external support are also problematic, together with poor interpersonal skills and anger management issues.

Poor academic achievement and school failure also contribute to the risk for violence. Young people who are consistently absent from school during early adolescence (ages 12-14) appear to be more likely to engage in violence as adolescents and adults. The link between alcohol consumption and violence and anti-social behaviour in early adolescence has also been reconfirmed in a new study.<sup>4</sup>

### **Family level factors that contribute to youth violence**

Family risk factors, such as a lack of parental or caregiver involvement, are thought to interfere with the 'normal' socialisation of physical aggression, in which most children learn to inhibit physically aggressive behaviour by the end of childhood. Findings from a Canadian longitudinal study

<sup>2</sup> "Violence" is often mixed with other terms describing similar phenomena, like "bullying" or "aggression". While some definitions focus on physical violence, others also include verbal and mental forms. There is no agreement between different disciplines executing studies on violence (Schäfer & Korn, 2000). Two internationally common definitions of violence are: Aggressive behaviour where the actor or perpetrator uses his or her own body or an object (including a weapon) to inflict (relatively serious) injury or discomfort upon another individual (Olweus, 1999, p. 12); and, the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury or harm (WHO, 1999, p. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Cote, S., Vaillancourt, T., LeBlanc, J., Nagin, D., & Tremblay, R. (2006). The development of physical aggression from toddlerhood to pre-adolescence: a nation wide longitudinal study of Canadian children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 71-85.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (2009). *Violent and antisocial behaviours among young adolescents in Australian communities: An analysis of risk and protective factors*.

indicated that children who followed a trajectory of violence were more likely to be from low-income families, from families where the mother had not completed high school, and from families who reported using either hostile or ineffective parenting strategies.<sup>5</sup>

Physically aggressive boys from low socio-economic areas were more likely to have mothers who started child-bearing early or had low levels of education.<sup>6</sup> Male adolescents who become gang members are more likely to have grown up in financially disadvantaged circumstances and have low parental attachment, supervision and expectations for success in school.<sup>7</sup>

### School level factors that contribute to youth violence

Use of aggression may also be triggered by poor adaptive functioning in school. Research indicates that low academic competence and problem behaviours, such as bullying, can work to reinforce each other at the beginning of formal schooling.<sup>8</sup> Juveniles with high grades were found to be less likely to be involved in violent behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Being involved in extra-curricular activities, especially after school, may protect juveniles from violent activities by reducing the opportunity to be involved or be influenced by peers.

## TOR 5: Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

Current research indicates that the multiple factors identified above come together to influence behaviour during childhood and adolescent development. While certain risk factors contribute to violent behavioural tendencies, the existence of protective factors can create resilience<sup>10</sup> against these.

### Addressing the broader socio-economic determinants of youth violence

A comprehensive violence prevention strategy needs to be integrated with policies directed at reducing disadvantage and the social pressures that can fuel youth violence, such as unemployment, income inequality, rapid social change, intolerance of cultural differences, gender inequality and a lack of access to education.<sup>11</sup> This also involves changing broader cultural and social norms that support interpersonal violence and reducing the availability and harmful use of alcohol and drugs.

One of the most powerful protective factors emerging from studies of resilience is the presence of caring, supportive relationships within the community.<sup>12</sup> This requires building a base of understanding and commitment to working with and engaging young people. National, state, and local policies that support child and youth-oriented programs and a commitment of resources to

<sup>5</sup> Cote *et al.*, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Tremblay, R. E., Gervais, J., & Petitclerc, A. (2008). *Early learning prevents youth violence*. Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development.

<sup>7</sup> Hart, J. L., O'Toole, S. K., Price-Sharps, J. L., & Shaffer, T. W. (2007). The risk and protective factors of violent juvenile offending: an examination of gender differences. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 367-384.

<sup>8</sup> Cote *et al.*, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Hart *et al.*, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> While resilience is sometimes considered an *internal disposition* of a person's temperament, research has shown that resilience is also enhanced or supported by facilitating positive connections in the home, community and school (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 2004; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The concept of resilience involves more than an individual's ability to bounce back, and also includes the capacity to *learn and adapt in a number of different settings*.

<sup>11</sup> World Health Organisation (2009). *Violence prevention: the evidence*.

<sup>12</sup> The Smith Family (2008). *Enabling Relationships – Students Connecting with Sponsors*, at [www.thesmithfamily.com.au](http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au).

programs that support meaningful opportunities for adult/youth interaction will build greater understanding of different youth perspectives and motivations, and contribute to a culture of caring and cohesion.<sup>13</sup>

### Strategies for violence prevention at the level of the individual

The earlier the onset of problem behaviours, the higher the risk for continued aggression and violence.<sup>14</sup> The preschool years are therefore a critical time to teach children socially appropriate behaviour.<sup>15</sup> In childhood, children can be socialised out of the use of aggression and learn self-management skills to control their emotions and develop more constructive strategies for interpersonal communication. The pre-teens are also a key time for intervention. According to the new Australian report<sup>16</sup>, programs to prevent youth violence need to start prior to adolescence and be sustained longer. Early interventions at key developmental stages are more cost effective than measures involving significant change and control of entrenched behaviours in later adolescence or young adulthood.

The effectiveness of life skills development programs as a strategy for violence prevention is supported by robust evidence.<sup>17</sup> Life skills include the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and social skills that enable individuals to deal effectively with the challenges of everyday life. Among such skills, emotional literacy is foundational.<sup>18</sup>

To help develop these personal capacities early in life, two related kinds of program have proven to be most effective:

#### 1. Preschool enrichment programs

These aim to increase children's school readiness by providing them with early academic skills such as emergent literacy and numeracy, and emotional literacy, such as raising self-esteem, problem solving, and empathy.<sup>19</sup>

#### 2. Social development programs

These aim to promote pro-social behaviour and prevent aggression in children by developing life skills such as anger management, empathy, developing and maintaining healthy relationships, problem-solving and conflict resolution.<sup>20</sup>

The positive long-term effects of these programs are most pronounced in children from disadvantaged backgrounds and at-risk groups, reducing involvement in violence and improving educational and employment outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

Effective bullying prevention programs in the school setting also focus on developing awareness and life skills to deal with bullying. These include the development of effective self-management and coping skills, interpersonal communication strategies, and the emotional resilience that can

<sup>13</sup> The Smith Family (2008). *Building Relationships – Mentees connecting with mentors*, at [www.thesmithfamily.com.au](http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au).

<sup>14</sup> Cote *et al.*, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Tremblay *et al.*, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> ARACY (2009), *Violent and antisocial behaviours among young adolescents in Australian communities – An analysis of risk and protective factors*.

<sup>17</sup> WHO (2009a). Preventing violence by developing life skills in children and adolescents.

<sup>18</sup> The Smith Family understands emotional literacy as an individual's ability to recognise and understand their emotions; manage these effectively through self-discipline; recognise emotions in others through empathy, and draw on all of these to successfully develop and manage relationships with others for different purposes in different contexts.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of international pre-school enrichment programs are the High/Scope Perry Preschool Enrichment program and Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) program (WHO, 2009a).

<sup>20</sup> Examples of social development programs are Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) program and Second Steps, which uses a classroom-based curriculum to develop psychosocial skills, with a focus on self-management (WHO, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> WHO, 2009a.

reduce trauma and long-term effects. The emphasis is on teaching young people strategies to mitigate the interconnected roles and behaviours of the bully, the bullied and the by-stander, with the aim of changing a culture of bullying in a school as a whole.

### **Strategies for violence prevention at the level of the family**

Interventions that encourage safe, stable and nurturing relationships between parents (or caregivers) and children in their early years can help to mitigate family risk factors.<sup>22</sup> Family members, especially parents or primary caregivers, can play a significant role in helping protect youth from violence by emphasising the importance of education and offering support and affection. Frequent, in-depth conversations and communication between parents and children help build resilience as does the existence of a non-kin support network which offers access to a variety of adult viewpoints and experiences.<sup>23</sup> Having a caring adult in the community or parents with higher demands provide protective factors against youth violence.<sup>24</sup>

Emerging evidence suggests that violence prevention programs that aim to develop nurturing relationships can reduce violent acts in young people, and help decrease intimate partner violence and self-harm in later life. They also have the potential to prevent child maltreatment and childhood aggression, and the long-term negative consequences that can impact on human capital, security and socioeconomic development.<sup>25</sup>

To help develop these nurturing, stable and supportive relationships, several kinds of program have proven to be most effective:<sup>26</sup>

1. positive parenting programs,
2. parent and child programs,
3. social support groups, and
4. social media programs.

Pre-school enrichment and social development programs can also be combined with these family-focused interventions and have been shown to help protect children from child abuse.

### **Strategies for violence prevention in the school setting**

Poor adaptive functioning and low academic competence in school can trigger aggressive behaviours in children entering the school system. However, a strong school bond can protect children with early aggression or numerous environmental risks from later violence. Strong school engagement can also act as a protective factor against the influence of delinquent peers and social disengagement.<sup>27</sup>

In the school setting, emotional literacy programs that focus on building life skills can help to mitigate some of these risks by increasing pro-social behaviour and the bonds that can act as protective factors. Mentoring programs that provide positive role models have also proved to be effective in redirecting young people towards more positive outcomes. Incentives, including financial support, can also be introduced to encourage youths to participate more fully in education

<sup>22</sup> WHO (2009b) Preventing violence through developing safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their parents and caregivers.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (2008) *Report Card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians*.

<sup>24</sup> Hart *et al*, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> WHO, 2009b.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> Spratt, J.B., Jenkins, J.M. & Doob, A.N. (2005). The importance of school: protecting at-risk youth from early offending, *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 59-77.

and complete the formal qualifications that provide access to further opportunities.

### **The Smith Family's support for individuals and families**

The Smith Family's early intervention and prevention approach recognises the need to build capacities and provide support at key developmental stages and transition points from early childhood through to young adulthood. This includes the development of a range of integrated programs and models that can help build the life skills and emotional resilience to deal with the challenges and pressures faced by young people, together with the building blocks for academic success. We also provide mentoring opportunities and scholarships at primary, secondary and tertiary level to provide support and incentives for fuller participation. Examples of some of these initiatives are provided below.

#### **The Smith Family's programs that contribute to pre-school enrichment**

##### ***Let's Read***

In 2003, The Smith Family commenced a partnership with the Centre for Community Child Health to develop and implement a home-based emergent literacy program called *Let's Read*. This program is designed to encourage parents to enjoy reading with their young children, and to help them develop a love of books in addition to emergent literacy skills. *Let's Read* is designed to be delivered at four points during a child's development: from 4 months, 12 months, 18 months and 3½ years. Since the commencement of the *Let's Read* program in 2005, well over 130,000 children have been involved from over 95 communities across every state and territory in Australia.

##### ***Communities for Children (C4C)***

In 2004, The Smith Family was invited to be a facilitating partner for *Communities for Children*, part of the Commonwealth's 'Stronger Families and Communities Strategy'. *Communities for Children (C4C)* is an innovative approach to improving the coordination and delivery of existing services for communities and families with a focus on children aged 0-5 years.

C4C employs a preventive 'community development' model that encompasses a range of activities within any particular site, including:

- a. early learning, literacy and numeracy programs
- b. early development of social and communication skills
- c. parenting and family support programs
- d. child health and nutrition
- e. professional network and community development strategies

##### ***Families Learning Together (The Smith Family's dual-generational model)***

*This dual-generational model works at the level of the individual and the family, combining pre-school enrichment, social development and the facilitation of nurturing and supportive family relationships.*

Research has revealed a wide range of positive factors arising from initiatives that support families learning together that make them in many ways more effective than traditional

forms of education.<sup>28</sup> In response to this evidence and our experience facilitating Communities for Children and Let's Read, The Smith Family (with the pro-bono support of McKinsey & Company) has developed the Families Learning Together model to facilitate dual generational learning. The model integrates the education and care of children, with the education and parenting skills enhancement of adults, employing four streams of learning within a single cohesive learning system:

**1 Early education and development for children** to aid their cognitive and non-cognitive development and assist their transition to school,

**2 Parenting education for adults** to build their confidence and capacity to provide a stable home environment,

**3 Adult education for parents** to assist them in engaging in learning opportunities and improving their prospects to enter the workforce,

**4 Parent and Child Together Time (PACT)** to improve skills and strengthen relationships and communication within families.<sup>29</sup>

### The Smith Family's programs that contribute to social development

#### ***TSF-Outward Bound***

These programs incorporate traditional Outward Bound adventure activities and expeditions with residential workshops and activities. The program's development took into consideration where the young people are at and some of the challenges they are facing in their everyday lives. Students who participate in an Outward Bound course have shown significant improvements across numerous fields including: leadership, emotional self-management, academic performance, motivation, self-confidence, and teamwork. It provides students with the attitudes, life skills and inner strength that lead them to greater achievement and well-being back at school.

#### ***Girls @ the Centre***

This is a senior secondary program designed by The Smith Family that provides indigenous girls opportunities in the context of school to: improve school attendance and achievement; develop aspirations and positive pathway action plans and relationships; and build social relationships, confidence and self-esteem.

#### ***The Smith Family's arts-based programs***

Research has also shown that arts-based learning programs can improve a student's school attendance and involvement with learning, while also improving their capacity to build social relationships, confidence and self-esteem.<sup>30</sup>

**BELLA**, an initiative of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), is a four day residential art workshop program designed for groups of 15-18 year olds with disabilities, financial disadvantage, or social and geographic disadvantage. It provides opportunities for *Learning*

<sup>28</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the research, see The Goodling Institute (2006). *Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy – Annotated Bibliography*; The Pennsylvania State University.

<sup>29</sup> The four components of dual generational learning are adapted from The Goodling Institute (2006) *Family Literacy: A Research Agenda to Build the Future*. Report from Penn State's Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy Think Tank, Penn State College of Education.

<sup>30</sup> Research literature shows that engagement in art and music programs can increase students' levels of achievement and connections to education (Barraket, 2005).

*for Life* students to build social relationships, confidence and self-esteem as they learn, work, and socialize with other young people and adults in a range of afterhours cultural and recreational activities designed to broaden their experience of the city.

**CONverge** is a music program run by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (Conservatorium) for secondary students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**The Smith Family's recommendations for lessening the impact of violence on young Australians**

**Recommendation 1:** To address the broader social determinants of violence, a comprehensive violence prevention strategy needs to be integrated with policies directed at reducing disadvantage and the social pressures that can fuel youth violence. These include unemployment, income inequality, rapid social change, intolerance of cultural differences, gender inequality and a lack of access to education.

**Recommendation 2:** Strategies for preventing violence need to recognise the importance of early interventions both in early childhood and in pre-teens as key developmental stages.

**Recommendation 3:** Emotional literacy and effective interpersonal skills are an important outcome of school education. Social development programs can be successfully integrated into mainstream curriculum and community learning environments to support positive academic and psychosocial outcomes in young people.

Yours sincerely



Elaine Henry  
Chief Executive Officer  
The Smith Family



## Appendix I

### The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national, independent social enterprise that provides opportunities for disadvantaged Australian families and communities to create a better future through education. The purpose of The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* suite of inter-connecting programs is twofold: on the one hand, it works to increase the **participation** in society of disadvantaged children and their families through the provision of educational opportunities across the life course (increasing *human* capital); while on the other, it works to increase the **engagement** of those with the time, talent or dollars to support them (increasing *social* capital).

All of the programs within our evidence-based *Learning for Life* suite are built around facilitating children and their families to develop the skills and capacities they need to make successful transitions across the life course; and around enabling the relationships and attributes that support this skills development in the key settings of Family (home), Community, Educational Institutions (which include preschools, primary, secondary and tertiary education) and the Workplace.

Through this agenda, our disadvantaged kids and their families develop the skills or 'literacies' that participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy demands, including emergent literacy and numeracy in the early years, comprehension literacy (reading and writing), financial literacy, digital literacy, health literacy, emotional literacy, community literacy and inter-cultural literacy.

For more information, see [thesmithfamily.com.au](http://thesmithfamily.com.au)