Young and Wise: Key Insights for the Arts Sector Summary by TNA

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About the Report

The *Young and Wise* report, published by ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth) in September 2024, is a comprehensive review of what Australian children and young people say they need to thrive. The report collates consultations from 2018 to 2023, drawing on surveys, conversations, and creative responses from young people aged 0-25 across Australia.

The research focuses on six interconnected domains of wellbeing: **Valued, Loved, and Safe; Material Basics; Healthy; Learning; Participating;** and **Positive Sense of Identity and Culture**.

Findings are explored for four age groups: **Childhood (0 to 8 years); Middle Years (8 to 14 years); Adolescence (12 to 18 years);** and **Early Adulthood (16 to 25 years).**

This work is underpinned by *The Nest*, a national wellbeing framework for children and young people, ensuring a holistic approach to understanding their needs and experiences. The report aims to amplify youth voices in decision-making and to guide policies and programs that support their wellbeing.

Key Findings Relevant to the Arts

The report highlights several themes that reinforce the value of arts and cultural engagement in fostering the wellbeing of children and young people. The findings also give some ideas of where the arts sector can better serve young audiences and participants.

1. Creativity, Play, and Being Active

- Young people in the middle years report having **opportunities to play, be active and creative are extremely important**. (Connolly, 2022b; The Smith Family, 2019). South Australian children in the middle years report wanting to be in communities where everyone has access to a variety of fun, affordable and safe places to go with interesting things to do (Connolly, 2022b). Consultation with 8 to 12-year-olds in regional NSW indicated a majority are involved in out-of-school activities (Barnardos Australia, 2021). However, these consultations also showed a real **need for more activities and programs, and spaces like community centres, to be available for this cohort**. (p. 86)
- Children want **opportunities to be creative, learn, and have future dreams** of what they will do as adults. Playing with toys, playing sports, doing crafts, music, dancing, reading books, and learning/getting help with things were identified across consultations as important to children aged birth to eight years. (p. 42)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from birth to 4 years **value connection to culture and participation in cultural activities**. (p. 41)
- Children living with a disability discussed how much they enjoyed sport and recreational activities outside of the school community, particularly when these activities **were designed for children with disabilities**. (p. 87)

2. Being Part of Community and Safe Spaces

- Young people in the middle years are **not often asked about culture, traditions, and heritage**. When asked, however, an open-ended question about the important things in their lives, children in the middle years in the Katherine region identified taking part in cultural activities such as fishing and hunting (The Smith Family, 2019), and in South Australia, dancing, learning culture, and speaking their language (Connolly, 2022b). (p. 62)
- Young people gain a **sense of belonging** from a variety of sources, including family, friends, workplace, housing, and recreational activities, and through common lived experiences. Participants discussed how spaces where they felt respected and understood fostered a sense of belonging and comfort. (p. 172)
- **Young people want more third spaces**—places that are not work or home—where they can relax, socialise, and focus on their wellbeing. (p. 27)
- Communities could be improved for young people by **creating more youth-friendly spaces** for recreation and socialising, especially for older adolescents. (p. 117)
- **Cost, accessibility, and trust were the top three barriers** to accessing support services for young people aged 13-17 (p. 126).
- **Cost was cited as a determining factor** for accessing organised sports and lessons, and many children from low socio-economic backgrounds discussed seeking cheaper options, or not participating at all (Saunders et al., 2018). Accessibility of extracurricular activities was also mentioned in the Speaking Out Survey (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2021), with students claiming they had no fun things to do in their community due to relying on adults for transport and feeling they had little agency over their lives. Children in out-of-home care said their lives would be better if they had more access to participating in extracurricular activities and exercise (Connolly, 2023a). (p. 87).

3. Mental Health and Wellbeing

- **Mental health was a top personal and national concern** among young people aged 15 to 19, with 33.9% identifying it as a top national issue and 27.7% citing it as a personal concern. (p. 131)
- **School-related stress** was a significant issue, with 41.5% of respondents reporting academic pressure, high workload, and challenges with teachers as major concerns. (p. 149)
- Many young people struggle to prioritise health-enhancing behaviours, citing **barriers such as lack of time and money**. (p. 205)

4. Feeling Heard and Valued

- **Feeling heard and valued was a recurring theme**, with only 13% of young people feeling that government leaders listen to them. (p. 50)
- Young people appreciated opportunities to **develop and drive their own initiatives** as well as consult on expert-led initiatives. Young people want meaningful participation rather than tokenistic engagement. (p. 166)
- **Children and young people are experts in their own lives.** The UNCRC states children and young people have the right to have a say in issues that affect them (United Nations, 1989). Research shows that engaging children and young people in the development and execution of research, policy and practice provides better outcomes (Moore, 2011). (p. 24)

Key Recommendations

The report offers six key recommendations to support the wellbeing of Australia's children and young people (p. 16-17):

1. **Give children the best start in life**: Invest in creating safe, supportive, and nourishing home and learning environments for young children.
2. **Cultivate positive mental health:** Embed a cross-sectoral, prevention- focused, life-course approach to fostering positive mental wellbeing by addressing evidence-based determinants of mental health.
3. **Prioritise the environment:** Prioritise climate change and protecting the environment in all policies and practices.
4. **Enhance wellbeing literacy:** Empower children and young people to support their own mental health and broader wellbeing, especially by developing skills healthy relationships, managing stress, and optimising their physical health.
5. **Foster belonging and connectedness:** Recognise belonging and loneliness as powerful determinants of physical, mental, and social wellbeing.
6. **Embed children's voice:** Government, non-government organisations, researchers, services providers, philanthropists, and other stakeholders working in partnership with children and young people as an integral part of their work.

Why This Report Matters for the Arts Sector

The *Young and Wise* report offers valuable insights for the arts sector in advocating for stronger investment in arts programs for children and young people. It provides evidence that creative engagement is fundamental to youth wellbeing and highlights areas where the sector can improve accessibility and representation.

The report can be used to:

- **Advocate for government funding**: The data reinforces the need for investment in youth arts programs, particularly those that address mental health, access, and cultural expression.
- **Strengthen partnerships with education and community sectors**: The findings support the role of arts in education and wellbeing initiatives, providing leverage for collaborations with schools and social services.
- **Inform program development**: The research identifies gaps in creative engagement for certain demographics, guiding the design of more inclusive and accessible arts experiences.
- **Support policy submissions**: The report's statistics and insights can be cited in advocacy work, funding applications, and sector-wide discussions about the role of the arts in youth development.

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