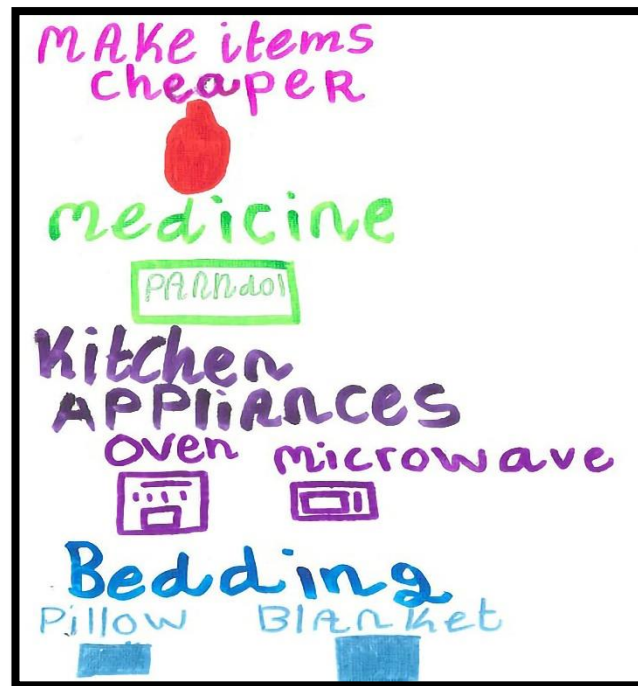


More for Children:

Children's Experiences of Poverty



Sharon Bessell and Cadhla O'Sullivan

Suggested citation

Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. *More for Children: Children's Experiences of Poverty*, Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University.

Cover image

Drawn by Star, 11-years.

Contact Us

The Children's Policy Centre
The Crawford School of Public Policy
The Australian National University

sharon.bessell@anu.edu.au

crawford.cpc@anu.edu.au

childrenspolicycentre.org

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the More for Children Community Engagement Officers, Belinda Whitelaw and Shandel Pile for their contribution and commitment; and without whom this research would not be possible. We are also grateful to the incredible researchers who have worked with us in the child-centred research workshops: Clara Siagian, Liz Cleary, Vijetta Bachraz, Lauren Moran and Wanda Komorn. We are also grateful to FamilyCare and Burnie Works, who have been partners in the research since the design stage. A special thank you to David Tennant, CEO of FamilyCare for his incredible support and ongoing contribution to the research, and to Kylie Burgess who has shared the vision from the outset.

Our thanks to the More for Children Project Advisory Committee for their valuable strategic guidance: Kylie Burgess, Professor Sharon Friel, Associate Professor Elise Klein, Dr Becky Shelly, Professor Lyndall Strazdins, David Tennant, Professor Peter Whiteford.

This research has been supported in a range of ways by deeply committed local organisations and individuals. We recognise that the research would not be possible without the support of those organisations and individuals.

Our thanks to members of the More for Children Local Advisory Groups: in Victoria; Amanda McCulloch (Chair), Kirsten Green, Lee Joachim, Sara Noori, Amy Robinson, David Tennant and in Tasmania; Shandel Pile, Kira Coghlan, Nicci Skerl, Mary Yaxley, Jonathan Cowen, Kylie Mulcahy, Nikki Brannigan. Thanks too to Mikkayla Leckie.

We are grateful to the organisations that have provided support, without whom this research would not have been possible including FamilyCare, Our Place Mooroopna, Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project, Lighthouse Mooroopna Family Haven, Lighthouse OLLY Youth Space, Uniting Vic.Tas. Our deep gratitude also goes to Courtney Wilson, Deb Walsh, Ann Sexton, Bella Ainsworth, Nicole Reynolds, Ana Filipovic, Fatima Al-Qarakchy and Shakilla Naveed.

We would like to acknowledge the Paul Ramsay Foundation for funding this research and for their ongoing support.

Above all, we are grateful to the children, parents and carers who have generously shared their time, experiences, insights, daily challenges and hopes for the future. While this report cannot document the story of each child, the themes discussed here reflect the issues that children are struggling with – and the issues on which urgent action is needed. This report also highlights the importance of listening to children.

Sharon Bessell and Cadhla O'Sullivan

June 2024

The Children's Policy Centre acknowledges, celebrates, and pays our respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people on whose country we are situated, and to all First Nations Australians on whose traditional lands we work. Much of this research is taking place on the lands of the Yorta Yorta people and in pataway, lutruwita and we pay respect to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing care for and connection to country.

In our research, our aim is to engage genuinely and respectfully with the traditional owners of the lands we work on, recognising the importance of connection to community and country for all children and young people, but especially for First Nations children and young people.

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A Program of Transformative, Child-Centred Research

More for Children is a program of transformative research that aims to understand children's experiences of poverty in order to act. Led by the Children's Policy Centre at The Australian National University, More for Children is driven by the vision that all children have the material basics, opportunities now and into the future, and strong and supportive relationships. Currently, Australia is far from achieving that vision, with one in six children living in income poverty. More for Children aims to provide a knowledge base for change.

The current phase of the More for Children program of research focuses on children's experiences of growing up in contexts of poverty in two communities in Australia. It involves rights-based, child-centred research with children and their families in order to understand, assess and respond to child poverty. Influenced by a recognition that a deep understanding of the structural nature of poverty is needed in order to act to end it and building on past research that demonstrates the multidimensional nature of child poverty¹, More for Children aims to conceptualise, define and assess poverty² in ways that respond to children's lived experiences. The research will provide tools to support policy makers and service providers design child-centred policies and programs to reduce, and ultimately end, child poverty.



OUR VISION

All children have the material basics, opportunities now and into the future, and strong and supportive relationships.



WHY

When these things are in place, children have happy, healthy lives now and in the future.



OUR APPROACH

- Listening to children and their families and communities
- Respecting children's human rights
- Understanding what makes life good and what makes life tough, from a child standpoint



OUR VALUES

Placing children at the centre of our research to bring about child-inclusive policies, contribute to safe, child friendly communities, and ensure no child is left behind or lives in poverty.

This report recognises poverty as a fundamental violation of children's human rights and highlights the importance of shifting the narrative away from individual blame to understanding

¹ Bessell, S. (2022). 'Rethinking Child Poverty', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 23(4): 539-56. Doi: 10.1080/19452829.2021.1911969

² See Lister, R. (2020). *Poverty* 2nd edition, Wiley.

the structural causes of poverty. It presents a child-centred definition of poverty, and introduces the MOR Framework as a means of deeply understanding how poverty impacts on children.

Reframing Narratives

Over recent decades, narratives about poverty in Australia have tended to focus on individual responsibility. While a 2023 survey³ found that over 80 percent of Australians believe people can experience poverty through no fault of their own, stigmatising narratives and attitudes remain common. Moreover, policies towards people experiencing poverty are often punitive and blame individuals for their circumstances.⁴ Such policy approaches have largely failed to take account of the structural nature of poverty. A focus on individual responsibility neglects the ways in which systems fail children, families and communities, and sometimes exacerbate poverty. Focusing on individuals not only diverts attention from how and why systems fail, it also diverts attention from how and why systems work, preventing us from changing social and economic conditions in ways that enable us to end child poverty and ensure all children can thrive.

In policy and public discourses around children the concept of thriving is widely used, but usually poorly defined.⁵ The ‘failure to thrive’ has its origins in health research, where the focus is on low weight for age or lack of weight gain.⁶ Growing up in contexts of poverty is, not on its own, an indicator of failure to thrive, but poverty has also been identified as the greatest single risk factor.⁷ More recently, the concept of thriving has expanded beyond health and nutrition to include nurturing and responsive care, learning opportunities, security and safety.⁸ We use the concept of thriving to describe a situation where children have their material needs met; have opportunities for connection, learning, play and participation, now and in the future; and have strong and supportive relationships. Our focus is on children’s lives now, their experiences of childhood, and the extent to which their human rights are protected, as well as on the ways in which childhood experiences provide a foundation for the future. Poverty prevents children from thriving. As narratives of individual responsibility have come to dominate, the role of the state as a duty-bearer in upholding children’s human rights has been lost; so too, has any sense of collective responsibility for children’s well-being. More for Children aims to shift the dial by placing children at the centre of efforts to end poverty. In doing so, we aim to contribute to child-inclusive policies, communities that are genuinely supportive of children, and place-based initiatives that are child-centred. We also aim to shift the dial on the individualised and destructive narratives that have been a feature of discourses around poverty in Australia for too long.

Narratives of individual responsibility and blame have caused both shame and stigma. This was highlighted in an interview undertaken as part of the More for Children research with a single mother, who was struggling with the escalating costs of food and housing. She lived in fear of losing her home and with daily food insecurity and often hunger.

³ Treloar C, Bradbury B, Naidoo Y, Cama E, Brener L, Caruana T, Calabrese S, Dorsch P, Phillips J, Goldie C, Broady T. 2023. *Community Attitudes Towards Poverty and Inequality 2023: Snapshot Report*, Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney.

⁴ Klein, E. ‘Unpaid care, welfare conditionality and expropriation’, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 28 (4). doi: [10.1111/gwao.12679](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12679)

⁵ Ettinger, A. K. et al. 2022. ‘Defining and Measuring Child and Youth Thriving: A Scoping Review’, *Pediatrics*. 150 (5). doi: [10.1542/peds.2022-056902](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2022-056902)

⁶ Rudolf, M. C. J and Logan, S. 2005 ‘What is the long term outcome for children who fail to thrive? A systematic review’, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 90: 925-931. doi: [10.1136/adc.2004.050179](https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2004.050179)

⁷ Raynor, P. and Rudolf, MCJ. 1996. ‘What do we know about children who fail to thrive’, *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 22 (4): 241-250.

⁸ Black, M. M., Lutter, C. K. and Trude, A. C. B. 2020. ‘All children surviving and thriving: re-envisioning UNICEF’s conceptual framework of malnutrition’, *The Lancet*, 8 (6). doi: [10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30122-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30122-4)

She said, 'I am not a leaner, I just need a bit of help right now'. This comment refers to then-Treasurer Joe Hockey's 2014 Budget Speech, whereby he said 'We are a nation of lifters, not leaners.... We are a great nation. We are a great people. By everyone making a contribution now, we will build a bigger, better Australia.'⁹

The 2014 budget was brutal for Australians who were reliant on government benefits and was couched in narratives of the undeserving poor – the 'leaners' who are failing to contribute.¹⁰ The 'lifters not leaners' phrase was widely quoted. We interviewed the mum who felt that she had to defend herself against being labelled a leaner almost a decade after the 2014 budget speech – but the language used and the portrayal of people who need support have created deep scars for some people and continue to cause pain.

This research aims to reframe narratives. In seeking to understand how children experience poverty, we aim to understand how we can change the conditions that create poverty to ensure all children, their families and their communities, can thrive. We aim to contribute to ending poverty in this wealthy country, and ensuring all children thrive.

Our research shows very clearly that poverty is the result of structural inequalities and failing systems. People do not choose poverty and children are never responsible for growing up in poverty. As a society we have a responsibility to act to end child poverty – and to work respectfully and collaboratively with children and communities to understand what needs to change.

Listening to and talking with children about poverty

Narratives of individual shame make it difficult to talk about the realities of living in poverty and how we shift the conditions that create it.¹¹ Those narratives have acted to silence many people, to disparage their struggles, and dismiss their strengths. It is especially difficult to talk about poverty with children, not least because parents are often worried that poverty – and the inability to provide for their children – will be misrecognised and mislabelled as neglect. In one More for Children research session, a ten-year-old girl started the conversation by saying 'you need to know my family is good, we're OK'. Over the course of the research, it became clear that her family is loving and caring – and in desperate need of support but also in fear of being labelled as unfit or undeserving of support, or worse, neglectful.

Talking about poverty is essential, and we need to understand from children how they experience growing up in contexts of poverty.¹² We need to create spaces for children to share their experiences, their concerns, their ideas for change, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Those conversations need to value children's views, recognise the strengths of their families and communities, and uncover how the social and economic conditions that create poverty are understood and changed.

The More for Children research project has been designed to ensure children do not feel any sense of shame or stigma. We recognise the power of language, and do not use the words 'poverty', 'disadvantage' or other terms that may be considered 'negative' with children.

⁹ 'Federal Budget 2014: Full Speech', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 2014, [Federal budget 2014 – Full speech \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au/federal-budget-2014-full-speech)

¹⁰ 'Lifters and Leaners: The Real Welfare Bludgers', *New Matilda*, 22 July 2014. <https://newmatilda.com/2014/07/22/lifters-and-leaners-real-welfare-bludgers/>

¹¹ Walker, R. et al. 2013. 'Poverty in Global Perspective: Is Shame a Common Denominator?', *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(2): 215-233. doi: 10.1017/S0047279412000979.

¹² Bessell, S., Siagian, C., Bexely, A. 2020. 'Towards child-inclusive concepts of childhood poverty: The contribution and potential of research with children', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116. doi: [10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105118](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105118)

Instead, we ask about the things that make life good and the things that make life tough. Children throughout our research often use words like ‘struggling’.

Our approach is activity based, using a range of participatory methods that enable children to share their ideas and experiences on their own terms and in their own time.¹³ Our research is rights based and child-centred.¹⁴

In taking a rights-based approach, we are informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, drawing in particular on four articles:

- Children have the right to express their view on matters affecting their lives and to have those views taken seriously and respected (Article 12)
- Children have a right to receive and share information in ways that are age appropriate (Article 13)
- The best interests of the child are of greatest priority (Article 3)
- Research with children should never be exploitative or extractive (Article 36).

These principles ensure that our research supports children to share their views and experiences in ways that are respectful and genuinely value their contribution. Information about the research must be in a form that children understand and can engage with, and the methods used must enable children to share their ideas and experiences in ways that are both comfortable and meaningful for them. Within the research, children’s best interests are centred ensuring that children are safe, feel safe and respected, and have their ideas and experiences recognised and valued.

In taking a child-centred approach, two principles are central in ensuring children can participate freely and on their own terms or choose not to participate.

- Informed consent: Children must be supported to understand the research and to decide if they want to take part.
- Informed dissent: Children must feel comfortable in saying no. This means children must be able to disengage from specific activities and conversations or to withdraw from the research if they wish.¹⁵

In addition, child-centred research is shaped by the following values:

- Listening with care and respect
- Responding with care and respect
- Activity-based
- Led by children
- Enjoyable and supportive.

The methodology that shapes the research is designed to ensure that children are treated with dignity and their views are respected.¹⁶ The methods or activities used are designed to let children share their views and experiences on their own terms, and to choose not to participate at any time.

¹³ See ‘More for Children: Rights-based Methodology for Research with Children on Poverty’ available at <https://childrenspolicycentre.org>

¹⁴ Beazley, H., Bessell, S., Ennew, J. and Waterson, R. 2009. ‘The right to be properly researched: research with children in a messy, real world’, *Children's Geographies*, 7(4), doi: 10.1080/14733280903234428

¹⁵ Beazley, H., Bessell, S., Ennew, J. and Waterson, R. 2009. ‘The right to be properly researched: research with children in a messy, real world’, *Children's Geographies*, 7(4), doi:10.1080/14733280903234428

¹⁶ Bessell, S. (2015), ‘Rights-based Research with Children: Principles and Practice’ in Ruth Evans and Louise Holt (eds.) *Methodological Approaches and Methods in Practice*, volume 2, in Skelton, T. (editor-in-chief) *Geographies of Children and Young People*, Singapore: Springer.

The principles that underpin the research are put into practice through child-centred research workshops. Child-centred research workshops generally involve 10 to 15 children and three to four researchers and are activity based. Children have to be able to engage in activities on their own terms; this includes deciding whether they prefer to work individually or as part of a small group – and children often shift back and forth between individual and group activities during the research. Children are also able to decide which researchers they would like to talk with, and children often choose to talk with different researchers at different times or on different issues.¹⁷

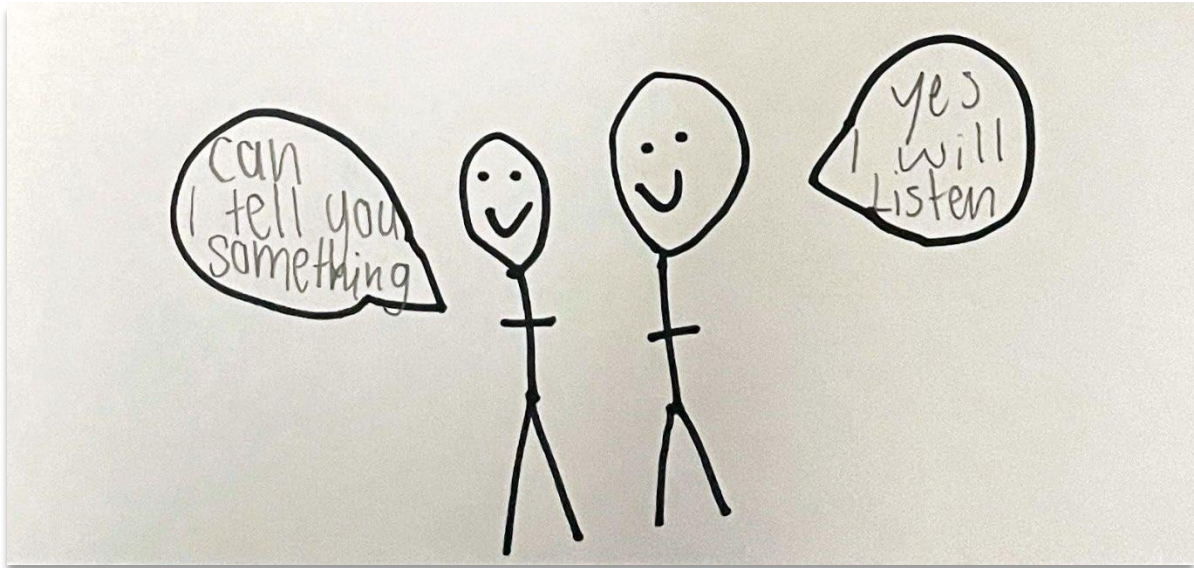
The ethical principle of confidentiality is taken very seriously in this research, and we discuss this with children as part of the ongoing informed consent process. To protect children's confidentiality – while recognising their contribution – we use research nicknames. Children choose their research nickname, or pseudonym, at the start of the research, and we use it throughout the process. The researchers also take on research nicknames. Research nicknames are used in writing up the findings, so long as children's confidentiality can be maintained. Children's real names are not used in any publications or presentations of the research.

The subjects discussed in this research are often difficult, but the activities are designed to be enjoyable. Research activities are interspersed with games and downtime and sharing food.

This research was designed by non-Indigenous researchers, and we were conscious from the outset of ensuring the cultural safety of any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children who participated. In doing so, the safety and engagement of all children participating in the research were strengthened and scaffolded. Prior to commencing research with children, we workshoped our proposed approach and took advice from Indigenous organisations in both communities. The research benefited enormously from the participation of an Indigenous researcher in some of the child-centred research workshops in Victoria. Because the research was not designed by Indigenous researchers, the research does not focus on the specific ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience poverty. Because some of the children who participated are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander we have some, limited insights into their experiences; but there would be great value in research of this kind with Indigenous children to better understand the intersection between race and racism, disconnection from and connection with country and culture, and experiences of poverty. Ideally, such research should be designed and led by Indigenous researchers.

At the centre of our approach to research with children is the importance of listening. Children who are part of the research consistently say they love being listened to and being able to have their say.

¹⁷ See Bessell, S. 2013. 'Child-Centred Research Workshops: A model for participatory, rights-based engagement with children', *Developing Practice*, 37, 11-20.



A message from Bananas, 11 years.

Research in two communities

This report is based on research undertaken between 2022 and 2024 with children in two regional communities – one in central Victoria and one in northwest Tasmania. It builds on earlier emerging findings reports that were produced for the two communities, to contribute to local action and place-based initiatives. The communities were selected because the Children’s Policy Centre had strong relationships with local partners, who saw the research as a means of understanding from children what life is like when families are experiencing the many dimensions that comprise poverty. Each community has remarkable assets and strengths, not least the commitment of many individuals and organisations in the local community to ensuring that all children and their families are well supported.

Within each community, as across Australia¹⁸, there are families who are struggling and children who are carrying the pain and burden of poverty. The experiences, described by children and reported here, are characterised by hardship: a lack of essential material goods, lack of access to essential services, lack of opportunities, and relationships under incredible stress as a result of poverty. Children’s experiences and lives are also characterised by love, joy, hope and often mischief: children described their love for their families, their appreciation of the kind and caring people in their lives, the fun they have and the things they like to do.

While there were some differences between the two communities, and among children within each community, the themes that emerged are very similar. Poverty is a deeply personal experience, but it creates experiences that are often similar across places. This is not a story of any one community failing children or not having a range of assets locally. It is a story of how children’s lives are impacted by poverty, and it is a story that plays out in communities across Australia daily. While a deep, place-based understanding of poverty is important in appreciating and responding to the nuances of poverty and the complex drivers, there is a commonality of experience. In finding responses, we need place-based initiatives

¹⁸ Naidoo, Y; Valentine, K; and Adamson, E. 2022. *Australian experiences of poverty: risk precarity and uncertainty during COVID-19*, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW Sydney.

that are supported by local communities and organisations; we also need policies at state and federal levels to better support all children and to ensure no child experiences the pain of poverty in this wealthy country.

At the time of writing this report, 114 children have participated in the research, sharing their experiences of poverty, the things that make their lives good, and their fears, hopes and dreams for the future. We did not require children or families to share information about their cultural, religious or ethnic background, but some chose to do so. Of the children who have participated, 14 are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. As discussed earlier, the methodology and methods used were designed to ensure cultural safety for any Indigenous children who participated, and advice was received from Indigenous organisations. 15 children are from Arabic-speaking or Afghani backgrounds who are refugees or are seeking asylum; most of these children have arrived in Australia in the past five years.¹⁹ In addition, 18 parents have participated in the research, including two grandparents with responsibility for caring for their grandchildren. Interviews have been undertaken with 27 individuals with deep knowledge of the local communities.

From children's voices to a child standpoint

Our rights-based, child-centred approach to research with children creates an opportunity for children to share their experiences, concerns, ideas, and dreams for the future. Children share their own stories and relate what they see in their communities, resulting in a deep understanding of children's lives – and the struggles they and their families face when they live in contexts of poverty.

Children's stories are powerful, and they demonstrate clearly the ability of children to express their ideas, to understand the world around them, and to contribute to new ways of thinking. To move from the power of individual stories to an understanding of the social and economic shifts needed to end child poverty and ensure every child can thrive, we use the concept of a child standpoint.

We draw on feminist standpoint theory, which begins with the idea that the less powerful members of a society experience a different reality from those with more power, more influence, and more wealth.²⁰ Children's realities are often very different from – and obscured from – those who make decisions on their behalf, through – for example – policies and services and their standpoints missed.²¹ The standpoints of children who are growing up in contexts of poverty are most likely to be missed, marginalised or ignored. Based on the stories children share, we draw out common themes, and develop a child standpoint. In this research, a child's standpoint is the outcome of genuinely listening to children's voices. It takes us from the individual voices of children to a collective position that is child-centred and able to inform positive change for all children, particularly those who are doing it tough.

¹⁹ See O'Sullivan, C. and Bessell, S. 2024. Listening to Child Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Australia: What Matters Most, *Refugee Research Online*, March 10. Available at <https://refugeereseearchonline.org/listening-to-child-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-australia-what-matters-most/>

²⁰ Swigonski, M. E. 1994. 'The logic of feminist standpoint theory for social work research'. *Social Work*, 39(4), 387-393.

²¹ Fattore, T., Mason, J. and Watson, E. 2016. *Children's Understandings of Well-being: Towards a Child Standpoint*, Dordrecht, Springer.

MOR for Children: A framework for change

Based on what children have told us is important if they and their families are to live free from poverty, we have developed the MOR Framework.

The MOR Framework helps us to understand poverty from a child standpoint. It enables us to assess progress towards ending child poverty by understanding deeply the way poverty shapes children's lives. It also uncovers the things that matter most to children, providing a basis for action that is child-centred. Importantly, the MOR Framework provides a means of addressing the underlying causes of poverty.

The MOR Framework recognises that a lack of income is at the heart of poverty, but poverty is created and experienced as more than insufficient income. Poverty shapes every aspect of children's lives – creating insecurity, limiting what they can do and how they participate in their communities, shaping how they are able to learn, and often putting stress on relationships that children deeply value.

Guided by what children have told us, the MOR Framework has three dimensions: **Material, Opportunity, and Relational**. It is a Framework for transformative change. When the essential elements of each dimension are in place, children are supported and can thrive both now and into the future– and there will be no child poverty.

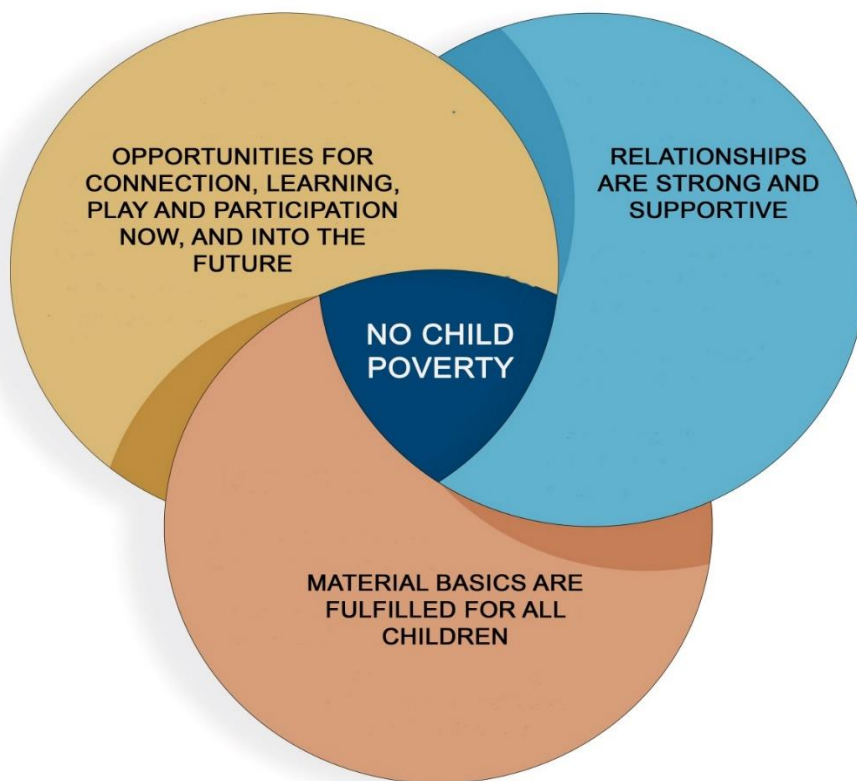


Figure. 1 The MOR dimensions

The MOR Framework is designed to be used by governments, service providers, and communities who are committed to ending child poverty in this wealthy country. It is designed to identify both the structural causes of poverty and the ways in which systems are failing children and their families. It provides deep insights into children's experiences, which are too often hidden, and provides a child-centred framework for action.

The MOR Framework is a tool for acting to end child poverty, scaffolding wellbeing, and ensuring no children are left behind.

This report shares children's experiences and presents a child standpoint of poverty. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the transformations needed to end child poverty – including changes in attitudes, new policy approaches that put children at the centre, and shifts in social and economic conditions. Achieving these transformations is challenging but possible, and the MOR framework provides a basis for lasting and meaningful change.

This report uses the three dimensions of the MOR Framework, discussed above, to present the issues that children said matter most and to describe their experiences of 'doing it tough'. Wherever possible, we use children's own words to convey their experiences, views and priorities.

What children say makes life good?

The More for Children research takes a strengths-based and protective approach. It begins by recognising the assets and strengths that exist within communities, within families, and within each child. The first activities in the research focus on what makes life good for children.

When children talk about the things that make life good, relationships with family and friends are always at the forefront. For younger children, in the six-to-12-age group, their parents or immediate family or carers are at the centre of their worlds. Younger children often talked about the importance of toys but were clear that their families and the people they love matter most. While children talk about their families, mums tend to occupy a very special place – and children are aware of all their mothers do to care for and support them.

Importantly, children of all ages, including those in the 13-to-16-age group, spoke of their love for their parents. Many children also spoke of their concern for their parents and their desire to help and support them.

You need your parents. I wouldn't be alive without my parents, and I love my parents. They like help, like with anything! It's all you need sometimes, in every way' (Blank, 14 years).

I think that love is the most important thing in the world...having a wonderful mother who loves and adores you (Rainbow, seven years).

Children need family, so they've got someone to talk to or to love (Jordan, 12 years).

In each round of research undertaken, children and young people have spoken of the importance of having time with parents. Importantly, older children, in the 13-to-16 age group, often shared their desire to have more time with their parents, something that challenges some assumptions about adolescents wanting to disconnect from their parents.

Many children explained that the simple moments of being together are the times they enjoy most - bringing a sense of safety, security and comfort. A 12-year-old boy, for example, when reflecting on his favourite memories described a day when just he and his mum went into town for an appointment; a seven-year-old boy talking about his grandmother buying him treats when he is unwell.

Me and Mum just went to town for the day, and we got fish and chips and calamari. And it was just like really nice (Barry, 12 years).

My gran, she takes me whenever I'm sick to this petrol station and I always get Pringles and vanilla Coke (JB Hi-Fi, seven years).

For another girl, her favourite time of the day was when her younger siblings would go to bed, and she could have one-on-one time with her mum.

I love that I could sit on my mum's lap and I'm sort of like a big baby. Like my siblings are gone to bed and I'll go over to my Mum and sit on her lap (Commander Evil Bob, 12 years).

Children also spoke of their desire to support, and sometimes protect, their parents – particularly their mums. A seven-year-old boy said he wants to be an Uber driver, so he can take his mum and little sister to their favourite places. He explained that their own car often breaks down, and he would like to prevent his mum from feeling stress. He also said he tries to help around the house, so his mum can relax.

It's important that you can help them and do dishes and make them relax. I do vacuums (Rar, seven years).



What a group of children said matters most

Children also spoke about the importance of strong and supportive relationships, and caring people in their communities. Significantly, children described feeling safer when there were trusted adults in their communities – and in their lives.

Police, security, teachers: all the special adults [are good to have around] and can protect you (Jordan, 12 years).

Strong relationships at school are especially important to children. Good friends transform children's school experiences, as do kind and caring teachers. Across all rounds of research, children spoke of the importance of nice and supportive teachers. Children also shared the ways in which some teachers enhance their self-confidence and make them feel special.

My teacher treated me like I was smart, and she just trusted me because I was responsible. She let me use her text tools and she would treat me special (Lalah, 10 years).

While connections to people are important for children, so too was their connection to place. The sense of belonging and care children and young people have for their community is emerging strongly in the findings. A sense of connection to place was especially strong among children from Tasmania, demonstrated by one young girl who shared her dreams for the future and explained she would not want to live anywhere else in the world but Tasmania.

Tasmania is the best place in the world. I don't ever want to move out of Tasmania because it's just really safe here' (Blank, 14 years).

For many children a sense of belonging and connection to the place that is home is important and helps to make life good. Many children, particularly in Tasmania, spoke about the importance of nature and described bush walking and camping with their families, going to parks, walking, and being on the beach as things that are important for them to have a good life.

Children also spoke of having places to go that are safe and fun – and allow them to play. Many children shared their love of spending time at the park, playing sports, going for walks with their families, school trips to the bush, and visiting the library after school and on school holidays. All these activities combined time with important people and enjoyable activities.



Community map drawn by Daisey, nine years.

From a child's standpoint, life is good when children are surrounded by people who care and connected to place. Yet not all children experienced this sense of care and connection, and many spoke of feeling isolated and not knowing the people who lived around them. Children also spoke of the ways in which 'doing it tough' places stress on the relationships they value most. They also talked about feeling unsafe.

While children emphasised connection to people and to place as essential to making life good, they also shared what makes life tough – and the things they need to have the best life possible both now and in the future.

Below is a jigsaw created by a group of children who participated in the More for Children research in Tasmania; it identifies the pieces that need to be in place for life to be good. If we listen to children, we can begin to see clearly not only what is missing as a result of poverty, but also how we can put all the pieces in place to ensure no child is left behind and every child in every community thrives.

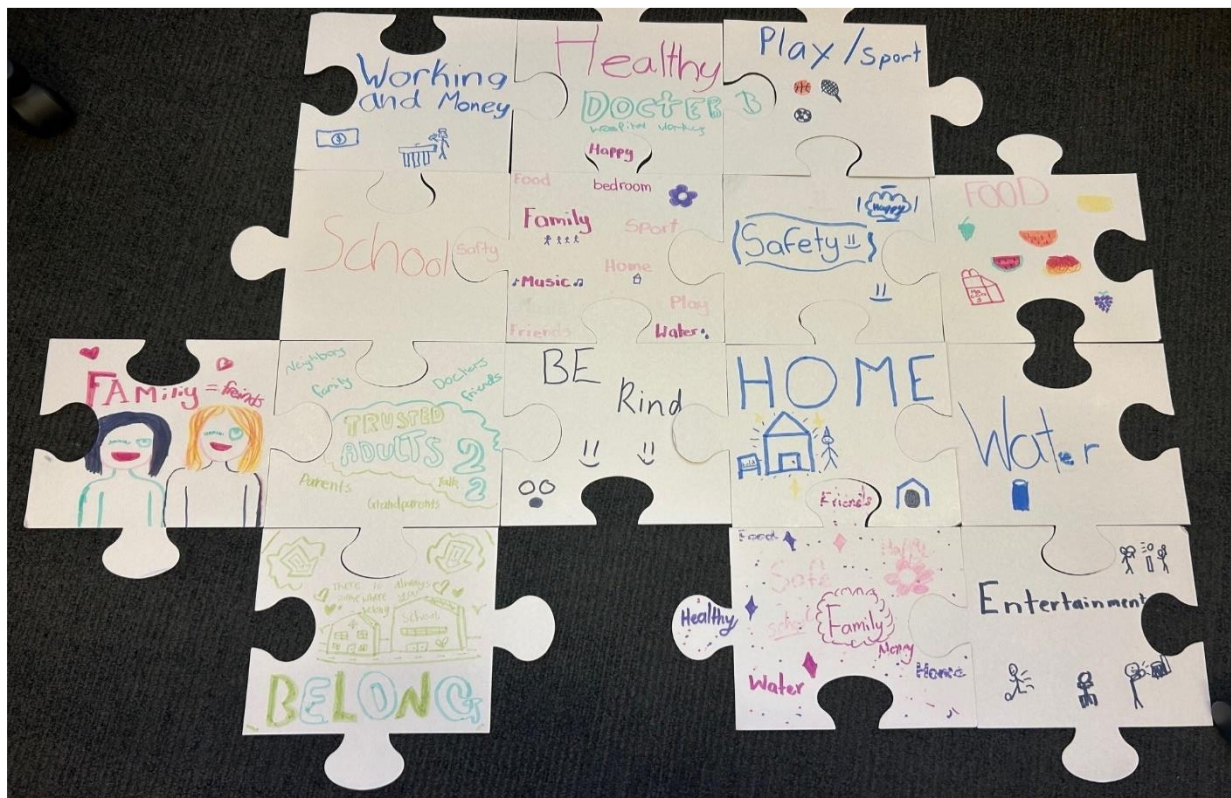


Figure 2: 'Community Jigsaw'-A message from children aged 10-12 years about the pieces that need to be in place to live a good life

Making life good for all children

While children described the importance of having the material basics and opportunities, it is relationships that they value most. Working to develop strong and supportive relationships for children – within their families, schools, and communities – is a powerful means of making life good. Significantly, the interviews with service providers and community members across both communities highlighted the deep commitment to ensuring all children have the best possible childhood and to fostering inclusive and supportive communities. Such local commitment creates opportunities for place-based initiatives designed to create a child-centred community. To make that happen, listening to children and responding to the challenges they face must be our starting point.

The importance children place on relationships also highlights, powerfully, the sadness they experience when stress is placed on relationships in ways that create tension, erode their time with parents, or cause their parents to be physically or emotionally absent. The structures and systems that create and deepen financial hardship and poverty place pressure on relationships, often in ways that are deeply painful for children.

The following sections of this report focus on the things that children described as making life tough – across the material, opportunity, and relational dimensions of the MOR Framework. By understanding how poverty is negatively impacting children in each of these dimensions, there is the possibility of building on the strengths within the community to bring about positive change – and to challenge structures and systems that create contexts of poverty.

Children shared the things that matter most to them.

They spoke of their love for their families, and described how much their families do for them.

They also spoke about the things children miss out on when they grow up in poverty. And they talked about the pain that poverty causes.

Children talked about the things they miss out on and the ways in which poverty limits their ability to lead a life they want, now and in the future. They talked about the pain and despair that poverty causes. This was articulated powerfully by a 12-year-old boy, who has experienced homelessness and continual food insecurity.

OK, so when life is tough at home, it's anger, heartbroken, feels like pain is in the air, devastation is everywhere. You can see it through peoples' eyes. It's so frustrating but it happens sometimes in life. It just hurts. It hits you in a way you don't want it to. It normally causes people to argue, and you get hurt, or no one helps you. It hurts you inside.

Boy, 12 years

Defining Child Poverty

Based on the things children say matter most to them, we have developed the following child-centred definition of poverty.

This definition recognises that while a lack of money and material resources is at the core of poverty, poverty is multidimensional. It is both material and non-material – and impacts every aspect of children’s lives.

Importantly, child poverty should not be understood as an ‘individual problem’, but as the outcome of structural barriers, deep inequities and systems that are not adequately supporting children and their families.

A child-centred definition of poverty:

Poverty is the interplay between key material and non-material deprivations.

It means children do not have the **material basics**, their **opportunities** are limited, and critical **relationships** are not in place or are under pressure.

In what follows in this report, are our findings from research with children about their experiences of living in poverty, using the three dimensions of the MOR framework.

As the diagram below shows, the dimensions of the MOR Framework are interrelated, and children’s experiences of poverty are deepened by its multidimensional nature.

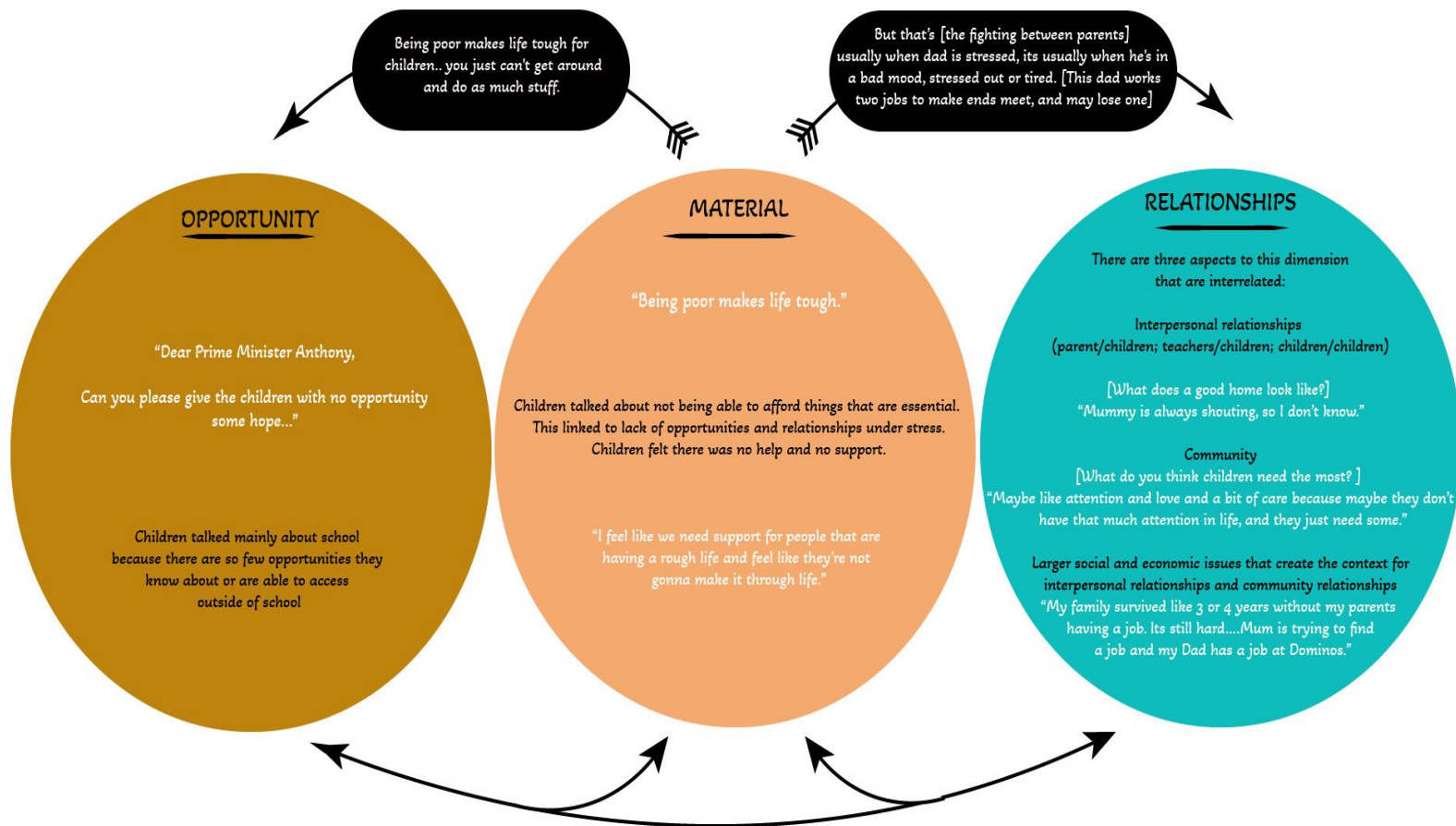


Figure 3. Diagram showing the interconnected nature of children’s experiences

MATERIAL

**Material basics are
fulfilled for all
children**

Material deprivation is at the very heart of poverty.

Insufficient income means children and their families cannot afford the basics needed for an adequate standard of living, and there is no money available but for the essentials. When children described the material basics, they spoke about having enough to eat, having a place to live, being warm, and being able to get to the places they need to go. While some children grouped toys under material basics, many said toys are important but not essential. Children often described a distinction between wants and needs, highlighting the sacrifices children and their families make when faced with material hardship.

As stated from the outset of this report, poverty is a deeply personal experience, but it creates experiences that are often similar across places. While children in both communities had experience of deep material hardship, there are elements of material deprivation that are shaped by the specific circumstances of some children. The More for Children research highlights the importance of understanding deeply the individual and context specific experiences of poverty, as the foundation for developing place-based solutions to poverty.

Experiences of food and housing insecurity were discussed by children both in central Victoria and northwest Tasmania. Access to public transport emerged as an issue across both communities but was felt more deeply in northwest Tasmania.

Children across both communities spoke about the hardship that comes from a lack of material basics, especially when there is insufficient income to meet their basic needs of food and housing, and the ways in which their lives are limited by not having sufficient money.

Many children were aware of services provided in their community and within their school, particularly those services addressing food insecurity such as food charities and school breakfast and lunch programs. Children's experiences of accessing these services were mixed. School lunch programs, especially when available to all students, were seen very positively.

Children described local organisations providing assistance with essentials, but also the ongoing crisis many families face, particularly after experiencing homelessness and/or escaping family violence.

[The organisation] gave us some furniture because we didn't have furniture. They gave us like four beds and two couches, and a little TV and some kitchen utensils. We've been going

to open shops for more beds because not everyone fits. Most of the week Mum has been going to [the organisation] to get food and stuff (Max, 12 years).

However, some children recounted negative experiences when seeking support from services. One boy described a painful and stigmatising experience when he and his mother were told by a food charity that they were seeking assistance too often.

Mum doesn't go [to that place] anymore because when we were going through a hard time, like they're not supposed to ask you why you're coming here. But they were asking why we were coming here for food assistance. It hurts, my Mum was angry. She was already crying that day and it just made everything worse (Max, 12 years).

When asked what would make life better for him, he spoke about having people who care when you are going through a hard time. He also emphasised that people who need support should receive it, and not have to justify themselves.

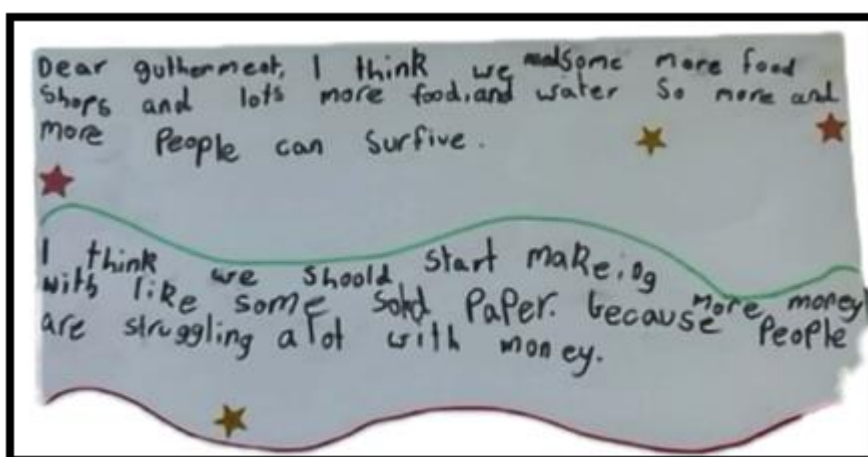
It would look like people who care if you are going through something hard. Like they wouldn't have to ask you, like it's a charity... it even says on their door that they won't ask you why you're coming there. And then this lady one day asked us. Mum shouldn't have to explain why we go there, it says it on their door (Max, 12 years)

Children whose families are dependent on government benefits described the depth of their financial struggles; and children living in single parent (usually single mum) families described life as being very tough. One child explained that her family's situation improved when her older sister got a job. When asked what changed, she replied:

Life. It gets you a warm home and food (Apple, eight years).

As the cost of living continues to increase, children and young people are acutely aware of the financial pressures facing their families. Many children have detailed knowledge of household income, the cost of essential goods, and which supermarkets offer the best discounts. In her poster of what would make life better for children, one wrote:

I think we need some more food, shops and lots of food and water. So, more and more people can survive. I think we should start making more money with solid paper, because people are struggling a lot with the money. I think we should get more houses and they should be for free because people are struggling (Daisey, nine years).



A message from Daisey, nine years

Children described not having the most basic needs met, including adequate food, shelter, and warmth. For example, one child explained:

What would make life go down for me is when it was winter and it was freezing and I didn't have enough clothes to keep me warm, and there was no heating in the house. So, I was kinda freezing (Atomic Bomb, 12 years).



A message from Star, 11 years.

One girl drew a poster that highlighted the importance of having basic kitchen appliances, such as an oven or microwave, as well as blankets and pillows. She also called for essential items, such as food and medicine to be made affordable. She explained that these items – and many more – were often out of reach for her family, and they had to make do without the most basic of essential items.

Housing insecurity was a major issue for many children. When children do not have safe and secure housing, every aspect of life is impacted. Three children were homeless at the time of the research, and several others had experienced homelessness or emergency housing.

Children described the challenges of living in emergency housing. For some, the experience included feeling unsafe, not having adequate cooking or sleeping facilities, being separated from much loved pets, and having to move away from the places they know.

Homelessness is a devastating experience for children and undermines their sense of safety and belonging. The children who participated in the research, while experiencing homelessness, described the intense pain of their situation, and their anger and frustration.

One mum also described the experience of homelessness; her family had spent some time living in a caravan park with inadequate cooking facilities and a communal toilet block:

It was pretty horrible. You have to take the baby with you in the pram to shower, stuff like that.

It was really hard with the toilet block, like you have to walk the kids over in the middle of the night, and there's lots of drugos and people around.

It's a pretty horrible environment to have your children living in. But that's where [housing service] tell you to go; that's where they put you.

I was actually told to go down the river to sleep with my kids, because it was the Easter long weekend and there was no accommodation.

For children who are refugees or seeking asylum, the poor quality of housing available to their families is a significant issue. While insecure and poor-quality housing was identified as a common problem across all children who participated in the research, children whose families are seeking asylum are especially vulnerable, and have no recourse when housing is in a very poor state.

The roof of our house fell down...like two months ago...There's like cardboard there but it's just a very bad smell, you know. The filling they put in the roof for when it rains, it smells. He [his brother] sleeps on the couch, and I sleep on the ground on a mattress and my little sister sleeps next to me [in the lounge] (Suii, 11 years).

For children seeking asylum, their parents' visa status exacerbated material deprivation. Some children explained that their parents do not have work rights, meaning that their family is entirely dependent on charities. This created both uncertainty and dire hardship.

It makes me sad [not having the visa], because we don't get paid that much...My Dad used to be a merchant [in his home country] but they kidnapped him and 50k worth of stuff and they stole everything. But we kept some in the safe and that's how we got money. If we run out, we just run out of money (Suii, 11 years).

For these children, material deprivation was intertwined with the trauma of fleeing their homelands and re-establishing their lives in a new country.

Several children tried to make sense of the escalating cost of essential items, such as food and petrol. Some associated it with COVID-19, others with the war in Ukraine, and many were aware of the uncertain and tumultuous world in which they live, while experiencing uncertainty in their daily lives.

It's to do with Ukraine and Russia too, since Russia is one of the biggest suppliers of oil (Goku, nine years).

The children who participated in this research clearly differentiated between wants and needs. Many identified toys as important but not essential, while relationships and the material basics – including having a house, having food, and being warm, are essential to life.

[Toys] are not important, but if we give the parents money, they can get water food and a little bit of toys. But mainly the important things like food water and a bed and a toilet'. (Mr. Potato, 10 years)

An eight-year-old boy said:

There's not many things that I need. I want toys but you don't need toys because they're not important. They don't make you live and stuff, they just make things fun, and life is really important'. (Marblerun, eight years)

The way in which children distinguish between wants and needs and how they position toys, indicates the difficult decisions that families need to make in contexts of deep financial hardship and the extent to which children understand those decisions. It also indicates the extent to which children are moderating both the requests they make of their parents and their own expectations.

Children also highlighted the challenges they face when there is insufficient public infrastructure. The lack of transport is a major problem for many children. When families cannot afford a car – or the petrol to run it – public transport becomes essential, but is often absent, unreliable or too expensive. Children described being unable to go to parks or visit fun places as a result of not having transport. They also described the struggle of going shopping or accessing essential services (such as health care) when there is no transport available. A six-year-old girl explained how tired her legs get when she and her mum walk to the shop to get groceries – this was not an example of a child preferring not to walk, but a child whose life is shaped by poverty, and for whom the most basic needs are hard to obtain. The lack of transport experienced by many children who participated in the research demonstrated that ending poverty not only requires greater support for families directly, but it also requires far greater attention to essential public infrastructure, particularly in low-income, marginalised, or geographically isolated communities.

Living in these circumstances described by children and reported here not only creates a sense of unsafety and insecurity for children, but it also creates a chasm between their home life and what is expected at school. It also isolates children and disconnects them from their communities. Not only are children growing up without the most fundamental material basics, but their opportunities are also narrowed, and their relationships are negatively impacted as a consequence. The ways in which financial hardship limits children's expectations and their opportunities is discussed in the following section, where we report on the second dimension of the MOR Framework: Opportunities.

OPPORTUNITY

**Opportunities for
connection, learning,
play and participation
now, and into the
future**

For children, poverty is not only the absence of material basics; it also undermines positive experiences that are important to children now, and to their futures.

When children are growing up in contexts of poverty, essential services – particularly those that are high quality and child friendly – are often out of reach. Safe, inclusive communities can offer children essential supports, and hardship is deepened when such supports are lacking.

For many of the children who participated in this research, access to both activities within their communities and to quality, child inclusive services is limited.

What children said about safe, child inclusive communities and the opportunity to play

As discussed previously, children who participated in this research clearly differentiated between wants and needs, with most identifying toys as wants, while food, housing and warmth are needs. Children place clear limits on what they ask their parents for, and often what they dream of and what they aspire to be.

As discussed, material deprivation is at the core of poverty, but the impacts of poverty for children go far beyond the material basics. Children's opportunities are limited by poverty, as they are excluded from a range of activities that many families take for granted, with immediate impacts on their lives now and on their futures.



A message from Suii, 10 years

Two boys who participated in the research described playing soccer as the activity that makes them happiest, but there was no money to buy boots or to pay for the registration fees necessary for them to join a local team. In contrast, children who were able to play sport often described the sense of belonging and connectedness that came as a result.

The lack of sufficient money shapes every aspect of children's lives, and while children often limit what they ask for they are acutely aware of what they are missing.

It shouldn't cost money to have fun (Jordan, 11 years).

A 12-year-old boy described looking forward to his birthday, because his mother was hoping to take him and his siblings bowling as a special treat. However, he was aware that even such a rare treat was dependent on his mother being able to save enough.

[We will go, but] only if my Mum can afford it really. ...We will be able to do it on my birthday because it's the day my Mum gets paid (Max, 12 years).

This boy's mum explained later that she was able to take her children bowling to celebrate her son's birthday. She added that she had no idea how she would afford food that week but did not want her son to miss out on his birthday. She was able to ensure her son had a special birthday, but only by using the small budget she had for food and was under enormous pressure as a result.

A girl explained that there weren't many places to go that are affordable but added that she enjoyed just walking with her mum. Her mother explained how hard it is to find activities that are affordable and the challenges of finding time and the resources (including transport) to access activities that are low or no cost. She explained that she tries to compensate by spending time walking with her daughter.

Yet, while family income is a significant factor in children not being able to take part in community activities and to have fun it is not the only factor; patterns of social exclusion, a sense of disconnection and feeling unsafe, and the lack of public infrastructure are also important.

What children said about health care

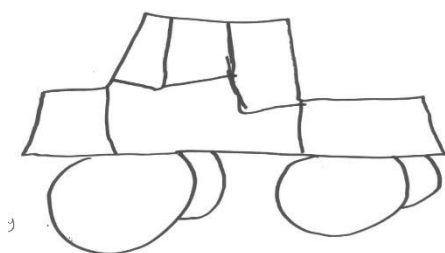
A number of children identified the unaffordability and inaccessibility of health care as a major problem. Many, particularly in Tasmania, described not having access to essential health care or having to drive very long distances to see a medical practitioner – a problem that exists across regional and remote Australia, and in many sub-urban communities. In Tasmania, one boy spoke

of his health complications that affect his heart and his frustration that the specialist he needs is based in Melbourne. He went on to explain that many of his friends have to travel for health care.

While cost and availability are major barriers to children accessing health care, some also spoke of their negative experiences within the health-care system. One boy, who experiences serious health problems, described the way in which he was treated by a specialist who flew in and out of the community to provide periodic consultations.

I'm getting surgery soon, after I figure out what the problem is. But these doctors...they're just saying this and that and blah, blah....It's scary. Almost traumatising' (Chog, 11 years).

Access to health care was a significant concern for children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. When asked what they need from the government, one girl drew a picture of a car and explained that her father was unable to get a licence to take her younger brother to Melbourne to receive the health care he needs every week.



Poster drawn by Neymar, 12 years

For children who are seeking asylum, access to health care is dependent on their visa status. Children understood that the lack of a visa impacted on many aspects of their lives, and described the deep uncertainty they feel as a result of very long waiting periods.

For some children, that uncertainty was exacerbated by the knowledge that their parents could not access the health care they desperately needed. One boy described his mother's serious illness, which is debilitating, but explained that she cannot see a doctor because his family has no money to pay. The stress and worry this boy experienced impacted on every aspect of his life and well-being.

What children said about school

School takes up a great deal of children's time and is essential to their learning, broader experiences, and current and future opportunities. While school should not be seen as the entirety of children's lives, many children talked at length about their experiences at school, and it was central to children's accounts of what makes life good or tough. School can be especially challenging for children living in contexts of poverty, both because they do not have the material resources necessary to support their education and because the difficulties they and their families are facing make it hard to concentrate on school.

Most children said school is good when teachers are kind and caring, there is no bullying, and lessons are not boring. Many children spoke positively about the teachers in their lives.

I like my teacher. She's just very, very nice. She usually stays calm when some people are being silly (Bob the Builder, seven years).

They spoke about good teachers being those who *treat us more as an equal* (A, 14 years) and those who understand and care about their needs.

Someone who understands if you're having trouble (Sophie, 10 years).

She's a very good teacher. There are only two teachers I like. They understand how I am with like my ADHD and that I need a brain break sometimes. And she understands that some days I might not do a lot of work depending on how I am and how I feel. But then some other teachers, they just don't care about mental health. They don't really care but [his favourite teachers], they actually care. They are the only two teachers I properly respect (J, 15 years).

Yet for many children, school is a challenging place, and many children spoke about the difficult relationships they have with their teachers and with other children. Negative experiences are exacerbated when children and their families are experiencing multidimensional poverty, and very often there is a chasm between children's experiences at home and the expectations of school.

Children and young people spoke with great clarity and understanding about the demands on teachers. A 15-year-old girl explained that the teachers in her school are 'spread a bit thin'. A nine-year-old girl spoke of how she had never seen an adult cry before her teacher left the room in tears after students had been engaging in difficult behaviours. The girl said she felt sad for her teacher.

While children and young people understood the pressures on teachers, they also expressed frustration at not receiving the help they needed at school. A 12-year-old boy described the difficulties he faces and the frustration of trying to deal with those difficulties alone:

We need a teacher-aid-type person, so that if we're struggling with the class they can help. I feel like I can't read or write, because like I have dyslexia, so I struggle with reading and writing. There are schools that do one-on-one help, but I can't get in because there's people there that actually don't need one on-one-help. But my school, they don't do one-on-one help, they don't even have enough teachers as it is' (Max, 12 years).

The teacher is really strict. Like say she asks us to make a list of things and I do it and then bang- she's telling me oh you're doing it wrong....The only time I get a break is on the bloody weekend' (Chog, 11 years).

When asked what she would like to change about school, an eight-year-old girl replied:

My teacher being grumpy, my brother being not so rude to the teachers, and just stop the fights at school. One time when my brother was rude to the teachers, I got called to the office too (Apple, eight years).

This girl went on to describe her situation, explaining that her brother finds it hard to concentrate at school and often gets into trouble. On some occasions, he has been suspended, and either her Mum or Dad have had to take time off work to look after him, making life more difficult for everyone in the family. She also described being seen as a potential problem at school, because her brother is seen as 'a troublemaker'.

Children's accounts highlight the challenges that schools must deal with, and children's own frustrations.

Bullying is a major concern for children, and one that undermines their sense of physical and emotional safety at school. Bullying is a well-being issue for all children and a problem that occurs in all schools. For children living in the context of poverty – where material basics are not fully met and where financial hardship places pressure on relationships at home – the impacts of bullying become more acute. Bullying is yet another challenge, another layer of complexity, that children must deal with and becomes part of the experience of multidimensional poverty.

Everyone gets bullied. Nearly everyone gets bullied. For being different (Lando Norris, 11 years).

The actual school is fine, it's good, but the people can be a bit nasty (Sunny, nine years).

Bullying, while a common theme for all children we spoke with, took a specific form for children who were from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds as they described often being subjected to racial bullying at school. Children described being bullied because of the way they look or because they are seen to be different.

They say our names differently like just to make fun of us (Wonyoung, 12 years).

Not understanding each other like being from different backgrounds and stuff [can stop you from having friends] (Minji, 11 years).

A common theme was for children across both communities to associate school with feelings of anxiety, as described by an 11-year-old girl:

I've got a lot of anxiety around school so I'm not comfortable with the school. I'm currently going but I kind of have no choice because my Mum can't home school me 'cause of court stuff with my dad. So, we kind of have no choice but I don't like it though (Commander Evil Bob, 11 years).

This girl's comments highlight not only the anxiety she feels about school, but also the complexity of her family relationships – a theme that emerged strongly from the research.

The impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on experiences of school

Children, particularly those in the 13-to-16-age group, talked about their experiences of COVID-19 lockdowns, restrictions, and quarantines, which were particularly severe in Victoria. Many felt they did not have what they needed during COVID-19 school closures and restrictions – from support for anxiety and feelings of loneliness and isolation to the challenges of studying and learning from home when basic resources were not available.

For some children and young people, the transition back into school was difficult after a long period of very little contact with people outside their immediate family. A, a 14-year-old girl, said, *I don't know how to socialise.*

COVID-19 restrictions impacted significantly on many children's anxiety about school.

We got off earlier last year because of COVID for almost like two weeks. And then we had to go back to school. It was like the scariest (Avocado, 12 years).

Children who transitioned from primary to high school throughout COVID-19 lockdowns described experiencing significant challenges on their return. For some, school came to be associated with a sense being overwhelmed, which was exacerbated by crowded classrooms and noise. Many children described feeling that their security was under threat. For some children, distress and insecurity was created by *how big and loud everything is* (E, 15 years).

Some children described disengaging from school because of their negative experiences. One 15-year-old girl explained that she no longer attends her classes because she feels too anxious and there was no quiet place for her to go.

Having a choice and being listened to

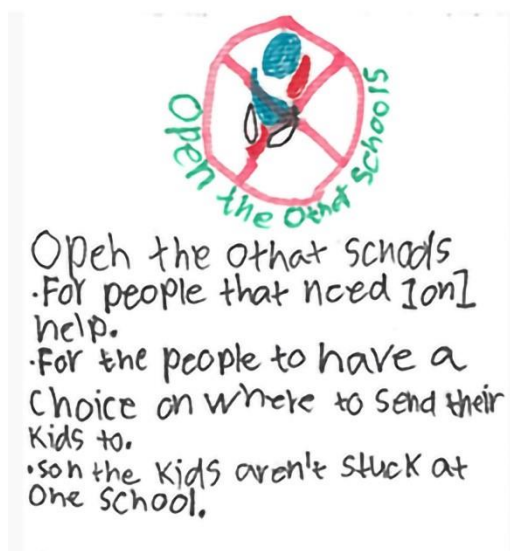
Being listened to and having some choice over the things that matter was described as being fundamentally important by the children who participated in this research.

Children are often marginalised within age-based social hierarchies. For children growing up in contexts of poverty, this is exacerbated. The intersection of age and socio-economic position

creates a sense of having no control, no choice, and not being listened to. Significantly, children said that their parents also lack choice – or are not listened to or treated with respect within their communities.

A number of children raised concerns about having no control over where they go to school or what happens at school. Choice of school is limited by a family's financial resources, and often by geographic location. This speaks to broader inequity in education across Australia; it is an issue that children in middle-childhood are aware of and one that impacts directly on their opportunities and their experiences of disadvantage. Inequality within the education system is often accentuated as children transition to high school.

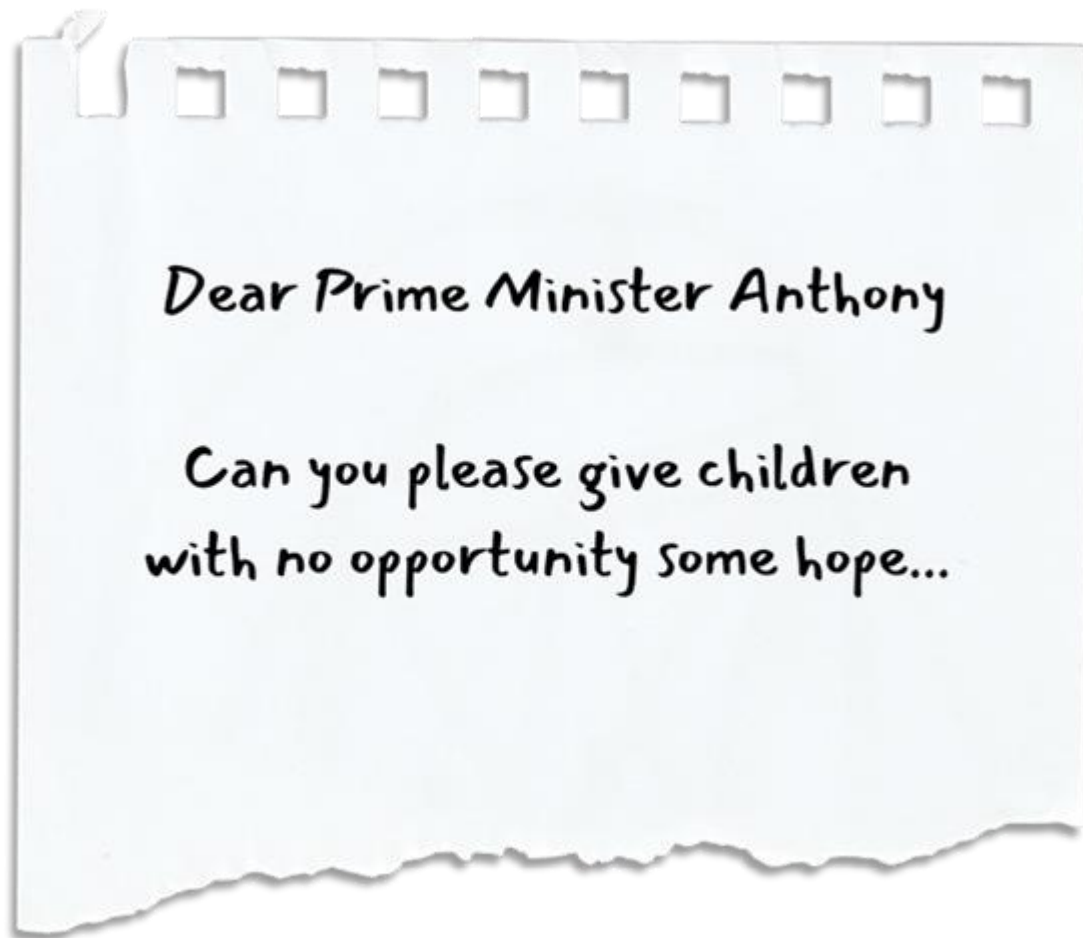
In one community, children were particularly concerned by the amalgamation of schools – as a process on which they said they had not been consulted. The amalgamation of schools created a very large, centralised school that many children found overwhelming. While some children said that the larger school provided a larger choice of subjects and had very good facilities, others shared their concern that they now have very limited choice of which school they would like to attend. The lack of choice available to children in regard to which school they attend is conveyed powerfully in a poster drawn by a 12-year-old boy.



A message from Max, 12 years

A lack of opportunity now – and in the future

When invited to write messages to the adults who make decisions, an 11-year-old girl, Lily, included a request to the Prime Minister:



A message from Lily, aged 11.

Some children worried that the lack of opportunities they have now will impact them in the future. This was evident in conversations with children who worried that they would be unable to find jobs in the future or that even if they find jobs, they will not have sufficient income to achieve a decent standard of living or afford a house. One child reflected the views of others when he clearly expressed his concerns for the future:

Yeah, you're scared of the future, because you're not sure what will happen. Like you want a really good job and you get declined because of your past, maybe drugs or something like that....It happens to a lot of people (Warren, 11 years).

For some children, education provides the promise of a better future, while others worry that school is not likely to lead them towards better futures. Many of the children who have participated in the research feel pressure to do well at school and to make the most of any opportunities they have. An 11-year-old girl described being worried that she would not keep up with the work when she reached high school, explaining that she was particularly concerned about these issues when she was younger. In some cases, this places children under a great deal of pressure as they try to build a foundation for their futures in very difficult circumstances. Significantly, children in school leadership positions often relished the opportunity and described the pride and joy they gained from contributing to their school communities, but also described often feeling under intense pressure:

It's [being school captain] like you have to do everything perfect and it's a lot of pressure, but I don't talk to anyone about it (Pizzafryer, 10 years).

One child described the complexity of being a school captain. She described trying to support other students:

Well at my school, I'm school captain, so I always have to make sure that everyone feels included and I just try and make sure that everyone fits in (Avocado, 12 years).

But she went on to describe some of the pressures, including feeling that she should always do well in class.

If a lot of people get something wrong [the teacher] will explain it in front of everyone, but if it's just you she'll call you up to the front and everyone will know....it's really embarrassing, plus since I'm school captain, I feel like everyone thinks I have to be good at my work and really nice and know what's going on (Avocado, 12 years).

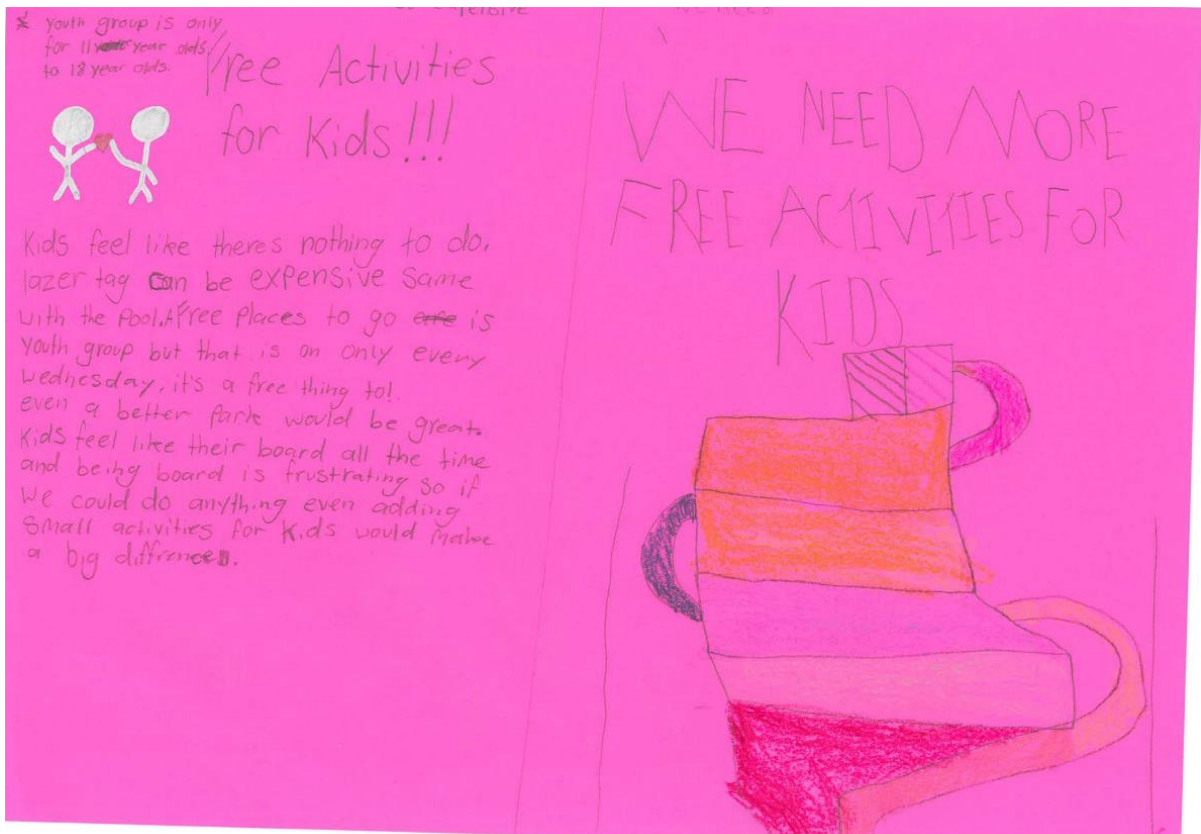
Children from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds explained additional issues that impacted on their opportunities, and many saw education as central to their futures. Those children whose families are waiting on decisions about their residency status described deep worry – sometimes desperation – about their futures and their ability to fulfil their dreams:

I wish to be a doctor...but if we don't have it [the permanent visa] we'll get sent back to Iran (Suii, 11 years).

Children from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds were also acutely aware of the need to learn English and described the benefits of learning English at school or through educational support services for children from non-English speaking backgrounds. Several children also described helping their parents to learn English, and explained the struggles facing their parents as they try to learn a new language.

School features heavily in children's descriptions of the opportunities that are important now and into the future, but school is only one aspect of children's lives. Children also spoke of the absence of activities or services outside of school. Having places to go and to play is a priority for children, but many of those participating in this research had no opportunity to participate in community activities or to visit parks or other fun places. Such opportunities are especially limited for children in middle childhood, as one group of children explained, youth groups are for those who are older, and play groups are for very young children.

Children also spoke of their desire to have places to go with their parents, and to have the opportunity to connect with others in their community. For many children, isolation and disconnection is a common experience, and prevents them from feeling part of their communities. A lack of income often prevents children and their families from connecting with their communities, but so too does the lack of infrastructure (including transport) and non-material barriers that act to exclude some children and families from being part of community activities and connections.



A message from Avocado, aged 12 and Watermelon, aged 9. Poster text reads:

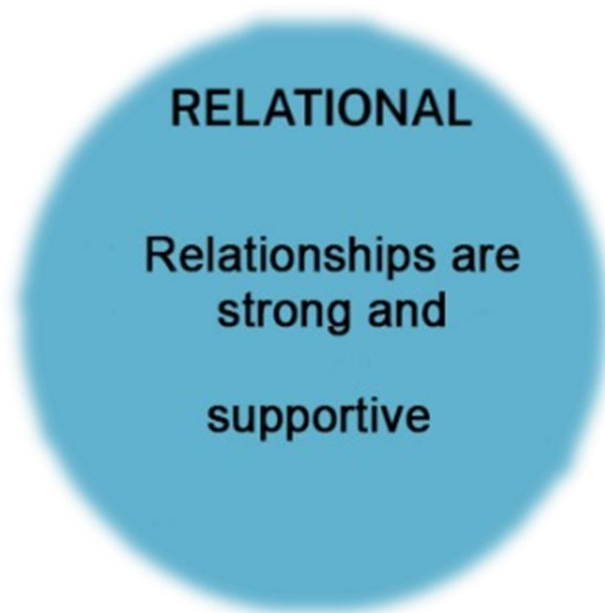
“Free Activities for Kids!!!

Youth group is only for 11-year-olds to 18-year-olds.

Kids feel like there’s nothing to do. Lazer tag can be expensive. Same with the pool. Free places to go is youth group but that is only every Wednesday, it’s a free thing too!

Even better- a park would be great.

Kids feel like their board all the time and being board is frustrating so if we could do anything, even adding small activities for kids would make a big difference.” (Poster drawn by Avocado aged 12 and Watermelon aged nine)



When children talk about the things that make life good, relationships dominate. Children describe life as tough when relationships are not strong and supportive. Poverty places stress on relationships in myriad ways – and the impacts on children are often ignored or misunderstood. The relational dimension of the MOR Framework is of utmost importance to children and reveals both the centrality of relationships and the ways in which poverty places relationships under pressure.

Almost all children who have participated in this research have talked about the importance of friends and family. Children’s love and care for their parents, siblings, and often extended families is at the centre of their worlds.

When asked what makes life good:

Cuddles from Mum (Goku, nine years).

I love my Mum. She’s the best; like, she is my bestie (Lil Peep, 11 years).

While the love children have for their parents and family is powerful, so too is the strain that living in poverty places on these relationships. Children often described their sadness when their parents were too busy to spend time with them and spoke with deep concern of the pressures their parents face. Many children spoke about challenging family situations, whereby poverty creates or exacerbates tensions. When their parents are struggling, life becomes difficult for children.

As children described their love for their parents, they also described how life becomes tough when parents are angry and yell. A significant number of children explained that this tends to occur when parents are under pressure, when money is very tight, and when essential services – such as health care – are not available. In interviews with parents, some described their guilt when the pressures of poverty became too much, and they yelled at their children. One mother reflected the experiences of many when she described her desperation at having her government benefits reduced without explanation. She recounted a situation when she could afford very little food, and snapped at her daughter when she said she was sick of eating the

same (cheap) meals, and the guilt she subsequently felt. The value and importance of relationships to children's lives is clear from this research, as is the stress relationships are placed under in contexts of poverty and financial hardship.

Children described the heavy workloads, financial stress and daily pressures their parents face. They also spoke of the ways in which they try to alleviate those burdens to make life easier for their parents. Even the youngest children were acutely aware of the pressures their parents are under and shared their strategies to support and protect their parents. For example, a seven-year-old boy described the pressures that resulted when his mother's car broke down and explained his plan to help his mother in the future.

When I turn 13, I'm going to get a Ute. I'm going to get the licence. Mum went to the mechanic, and something happened. Her car, the AC and the engine broke down and she had to take it to the garage. They say it's \$5000 and the tow truck came to her home and my dad's friends took the car to the repair shop. If she can buy a car it's going to cost lots of money (Rar, seven years).

Many of the children who participated in the research spoke of the ways they support their families, especially in single parent (usually single-mum) households. This ranged from going with their parents (usually mums) to seek services, benefits, or support to working long hours to bring income into the family. One teenage girl spoke about the pressure of juggling school and part time work. She explained that the number of hours she works means she has no time for friends and often feels too tired for school; she also explained that her income is essential to her family, whom she wants to support:

I'm working every single day except Monday. School, work, home and sleep. I can't even go to parties because of work (K, 15 years).

This girl lived with her single dad, an unusual situation as all other single parent families were headed by mums, and she described her desire to help him as he struggled to support the family.

It's good to be able to help dad out because he raises like five kids by himself. So, I give him money all the time, just to help him. It makes me feel good about it. Like for groceries or fuel (K, 15 years).

This girl's experiences highlight the interaction between the three dimensions of the MOR Framework: material disadvantage required her to work long hours, which limited her opportunities. The pressure of financial hardship also placed the relationships that she valued most – with her family and her friends – under stress, undermining her support networks.

Children also described their frustration and sadness when their parents did not receive the support they need.

Mum doesn't get any help. No one helps us. So, she just has to raise five kids by herself (Max, 12 years).

Children also spoke of the demands on their parents' time. While children generally understood the reasons for their parents' time-poverty, they also expressed the desire to have more time with them.

I don't get attention at home. My Mum has too many of us and if she gives one of us too much attention the other one will get jealous (Lalah, nine years).

While time poverty is not limited to families who are experiencing financial hardship, poverty often exacerbates time poverty and gives it a particular character, as people – including young people as this research shows – juggle multiple, low-paying jobs; lack of transport; caring responsibilities; the search for affordable food; and sometimes compliance with social security requirements.

Some children described their parent's struggle with mental health as making life tough, and some spoke of the ways they try to support their parents. A 14-year-old boy shared the caring responsibilities he undertakes with his mother.

It's mostly stuff at home that makes life difficult. My Mum has DID, basically she has multiple personality disorder. It's a struggle at home most times. Recently she's been getting these little children personalities which is kind of hard to live with....I go and check on her and do stuff with her just to make her feel happy (K, 14 years).

In all cases, parents' mental health challenges were exacerbated by multidimensional poverty, including barriers to them accessing health-care services, and children felt this acutely and sought to shoulder some of their parents' burdens.

Children from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds also spoke of the love they have for their families, but their experiences are shaped by experiences of conflict, fleeing their homes and trying to rebuild their lives as they struggle to both fit in and hold onto their culture. These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of certainty about their futures and the barriers some face in accessing essential services. For families seeking asylum who do not have work rights or access to essential services or benefits, such as Medicare, the pressures are intense – and compound the trauma of having fled their home countries. These pressures are hard felt by children, who are well aware of and share the desperation experienced by their parents.

The situations outlined above demonstrate children's knowledge of family finances and of the pressures parents are under. They also reflect the deep sense of responsibility many children feel to support their parents and help their families.

For children who are seeking asylum or arrived in Australia as refugees, the trauma of their pasts is a defining feature of their lives and relationships. One boy described his gratitude for being able to be with some of his family, and his pain at having lost others.

I am happy because my Mum and my Dad and my brother are with me. But still, it's like there's something missing. When we were in Syria, when I was like one year old, my big brother, he get dead from the war. My Mum, she told me that it happened because of the war. In Syria we were rich but we go to Jordan so we can only lose one kid and not all of us (Ronaldo, 10 years).

my sister



A message from Ronaldo, 10 years

This boy's older sister had remained in Jordan with her husband and children when her parents and siblings fled to Australia. This boy spoke of how deeply he misses her and described the pain of separation. He drew a picture of his 'broken heart' and said his greatest wish is that his sister would be able to join him and their family in Australia.

The multidimensionality of children's experiences of poverty is highlighted in the intersection of insufficient income, inadequate housing, over-crowding, and highly-pressured relationships. Many children who participated in this research talked of the lack of physical space in their homes and the ways in which over-crowding exacerbates the stresses on relationships. The lack of privacy was an issue for some children, particularly those who shared bedrooms or slept in

shared spaces, such as lounge rooms. One boy explained that life would be good if his bedroom had a door.

Many children also described navigating complex family relationships and splitting their time across different homes. These complexities deepened when relationships between their parents, or between different family members, were problematic. While some children described very strong relationships with step-parents and step-siblings, several described the ways in which financial pressure and conflict about child support led to arguments and deepened existing rifts. Navigating the realities of complex family relationships is not unique to children who are experiencing poverty. However, poverty deepens the pressures children experience.

The centrality of relationships in children's lives is reflected in a poster, drawn by six-year-old, Tracy, to communicate to adults what matters to children. She included the material basics, such as food, drink, toys, a home and a backyard to play in, as well as parents, as the things that matter most. She then described kindness as essential, and said people should show kindness to babies, so they grow up to be kind.

Kindness, care, and connection are the things that all children who participated in this research highlighted as making life good. Poverty often robs children of these essentials by placing intense pressure on the relationships they value most.



A message from Tracy, seven years

More for Children

Across Australia, about one in six children are growing up in income poverty. In some communities the incidence of child income poverty is far higher. This means that too many children are missing out on the essentials of life. The More for Children research with children in two regional communities of northwest Tasmania and central Victoria highlights the multidimensional nature of child poverty. A lack of income is central to the experience of poverty, but poverty impacts on every aspect of children's lives.

Financial hardship results in children missing out on the material basics, and this is exacerbated by inadequate essential infrastructure. When life is tough, children miss out on critical opportunities which limits children's lives now, and in the future. Poverty places often unbearable pressure on relationships and the impacts on children are often painful. When we listen to children, we hear how poverty impacts all aspects of children's lives. Children often take on responsibility for trying to make things better, and they worry deeply about their families' situations. Notably, children try to hold on to the relationships that matter most to them, even as they experience severe challenges.

This report has presented children's experiences and priorities with little additional discussion or analysis. While future reports will include analysis and recommendations for policies and services, this report aims to centre children's voices and experiences, which are rarely heard in debates about poverty in Australia or elsewhere.

Children's experiences, shared through the More for Children research and reported here, are challenging. Many of the stories are hard to listen to. Yet listening is essential, for only then can we understand children's lives and respond. In the communities we worked in and across Australia, there is an opportunity to respond to what children say – and to create a genuinely child-inclusive society, where every child has the chance to thrive by having access to the material basics, opportunities now and into the future and strong and supportive relationships.

When we listen to children, we hear about the many strengths of communities and families, but we also hear what needs to change to ensure that no child is left behind in this wealthy country. Listening to children is essential, but it is insufficient. It is now essential that we move from listening to acting – and acting differently – to change the conditions that create poverty, often across generations. Change is possible, but we must shift the narratives, change the conditions, and build a consensus that all children should have what they need to thrive.