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# Listening Together

*Do young people with disability and young carers feel heard?*

Summary report

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# Project summary

## What is this research about?

The Listening Together project explores **how young people with disability and young carers think about listening**, and whether they feel listened to by the services and systems in their lives. There are three core research questions:

1. How do young people with disability and young carers understand listening, and how do they define what it means to be heard?
2. Do they feel that the organisations and institutions in their lives listen to them in the ways they want to be listened to?
3. How can these organisations and institutions strengthen their capacity to listen to young people's voices, experiences and perspectives?

## Who did the research?

This research was designed by a **co-design group** of six people with lived experience of disability and/or caring. Co-design is a participatory method that involves sharing decision-making power with community.

There were four community co-researchers – Simone Bartram, Talon Cass-Dunbar, Megumi Kawada, and Luci McClusky – and two researchers from the Australian National University, Laura Davy and Molly Saunders.

## What did the research involve?

The co-researchers built **two national online surveys**. The survey questions were designed to be accessible and inclusive.

The **long survey** asked in-depth questions about what good listening looks like and how people and services could listen better.

The **short survey** invited responses to one open-ended question about listening, which participants could answer through written responses or creative formats such as drawings and video.

The survey was for people aged 15-29 years old, who lived in Australia, and identified either as a person with disability and/or as a young carer.

# Summary statistics

## Who took part?

- 72 young people in total
- 56 did the long survey
- 16 did the short survey
- 58 identified as having a disability
- 23 identified as young carers

## Demographics: Age and Gender

	n	%
<b>Age</b>		
15-18 years	25	34.7
19-21 years	16	22.2
22-24 years	16	22.2
25+ years	15	20.8
<b>Gender</b>		
Woman	42	58.3
Man	16	22.2
Non-binary/other	10	13.9
Prefer not to say	4	5.6

## Listening matters to young people

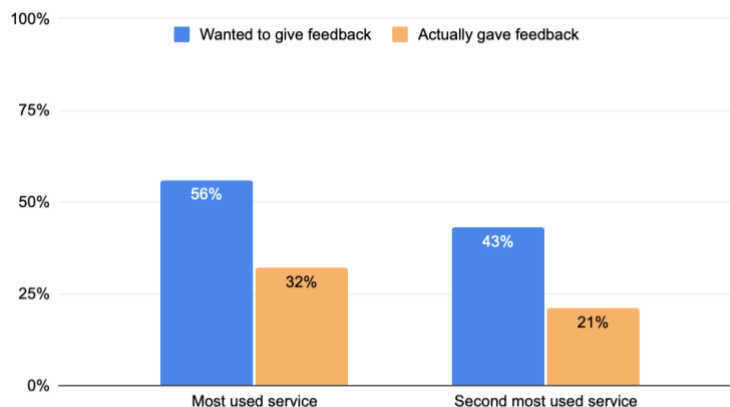
70% of survey respondents rated the importance of listening as 10 out of 10. On average, they rated it 9.2 out of 10.

## Some services listen better than others

Psychologists were rated best, with a listening score of 8.4 out of 10 and a trust score of 8.8. Disability support workers and GPs were rated more modestly. Financial services (e.g. Centrelink) received the lowest ratings, with a score of 5.2 for listening and 4.5 for trust.

## The feedback gap

Many young people want to give feedback to their service providers, but few get the chance.



## What did young people say?

Good listening is important because:

- It is respectful
- It helps young people make decisions about their lives
- It helps them feel connected to others
- It helps services meet their needs

Good listening involves:

- Certain attitudes, such as care, empathy, validation, understanding
- Certain behaviours; this depends on each young person but might include paying attention and not playing on your phone

Bad listening hurts:

- Not being listened to can negatively impact someone's mental health, lead to inadequate care and stop people from speaking up in future.

Things that help good listening:

- Giving young people time to speak
- Being truthful and respectful
- Having clear ways to give feedback
- Employing staff with disability



Things that hurt good listening:

- Unsafe or judgemental environments
- Inaccessible ways to give feedback
- Lack of trust
- Inflexible rules

Depending on the situation, advocates can be an enabler or a barrier to good listening.



## Recommendations for organisations

The what	The why (what young people said)
<p><b>1. Educate your staff and others:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in regular anti-discrimination and awareness training. Encourage parents, peers and the broader community to educate themselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training helps staff understand how young people may communicate and navigate everyday challenges. It can also reduce stigma, which many identified as a barrier to good listening.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Hire people with lived experience of disability and caring:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit, support and promote people with lived experience across all roles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This makes services more relatable to young people's needs, although it does not remove the possibility of misunderstanding.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Provide safe, accessible feedback mechanisms:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly signal that feedback is welcomed. Offer both anonymous and non-anonymous feedback options.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Young people said it is essential to have safe ways to give feedback without fear of negative consequences.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Ensure follow through:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate back to young people about what has changed as a result of their input.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow-through matters in both formal feedback systems and everyday interactions. It builds trust by showing that speaking up leads to real change.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Create equal and trusting relationships:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve access to advocacy, support and information. Review policies and processes that may create unequal access or discourage participation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reducing systemic inequality helps young people feel able to speak up. Young people said access barriers, cost, complexity and stigma can silence them.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Support and recognise young people's decisions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commit to and create decision-making processes that prioritise young people's voices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening includes respecting young people's choices and ensuring their views are not overridden. Young people said this commitment should exist across all organisational levels.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations for individuals

The what	The why (what young people said)
<p><b>1. Believe young people’s lived experiences:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Take young people seriously when they explain what’s happening in their lives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being doubted or dismissed can cause emotional and physical harm.</li> <li>Believing someone includes validating their feelings and not telling them how they “should” feel.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Be empathetic and non-judgmental:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be calm and show genuine care. Avoid blaming, shaming or reacting negatively when young people share difficult experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A compassionate, non-judgmental attitude helps young people feel heard and safe. This emotional safety builds trust: the foundation of good listening.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Educate yourself before asking respectful questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask questions that are appropriate to the context and to the relationship you have with this person.</li> <li>Respect people’s boundaries.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services often make assumptions about young people’s lives. Young people often have to teach people about disability and caring. Education reduces the onus on young people.</li> <li>Asking respectful questions can supplement this education.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Give young people time and space to speak:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow extra time for conversations when needed; avoid rushing or interrupting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some people need more time to find the right words or express their experiences. Patience creates a safer, more inclusive environment where they can speak without pressure.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Ask young people what good listening looks like to them:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do what they tell you, and show that you are listening, verbally and non-verbally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many listening experiences are subjective, which is why it is necessary to check in with each young person about what makes them feel heard.</li> </ul>

### **Suggested citation**

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