

This submission is from Play Australia, the peak national advocacy organisation for PLAY. We're a not-for-profit charity that is membership based and has been supporting play for over 100 years. We wish to focus our comments on the priority need for early intervention to address the mental health and wellbeing of today's children and young people. Whilst we recognize that this enquiry is focussed on the need for improved mental health services throughout Australia, we wish to stress the importance of the need to change the behaviours of children and young people, by normalizing play and physical activity in their lives, which we know will reduce the incidence of mental health problems in later life.

We are extremely concerned about the health and wellbeing of all Australians and believe that if governments and families recognised the importance of embedding play into everyone's daily lives, better mental health and life outcomes would be achieved.

In Australia today the health and wellbeing of our children and young people is of increasing concern.

- 1 in 4 children are overweight or obese (AIHW, 2019);
- 1 in 7 children are experiencing a mental health condition (Beyond Blue, 2019). The most common disorder is ADHD, followed by anxiety, depression and conduct disorder;
- only 30% of Australian children (aged 2-17 years) meet daily physical activity recommendations (AIHW, 2018) and the statistics get progressively worse as children get older;
- the health and wellbeing of adults is as worrying;
- **2 in 3** Australian adults are overweight or obese (ABS, NHS 2017-18);
- **60%** of Australian adults do less than the recommended 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per day (Australian Health Survey, 2011-12);
- **20%** of Australian adults are estimated to have a mental or behavioural condition mainly due to an increase in the number of people reporting anxiety-related conditions, depression, or feelings of depression (ABS, NHS 2017-18).

The key findings of the recent **Vic Health Young Australian Loneliness Survey report that:**

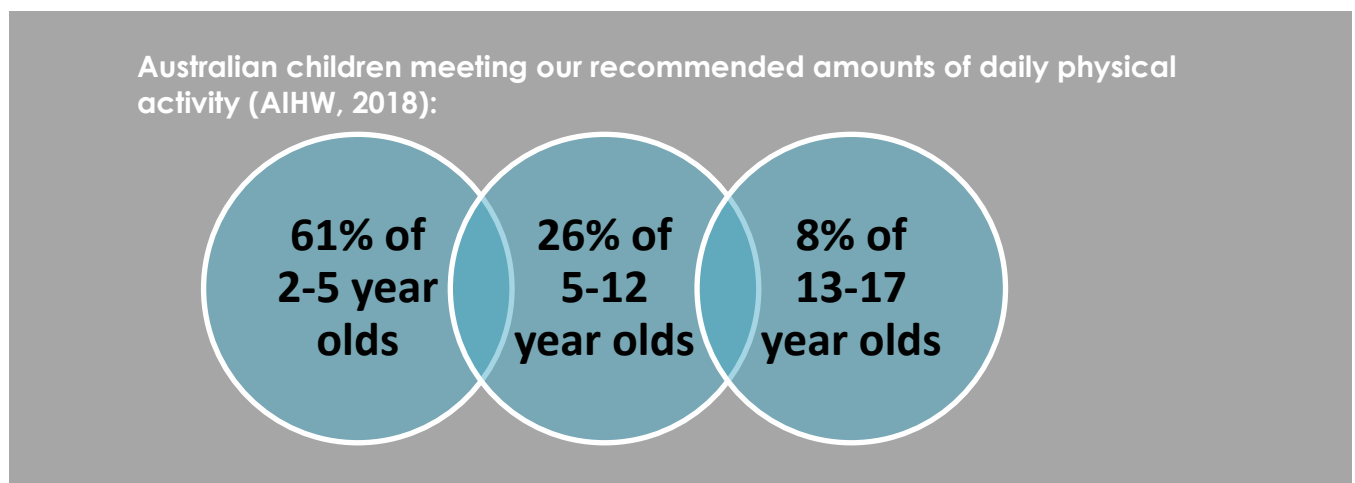
- loneliness is common among adolescents and young adults and is associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes;
- a significant proportion of young Victorians reported problematic levels of loneliness. This included one in six adolescents (aged 12–17) and more than one in three young adults (aged 18–25);
- many were at risk of social isolation, with young adults reporting higher levels than adolescents, and young women reporting higher levels of loneliness, social anxiety and depressive symptoms than young men;
- lonelier young people are more likely to experience social anxiety and depressive symptoms than those who are less lonely. They are also more likely to report negative affect (negative mood states) and use unhelpful emotional coping strategies.

There is no reason to believe that these findings do not relate to all of Australia.

Research demonstrates that if we can build healthy physical activity habits in our children and young people then we increase the likelihood of them being active throughout their adult lives.

The connection between play and physical activity needs to be better understood. Play is essential because it provides the foundations of physical literacy in order to establish healthy habits that last a lifetime:

PLAY creates healthy children	Play supports children's physical development and activity levels to support a healthy lifestyle.
PLAY connects children with their community	Play within communities allows families and neighbours to connect and enables children to develop socially.
PLAY balances risk-taking and safety	Play develops risk competency in young children which can build confidence, decision-making and problem-solving skills, later on.
PLAY supports children's learning	Play supports independent self-learning by allowing children to practice skills and challenge themselves.



A recent global study on teen physical activity, sees Australia performing amongst the worst in the world, ranking 140th out of 146 countries (The Lancet, 2019).

The relationship between poor mental health and limited active outdoor play and physical literacy is well established.

PLAY can support our children to meet the Australian 24hr movement guidelines (2019):

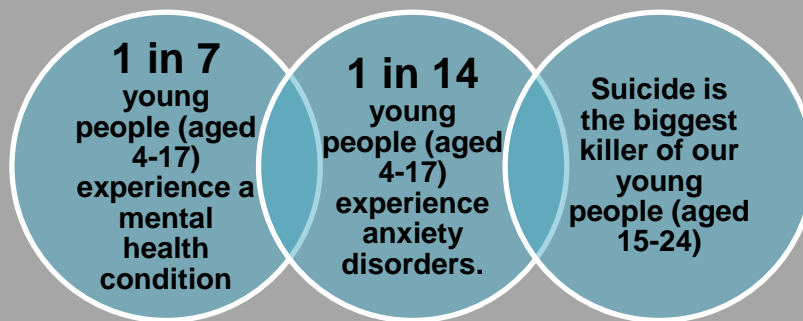
- 1-5 year olds need at least 3hrs of daily physical activity with at least 60 minutes of energetic play spread throughout the day; and
- 5-17 year olds require a minimum of one hour of moderate to vigorous activity each day.

Lack of physical activity is a major contributing factor to the poor mental health amongst our Australian children and young people.

Poor mental health arises due a range of complex factors, and we know that there are clear links between an individual's social connections (number and strength) and their levels of mental wellbeing.

“Connections matter. Strong ties with family, friends and the community provide people with happiness, security, support and a sense of purpose. Research shows that being connected to others is important for mental wellbeing and can be a protective factor against anxiety and depression” (Beyond Blue, 2016).

According to the Australian Government's Mental Health of Children and Adolescents Report, 2015:



Our children and young people need to have the ability to develop and maintain quality relationships, which means that they must develop key skills – including:

SOCIAL SKILLS – ability to connect with others and get along;

EMOTIONAL SKILLS – ability to control emotion and reactions; and,

COGNITIVE SKILLS – ability to understand what is going on.

And **PLAY** provides an essential opportunity for our children and young people to develop these skills in the most natural of ways.

We know that the earlier our children play, the better, as play can enhance the early development of children by 33% to 67% by improving language skills and reducing social and emotional problems, which contributes to greater resilience when faced with challenging circumstances (Fischer, 1992).

What is concerning, is that only 1 in 3 Australian children engage in free play outdoors daily (Natural Fun, 2010).

Play Australia believes that there is need to focus on preventative measures which will change the behaviours of Australian children and young people. We believe that all children need to play outside every day in order to improve their current mental health and wellbeing, and that an increased commitment is needed by governments, schools, the early childhood sector, families and communities to make this happen as a matter of urgency.