

Response to the Productivity Commission Draft Report into Mental Health in Australia.



Formal Submission from Smiling Mind

Smiling Mind is an Australian not-for-profit organisation providing evidence based mindfulness programs designed to support children and young people to take a proactive approach to foster good mental health on a global scale.

Our prevention focussed programs are widely used in schools across Australia, with more than 150,000

Australian teachers using our programs nationally. This submission focusses on our experience in delivering prevention focussed child and youth mental health programs within the context of the school system and our experience providing self-directed wellbeing programs through the Smiling Mind app which now has more than 5 million downloads.

Our reach:

 5M app users

 3.8M children and young people

 150K teachers

 Over 50K employees

About Smiling Mind

Smiling Mind works at the intersection of mental health and technology and we're widely known for our positive and proactive approach to mental health and wellbeing. Our mindfulness app is used by more than 5 million people from all walks of life, many seeking personal development strategies but many others under the recommendation of their mental health professional or GP. We work closely with schools across Australia and our classroom programs and resources are used by more than 150,000 educators.

Our program implementation partners in schools include the NSW Department of Education with matched funding from the Buildcorp Foundation, The Federal Department of Health and Worksafe Victoria. Across these initiatives we are implementing our prevention focussed mental health and wellbeing programs in more than 850 primary schools nationally. We work closely with other school based initiatives such as those run by beyondblue and Headspace, and we know that our programs and resources provide a valuable contribution to the mental health and wellbeing of students, teachers and parents across Australia.



Our goal is to reach 5M young people by 2021 so we can help turn the mental health statistics around.

Our submission

Attached you will find a detailed response to the draft report released by the commission.

We have also provided a detailed review of the research literature examining the impact of taking a prevention and mental health promotion focussed approach to support mental health and wellbeing within a school environment, using a mindfulness based social and emotional learning approach. Of note, this literature review details not only the mental health benefits of taking such an approach but also the potential academic benefits, with resultant flow-on benefits in terms of employment and earning potential.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak with the commission or provide further information to inform your final report.



Kind Regards

Dr Addie Wootten

CEO, and Clinical Psychologist

Smiling Mind Response to the Productivity Draft Report

Smiling Mind welcomes the draft report produced by the productivity commission exploring the mental health of Australians.

As the commission seeks feedback we wish to provide further insights for the commission to consider in further refining the report.

The report details a range of recommendations and it is good to see the breadth of mental health experience documented. Whilst prevention is detailed, we urge the commission to consider prevention and early intervention more closely, with a stronger focus on what can be done at a population level to prevent the onset of mental illness. We also encourage the commission to explore the potential benefits of **mental health promotion** as a further universal approach that could provide significant benefits to the Australian community.

On behalf of the Smiling Mind Board of Directors:



Professor Frank Oberklaid, AM



James Tutton



Jane Martino



David Sacks



Neil Thompson



John Chambers



Charlie Carpinteri

Mental health Prevention or Promotion, or both?

Prevention is concerned with avoiding disease while promotion is about improving health and well-being (WHO, 2001).

Priority should be given to prevention and promotion in the field of mental health to reduce the increasing burden of mental disorders: The World Health Organisation, 2001¹

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health promotion as “the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health”(WHO, 1986²).

Mental health promotion often refers to positive mental health, rather than mental ill health. Mental health promotion involves promoting the value for mental health and improving the coping capacities of individuals rather than amelioration of symptoms and deficits.¹

“Combining prevention and promotion programs in mental health within overall public health strategies reduces stigma, increases cost-effectiveness, and provides multiple positive outcomes”; The World Health Organisation, 2001¹

Furthermore, the World Health Organisation definition of mental health is worth considering:

“Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO, 2004³)

This definition of mental health encapsulates all areas of an individual’s life and re-frames the focus from one of ill-health to one of thriving. Framing mental health in this way provides a framework that all Australians can understand and engage with. Many Australians do not understand that we all have mental health and we all need to ensure that we promote good mental health in each of us and those we care about, before we have signs or symptoms of poor mental health.

Smiling Mind Recommendation



The productivity Commission exploring mental health should consider the value of taking a mental health promotion approach to support Australians approach to mental health – just like campaigns around SunSmart awareness have shifted the rates of skin cancer awareness and preventative action across Australia we propose that a similar approach could be taken to the promotion of good mental health practices.

Reform area 1: prevention and early intervention for mental illness and suicide attempts

Social and emotional skills development is an important consideration during the early years of life and the commissions focus on the foundational need for children to develop these skills early in life is commended.

Screening and assessment is important but referral pathways and access to programs or resources need to go hand-in-hand with these assessments. If problems are identified health providers and

parents need to be guided to evidence-based approaches that can support the development of these skills. Currently the programs, resources and services that could provide such intervention is fragmented and there is no one central point of reference for parents to seek guidance from.

Smiling Mind Recommendation



Parents need to be engaged in the development of their children’s social and emotional skills and overall wellbeing and a centralised access point or directory of resources is required.

Reform area 2: close critical gaps in healthcare services

We welcome the recommendation to expand low intensity and self-help resources to ensure consistent access for all Australians.

Smiling Mind has been offering self-directed programs through our app for the last 6 years and we now have more than 5 million people accessing the app. We are seeing an increased uptake of the app on the recommendation of healthcare providers and currently 25% of Smiling Mind app users have been referred by a health professional. Whilst we provide this service free of charge it is important to note that we have self-funded this through generous philanthropic support and with increasing demand

we would welcome government support to continue to provide this resource free of charge to the Australian community.

We have research evidence to suggest that our app reduces depressive symptoms and increases resilience⁴ and we would welcome the opportunity to extend the research evidence base and explore how we could integrate our programs into the continuum of care. With government support an integrated approach utilising our technology-based programs could provide significant cost reductions in the long-term.

Smiling Mind Recommendation



We strongly encourage the commission to consider recommending funding to be invested in strengthening existing and well utilised self-directed and highly accessible programs such as Smiling Mind.

Support for families and carers

Another area for consideration is the provision of support and self-directed services to support parents, carers and families with children who need additional support. Families play an integral role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their children and many parents are seeking guidance. Evidence-based and credible programs are urgently needed to support parents to upskill and learn more about the development of their children and to support them in implementing techniques that may support good mental health development and reduce the burden of mental illness.

More than 50% of the 5 Million people who have downloaded the Smiling Mind app are parents and we often hear from parents about their desperation to find better ways to support their children. We also often hear about the ways in which our self-directed and low intensity programs support parents to support their own children.

Smiling Mind Recommendation



We strongly encourage the commission to further explore the low intensity and self-directed programs and resources that could be strengthened to provide a national approach to support parents to integrate mental health promoting practices within the home environment.

References

1. WHO Meeting on Evidence for Prevention and Promotion in Mental Health: Conceptual and Measurement Issues (2001: Geneva, Switzerland) https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/545.pdf
2. World Health Organization. Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. Geneva, 1986
3. World Health Organization. Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice (Summary Report) Geneva: World Health Organization; 2004. [[Google Scholar](#)]
4. Flett, J., Hayne, A., Riordan, M., Thompson, H., & Conner, B. (2019). Mobile Mindfulness Meditation: a Randomised Controlled Trial of the Effect of Two Popular Apps on Mental Health. *Mindfulness*, 10(5), 863–876. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-018-1050-9>

Smiling Mind

✉ info@smilingmind.com.au

smilingmind.com.au

Illustrations by Beci Orpin | The Jacky Winter Group

Smiling Mind is a 100% not-for-profit organisation that works to make mindfulness meditation accessible to all.

Visit us online or download the free app to get started.

