

**In their own words:
the hidden impact of
prolonged drought on children
and young people**

“I think I did grow up faster than my sister did at my age... I had to become more mature quicker because I needed to learn what was actually going on. And, like, my sister didn't really have to deal with it. Neither did my brother...It's just what I have to do - ... I just wish it was green.”

(Girl, Year 9)

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UNICEF Australia recognises the significant demands on parents experiencing this drought. In conducting these consultations and writing this report, it has been very clear to us that most are doing the very best they can for their children. The purpose of this report is not to apportion blame or suggest that any particular stakeholder involved in the lives of drought-affected children is responsible for the circumstances these children are in. It is simply to understand the variety of experiences and responses children and young people are living with in drought-affected areas.



1. Beyond the media spotlight, the drought is continuing...

The severity of the drought in inland eastern parts of Australia is undeniable and continuing, despite the rainfall experienced by our coastal communities. Australia's drought-affected communities are experiencing extreme long-term rainfall deficits, intensely hot temperatures and severe water shortages. The media has reported regularly on the enormous pressure facing farmers and their families. All indications are suggesting this natural disaster will continue for the foreseeable future.

What is less known, and discussed, are the specific ways in which children and young people are being impacted by the drought.

UNICEF Australia initiated this important project as part of our mandate to be a voice for children – to focus on their wellbeing, healthy development and rights. Our decision to talk with primary and high school students and their communities was driven by UNICEF's global approach, anchored in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As part of our ongoing work consulting with children across the country, it is key to UNICEF Australia's efforts to listen to children and involve them in problem solving – to help ensure a fair chance for every child.

It is clear, from our discussions in these drought-affected communities, that children and young people are making reasoned, informed, adult decisions – based on real lived experience - on a daily basis. They have been forced to grow up prematurely. Among other things, these decisions concern the running of the farms, the lives of their families, their own education and management of their relationships with others. Their insights are therefore informed and valuable.

The chief purpose of this report is to encourage government stakeholders to listen to and consult with these children and young people who are living with drought, and in doing so, to protect them and take action to strengthen the broader drought response.

Since our consultations for this report were completed, media and government attention has naturally been drawn to new emergencies, such as flooding across northern Australia and acute fires across southern Tasmania.

Yet, while national attention and media reporting on the drought has waned, children and families are continuing to experience the significant stressors and hardship that flow from it.

We encourage government stakeholders at all levels to adequately consider and prioritise the wellbeing of children and young people affected by natural disasters in Australia. The onset of natural disasters inevitably creates circumstances of disrupted education, displacement from their homes and multiple economic and social stressors.

During natural disasters such as drought, risk factors that already exist for children in rural and remote areas - such as mental health and suicidality, family violence, social isolation and poor education outcomes - can become exacerbated. Coordinated and whole-of-government approaches are, therefore, required to ensure that this does not take place.

2. Executive summary



During our consultations, children and young people told UNICEF Australia that they are struggling under significant pressures. They are not receiving the support they need to alleviate some of the worst effects of the drought. While a number of measures exist to support relief for families, there are few child and youth specific interventions.

The everyday lives of children and young people change rapidly and dramatically during periods of drought. For example, across the communities we consulted, workloads for children on and off farms have increased substantially, leaving little time for schoolwork and almost no time for play, sport or other recreational activities. Children and young people described their days as long and stressful. They indicated that there is no escape from the drought. The drought dominates their family lives, their whole community and the local media. In other words, children and young people live and breathe the drought every day.

Historically we know that families living through drought and other natural disasters experience enormous levels of persistent stress. However, we know far less about the specific experiences of children - in particular adolescents. Many of the children UNICEF Australia had contact with described the reality of having responsibilities beyond what is reasonable for their age. These young people fear for the future of their family, but they also fear for their own futures. Will they stay or leave? Will they finish high school? Will their parents be able to afford school? Or university? They feel powerless to do anything to alleviate the suffering around them.

These children and young people are highly focused on their families and communities. They are compassionate, caring, generous, selfless, mature, and incredibly hardworking. They are very proud of their communities and, in particular, how they help to feed Australia. However, the cumulative toll on the physical and mental wellbeing of the children and young people that we met was evident and concerning - the longer the drought progresses, the more diminished their coping reserves will become.

This current and developing crisis requires significantly more attention than it is receiving.

In addition to recognising the clear need for greater long-term investment in mental health services for children and young people living in rural communities, more could be done to prioritise and invest in policy and community-based measures to strengthen the resilience and wellbeing of children living in drought-affected areas. To benefit children and young people who are most severely impacted by drought, investments and interventions should be delivered at a family, school and community level.

UNICEF Australia specifically recommends the following actions to strengthen the coping skills and resilience of these children and young people:

- That the Australian Government develop a targeted national youth mental health strategy which is informed by youth perspectives. This should provide targeted funding and service delivery to meet the mental health needs of young people who are impacted by drought and natural disasters.
- That the Australian and State and Territory Governments fund and design a basic psychosocial competence capacity building program for young people, adults and community leaders in drought-affected communities.
- That state and territory Departments of Education ensure that schools in drought-affected areas provide options for group-based student support to avoid the stigma often associated with one-on-one counselling or clinical support.
- That those working closely with families most significantly affected by the drought and other interested members of the child-facing workforce participate in UNICEF Australia-

designed training on providing quality psychosocial support for children and young people.

- That the Australian Government funds a youth-designed sensitisation campaign in drought-affected communities to increase mental health literacy and normalise support/help-seeking behaviours.

Greater investment is needed to support parents of drought affected children. It is, therefore, recommended that, the Australian Government fund in-home parenting support programs to:

- support parents to increase their confidence in communicating effectively with children and adolescents who are experiencing distress;
- support children and adolescents to positively manage and self-regulate their own behaviour; and
- reduce family stress, conflict and breakdown.

There are many activities, funds, programs and services being implemented to support those most affected by the current drought. However, UNICEF Australia believes there is more that the Australian Government could do to strengthen its responses for drought, child and youth sensitive services. We recommend that the Australian Government, in cooperation with state and territory governments ensure that the design of mental health and wellbeing services starts with local community input, including from children and young people.

To strengthen local capacities to respond to the needs of children and youth who are affected by the drought, UNICEF Australia recommends that the Australian Government adequately fund:

- local governments to provide designated youth-friendly spaces and at least one full-time designated Youth Development Officer, on an ongoing basis, with a capacity to scale up during periods of drought; and
- long-term investment for Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to support local and community-based resilience and wellbeing initiatives, as well as mental health services, for children and youth.
- establishment of community based child and youth wellbeing groups, linking key stakeholders across each drought affected community – i.e., local council and school-based focal points, community leaders, parents, and youth representatives for the purposes of information sharing, monitoring and joint advocacy.

Lastly, to improve awareness and accessibility, UNICEF Australia recommends that the Australian Government, in cooperation with state and territory governments, map child and youth-related services in drought-affected areas and ensure that community support materials are in a child-friendly and accessible format, and are readily available.

As communities and governments at all levels grapple with how best to support those in need, we must not forget that children and young people, on and off farms, are at the very centre of this drought and all the challenges that have come with it. It should also be recognised that children and young people are not only experiencing the effects of the drought, they are each a vital part of a family and a community's ability to survive it.

In response to the demands of the drought, these children and young people have often been forced to grow up prematurely. As a consequence, they are making reasoned, informed, adult decisions – based on real lived experience - on a daily basis. Among other things, these decisions concern the running of the farms, the lives of their families, their own education and management of their relationships with others.

Their insights and solutions are therefore informed and valuable.

We must listen to them.

3. Introduction



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3.1 Little is known about the impacts of drought on Australia's children

"Drought doesn't end when it rains"

(Principal)

There has been significant community, political and media attention given to the drought, currently affecting large parts of Australia's eastern States.¹ Understandably, much of this attention has focused on the impact of the drought on farmers, their families, the land, and livestock. However, equally important and thus far little understood, is the impact of the drought on children and young people living in severely affected areas, both on and off farms.² There is little current or archival research into the specific impacts of drought on children and young people. There are few media stories examining this aspect of the drought, and even fewer that are the result of speaking with children directly.³

Advice from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) and Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR) suggests that the drought is unlikely to ease in the foreseeable future.⁴ If that is the case, it is likely that the negative impacts

of the drought on children and young people will increase and compound. Therefore, if we are to better support these children and young people, it is essential that there is a better understanding of the ways drought is affecting their lives.

UNICEF Australia⁵ has sought to address this current knowledge gap by seeking the views of children and young people who are affected by drought, and key members of their communities.⁶ Listening to their perspectives is an essential step in developing responses to the drought which will effectively provide the support they need.

3.2 The existing policy and drought-response landscape

This report does not provide an in-depth analysis of the broader policy environment surrounding the drought.

In the policy documents we were able to review, the unique issues, vulnerabilities and needs of children and young people, as well as their contributions to managing the drought, do not appear to have been specifically mentioned or considered.⁷

However, UNICEF Australia acknowledges that some children and young people affected by the drought have indirectly



benefitted from various recent reviews and policy reforms. In particular we welcome the federal government's significant changes to boost financial and social support for farming communities across the country, particularly those experiencing drought.⁸

The Farm Household Allowance (FHA)⁹ - a financial support package for farm households experiencing hardship is of particular relevance. However, we note that this is not available to all families impacted by the drought, such as those not living on farming properties or those deemed ineligible under existing criteria.

UNICEF Australia also welcomes the significant funding boost for local governments and community organisations to provide free support services such as: family support services, counselling, outreach support, community events devoted to mental health and wellbeing.¹⁰ While these programs do not specifically target children and young people per se, they undoubtedly have an indirect benefit to children of farming families who are under financial and emotional stress.

Other specific measures that target young people are also welcome policy initiatives - such as the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme¹¹, which provides farming families with

financial assistance to pay for boarding school fees, and changes to the eligibility and parent income cut off for Youth Allowance for rural students.¹²

At the state level, the NSW Government has announced a \$500 million Emergency Drought Relief Package¹³ to help farmers manage the effects of the current drought. It includes new funding for mental health services¹⁴ and commitments to ensuring that drought-affected preschools can continue to offer early childhood education during the drought.¹⁵

Despite these positive policy initiatives UNICEF Australia notes that, overall, beyond being considered as part of farming families, children and young people affected by drought appear to be overlooked as a stakeholder group. Moreover, as far as we're aware, no children or young people were directly consulted or involved in any of the services, supports or other interventions that seek to assist children and young people living in drought. Indeed, in general, children and young people currently have limited opportunities to provide input into policy and service design on matters directly relevant to them. Lastly, while information and support for farmers (and their families) is available, we could find little information or support materials tailored to children and young people in an accessible format.

4. Consultation method and design



4.1 Conversations with children, young people and adult community members

To gather data for this report, UNICEF Australia conducted a series of semi-structured discussions with children and young people in selected primary and secondary schools in drought-affected areas of NSW, namely: Tamworth (where we spoke to boarding school students), Gunnedah, Narrabri, and Walgett. Student participants were selected by the schools. They included students specifically chosen by teachers, based on a prior knowledge of their struggles, and students who volunteered. We also had discussions with parents, teachers, principals, counsellors, recreational instructors, service providers, members of community organisations, local government personnel and members of the wider communities we visited. These conversations helped us to better understand the ways the drought is impacting upon the children in their lives. Lastly, we conducted preliminary research in this area.

Overall, UNICEF Australia spoke with 16 primary-aged school students, 38 secondary-aged students, and seven educators and school staff (a combination of teachers, sports coordinators, school counsellors, chaplains and principals). During the consultations, we also spoke with a number of community members and service providers (for example, parents, youth development and other local government staff). In addition, UNICEF Australia conducted bilateral discussions with a number of organisations involved in drought, rural services, mental health and child/youth support.¹⁶

UNICEF Australia sought the views of children and young people affected by drought about:

- life on farms/in rural areas;
- daily life and how it's changed since the drought;
- short and long-term impacts of drought on individuals, peers, families, school and community;
- coping strategies to mitigate negative effects;
- ideas about what is needed to limit negative impacts;
- thoughts and hopes about the future;
- attitudes towards participation of young people and children in responding to the drought; and
- messages they wished to convey to decision-makers.

Discussions with children and young people utilised participatory methodologies appropriate for their age. We aimed to create a more comfortable space to communicate views and opinions and to help children and young people to feel more a part of, and in control of, the process. Sessions were conducted in a safe, ethical and voluntary manner consistent with UNICEF Australia's Child Protection Policy, Child Safeguarding Policy¹⁷ and Code of Conduct.¹⁸ Names of students and schools have been withheld from this report to protect confidentiality.

4.2 Understanding personal and environmental factors

The analysis, observations and recommendations in this report have been structured to align with the social ecology model. This is a framework for understanding the multifaceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors – in this case, those influencing the effects of the drought on children and young people.¹⁹ For the purposes of this report, these factors are: families, communities, services and government.

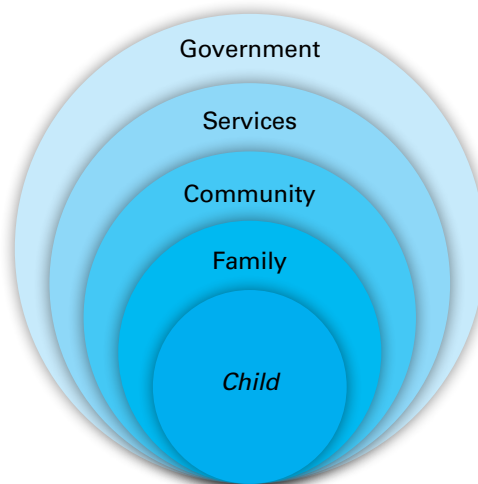


Figure One: Social and ecology model

4.3 Limitations of our consultations

4.3.1 Location, access and timing

Our discussions were not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of how children and young people are experiencing the drought and its' impact on their wellbeing, but rather to provide an initial snapshot. The scope of this consultation was limited in geographic representation, access to schools and timing. Due to the busy time of year (December), UNICEF Australia was not able to reach as many schools or community leaders/members as we would have liked. Understandably, communities are currently overloaded in responding to the drought.

While this report includes some overarching analysis, it is not intended to provide a comprehensive roadmap for going forward. Instead, it is intended to provide important content, in the words of children and young people, to share with decision-makers and the Australian public.

4.3.2 Aboriginal children and communities

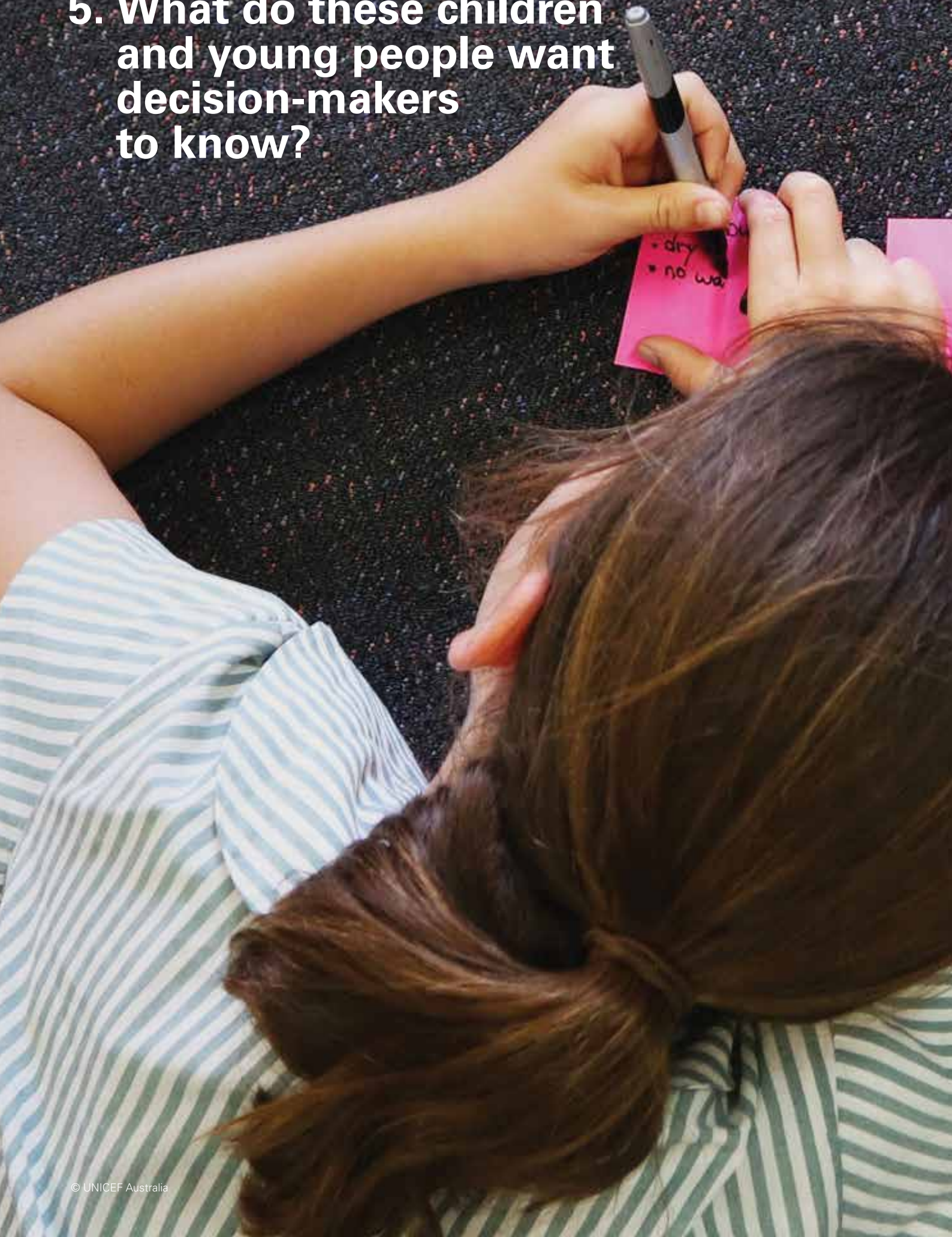
The information we were able to obtain about the impact of the drought on Aboriginal children specifically was anecdotal. Local schools and community leaders recommended that UNICEF Australia should not conduct targeted focus group discussions (FGDs) with Aboriginal children through school-based settings. Educators and community leaders pointed to the broad context of historic and acute disadvantage for Aboriginal children. They noted that the drought, while having some impact for Aboriginal children and young people, particularly in relation to connection to land and culture, was not viewed by Aboriginal communities as a leading priority. It should be noted, however, that several local community members we spoke to in Walgett, for example, specifically highlighted the impact of the drought on the land and its vital role in the lives of Aboriginal children and young people.

UNICEF Australia does not have existing relationships with local Land Councils or Aboriginal community leaders to receive the required permission to design and conduct meaningful consultations with Aboriginal children at a community level. With these limitations in mind, we heeded the advice of local representatives and educators and their understanding of the complex dynamics of their student body and communities.

4.3.3 Mental health and wellbeing

This report has a significant focus on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people impacted by the drought in New South Wales. However, UNICEF Australia does not purport to make definitive assessments as to the mental health of the children and young people we spoke with. Instead, our report relies on a self-reporting model for those children and young people we had contact with.

5. What do these children and young people want decision-makers to know?



5.1 They want to be part of the solution

In the drought-affected communities we visited, children and young people have become a vital and necessary part of the workforce for many families trying to stay afloat. Indeed, in some families, parents said they considered young people to be partners in the challenges they were facing and in identifying solutions. The young people we spoke to expressed a strong desire to be part of any solutions and responses to the drought, particularly on matters that involve or impact upon them. They wished to convey this message to parents, teachers, members of the community and decision-makers at all levels.

Some young people and children expressed a particular desire to be part of solutions around climate, environmental and resource management, and other related issues. They feel that they are the ones who will have to live with, and manage, the consequences of the decisions made today:

“To get around the drought at the moment I think there might need to be...maybe drop some things that might use more water that we don't really need...”

(Boy, Year 5)

“Don't let the mining companies access and mine near the Artesian Basin.”

(Girl, Year 6)

“[The drought] does teach you a bit about regenerative agriculture. It could teach you how to better manage in the future. To learn and educate.”

(Boy, Year 9)

5.2 They want to be understood

Overall, many of the messages young people and children shared with us conveyed a deep desire to be better understood by everyone. They want their teachers and fellow students to understand their lives. They want support from people who have been through what they're going through. They want to be asked more about what they are doing and going through, and to be heard when they speak. They want help and support that meets their needs in a manner that connects with their world. Lastly, some had specific messages for politicians seeking to better understand what they're experiencing:

“They should come down for a week and feel what it's like.”

(Girl, Year 10)

“They need to come down...like, as a human, not a politician.”

(Girl, Year 9)

“You have to come and be present in it for a while and feel it. Because it's very tangible, you can feel what the drought is doing.”

(Community member, Walgett)

6. Key themes



"It's the most depressing thing. You get off the bus and you're driving down the driveway and it's just dust. And you only really notice it when you go to the coast and you drive over the mountains and it's just green...It's sad to think that I'm saying 'wow, it's green!' if that makes sense?"

(Girl, Year 10)

Students talked about being shocked and saddened when they saw pictures of their home taken five or more years ago, and not being able to remember how green everything used to be:

"You see photos and stuff and home looks green and we can't really remember that."

(Girl, Year 9)

6.4 When the river runs dry

"The river's dead"

(Community member, Walgett)

The dry riverbeds have had a major impact, in many ways, on the lives of all the children and young people living near or beside them. However, it is the Aboriginal communities living alongside these rivers that particularly feel this impact. In Walgett, for example, where the Namoi, Barwon and Narran rivers are dry, a number of locals highlighted the severe and unique impact this was having on Aboriginal children:

"Generationally they've grown up on the river... they have their own way of life that is sustained by that river. What's going to become of them?"

(Community member, Walgett)

Aboriginal children rely on the river systems not only for important cultural and spiritual reasons. They also rely on rivers for recreational purposes - particularly during the summer months, when children used to spend all day by the rivers, fishing and swimming. Some community members wondered what children would do to fill their time during the hot summer holiday. They speculated that this could present risks that children and young people would engage in other, possibly dangerous or harmful activities.

6.5 Families experiencing profound stress

"It can be difficult because it can ruin [family] relationships."

(Girl, Year 11/12)

The children and young people we spoke with painted a worrying picture of life at home during the drought. It seems that for many, families are in 'survival mode' where everything that isn't directly related to survival is secondary, at best. As one student explained:

"You have to take care of [the animals] more than you take care of yourself or your family...you have to focus on them because they're part of the income"

(Boy, Year 9)

another student added

"...worrying about the cattle. That's it. Sleep, school, it's all secondary."

(Boy, Year 11/12)

Many, if not most, of the young people reported high levels of stress at home, rating it as a significant impact of the drought. They spoke of the anger, depression and tension the drought has brought into their homes.

"You're walking on eggshells"

(Girl, Year 9)

"It's not a very friendly or good environment to be in."

(Girl, Year 11)

"My father and my grandfather are feeding cattle for about three hours every day so you don't get to see them in the morning and they're always tired and grumpy so the home environment isn't the best."

(Girl, Year 9)

While most students only referred to the damage the drought is having on family relationships opaquely, one student shared a story that illustrates not only the strain the drought is placing on those relationships, but the unique pressure it can place on young people.

The student described a serious family argument about how to best find resources to feed their depleted and hungry stock. It escalated when an extended family member argued with the student about her level of involvement:

"You feel compelled to say something. Because she's not here every day. She's not pulling dead sheep from the dam. We are."

(Girl, Year 11/12)

Financial strain has been exacerbated in some families with the loss of employment. One student angrily described his father's recent job loss:

"Dad's been there...pretty sure he's the third longest person to be there. Thirty-one years next January. And yeah, he just got told 'in about a weeks time, you'd better get a job."

(Boy, Year 11/12)

Every child we spoke to is highly aware of the financial stress their families are under. This was particularly apparent in the context of Christmas, which was approaching at the time of the consultations. Children and young people were uncomplaining of their own situation. Rather, they expressed concern for their parents or, in some cases, their siblings:

"It's even harder now because it's getting close to Christmas. I have three younger siblings and one's six and he wants everything in the world. He wants a BMX bike and Mum and Dad are looking around...and we're just hoping we'll get some money for it and it'll all turn around because we've had a little bit of rain."

(Girl, Year 9)

"It's that unspoken thing where you just ask for less. You just know. You don't have to be told."

(Girl, Year 11)

And as one primary school student put it when asked how it felt to not be getting much in the way of presents this Christmas:

"When it rains it's like a present."

(Boy, Year 6)

Boarding school students, discussed in more detail below, also reported feelings of guilt and worry about the cost of their education, knowing the additional financial pressure this is causing for their parents:

"You feel powerless. You hear them on the phone. You know how difficult it is financially."

(Boy, Year 10)

Younger children were also aware of the levels of stress their parents are under, some describing mum or dad as "angry" or "shouting all the time", others talking about how worried their parents are. When we asked a group of primary-aged children what the hardest part of the drought was, one boy's face reddened with emotion as he struggled to articulate how difficult things are at home:

"Seeing Mum and Dad so stressed, sort of, maybe...?"

(Boy, Year 4)

When asked if it made things tense at home, the children nodded, with one adding:

"Sort of want to help them a lot..."

(Girl, Year 6)

Another boy describes things at home as:

"Well Dad gets up early to go spraying and he gets quite depressed sometimes because... we live right next to a mine and he's dealing with that and also dealing with the drought."

(Boy, Year 5)

6.6 Less time together

"I haven't seen my Dad in ages."

(Girl, Year 9)

For the most part (for families who still have livestock and/or crops to attend to), the drought has resulted in significantly less time for children to spend with their parents. Family meals, an important time for the family to be together, were reported as rare nowadays because family members are out working on different jobs. Some children with siblings reported they barely see their family during the day. Some mothers are taking jobs in town to make ends meet and, in cases where their property is too far away, need to live in town during the week. In town and on farms (particularly those that have had to de-stock) some fathers are taking on other jobs, leaving almost no time to spend with family. In some cases, those jobs are in various mines, which can mean having to move away for periods of time.

"My Dad will work until after sundown and will just come back for dinner."

(Girl, Year 10)

"You just don't see your Dad, sometimes. Because you just go to bed before he comes home."

(Girl, Year 10)

However, it should be noted that some students spoke of how much they valued the time they had with their parents while working on the farm:

"I actually enjoy working with my Dad - everything about it. Being outside, having responsibility to get something done, riding, feeding someone along the line."

(Girl, Year 9)

Others also spoke with appreciation for working alongside their siblings, going through the same experiences and supporting one-another.

6.7 The situation for boarding students

"You'll be on the phone and they're telling you what's going on and you can't help with what they're doing."

(Boy, Year 11)

Students attending boarding school, particularly those who live further out west and are unable to return home on weekends, have unique challenges that are different from children who attend local schools. Some boarders expressed relief at being able to escape the daily realities of life during the drought and about being able to share time with friends. For others, the transition between school and the harsh realities of home was jarring and difficult, particularly when just for the weekend:

"I'll get home of a weekend and you sit there having tea that Friday night just hearing what's going on...just same old same old sort of thing..."

(Boy, Year 9)

(Completed by another student)

"It's only 2 days that you're there to help. Like, you go home for the weekend, they're telling you the week problems but you're only there for 2 days."

(Boy, Year 11/12)

But for many students, being away from home brings its own acute anxieties. All boarders, even those who preferred to be away for much of the school year, spoke of the guilt and helplessness they feel at being too far away to help their families. Most are fully aware of how much their parents are struggling. One educator gave the example of a student who regularly receives calls from home where her father is in tears describing what's going on. Thus, for many of the young people we spoke with, being home (while difficult) also reduces some of their anxiety and feelings of powerlessness because they're able to make an active contribution to their family's situation.

6.8 The effects of drought on the physical health of children and young people

The drought is having both direct and indirect health impacts for children and their families. One high school student, who lives in town, told of a particularly grave set of circumstances where, as a result of the increased dust during the drought, his sister has developed Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and had been hospitalised several times with collapsed lungs. His mother has developed severe allergies and his father had a significant back injury several years ago, which means he can only do minor jobs. This has placed additional pressure on him as the remaining healthy and able-bodied member of the family:

“...even living in town, that’s causing struggle and stress that reflects on me particularly. Because Dad works, I have to manage everything [at home].”

(Boy, Year 9)

UNICEF Australia has not conducted research into the physical health impacts of the drought on children, although it appears this is an area generally under-researched. It would be logical to assume that the poor air quality in drought-affected areas is likely to particularly exacerbate health issues for children with pre-existing lung and sinus conditions. Furthermore, in towns and properties living off bore water, there is a risk (however small), of contracting amoebic meningitis, which is very often fatal. There are risks for children playing in contaminated water sources and under hoses and sprinklers.²⁰

The drought is impacting on the health of children and young people in more common ways as well. As elaborated upon in the section below, young people on rural and farming properties in particular reported engaging in more dangerous activities since the drought took hold. While no injuries were reported to us, it is more than possible that young people have been (or will be) injured engaging in farm and work activities that, if not for the drought, they wouldn’t be doing. Also discussed below, many children reported not getting enough sleep during school term because they had to balance school, work and homework.

During summer, particularly with the unusually high temperatures and heatwaves NSW has been experiencing, sleeping well at night is difficult. For children working on farms, this can impact on their health in many ways, including increasing their vulnerability to injuries resulting from fatigue. Other students made references to adults “getting themselves hurt”. Again, the impacts of these injuries are also felt on young people who need to do even more to compensate for a parent’s inability or reduced ability to work.

One of the biggest mental and physical health concerns that children shared with their parents is a desire to protect the rest of the family, particularly their younger siblings, from the worst of things.

6.9 Rest, recreation and recovery in times of drought

“And then you have to get up and go again.”

(Girl, Year 9)

6.9.1 The family as workforce

What was particularly striking during the course of these consultations was how hard children and young people worked to reduce the workload of parents and support the family’s livelihood. Indeed, some educators listening to the consultations

expressed surprise at hearing about their daily lives. As many on farms have had to let go of their casual staff, young people and children have had to fill that labour shortage. As one educator explained:

“Mum and the kids are the workforce because they’ve let go any of their casual staff, they’re not employing anyone...they just use the family. That’s the workforce now.”

(Principal)

Feeding stock, for example, has become increasingly time consuming. Similarly, for families where parents have lost work, young people are stepping in to assist. During term, students reported days beginning as early as 5am - with work, followed by school, followed by work (sometimes until late in the evening), and finally followed by homework. During the holidays, the workload only increases. For many, these days are long and difficult as the children explained:

“The workload is full on because you have to feed stock but you also have to do whatever else you normally used to do. So not only do you have to go into the paddock to fix that fence, you’ve got to go and feed the stock twice a day...”

(Girl, Year 10)

“Especially with daylight savings...In the afternoons you think it’s four o’clock but it’s six o’clock, so you’re out there for longer. You don’t get to bed until 10 o’clock sometimes.”

(Girl, Year 10)

Many on farms reported not being able to leave the property because of this constant work:

“You’ve got to make sure there’s someone there to feed the cattle all the time...If the men have to go away then my Nan or my Mum or us girls have to help out.”

(Girl, Year 9)

Likewise, some children noted that if the family goes away, one parent needs to remain behind on the farm. In an interview with a member of a regional drought task force, we were told that some women have reported not feeling able to leave their husbands alone on the farm for fear they may harm themselves.

6.9.2 Engaging in dangerous activities

Some students reported that the drought had created conditions where they were required to engage in more dangerous activities. For example, due to the absence of fodder, farmers are resorting to using tree foliage as animal feed.

“Climbing up a tree - bloody god knows how high it is - no harness - got yourself a chainsaw - jumping around like a monkey just cutting branches down. It’s not real fun.”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

"If you had feed you wouldn't need to do it but since we've got nothing, we're resorting to trees."
(Boy, Year 11/12)

"There's less safety precautions with things... you don't want to spend the money to buy that... you put off certain things and you don't think about the risks that comes."
(Boy, Year 9)

6.9.3 Time for peer relationships and recreation activities

The heavy workload has meant that for those with farms that are less remote, where they would typically spend regular time with friends, there is now very little socialising:

"You used to have time to go out with your friends and have a night out having fun and all that and now it's like, 'nah, can't do that, gotta feed animals.'
(Girl, Year 10)

"And even when you do have friends come over, it's like 'oh, what are we gonna do now? Let's go feed the cattle!'
(Girl, Year 10)

For boarding students, the adjustment from seeing their friends every day during term to seeing them barely, if at all, during school breaks is particularly stark. As one student put it:

"You get crazy."
(Boy, Year 10)

Others have pointed out that social isolation has always been the case for them due to the location of their property:

"It's been like that forever so we're used to it."
(Girl, Year 11)

Sports teachers noted the significant drop in numbers of students participating in organised sports, with one reporting a 50 per cent drop over the last year. Events in town centres are sparsely attended or cancelled altogether due to a lack of numbers. As one teacher explained:

"...It's the time they can't manage... In a lot of cases, the kids are the workers on the farms now. You know, they're the ones lending an extra hand because when you're starting to have to feed stock it's labour intensive and... it's a constant process."
(Sports Coordinator)

He also pointed out the consequences of young people letting go of sport as recreation:

"Once they stop participating in their sports... if you have a couple of years off, particularly in your teens, more than likely you're not coming back to that sport."

Community events, a crucial source of distraction and entertainment, have decreased overall, particularly those that relate to livestock. As two students put it:

"They're less and not as many people attending them. It's basically 'townies.'
(Girl, Year 10)

"Because people can't get away from the farms because they're out feeding cattle or something like that."
(Girl, Year 10)

It should be noted that not all families or farms are the same. For families further west, having had to de-stock or having been unable to plant crops, the lack of time is not an issue in the same way. Some local community members in Walgett, for example, noted there had been a large increase in children and both parents attending various sporting events over the year, as a welcome distraction from their worries. However, another put it this way:

"It's not [always] a tangible thing, it's just the feeling – that there's no time for fun."
(Principal)

In other words, even if there is more time, some families don't feel it's appropriate to be having fun when things are so dire. And of course, having time but feeling powerless to do anything to improve the situation bring about its own set of challenges.

6.9.4 Students don't think time off matters

It was also striking that while all students noted that a lack of time off and lack of time with friends were impacts of the drought, they consistently rated these as having low importance:

"It's hard, like...you say that sport and hanging out and stuff, like, it's pretty important but in a drought you don't really care about it."
(Boy, Year 9)

Some even dismissed the impact, compared with the needs of their parents:

"I feel like that's quite a big one for the parents. I feel like they are predominantly affected by the less rest and recreation. Like, so are we but our parents more than us."
(Girl, Year 9)

6.9.5 Difficulties balancing school and work

Many students, including primary-aged children, reported having to take days off school to help out at home, something that has also been noted by NSW Department of Family and Community Services. For some with children in high school, parents are deciding to keep the younger child at home because the older one is in Year 11 or 12:

"Education-wise, me personally I've had to probably take 10 or more days off this term alone to help."
(Girl, Year 9)



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Others with children in primary school (distance education) are rotating siblings between helping out and attending school:

“Dad might take me one morning and [my brother] in the afternoon.”

(Girl, Year 5)

In some cases, the absences have been significant, and pressure is being keenly felt.

Primary-aged children similarly reported an increase in workload and difficulties balancing farm work with schoolwork:

“Whenever we’ve got horses...we’ve got to always feed them. When we went to [horse show] and we had to give them hay three times a day and feed them morning and night with chaff. And we’ve got a lot of young horses and they’re fairly skinny at the moment because they’re only little and we’ve got to feed them. We’ve got to water the dogs a lot more often because it’s so dry and hot. We’ve got to move cattle because the dams are low and they’re eating all the paddocks.”

(Girl, Year 5)

Students recognised the stress they were under trying to balance work and school:

“It affects our mental state because with us at school there’s more stress on us with school work.”

(Boy, Year 9)

This is particularly the case for young people in Years 11 and 12:

“It’s like there’s more pressure on you than there should be.” (Another adding) “Yup. Which is awful going through year 11 and 12. Anxiety is high enough as it is. Never mind trying to deal with what’s going on at home.”

(Girl, Year 11/12)

6.10 The cumulative toll on children

The cumulative emotional and physical toll of the drought on children and young people was evident throughout the consultations. Financial stress and heavy workloads are causing emotional stress:

“You start to get into the mindset where all you think about is the money. Every time you see a cow, it’s just, that’s money. It’s no longer a cow, it’s just money. That’s all it is. Seed is money. The farm needs money. That’s the part that stresses you out. It’s your whole outlook on life.”

(Boy, Year 10)



This accumulation of fatigue and anxiety is vividly described by one high school student:

“The problem is, you get home and you bust your arse to feed stock and that, all night until about 10 o’clock at night, and then you’ve got to do homework. And that’s the hardest thing. Like, you’re tired and you’re up til 12 and you’re tired the next day. So it just keeps piling up. It’s like a domino effect and it just gets worse and worse.”

(Boy, Year 10)

It is therefore all the more important that children and young people receive the support they need to strengthen their ability to cope with their situation.

6.11 Grief, loss & fear about the future

“Kids have gone quiet.”

(Teacher)

We were surprised at the level of emotion many of the children, particularly those in high school, expressed to us as outsiders from the community. We also witnessed other students struggling to contain their emotions and describe what they’d seen and done. Therefore, while these quotes provide a picture of what they’re going through, we’re well aware of how much was not said.

Secondary students in particular reported a number of significant fears about what lies ahead. Will their family be able to hang onto their farm? Will their parent be able to get another job? What will their future be? Will they be able to live on the land? When will all of this end? Students in Years 11/12 were wondering what next year would be like:

“For us [going into Year 12] we’re thinking about Unis and how our parents are going to pay for Uni if they can’t pay for our sheep to survive?”

(Girl, Year 11/12)

Students described wondering whether to take a gap year or “whether we just don’t go at all,” with one adding:

“It’s just the thought of, like, what are my other choices? If this is going to continue for as long as they think it’s gonna continue?”

(Girl, Year 11/12)

One local noted that farms that have had to de-stock have effectively lost a generation of work and will need to start from scratch. For children in these families, wondering if they’ll be able to survive on their land is a very real and present fear.

6.12 Growing up quickly

“For a lot of these kids, they’re losing their childhood.”

(Sports Coordinator)



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“You’re sort of at the age... like, you’ve got to grow up sooner or later. Might as well just get it over with.”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

“You have to sort of step up as an adult.”

(Boy, Year 9)

All of the young people we spoke with talked of being aware that the stresses, work and burdens created by the drought are impacting on notions of their childhood. They said that the responsibilities they’ve had to take on have forced them to grow up quickly. They particularly noticed it when they compare themselves with older siblings:

“I think I did grow up faster than my sister did at my age... I had to become more mature quicker because I needed to learn what was actually going on. And, like, my sister didn’t really have to deal with it. Neither did my brother... It’s just what I have to do. I just wish it was green.”

(Girl, Year 9)

“That bit does suck. I had to grow up a lot more quicker than my sisters did. And for that, it just sucks.”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

While many children tried to be stoic about this, many expressed sadness and in some cases anger when reflecting on this reality.

This idea of having to grow up quickly is evidenced in many ways. It relates to the decisions they have to make. Do I stay at home and help or go to school? Is my sibling’s education more important than mine? Do I even contemplate going to university?

It comes from the work they now have to undertake, such as killing livestock and the more dangerous activities they have to engage in ‘to make ends meet’, such as operating farm machinery. The stakes seem incredibly high and if anything goes wrong it can mean disaster. Younger children are aware of this reality too. As one principal explained, previously minor chores like watering dogs or chickens have now become elevated to the level life-saving activities, adding:

“They’ve stepped up and become responsible – doing it for their parents because they see how much help they need. They want to help.”

She said that while ‘stepping up’ has made them more mature, there are also downsides to this:

“Because they are stepping up, they are sort of taking on adult responsibilities, having a more mature attitude. Which is like losing your childhood. You’re supposed to goof off and forget things. You’re supposed to be a kid, you know... If you were kicking back at home you wouldn’t ask them to do half the stuff that they’re doing. You wouldn’t. Because you’d go, ‘that’s my job.’”

(Principal)

“Even a 16-year-old shouldn’t have to step up and do adult jobs and responsibilities. They should be able to go and live.”

(Boy, Year 9)

“Some things are asked of you, though. Like, you shouldn’t have to do that. Even if you’re 18, you shouldn’t have to do some of the things that your dad tells you to do.”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

Young people are highly aware of this although not all felt comfortable being explicit as to what they are now being asked to do:

“Everyone’s had to step up, too. Like, with stuff I previously hadn’t done, being forced to do. It just... can’t say it...”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

Others felt almost that their life was fragmented. While at school, young people could be children; but once they went home it was a different story:

“It’s sort of like you’ve got your school self. Like, you’ve got to get stuck into your work then once you get home, you’re a different person. You have to do everything for your family.”

(Boy, Year 9)

6.13 Witnessing animal suffering

“And, like, before the start of this year I’d never shot a lamb in my life and I’ve done probably about 50 or so this year. That was probably one of the [biggest] things I’ve noticed. Like, I’d never had to do that before but it’s normal now... [Initially] I didn’t want to do it. Like, I cried sort of thing. Like, I didn’t want to do it. But now it’s just easy. You just do it.”

(Boy, Year 10)

Having to shoot animals is one of the adult roles and responsibilities, which many children and young people have had to take on. It is one that they view as a fundamental contributor to the experience of growing up prematurely.

And the daily reality of living amongst and witnessing animals that are suffering and dying is taking an emotional toll on children of all ages. During our consultation sessions, some high school students became visibly upset telling stories of things they have seen and had to do. One student described a neighbour’s error that resulted in their cattle going without water for several days and ultimately needing to be put down:

“Before we shot the cattle, we... had to video a cow [trying to] drink water... Anyway, this cow couldn’t remember how to drink water and it just tipped the bucket over and was struggling and stuff and then we had to shoot it. Like, we had to watch it struggle and then shoot it.”

(Girl, Year 10, crying)

Other students added their stories:

“It’s hard seeing your cattle getting skinny... All you see are ribs now.”

“And like with horses. I’ve had my horse since... like... six and dad said he’s sorry but it’s just not going to last until Christmas.” (Breaks down crying)

(Girl, Year 10)

Younger children in primary school also displayed an awareness and sorrow of the suffering with which they are surrounded by every day. Asked how the landscape made them feel, a group of primary students used words like “depressed”, “sad” and “angry”, with one saying:

“...because coming out seeing animals all skinny and laying down. You think they may be dead sometimes but then you try to go over there and they get up and walk around. Sore, lame and all that.”

(Boy, Year 5)

Some teachers and school staff spoke of the sorrow, anxiety and anger that some children feel in relation to the drought and how they bring that to school every day:

“So they’re having that [experience of killing livestock] in the morning and having that burden all day and they’re the ones that are going to have to bury them that afternoon... They understand things are not right and they’re trying to work out a way through it... It’s all very real and the emotional impact is huge as their coping mechanisms are exhausted.”

(School Chaplain)

School staff also spoke of young people becoming increasingly explosive and struggling to regulate their own emotions, some getting into physical fights more frequently. Others observed students becoming increasingly withdrawn, introverted and quiet.

Some high school students noted their desensitisation to suffering and sorrow as the drought has worn on:

“You do desensitise yourself a bit though... it’s sad... You know how you’ve all got... You try to feed [an animal] for a week and you can’t feed it anymore and you have to put it out of its misery... You do it that often and you see it that often that when you see it there, just suffering, you can no longer feed it. You just kill it straight away.”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

“You become like immune to it. Like, it’s something that has to be done.”

(Boy, Year 9)

“When it started Dad made a real effort to tell us what was going on because we’re not stupid, we can see...”

(Girl, Year 11/12)

“I’ve tried [to talk about it] but they just try to hide it.”

(Girl, Year 10)

“It’s sort of bad because you don’t sort of treat them as animals. That’s the worst part.”

(Boy, Year 9)

6.14 Resilience

6.14.1 Overall observations

“We all know what we have to do to get through it. Just keep going.”

(Boy, Year 11/12)

In each consultation UNICEF Australia conducted, we asked children and young people whether they were familiar with the concept of ‘resilience’. We had them engage in activities to illustrate how they understood resilience. We also asked them to reflect on the degree to which they thought they were coping with the current circumstances in their lives.

These activities revealed that, overall, the young people we spoke with considered that they were only just coping, and that if things continued as they are now, in 12 months’ time they would be doing substantially worse. On a scale of one to five (where 1 = not coping at all and 5 = coping very well), students were asked to assess how well they thought they were coping with life during the drought and how they imagined they would be coping in a year’s time. The average results for each school are provided in the table below:

LOCATION	AVERAGE – NOW	AVERAGE – 1 YEAR FROM NOW
Tamworth (high school boarding students) – Group 1	3.07	1.5
Tamworth (high school boarding students) – Group 2	3.7	2.15
Gunnedah (high school)	3.7	2.6
Narrabri (high school)	2.85	1.25
Narrabri (primary school)	2.8	0.75

Children and young people were asked to identify the protective factors that contributed to their wellbeing. They were then asked to vote by sticker as to the degree to which they felt they were utilising each factor listed. This is a summary of the factors listed by young people, noting where red was indicated overall:

Lots of red stickers	Feeling proud of what you do
	Focussing on other things
	Accepting help from others
	Being there for others
	Being hopeful
medium amount of red	Remembering better times
	Having a break/doing things you enjoy
	Laughter
	Perspective/being aware of other people’s struggles
	Talking with people who get it
A few red stickers	Being with friends
	Community events
	Positive family environment
	Reaching out to family/not being isolated

Young people demonstrated a good understanding of the protective factors that contribute to resilience and wellbeing and, to some extent, acknowledged where they experienced gaps. However, they also consistently ranked key resilience factors, such as having time off work or spending time with friends, as least important. For primary-aged children, we asked them to write these factors on cardboard hands, as shown in the image below.



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One particular message was clearly conveyed by the young people we spoke with: - that they understand their own wellbeing in the context of their wider family. Many times they deflected questions about their own wellbeing by pointing out how much worse their parents were doing. This led us to observe the inherent contradictions in many of these children and young people - on the one hand (some) could recognise that they were not coping particularly well, while on the other (many) were resistant to ask for help for themselves, only prepared to ask for their families. These contradictions are elaborated upon below.

While a number of students communicated openly about their struggles, there were others who resisted doing so, even when identifying ways that other children and young people might be struggling. The comments they made reveal their suspicion about the value of talking or reflecting on these difficult times. In some cases, they believe it would only make life worse:

“Because people know in a drought everyone’s having the same problems so you just don’t need to talk about it.”

(Girl, Year 11)

“It’s just how it is – what you have to deal with.”

(Boy, Year 9)

“It’s gotta be done.” “You just do it. There’s no point in fixating on it.”

(Boys, Year 9/10)

Some younger children also demonstrated awareness that, even though children were stressed, they didn't show it in front of others. When asked why, one student explained:

"Because everyone's going through the same thing."

(Boy, Year 5)

Some teachers said they had experienced difficulty when trying to engage with children and young people in relation to the drought. They spoke of the ongoing stigma associated with recognising and seeking specialised help. They also provided some additional reasons for this resistance to acknowledge struggles and ask for help, or try to talk about things:

"They talk about what they can't do [planting crops, etc] but not about the impact because they don't want anyone to know that they're struggling."

(Teacher)

"Most of them aren't willing to share how they're struggling personally because they don't want to be an additional impact on their family."

"They're too embarrassed to say what the real problem is."

(Sports Coordinator)

"...we tell them, particularly as far as their wellbeing goes, it's better off to share the problem rather than keep it to yourself. And there hasn't been much sharing going on."

(Sports Coordinator)

This desire to avoid being a burden to their parents, in any way, was echoed by other educators and students.

Not all children and young people expressed wariness of talking about struggles. Some said it did help, even pointing out the value of UNICEF Australia's consultation in bringing them together. They said that, by listening to each other's experiences, they have become aware of the suffering they share in common. They are now more likely to approach one another to talk about the drought:

"I think talking about it like this was good. Although it was hard for us, I think I was good to share. And for us to get together."

(Girl, Year 9)

"Because we're all from different places but we're all going through the same things."

(Girl, Year 10)

"It's nice to have this set up."

(Girl, Year 9)

"I think there could be more discussion about it. Instead of hiding away and just trying to ignore what's happening, we should discuss it and try to think about long-term things and what we should do about it."

(Boy, Year 9)

UNICEF Australia observed many students comforting one-another and drawing comfort from sharing their experiences in our consultations.

6.14.2 Modelling adult stoicism

Many children spoke of how their parents behave in times of great stress. One child, for example, described his father's generation as "tough" and his generation as "much softer" by comparison. This stereotype of the tough, silent farmer getting on with the job is still alive in many children's imagination, even with a greater awareness of contemporary mental health struggles amongst rural adults.

"People definitely don't show what's happening behind the scenes. They're like a different person when they're around others. Like, when people say 'How are you?', everyone says 'Oh, yeah, good, yourself?'. It's never 'Oh no, I'm not doing very well.' Even though they are [not doing well]."

(Boy, Year 9)

There was also recognition of the downside of excessive stoicism among their parents' generation, as well as their perceived reluctance to ask for help (although there is less awareness of how they might be modelling this behaviour):

"I think sometimes it's up to people to reach out but then they don't want to be seen as reaching out and needing too much."

(Girl, Year 10)

"They don't want to be seen as weak."

(Girl, Year 9)

"If you thought to yourself... like, if farmers were just thinking about all the things that's wrong in their lives, they probably wouldn't be there. That's why they sort of ignore the troubles because, like, if...you dwell on it for too long it'd probably have a big impact on yourself."

(Boy, Year 9)

"I think farmers are like sort of proud of their work and don't really...they sometimes don't ask for help. So they're a lot more independent."

(Girl, Year 5)



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6.14.3 How is the drought talked about at home?

In order to better understand if and how the drought was being discussed and whether this was what young people, in particular, wanted, we asked groups how the drought was talked about at home. Among high school students, in contrast to younger children, the responses varied: as the drought worsens, it seems that more parents are talking about what's going on, either directly or within earshot. For other children, they reported being well aware of how dire the situation is, but that their parents are not discussing it at all.

One message that was clearly conveyed to us by most of the young people we spoke with was that they prefer and indeed, need to know what's happening with the drought and their family. They feel valued, respected and involved when this happens:

"It's nice that they feel comfortable to share it with you - as a younger person."

(Girl Year 10)

"I feel better because I know what's going on."

(Girl, Year 9)

"When you know you can help out."

(Girl, Year 10)

"Dad's quite open to talking about it because he thinks that if we have to help and we have to be there every day and see him shoot, or see the cows and have to feed them then we deserve to know how it works, what's going on and how we can help. Because otherwise you don't understand."

(Girl, Year 11/12)



In general, however, it appeared to UNICEF Australia that younger children are much less aware of how difficult their family's circumstances may be. As noted above, several high school students spoke of the family wanting to protect younger siblings from the worst of things. They were certainly aware, however, of the stress within the family, the increased workloads and what they can see going on around them.

6.14.4 Surviving adversity together

Lastly, it should be noted that several students spoke of what they saw as positives of living through and surviving drought. They spoke of how it has changed them, made them more aware of others, increased their sense of family and community and, for some, made them stronger for it:

"It changes your perspective on life."

(Boy, Year 9)

"...because I know if I can get through this I can sort of get through anything, really. Because it's just making me work harder than anything else and toughen me up."

(Boy, Year 11/12)

"It's getting you ready for life. Like, you've got to work hard and that's what we're doing now, I suppose."

(Boy, Year 10)

"Yeah, I'd say, like, going through this... Like, when we go out into the workforce and stuff when you're older, like it all seems a lot easier. You'd be more determined to get through things."

(Boy, Year 9)





Other children spoke of how the drought had brought people together more - that they are all "in it together" and that this sense of connected suffering helped them feel better about what they are going through; that people understand.

"I guess it's the whole worst can bring out the best in people sort of situation."

(Girl, Year 10)

"And the thing about this drought is no one's exempt from it...When you feel like you're the only person doing it, everyone else is too. The businesses and people losing their jobs because there's no grain or people try to buy hay for their horses. It hits everyone."

(Girl, Year 11/12)

6.15 Support through school based settings

"At school you're a different person. You can't show what you're dealing with."

(Boy, Year 9)

6.15.1 Perceptions of school support

Many high school students, and some parents, spoke of their frustrations and perceptions that schools do not fully appreciate the pressures drought-affected farming families are under. They want more support from teachers and a better awareness of what the life difficulties and stresses faced by these families and children are like. Some students reported that their school had not made any effort to engage with students affected by the drought or tried to understand what they are going through. Indeed, students who attend schools in larger towns reported a deep lack of understanding, even within the student body.

The perception that schools are unaware of the severity of the situation for drought-affected families is reinforced for some when it comes to the issue of school fees. Parents expressed being upset their school hadn't communicated an appreciation that fees may need to be late. Some parents with children in boarding schools were particularly frustrated that their school hadn't adapted their usual fee-paying reminder processes to consider the dire financial situations facing these families. Although unintended, the message this has conveyed to some families is that schools are oblivious to the drought and its severe impacts - financial and otherwise.

Simple errors or misunderstandings can do harm to children and young people who are already feeling highly vulnerable and guilt-ridden.

One student shared a story about a number of dresses that were donated to students to wear to their formals. Each one included a short message of support from the owner. Students described the experience of trying on dresses and reading these messages as a lovely afternoon that was both therapeutic (hearing best wishes from members of the public) and fun. One Year 10 student observed that, at that point, the community gesture,

"...sort of kept your minds off [the drought]. Like, although it raised awareness [of the drought in their minds], it was in a positive way."



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Then the experience was dampened when a teacher told them the donations should be packed up and were unsuitable for girls whose parents could afford to send their children to boarding school. The students felt the teacher had no idea how much their parents were struggling to keep sending them to school, how awful they felt about the costs involved and how much they needed this experience:

“They don’t realise that to our parents, our education is one of the first priorities. A dress really isn’t.”

(Girl, Year 10)

Educators and student support staff that we spoke with noted that schools were making some efforts to recognise the drought and its impact on students and the community, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

One teacher noted these efforts could be fraught with confusion. For example, some school-organised fundraisers for the drought were asking families of students to contribute donations, when they were often the ones who needed the funds themselves.

Overall, most of the educators we spoke with also believed that schools could do more to support children and young people affected by drought. Some suggested that wellbeing programmes could be significantly improved by making it a higher priority within the curriculum, rather than an add-on if time became available.

Some also noted that, while many teachers were caring, some attitudes among some staff were unhelpful, lacking insight and understanding, such as that young people needed to be ‘more resilient’ by toughening up. Indeed, we also noticed that some teachers and principals seemed surprised by the level of emotion expressed in these consultations. Others wondered why more young people weren’t reaching out for help:

“We thought we’d have more kids putting up their hands sort of asking for help. You know, sort of saying ‘Yeah, I’m struggling. I can’t do all of this’ but there hasn’t been much at all compared to what we were expecting.”

(Sports Coordinator)



“In one of the things we tell them, particularly as far as their wellbeing goes, it’s better to share the problem rather than keep it to yourself. And there hasn’t been much sharing going on.”

(Sports Coordinator)

16.15.2 Drought is disrupting learning

As a result of the increased farm workload faced by many students in drought, attention to schoolwork has diminished. Students were often less focussed during school because of fatigue, stress and anxiety. They also had far less time for homework and studying after school and on weekends.

Primary school children we spoke with also noted that some, but not all teachers understood their home life:

“A lot of teachers understand that, like, you were helping your Dad...”

(Girl, Year 5)

“Some teachers don’t understand.”

(Boy, Year 5)

While some teachers noted that avenues to gain extensions for assignments were available, these weren’t often utilised. One teacher explained why:

“...they’re worried about – I don’t want to ask Mum for an extension because I can’t fit everything in in the day because that’ll add to her burden and then she’ll worry about me not getting results from school – and it’ll snowball from there.”

While respective school counsellors or year coordinators are available to develop individual support or learning plans, to balance a student’s increased home workloads and schoolwork requirements, as far as UNICEF Australia knows, none of the students we had contact with had availed themselves of this opportunity.

7. Discussion and key recommendations



7.1 Strengthening the coping skills and resilience of children and young people

At an individual level, UNICEF Australia observed a number of attitudinal barriers among children and young people in relation to seeking support.

As noted earlier, young people particularly have a tendency to disregard their own individual needs, significantly preferring to focus on the needs of their parents or the broader needs of their family.

Addressing this resistance, and other external obstacles to reducing the impact of the drought on children and young people, requires dedicated interventions at a family, school and community level that can make supportive conversations safe and accessible.

At the time of our consultations, many of the children and young people who participated self-reported as being able to cope with drought related stress. When asked how they would assess themselves in a year's time, if their situation had not improved, all participants anticipated a significant reduction in their ability to cope and manage stress.

Even if many children and young people are 'coping' at a moderate level now, as time goes on, their ability to cope and manage the effects of the drought on their lives is likely to diminish.

UNICEF Australia witnessed heightened emotions among participants in each consultation session we conducted. While this is a healthy response to a situation of prolonged stress, a number of participants indicated that it was the first conversation they had engaged with regarding the drought. This suggests that children may need more safe spaces to have supportive, and/or peer-to-peer conversations about the drought and its many impacts.

We also observed that high school aged young people we spoke with were more profoundly affected by the drought than primary aged children – possibly, in part, due to their parents allowing them to be more exposed to the challenges facing their farms.

It is therefore our main contention that, in addition to ensuring appropriate and specialised care is available to those who need it, preventing mental health issues before they arise is an equally important strategic objective for all stakeholders involved in the lives of these children and young people. By appropriately investing and supporting initiatives that can increase protective factors and decrease risk factors for children and young people, the likelihood of increasing resilience and wellbeing, and heading off mental health issues before they arise, is increased.²¹

While there is no single definition of 'resilience' or 'resilience factors' for children and young people, Andrew Fuller (Lead Researcher and Director of Resilient Youth Australia) provides six useful factors²² that are relevant for drought-affected children:

- encouraging children to deal with day-to-day demands;
- confidence in one's own ability to cope in difficult situations;
- maintaining a sense of humour (a pressure valve for stress);
- having a sense of belonging or feeling connected;
- identifiable positive role models; and
- encouraging community participation.

These factors provided a useful basis for our assessment during the consultations.

Recommendation 1:

- That the Australian Government develop a targeted national youth mental health strategy which is informed by youth perspectives.
- This should provide targeted funding and service delivery to meet the mental health needs of young people who are impacted by drought and natural disasters.

Recommendation 2:

- That the Australian and State and Territory Governments fund and design a basic psychosocial competence capacity building program for young people, adults and community leaders in drought-affected communities.

Recommendation 3:

- That State and Territory Departments of Education ensure that schools in drought-affected areas provide options for group-based student support to avoid the stigma often associated with one-on-one counselling or clinical support.

Recommendation 4:

- That those working closely with families most significantly affected by the drought and other interested members of the child-facing workforce participate in UNICEF Australia-designed (or other) training on providing quality psychosocial support for children and young people.

Recommendation 5:

- That the Australian and State and Territory Governments fund youth-designed sensitisation campaign in drought-affected communities to increase mental health literacy and normalise support/help-seeking behaviours.

7.2 Supporting parents and families

With children's evolving capacities in mind, UNICEF Australia has identified an opportunity to support parents with approaches for talking about and listening to issues relating to the drought with their children. Drawing upon discussions in our consultations, we believe it would benefit children if more conversations occurred in the home about the drought and its impacts upon farm and family life, as well as upon children and young people.

Such conversations would need to take into account the individual circumstances of children - for example, the development of strategies for finding more time for school work. To be most successful, these conversations should be informed by an awareness of the attitudinal barriers that are preventing young people from reaching out and communicating their struggles – such as not wanting to be a burden.

To illustrate, some parents may benefit from advice on how to provide guidance to children and young people on ways to balance the desire to help others with attending to their own needs. We should also remain mindful that parents may need advice to help recognise the varied signs of distress (for both their children and themselves) and where to access further assistance if needed.

Additionally, it was clear that out of a desire to protect their children from the struggles they themselves are experiencing, some parents avoided talking about the drought with them. Nevertheless, young people remained concerned about what was going on and felt they would feel better if they were kept



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informed. They expanded upon this by saying that being able to understand what was happening within the family would help them feel more like they were valued family members who made a beneficial contribution – providing a sense of control in a largely uncontrollable situation.

Through such conversations, parents can also be empowered to assist their children in the development of resilience by building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control, as well as a belief in one's own ability to cope in difficult situations.²³

Recommendation 6:

- **That the Australian Government fund in-home parenting support programs, possibly through existing support services to drought-affected families to:**
 - support parents to increase their confidence in communicating effectively with children and adolescents who are experiencing distress;
 - support children and adolescents to positively manage and self-regulate their own behaviour; and
 - reduce family stress, conflict and breakdown.

7.3 Government responses and child and youth sensitive services

As noted in the introduction to this report, there are many activities, funds, programs and services being implemented at the local, state and federal levels to support those most affected by the current drought - particularly for farmers and their families. UNICEF Australia's observation is that those involved in drought-related responses need to ensure that a specific focus on children and young people is integrated into existing networks and organisations specifically as they relate to drought, rural resilience and mental health.

Achieving this, first and foremost, requires the development of systematic, safe and practical approaches to hearing, valuing and acting on the views and experiences of children and young

people, so that they are incorporated into the design of drought response policies and services. For example, we should ensure that youth and child specialists, with a good understanding of the impact of the drought on children and young people, are included in drought-related services, networks and coordination bodies. Further, youth representatives should be involved in all aspects of drought response.

We found that there is awareness amongst service-providers (both government and non-government) of the need for greater collaboration on issues related to the drought and children and young people. To better support children and young people affected by drought, collaboration and partnerships between organisations, agencies and services, particularly those involved in drought, resilience, mental health and education, is needed.

The important role of Primary Health Networks (PHN) should also be highlighted.²⁴ Long-term financial and administrative investments will provide greater opportunities for PHNs to support local and community-based resilience and wellbeing initiatives, as well as mental health services, for children and youth. For example, one regional PHN staff member we spoke with is attempting to partner with a non-governmental organisation to develop a pilot resilience programme for young people this year. These initiatives require greater support.²⁵

Increasing the number of opportunities for drought-affected young people to engage with the community and with each other also requires additional support from local government. UNICEF Australia agrees with the recent recommendation by The Commonwealth Senate Community Affairs References Committee that:

“...the design of mental health and wellbeing services starts with local community input to ensure that all rural and remote mental health services meet the measure of ‘the right care in the right place at the right time.’²⁶”



The need for increased availability and accessibility of mental health services in rural and remote areas is well documented and articulated by all major organisations working in this area.²⁷ This need is no less for children and young people, particularly during the drought.

The Senate Community Affairs References Committee recommended the development of a national rural and remote mental health strategy. Its aim is to address the low rates of access to services, workforce shortage, the high rate of suicide, cultural realities, language barriers and the social determinants of mental health in rural and remote communities.

UNICEF Australia endorses this recommendation and advocates that such a strategy should provide a particular focus on children and young people, including those affected (or likely to be) by drought. Furthermore, specific mechanisms should be established to allow for sufficient buy-in from children and young people during the development of the strategy.

Local governments should be resourced to provide designated, safe youth-friendly spaces and at least one full-time designated Youth Development Officer (YDO). These YDOs could provide greater focus on community-level support for young people affected by the drought by providing avenues for them to share their experiences and support each other - including specific events that have an additional psychosocial support component. They could strengthen opportunities for drought-affected youth to participate in community forums and to take on greater leadership roles in their community. There is also scope to invest in building connections between YDOs from various drought-affected areas to provide professional support and for sharing lessons learned.

UNICEF Australia heard that young people and adults need improved information on the services available in their area and how they can better help others.²⁸ This would require mapping these services, raising awareness of the services available, and ensuring this communication is in a child-friendly and accessible format.

Recommendation 7:

- **That the Australian Government, in cooperation with State and Territory governments, ensure the design of mental health and wellbeing services begins with local community input, including children and young people.**

Recommendation 8:

- **That the Australian and State and Territory Governmentst adequately funds:**
 - **Local governments to provide designated youth-friendly spaces and at least one full time designated Youth Development Officer, on an ongoing basis, with a capacity to scale up during periods of drought; and**
 - **Long-term investment for Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to support local and community-based resilience and wellbeing initiatives, as well as mental health services, for children and youth.**
 - **The establishment of community based Child and Youth wellbeing groups, linking key stakeholders across each drought affected community – i.e., local council and school-based focal points, community leaders, parents, and youth representatives for the purposes of information sharing, monitoring and joint advocacy.**

Recommendation 9:

- **That the Australian Government, in cooperation with state and territory governments, map child and youth-related services in drought-affected areas and ensure that community support materials and information on available services are in a child-friendly and accessible format, and are readily available.**

8. Conclusion

8.1 Not as tough as we may like to believe

“Because their struggles are real. What they’re feeling is real and legitimate and we can help rebuild their coping mechanisms and help them get through it.”

(School Chaplain)

A pervasive stereotype exists within Australian culture of the ‘tough country kid’. It’s something we can see in literature, film, music, and throughout popular culture. Even during the drought, the media in some instances has reinforced this stereotype with stories showing farming children as strong and resilient – heroic in almost mythical ways. While we had many opportunities to witness the strength of the children and young people we spoke to, these stories often fail to scratch the surface to reveal the real struggles these children face.

Within the communities we visited, some adults showed a deep understanding and empathy for these children, while others expressed surprise at hearing of the emotional toll of the drought. They appeared to some extent to underestimate the cumulative emotional and physical toll the drought is having on children and young people and overestimate their coping ability. In other words, in some cases it is not only that young people are ‘taking on the burdens of adults’, but perhaps to some extent that they’re led to believe this is something they’re supposed to do.

The pervasiveness of this stereotype filters down to the children and young people themselves who feel compelled to demonstrate how ‘tough’ they are. We observed many young people demonstrating difficulties acknowledging, even to themselves, how much they’re struggling. Boys in particular seemed to demonstrate this resistance, even when their feelings were plainly evident. On one occasion, a male student in year 10/11 who made several “we’ll be fine” statements was seen crying after the consultation ended.

8.2 A preventable crisis – hope is fading

UNICEF Australia is unable to speak to the general mental health of children affected by drought. However, we observed many young people showing signs of distress. Even where young people and children considered they were coping at moderate levels, they believed this would plummet if they faced similar conditions for another year. While some young people expressed feelings of hope, they all acknowledged it was diminishing. This was exemplified by an incident a counsellor had after a consultation session, where a student said, “it’ll get better, it has to...” with tears streaming down her face.

UNICEF Australia agrees that, in general, more needs to be provided in mental health services for children and young people in rural areas. In a drought, this need becomes more critical. However, there is also much that can be done to increase support for children and young people who are impacted by the drought - to alleviate their struggles, strengthen their resilience and wellbeing, and to reduce the risk of mental health issues arising.



8.3 We need to understand more

“There’s no quick fix...This has been a problem now for a long time and will continue to be, it’s something we need to certainly face up to and deal with.”

(Sports Coordinator)

Due to various constraints, our consultations enabled us to visit only three areas significantly impacted by drought. Nevertheless, it was sufficient to gain an insight into the ways children and young people were experiencing and being affected by the drought. It is clear that further assessment and analysis in this area is needed. Particular attention should be paid to the specific contexts and communities for these children. Further understanding is also needed of the unique ways Aboriginal children are impacted by the drought, given their existing social and economic disadvantages.

Several educators and community members highlighted the complex factors that interplay to create the impacts young people and children experience during drought. Improving the lives of these children requires a better understanding of their unique circumstances. It also requires a nuanced approach that considers the various levels and actors within the environment in which they are living. It should identify holistic solutions that address all facets of the problem.



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8.4 We need to listen to children and young people

“[Attitudes of] we shouldn’t be able to say our opinion because we aren’t old enough to know the situation. Yet we’re the ones doing the work.”
(Girl, Year 11/12)

UNICEF Australia hopes that this one message is clearly conveyed – that children and young people affected by drought need opportunities and mechanisms to talk of their experiences. In response to the demands of the drought, these children and young people have often been forced to grow up prematurely. As a consequence, they are making reasoned, informed, adult decisions – based on real lived experience - on a daily basis. Among other things, these decisions concern the running of the farms, the lives of their families, their own education and management of their relationships with others. Their insights and solutions are therefore informed and valuable.

These children and young people want to talk more with one another and within their families. But they also want to be heard by their schools, communities and the wider society. Specifically, they want to be part of the solution.

There are many reasons why it is important that we provide opportunities for young people and children to participate in developing solutions to problems that affect them. This report has provided several of those reasons.

One additional reason we would add is, in the words of one student, “we are the future.”

Most of the young people we spoke with want to remain living in country areas as adults; students from farms want to become farmers in the future. The severity of this drought has made them worry about whether they’ll be able to live that future and they want their investment in their future to be recognised today.

In conclusion UNICEF Australia hopes this report forms the beginning of what will be a much deeper conversation between stakeholders, decision-makers and children and young people about how to best support them through this devastating drought.

Thank you

This report was made possible by the thoughtful, honest and moving insights generously provided by the children and young people we interviewed in NSW. We thank you very much. You helped us to understand the world you inhabit during this difficult time; and the strength, selflessness and compassion you showed were inspiring. Our thanks also go to the many community members – teachers, parents, counsellors, principals, local government workers – and experts who also generously shared their time and insights with us.

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- ¹ Based on BOM, DAWR, media reports and consultations with experts. The entire state of NSW is now impacted by drought: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/aug/08/nsw-declared-100-in-drought-as-farmers-fear-relief-package-too-late>
- ² UNICEF Australia, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, defines a “child” as anyone under the age of 18 years. For the purposes of this project, children, youth and young people refer to those of school Age/attending School.
- ³ See for example: Sam Buckingham-Jones, ‘Children are collateral damage in the Big Dry’, *The Australian* (online), 3 September 2018 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/children-are-collateral-damage-in-the-big-dry/news-story/c2f8b689f27bfa07acb578980c4f13f5> Matt Bedford, ‘Children on drought-ravaged farms get no time for rest or recuperation during their school holidays’, *ABC New England* (online), 5 October 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-05/drought-children-of-farming-families-must-roll-up-their-sleeves/10333484>; Anna Henderson, ‘From the drought to the dancefloor: the kids of the big dry’, ABC news (online), 31 July 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-30/drought-to-the-dancefloor-the-kids-of-the-big-dry/10048816>
- ⁴ See also recent media reports, for eg: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/high-chance-of-el-nino-in-australia-worsening-heat-bushfires-and-drought>
- ⁵ UNICEF is the United Nations Children’s Fund, working in 190 countries and territories to protect the rights of every child. At the heart of its work is the belief that all children have a right to survive, thrive and fulfil their potential. For more information on UNICEF Australia, please see: <https://www.unicef.org.au/about-us>
- ⁶ This includes but is not limited to children of those working in the farming sector.
- ⁷ National Drought Agreement, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, December 2018, <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/drought-policy-national-drought-agreement>
Farm Household Allowance guidelines, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, 2018, <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/farm-household-allowance/guidelines>
NSW Drought Strategy and Framework, <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/climate-and-emergencies/drought/drought-in-nsw>
- ⁸ For more information, see: <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/>
- ⁹ For more information, see: <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/farm-household-allowance>
- ¹⁰ See for example: <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/social-community-support-services>
- ¹¹ For more information, see: <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/assistance-for-isolated-children-scheme/payment-types-and-rates/payment-rates>
- ¹² For current criteria, see: <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/enablers/dependent-or-independent-youth-allowance/29921>
- ¹³ For more information, see: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/your-government/the-premier/media-releases-from-the-premier/more-than-1-billion-in-support-to-help-farmers-through-worsening-drought/>
- ¹⁴ For more information, see: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/Pages/emergency-drought-relief.aspx>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/your-government/the-premier/media-releases-from-the-premier/support-for-drought-affected-preschools/>
- ¹⁶ These include the Country Women’s Association, NSW Rural Resilience Program, Rural Adversity and Mental Health Program, Headspace, Isolated Children and Parents’ Association, Primary Health Network (Hunter, New England and Central Coast), NSW Department of Education and Training (Rural Education)
- ¹⁷ Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/1806-CS-Policy-UA.pdf>
- ¹⁸ These are available at: <https://www.unicef.org.au/about-us/accountability-governance>
- ¹⁹ UNICEF, ‘Module 1: Social Ecology Model, Communication for Development, available at: https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/Module_1_SEM-C4D.docx
- ²⁰ Where bore water is held in above-ground dams then piped over distances in above-ground pipes. See: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/water/pages/groundwater.aspx>
- ²¹ As argued by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, ‘Inquiry into the Accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia: ARACY Submission’, Submission 81, available at: <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=76e292a3-05b8-4c52-b82d-57b4ac3ebf3a&subld=612900>
- ²² <http://www.resiliencyouth.org.au/>
- ²³ See also in John Dean and Helen J. Stain, ‘The Impact of Drought on the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Adolescents in Rural and Remote NSW’, (2007) 23 (4) *Journal of Rural Health* 356-54
- ²⁴ See for example Beyond Blue, ‘Beyond Blue Submission (Submission 85)’, May 2018, *Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs: Accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia*, p.3, available at: https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/policy-submissions/bw0526_sub_submission-to-the-inquiry-on-rural-and-remote-mh-services_final.pdf?sfvrsn=be48c9ea_2
- ²⁵ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament of Australia, *Accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia* (December 2018), Recommendation #3. See also Senate Committee Recommendation #8 supporting a Commonwealth Government review of the role of Primary Health Networks in commissioning mental health services under the stepped care model to ensure effective and appropriate service delivery in regional, rural and remote areas.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ See for example, Beyond Blue, note 26.
- ²⁸ This is consistent with previous consultations with drought-affected young people See for example, Carnie et al, note 24.

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