being a/part

A short report

What is the impact for young people when their relationships in their early years are seriously disrupted?

Do young people find other avenues of social support and places to belong that help them to successfully navigate the challenges of adolescence?

And are there ways that service providers and government policy makers can help them on this journey?

These questions are at the core of

***Being a/part: a study into young people's experiences of belonging*.**

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Belonging is… when you get a feeling in your chest of happiness.

Being a/part participant, aged 18

What was the research?

The *Being a/part* study set out to make a contribution to the body of knowledge that exists around working with young people. Anglicare agencies provide a range of services to people in the community including providing a vast array of services specifically to young people. The research aimed to focus on the experiences and insights of young people and what they felt was important for them to feel supported and that they belong.

Key Findings

A total of 280 surveys were completed by participants over 4 weeks in April/May. All these young people were aged between 17 and 21; two-thirds were female, and nine out of ten identified themselves as Australian. From their responses to the survey questions we found:

There is *no connection* between perceived social support from any source and a sense of belonging.

The research question we posed was: Does perceived social support and sense of belonging mediate the relationship between childhood adversity, quality of life and psychological functioning in young adulthood?

What that means is, does how a young person perceive the support they get from important people in their lives, together with a strong sense of belonging to people and place, change the impact of childhood experiences on how they grow into young adults?

The way both social support and a sense of belonging were measured in this study resulted in there being no connection between them. That is to say that there is no added effect on outcomes in adulthood when both high levels of perceived social support and a high sense of belonging are present.

Take away message:

It is not that a sense of support and a sense of belonging do not have an impact on the outcomes for young adults, as we will show later, but that there is no *combined* effect.

I have two major supports, my friend who teaches me how to skateboard, he's been a true friend since the day we met and my boyfriend, I think we need each other because we are so alike. He needs me for support just as much as I need him.

Being a/part participant, age 18

im not supported by my family and wish I had someone who would make me the most important thing in their life.

Being a/part participant, age 21

It is so vital to get support otherwise the feeling of [being] lost is overwhelming.

Being a/part participant, age 19

I want to be loved.

Being a/part participant, age 17

Young people with *higher* current levels of psychological distress feel they have *less* support from their families, friends and significant others and a *lower* sense of belonging.

Across the board, psychological distress led to decreased perceptions of social support from all sources and a lower sense of belonging. Psychological distress includes general feelings of anxiety including fatigue, a sense of worthlessness, nervousness, depression, restlessness and hopelessness which ultimately impact on psychological wellbeing.

Psychological distress was both a predictor and an outcome of perceived social support and a sense of belonging in that it had a 'mutually reinforcing relationship'. This means that lower perceptions of support or a lower sense of belonging leads to a higher level of psychological distress and that higher levels of psychological distress lead to lower levels of perceived social support and a lower sense of belonging. This finding in particular lends weight to the importance of services that support young people with mental health concerns.

Take away message:

The presence of distress can be a contributing factor for further poor self-worth appraisals which, in the end, impact on how the young person relates to the world around them.

As childhood adversities *increase*, there is a corresponding *decrease* in perceived family support and sense of belonging.

In line with other studies in this area, the *Being a/part* study showed that the increase in the number of adversities experienced by a young person greatly impacts on how that person feels they will be supported by their family and how they view their place in the world.

We found that the greater the number of adversities the stronger the sense of feeling 'let down' by family. Subsequently the expectations of support are lower than if a fewer number of adversities were experienced.

This finding does not diminish young people's experiences of adversity but serves to demonstrate that childhood trauma that is not prevented can have compounding effects later in life.

[W]hat works best for me when being supported is when someone listens to me, is consistent, write out a plan with me, reflective listening and supports me to make the best decisions for me. Remembering my name would be good too, because I'm not a barcode or a case file number I'm a human that an individual with a voice.

Being a/part participant, age 18

Take away message:

Prevention and early intervention is integral not only for protecting young people against poor outcomes later in life but also for safeguarding the family unit.

Young people who feel they are *highly* supported by their family, friends and significant others feel *more* connected to their communities.

Young people who feel they will be more supported by family, friends and significant others tend to have a greater connection to the community that surrounds them. Remembering that the original question asked whether or not a combined sense of support and sense of belonging would lead to better outcomes and that we found there was no connection between them, this finding might go some way to showing that there could be a connection.

Take away message:

Community can be considered in a number of different ways, as can how someone feels connected to it. In further exploring these concepts and how they relate to young people we may be able to work out if there is a connection between support, belonging and how these can support young people to achieve great life outcomes.

As the level of perceived social support from significant others *increased*, the likelihood of the young person being engaged with education decreased.

This was an unexpected finding. If anything, the expectation was for the reverse to be true, that increased perceptions of support would lead to an increase in educational engagement rather than a decrease. This finding highlights the complexity of challenges that young people with significant childhood adversities face. Not only are their childhood and adolescent relationships seriously disrupted, so is the 'traditional' journey into young adulthood. Other young people in the same age group may be leaning on social supports to take risks on education. Risks like moving away from home, from support networks to continue on their educational journey. Young people who've experienced trauma and unstable relationships may be maximising the value and opportunity of current social supports

and needing instead to focus on addressing issues arising from childhood, rather than education or training goals.

Take away message:

The role of adults which young people deem to be important or significant is a critical one. This role can mean the difference between a young person feeling they are *a part of* something or *apart from* everything.

To know that when/if ever rock bottom looks like it is right in front of me; knowing that I always have at least one person I can rely on. It also means that I know I have comfort within someone even when I don't have comfort left within myself

Being a/part participant, age 20

Why it's important?

As agencies involved with the provision of care and support to people in the community, it is important to understand help-seeking behaviours and the factors that influence them. In this way, services can be more responsive and more effective in the supports they provide to assist people on their journeys to full and happy lives.

For young people, our study has shown that feelings of support and belonging are changed by the roles of adults in their lives. These adults can often work as powerful motivators or detractors for a young person working to overcome adversity. Though it may not seem new or novel, it reinforces and reminds us that it is important for support workers and policy makers alike to be mindful of that level of influence.

Support in the community sector and in particular that provided by Anglicare services is based on a therapeutic relationship which relies on notions of trust and engagement. Active participation in the process or relationship is one of the greatest predictors of successful outcomes for an individual (Karver et al., 2006). Other studies also point to the seemingly ordinary interactions, conversations and shared activities that people engage in which can have a bearing on outcomes (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Whatever the context, the trust and connection between the person and the support worker is integral.

This makes the findings of the *Being a/part* study particularly relevant in that if a young person is less likely to engage due to lower perceptions or expectations of support, then there is potential for that young person to go on feeling isolated and facing challenges on their own. Trust is a major component of help-seeking behaviour and can often mean the difference between seeking help or not (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christensen, 2010).

The experiences I have shared with the staff have been positive and delightful[.] id admit I had come to some bad times and the staff have helped me a lot in my life and is and will be a positive thing and for other people in care I think you should connect with your team.

Being a/part participant, age 18

Being able to speak for myself, doing things on my own and not having anyone over ride my decisions just because im under 18.

Being a/part participant, age 17

It is also important to remember that perceptions of social support are often reflections of self-evaluations that are linked to the person's sense of their own self-worth and interconnectedness (Blain, Thompson & Whiffen, 1993, cited in Corrales, 2014). These, in turn, are affected by an individual's state of psychological distress, increases in which are likely to bring about a corresponding decrease in positive self-appraisals. With this comes a lower expectation of being cared for or loved (Brown, 2014). However, even though they may not have the expectation of support, these young people have clearly demonstrated that, like everyone else, they desire it which again, is an important aspect of the support relationship and points again to the important role of the support worker and the part they have to play.

Each young person we come into contact with will be a product of their experiences, and those experiences continue to colour their world view. Ultimately, what this study has taught us about young people's perceptions of feeling supported is that the connections they make with others, be they family, friends or significant others in their lives, all have some impact on how they experience the world and their place in it.

Recognising that families are not always the answer, mental health support services are vital for young people, helping to promote a positive self-view as well as addressing residual issues from past adversities. But it is not only mental health services that are important. In all services we should be seeking to develop services and programs where the young person interacts in a community context. Factors which might be considered here include the physical space the service agency occupies and the way in which the young person is able to move in it; the people within the space (including both staff and other service users) and how they interact with the young person; the expectation of behaviour while in the service space and whether or not there is a culture of acceptance and welcoming; and the nature of the service supports being delivered, that is, whether it is generalist or highly specialised (which will have implications for whether or not the young person can identify with other service users).

The *Being a/part* findings lead us to think that adults whom young people deem to be of significance in their lives need to be aware of their role and position of influence. It suggests, too, that current calls in some quarters for young people to look to family before calling on government or society for help are perhaps misguided. The significant other exists outside the family, and it might be exactly that separation that allows them to have the level of influence that they do. The focus perhaps should be on identifying a range of potential significant others and determining how they might be encouraged to step forward and embrace their responsibility—and a

When asked 'What are you looking forward to in the future?' this is how some young people responded:

Getting a job, Getting my P's and starting a family with my girlfriend.

Being a/part participant, age 18

having a stable place to live having a job + having a family.

Being a/part participant, age 19

Having my own family, building a better image for myself, earning antiquate amounts of money, moving away.

Being a/part participant, age 17

Getting my first car, hopefully the right guy that I can trust and have a happy life with. Having children of my own one day, getting married.

Being a/part participant, age 17

I've been saving for ages, and am finally going to be able to have a nice holiday because of it. So travel is something I am looking forward to. Graduating uni and having enough money to put a deposit on a place of my own is something further away I hope to do some time.

Being a/part participant, age 19

responsibility it is, for these individuals tread perhaps the finest line between being a powerful source of support and further reinforcing a negative world view for the young person.

About the participants

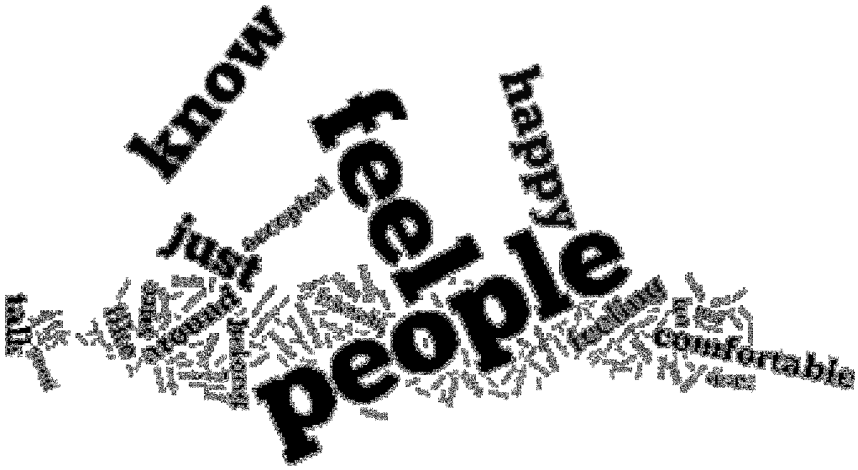
Of the 280 attempted surveys, 254 were able to be included in the final analysis. Reasons for not including a survey in the analysis can be that there are no or too few questions answered in the survey or that the survey respondent falls outside of the eligibility criteria, for instance if they are 24 years old then they are not actually within the age range of 17-21 years of age and therefore cannot be included.

The participants from the *Being a/part* survey are supported by **19** agencies from across the Anglicare Australia network and live in **63** postcode areas.

Demographic characteristic	Proportion
Cultural identity (n=254)	
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander descent	
Aboriginal	11.4%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	0.8%
Placement stability and living arrangements	
Placement/ living stability up to age 17 (n=247)	
Lived in 1 to 2 places	22.0%
Lived in 3 to 5 places	28.9%
Lived in 6 to 10 places	23.3%
Lived in more than 10 places	25.9%
Current living arrangements (n=254)	
Living with parent(s)	26.8%
Living with other person with parental responsibility	1.6%
Living with another relative	8.7%
Living in supported accommodation	14.6%
Living in share accommodation	14.6%
Living alone/independently	21.3%
'Other' living arrangements	12.6%
Education and employment	
Highest level of completed education (n=252)	
Primary school	0.4%
Some secondary schooling—Year 9 or below	14.2%
Year 10	26.8%
Year 11	22.4%
Year 12	21.7%
TAFE	11.0%
Undergraduate degree	1.6%

Demographic characteristic	Proportion
Current engagement with education (n=250)	
Not attending any learning institution	47.6%
Attending high school	14.6%
Completing an apprenticeship or traineeship	3.5%
Attending a private college or institution	9.1%
Attending university	9.8%
Employment status (n=120)	
Working (part-time)	12.5%
Studying (full-time)	58.3%
Working and studying	25.8%
Not working or studying	3.3%
Relationships and parenting (n=251)	
Living with a partner	21.3%
Had, or expecting, a child	22.0%
Psychological wellbeing	
Generalised psychological distress	
Low	29.9%
High	70.1%
Service access and support (n=197)	
Homeless services and crisis accommodation	39.6%
Out of Home Care (placement)	5.6%
Post-care support/transition program	4.6%
Pregnancy/early parenting program	3.0%
Mental health services	8.6%
Emergency Relief	1.0%
Schooling/education support	7.1%
Employment services/programs	13.2%
General youth services/ drop-in centres	17.3%

How do you know when you belong?



They simply just listened to what I needed to say and express. Most people are quick to turn around and say I don't know what to do, sorry and that's that, sometimes all we need in life is for someone to just listen to us, not necessarily talk back and help.

Being a/part participant, age 20

Explanation of terms

There are a number of terms used in this short report and its sister report *Being a/part: State of the Family 2014*. These terms help to clarify the research questions and research findings.

Childhood adversity – A range of negative childhood events experienced by young people that can have lasting impacts into adulthood and influence how they perceive their place and value in the world. Adversities in this study ranged from coming from a large family or wearing dirty clothes through to maltreatment—both experienced and observed—such as violence and sexual abuse.

Mediator – An intervening variable that changes the relationship between other variables.

Outcome – The end point of the relationship between variables.

Perceived social support – A young person's subjective evaluation of the quality of support that is available from family, friends and broader social networks. This is distinct from support that is actually received.

Predictor – A variable that determines and influences another variable.

Psychological distress – The generalised categorisation of symptoms such as fatigue, nervousness, worthlessness, depression, restlessness and hopelessness which subsequently influence the psychological wellbeing of young people.

Sense of Belonging – The interconnectedness of an individual with others and the environment. It also includes assessments of the 'self' in relation to those factors. In the context of this study, a sense of belonging, can frame how a young person accounts for their role in particular contexts, either in a physical or relational setting.

Significant other – These are important people in the young person's life who are distinctly separate from friends and family. From the comments in the survey it is clear that significant others can often be support workers, teachers and other adults with whom they feel a connection.

Variable – Each of the constructs/concepts that this study looks into. The key variables include sense of belonging, psychological distress, perceived social support and childhood adversity.

Help me attend appointments, help me find a job, help me to understand letters from Centrelink and the tax department, help me find accommodation, material aid to help me pay my bond.

Being a/part participant, age 21

[the support worker] **gave me a hug and some food.**

Background of the project

Being a/part is a nationally collaborative research project investigating young people's sense of belonging and connection with their world. It also looks at the potential mechanisms through which the negative outcomes expected from a tough childhood can be lessened.

Being a/part was a brainchild of the Anglicare Research Network and was built upon an initial discussion around the life outcomes of young Australians in out-of-home-care. After months of discussion and preparation, it progressed into a project that takes a broader look at life outcomes of disadvantaged Australian youth. The *Being a/part* survey was administered through an online survey tool and was constructed to measure the relationship between the five interacting elements: *perceived social support*, *sense of belonging*, *childhood adversity*, *outcomes in young adulthood* and *demographic characteristics*.

How we did the research?

To collect young people's perspectives on the idea of belonging and life outcomes, an online survey was constructed. The purpose was to measure the relationship between five interacting elements—namely, perceived social support, a sense of belonging, childhood adversity, outcomes in young adulthood and demographic characteristics. We wanted to see how they each came together to shape young people's perceptions of their future.

Nineteen Anglicare organisations chose to be a part of the national project, and over four weeks in May, staff from various survey sites across the country invited young people who use their services to take part in the project.

All participants were Anglicare service users aged between 17 and 21, who were considered to be resilient individuals who would be capable of handling questions about their experiences.

Before they could participate in the survey, the young person would receive an information sheet, based on which, they could make an informed decision about consenting to be part of the research. Every effort was taken to minimise the chance of young people feeling distressed after the survey.

Being a/part was approved by the Anglicare Victoria Research Ethics Committee (AVREC) in April (along with a number of state and territory statutory approvals–all except Victoria) and soon after, the surveys were distributed online and in person.

Some advice from young people for helping them and others to feel connected:

'to always be true to yourself and honest, you can't be connected with people who aren't who they show they are'

'Empathy'

'Be nice'

'Being kind, nice, good and helpful'

'be yourself'

'Being able to connect with the person, make them feel like you understand'

'grow a strong enough bond with people'

'being able to hold a conversation with someone about something important to yourself'

'talk to us and get to no us'

'Connecting on a personal level, whether interests or problems'

'knowing family history'

'Communication'

Young people participating in the survey were offered a gift card ($10 in most areas) to thank them for their time and effort in contributing to the study.

Where to find the results?

In addition to this short report, the findings from the *Being a/part* study will be reported in other forums and media. Anything produced as a result of the *Being a/part* study can be found on the Anglicare Australia website **http://www.anglicare.asn.au**.

Being a/part: State of the Family 2014

Each year Anglicare Australia produces a State of the Family report. This publication offers insights into the social context in which all manner of families operate in today's society. In previous years the report has focussed on the Global Financial Crisis (2007), Social Exclusion (2011) and the nature of service delivery in an increasingly complex world (2013). In 2012 we released our first research based report – *When there's not enough to eat* – which looked at the experiences and coping strategies of people who rely on emergency relief and experience severe food insecurity.

This research report, looking at the experiences of young people and how to achieve positive outcomes after trauma and adversity fits well within that framework.

Academic Journals

This research aimed to fill a knowledge gap in service delivery about what positive attributes can be used to support young people to find their feet after experiences of childhood adversity. Specifically, we wanted to learn if an increased sense of belonging and feelings

of connection might contribute to better outcomes. As we have discovered, there are things we can learn about a young person's sense of connection and their outcomes. We have been successful in what we have set out to achieve. In view of that, we will publish the findings of the research, along with the comments that young people have made, in academic journals so that others may also learn from what we have found.

Conferences and Forums

Similarly to publishing in journals, presenting findings at conferences and seminars for other people in the sector and will help to share what we have learnt more widely.

Anglicare Australia network members participating in the *Being a/part* project across the country and between them sought responses from 280 young people. Participating network members were:

- ac.care
- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Anglicare North Coast
- Anglicare North Queensland
- Anglicare Northern Territory
- Anglicare South Australia
- Anglicare Southern Queensland
- Anglicare Sydney
- Anglicare Tasmania
- Anglicare Victoria
- Anglicare Western Australia
- Anglicare Willochra
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- CASPA (Child & Adolescent Specialist Programs & Accommodation)
- EQubed
- EPIC Employment Services
- St John's Youth Services
- The Samaritans Foundation
- Parkerville Children and Youth Care

A big Thank You!

There are many people that Anglicare Australia would like to thank for this research. First the *Being a/part* reference group who guided the development of the project and the subsequent reports, articles and other materials coming out of the research.

Next we'd like to thank all of the project partners: the Anglicare agencies that saw the value in this research and took the time and resources to participate.

Finally, we'd like to thank the young people who participated in the research by sharing with us their thoughts and experiences about what it is to belong. We hope that you can see something of your insights included in this paper.

Contact Us

If you would like further information on the *Being a/part* research project or this report, please get in touch with Anglicare Australia on the following details:

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