

# Submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

22 February 2012



**Save the Children**  
New Zealand



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To the Minister for Social Development and Employment

Save the Children New Zealand wishes to make a submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children.

### **Contact Details**

Liz Gibbs (CEO, Save the Children NZ)  
Level 3, 204-210 Willis Street, Wellington 6011  
Ph: 04 385 6847  
Email: [liz.gibbs@savethechildren.org.nz](mailto:liz.gibbs@savethechildren.org.nz)

### **Our Organisation**

Save the Children, which was founded in 1919, is the world's leading independent organisation for children.

Save the Children's vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation. We work in New Zealand and in 120 countries around the world.

Save the Children has a global aspiration to provide safe spaces for children's voices to be heard and their rights respected. Recent activities to ensure children's voices are heard include:

- In 2010, Save the Children New Zealand (SCNZ) submitted the *Hear Our Voices* report to the United Nations and Government, which expressed the views and opinions of children and young people in New Zealand on their own well-being.
- In August 2011, SCNZ established the Save the Children Child and Youth Council (CYC). The CYC is a national body of children and young people that provides advice to SCNZ on matters related to the well-being of children and young people in NZ, and actively works towards identifying solutions to these challenges. The CYC is made up of 22 regional leaders aged between 13 and 17, and targets a constituency made up of young people in NZ under the age of 18.
- In late 2011, SCNZ went live with our *Hear Our Voices Values Exchange*, a new and safe online platform established for the sole purpose of engaging children and young people on matters that affect them, and intended to stimulate solutions and positive action through young people, families, communities, policy makers and government.



## Submission

### Executive Summary

Save the Children New Zealand (SCNZ) wishes to affirm the need to protect vulnerable children and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Green Paper discussion. We support the intent of Government to ensure children in New Zealand thrive, belong and achieve, and recognise the importance of sharing responsibility, showing leadership, and making child-centred policy and practice changes in addressing challenges facing vulnerable children.

In our submission, SCNZ would like to (1) highlight seven key points we wish to be considered as the Government moves forward with its thinking on vulnerable children in New Zealand; and (2) present some of the young people's responses in line with the key questions posed by the Green Paper as gauged through online consultation.

In summary, Save the Children New Zealand calls on Government to improve outcomes for children by:

1. Making the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child a starting point for assessing and addressing child vulnerabilities.
2. Using the Convention to agree on a common definition of 'child vulnerability', noting vulnerability occurs when children's rights are threatened or violated.
3. Understanding what works, as the economic and social cost of 'not getting it right' for children is significant.
4. Taking a coordinated, child-focused, cross-party and long-term approach to improving outcomes for children.
5. Providing universal services for all children, but targeted services for those who need them most.
6. Investing in the early years of childhood to measurably improve lifetime outcomes for children.
7. Ensuring children's voices are heard at all stages of this process and in all aspects of policy decision-making that affects them.



## PART ONE

### Comments / Key Messages

- i) **The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child should be a starting point for assessing and addressing child vulnerabilities.**

The protections sought by the Green Paper are contained in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child ('the Convention'), first drafted by Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of Save the Children in 1923. The Convention, which encompasses the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of all people under the age of 18, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and ratified by New Zealand in 1993.

New Zealand's ratification of the Convention reflects a commitment to children's rights and to putting this commitment into practice. SCNZ acknowledges the legal protections for vulnerable children under the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act, 1989 and the leadership of the Deputy Chief Executive Social Sector Forum on matters related to the Convention. However we call on Government to utilise the Convention as the basis for developing a national framework for accountability leading to specific terms, scope and indicators for effective cross-ministerial coordination regarding vulnerable children to ensure that every child thrives, belongs and achieves. This approach would mainstream and align New Zealand practice with the Convention, a sound internationally binding agreement.

- ii) **A common definition of 'vulnerable children' can be found using the Convention.**

The Green Paper states that vulnerability is difficult to measure and describe, and that Government does not have a comprehensive picture of vulnerable children because information collected is by and within sectors.

We also recognise that child vulnerability is an abstract term. Vulnerable children<sup>1</sup> can be found in all socio-economic levels, cultures and ethnicities, families and whānau, schools and communities. The issues that affect them can be incredibly diverse, as demonstrated by the varied concerns raised in our *Hear Our Voices* report and the online Values Exchange. Bullying, racism, poverty, family violence, teen suicide, health problems, struggles with education, issues surrounding sexuality, gangs, alcohol and drug abuse are only some of the many challenges faced by children and young people in NZ.

SCNZ recommends that in order to be effective, a common definition of what 'vulnerability' means in New Zealand is needed. We submit that vulnerability occurs when children's rights are

<sup>1</sup> We recognise the UNCRC definition of 'children' to mean everyone under the age of 18, and note the Government also uses this definition (Green Paper for Vulnerable Children, pg 2). In moving forward, we would encourage wording such as 'children living in vulnerable circumstances' rather than 'vulnerable children' as vulnerabilities do not define who children are. For the purposes of this submission, however, we use the existing terminology.



threatened or violated. With this common understanding, the list of rights of the child, as articulated in the Convention, could then be used as the base for identifying and addressing child vulnerability across various sectors.

**iii) We need to know what works, as the economic and social cost of ‘not getting it right’ for children is significant.**

As a member of the Every Child Counts coalition, which commissions ongoing research into the well-being of New Zealand children, we recognise the importance of exploring what works best for children in terms of public investment. The recent Every Child Counts report, “1000 days to get it right for every child”<sup>2</sup>, noted that New Zealand ranks 28th out of 30 OECD countries in terms of rates of public investment in children, and the investment we do make ranks as one of the least effective. ‘Getting it wrong’ not only has a hugely detrimental impact on children, it also leads to greater economic costs to our country. The report suggests the economic cost to the New Zealand economy of poor child outcomes is of the order of 3 per cent of GDP (approximately \$6 billion).

Poor early childhood experiences (including poor parenting, inadequate family income, poor quality housing, inability to access health services, educational opportunities and reduced social engagement) generate long-term social and economic costs. Such costs can be measured in terms of low educational and training success, reduced workplace productivity, and increased public health, welfare and justice expenditures. Successful interventions can therefore be powerful investments that produce multi-generational economic multipliers.

Understanding what works, both internationally and within New Zealand, will help. Every Child Counts, for example, has commissioned research to analyse and assess why the Netherlands has been able to achieve high outcomes for children with significantly lower rates of per child public spend in comparison to North European countries (which achieve similar outcomes at a higher cost). While the ‘cost-effective’ results achieved in the Netherlands are startling, it should be emphasised that the Netherlands’ public expenditure per child is nearly twice that of New Zealand’s<sup>3</sup>.

**iv) A coordinated, child-focused, cross-party and long-term approach to improve outcomes for children is required.**

While the causal roots of child vulnerability may reflect broader, longer-term, systemic challenges that can’t be addressed overnight, putting children and their welfare at the core of policy and practice is critical.

<sup>2</sup> Every Child Counts, *1000 Days to Get it Right for Every Child – The effectiveness of public investment in New Zealand children*, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The report states that New Zealand spends about US\$14,000 per child, the Netherlands about US\$24,000, and the top-spending countries, over US\$50,000.



New Zealand must use evidence-based research; identify gaps; agree, cost and resource cross-sectoral plans; establish baseline data; rigorously measure and evaluate policies and programmes to see whether they enhance child well-being; ensure there is clear child-impact reporting; and reallocate money from programmes that don't work to those that do.

We wish to emphasise that child vulnerability is an ethical issue that requires long-term commitment and action from all. Government policies, programmes and services need to be coordinated through a cross-party, central mechanism that ensures the multi-dimensional nature of child well-being is addressed in the short-, medium- and long-term. Establishing a Minister for Children who has cross-cutting ministerial responsibility for improving the outcomes for children would also ensure issues affecting New Zealand's children are at the forefront of political discourse.

The development of a common framework, such as the Children's Action Plan, will facilitate cross-sectoral coordination and unite child-focused work. The plan must improve outcomes for all children and identify priority groups – i.e. targeted services for those that need it most, set targets for increasing well-being, and highlight the key priorities. It should be supported by principle-based legislation, which makes children's best interests central to Government considerations.

We acknowledge the potential for two committees to improve coordination of government activity that works to improve the lives of children: the ministerial committee on poverty; and the Māori Affairs Select Committee to explore the determinants of well-being for Māori children. We look forward to this work being translated into decisive action for New Zealand's vulnerable children.

**v) Provide universal services for all children, but targeted services for those who need them most.**

SCNZ recognises the importance of raising standards for all children, but providing more for those who need it most. To that end, we submit that all children should have access to a set of universal services that is agreed across political parties and sustained in the long term: effective antenatal and post-natal care; more paid parental leave; well child health; free GPs; parenting education and support that enables secure attachment; immunisation; warm, dry housing; nutrition; and quality early childhood care and education.

It is also essential that additional services and support should be available in proportion to the needs of specific groups. For example, the New Zealand Children's Social Health Monitor 2011 Update<sup>4</sup> notes the large disparities in child health status, with Māori and Pacific children experiencing a disproportionate burden of morbidity and mortality. Targeted, culturally responsive interventions that balance community-led development with state-supported services to address these disparities will be critical.

Early childhood, as outlined below, is another key area where targeted investment will improve child outcomes.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nzchildren.co.nz/>



**vi) Invest in the early years of childhood to measurably improve lifetime outcomes for children.**

New Zealand needs to invest in quality and effective early childhood interventions that produce measureable results for children, including concentrating spending in health, early childhood education, and positive parenting.

SCNZ appreciates the importance of taking a life-course approach to developing policies that impact on child development. However, international studies<sup>5</sup> indicate that investing in early childhood is often more effective than interventions that come later in life. The early years are critical for optimal child development, and also when children are the most vulnerable to the long-term damaging consequences of deprivation.

The Every Child Counts “1000 Days” report highlights the economic importance of supporting children, and their families, early on. Not addressing issues in the early years can result in poorer health outcomes, poorer education and consequent labour market outcomes, delinquency and later criminal behaviour, and other factors that inhibit social integration and impose a significant financial burden on the state.

**vii) Ensuring children’s voices are heard in this process, and in any policy decision that affects them, is critical.**

SCNZ recognises that children and young people are not passive objects upon whom policy and practice are imposed. Instead, children are individuals, as well as members of families, whānau, and communities who possess rights and responsibilities and are active agents of change in their own lives. Article 12 of the Convention states that children have the right to an opinion and for it to be listened to and taken seriously. If Government wants to ensure ‘children always come first and remain at the centre of our thinking’, the voices of children and young people must be heard.

We acknowledge the steps taken by Government to bring the Green Paper questions to children and young people. However SCNZ submits that consultation with children needs to go beyond this measure. It must be embedded in all Government and parliamentary processes, and a central feature of all Government sectors that work with children and on child-related issues.

SCNZ’s own work with children and young people on addressing child vulnerability can be found in Part Two of this submission.

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<sup>5</sup> A range of studies is referred to in Chapter 4 – ‘Returns on Investment in Early Childhood’ in Every Child Counts “1000 days to get it right for every child”, 2011.



## PART TWO

### SCNZ consultation with children and young people

#### Consultation

In preparation for the Green Paper submission, SCNZ has worked with the CYC, and posed questions connected to the Green Paper on the online *Hear Our Voices Values Exchange*. To date, we are honoured to represent 131 voices that participated in the Green Paper discussion on our *Values Exchange* website.

Save the Children has also consulted with members of the Every Child Counts / He Mana to ia Tamaiti coalition. Every Child Counts was established in 2004 to promote the concept that children need to be at the centre of government policy and planning if New Zealand is to have an economically and socially sustainable future. Other members include Barnardos NZ, Royal New Zealand Plunket Society, UNICEF NZ, and Te Kahui Mana Ririki. Save the Children CEO Liz Gibbs is currently the Chair of Every Child Counts / He Mana to ia Tamaiti.

As mentioned, SCNZ is currently working to ensure we provide a range of platforms for children and young people to engage on matters that affect them. The establishment of the CYC and online Values Exchange are examples of the tools used to gauge young people's opinions.

Most recently, we asked participants via the Values Exchange what issue they would like Government to address most urgently. We also adapted relevant questions from the Green Paper to generate response from young people across NZ, asking them 'how do we support vulnerable children?'<sup>6</sup>

Respondents come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, illustrated in the richness of their responses, perceptions and suggested solutions. While we recognise that these voices represent only a segment of society, we note that the issues raised are also reflected in studies conducted by other organisations such as the Office of the Children's Commissioner<sup>7</sup>, UNICEF<sup>8</sup>, the Human Rights Commission<sup>9</sup>, and the Ministry for Social Development<sup>10</sup>. We acknowledge that we have presented the aggregated results only, noting the responses can be viewed through different demographic lenses. As the Values Exchange is live, the results will also change over time, however it seems unlikely that the general patterns will alter.

<sup>6</sup> Initial analysis of results was conducted by David Seedhouse, *Values Exchange*, 12 Dec 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Dr Janis Carroll-Lind, *Responsive Schools*, Office of the Children's Commissioner, March 2010; Dr Janis Carroll-Lind, *School Safety: inquiry into the safety of students at school*, Office of the Children's Commissioner, February 2009.

<sup>8</sup> *Children are Unbeatable: Seven very good reasons not to beat a child*, Office of the Children's Commissioner, UNICEF New Zealand and the Families Commission, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc\\_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/01-Sep-2009\\_14-08-40\\_Human\\_Rights\\_School\\_Violence\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/01-Sep-2009_14-08-40_Human_Rights_School_Violence_FINAL.pdf)

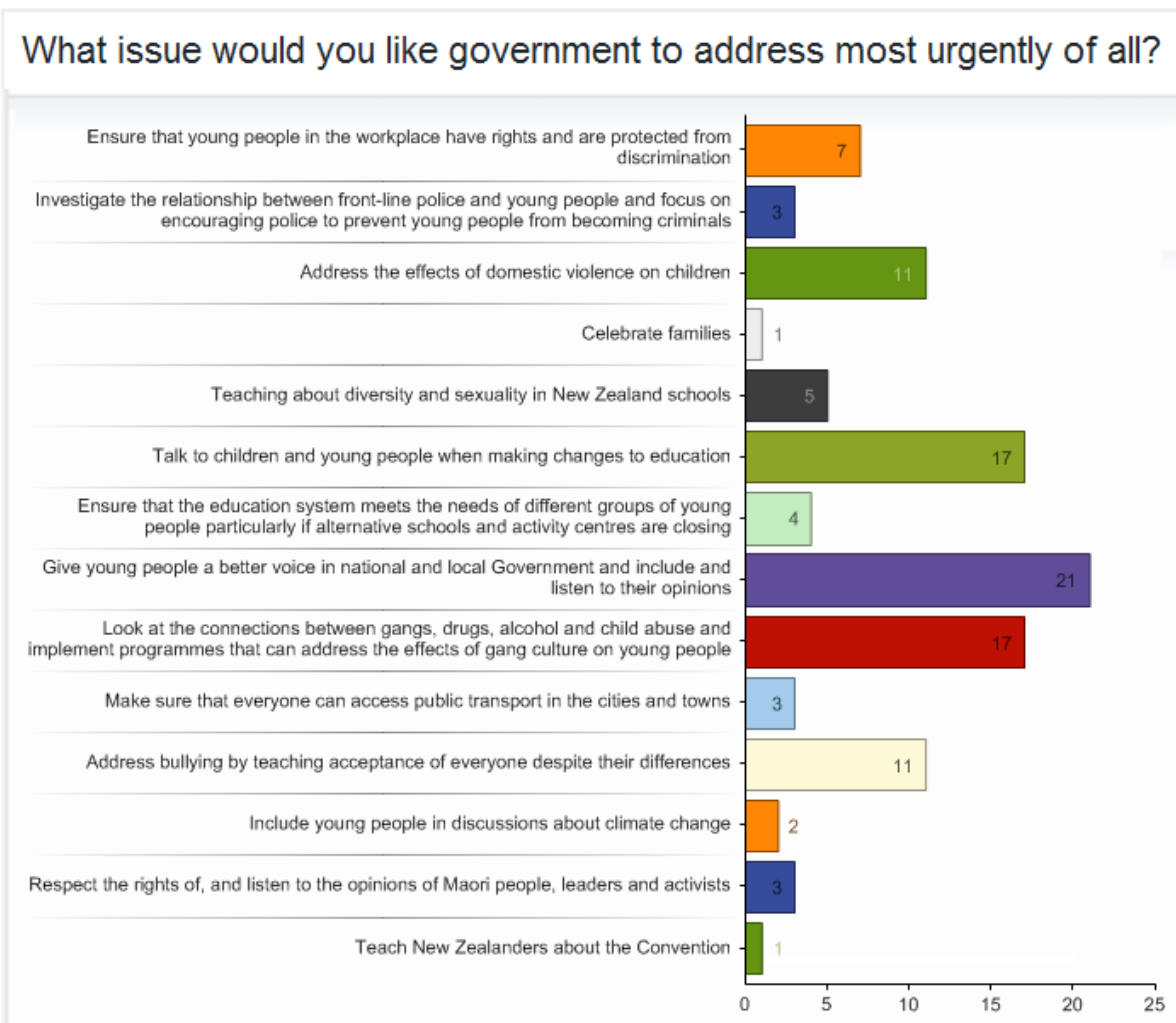
<sup>10</sup> [http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc\\_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/01-Sep-2009\\_14-08-40\\_Human\\_Rights\\_School\\_Violence\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.hrc.co.nz/hrc_new/hrc/cms/files/documents/01-Sep-2009_14-08-40_Human_Rights_School_Violence_FINAL.pdf)



A selection of children's thoughts and ideas from these consultations are listed below.

- **What are the key issues?**

Taking recommendations from the 2010 *Hear Our Voices* consultation as a starting point, we asked young people what issue they wanted Government to address most urgently. The results showed:



Other issues that young people felt important included youth binge drinking, smoking, depression, teen suicide, teen pregnancy, poverty, environmental responsibility, better access to healthcare, unemployment, racism, and improving housing.



If we map the above issues in terms of the Government's focus on every child thriving, belonging and achieving, the following emerges (noting overlaps):

Thrive		Belong		Achieve	
Be healthy	- domestic violence - bullying - youth binge drinking / smoking / drugs -depression / suicide - teen pregnancy -better access to healthcare -improved housing	Be loved	- domestic violence -celebrate families - depression / suicide	Lifelong learning	-talk to children/youth about education decisions -ensure education meets needs of different groups -teach NZers about the UNCRC
Be protected from harm	-protection in the workplace - domestic violence - gang culture -bullying - youth binge drinking / smoking / drugs - depression / suicide -racism -improved housing	Be confident in identity	-teach diversity and sexuality in schools -respect rights and opinions of Māori -teach NZers about the UNCRC - depression / suicide -racism	Contribute positively to the future	-greater voice in Government -better access to public transport -greater voice in climate change issues -unemployment
Basic physical needs met	- poverty - teen pregnancy -better access to healthcare -unemployment -improved housing	Positive connections	-protection in the workplace -working with police in crime prevention - domestic violence -celebrate families - gang culture - bullying - teen pregnancy -unemployment -racism	Māori succeed	-greater voice in Government -respect rights and opinions of Māori -unemployment -racism
				Achieve in own culture	- bullying - depression / suicide -racism

- **What is vulnerability?**

Participants were asked how they would define 'vulnerable child'. Responses reflected the various elements of what it means to thrive, belong and achieve. Not having basic physical needs met, or living in an unsafe family environment were the main themes (disability and/or significant health problems didn't feature at all). Comments included:



*"A child whose basic needs are not provided or is in harm's way with no one to protect them."*

*"A child that is in an unhealthy environment...that can't necessarily speak up for itself."*

*"A child who is in danger of self-harm and harm caused by their family and/or community."*

*"Someone who has abusive/alcoholic/drug-addicted parents (or an unstable background), who lives in poverty, doesn't get enough food/shelter/love, lacks education (due to family issues, money etc)."*

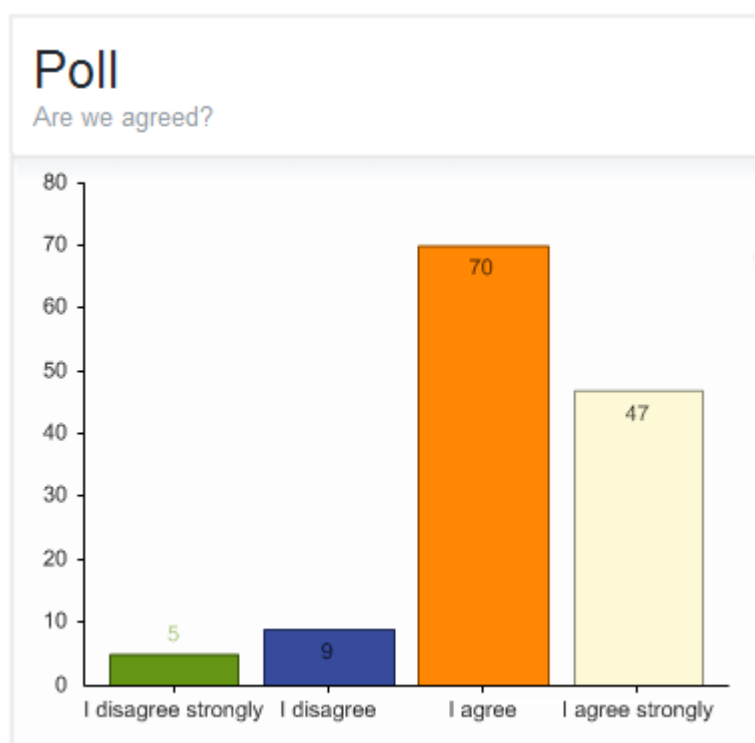
*"A child who is at risk of physical or mental distress or abuse."*

*"Someone who does not have a supporting family who loves and cares for them, or is not able to afford the things they need most."*

When asked what is the most important influence when it comes to improving the lives of vulnerable children, the majority stated that the 'family/whānau' was most critical.

- **How do we support vulnerable children?**

Participants were given a case study which reflected a family in crisis: the parents were struggling financially and emotionally, the children were increasingly engaging in at-risk behaviour. Noting the parents were facing their own challenges, **young people were asked if it is parents' first duty to help their children.**



The majority of respondents agreed that parents' first duty is to their children and clearly thought the most fundamental consideration in this case is the child's right to safety.

*"I think that by putting their children first the parents are fulfilling the commitment they had to their children when they had them."*

However, some disagreed noting that some parents face challenges and need help themselves before they can be expected to care for their children.

*"Children deserve to be loved and safe. This is a duty of the parents, the local community and the country. Following this duty will benefit everybody as the children will grow up to become considerate and helpful people within society."*

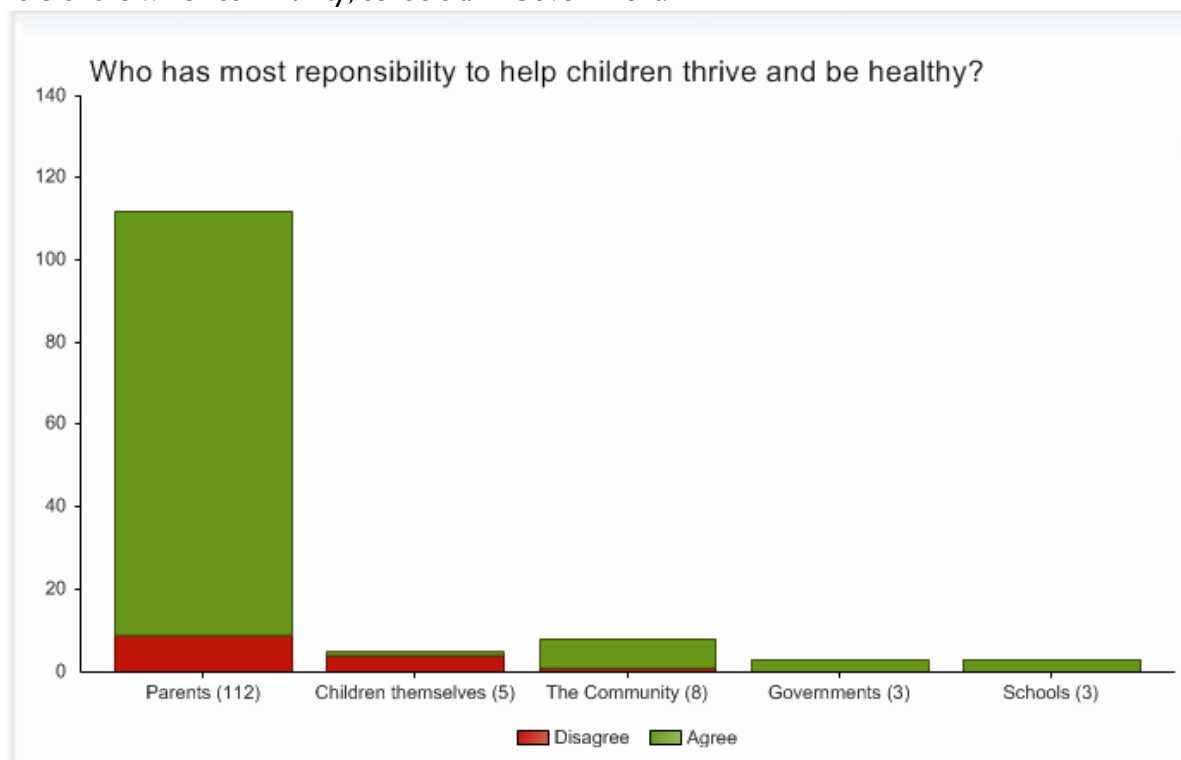
*everybody as the children will grow up to become considerate and helpful people within society."*



When asked **'who matters most' in this case**, respondents did NOT single out the children; rather they thought that 'everyone' matters most. This indicates that young people see the quality of family life as something that is interconnected with society as a whole, rather than solely the result of good/bad parenting. They recognise the need for parents to be supported – both economically and with parenting skills – and argue that it is this support that will allow better parenting.

*"It's sad to learn about the situation that the family is in, the parents have their own serious problems but also have the moral obligation to help their daughter who is having issues. The mother isn't in a right state of mind, so it is unreasonable to blame her. She should be helped first so she can then help the children... she should be the first priority."*

Participants were also asked **who has the most responsibility to ensure children thrive and be healthy**. Again, the parents' role came out clearly on top, but with some consideration for the role of the wider community, schools and Government.



Respondents recognised that the scenario reflected a socially complex issue. Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that 'support' was critical in the context of the scenario, demonstrating a rich understanding of the possibilities for support. The majority suggested that support should be in the form of ensuring basic needs are met (the importance of food, clothing, shelter, and parents providing a loving and safe home environment). However many also believed that it was essential to seek external assistance through specialist organisations and Government.



*“Children need to be kept safe and for this to take place they need help from their parents. If their parents aren't fit to help enough, other family members should be there to help. If not, the government and society needs to help out.”*

*“If social services help out I'm sure that the whole family will feel better.”*

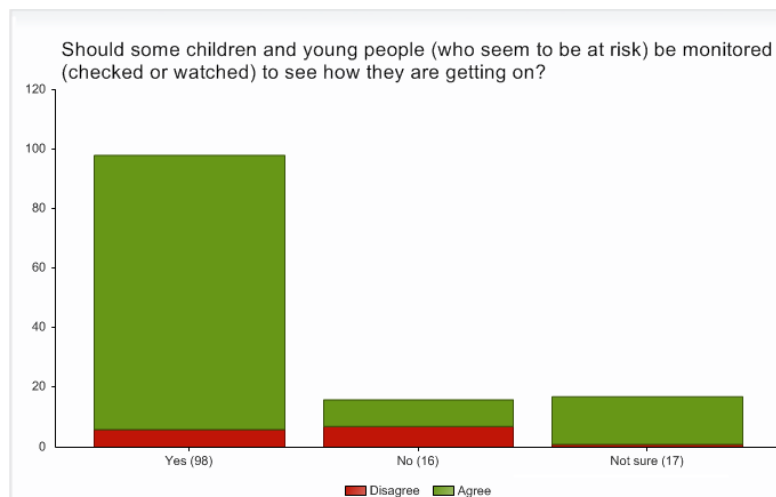
As part of shared responsibility, participants said that government and social services must intervene to protect vulnerable children by helping parents deal with depression, anger or drug and alcohol dependence issues.

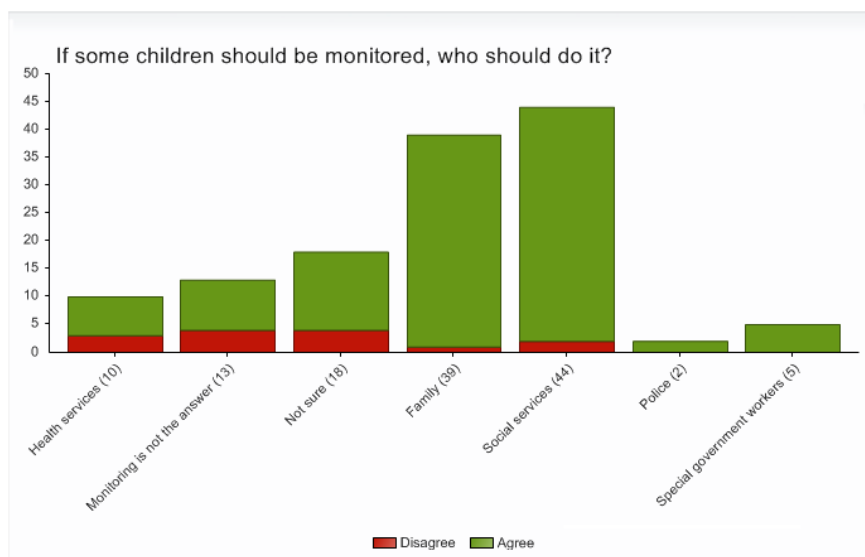
*“By the government and social workers stepping in, they can help the father to control his anger and he could become less aggressive to the family. Plus the mother could get psychological support for her depression.”*

Another suggested a more results-oriented outcome:

*“The family will not just be better with a counselling session. There must be determination with the people helping them.”*

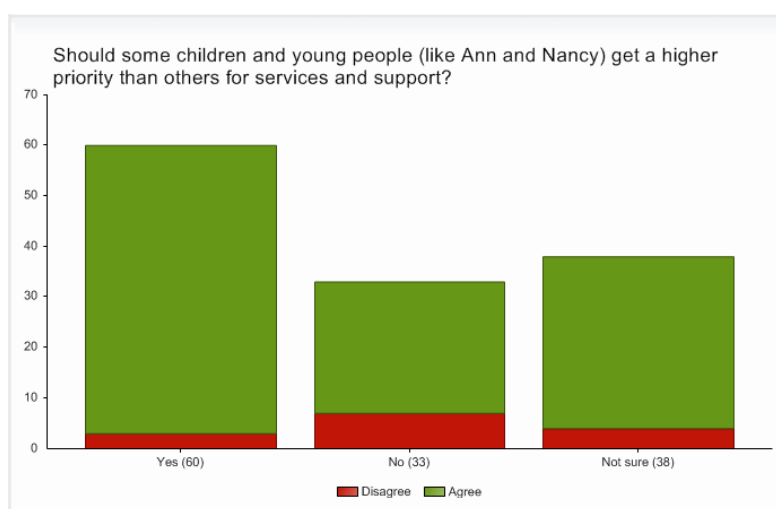
Questions around **monitoring children** indicated strong support for ensuring children are checked regularly, with a balance to be struck between social service support and the role of the family in caring for children.





In terms of **universal vs targeted support**, what emerged was a strong belief in equality among all New Zealanders – that there should be no discrimination between people for any reason. However, it also became clear that while youth wanted a ‘level playing field’, they also recognised the need for special support for vulnerable people.

There was a strong sense that it was our duty to ‘help people who need it’ and ‘protect people’ and that to make things ‘fairer’, help should be given to those who need it.



We also asked participants **how parents can best help children to thrive and be healthy**. Responses included such things as: healthy food, having a secure source of income, providing the basics (food, water, shelter), creating stable and loving family environments, ensuring children have someone to talk to / emotional support, listening, setting good examples, being trusting and respectful, giving children responsibility, and monitoring progress in school.



A selection of responses includes:

*“First of all, the parent must thrive in life and be healthy themselves. I believe many people think that a parent must give everything to their children, but in my opinion, if the parent themselves are not happy they have nothing to offer their children. The child is an observer, and follows the example of their parents. If the parents are happy and a good role-model to their children, then their children are more likely to follow in their footsteps.”*

*“Parents should be able to prioritise their family expenditure to cover the basic needs of their children and should not be ashamed to ask for help if needed. Also they should be able to allocate time to their children so that they may monitor their growth and build strong family ties in order to prevent their children ‘falling off the wagon’. This may not seem possible for everyone but it is indeed correct planning and dedication can build a strong family and ensure that children are healthy and given the best possible opportunities for life.”*

*“Sometimes parents aren’t equipped with the necessary abilities to effectively raise children. In these cases government intervention is permissible. Nevertheless these cases although a major problem are not the majority and more often than not the onus is on the parents to allow their children to thrive and be healthy.”*

*“By having a small amount of financial support even from the government and benefits it can help parents get back with their parenting skills. As they are adults who are emotionally unstable and are under much pressure they lose the strength to help their children and set priorities straight. by getting support from qualified trained professionals, they are able to receive the help that is needed to get them stable, so then they are able to do their job and be their parents.”*

Respondents were asked **what ideas they have about how adults could do a better job of looking after children.** We asked, **from their own experiences, what really makes a difference?**

The trends (advice from young people to both parents and children) are: listen, talk, spend time, get involved, be a role model, set a good example, be respectful, be just.

Beyond this there is a more complex general position that clearly asserts the need for parents to accept their responsibilities and the right of children to be safe, while at the same time encouraging and supporting the independence of young people. The message is that parents need to set the right environment for family flourishing (and may need help in this themselves) but a large part of what ‘family flourishing’ means is that young people are included in decision-making, are treated with real respect, and have their interests genuinely valued.

A selection of responses include:

*“Adults should recognise that children are emotional beings aware of the tensions within households. Adults should not bully children but be supportive and set an example. Treat children as having the intelligence to learn and contribute to decision making.”*

*“I do think that most adults try their best but to help out if childcare was more affordable and they had more support from the local govt. or community it could help them out a bit.”*



*“I think that parents will parent their children how they have been parented themselves. So I think if you hasn’t had a good up-bringing, there need to be people who train people into being better parents, which will create a new cycle of parents who know how to treat children.”*

*“As a teenage mum I know how hard it can be juggling your life with the duties of parenthood. But I really think the most important things are to really be there for your child throughout the stages of their life. As a parent your first priority is your children, Also as a parent I believe you should put your problems aside to help your children as they are fully dependant on you and rely on you to guide them. Every little thing you do can help.”*

The strongest message so far may be the importance of strong, open family relationships – family environments where things that matter can be readily discussed and where everyone’s point of view (adult or child) is heard and considered.

Finally, we asked **what communities and the Government could do to improve the lives of vulnerable children**. With a community focus, responses varied from being more aware of conditions that children are living in, setting up more organisations to support families, more support for struggling families, and creating more cohesive neighbourhoods to ensure children have people to talk to if needed.

In terms of the role of Government, many responses focused on legislation, child protection and monitoring systems. Improving access to a range of more effective support services was a common theme. Ultimately respondents felt it was the Government’s role to support families and communities.

*“The government should put in place youth benefits for those who actually need it, stricter laws against child abuse, and make sure that children know of these measures and have a way of getting help if they are able. The government should also monitor the state of known vulnerable children regularly.”*

*“The government should enforce tougher laws to parents who mistreat or abuse their children. The government should also remove children from dangerous situations... and children shouldn’t be entrusted back to their parents until the parents have done some kind of parenting class or have proved they can be good and responsible parents.”*

*“Have legislation that means that once a child in danger is taken away from those who hurt him/her, they cannot be returned to the same person to prevent further damage to the child. Also create better support systems for children in danger.”*

*“Help the families and communities more and support them.”*

**We thank the Ministry for Social Development for the opportunity to comment on the Green Paper.**