

# CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

ACCORDING TO A  
RECENT REPORT BY THE  
AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF  
FAMILY STUDIES:

“Families do not exist in isolation. They need community supports and, in turn, they are the foundation of strong communities.

Together, they advance a fair, cohesive and resilient nation. Resilience requires support from within and beyond families, tailored to the needs of individual, family and community circumstances.”<sup>1</sup>



## OVERVIEW

Children and their families are an integral part of the community. Families come in all forms, from the traditional two parent household, to sole parent families, blended families, extended family groups and gay and lesbian parented families. This paper looks at the needs of families in recognition of their important role in shaping our community values, aspirations and ongoing long term economic and social sustainability.

Provision of access to opportunities for education and participation provide key conditions for family members to develop their capabilities, to live satisfying and fulfilled lives, remain in the local community and to manage in times of need. Again, these underpin the resilience that enables families to stick together.<sup>2</sup>

Raising children is complex and many issues arise along the way. This Social Issues Paper aims to highlight what children are saying in the Bega Valley, the changes relevant to children and opportunities locally to improve circumstances for children and families now and in the future.

## IN THE BEGA VALLEY

According to the 2011 Census the Bega Valley had 6949 children residing in the Shire. 1686 were aged 0-4yrs, 2593 were 5-11 yrs and 2670 were 12-17yrs, approximately 21.8% of the Bega Valley Shire's population were children 0-17yrs old.

8,874 family households are living in the Bega Valley, 22.6% of total families were couple families with child(ren), and 9.7% were one-parent families, compared with 26.7% and 11.3% respectively for Regional NSW.

Indigenous families in the Bega Valley Shire experience relatively more disadvantage compared to other families, due to less opportunity for social and community participation, resources, access and equity issues, health conditions and geographical isolation.

Bega Valley Shire scores 976.9 on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). The SEIFA measures socio-economic disadvantage and this score indicates that the Bega Valley Shire is more disadvantaged than the national average. This score has an impact on the health and wellbeing of children and families in the area and shows that a number of children are growing up in socially and economically disadvantaged households in the Bega Valley.

## BEGA VALLEY KIDS SAY.....

In the development of this Social Issues Paper consultation was undertaken with 91 children aged between 2.5 years and 12 years from across the Shire. The children provided feedback about what they most enjoy about living in the Bega Valley and who are the important people in their lives.

### 47% of these children identified family as being most important.

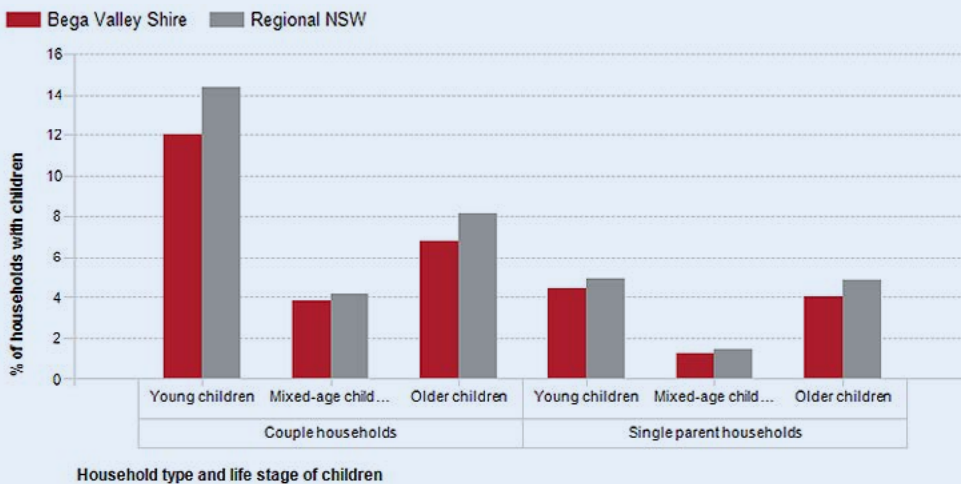
Family features strongly in children's stories, as do friends. Children talk about family that extends beyond brothers, sisters and mum or dad to grandparents, cousins, aunts and family pets.

However, children also talked about how family is at times separated by distance. In these cases, their stories of fun and enjoyment centre on times when families can connect and the spaces in which families can spend time together.

*'Mummy, my brother in Queensland. We went there. Granny, my auntie too.'*  
(AGE 4, EDEN)

*'I went to see my grandpa. We went to a park in his car. It was too far to walk and the sun came up like that. Grandpa is his bikie name and he lives in Hastings in Melbourne.'* (AGE 4, BEGA)

### Households with children, 2011



In Bega Valley Shire, 23% of households are made up of couples with children compared with 27% in Regional NSW.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2011 (Enumerated data)  
Compiled and presented in profile.id by .id, the population experts.





Transport, road and air travel is important to connecting families who live in the Bega Valley Shire with others who are important to them. Strategies that support family connections into and out of the Bega Valley are valued by children. Transport needs to be affordable and accessible, particularly for ageing members of families or young children. Continued lobbying for competitive road and air travel should be considered. Transport is not just simply useful in children's lives. It also threads through children's stories of excitement and pleasure with adults.

*'My best day is Sunday. I go driving on Sunday in the car with my dad. It's his 4 wheel drive and we go through water.'*  
(4 YEARS, EDEN)

*'I would like a bike track all around town and a place to ride bikes and motor bikes. Also a swimming pool where we could go underwater would be good.'*  
(4 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

Safe roads for riding, footpaths, bike paths, skate parks are all strongly featured in children's stories.

**41% of children named public parks as important to them. 31% identified commercial/retail and recreational/entertainment venues as important.**

Families within the Bega Valley Shire are often separated by family circumstance. For example, single parent families may involve an estranged second parent. Children in out of home care may have supervised access with their parents. Often public or commercial venues like a park or Magic Mountain create a safe and neutral space for children to share time with family.

Access to parents and other good adult role models is essential to children. They talk about how public spaces make these



19% of all children identified the importance of the natural environment.

*'I like jumping over the waves at the beach'* (3 - 4 YEARS, MERIMBULA)

*'We need trees on the beach, yeah ... shady spots on the beach would be good'* (4 YEARS, TATHRA)

*'I love the beach and playing in the sand with my brother. I bury my dad.'* (3 - 4 YEARS, MERIMBULA)

*'I would like lots of trees to climb'* (7 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

*'The ocean'* (8 YEARS, BEGA)

A balance of commercial, natural and public spaces are important to children's lives and the ways that they can connect with friends and family. Bega Valley Shire Council's continued focus on sharing the provision of these spaces, services and facilities with the community and other government sectors is important.

The ongoing review of retail and commercial service provision within the Bega Valley Shire may support ongoing local employment strategies that reduce the need for family separation and keep spending within the Shire. Additional infrastructure and education opportunities linked to the use of technology may also reduce the draw of families from the Bega Valley Shire to larger business or employment centres.

9% of all children sought out spaces for artistic and creative activities.

The Bega Valley children also identified artistic and creative spaces as being important to them. This was often about their own pleasure rather than shared pleasure.

*'I would be playing drums and with Barbies and mermaids'* (3 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

*'I would be playing guitar and rock and roll. Also I would like a magician'*

forms of access pleasurable and something to look forward to. Their descriptions suggest they carry these times as a happy memory when their parent is not with them.

It is not only children, who are experiencing formal separations within their family, who celebrate the opportunities to connect with family.

Children recognise that parents' commitments also limit some of the available time for family to connect. Again public and commercial spaces offer the opportunities for families and friends to connect and celebrate.

*'When it's raining we go to Top Fun with my mum and dad and sister and me.'* (3 - 4 YEARS, MERIMBULA)

*'I go to Magic Mountain and nanny and pa and mum and my brother were there. Dad came too because he didn't have to work.'* (4 YEARS, EDEN)

*'A park'* (5 YEARS, BEGA)

*to do magic.* (4 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

*'I would be dancing and painting'*  
(4 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

## 29% of all children linked their best day with venues that are part of the community infrastructure and services.

Children identified community services that enable them to make connections to family and friends. These included education services such as preschool, child care, after school care services and schools. Additionally the local church provided a regular meeting place.

*'I like to go to Preschool. Play on slide in sandpit in boat'* (4 YEARS, EDEN)

*'I would have a rollercoaster for the end of year excursion at a theme park.'*  
(9 YEARS, BEGA)

*'I was at the slides with my friend. The ones up there and the ones down here at preschool.'* (4 YEARS, BEGA)

*'I play with my friends at school.'*  
(8 YEARS EDEN)

*'I go to church with my mummy and daddy.'* (3 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

## 25% of children identified housing as an important part of their life

However private spaces, including housing, that mean family could continue to be together featured strongly. These were spaces in which children had a sense of ownership and could bring toys, pets and friends together.

*'Staying at home and playing in the kid's room. There's toys. My brother and my sister – because it's so fun'*  
(4 YEARS, EDEN)

*'I would be playing with my dog Harvey outside'* (3 YEARS, BERMAGUI)

*'My best day is Tura Beach because I love it and I live there.'*

(3-4 YEARS, MERIMBULA)

Children in their middle childhood years and young teens living in the Bega Valley are looking to be more independent from their parents and family. However, due to the spread of townships in the Bega Valley Shire, children often rely on their parents for transport to visit friends or undertake various activities.

Children of this age are generally developing confidence in all areas of life, such as through friends, schoolwork, sports, music and creative arts. These older children place importance on friendships and are becoming more aware of their own bodies and the world around them. Physical activity, music, local shops, parks, skate parks, computer gaming, relationships with their parents and the opportunity to participate are all high priorities.

## THE CHANGES

*"On 1 January 2012, the National Quality Framework was established and will apply to most long day care, family day care, preschool (or kindergarten) and outside schools hours care services."*<sup>3</sup>

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK INTEGRATES NATIONAL LAW, REGULATIONS, CURRICULUM AND QUALITY STANDARDS.

In the Bega Valley Shire these changes will impact on a number of children's services, including preschools, long day care centers and family day care.

*"The National Quality Framework is an important reform, which will deliver a higher standard of care for children in the critical areas of education, health and safety. The framework will provide clearer and comprehensive information for families so they can choose the best services for their child."*<sup>4</sup>

While the push for improved service delivery and outcomes is welcomed across the sector, the changes bring with it some

challenges. Increased child/staff ratios and staff qualifications have resource implications. Long day care services are required to progressively increase the number of staff working with children under 3 years and ensure a mix of Certificate, Diploma and Degree qualified educators. Family day care, for example, will move from a ratio of 1:5 to 1:4 by 2014.

Closing the Gap is another Federal Government strategy that local education providers are working towards. One of its aims is to reduce Indigenous disadvantage with respect to accessing early childhood education.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health, the NSW government has announced the implementation of new initiatives. The Healthy Children Initiative promotes healthy weight, healthy eating and physical activity. Similarly, the Healthy Worker Initiative aims to modify lifestyle factors, such as inactivity, nutrition, smoking and alcohol.

A recent report to the Australian Government has advised that the cost of violence against women and their children in 2009 was around \$13.6 billion. Without appropriate action this is estimated to rise by another \$2 billion in the next ten years.<sup>6</sup>

The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010-2022, was the first plan from the Government to coordinate action across jurisdictions and the first to focus strongly on prevention. It is the first initiative that looks at the long term, building respectful relationships and working to increase gender equality to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. It holds perpetrators accountable and encourages behaviour change. However, currently there are no behaviour change programs or risk assessment processes for perpetrators of violence in the Bega Valley Shire.

The Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011 is relatively new and part of the

Government's agenda to improve the family law system's response to family violence and abuse. This Bill aims to put the safety of children front and centre in family law matters, without compromising a child's right to a meaningful relationship with both parents where it is safe to do so.<sup>7</sup>

## THE SOCIAL ISSUES

### Infrastructure and Accessibility

Sustainable access to work, shopping precincts, education and play are on the agendas for many families. Minimising the use of cars provides healthier lifestyles and improved community connections.

Equity is fundamental for families and supports social cohesion. Access to all aspects of community, including open space, health, safety, education, transport and economic development is fair to all residents in the Bega Valley Shire regardless of socioeconomic status, cultural background, sex, age or ability.

Consultation with families prioritised a playground and open space as the most important need, where families and young children can unite with others in the community.

Each town in the Bega Valley would benefit from a park and open space area that included BBQ facilities and well lit accessible toilets with baby change tables. Families were looking to interact with community and play with their children without driving long distances. There is also a call for an accessible playground for children with disabilities.

Parents and grandparents identified the need to slow traffic in several places such as Tathra (Andy Poole Drive shops), Tura (outside Woolworths), Merimbula and Bega (Cnr Parker and Carp St).



## Access to Information and Services

Additional, affordable and regular access to early intervention services was identified throughout the consultations with families and service providers in the Bega Valley.

Services like Brighter Futures, South East Women and Children's Services (SEWACS), Family Support and Playability, support numerous families and are much needed services. However, specialists such as paediatricians and child psychologists are less accessible for children and families in the area.

Achieving a connected accessible pedestrian network of pathways for pram use is important for families. This would enable families to move around buildings and streets safely, participate in community life and develop improved healthier lifestyles.

There is currently inadequate pram access into several public buildings and services, creating barriers for families with a child who has a disability.

Caregivers stated through consultations that there was a growing need for more childcare, in particular after school care and vacation care. However the current federally funded vacation care model in Bega was expensive for families with two or more children.

There was an increased need for more 0-2 year old places in childcare so mothers can return to work and keep their jobs. Additionally, childcare needs to be more flexible to support shift workers and accommodate the time it takes to travel to work.

There was also a need for family day care providers in Candelo and Bega, furthermore several preschools in the Bega Valley Shire have waiting lists.

## Housing

Strategies for improving and making housing more affordable are supporting children and families. In NSW, efforts in developing affordable housing mainly target low to moderate income households.

Providing families with greater residential stability through affordable housing reduces stress and related health issues on families and consequently children. It enables families to establish better commitments to children's activities and education as well as parental learning and employment. Bega Valley has a moderate housing need compared to other areas.

Affordable, safe and long term housing enables children and families to establish community connections in their neighbourhood that are ongoing. Permanent housing, for homeless women and children, due to domestic violence is a concern in the Bega Valley. In particular, affordable and available

housing for single women, older women and women on low incomes is an issue.

## Vulnerable Families

Children may be at risk when problems in their family impact on the ability of their parents to properly care for them. Children are greatly affected by parental problems such as mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, family violence, homelessness and intellectual disability.<sup>8</sup>

The consequences for the victims of domestic violence, including children witnessing violence, are complex and wide-ranging. It can have a negative impact on the victim's psychological, emotional and physical health.<sup>9</sup>

Women are commonly the victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. However, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research has identified that 18% of perpetrators are also women and 28.9% of victims are men.<sup>10</sup>

Domestic violence harms the well-being of families. Children need to grow up in a secure and nurturing environment for ideal development.<sup>11</sup>

## STRENGTHS IN THE BEGA VALLEY

The natural environment in the Bega Valley is a brilliant opportunity for children and families. The bush, beach, country and mountains provide plenty of opportunity to participate in structured and unstructured play and family time. Sandcastles on the beach in winter or summer, fishing, swimming, bike riding, bushwalking, playing in creeks and bushland, walking on farms, the list is endless.

No matter where people live in the Bega Valley they are reasonably close to accessing the natural environment.

Young adults who grew up in the Bega Valley come 'home' from spending time away, for the beauty of the Bega

Valley and their family. 'Seachange and Treechange' families move to the Bega Valley for the beautiful environment, lack of urban development and relaxed country/coastal lifestyle to raise families.

The Bega Valley population in general, is a small community with energy to support community groups, events, activities, art, music, education and local produce.

These resilient groups of people in our community often support families and children informally and regularly throughout life. There is a strong connection to family in the Bega Valley and a history of progressive groups of people supporting community life and social cohesion.

## THE CONSTRAINTS

The Bega Valley Shire is a relatively isolated rural community, with a large geographical spread of small towns. It is situated 6.5 hours from Sydney, 3 hours from Canberra and 7 hours from Melbourne. There is limited choice for families with employment, accommodation, care options, childcare, transport and health due to the geographically dispersed population.

The distance to travel to town is a constraint for people living on rural properties or outside the main towns. Smaller rural towns are more affordable for families living in rural areas. This may increase social isolation and cause some challenges for education, care, health and transport issues.

## THE OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunity to develop and expand services for children and families in the Bega Valley is welcomed by both service providers and parents. The child centred approach programs are holistic and the commitment from earlier educators and early intervention organisations is high.

Social connections for children and families are important, children benefit from regular interaction with their peers.



Furthermore, friendship in primary school is associated with self-esteem. Vulnerable children may not have opportunities to form these social connections or have access to positive role models. Support and services such as youth groups, after school programs, school holiday programs, mentoring and recreational activities are important for families.

There is an opportunity to reduce the barriers to social inclusion through providing ongoing opportunities to participate in community life, such as attending preschool and school activities. Whilst endeavouring to increase opportunities for social inclusion, issues around transport and financial constraints for families need to be addressed.

Regular connection with other people in the community enables the development of friendships and provides support to children and parents under stress. In neighbourhoods where adults report positive social ties, children demonstrated fewer behavioural problems.<sup>12</sup>

Improving the quality of life, recreation, education, work and social interaction of our community must be a priority. Urban planning and development can play an important role in ensuring that new and existing community members have equal access to a range of facilities and service. Equal access to health promoting features of urban development include open space, safe pedestrian and cycling environments, gathering places and natural areas.<sup>13</sup>

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### SOCIAL ISSUES PAPERS

This document is part of a broader Social Issues Paper produced by the Bega Valley Shire Council. To read the document in its' entirety go to [www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au](http://www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au)

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