



Australian
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Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood

A More for Children Report

Sharon Bessell and Cadhla O'Sullivan

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Acknowledgements

Contact Us

The Children's Policy Centre
The Crawford School of
Public Policy

The Australian National
University

sharon.bessell@anu.edu.au

cadhla.osullivan@anu.edu.au

childrenspolicycentre.org

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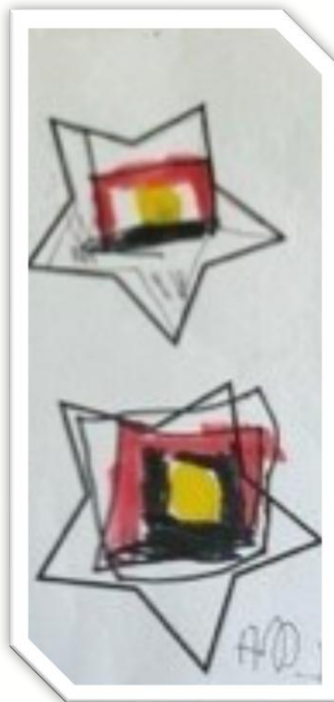
The research was funded by Catholic Care Victoria through Greater Shepparton Communities for Children. It draws on research with boys in Greater Shepparton and three other communities across Australia.

Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Catholic Care.

The Children's Policy Centre acknowledges, celebrates, and pays our respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people on whose country we are situated, and to all First Nations Australians on whose traditional lands we work.

The research reported here is taking place primarily on the lands of the Yorta Yorta people. We recognise that these lands were never ceded. We pay respect to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing care for and connection to country.

In our research, our aim is to engage genuinely and respectfully with the traditional owners of the lands on which we work, recognising the importance of connection to community and country for all children and young people, but especially for First Nations children and young people.



Drawing by Rar, aged 7 years

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What is More for Children?

More for Children is a program of transformative research that aims to understand children's experiences of poverty in order to act. Led by the Children's Policy Centre at the Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, More for Children is driven by the vision that all children have material basics, opportunities now and into the future, and strong and supportive relationships. Currently, Australia is far from achieving that vision, with one in six children living in income poverty. More for Children aims to provide a knowledge base for change.¹

The More for Children research uses a rights-based, child-centred research methodology, put into practice through child-centred research workshops.² Our aim is to understand deeply the ways in which poverty shapes and constrains children's lives, the systems and services that need to change, and how we can better support children to be healthy, happy and live free from poverty.

The first phase of More for Children involved research with 162 children, in two regional communities (Victoria and Tasmania) and two urban communities (Western Australia and ACT). Sixty-eight children participated in Greater Shepparton. Ten percent of children that participated in phase one identified as Indigenous.

The More for Children research found that children in middle childhood experience poverty when they lack the material basics, their opportunities are narrowed now and into the future, and there is an absence of strong and supportive relationships. The following, child-centred definition of poverty was developed from the More for Children research:

Poverty is the interplay between key material and non-material deprivations, limiting children's choices now and into the future.

*It means children do not have the **material basics**, their **opportunities** are narrowed, and foundational **relationships** are not in place or are under pressure.³*

¹ Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. *More for Children: Children's Experiences of Poverty in Australia*. Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. Available at <https://childrenspolicycentre.org/latest-news/more-for-children-childrens-experiences-ofpoverty-in-australia/>

² Bessell, S. and O'Sullivan, C. 2024. *More for Children: Rights-based Methodology for Research with Children about Poverty*. Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. Available at <https://childrenspolicycentre.org/resource-type/reports/more-for-children-rights-based-methodology/>

³ Bessell, S., O'Sullivan, C., Rose, T., Lang, M., and Avrahamzon, T. (2025). Measuring Multidimensional Child Poverty in Australia. *Australian Economic Review*, 58, S22-S35.

As the following discussion highlights, multidimensional poverty continues to shape children's lives as they move into adolescence. For the boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys', this plays out as layered and cumulative deprivations, with the lack of connection particularly painful. Notably, boys described feeling they had no control over the direction of their lives and shared their worries about being forced down a path they do not want to follow. The experiences shared by boys through the 'Connecting Boys' research is the continuation and arguably exacerbation of the multidimensional poverty that structures their lives.

The MOR Framework

The MOR Framework is based on what children told us is important if they and their families are to live free from poverty, during the first phase of More for Children.

The MOR Framework helps us to understand poverty from a child standpoint. It enables us to assess progress towards ending child poverty by understanding deeply the way poverty shapes children's lives. It also uncovers the things that matter most to children, providing a basis for action that is child-centred. Importantly, the MOR Framework provides a means of addressing the underlying causes of poverty.

The MOR Framework recognises that a lack of income is at the heart of poverty, but poverty is experienced as more than insufficient income. Poverty shapes every aspect of children's lives – creating insecurity, limiting what they can do and how they participate in their communities, shaping how they are able to learn, and often putting stress on relationships that children value deeply.

Deprivation in any of the three dimensions of the MOR Framework negatively impacts children. Deprivation across all dimensions creates multidimensional child poverty.

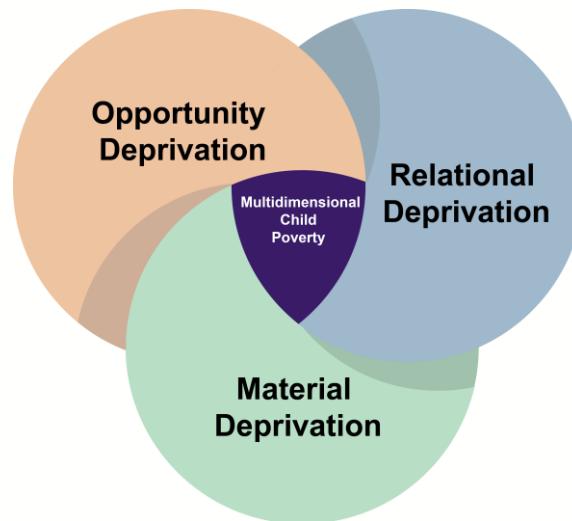


Figure 1: The MOR Framework

The MOR Framework provides the basis for three current research projects: the MOR Index, the MOR Policy Assessment, and the MOR Jigsaw. The MOR Index is developing the principles and methodology for a child-centred measure of multidimensional poverty. The MOR Policy Assessment provides a means of designing, delivering, and determining the impact of policy on both the extent of child poverty and children’s experiences of poverty. The MOR Jigsaw is a child-centred place-based tool-kit to support organisations and communities to work with children to ensure the pieces are in place locally for children to live free from poverty. Figure 2 provides an overview of the More for Children program of research.

THE MOR JIGSAW	MOR POLICY ASSESSMENT	THE MOR INDEX
A CHILD-LED, PLACE-BASED TOOL-KIT FOR LOCAL ACTION	CHILD CENTRED POLICY ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	A CHILD-CENTRED MEASURE OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY
THE MOR FRAMEWORK MATERIAL BASICS; OPPORTUNITIES NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE; STRONG AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS		
RIGHTS-BASED, CHILD-CENTRED RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN		

Figure 2: The More for Children program of research

Within each dimension of the MOR Framework, there are six themes. These themes have been identified by children as essential if they are to be free from deprivation and multidimensional poverty. The MOR Jigsaw is a child-centred, place-based means of understanding which themes (or pieces) are in place in each dimension. When all pieces of the MOR Jigsaw are in place, children are living free from poverty: the material basics are met, they have opportunities now and into the future, and are supported by strong, caring relationships. As pieces are missing, the level of deprivation experienced by children increases. The MOR Jigsaw provides a child-led, place-based means of understanding which pieces are in place, and which are missing.

The image below depicts the MOR Jigsaw. The pieces have now been finalised, based on rigorous testing with children who participated in phase one of More for Children.

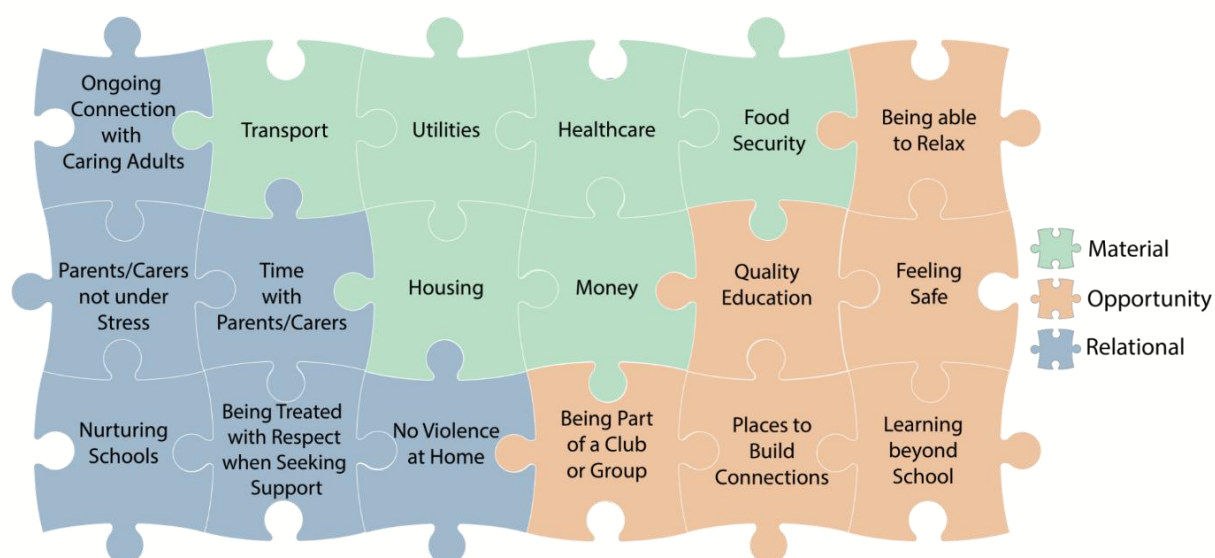


Figure 3: The MOR Jigsaw

Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood

The first phase of More for Children highlighted the extent to which children are disconnected from their communities and the deep sense of isolation that shapes the lives of many. While both boys and girls described having few social connections and a lack of intergenerational relationships, many boys spoke of deep isolation and having very few adult men in their lives.

In June 2025, Catholic Care Victoria and the Children’s Policy Centre at the Australian National University entered a partnership agreement to further explore the ways in which the pieces of the MOR Jigsaw are in place or absent for boys. The focus on boys responds to both the findings of the first component of More for Children and to concerns among policymakers and service providers that disconnection and violence are significant factors in boys’ lives. Figure 4 shows where ‘Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood’ sits within More for Children.

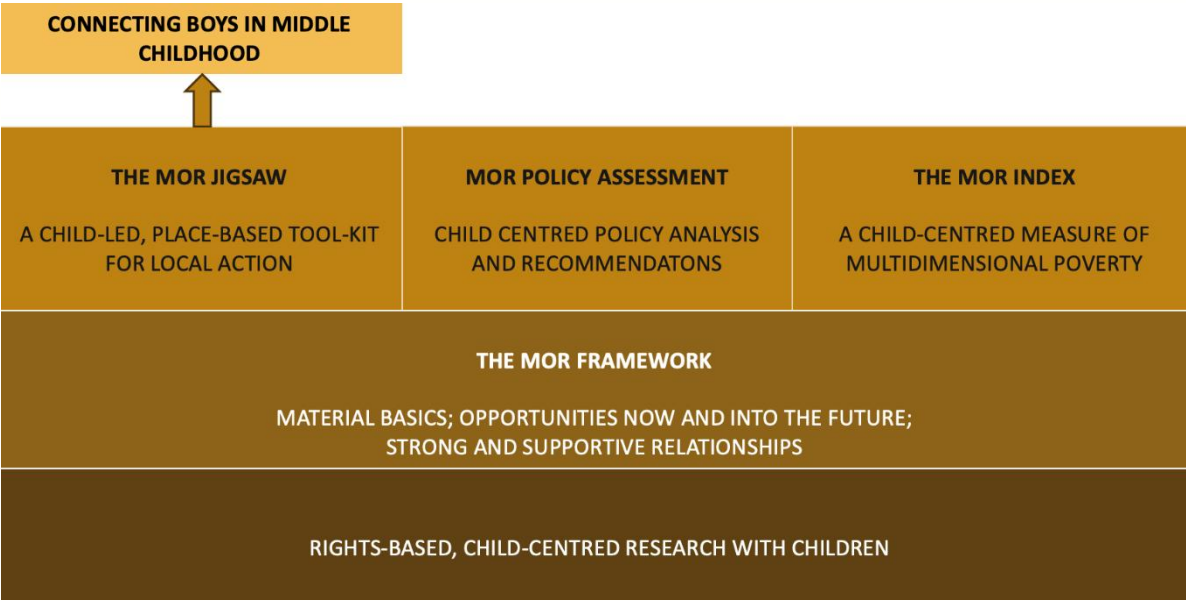


Figure 4: Connecting boys in middle childhood

This report outlines the findings from the ‘Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood’ component of More for Children. It draws on the experiences of 70 boys who participated in the More for Children research and deepens insights through additional research with the smaller group of boys who participated in ‘Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood’.

Methodology and Participants

‘Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood’ (Connecting Boys) uses the rights-based, child-centred methodology that shapes all research within More for Children, providing children with the right to withdraw from the research at any time and to participate on their own terms. Children are treated with respect and dignity throughout the research and in ‘Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood’ are positioned as partners in identifying the missing pieces and beginning to explore possible local responses. The More for Children research methodology has been approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol: 2021/458).

All boys who participated in ‘Connecting Boys’ also took part in the first phase of More for Children. At the beginning of the ‘Connecting Boys’ research (2025), the boys who participated were aged between 12 and 15 years; most were in year seven of secondary school, one was no longer attending school because of violence and disconnection. The boys who participated in ‘Connecting Boys’ took part in either child-centred research workshops or in less structured research conversations. Overall, four child-centred research workshops and five research conversations were held; several boys participated in several research sessions, while a smaller number participated in only one.

Research workshops and conversations were conducted by Sharon Bessell and Cadhla O’Sullivan, with support from Belinda Whitelaw, the More for Children Community Engagement Officer.

During initial workshops with the boys, the MOR Jigsaw was tested with children, ensuring that it makes sense and does not exclude pieces that children consider essential. Workshops then identified the pieces that are missing from the perspective of boys and what local actions might result in securing the missing pieces. Research conversations provided deeper insight into the issues facing boys.

Findings

The MOR Jigsaw resonated strongly with all boys participating in ‘Connecting Boys in Middle Childhood’ and proved to be a highly effective and supportive means of catalysing often difficult conversations. Importantly, the MOR Jigsaw provided participating boys with a means of directing conversations. One boy reflected on this in a workshop session, stating ‘[the Jigsaw] helps with what you are talking about, it’s like a guide to start conversations.’ (boy, 13 years)

It is important to note the depth and complexity of the issues facing some of the boys. All the boys have experienced or are experiencing some level of material deprivation; for many, material deprivation was deep and included food insecurity and regular hunger. For some, issues of family violence or drug

abuse added another layer of complexity and pain to their experiences that they felt were often beyond solutions. Significantly, at times the boys expressed the view that it was too late for them, but that they could help change things for 'kids' who are experiencing similar issues to them. Yet, the boys involved in the research were between the ages of 12 and 15 years – most were 12 years – and clearly need support and connection to ensure that it is not too late for them. The boys expressed deep concern for their community and, in particular, for younger children. They also spoke of their desire to use their own experiences to help other children who are dealing with similar issues. Of deepest concern to the boys were issues of drugs and violence. One boy noted that while there is a drug rehabilitation centre in his community, there is no detox centre, meaning those needing help with addiction have to move away, which is impossible for some people; if people do move, families are often separated as a result. This was one example of the boys feeling that the services they and their families needed are unavailable. All boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' expressed deep frustration that issues such as violence and drug addiction are widespread and deeply entrenched but may be too difficult, or perhaps impossible, to fix. Nevertheless, they felt the Jigsaw made sense and could be used to identify some pieces that could be actioned to improve the lives of children and young people in their communities.

The boys who participated in the research workshops and conversations identified the following pieces of the MOR Jigsaw as critically important but missing in the lives of many children, particularly for boys in middle childhood and transitioning into adolescence.

-  Money
-  Food security
-  Feeling safe
-  No violence at home
-  Places to build connections
-  Learning outside school
-  Ongoing connection with caring adults
-  Being able to relax



Money

Underpinning all themes discussed by the boys was a lack of money. Each boy involved in the research was experiencing some level of material deprivation, albeit at varying levels. They spoke about their families struggling, doing it tough, or in need of the basics. While insufficient money underpinned the boys' conversations, they felt there was little that could be done about that locally and instead focused on other critical but missing 'pieces' that could be actioned locally that would make a difference in their lives.



Food security

Food insecurity was a significant problem, evident through the experiences they shared but also observationally throughout the workshops and conversations. The child-centred research workshops were conducted after school and the boys who participated expressed how hungry they were. Food was provided at each workshop, and the boys described their hunger, explaining that they had not eaten all day. Some boys who had participated in 'Connecting Boys' had previously attended a primary school that provides meals and ensures children have nutritious food to facilitate learning and promote overall wellbeing. At secondary school, food is not as readily available as in primary school and while some meals/snacks are provided, not all students seem able to access them. Significantly, the boys explained that breakfast is provided by their secondary school on some days, but their bus arrives at school too late for students to access it. Notably, the buses that arrive later service low SES communities, where students most need to access the breakfast program.

During the first phase of the More for Children research, children who were provided school meals at primary school spoke of their worry of going to high school and no longer having access to free meals. They were also concerned about the additional pressure this would place on their families. For the boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys', these worries had been realised. For children living in contexts of poverty, nutritious school meals are important in ensuring they are not hungry and can concentrate at school, contributing to both health and learning outcomes. The specific problem identified by the boys lends itself to an easy resolution. There is already a breakfast program in place, but some buses arrive too late for students to utilise it. Extending the time period during which breakfast is available to accommodate students who arrive late would reap immediate benefits. Further, the boys spoke of the types of food that were available for free at recess, such as tins of tuna, but explained that they were not always easy to eat or desirable. Significantly, the boys made clear that they do not expect a lot and are aware of the limited resources available to their school; but they thought tasty, filling snacks could be a better option.

Three points are important here. First, in contexts of poverty, the provision of nutritious, tasty food (breakfast or snacks during the day) helps to address hunger and helps students to concentrate. Significantly, the provision of food also makes students feel included and cared for by their school. Second, when schools provide food, it is essential that students are consulted to ensure that all have access and that the food provided will be eaten. Third, the experience of the boys who have participated in this research indicates that while school meals have an important role to play in redressing hunger, they are not sufficient to address broader issues of food insecurity and hunger. The boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' and other children who participated in the first phase of More for Children described being hungry on weekends and during the holidays, when school meals were not available. While school is a crucial institution in children's lives, it cannot deliver all the pieces that are missing. Solutions need to be sought in, and by, the broader community and through broader systems reform.



No violence at home, feeling safe and being able to relax

Violence at home was a major focus of the child-centred research workshops and research conversations. In the first research workshop, the piece 'no violence at home' was the focus of discussions, and one boy described having witnessed extreme violence at home as a younger child. As the research progressed, 'no violence at home' remained a focus, but conversations extended beyond home as boys described experiencing violence in their communities and in their school. One boy explained that he no longer attended school because he had experienced serious violence, one episode resulting in hospitalisation, and his safety was at risk.

Violence in the community:

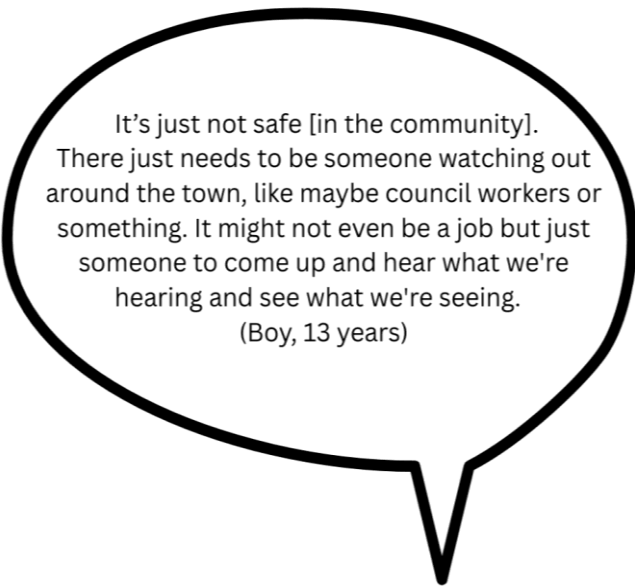
The boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' also spoke extensively about violence they see and experience in their community. They described serious – sometimes extreme – violence in their neighbourhoods, an example of which is captured in the comment below from one boy, 13 years:

*'...the other day, there was a kid wearing expensive things and these people came up to him kicking the living s**t out of him, threatening him with the machete, and kicked his head in for about three minutes straight. The kid was crying. They took his phone, scooter, vapes, and the kid was begging him to stop and they just wouldn't. They kept going. And that happens to like a lot of people [here]. You just can't feel safe in your community when that sort of thing is going on.'*

Boys often grouped three pieces together: violence at home, feeling safe and being able to relax. It was clear from the research workshops and conversations that violence pervaded all aspects of the boys' lives, sometimes in their homes, but also in their school and particularly in their community. As a result, the boys did not feel safe anywhere in their lives and were unable to relax.

Most of the boys felt that there were few or no places in their communities where they could hang out with their friends and feel safe doing so. The threat of violence was ever present. Not surprisingly, the boys highlighted the need for places in their community that are safe and where they can build connections.

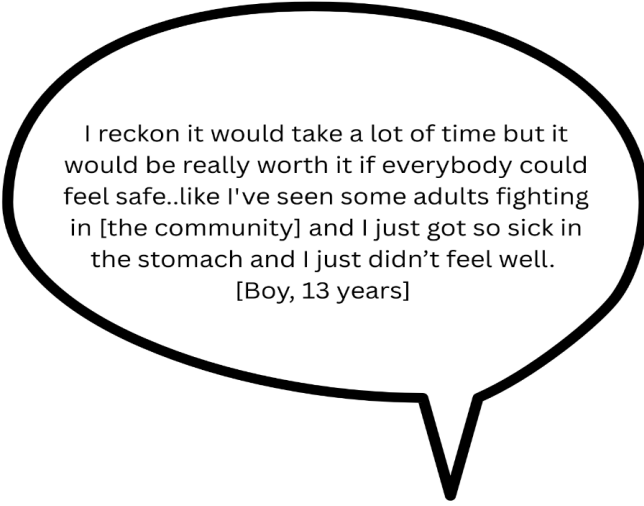
Some boys highlighted the relationship between violence and drug use. Violence between young people was often fuelled by drugs, while one boy explained that the violence he had experienced in his home as a child was a direct result of drug addiction. He described seeing similar issues play out in the community. Boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' expressed frustration at the lack of action being taken to tackle what they felt were the two biggest issues facing their community: violence and drugs. They acknowledged these are big issues and often seem impossible to fix but felt more could be done to work toward possible solutions or, at least, efforts to make them feel safer, more connected, and more welcome in their communities.



It's just not safe [in the community].
There just needs to be someone watching out
around the town, like maybe council workers or
something. It might not even be a job but just
someone to come up and hear what we're
hearing and see what we're seeing.
(Boy, 13 years)



I reckon it would be good to
have more places to relax,
'cause that would roll into
having people that care about
you too.
(Boy, 13 years)



I reckon it would take a lot of time but it
would be really worth it if everybody could
feel safe..like I've seen some adults fighting
in [the community] and I just got so sick in
the stomach and I just didn't feel well.
[Boy, 13 years]



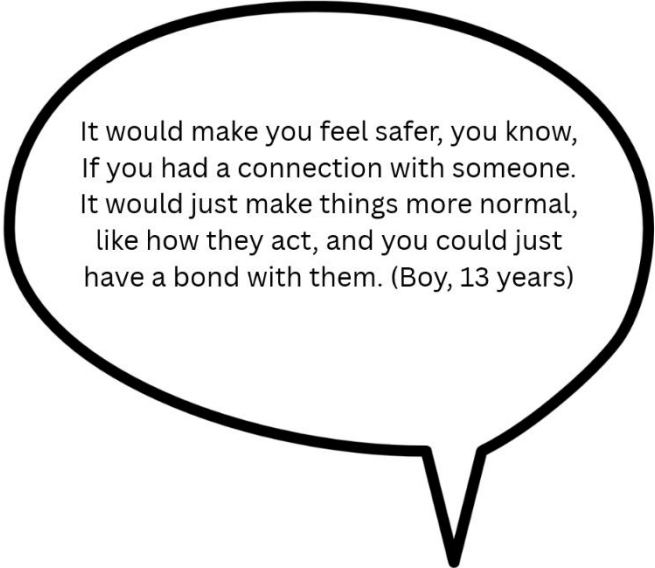
Places to build connections

The boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' also identified the jigsaw piece 'places to build connections' as important. They linked 'places to build connections' to 'feeling safe' and their desire to be protected from the routine and often extreme violence they experienced in their neighbourhoods, and sometimes at school. They wanted places that are both safe and free to be able to meet their friends, hang out, and engage in activities. Importantly, such places potentially provide the opportunity to relax. As well as meeting and hanging out with friends of their own age, boys described the importance of building intergenerational connections with adults who are caring and supportive. Boys spoke about wanting opportunities to learn 'hands-on' things that they need for life but are not taught in school. Here, the boys echoed the views of other children who have participated in the More for Children research: that not all learning can or should take place in school. The boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' also spoke about wanting to build connections with adults who could be a good influence in their lives. However, such opportunities are rarely available outside school and family.



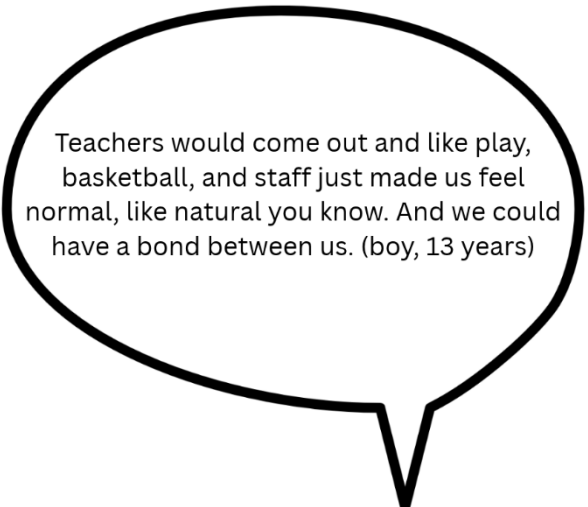
Learning outside school and ongoing connection with caring adults

All boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' described wanting to learn in a 'hands on' way, and to learn things that are not taught at school. They also described wanting to have safe and supportive relationships with a wider range of adults. A strong theme emerging from 'Connecting Boys' was the extent to which feelings of stress and worry shaped the boys' lives, because most described never feeling able to relax. Playing sport was important for some boys, but it did not provide all the pieces that are missing from their lives. Moreover, the boys who do play sport explained that they attend games but rarely go to training due to the cost and difficulty of transport and the challenging, sometimes disrupted, nature of their lives. When identifying adults they have connections with and can speak to, the boys felt that it was not the job of their sports coaches to know about, listen or respond to their problems. Added to this, the boys noted there are a lot of children who do not participate in any sports activities, so more is needed in the community for children and young people to be listened to and supported.



It would make you feel safer, you know, If you had a connection with someone. It would just make things more normal, like how they act, and you could just have a bond with them. (Boy, 13 years)

Some of the boys spoke positively about their wellbeing teachers or year heads, who they said treated them with respect and care. While these relationships are important to and valued by the boys, they are confined to school. Most boys expressed the need for connections outside school, and positive influences they could learn from. Importantly, boys spoke about needing men in their lives, saying they often feel more comfortable speaking male to male.



Teachers would come out and like play, basketball, and staff just made us feel normal, like natural you know. And we could have a bond between us. (boy, 13 years)

‘Role models are good, because it gives you an idea of what you want to be. But if you don’t have a role model it’s hard to make your choices in life, like where you want to be and what you want to do. But there’s not many role models around that you can look up to, especially in families when you want to look up to parents but one is always at work. Then you look to another family member and 90% of the time they’re at work and you’re not actually able to see them. (Boy, 15 years)

The absence of the MOR Jigsaw piece ‘ongoing connection with caring adults’ was a major theme emerging from ‘Connecting Boys’, creating for the boys who participated a sense of isolation and disconnection, which was exacerbated by experiences of violence. This missing piece is also closely connected to the boys’ desire to learn outside school, something which they have almost no opportunity to do. The lack of ongoing relationships with caring adults, the absence of places to build connections or to learn outside school, and the resulting sense of isolation, all contributed to the boys being unable to relax or find safe places to simply be.

Some boys described programs that do help to put some missing pieces in place. One example is ‘Pitstop’, a school-based, hands-on learning program in the Greater Shepparton area that operates outside the school campus. Children who participated in ‘Connecting Boys’ and More for Children regularly identified Pitstop as a positive program that they wanted to participate in; it provided much desired hands-on learning as well as an opportunity to connect with adults who are caring and supportive. Pitstop is a model that could be extended into the community, enabling children to access it outside of school and over longer periods of time, thus supporting the intergenerational relationships that are missing from so many children’s lives. This is not to suggest that Pitstop necessarily be expanded – and certainly not without sufficient funding and resources – but to highlight that the *model* is worthy of

attention when considering how ongoing connections with caring, supportive adults can facilitate learning beyond school.

From the pieces identified above, the key issues that emerged powerfully from the Connecting Boys research are:

- The material basics are not fully in place, with food insecurity a major problem.
- Violence is a major issue and structures much of their lives: for some boys, violence occurs at home; for many more, it occurs at school and in the community and undermines their sense of safety.
- Disconnection from the community and a sense of isolation are major issues, as is the feeling of not being safe.
- School is not a place of connection for most children who participated in 'Connecting Boys'.
- Boys want, but rarely have, connections in their community to provide them with a positive environment and sense of inclusion and belonging.

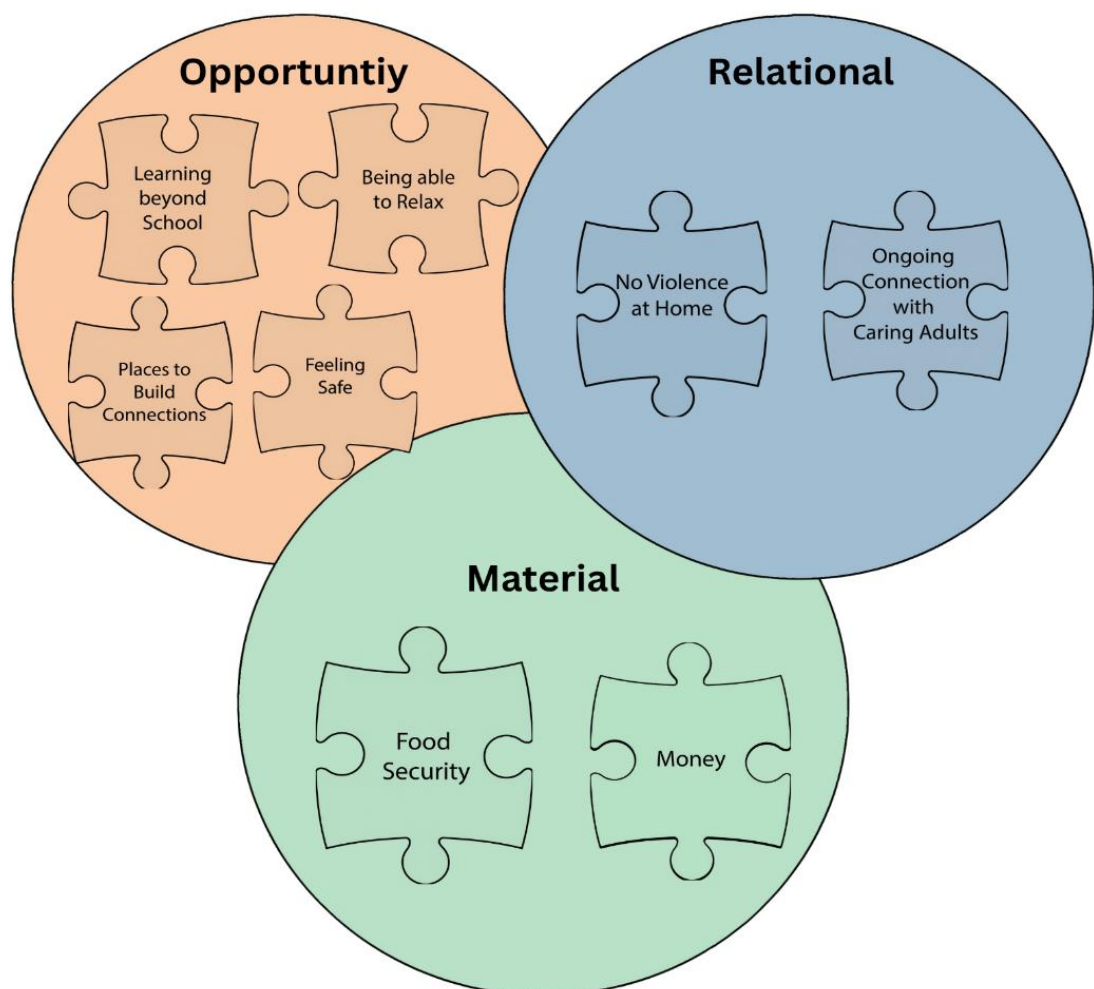


Figure 5: The missing pieces

Throughout the 'Connecting Boys' research, boys spoke about needing good influences in their life: people they could speak with and learn from. They spoke about needing a 'good environment' to grow up in. The boys also described being surrounded by negative influences, which they felt could lead them down a 'bad path'. As an example, one boy spoke of his frustration at wanting to do the right thing and work hard in school but feeling that negative influences were outside his control and the support he needed was not available. In one workshop, the conversation centred on the pathways children – particularly boys – face, and the need for support and guidance to follow the 'good' path; this conversation is captured in figure 4, below.

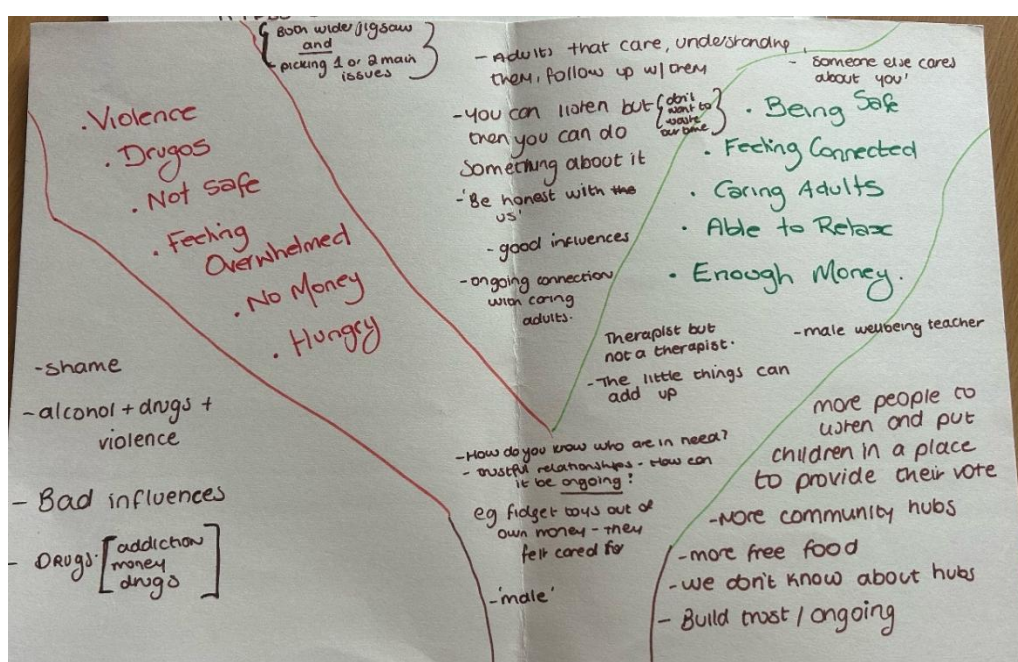


Figure 6: Brainstorming with the boys

Importantly, while the boys worried about the influences around them that could lead to a bad path, they also highlighted some positive elements in their lives, such as wellbeing teachers in school and their school heads. Overall, however, the boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' did not describe school as a positive experience, and they spoke of the need for connections and good influences beyond school.

The issues identified by the boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' highlight both the depth and multidimensional nature of the challenges they face. All boys who participated in the research experienced some level of material deprivation; most lacked opportunities for connection, learning, play and leisure; and for many, foundational relationships are absent. Significantly, throughout the research, several boys expressed a sense of hopelessness and described the complex issues they and others in their community face as

‘impossible’ to fix. As noted earlier, some of the boys felt it may be too late for them and those around them, and that they were already going down a ‘a bad path’.

This was powerfully conveyed by one boy, who described the experience of a boy he knew:

‘A child’s mind can’t fully understand what’s going on. Their minds are not fully adapted yet. [A boy in the community] was really bad at home. He was flipping cars, stealing and that. So, he got put into resi care. He didn’t like it, but they needed to get him away from his [family member], ‘cause his [family member] just couldn’t look after him. There was just nowhere else to go for him. So, being in resi care can teach you a lesson but it can also teach you to go down the wrong path. For [boy in the community], he’s even worse now. He didn’t grow up with good influences but if he had of grown up in a better environment, he might have actually had a better childhood, and he wouldn’t be the way he is’. (Boy, 13 years)

This quote reflects the thoughtful conversations the boys led during the child-centred research workshops and conversations, it also highlights the need for children to receive support before their lives unravel. This means both early intervention *and* ongoing intervention. There is an urgent need for support for children and their families during middle childhood and into adolescence. The ‘Connecting Boys’ research highlights the importance of engaging meaningfully with boys to understand what support is needed and the form it should take. This research clearly indicates the need for boys to feel connected to their communities and to have positive, safe, caring and ongoing relationships with adults, particularly men, during middle childhood. A range of factors contribute to children feeling disconnected, however both More for Children and ‘Connecting Boys’ highlight the ways in which poverty exacerbates isolation and a sense of disconnection; importantly, ‘Connecting Boys’ demonstrates the desire of boys to have positive supportive relationships, as well as the absence of those relationships in most boys’ lives.

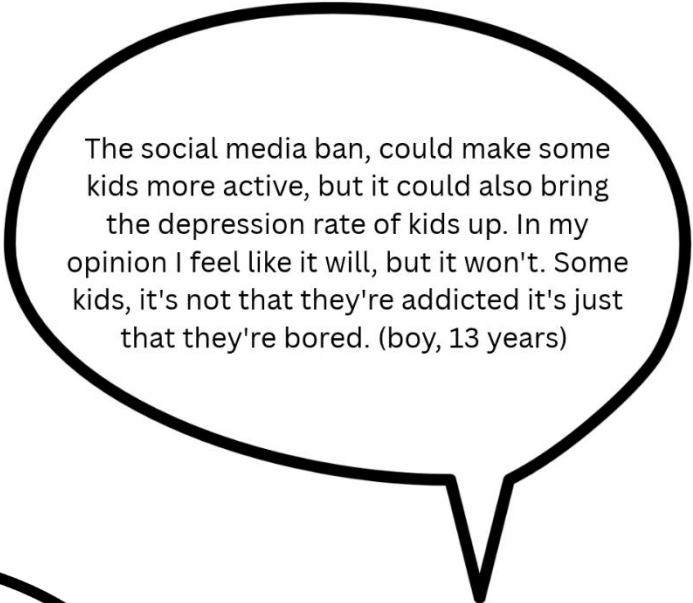
Social media

When thinking about building connections, the children who participated in this research said they did not want to be online regularly but had few other options. The boys who participated in ‘Connecting Boys’, like other children who participated in More for Children, described being bored; being worried about their safety in their communities; and the high cost of activities. As a result, gaming and social media provided a means of connecting and communicating with others. It was not children’s first choice for connecting, but often their only option. This raises important issues about the role and availability of adults in children’s lives. Throughout both More for Children and ‘Connecting Boys’, children described their parents’ work and time burdens. They also described complex relationships, which were caring but also difficult and sometimes fractured because of the stress of poverty. Few children could identify caring adults to whom they could turn for support, beyond their family and some

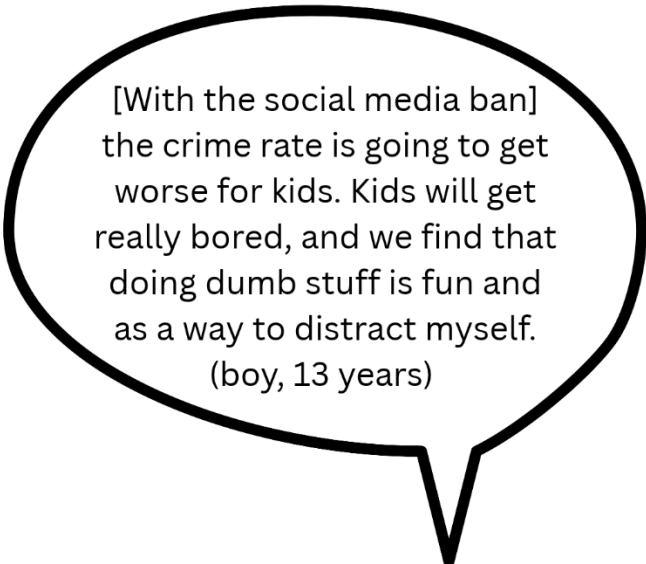
teachers. This suggests that connection through social media is not children's preference but one that results from the nature of social relationships, work requirements, and the constraints of poverty. Creating 'real world' connection that creates positive intergenerational relationships may be a powerful means of providing children with opportunities for connection beyond those available online. Creating those connections is the responsibility of adults, not children – but children must be meaningfully involved in shaping the nature of those connections.



Kids need to play sports, get yourself dedicated to something. (boy, 13 years)



The social media ban, could make some kids more active, but it could also bring the depression rate of kids up. In my opinion I feel like it will, but it won't. Some kids, it's not that they're addicted it's just that they're bored. (boy, 13 years)



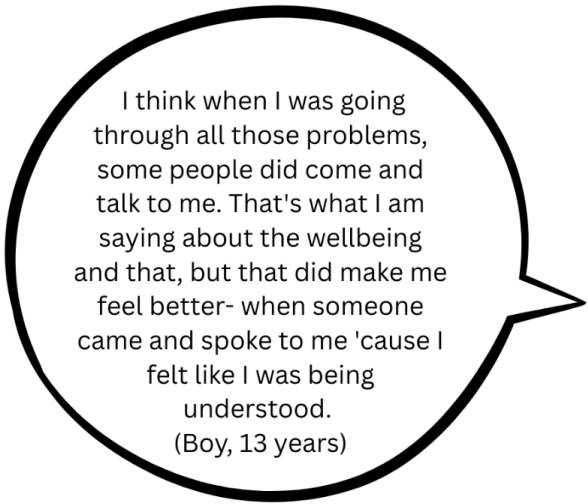
[With the social media ban] the crime rate is going to get worse for kids. Kids will get really bored, and we find that doing dumb stuff is fun and as a way to distract myself. (boy, 13 years)

Toward Connecting Boys

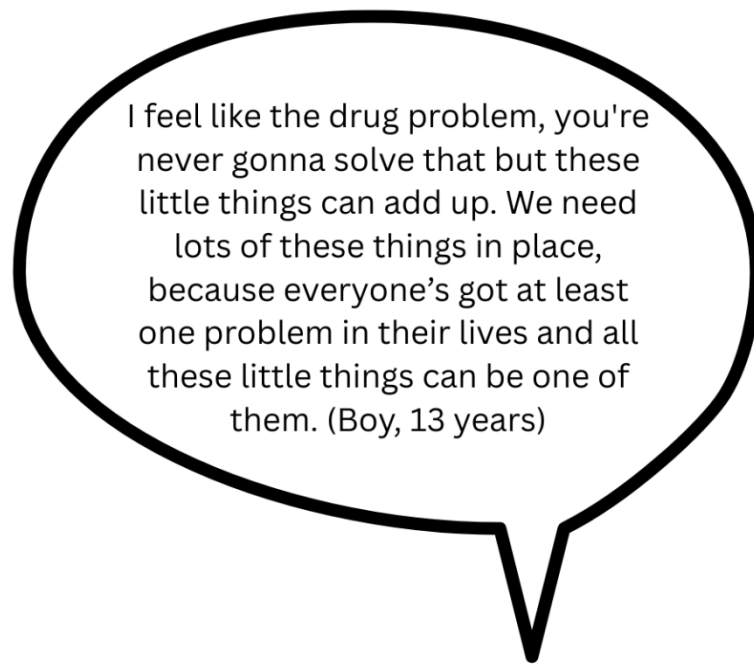
This report demonstrates the depth of challenges and the complexity in many boys' lives. The More for Children research found that disconnection and isolation begin in middle childhood, as poverty denies children the material basics, narrows opportunities, and places foundational relationships under pressure. The boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys' are moving out of middle childhood into adolescence; as they do so, they face increasingly multifaceted and complex challenges. The MOR Jigsaw was a powerful tool in supporting boys to identify the strengths in their lives, families and communities, as well as the pieces that are missing. While insufficient income is a structuring feature of the lives of the boys who participated in 'Connecting Boys', it is not the only missing piece of the MOR Jigsaw. Indeed, for many boys who participated in the research, too many of the pieces needed for them to thrive are missing. As these boys move into adolescence, disconnection is emerging as a serious problem. Notably, it is a problem that the boys themselves recognise but one they cannot fix alone. Indeed, their inability to create connections within the social structures available to them deepens their sense of isolation.

The MOR Jigsaw is intended to be used as a child-centred, place-based tool-kit for change. Through careful testing and workshopping with the boys, we have confirmed that the MOR Jigsaw makes sense and can be used as a guide for locally-led action. The MOR Jigsaw includes many pieces, and some may be beyond the remit of what can be achieved at the community level, but as highlighted by the boys, there are many elements of the pieces that can be put in place to improve the lives of boys and children in the community.

The boys who participated in this research described many of the problems they are facing as overwhelming, for example drug use, violence at home and in the community, intergenerational multidimensional poverty, and lack of money. But they also noted that change must start somewhere and small things can begin to make a difference and cumulatively can improve children's lives.

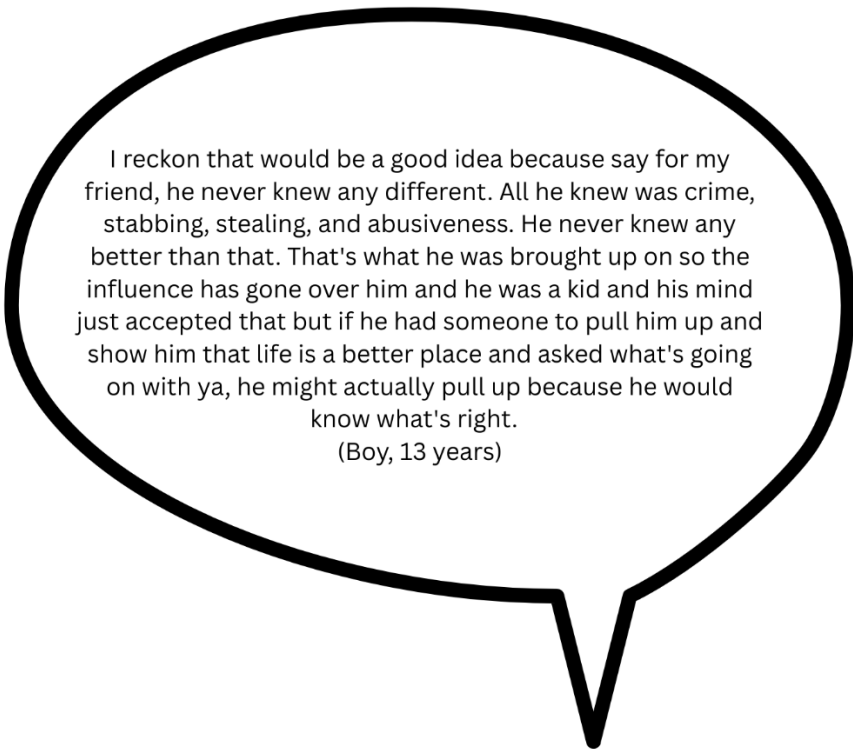


I think when I was going through all those problems, some people did come and talk to me. That's what I am saying about the wellbeing and that, but that did make me feel better- when someone came and spoke to me 'cause I felt like I was being understood.
(Boy, 13 years)



The missing pieces identified by the boys were presented in Figure 5 above. Some of these can be actioned locally, while others cannot. Within the dimension of material basics, both money and food security were identified by the boys as missing. Ensuring families have sufficient income and building food security is beyond the capacity of local communities and service providers, although they may have an important advocacy role to play. Moreover, place-based action has a crucial role to play in addressing hunger. For example, ensuring that school breakfast programs are fully inclusive and available to all students is a relatively easy change to make, and one that would prevent hunger during school days.

Within the opportunity dimension, the boys who participated in this research made clear that they do not feel safe in their communities or when walking the streets, there are no places for them to build connections or to learn outside of school, and they are unable to relax as a result of the pressures on them and the pieces that are missing. Creating safety in contexts of violence and drug use is a long-term process requiring significant resources and systemic reform. However, initial and immediate steps can be taken to make children safer by addressing the other missing pieces in the opportunity dimension. It is possible for local initiatives to build places where children can make connections, including intergenerational connections, and learn things that matter to them that are not (and perhaps should not) be taught in school. This is important in ensuring that children's lives are not narrowed to the single institution of school. One boy, when speaking about the MOR Jigsaw piece 'ongoing connection with caring adults' said:



I reckon that would be a good idea because say for my friend, he never knew any different. All he knew was crime, stabbing, stealing, and abusiveness. He never knew any better than that. That's what he was brought up on so the influence has gone over him and he was a kid and his mind just accepted that but if he had someone to pull him up and show him that life is a better place and asked what's going on with ya, he might actually pull up because he would know what's right.
(Boy, 13 years)

Finally, the relational dimension matters greatly to children. The boys identified the crucial pieces in this dimension as not experiencing or seeing violence at home and having ongoing connections with caring adults. Domestic and family violence is a major issue, and one that a range of organisations are working to end. The findings of the 'Connecting Boys' research suggests that it is essential that the experiences of boys in middle childhood and early adolescence are understood in efforts to end domestic and family violence. Significantly, the boys who participated in this research felt that there were pieces that could be put in place locally that would help to challenge cultures of violence, including support from local organisations to build and foster positive intergenerational relationships.

The disconnection that boys feel is deeply concerning. Their isolation means that, as the boys so powerfully described, they can easily go down 'the wrong path'. Local communities and organisations have an essential role to play in developing ongoing connections between children and caring adults in environments that are safe and trustworthy. Creating safe places for connection, which enable children to learn, relax, and build intergenerational relationships, may provide a means of redressing the disconnection boys currently experience, while simultaneously also putting in place other missing pieces to expand their opportunities now and for the future.

To conclude, some final words from one boy involved in the research workshops:



I feel like we should have a big meeting in the community, 'cause **we're the town, we're the community**, we should be able to build something that we want, that we all agree on
(boy, 13 years)



The Children's Policy Centre
The Crawford School of Public Policy
The Australian National University

sharon.bessell@anu.edu.au

cadhla.osullivan@anu.edu.au

childrenspolicycentre.org

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