First 1001 days of the second decade participation project summary

Early adolescence (ages 10-12) is a time of development, change and challenge. Identity and independence emerge at this age and many health behaviours are being established that can have long term effects, both positive and negative. It is an age where prevention and support can make a real difference for young people. For this reason, AYPH believes it's worth focusing specifically on the needs of early adolescents and hearing directly from them about what they think could make this life stage better.

Some important challenges at this age identified in Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) [1]**:**

- Move from primary to secondary school – school stress increases
- Changes in relationship to parents/family – seeking more independence
- Decrease in life satisfaction after 11 (more pronounced in girls)
- Disability/long term conditions start to impact on school attendance
- Being bullied reported at higher rate in younger age group
- Increased access to technology – this can have both positive and negative impacts
- Gender stereotyping increases re: sport and physical activity as well as ability to talk about emotions
- Start of puberty, sexual awareness and gender identity (some young people experience this earlier)

Using animation and science fiction:

In order to explore how young people feel about dealing with these and other challenges, AYPH chose to use science fiction and animation as a means to imagine a completely different world for 10-12 year olds. Through the characters who live in this world, participants are able to explore what the best possible support and prevention at this age could look like. Using fictional characters in an imaginary world also allows young people to talk about sensitive issues in a safer, depersonalised way.

The process:

AYPH facilitated this project with a Woodcraft Folk group in Bromley, South London. A mixed gender group of 15-20 young people aged 10-13 participated. We ran two sessions with them. In the first session, we explored concepts and found out how young people imagined an ideal world that encouraged their wellbeing. We used the following three part working definition of wellbeing throughout the project:

- Feeling physically and mentally well
- Feeling prepared for and supported through any difficult changes in life
- Feeling fully included in society and having a sense of belonging

Using this as a springboard, we supported three small groups of participants to develop alien creatures and the world they inhabit. We asked them to imagine all aspects of their characters' lives. There was also a small group tasked with imagining what questions a visitor from Earth would ask the characters. These formed the basis of the character interviews in the animation.

In the second session, the groups created their characters from colourful paper. In addition to deciding how they looked, participants were asked to come up with answers to the explorer's questions that would give a deeper impression of their characters' lives. Some aspects of the characters' identities and lives didn't make it into the animation as there was limited filming time. For this reason we have incorporated the written and verbal feedback from both workshops into this summary.

What we found out:

When we asked the young people to think individually about an ideal world for 10-12 years olds, they came up with an array of responses. They can be grouped into 5 main themes:

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[1] Brooks, F., Magnusson, J., Klemera, E., Chester, K., Spencer, N., and Smeeton, N. (2015) HBSC England National Report 2014. University of Hertfordshire; Hatfield, UK.

- **greater emotional support** - lots of support from friends, family, schools and therapists, teachers more like friends, someone to cross the road with;
- **a better balance between work and leisure time** - art and creativity everywhere, more time to play, work two days and rest five days every week, holidays every month, getting out in the country;
- **decreased inequality and discrimination** - young people have a say on who they live with/who cares for them and other things that affect them, everyone can afford the things they need, no branded clothes, less technology, no beauty standards, support for disabled people, no bullying, no cruelty;
- **improved leadership and physical environment** - no pollution, no nuclear weapons, peace, happiness, no global warming
- **and comical fantasy** - unicorns and flying pig robots to do all your chores.

When the young people worked together in groups, they expanded on these ideas through the characters they developed. A theme that came up in more than one group was the idea of education being flexible and tailored to young people's individual needs and abilities. One of the characters had autism and was able to learn through technology and in experiential ways rather than attending school every day. They all emphasised that their characters were treated better by teachers and schools than young people on Earth.

One of the characters talked about access to swimming pools as a key to wellbeing. Another character also talked at length about riding around on bees and their friendship with these bees as a source of happiness. The final group of characters emphasised the importance of outdoor play and spending time with friends.

All the groups imagined a world where young people were included in decision making, from being consulted about issues that affected them to voting rights. Essential to this was the fact that nobody told anyone else what to do or got 'told off' for behaving like young people. Gender constraints and expectations were also non-existent on their planet and two out of three of the characters the participants created were transgender or non-binary.

The messages:
What the young people told us speaks to the fundamental conflict that occurs at this age between seeking more independence and coping with the resulting stress and responsibility. The young people expressed a longing to play, be creative and relax more. Their ideal planet was free from the sources of anxiety that affect them, from interpersonal issues like bullying to more societal concerns such as inequality and climate change. They demonstrated ambiguity towards technology with some touching on the benefits it could provide and others feeling wary about how it can negatively affect young people's lives.

Feeling included and having a sense of belonging was important to all the participants and their characters reflected this. They told us that an increase in support and inclusion through family, friends and institutions such as school and government was vital to wellbeing.

Although we offered young people the freedom to create an ideal world for 10-12 year olds with no limitations, what they came up with was mostly realistic and achievable. It is one in which adults and young people worked together, supported each other and shared power, not one where young people ruled and dominated everyone else. They demonstrated compassion, empathy and self-awareness. After the young people finished describing their world on camera, one adult Woodcraft Folk volunteer asked, 'Can I go live on that planet?' This is in stark contrast to how the young people told us they feel about the world adults have created for them.