Time is of the essence if we are to build strong communities in which our children can flourish

Quality time with parents is a key piece in the puzzle of building strong, supportive communities for children, a leading researcher says.

Associate Professor Sharon Bessell, who delivered the opening keynote address of Education Transforms 2017 in Hobart today, recently completed a research project which involved more than 100 children aged 8-12, in six urban communities in eastern Australia. Dr Bessell, Director of Research at the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University, said the desire of children to spend more time with their parents came out strongly in the research.

“The resource children valued across all communities was time with parents,” Dr Bessell said. “It was also the resource that children described as being in limited supply.”

The research project took place over a 3-1/2 year period and the communities involved ranged from affluent to low income. It revealed that children from low-income communities felt their parents, and particularly their fathers, had to work long and in many cases “unsociable” hours. And when their fathers were at home, they were “too tired” to interact with them.

But Dr Bessell said the issue cut across the socio-economic divide.

“Children from the most affluent communities also talked about not having enough time with their parents,” she said.

“Some could see the trade-off in the consumer goods their parents’ high incomes provided for them.

“Children from middle-income families were the more likely to talk about their dads kicking the ball with them, or going for a bike ride with their parents, and that was really important to them.”

Dr Bessell said the findings should be taken into consideration by policy makers.
“We should consider the impact of labour market policy on the lives of parents, children and families,” she said.

Another finding of the research was that children were feeling the strain of their own time pressures as a result of a heavy schedule of structured activities outside of school hours, including homework.

“In the better-off sites children’s lives were intensely busy,” she said. “Whether that’s the best thing for raising healthy, happy children is highly questionable.”

Dr Bessell said across all sites a significant number of children considered homework as preventing them from engaging in their communities.

“The first thing I would do is end homework or certainly end homework for homework’s sake,” she said. “Rather than students in primary school being set formulaic homework it would be better to think how we use that time to engage them in sport, in outdoor activities and with their communities.”

“One of the striking things for me in doing research with primary school-aged children was to hear children aged 8 and 9 talk about the fact that they were really stressed about the tests they were going to face, particularly NAPLAN,” Dr Bessell said.

“When we start to channel education in a way that is very test-focused, the exciting experience of education is often lost.”

ET 17 is the second international symposium of the Peter Underwood Centre and brings together key stakeholders to share and reflect on insights about the collective mission to raise aspirations for educational attainment.

Launched in February 2015, the Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania.

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