

# Enabling all young Australians to grow up safe, happy, healthy and resilient: a collaboration for young people, technology and wellbeing

## The Collaboration for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing

**Objective:** This paper describes a framework for a multi-disciplinary collaboration to investigate the role of technology for improving young Australians' mental health and wellbeing.

**Results:** The poor mental health of young Australians poses a significant challenge to Australia's future. Half of all Australians will experience a mental health difficulty in their lifetime and 75% of mental illness has its onset before age 25. Cross-sectoral collaboration is critical for meeting this challenge. In order to establish a world-first multi-partner collaboration, leading researchers and institutes, commercial, non-profit and end-user organization and young people were identified and invited to participate. Together we have developed an international research framework that explores the role of technologies in young people's lives, their potential and how this can be harnessed to address challenges facing young people. This research framework will: (i) conduct empirical research that tests the utility of technology across mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment and, (ii) translate existing and new knowledge into products and services that help create a generation of safe, happy, healthy and resilient young people. Research undertaken by the Collaboration will be the most comprehensive investigation of technologies' potential to improve the wellbeing of young people ever conducted, leading to significant benefits for Australian young people and their mental health.

**Key words:** collaborative research, mental health, policy, young people.

## INTRODUCTION

Youth is a critical period for social and emotional development, a time when individuals can face serious challenges to their wellbeing. Currently, one in four young people experience mental health difficulties, disrupting relationships, education and work.<sup>1</sup> Over 75% of mental illness occurs in the young, yet only 29% of those who require care seek help.<sup>2</sup> Australians forgo massive economic benefits as a result of lost productivity, lower employment, absenteeism, welfare and health care expenditure and carer costs due to suicide and mental illness in young people. In 2009, untreated mental illness in young people cost Australia \$10.6 billion<sup>3</sup> with suicide costing a further \$17.5 billion annually.<sup>4</sup>

Since the 1990s, Australian health and social policy has shifted to acknowledge that to address complex youth problems a framework that embraces promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment is essential. This approach builds on the US Institute of Medicine framework which argues that including every population segment is essential to prevent disorders and promote the wellbeing of all in society regardless of their health status, situation or disability, and to provide quality health and community services.<sup>5</sup> Wellbeing is defined by the World Health Organization as a state in which "every individual realizes his or

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**Jane Burns**

Orygen Youth Health, Parkville VIC, Australia.

**Correspondence:** Associate Professor Jane Burns, C/o Orygen Youth Health, Locked Bag 10, Parkville, VIC 3052, Australia.

Email: jane@inspire.org.au

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her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”<sup>6</sup> Such a framework involves a shift from seeing young people as “problems” towards recognizing their unique strengths.

Consistent with mental health promotion frameworks proffered by the World Health Organization and VicHealth we must engage with young people in environments where they interact<sup>6</sup> and make use of the tools and networks with which they engage. Over 95% of young Australians use the Internet daily, dramatically changing how they interact with one another, their families and communities.<sup>7</sup> An unprecedented opportunity exists to engage young people to utilize these technologies to promote good mental health and wellbeing. “Technologies” include devices, practices (consuming, creating and sharing) and the social relationships they mediate. Research to understand the best ways in which to utilise these technologies for maximum impact is needed urgently.

The Collaboration for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing unites young people with 62 youth-serving partner organizations including the not-for-profit sector, researchers, industry, policy makers and service providers to meet this challenge. This paper will outline the Collaboration, its research programs and the benefits that research undertaken will bring for young people aged 12 to 25, their families and the community.

## WHY A COLLABORATION?

Successful research to address “youth challenges” demands a coordinated, multi-sector approach undertaken in partnership with young people. It also requires a “whole-systems” approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing using innovative methodologies that cannot be deployed without substantial investment and partnership. There are additional reasons why a collaborative model is appropriate in this case.

1. We have a significant problem to solve; we can't do this alone. Improving young people's mental health and wellbeing requires a concerted effort from across the community. A collaborative model values the participation of organizations across academia, government, business, community and not-for-profit organizations.
2. Young people must remain at the centre of the model. Our partner organizations have a strong commitment to partnering with young people to improve their wellbeing. This model, which prioritizes the engagement of end users, values this practice and resources it appropriately.
3. Collaboration facilitates access to shared resources: There are currently a number of organizations working in this space, many of whom are small and under resourced. Uniting them enables smaller organizations to make best of use of the resources of the collective, allowing them to both meet their objectives and innovate.

## THE WORK OF THE COLLABORATION

This Collaboration aims for all young Australians to grow up safe, happy, healthy and resilient. In doing so we will:

- enable young people to participate safely and confidently online;
- equip young people to shape their own futures and build the skills and personal networks to ensure they succeed in education, employment and volunteering;
- support young people within their families;
- empower young people to take an active part in their communities;
- strengthen early intervention and treatment.

The Collaboration will implement three separate but complementary research programs which have been developed through extensive online and face-to-face engagement with over 600 young people.

### **Program one: safe and supportive: technologies as settings to promote cybersafety and strengthen the resilience, mental health and wellbeing of all young people**

This program aims to investigate and build safe and supportive online environments and provide strategies and tools that promote cybersafety, mental health and wellbeing. This research targets all young people and is vital to prevent the onset of mental ill-health. Our partners across research, communities, government and industry have identified four major challenges: (i) cybersafety; (ii) participation; (iii) respectful relationships; and (iv) help seeking. We will develop solutions using technology to promote cybersafety, strong and supportive relationships, good communication and life skills – all known to enhance a young person's ability to manage, survive and thrive in the face of adversity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Program two: connected and creative: technologies as enablers of good mental health for young people who are vulnerable to the development of mental health difficulties**

The National Mental Health Plan 2008–2011 recognizes that a range of economic, social and environmental factors seriously impact the wellbeing of some groups,<sup>8</sup> including young people living with chronic illness or disability, Indigenous, those experiencing homelessness, carers, same-sex attracted, newly arrived refugees and those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. To achieve a vision of a socially inclusive nation in which all people feel valued and able to engage with the world around them,<sup>9</sup> we must engage and support the wellbeing of those most vulnerable to developing mental health difficulties. This program will generate baseline data about how vulnerable young people integrate existing technologies into their everyday lives, track how this use changes, and carry out predictive mapping of target groups' technological needs. We will implement and

evaluate stand-alone and cross-platform media interfaces tailored to young people's needs.

### **Program three: user driven and empowered: technologies as facilitators of good mental health for young people experiencing mental health difficulties**

The fourth National Mental Health Plan,<sup>8</sup> the National Primary Health Care Strategy,<sup>10</sup> and the National E-Health Strategy 2008<sup>11</sup> all advocate that better use be made of "innovative services" to address mental health difficulties. Young people express a desire to control their own health care and access confidential advice from sources they trust. They want support that is timely, accessible, relevant and effective. Service providers insist that information and tools used by young people and health professionals are evidence-based. Program three meets these requirements.

## **THE BENEFITS**

This Collaboration will deliver:

- the first consolidated Australian data on young people's technology use, available through an online knowledge hub for researchers, policy-makers and the community;
- an education and training program for over 350 leaders in youth, technology, cybersafety, mental health and wellbeing;
- proven online services and tools used by young people and professionals for mental health and wellbeing;
- research that supports parents, the community and professionals to respond to the mental health needs of young people.

Our end-user partners will facilitate adoption and application of research outputs through networks that reach over one million young people in Australia. All are committed to a range of means of achieving this, including integration of outputs into existing services, professional development orientated to new approaches, and promoting online resources to their clients.

Robust economic modelling estimates that this Collaboration will bring about a return on investment of \$3.57 for every dollar invested. Within 15 years it is anticipated that we will be able to see:

- 0.8% reduction in suicide and 2% reduction in suicide attempts; five lives saved; 400 suicide attempts avoided each year;
- improved mental health resulting in a reduction in medical, carer and welfare costs;
- decreased medical costs and young lives lost from substance abuse and violence; four lives saved; 400 hospitalizations avoided;
- reduction in lost productivity due to days absent from education or work;

- reduced social isolation and improved quality of life for young people, their families and communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Collaboration will play a critical role in understanding how best to meet the challenge of improving young people's mental health. It will provide the most comprehensive investigation to date of the potential of technologies to improve the wellbeing of young people. A similar initiative bridging disciplines and sectors does not exist internationally and Australia's role as a world leader in this field would be cemented. Sustainable benefits to young people, their families and the community will result from systemic change created through partnership between researchers and end users.

## **DISCLOSURE**

This paper was submitted by Associate Professor Jane Burns on behalf of the 63 partner organisations who form the Collaboration. In December 2010, the federal government announced a \$27.5 million investment to further this collaboration through the establishment of the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing. This initiative will be established under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centre's Program.

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