

# **Young People's Experiences of Family Connectedness**

Submitted by

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## **Statement of Authorship**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).

Elise Woodman

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## **Abstract**

With a quarter of 16-24 year old Australians experiencing a mental health disorder and strong indicators that rates of these disorders are rising among young Australians, it is vital to address youth mental health and wellbeing. Family connectedness is known to be a key factor for youth wellbeing, but there is little detail about how young people experience it. Understanding the perspectives of young people is essential to help families connect and support the wellbeing of young people.

This thesis aims to fill this gap in the understanding of family connectedness by qualitatively exploring young people's experiences. The study adopts a childhood studies lens to capture the perspectives of young people, which differ from adult viewpoints, and brings a social work perspective to this area of research. Systems theory is used during analysis to ensure both the micro and macro elements of family connectedness are explored.

To better understand young people's experiences, qualitative interviews were conducted with 31 young people, aged 15 and 16, from four schools in Canberra. Young people were asked for detailed descriptions of their family relationships and the factors that promoted their sense of connectedness. Interview transcripts were reviewed using thematic networks analysis to ensure theme development was grounded in and reflected the young people's language and experiences. Guided by childhood studies, young people's voices and the value offered by their insights are key priorities throughout the study, together with careful analysis of how the broader social context affects young people, families, and connectedness.

Young people highlighted the need to be engaged in family life, how common factors could help family members connect, and their need to feel valued. The role of connections prior to adolescence, the impact of different family dynamics, and the way these connections

changed as young people aged were also evident. Work, school, technology use and ideas about what ‘normal’ families do all strongly impacted young people’s sense of connectedness. Key insights emerged at the micro level, capturing what is important within families, and the macro level, where young people’s stories reflected pressures on families within the broader social context.

This thesis contributes essential qualitative insights into young people’s experiences of family connectedness that will support families and young people’s wellbeing. The findings highlight the importance of speaking with young people about their needs, challenging taken-for-granted social values that devalue and inhibit connections, and considering better support structures for families so they have the time and energy to care for and connect with each other.

The overarching model of family connectedness developed from the interviews is presented as a tool to support therapeutic interventions aimed at improving family relationships. The thesis offers recommendations for families, schools and social workers to support the wellbeing of young people in Australia by building and maintaining family connectedness throughout adolescence. The results provide an important evidence-base for social work practice that values young people’s perspectives, is flexible in its application, responds to unique contexts, and is sensitive to the broader environment.

## Glossary of Key Terms

Many of the key concepts in this study have different meanings depending on the context and are defined in the literature in a multitude of ways. For the purposes of this study, the following definitions have been adopted:

- **Adolescence** is the period between the ages of 11 and 18 (Berk, 2012; Chisholm & Hurrelman, 1995) and is considered an important life phase - on equal footing with adulthood (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).
- **Family:** To ensure young people could include whoever they felt was important to them when describing family connectedness, a specific definition of family has not been adopted. Instead, individual participants were asked to describe who was in their family at the beginning of the interview.
- **Family connectedness** is “the family’s sense of belonging and being psychologically close in ways perceived and defined by the adolescent” (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010, p. 1394).
- **Mental health** is understood as “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2011, para 1).
- **Mental health disorders** are diagnosed conditions that “affect the perceptions, emotions, behaviour and resulting social wellbeing of individuals.” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2011, p. 24). These include depression, anxiety and substance abuse.
- **Wellbeing** is a “stable state of being well, feeling satisfied and contented” (Australian Unity Ltd, 2011, para 1), and includes “having meaning in life...fulfilling potential

and feeling that our lives are worthwhile” (Eckersley, Wierenga, & Wyn, 2006a, p. 19).

- **Young people**, when used in general terms, refers to those aged 12 to 25 (McGorry, Parker, & Purcell, 2006); when specifically referring to the young people interviewed in the present study, it relates to the 15 and 16 year old participants.

The reasoning behind adopting these definitions is explored in more depth in chapters 2 and 3 of the thesis.



## **Chapter 1: Researching Young People's Experiences of Family Connectedness**

### **1.1 Introducing the Thesis**

With a quarter of 16-24 year old Australians experiencing a mental health disorder and strong indicators that rates of these disorders are rising among young Australians, it is vital to address youth mental health and wellbeing (R. White & Wyn, 2013). Research has found family connectedness to be an important factor supporting young people's wellbeing and mental health (Houlterberg, Henry, Merten, & Robertson, 2011; Resnick et al., 1997). Little is known, however, about how young people experience family connectedness and hence how families can best contribute to young people's sense of connectedness and wellbeing.

Family connectedness is "a whole-family variable that refers to the family's sense of belonging and being psychologically close in ways perceived and defined by the adolescent" (Crespo et al., 2010, p. 1394). While there are many variables that impact on young people's wellbeing, the importance of family connectedness for individual wellbeing and mental health is widely acknowledged in the literature (Houlterberg et al., 2011; Mueller, Bridges, & Goddard, 2011). Feeling connected to family provides young people with an important and stable foundation of support and warmth for positive development, managing changes and challenges during adolescence and building a sense of self (Crespo et al., 2010; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Houlterberg et al., 2011). Family connectedness can buffer against depression and poor psychosocial outcomes, and provide security as young people develop (Gonzalez, Holbein, & Quilter, 2002; Mueller et al., 2011).

Understanding how family connectedness works from the perspectives of young people is an issue seldom explored in detail in previous studies. This thesis makes an important and timely contribution by qualitatively exploring young people's experiences of family connectedness, the ways in which family dynamics contribute to that sense of connectedness, and the broader social influences which, if not carefully managed, can make its achievement more difficult.

## **1.2 Introducing the Chapter**

This chapter outlines the aim of the present study, the origins and context of the research, and the reasons for exploring young people's experiences of family connectedness. The limitations of the existing literature addressing these issues are identified, the personal and professional factors influencing the study are summarised, and the structure of the thesis is outlined.

## **1.3 Origins of the Research**

My interest in young people's wellbeing and how they can best be supported has been the essence of my work as a school counsellor over the past 8 years. This PhD was supported by a scholarship from the Australian Catholic University and the Institute of Child Protection Studies, whose focus on research to benefit children and young people matched my own interests. The thesis seeks to contribute to our understanding of the factors shaping young people's sense of wellbeing and develop strategies to support more effective social work interventions.

The specific research focus was developed through a careful reading of the research literature on young people's wellbeing. The most recent report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare on the wellbeing of young Australians identified high rates of mental health disorders and recognised family connectedness as crucial for young people's overall

mental health and wellbeing (AIHW, 2011). The importance of family connectedness for young people's wellbeing resonated with my social work practice experience.

In much of the literature which identifies the value of family connectedness for wellbeing, connectedness is presented in broad terms with little detail as to how families can build lasting connections. While these broad studies have established family connectedness as an important factor for young people's wellbeing, to better understand family connectedness more nuanced examples of what helps young people feel connected to their families are needed. In addition, as most research in this area has been quantitative, the stories and voices of young people are missing.

Understanding how young people see family connectedness is important not only to provide greater depth (and where appropriate qualification) to the outcomes of the quantitative research but to ensure that any judgements made are sensitive to how the issues are actually perceived by young people. Without that knowledge, it is difficult to develop approaches with the understanding and flexibility needed to effectively support connectedness during adolescence. A qualitative study that explores young people's insights on family connectedness makes an important contribution to our understandings of the relationships between young people and their families and efforts to support young people's overall wellbeing. In this context, the overarching research question driving the study was:

***How do young people understand and experience family connectedness?***

To address this question, the present study aims to identify and better understand the factors that support young people's sense of family connectedness, and discover what young people's experiences tell us about the specific dynamics occurring within families and the broader social context impacting on young people and their families. The study aims to contribute to knowledge supporting family connectedness and young people's wellbeing. The

contribution made by the research findings and the ways these findings can help families, schools and social workers are considered in the final chapter of the thesis.

## 1.4 Research Context

The research encompasses three broad areas of inquiry: the mental health of young Australians; the link between family connectedness and young people's wellbeing; and social changes that have impacted families and young people. Each of these key areas, the relevant literature, and the emergent insights are explored in detail in chapters 2, 3 and 4 respectively. A brief discussion of each is provided here to establish the context for the present study.

**Young people's mental health.** Robust mental health is critical to success and personal wellbeing and for managing the trials that young people face. Adolescence, typically occurring between 11 and 18 years of age, is considered a crucial time to establish positive mental health that will continue into adulthood (AIHW, 2011; Berk, 2012; Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011). It can be a vulnerable period given the rapid physical, cognitive and emotional developments commonly associated with adolescence (Berk, 2012; Houlberg et al., 2011; Lawrence, 2005). Poor mental health in young people has been linked to low self-esteem, poor educational and employment outcomes, increased health risk behaviours, and social withdrawal (Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011).

While most young Australians say they are healthy and happy, and general mortality rates have declined over the past decade, young people's mental health appears to be deteriorating and is a vital concern for today's young people and their supporters (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013; Eckersley, 2011; R. White & Wyn, 2013). Many researchers report that young people, aged 12-25, are experiencing mental health disorders at a greater rate than in past generations (McGorry et al., 2006; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011;

Wyn, 2005, 2009b). A quarter of 16-24 year olds in Australia are reported to have a mental health disorder such as depression or anxiety, outstripping the general population rate of one in five (Parkinson, 2011; Wyn, 2009b). In addition to those diagnosed with a disorder, another quarter of young people are reported to be experiencing moderate to severe psychological distress<sup>1</sup> (K. Muir et al., 2009; Parkinson, 2011).

Greater rates of mental health disorders in young people are reflected in increased prescription of anti-depressant medication and self-harming behaviour (Parkinson, 2011). While suicide rates for young people have declined since the mid-1990s, hospitalisations for intentional self-harm have risen; and in 2012, suicide was the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15-24 (ABS, 2007; 2014; AIHW, 2007; Eckersley, Wierenga, & Wyn, 2006b). The current rates of mental health disorders are particularly concerning as young people carry their increased mental health risks into adulthood (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Mueller et al., 2011).

Despite these concerns about the rates of youth mental health disorders, it is difficult to establish just how much young Australians' wellbeing and mental health have changed over time (Eckersley et al., 2006b). More awareness and diagnostic testing, and a greater willingness of young people to report mental health concerns, have all played a role in reported increases in rates of mental health disorders (AIHW, 2008). International evidence of increasing adolescent psychopathology in recent decades, however, suggests the greater rate of mental health disorders in Australian youth in the last thirty years is not just a consequence of greater awareness and diagnostic testing (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Parkinson,

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the Kessler-10 scale used to measure psychological distress.

2011). Even without a clear picture of the extent of the decline in young Australians' mental health over time, building knowledge to support young people's wellbeing is important.

**The importance of family connectedness for wellbeing.** The importance of family connectedness for young people's wellbeing has been established over the last 30 years and is now widely acknowledged in the literature (Crespo et al., 2010; Houltberg et al., 2011; Parvizi & Ahmadi, 2009). In response to the poor mental health of young people in the early 1990s, population based studies were used to identify the overarching factors determining the mental health of youth and ensure interventions to support young people were effectively targeted (Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). To achieve this, quantitative studies were valuable as they allowed large numbers of young people to be studied and society-wide influences to be identified. Resnick et al.'s (1997) study, which analysed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health conducted in the US, was particularly influential in highlighting the role of family connectedness for adolescent wellbeing. The importance of family connectedness in supporting adolescent mental health has been confirmed through further quantitative research (Crespo et al., 2010; Houltberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Resnick et al., 1993).

Connectedness is a fundamental human need, which provides a sense of belonging and purpose, and protects against social isolation and loneliness. A lack of connectedness has been found to negatively affect health, adjustment and wellbeing (McWhirter & Townsend, 2005). In Western cultures, the importance of family relationships for young people can be overshadowed by the tendency to see adolescence as a significant developmental stage in the transition to adulthood, involving increased independence and decision-making responsibility (Berk, 2012; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Family relationships retain their significance, however, as they provide young people with a sense of identity and are the main support for

physical, social and emotional development (AIHW, 2011; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). Being connected and feeling valued is central to young people's mental health, wellbeing and identity development (Butcher, 2010; McWhirter & Townsend, 2005).

The majority of the studies which look at family connectedness and young people's wellbeing are quantitative, conducted overseas (particularly in the US) and primarily by psychologists and other health professionals. In these studies, explored in depth in chapter 3, family connectedness and parental closeness have been found to be important for positive adolescent adjustment, higher self-esteem and emotional resilience, less drug use and fewer self-reported depression symptoms (Bogard, 2005; Houlberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Yugo & Davidson, 2007).

To build on the link between family connectedness and youth wellbeing, as established in quantitative research, and to ensure strategies to enhance connectedness are sensitive to young people's needs, a detailed understanding of how young people experience family connectedness is needed. In focusing on young people's in-depth perspectives the present study does not look to further explore the link between family connectedness and wellbeing. Instead, it aims to expand understanding of how young people experience family connectedness and how it can best be supported.

The value of adding young people's insights to the body of research knowledge is supported by the childhood studies approach adopted in the present study. Childhood studies, detailed in chapter 2, considers the views of children and young people to be different to, but as valuable as, adult perspectives (James & James, 2008; Korbin, 2006). This theory provides a strong argument for understanding young people's perspectives, and positions their insights as essential to developing comprehensive strategies for achieving positive family connectedness. Childhood studies was used to challenge the developmental assumption that

young people are inherently vulnerable. It further influenced the research methodology, interviews and analysis so that young people's perspectives were genuinely sought, highly valued, and accurately portrayed. The present study captures what young people value from family and how they connect with them. It considers how parents, schools and social workers can support family connectedness and, in turn, young people's wellbeing.

**Considering the broader social context.** Taking into account the wider social context is important for identifying the range of factors shaping family dynamics and individual perceptions of connectedness. Researchers believe changing social environments have a profound impact on the mental health of young people (Eckersley, 2011). Economic conditions, family structure, values and lifestyle have changed considerably in recent decades (Sweeting, West, Young, & Der, 2010). The broader social context affects the experiences of young people and the ability of families to care for and support them. Young people experience new opportunities and stresses, different from those faced by previous generations, and, therefore, understanding the wellbeing of young people in the context of their culture and times is crucial (Wyn, 2009b).

Eckersley (2011) provides a compelling argument that links deteriorating mental health in young Australians to fundamental cultural and social changes, such as the rise of materialism and individualism over recent decades. He suggests, that to address young people's wellbeing, health efforts need to focus on the social conditions that impact all young people and not just disadvantaged groups (Eckersley, 2011). Within Australia, young people's mental health is often pathologised and individuals and families treated without taking the broader social environment into account (Weeks, 2000). Consideration of the broader social context is rarely evident in family connectedness research.



The experiences of families and young people should not be viewed in isolation from the structural changes of recent decades. In the present study, systems theory (discussed in more detail in chapter 3) is used to draw attention to the impact of the broader social context on families and young people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The use of systems theory ensures the important role of the surrounding environment in family connectedness is not downplayed. As a result, recommendations arising from the present study consider this broader context to create relevant and sustainable family connectedness interventions. Specific changes which impact families, considered in chapter 4, include: increased workforce participation by women; rising living and housing costs; changes to family structure; and the influences of individualism, materialism and more pervasive technology use. Many of these social changes have also been seen to contribute to a decline in social connectedness<sup>2</sup> in both Australia and the United States since the 1960s (Leigh, 2010; Putnam, 2000; Ulichny, Ambrey, & Fleming, 2014).

Together, the importance of family connectedness for wellbeing, concerns about the mental health of young people, and the decline in social connectedness, make understanding young people's experiences of family connectedness a relevant and important contribution (Hamilton, 2003; Houlberg et al., 2011).

### **1.5 Contribution and Justification for the Present Study.**

There is a lack of qualitative studies on family connectedness and few studies have been conducted in Australia in this area (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Mueller et al., 2011).

There is also limited empirical research on family connectedness from a social work

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<sup>2</sup> Social connectedness refers to "the relationships people have with others and the benefits these relationships can bring to the individual as well as to society. It includes relationships with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours, as well as connections people make through paid work, sport and other leisure activities, or through voluntary work or community service. " (Ministry of Social Development (MSD), 2010, p. 110)

perspective. Given the importance of family connectedness to the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians, it is surprising how little research has been undertaken on the complexities of family connectedness and how young people experience it.

To address this gap, the present study used in-depth interviews to explore how young people experience family connectedness and to identify important factors that create a sense of connectedness. Interviewing young people directly is essential to understand their perspectives and develop effective interventions to support wellbeing (Kidger, Donovan, Biddle, Campbel, & Gunnell, 2009; Noble & Toft, 2010).

While there is extensive literature on the impact of the social context on mental health, this knowledge is not always evident in practice with families and young people (Weeks, 2000). This may reflect the challenges those in direct practice face in responding to the broader environment that affects their clients (Connolly & Harms, 2012). Consideration of the broader social context is also rarely evident in family connectedness research. This may be because family connectedness research has thus far largely focused on establishing the importance of these relationships, but it may also reflect the limited influence of the social work perspective in this area of research. By researching family connectedness through a systems theory lens, the present study reinforces the social work ‘person in environment’ perspective and offers a bridge between social analysis and practical work (Healy, 2005).

The present study contributes to knowledge by adding young people’s voices to our understandings of family connectedness and using a qualitative methodology to research young Australians’ experiences from a social work perspective. The knowledge gained provides information that will be useful to schools, social workers, counsellors and parents in building and maintaining family connectedness and supporting young people’s wellbeing.

**Value for social work.** By building our understanding of young people's experiences of family connectedness, the present study holds value for those who work with young people and families. It is particularly relevant for social workers, for whom the pursuit and maintenance of human wellbeing is central to their practice (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2010). The present study is interested in supporting the wellbeing of young people, acknowledges family as essential to the wellbeing of individuals, and, informed by my own social work background, considers the social factors that support or hinder family connectedness. As a profession, social work will have to respond to the reported increase in young people with mental health disorders and the effects of declining social connectedness. The findings contribute to the evidence base for practice available for social workers, and will assist social workers to understand these issues and provide insight into young people's perspectives (Jenson, 2005).

**Keeping schools in mind.** While the present study did not specifically explore the role of schools in family connectedness, it did consider the intersection of home and school in supporting young people's wellbeing - these are the two key environments in which young people develop (AIHW, 2003; Weare, 2010). The daily contact young people and families have with schools make them a unique resource to identify and prevent mental health disorders and promote wellbeing (Noble & Toft, 2010; Weare, 2010; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011).

Strategies that promote mental health in young people are important for schools, as good mental health leads to improved academic outcomes and lifelong resilience (Weare, 2010). Schools must also respond to the changing realities of young people's lives and, in preparing young people for adulthood, are increasingly required to focus on students' overall wellbeing in addition to their academic needs (R. White & Wyn, 2013). The knowledge

gained from the present study will assist schools in educating families on how to build and maintain connectedness during adolescence.

**Intellectual Contribution.** The present study makes an important intellectual contribution. It expands our knowledge of family connectedness from the perspectives of young people and the broader social factors which play a role in family relationships. In doing so, it bridges the gap in the literature between social critiques and individual families' experiences of connectedness and provides an avenue through which to respond to youth mental health issues both within individual families and at the broader cultural, social, economic and policy levels. Further, the study provides an in-depth model of family connectedness that can be used to inform and provide an evidence base for therapeutic work with families, supports the perspective of childhood studies and the need to understand young people's points of view, and reinforces social work interventions and the use of systems theory to guide practice, research and sustainable interventions.

The study reinforces the ongoing importance of family connections in young people's lives and critiques the influence of broader social values which devalue the importance of connections for youth wellbeing. The research demonstrates how childhood studies and systems theory can be effectively combined in research to consider issues from both the perspective of those who experience them and from the wider contextual level.

The particular methods used provide an example of how credible and robust qualitative research can be conducted while ensuring participants' views remain central and managing the researcher's subjectivity. The research approach adopted offers an holistic view of the different systems impacting on families and young people and an approach to research that heavily supports social work practice and can extend beyond the profession.

## **1.6 Introducing the Researcher**

In any study, the researcher's personal and professional biases have the potential to impact on the questions we ask and how we analyse data and present findings (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Fetterman, 1989). To identify and monitor the impact of any personal and professional biases, I recorded a statement of stance towards the research topic at the beginning of the PhD (Ely et al., 1997). This statement of stance and consideration of my personal and professional history provided the groundwork for ensuring reflexivity – “rigorous self-scrutiny” – throughout the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 327).

This statement covered my personal and professional history and my cultural and socio-economic status (Ely et al., 1997). The ways in which my professional identity as a social worker, my practice experience of working with young people in schools, and my personal history may have impacted on the present study are considered below. Here they serve the dual purpose of introducing myself, while also allowing readers of the thesis to be aware of, and make their own judgements on, the impact of my prior knowledge and experiences on the present study.

**Considering my social work identity.** In 2006, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Social Work (Honours), majoring in Sociology and English. In the following year I completed a Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education. Professional social work has always felt like the perfect fit for me. I am passionate about welfare and social justice and have always enjoyed working with people face-to-face, while also responding to their social environment. Research offers the opportunity to promote broader social changes that can support the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. The impact of my social work identity is evident throughout the thesis. I found limited research from social workers addressing family connectedness and, as a result, hoped to add a social work

perspective to this area of study. My professional background influenced the chosen theoretical approach for the research, outlined in chapter 5, and ensured individual experiences were recognised, young people's perspectives were valued, and the broader social context surrounding families was considered.

In addition to the expertise of my supervisors Professor Morag McArthur and Dr Parveen Kalliath, I was fortunate to be studying at the Institute of Child Protection Studies with colleagues who were experienced in conducting research with young people and always happy to provide guidance and support. This environment reinforced my belief that young people had important things to say and could make valuable contributions to research, and assisted me in understanding the theoretical underpinnings of such a research approach.

**Considering my professional experience.** My interest in this topic was influenced by my work as a secondary school counsellor for the previous 8 years. In this role, I have worked with young people aged 9 to 18 experiencing a vast range of issues including family transitions and crisis, relationship difficulties with peers, grief and loss, poor sleep, and mental health issues - including eating disorders, self-harm, depression, anxiety and suicide thoughts and attempts. I witnessed the value of family connectedness as a protective mental health factor in young people. Anecdotally, those young people who felt connected to their families, and saw their homes as safe and family as supportive, appeared to manage better during periods of stress. In contrast, many of the young people with mental health disorders felt disconnected from their families and parents. In considering these observations it is important to note that the cause and effect relationship between family connectedness and depression is not clear. Depression can affect young people's perception of family connectedness and how they interact with other family members, just as poor family connectedness can influence young people's mood (Bogard, 2005; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999).

In my work as a school counsellor I witnessed the capacity of young people to understand and think about ways to improve their situation, even if they were not always confident in their ability to effect change. My counselling work also raised an interest in how wider social conditions, such as more pervasive technology use, affected young people's lives. The significant role school played in many young people's lives, and the pressure for schools to respond to mental health concerns was evident. While the specific role of schools in supporting family connectedness was not researched, recommendations in the present study consider the role schools can play in supporting family connectedness given the daily contact they have with young people and their families.

I was aware that the findings of the present study could support my work as a school counsellor and I intend to share the findings through presentations and publications to ensure the valuable insights of the young people interviewed can make an impact. My work within schools provided a good base knowledge for this area of research but it was important to monitor the impact of this knowledge so it did not unduly influence the interpretation of results.

**Considering personal experiences.** It was also important to consider the potential impact of my personal experiences. I was born in Canberra, Australia and grew up living with my mum, dad, three siblings and a family dog. My mum was at home full time until my younger sister started primary school, worked part time until I reached high school and then worked full time. As a teacher, she was often home at the end of the school day and available to spend time with us in school holidays. My dad always worked full time, but was able to work from home when we were sick and was always actively interested in our hobbies. With no extended family in Canberra, my family relied on support from a strong network of friends and neighbours, particularly for rotating weekday care for kids to allow mothers to work part

time when we were young. In many ways we fitted the typical white, middle class Australian profile, although English is my mum's second language and my maternal grandparents both moved to Australia from Europe following World War Two and their experiences of Jewish persecution.

My personal history is one of positive family relationships that instilled in me a value of family and an understanding of the support a family could provide. In particular, I valued the stability my family provided for developing an identity and sense of self-worth in adolescence. This personal history has influenced my appreciation of, and interest in, family connectedness. I recognise, however, that the amount of time I had with my parents is partly reflective of the period in which I grew up (1980s- 1990s), when society was structured in a way that better allowed for families to survive on a single income (Bradbury, 2008; Edgar, 2000). I was also conscious that my own experiences were very much in line with the dominant culture and social structure of the 1980s, and would need to keep in mind that my experiences would not be reflective of the experiences and needs of the young people in the present study. In particular, I was conscious that my family structure, amount of access to my parents, and my expectations around family support were not the baseline for young people's expectations of their families. I was aware that my own positive experiences (although somewhat mediated through my counselling work) had the potential to position others' experiences more negatively, even if the young person was expressing satisfaction with how their family operated.

While the views of the young people interviewed have been filtered through my perspective, every effort was made to accurately portray these views. In addition to recording my personal and professional history, further steps to monitor the impact of my prior



knowledge and mitigate researcher bias are outlined in chapter 5 when presenting reflexive strategies used throughout interviews and analysis.

## **1.7 Outline of the Thesis**

To develop a comprehensive appreciation of young people's experiences of family connectedness, why these experiences are important, and how we can foster the wellbeing of young people through greater connectedness, the thesis is structured around four main elements. They are: a review of the literature, the conceptual framework for the study, the interview results, and the key findings and recommendations.

The literature review provides a robust foundation for the study by examining each of the key areas in which it is grounded – mental health, family connectedness, and the broader social context. The review explores how these key areas are depicted in the contemporary academic literature, and the theoretical approaches most suited to their analysis. Those insights are then integrated into a conceptual framework and methodology specifically developed to ensure the voices of young people are the central focus of the study and that the relationship between family and young people is evaluated by considering both internal family dynamics and the broader social context.

Young people's voices are then captured in detail, using the qualitative interview data to identify the key factors shaping young people's sense of family connectedness. Finally, the thesis identifies how the key issues and lessons emerging from the interviews either extend or challenge current understandings and can be used to strengthen family connectedness.

The specific content of each of the chapters is briefly summarised below.

**Chapters 2, 3 and 4** provide a comprehensive picture of the literature on each of the key areas in which the present study is grounded – young people's mental health, the

importance of family connectedness, and the impact of the broader social context on families and young people.

**Chapter 2 – The Mental Health of Young Australians** – provides the initial context for the study by reviewing the literature on young people’s mental health. Common understandings of key research concepts including adolescence, young people, wellbeing and mental health are explored, and the ways they are used in the present study are outlined. Developmental and childhood studies constructions of young people are presented and critiqued. Literature on the mental health of young people is then considered together with explanations for the possible increase in mental health disorders. International literature is used to look at trends in mental health more broadly.

**Chapter 3 – The Importance of Family Connectedness for Wellbeing** – examines the role of family connectedness in supporting young people’s wellbeing. Family and family connectedness are defined and the literature which establishes the importance of family connectedness for wellbeing is explored. Key theories that highlight the importance of connections are reviewed and systems theory is identified as the most appropriate lens to apply to the present study. This chapter highlights gaps in the family connectedness literature, exposing a lack of qualitative insights and more detailed understandings of connectedness from the perspectives of young people.

**Chapter 4 – The Social Context Impacting Young People and Families** – reviews the broader social context and changes impacting on mental health and family connections. Contextual factors which impact on families include: increased workforce participation by women; changes to family structure; rapid rates of social change; and the influence of individualism, materialism and more pervasive technology use. The impact of socio-

economic status on mental health is explored and the role of schools in supporting wellbeing is outlined.

**Chapter 5 – Conceptual Framework and Methodology** – outlines the conceptual framework and methodology adopted by the present study. The epistemology and theoretical approach is outlined. The key theories guiding the research - childhood studies and systems theory – and their influence on the methodology and methods for data collection and analysis are explained. The use of a qualitative methodology is further justified and the process for recruiting participants and conducting interviews is detailed, including the assistance provided by a young persons' reference group. This chapter describes the participants, steps taken to ensure ethical research, strategies to manage the impact of the researcher and ensure reflexivity, and the thematic networks approach used for data analysis. The chapter concludes with an outline of the key findings.

**Chapters 6, 7 and 8** – provide a detailed presentation of the results. Each of the key themes affecting young people's sense of family connectedness developed from the data is reviewed and young people's perspectives are explained in depth. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the factors within families that assist connectedness, while chapter 8 also considers the broader social context affecting families.

**Chapter 6 – Valuing the Basics** – focuses on the themes **being present and engaged in family life** and **having things in common**. These themes highlight how valuable connections can be supported through a family's daily routine and key factors shared by family members. Being present and engaged in family life is the first theme presented; it demonstrates the need for families to spend time together, communicate effectively, value family, and support each other. The importance of having common factors is then presented. This second theme highlights how sharing a common factor, interest or experience with

another family member helped young people relate to others and led to stronger connections. Young people talked about common interests, shared experiences and the way age, gender, values and personalities could affect connections.

**Chapter 7 – Valuing Young People and Connections Over Time** – presents two key themes – **feeling valued** and **connections over time**. Young people’s need to feel valued highlighted the importance of feeling accepted, respected and understood as a unique and important member of the family. More than any other theme, it focused on the individual needs of young people within the family. The connections over time data exposed the importance of developing connections prior to adolescence and the ways in which these early relationships provide the foundation for connectedness during adolescence. The ways in which connections changed as young people got older were also evident and many young people commented on their growing desire for independence and the need to balance freedoms and boundaries.

**Chapter 8 – Appreciating Difference, Widening Our Gaze** – focuses on the different ways families respond to changing dynamics within the family and the impact of the broader environment on family connectedness. **Family dynamics** highlights how family dynamics influence connections in different ways within families, the impact of stress on connections, and young people’s preferred parenting style. Despite young people’s tendency to focus on the role of others in creating connections, this theme added important recognition of young people’s ability to affect family relationships. The final theme presented examines the impact of **factors outside the family** on connectedness. The ways in which school and work environments can have flow-on effects into the home are presented, and the impact of more pervasive technology use is reviewed. The chapter concludes with a consideration of

how young people's perspectives on what families should do affected their sense of connectedness.

**Chapter 9 – Implications and Contributions** – positions the findings in the context of the wider literature and draws the thesis together. It outlines the ways in which the results of the present study variously support, challenge, and complement the current understandings of family connectedness. The contributions of the present study to our understanding of how both internal family dynamics and broader factors affect family connectedness are also assessed. The research concludes with recommendations for parents, schools and social workers on building and maintaining family connectedness throughout adolescence, and final reflections on the strengths and constraints of the present study. The overarching map of themes is presented as a model of family connectedness to assist therapeutic work with families. Challenging broader social values affecting families is encouraged, so that families might be better supported to have the time and energy to connect with each other.

## **1.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explained the context for the present study and identified the gaps in knowledge that make exploration of young people's experiences of family connectedness an important contribution. The next three chapters expand on the research context and provide a comprehensive review of the literature.

## **Chapter 2 – Mental Health and Wellbeing of Young Australians**

### **2.1 Introducing the Chapter**

This chapter provides the foundation for the present study. It highlights young people's mental health as a valid concern and establishes the importance of speaking with young people about their experiences.

The present study was driven by the high rates of mental health disorders affecting young Australians, the link between family connectedness and young people's wellbeing, and the social changes affecting young people and their families. In this and the following two chapters, each of these key areas is reviewed and gaps in current knowledge are identified. This chapter begins by reviewing common understandings of adolescence and outlines how the concepts of *adolescence*, *young people* and *wellbeing* are understood in the present study. Current literature on the mental health of young Australians is then presented. Explanations for the possible increase in mental health disorders are explored and international literature is reviewed to consider global trends in youth mental health.

### **2.2 The Construction of Childhood and Adolescence**

Adolescence is a constructed and relatively new concept in human history, understood differently across varying settings, times and cultures (Cottle, 2002; Freeman & Mathison, 2009). It is important to recognise constructions of childhood (which usually relates to those aged under 18) and adolescence (as the period between 11 and 18) as they heavily influence the way we think about young people. Different perspectives of childhood and adolescence over time are first used to highlight the constructed nature of adolescence.

**Constructions of childhood.** The idea of childhood and experiences of children have varied throughout history and across cultures and contexts (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; Thomas &

Percy-Smith, 2010). The concept of childhood as a “separate, vulnerable, and developmental stage of life” came to prominence in Europe between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries alongside changes in work, family and education (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 2). Before that time, there were no clear markers of adulthood, such as the completion of education, and children were considered to be faulty small adults who needed to be disciplined (Boakye-Boaten, 2010). Throughout history, children have variously been seen as inherently evil, blank slates, or naturally good (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). At most points in history, children have been seen as passive, without the agency to influence their own development or the relationships, systems or structures around them (Moore, 2012).

In contemporary Western thinking, childhood is usually considered a time of angelic innocence (R. A. Davis, 2011; Higonnet, 1998). Children are commonly thought of as dependent, in need of protection, powerless, and irrational (Rosen, 2007). The age-based schooling system, the need for parental consent for many activities, and age restrictions on driving, alcohol and criminal responsibility highlight these assumptions about children’s competencies (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognised the rights of children to express their views and have their voices heard (Mason & Bolzan, 2010). This convention acknowledges children’s vulnerabilities but also casts children as active citizens who can make decisions about what is in their best interests and who have rights to participation as well as protection (Thomas, 2007; Woodhead, 2010). Public discourse, however, still tends to focus on children’s needs and vulnerabilities (Thomas, 2007).

Universal ideas of childhood have been criticised for their failure to consider the impact of history, society and culture (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). For example, age distinctions between children and adults can vary extensively between societies and the role

of children within the family also varies across and within cultures (Rosen, 2007). In Western cultures, children are often considered to need constant adult supervision, while in other cultures children may be responsible for looking after younger siblings or contributing to the family's income (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Woodhead, 2008). As a result, the concept of childhood innocence is considered a luxury, more commonly available in wealthy societies (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; Woodhead, 2008).

**Constructions of adolescence.** The life stage known as adolescence emerged alongside industrialisation and the introduction of mass education at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chisholm & Hurrelman, 1995; Rutter, 1995). These changes separated the social spheres of home and work and of children and adults, increased the importance of peer relationships, and elongated the transition to adulthood (Chisholm & Hurrelman, 1995).

The way adolescence is constructed impacts the social interactions of young people (Gale & Bolzan, 2008). For example, the prevalent view that adolescence is a turbulent time filled with parental conflict can create a self-fulfilling prophecy – parents may withdraw from teens to avoid this conflict and, as a result, create a divide between themselves and their child (Rutter, 1995). Young people are often presented in the media as vulnerable, a portrayal which tends to lead to community views of young people as incomplete and in need of adult guidance, and limit young people's opportunities for participation in the community (Bolzan, 2003, 2005). There is also evidence that young people internalise these limiting notions of adolescence and may behave based on what they believe adolescents should do rather than what they might do in other contexts (Buchanan & Hughes, 2009).

Adults who have direct contact with young people are, however, more able to challenge these stereotypes (Bolzan, 2005). Most young people adjust well and when they are



trusted and recognised as valuable members of society they are more able to engage with their families and communities in positive ways (Gale & Bolzan, 2008; Robinson, 2009).

Young people's development and transition to adulthood is less defined and takes longer now than in previous generations (Lawrence, 2005; Wyn, 2005). In industrialised nations, such as Australia, young people take on adult experiences such as part time work and sexual experiences earlier, and study, stay at home and rely financially on their parents for longer (Lawrence, 2005; Wyn, 2005). Young people receive adult responsibilities and independence incrementally and in an individual and diverse fashion: turning 18, finishing school, moving out of home and getting a job are all steps in this process (Chisholm & Hurrelman, 1995; Rathus, 2006; D. Woodman & Wyn, 2013). Emerging adulthood is the term used to recognise the stage of development between 18 and 25 years of age and the extension of young people's identity development and role exploration into their twenties (Rathus, 2006).

This extension of adolescence is not, however, the norm for all young people (Hawley, 2011). Extended adolescence has been linked to diet, technological access and the tendency to continue living at home while undertaking further education (Lawrence, 2005; Wyn, 2005). Emerging adulthood is more common in wealthy societies where young people have greater control over the development of their identity and life direction (Rathus, 2006). In the Australian context, many of today's young people live at home for longer as they cannot afford to buy their own home (AIHW, 2011). The concept of emerging adulthood has also been criticised for comparing the experiences of today's young people to those born before 1975, and for implying that today's young people are slow in reaching adulthood, rather than recognising the changed social conditions (Wyn, 2011).

Young people in different cultures also experience adolescence in various ways (Cottle, 2002; Hawley, 2011). While in Western countries the awareness of, and struggle with, one's identity is seen to be a marker of adolescence, some cultures place little emphasis on individual identity development during adolescence (Cottle, 2002; Schlegel & Hewlett, 2011). Risk-taking behaviour is also more evident in cultures that separate the socialisation of young people and adults throughout the day and place high value on relationships with peers (Schlegel & Hewlett, 2011).

### **2.3 Comparing Dominant Constructions of Adolescence**

Contemporary understandings of young people are primarily framed by two different theoretical lenses – the developmental perspective and childhood studies. Each approaches and constructs adolescence in a quite different way. The developmental perspective reinforces the vulnerability of young people and focuses on the physical, social, cognitive and emotional development of adolescents as they move from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Moore, 2012). In contrast, childhood studies considers young people as human beings (rather than becomings) with agency, who influence and are influenced by the world around them (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). The developmental perspective positions children and young people to have limited capacity to reflect upon and reliably articulate their views (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). In contrast, childhood studies constructs them as competent social actors who have different, but equally important, perspectives to adults (James & James, 2008).

**The developmental perspective.** The developmental perspective present a widely accepted view of the key changes that young people experience, focusing on the ways that young people become increasingly adult between 12 and 18 years of age. From a developmental perspective, children and adolescents are generally seen to move through

defined stages of biological, cognitive, social and emotional development (AIHW, 2003; Berk, 2012; Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

In reviewing key assumptions of the developmental perspective, it is important to bear in mind that this is one way of viewing young people, grounded in a particular discourse that prioritises biological changes and brain development. The positioning of adolescence as a universal experience, without consideration of the broader social context, has been challenged not only by childhood studies, but also from within the field of developmental psychology (Woodhead, 2008). The developmental perspective is reviewed here because it is the dominant discourse influencing what behaviour and development is considered to be normal for young people in Western cultures and also reflects knowledge from neuroscience on the development of the brain (Moore, 2012; D. Muir, 1999; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; R. White & Wyn, 2013).

From a developmental perspective, young people grow in maturity, build new skills and competencies, and develop a clearer sense of who they are during adolescence (AIHW, 2011). Relationships with friends and family, and young people's mood and self-image can all change during this time (AIHW, 2011; Marotz & Allen, 2013). The 'tasks' of adolescence are seen to include: "accepting the full grown body; acquiring adult ways of thinking; attaining greater independence from family; developing more mature ways of relating to peers of both sexes; [and] beginning to construct an identity" (Berk, 2012, p. 529). It is also the developmental period in which people are most conscious of peer conformity (Marotz & Allen, 2013).

Physical developments include hormonal changes, developing an adult sized body and sexual maturity (Rathus, 2006). Puberty can influence young people's mood, the way they think about themselves, and their relationships with friends and family. Developmental

theorists observe that it is common to have more intense parent-child conflict in early adolescence, particularly for girls who begin puberty earlier (Berk, 2012). Young people's mood becomes more stable in later adolescence and relationships with parents more equal (Marotz & Allen, 2013; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Mood fluctuations in teens are seen to be the result of various biological, psychological and social elements, with negative life events such as getting in trouble at school and difficult relationships with parents most responsible for negative moods (Berk, 2012). Coleman's (1978) focal theory of adolescence sees decreases in youth wellbeing to occur when young people experience multiple challenges in a short period of time.

Brain development and cognitive changes across adolescence can affect how young people see themselves and the world around them. New skills include more logical reasoning, and an improved ability to consider multiple perspectives and think abstractly about issues (Marotz & Allen, 2013; Rathus, 2006). Improved reasoning skills can result in conflict with parents as young people get better at formulating and presenting an argument (Berk, 2012). Young people experience intense emotions and reactions to stress and pleasure, making it more difficult to manage their impulses and to self regulate (Berk, 2012).

Young people can live intensely in the moment and may have difficulty imagining a future self, which can increase risk-taking behaviours including a heightened risk of self-harm and suicide (Lawrence, 2005). Because of these changes, developmental theorists argue that young people need parental support and guidance while they are building skills in self-regulation and making decisions about high risk behaviour (Berk, 2012). Adolescence is often referred to as a period of storm and stress, due to the increased mood changes, high risk behaviours and conflict with parents. The idea that storm and stress are a natural part of growing up has, however, been challenged from within developmental psychology - many

young people pass through adolescence without any major family conflict (Rathus, 2006; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Coleman's (1978) focal theory sees storm and stress to occur only in a minority of cases, in which young people have to deal with multiple transitions simultaneously. In contrast, most young people cope well with youth transitions when they are able to deal with them sequentially (Coleman, 1978).

Socially, peer relationships commonly become more important, intimate and time consuming (AIHW, 2003; Mueller et al., 2011). Young people begin to question the authority of their parents and make more decisions independently (Berk, 2012). Although supportive parents are of ongoing importance for young people, relationships with other adults, such as teachers and coaches, are also important for wellbeing and motivation throughout adolescence (Glover et al., 1998; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011).

The developmental perspective thus provided important insights into the way children may grow and mature during adolescence but has also faced criticism on a number of fronts. The strongest criticism has been for its construction of adolescent development as a universal experience, without regard for culture and context (Woodhead, 2008). Even from within the field of developmental psychology, narrow and rigid applications of its knowledge have been challenged and there has been an attempt to recognise the influence of environmental factors on development (Smetana et al., 2006; Woodhead, 2008). Further criticisms have been levelled at the developmental perspective for positioning children as 'works in progress' towards becoming adult, rather than complete beings – overlooking children's competence, understanding, and ability to reflect and comment on their own lives (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Woodhead, 2008). Focusing on young people primarily as future adults undermines the significant role adolescents play in society (Wyn, 2005).

**Childhood studies.** Childhood studies, also known as the new Sociology of Childhood, offers an alternative viewpoint to developmental understandings (Mason, Urquhart, & Bolzan, 2003; Moore, 2012). It encourages flexible understandings of young people's development and challenges the universalised experience of adolescence presented in the developmental perspective (James & James, 2008; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010). The biological immaturity of children is still recognised, but childhood is considered a socially constructed concept shaped by social and cultural factors. From this perspective, culture, community, systems and structures are seen to be as influential on children's development, behaviours, and identity formation as their biology and brain development (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994; Tisdall, 2012).

Childhood studies also challenges the developmental idea that children are less competent, rational or important than adults, as well as the tendency to focus on young people purely for the ways in which they are becoming more adult (Prout & James, 1997; Qvortrup, 1994). In childhood studies, being a child or young person has intrinsic value; children and young people are considered as increasingly competent social actors with status, rights and reflective capabilities, rather than passive recipients of society and culture (James & James, 2008; Tisdall, 2012).

Childhood studies recognises the unique insights held by children and young people, and the active contributions they make to their own lives and communities (James & James, 2008; Wyn & White, 1997). It is essentially focused on children's rights, agency, voice and wellbeing and remains open to diverse experiences (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a; Woodhead, 2008). From this perspective, traditional and paternalistic views of childhood are seen to oppress young people's voices and rights, and undermine the important contributions children and young people can make to knowledge (Bolzan & Gale, 2011; Graham & Fitzgerald,

2010a). The ways in which Western conceptualisations of childhood are often presented as the global norm are also challenged (Tisdall, 2012; Woodhead, 2008).

While children are increasingly constructed as active citizens in creating positive outcomes for themselves and their community, it is doubtful how well this translates into social work practice or affects interactions between adults and children (Mason & Bolzan, 2010; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010; Woodhead, 2010). Developmental norms are still commonly used to measure expected competencies, and the way these norms reinforce children's vulnerabilities can lead to an emphasis on protection that overshadows children's rights to participation (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a; Vis, Holtan, & Thomas, 2012).

Childhood studies also has limitations. It has been criticised for focusing too much on individual agency, minimising the impact of relationships and the broader social context, and for downplaying children's vulnerabilities (Moore, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). The way in which different cultures construct childhood must also be recognised; Western ideas about children's rights as individuals may not be relevant or helpful for children in collectivist societies (Mason & Bolzan, 2010; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

## **2.4 Understanding Young People in the Present Study**

Given these contrasting approaches to childhood and adolescence, it is important to clarify how young people will be viewed in the present study. The present study aimed to highlight young people's agency and competence, without ignoring their potential vulnerabilities. Childhood studies was adopted as the dominant theoretical understanding due to its recognition of young people's competence, diverse adolescent experiences and the constructed nature of adolescence. Childhood studies reinforces young people's ability to reflect and comment on their own lives and supports the need to understand young people's insights into family connectedness.

The study did not exclusively use a childhood studies approach and was at least partly informed by a developmental perspective, accepting the biological aspects of development and recognising the changes commonly associated with adolescence. However, the present study challenged the universalising of developmental norms, was primarily interested in young people's individual experiences of family connectedness and wanted to remain open to stories that did not fit within developmental assumptions.

In some respects, it is difficult to avoid some overlap between developmental and childhood studies' understandings of young people. Despite their inherent differences, both recognise the biological immaturity of children. More recently, developmental theorists have also recognised the impact of environmental factors, bringing the two perspectives closer together (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Woodhead, 2008). Woodhead (2008) also clarifies that in challenging narrow forms of developmentalism we do not have to reject all knowledge about child development. Children still experience transitions of "size and maturity, relationships and identities, interests and activities and perspectives and skills", even if we recognise that these changes and the ways they are experienced by children and young people will depend on their context (Woodhead, 2008, p. 28). In addition, the review of the literature in this and the following two chapters unavoidably reflects aspects of developmental understandings, as this is the dominant framework in which much of the mental health and family connectedness research is framed.

The key element that positions this study firmly within childhood studies is the belief that young people, although different to adults, are just as valuable and important members of society, who have the ability to reflect on their lives and articulate their views (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2007; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; James & James, 2008). This contrasts with the developmental theory view that young people are not in a position to provide a



reliable account of their experience because they are seen to lack rationality, maturity, and reflexive capabilities (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Hogan, 2005). In the final chapter, developmental assumptions about young people are also reviewed and more actively critiqued in light of the participants' interview responses.

The present study adopted a broad understanding of adolescence to allow for the diversity within cultures and communities, considering adolescence to occur between the ages of 11 and 18. Young people's capacities evolve as they transition through a range of physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes throughout adolescence; the way these changes are constructed and impact on young people will differ depending on the context of their lives (AIHW, 2011; Chisholm & Hurrelman, 1995; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a). Adolescence is as important as adulthood; young people's perspectives and their contributions to society are valuable (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a).

Drawing on developmental understandings of young people, the 15 and 16 year old age group was chosen for the present study because this age group is seen to have passed the early adolescent surge of hormones linked with increased risk of parental conflict (Berk, 2012). It is also the age at which young people in Australia are on the cusp of social and legal independence but still exist primarily within their family unit. Given the relatively small sample size, a narrow age cohort was selected to introduce an element of possible consistency across those interviewed.

At the same time, the limits to the representativeness of the sample need to be recognised. The framing of the interview questions and the subsequent analysis of young people's responses were carefully done to avoid making assumptions of commonality either across the group interviewed or in relation to young people at that age more broadly. It was

important that the study did not inadvertently assume that established developmental expectations for 15 and 16 year olds would be reflected in the experiences of those interviewed.

To avoid invoking commonly accepted developmental assumptions linked with the term ‘adolescence’, the present study primarily uses ‘young people’ to describe the 15 and 16 year old participants (Mason et al., 2003; Prout & James, 1997). Young people refers to people aged 12 to 25 and acknowledges adolescents as people in their own right (Bolzan, 2003; McGorry et al., 2006). The practical implications of adopting a childhood studies approach as a dominant framework for the research and the ways in which this influenced how the present study was conducted are discussed in detail in chapter 5.

## **2.5 Understanding Wellbeing and Mental Health**

A major catalyst for the present study was the high rates of young Australians experiencing mental health disorders and indicators that these rates are rising (R. White & Wyn, 2013; Wyn, 2009b). These contemporary issues of youth wellbeing reinforce the value of developing knowledge of, and strategies for, supporting young Australians. Given the established link between family connectedness and youth wellbeing, (discussed in detail in chapter 3) the present study’s in-depth understandings of family connectedness make a valuable and timely contribution.

Before reviewing current concerns about wellbeing, establishing just what the terms ‘wellbeing’ and ‘mental health’ encompass for young people and why they are significant in Australian society today is an important foundation for this discussion. Wellbeing is used and understood in many different ways in the literature (Gillet-Swan, 2014). Wellbeing recognises that being healthy is not just about being free from disease but includes being physically, mentally and socially well (AIHW, 2011; WHO, 2011).

The three dominant ways of conceptualising wellbeing are: subjective wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, and social wellbeing (Gallagher & Lopez, 2008). Subjective wellbeing is an individual's judgement on their own wellbeing, happiness and how positive their life is (Gallagher & Lopez, 2008; Wirtz & Diener, 2004). Psychological wellbeing is composed of a sense of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Gallagher & Lopez, 2008). Social wellbeing considers how social and interpersonal factors impact on individual wellbeing and involves: having a sense of comfort with others, recognising order in one's social world, making a contribution to society, and feeling part of one's society (Gallagher & Lopez, 2008). These three types of wellbeing are considered to be complementary aspects of thriving mental health (Gallagher & Lopez, 2008).

In the majority of literature that was reviewed, wellbeing is used only in a general sense. Given wellbeing was only a subsidiary focus of the present study, a general definition was appropriate. The Australian Unity Project's definition of wellbeing was adopted; it defines wellbeing as a "stable state of being well, feeling satisfied and contented" (Australian Unity Ltd, 2011, para 1). The study was also informed by Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn's (2006a) description of wellbeing as "having meaning in life...fulfilling potential and feeling that our lives are worthwhile" (p. 19). Wellbeing is considered distinct from the more changeable state of happiness; it is not about feeling happy all the time, irrespective of our environment (Australian Unity Ltd, 2011; Diener & Scollon, 2004).

Mental health and wellbeing are often used interchangeably in the literature, and positive mental health in young people is an indicator of wellbeing (AIHW, 2011; Brooks, 2010). In the present study, mental health was understood as "a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can

work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO, 2011, para 1).

Wellbeing and mental health are shaped by a combination of genetics, socio-economic status, cultural settings, relationships with friends and family, and lifestyle factors including sleep, diet and exercise (Brooks, 2010; Eckersley et al., 2006a). Young people need to feel valued, connected, important and positive about their role in society (Butcher, 2010). Wellbeing has been associated with better relationships, management of stress, work productivity and health (Diener & Scollon, 2004; Wirtz & Diener, 2004). Key to the present study is the idea that wellbeing relates directly to an individual’s relationships with those around them. Eckersley (2005a) sees wellbeing to primarily come from:

... being connected and engaged, from being suspended in a web of relationships and interests. These give meaning to our lives. We are deeply social beings. The intimacy, belonging and support provided by close personal relationships seem to matter most; isolation exacts the highest price (p. 202).

Within Australia, wellbeing has become a public concern and a personal responsibility. This intense focus on maintaining individual wellbeing is likely to be implicated in the increased rate of mental health disorders as it challenges young people to worry about being happy, set unrealistic goals, feel personally responsible for their wellbeing, and to ignore the impact of social factors (Eckersley, 2005b; Wyn, 2009a, 2009b).

## **2.6 Young People and Mental Health**

Adolescence is considered a crucial time to establish positive mental health (AIHW, 2011; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Positive mental health in adolescence provides the foundation for positive mental health in adulthood and can affect young people’s education,

relationships and employment outcomes (Houlberg et al., 2011; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Adolescence can, however, be a vulnerable period with increased risk of depressed mood given the rapid physical, cognitive and emotional development commonly associated with adolescence (Ivancic, Perrens, Fildes, Perry, & Christensen, 2014; Mueller et al., 2011).

Experiences of depressed mood rise in early adolescence, with half of all mental health disorders beginning by 14 years of age (Ivancic et al., 2014; Mueller et al., 2011). By later adolescence, major depressive disorders are seen in similar rates to adult populations (Mueller et al., 2011). Poor mental health in young people has been linked to low self-esteem, negative body image, poor educational and employment outcomes, increased health risk behaviours, social withdrawal, and increased risk of suicide (Ivancic et al., 2014; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011; Wyn, 2009b). Good mental health in adolescence leads to better outcomes at school, better resilience and employment outcomes as adults, and less chance of interaction with the police (Weare, 2010).

Environments which promote mental health are based on warm relationships in which people care for each other's emotional wellbeing. These positive environments help young people feel valued and accepted, and provide a sense of belonging (Weare, 2010). Attachment to parents, strong friendship networks, supportive school communities, participation in extracurricular activities and service opportunities, and religious associations all assist healthy development (Berk, 2012).

## **2.7 The Mental Health of Young Australians**

The importance of examining the factors, including family connectedness, that have the potential to support the wellbeing of young people is further reinforced by the high rates of mental health disorders experienced by young Australians. The existing literature presents a mixed picture of the health of young Australians (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Parkinson, 2011).

Most young people say they are healthy and happy, and general mortality rates are declining (AIHW, 2011; Eckersley, 2011). Many young people are resilient, have good relationships with parents, work hard in school, avoid high risk behaviours, and are adaptable (Eckersley et al., 2006a; Weare, 2010). Young people generally experience more positive living conditions, higher levels of education, greater wealth and many aspects of improved physical wellbeing than past generations (Parkinson, 2011; Sweeting et al., 2010; Wyn, 2009b). This paints a positive picture of today's youth as the healthiest of generations and encourages health efforts to be directed at the marginalised minority (Eckersley, 2011).

On the other hand, there is evidence that the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians is deteriorating (Eckersley, 2011; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010c; R. White & Wyn, 2013). Eckersley (2011) challenges the positive narrative of young Australians' health. He questions the reliability of self-report measures in providing an accurate picture of wellbeing, and argues that declining mortality rates can mask the impact of chronic health issues - in particular, the extent of mental health disorders in young people. Eckersley, et al. (2006b) also note that while a majority of young people report being happy, as many as a third of young people experience high levels of mental stress at any point in time. In Bernard, Stephanou, and Urbach's (2007) study of 10,000 Australian students aged from 4 to 18, 89% said they were happy but 43% of the same cohort were assessed to be in the lower levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

Mental health is the leading cause of poor health for young Australians and there is evidence to suggest that young people are experiencing mental health disorders at a greater rate than in past generations (Kidger et al., 2009; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011; Wyn, 2009b). One in four 16-24 year olds in Australia are reported to have a mental health disorder such as depression or anxiety, outstripping the general population rate of one in five (Ivancic et al.,

2014; Parkinson, 2011; Wyn, 2009b). Another quarter of 16-24 year olds without a mental health disorder experience moderate to severe psychological distress, and young people are carrying their increased level of risk into adulthood (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Mueller et al., 2011; K. Muir et al., 2009). It is problematic to quantify changes to young people's mental health, however, as the Australian Bureau of Statistics only collects mental health data for those aged 16 years and over (AIHW, 2011).

For young Australians, the most common mental health disorders are depression, anxiety and substance abuse disorders, with mental health disorders more prevalent in females (Brooks, 2010; Ivancic et al., 2014; R. White & Wyn, 2013). Despite young people's alcohol consumption declining overall, they are more likely to have their first drink at a younger age and drink excessively when they do drink. The hospitalisation rate for excessive drinking for women aged 15-24 doubled between 1998 and 2006 from 46 to 99 per 100,000, bringing them much closer to the male rate which increased from 66 to 107 per 100,000 across the same time period (ABS, 2009b; Parkinson, 2011).

In Australia in 2005, 51% of young females reported moderate to very high levels of psychological distress compared to 40% of young males (Wyn, 2009b). In 2011, female rates of self-reported high or very high levels of psychological distress were twice that of males (13% of females, 6% of males) (AIHW, 2011). While females report low mood and low self-esteem more often and are more likely to self harm and attempt suicide, males are at greater risk of completing suicide (Brooks, 2010; Carr, 2014).

Emotional distress and risk of suicide increase in the later years of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Brooks, 2010; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). In the UK, research shows that the large majority of young people report good health up until the first year of high school. After this time, the proportion of young people who report good health decreases

every year (Brooks, 2010). The gap between male and female experiences of emotional disorders also widens as they get older, and by mid to late adolescence, boys are much more likely to report higher life satisfaction (Brooks, 2010).

Suicides and drug-related deaths declined in Australia between 1996 and 2006, giving the impression that mental health was improving. During the same period, however, the number of self-harm hospitalisations for youth aged 12-24 rose by 66%, and for females aged 15-17 the increase was particularly marked at 90%, highlighting ongoing youth mental health concern (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Parkinson, 2011). Increased public education about suicide, which means young people are more likely to seek help – together with improved medical knowledge, and safer pharmaceutical drugs – may explain the decline in suicide rates (Eckersley, 2005b; Eckersley et al., 2006a). Notwithstanding this decline, suicide was the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15-24 years of age in 2012 (ABS, 2014).

Risk factors for mental health disorders include: a family history of suicide and mental health disorders, conflict at home, economic disadvantage, and socialising difficulties (Berk, 2012). Most people experience difficulties, such as depression, suicidal thoughts and rejection at some point in their lives and these feelings are likely to be more intense for teenagers (Denholm, 2006; Eckersley et al., 2006a).

It is unclear how much increased diagnostic testing and a greater willingness amongst young people to report mental health concerns is responsible for the reported increase in mental health disorders (AIHW, 2008). However, increased self-harming behaviour, growth in prescriptions of anti-depressant medication, and international mental health trends, suggest the growth in mental health disorders is genuine (Parkinson, 2011). White and Wyn (2013) feel there is now strong evidence that mental health disorders are increasing for young Australians.



Eckersley (2011) argues that deteriorating mental health in young Australians is the result of fundamental cultural and social shifts, such as the rise of materialism and individualism, over the last several decades. To improve young people's wellbeing, he (2011) recommends efforts to support young people's mental health must address the social conditions that impact on all young people, not just disadvantaged groups. Wyn (2005) also notes how the distinction between 'normal' and 'at risk' young people obscures the diversity of youth and the impact of social change on all young people. Preventative and all-encompassing interventions for youth are also encouraged to support the many youth with mental health disorders who do not access health services (Ivancic et al., 2014; Mission Australia, 2013). The changing social conditions affecting young people and their families are explored in detail in chapter 4.

While it is difficult to establish the extent of long-term change in young Australians' wellbeing and mental health, international research supports the view that psychological problems have become more prevalent (Eckersley et al., 2006a). The high rates of mental health disorders experienced by young people and the evidence that these disorders are becoming even more prevalent, make addressing young people's mental health a priority, and research efforts to support wellbeing timely (Ivancic et al., 2014). While wellbeing is not a primary focus of the present study, the findings will contribute to young people's wellbeing by assisting efforts to build connectedness through providing a better understanding of family connectedness from the perspectives of young people.

**Considering mental health literature through a childhood studies lens.** Much of the literature on youth mental health reviewed for this study draws on developmental assumptions and positions adolescence as an inherently vulnerable time for mental health issues to develop. This focus on risk and vulnerability overshadows the strengths young

people possess to support their own wellbeing. In addition, youth mental health is largely considered in relation to how this will affect their success and outcomes as adults rather than looking at the impact on their experiences as young people. The disconnect between young people self-reporting as healthy and happy, while simultaneously being assessed with poor mental health would benefit from further consideration (Eckersley et al., 2006a).

Despite the acknowledgment of the social and cultural issues that are playing a role in increased youth mental illness, the labelling of mental health concerns can position young people as having inherent deficits (Rosenfield, 1997; K. White, 2008). This deficit approach does not position young people well to critically engage with the environments that are impacting upon them or to have a social voice about what can be done at a broader level to improve wellbeing. Young people should be encouraged to critically engage with these social pressures rather than being positioned as passive recipients of their culture and environment.

## **2.8 Chapter Summary**

By defining key constructions of adolescence and outlining the state of youth mental health, this chapter has established the approach to young people adopted in the present study and positioned the thesis within the context of high and possibly increasing rates of youth mental health disorders. This chapter outlined how adolescence, young people and wellbeing are understood in the present study. Dominant constructions of adolescence including the developmental perspective and childhood studies were reviewed. The reasons for primarily adopting a childhood studies approach and the importance of speaking with young people about their experiences were explained. Mental health was established as an important concern for young Australians. The following chapter looks more directly at the role of family connectedness in youth wellbeing.

## **Chapter 3 – The Importance of Family Connectedness for Wellbeing**

### **3.1 Introducing the Chapter**

Having established the importance of good mental health in adolescence and the high and possibly increasing rates of mental health disorders experienced by young people, it is necessary to assess the role of family connectedness in supporting young people's wellbeing. The theoretical perspectives that have been developed to explain and understand the value of connectedness differ from those seeking to understand young people as individuals. Accordingly, it is important to identify the lens most suitable to complement the childhood studies approach already established, thus ensuring that the insights offered by young people are not evaluated in isolation but within a broader context of how and why they matter. The concepts of family and family connectedness also need to be reviewed to establish the strengths and limitations of the existing literature and how the present study will deepen understanding of family connectedness from the perspectives of young people.

### **3.2 Understanding Family**

Families play a fundamental role in the lives of most young people in Australia. They support young people throughout their development by providing them with a secure base and sense of self and are the key site for young people's care and socialisation (Edgar, 2000; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). A family's ability to provide social, economic and emotional support to young people has a significant influence on their wellbeing (AIHW, 2011). Core functions of the family include raising and guiding children and providing love, encouragement, support, financial security and a sense of belonging and identity (Denny, Gavidia-Payne, Davis, Francis, & Jackson, 2014; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009).

Family has been conceptualised as the heart of young people's social network and holds great value and status within Australian society (Barker, 2012; Pinkerton & Dolan,

2007). In Pinkerton and Dolan's (2007) study with Irish youth, participants most commonly nominated their parents as a source of support, even in cases where relationships with their parents were strained. Ungar's (2004) Canadian research with 43 high-risk adolescents aged 13-17 found young people preferred to stay in family situations that involved risks and poor parenting over disengaged institutional care or no parenting (Ungar, 2004). In Barker's (2012) study of homeless Australian youth, many longed for ongoing relationships with family and he noted how enduring their hopes for a normal family were. While other supports are important in young people's lives, nothing seems to match the value or resilience of family relationships for young people (Barker, 2012; Robinson & Pryor, 2006).

The concept of family, however, is complex and its socially constructed meanings vary across time, cultures and between individuals (Edgar, 2000; McDonald, 2013; Robinson, 2009). During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the concept and role of family changed from providing children with name and property to an instrument to raise the spiritual and moral values of its members (Boakye-Boaten, 2010). The way families care for children has also changed over time, and the increased individualisation in Western societies and labour force participation by women has affected the relative importance of family and the ways family members relate to each other (Boakye-Boaten, 2010; Chisholm & Hurrelman, 1995). Culture can also affect whether people consider themselves in an individualistic way or as part of a collective, which extends the concept of family to include non-parental adults in the community and encourages the idea of interdependence over independence (Anyan & Pryor, 2002).

Family may include immediate family, extended family, families with no children, non-biological relationships and pets (Robinson, 2009). In Anyan and Pryor's (2002) study, young people saw the presence of mutual love and support as the main marker of family,

regardless of structure. Biological relationships were important with fewer than half the young people identifying non-biological relations as family (Anyan & Pryor, 2002).

There are also generational differences in the way family is defined, with a move away from the stereotype that family refers to a married mother and father living with biologically related children (Anyan & Pryor, 2002; Robinson, 2009). Families are much more diverse than this stereotype suggests and today's young people are generally very accepting of diverse family structures (Anyan & Pryor, 2002). Caring and committed family relationships have also been shown to be far more important than the structure of a household (McDonald, 2013). Age also affects how people conceptualise family and what needs the family caters for (Robinson, 2009). For example, a child may conceptualise family differently than a teenager would. Younger children are more likely to see two parents as being an important marker of family (Anyan & Pryor, 2002).

The present study acknowledges the variety among families and cultures and did not try to establish one right way to do family or family connectedness. Rather than imposing a rigid definition of family, individual participants were asked to describe their family in their own words. This method of allowing children to define their family is supported by Anyan and Pryor (2002) who assert that young people should be asked who they see as their family. In the present study, young people variously described their family as including: biological relationships, extended family relationships, step and foster relationships, pets, friends, god-parents, girlfriends and boyfriends, and other groups and adults important in their lives. A detailed description of the relationships young people considered as family is provided in chapter 5.

### 3.3 Understanding Family Connectedness

Surprisingly, given the prominence of the concept in academic and professional literature, there is no consensus definition of family connectedness (The Children of Parents with a Mental Illness, 2014). The New Zealand Ministry of Social Development (MSD) (2010) defines social connectedness as “the relationships people have with others and the benefits these relationships can bring to the individual as well as to society” (p. 110). To measure social connectedness the MSD (2010) uses a number of indicators including contact with family and friends, contact between young people and their parents, trust in others, and loneliness.

Mueller et al. (2011) identify three components of family connectedness for young people – their relationship with each of their mother and father, and, overall family connectedness. A sense of attachment and responsibility towards others, showing love, and experiencing a sense of harmony are important for connected relationships (Peterson, 2009). Most research on family closeness starts with the premise that people know what closeness means to them and can report reliably on the closeness of their relationships with others (K. E. Davis, 2009).

In the present study, a broad definition was required so as not to restrict young people’s descriptions of family connectedness and the aspects they saw as important to its functioning. To satisfy this criteria, the present study has adopted Crespo et al.’s (2010) definition of family connectedness as, “a whole-family variable that refers to the family’s sense of belonging and being psychologically close in ways perceived and defined by the adolescent” (p. 1394). This definition is supported by other research which highlights belonging and closeness as key to family connectedness (Bernat & Resnick, 2009; Jose & Pryor, 2010). Using this broad definition and allowing young people to conceptualise family

connectedness in their own way supported the study's efforts to deepen our understanding of how young people view family connectedness. This approach allowed for full consideration of whether young people's experiences match our current understandings of connectedness.

This broad definition encompasses a range of factors that have been shown to contribute to family connectedness. Parents in connected families are warm and supportive, knowledgeable about adolescent developmental changes and respectful of young people's interests and individuality (AIHW, 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009). Within the family, open and responsive communication, sufficient quality time, sharing daily activities, high levels of trust, support in hard times, appropriate levels of adult supervision, and a degree of responsibility for young people are important elements of connectedness (Brooks, 2010; Houlberg et al., 2011; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). To function effectively and sustain relationships, families need to solve problems and make decisions together (AIHW, 2011; MSD, 2010).

Factors that affect the closeness of family relationships include interpersonal warmth and support, geographical closeness, the frequency of interactions, the diversity of things done together, and the extent to which two people are included in each other's lives (K. E. Davis, 2009; Macdonald, 2006). Maintaining positive connections over time has a strong influence on interpersonal closeness (K. E. Davis, 2009). Family relationships can be affected during periods of crisis and when parents lack support or experience mental health or substance use issues (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2001).

As with definitions of family, family connectedness varies across societies and between families and individuals (Peterson, 2009). Ethnicity, family culture and the relative importance of family and autonomy can lead to different ways of expressing, building and maintaining connections (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). These cultural variations were evident

in Hardway and Fuligni's (2006) investigation of family connectedness among 489 year nine students with Mexican, Chinese and European backgrounds. Their study found the three ethnic groups connected in different ways. Identification and dyadic closeness were important for family connectedness for those from European backgrounds, whereas family assistance and obligation had greater significance for those young people from Mexican and Chinese backgrounds. Parenting styles and how they affect young people can similarly vary across cultures (Gonzalez et al., 2002).

Even siblings in the same environment can experience connectedness differently. Jacobson and Rowe (1999) see differential treatment of siblings by parents to have a strong influence on young people's mood and family connectedness. These different experiences across cultures and within families highlight the need to consider young people's individual needs and to be cautious in making generalisations about family connectedness. Family functioning may also fluctuate in response to external stresses and as family circumstances and relationships change (AIHW, 2011). This variety of experiences supports the broad definition of connectedness adopted by the present study and the value of qualitatively exploring the individual experiences of young people.

### **3.4 The Link Between Family Connectedness and Young People's Wellbeing**

The importance of family connectedness for young people's wellbeing cannot, however, be simply assumed. It needs to be demonstrated. To establish that link, the role of family during adolescence, the literature on family connectedness and wellbeing, and theoretical perspectives that reinforce the human need for connection must be reviewed.

**The ongoing importance of family for young people.** This analysis highlights a number of important observations. The environment in which young people are raised has a significant effect on their wellbeing, with the level of support available within families



affecting their health, social and academic outcomes (AIHW, 2011; Brooks, 2010).

Relationships with family play a significant role in young people's health, and interventions to support wellbeing need to consider the family context (Carr, 2014; Gilligan, 2006; Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2013).

Adolescence is commonly seen as a significant developmental stage in the transition to adulthood, involving increased independence and decision-making responsibility (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Santrock, 2011). Developmental understandings of adolescence focus on the increased importance of, and time given to, peer relationships by teenagers (Berk, 2012). The increasing importance of peer relationships and the way in which young people's relationships with their parents change throughout adolescence can, however, give the mistaken impression that family loses its relevance for young people during this time (Robinson, Power, & Allan, 2011; Schofield & Beek, 2009). Although the importance of maintaining close connections with parents to protect youth from experiencing negative outcomes is increasingly recognised, the importance of family is still frequently underestimated (Peterson, 2009; Robinson et al., 2011; Schofield & Beek, 2009).

Researchers promote the ongoing value of parental closeness and support throughout adolescence despite common assumptions that young people loosen ties with parents as their relationships with peers strengthen (Bogard, 2005; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). There is increasing recognition of the protective value of families for positive youth outcomes, including their role in providing care, a sense of belonging and a secure base, and helping young people's sense of self-worth as they cope with the changes of adolescence (Glover et al., 1998; Robinson et al., 2011; Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2013). Open communication, parental supervision and support, eating meals as a family, and young people's belief that their parents approve of and care about them have been linked to better

mental health outcomes for young people (Elgar, Craig, & Trites, 2013; Kenny, Dooley, & Fitzgerald, 2013; Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2013).

Older adolescents and emerging adults continue to need attachment to, and support from, parents and family (Bogard, 2005; Butcher, 2010; Lee & Robbins, 1995). While having a range of supporters has been shown to improve young people's wellbeing, even having just one supportive adult who cares for them is crucial (Bogard, 2005; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Siblings have also been identified as an important source of support, with the potential to compensate for young people's needs when parents or friends are not available or not providing enough support (Milevsky, 2013).

The majority of young Australians rate family as the most important thing in their lives and almost 9 in 10 young Australians are very satisfied with their relationship with their parents (AIHW, 2003, 2011). In the 2013 Mission Australia Youth Survey, young people rated their relationships with friends and family as the most valuable things in their lives (Mission Australia, 2013). In Pinkerton and Dolan's (2007) study, young people most often nominated parents as a source of support despite many having tense relationships with their parents. Despite the ongoing importance of family, a tension exists between young people's desire for increased autonomy and the ways in which they still want and benefit from close and supportive family relationships (Crespo et al., 2010).

During adolescence the type of support young people need from their parents changes (Vassallo, Smart, & Price-Robertson, 2009). This was evident in Parvizy and Ahmadi's (2009) study with Iranian youth, which found that the type of support desired shifted from physiological and nurturing support when they were children to greater psychological and emotional support as they got older. Parvizy and Ahmadi (2009) note how parents may continue to cater for the physical needs of adolescents without realising their increased

psychological support needs. This highlights the need for parents to adapt to different parenting requirements as young people age and, particularly, to recognise the increased emotional support needs of adolescents.

In Vassallo, Smart and Price-Robertson's (2009) research into the role of parents for young adults, the parent role was also seen to shift from more practical support in childhood to one of advice and support. In their study, based on the data from the longitudinal Australian Temperament Project, parents did not realise how valued their continued support was to their young adult children (Vassallo et al., 2009). The common belief, held by many of the parent participants in the Project, that young people need less support from parents as they enter adulthood, is also evident in traditional support from youth services (Robinson et al., 2011; Vassallo et al., 2009).

This tendency in traditional youth support and psychology to focus on young people's increasing independence, a reflection of the individualistic values of the Western world, downplays the role of family in positive youth outcomes (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Robinson et al., 2011). Consideration of young people's relationships with family and significant adults is, however, essential to effectively support positive outcomes for youth (Resnick et al., 1993; Robinson et al., 2011; Schofield & Beek, 2009).

The prevailing idea that healthy adolescent development involves young people distancing themselves from their parents can hurt parents' efforts to connect with their teens (Ungar, 2004). Parents must be made aware of adolescents' ongoing desire to remain close to their family and the continued worth of family connectedness for their wellbeing (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Robinson & Pryor, 2006).

Strong family connections are even more important when young people do not have close connections to peers, but close family relationships do not have to come at the expense of peer relationships (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Peterson, 2009). For the majority of young people, peers become increasingly important and influential during adolescence, and are a valuable source of support, fun and self esteem (Glover et al., 1998; Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulous-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009). These friendships assist positive health outcomes, identity development, and stress management (Brooks, 2010; Yugo & Davidson, 2007). Positive relationships with peers and family encourage positive mental health and protect young people's wellbeing during difficult times (Khatib, Bhui, & Stansfeld, 2013; Paradis et al., 2011).

Ongoing family support is crucial for helping young people's mental health and resiliency and their ability to cope with the changes, daily challenges and stress of adolescence (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Encouragement and affection from parents promotes adolescent health and strengthens family connectedness (AIHW, 2011; Houltberg et al., 2011; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009).

**The importance of connectedness in the lives of young people.** While there are many variables that impact on young people's wellbeing, the importance of family connectedness for individual wellbeing is widely acknowledged in the literature as one of the most important factors for adolescent mental health (Crespo et al., 2010; Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2011; Houltberg et al., 2011). Connectedness is often presented in academic literature as a fundamental human need which provides a sense of belonging and purpose and protects against social isolation and loneliness (Bernat & Resnick, 2009; McWhirter & Townsend, 2005). A lack of connectedness has been shown to negatively affect health, adjustment and wellbeing (McWhirter & Townsend, 2005). Feeling connected to

family provides young people with a stable foundation for positive development, managing changes and challenges during adolescence, and building a sense of self (Crespo et al., 2010; Houltberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011). Connectedness supports all young people regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or socio-economic status (Bernat & Resnick, 2009).

Families that provide close relationships and communicate well are associated with positive adolescent development (AIHW, 2011). Strong families provide support during difficult times, assist young people's self-worth, and model how to build positive relationships (AIHW, 2011). Family connectedness can buffer against depression and poor psychosocial outcomes, and provide security as young people develop (Gonzalez et al., 2002; Mueller et al., 2011). Family connectedness and positive family relationships have also been linked to reduced substance abuse, sexual risk-taking, and attempted suicide (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Markham et al., 2003; Paradis et al., 2011). Poor family connectedness, on the other hand, can lead to negative body image, less support in times of stress, low self-esteem and life satisfaction, mental health and substance abuse issues, increased risk of suicide, and reduced sociability and academic achievement (Crespo et al., 2010; Houltberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009).

The benefits of family connectedness for young people are reinforced by a wide range of studies across different nations and social contexts, providing the foundation for further exploration of family connectedness in the present study. Resnick et al.'s (1997) study, which analysed the data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health conducted in the US, found connectedness to family and school were the most significant factors for protection against health risk behaviour and emotional concerns in adolescence. This influential study found family connectedness could explain about 15% of variance in the

emotional distress of adolescents, and brought attention to the important role of connectedness for young people (Resnick et al., 1997).

In Bogard's (2005) US study of 374 affluent young people aged 12-13, parental closeness was the key predictor of positive adjustment for both male and female youth and significantly related to less drug use and fewer self-reported depression symptoms. A US study of 248 young people aged 14-16 by Houlberg, et al. (2011) found family connectedness was important for adolescents' emotional resilience and to protect young people against depression. A 2007 study of Canadian youths aged 12-15 found those with nurturing parents were more likely to report good health and self-esteem and were less likely to report substance use (Yugo & Davidson, 2007).

Mueller et al. (2011) explored the link between sleep, depression and family functioning in a representative sample from the United States. They found positive, warm and supportive interpersonal relationships within the family led to better adjustment and self-esteem in young people and to reduced risk of depression. Their study also found the relationship with the parent of the same gender was particularly influential on adolescent wellbeing and that conflict with family and friends was more likely to predict adolescent depression than other negative events (Mueller et al., 2011). A 2013 study of the mental health of young Australians by Mission Australia found 20% of young people were extremely or very concerned about family conflict and depression (Mission Australia, 2013). In the same study, young people with a "probable serious mental illness"<sup>3</sup> were almost three times

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<sup>3</sup> In Mission Australia's Youth Survey of 14,461 15-19 year olds, young people's level of psychological distress was measured using the Kessler 6. They used responses to the Kessler 6 "to classify respondents into two groups

more likely to report being worried about family conflict than other youth - 40% compared to 14% (Ivancic et al., 2014, p. 7).

Parvizy and Ahmadi's (2009) qualitative study of young Iranians on family and health found those who perceived poor or moderate relationships with parents reported more negative attitudes towards life and lower self-esteem. Participants in the study expected parents to communicate well, be supportive of their identity development and self-esteem, impart life skills and provide a comfortable and peaceful environment. The participants felt family had an important role to play in supporting their psychological health and felt conflict between parents could have a negative impact (Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009).

In Morgan and Haglund's (2009) study of English youth aged 11-15, negative reports of health were twice as likely from those young people with poor family belonging and limited neighbourhood participation. Morgan and Haglund (2009) consider access to supportive networks to be important for the healthy development of young people, and consider young people's social capital<sup>4</sup> to be just as important as their economic background. Given the protective role of social capital for health, Morgan and Haglund (2009) promote building all young people's social capital, regardless of their circumstances.

Khatib et al.'s (2013) analysis of longitudinal survey data from 821 UK adolescents found higher instances of depression in cases of low family support. Paradis et al. (2011) draw attention to the long term impact of supportive families during adolescence, finding

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– those with a 'probable serious mental illness' and those with 'no probable serious mental illness' (Ivancic et al., 2014, p. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to...membership in a group" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). It recognises the significance and value of social networks, the resources and support these networks provide, and the importance of participating in relationships, family and other groups (Barker, 2012; Neergaard, Shaw, & Carter, 2004).

those young people who had good relationships with their family when they were 15 were more likely to be functioning as healthy adults when they were 30.

Crespo, et al. (2010), in their longitudinal study into family connectedness and body satisfaction of 1774 New Zealand adolescents, demonstrated how connected families can provide a secure environment and positive messages that help young people navigate the changes of adolescence in positive ways. They found female body satisfaction affected, and was affected by, young people's sense of family connectedness. Theirs is an important study as it suggests young people can impact family connectedness, just as family connectedness can impact young people's health.

Those studies, discussed above, differ from the present study in that they are largely quantitative, were mainly conducted overseas (particularly in the United States) and primarily by psychologists and other health professionals. The methodology of prior research restricted young people's ability to bring their own understandings of connectedness by having them respond to specific and relatively closed questions. These studies do, however, leave no doubt as to the important role of family connectedness in youth mental health in a wide variety of contexts. At the same time, it is important to recognise that there can be significant variations in the nature of family connectedness.

**Gender and family connectedness.** The literature shows wellbeing and family connectedness can be influenced by the gender of family members. Although some studies have found no differences in relation to gender, most report a greater tendency for girls to be affected by family relationships (Bogard, 2005; Crespo et al., 2010; Houlberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011). Female adolescents have been found to have a higher likelihood of depression than male adolescents when they lack closeness to their parents (Jacobson &



Rowe, 1999). In Crespo, et al.'s (2010) study, boys generally reported a more positive sense of family connectedness than girls.

Research has found same gender relationships and role models to be particularly protective against depression and substance use in male and female adolescents, and for establishing a sense of security and confidence as young people enter adulthood (Bogard, 2005; Kenny et al., 2013; Mueller et al., 2011). Bogard (2005) found maternal closeness was important for girls' levels of depression and substance use, and paternal closeness influenced depression for both boys and girls. The support provided by each parent can also differ, with sons looking to fathers for "advice and shared leisure time" and daughters looking to mothers to provide "support and comfort and an overall sense of wellbeing in the family" (Mueller et al., 2011, p. 19).

Gender differences in mood and family connectedness have been explained by a combination of factors including: socialisation, responsiveness to the environment, interpersonal relationships and biological changes (Houlberg et al., 2011; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999). It is also possible that adolescent males and females have different needs in relation to family connectedness (Houlberg et al., 2011). Girls tend to value emotional closeness compared to boys who emphasise shared interests and achievements (Berk, 2012).

The parenting role of mothers and fathers can also differ, with mothers found to have a greater impact on young people's wellbeing (Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007). Houlberg, et al. (2011) note the tendency for young people to have more time and nurturing relationships with their mothers, which can lead to closer and more intense relationships than they have with their fathers. With fathers, on the other hand, young people are more likely to seek information and share leisure time (Houlberg et al., 2011). Age also appears to affect

connections with two studies reporting that family connections and positive relationships with parents are likely to decline across adolescence (Crespo et al., 2010; Kenny et al., 2013).

**Exceptions to the connectedness-wellbeing link.** It is also important to recognise that connectedness is not always beneficial. The very closeness that makes family connectedness such an important element in promoting wellbeing can have the opposite effect when there is stress, emotional distress or risk in the home environment. This situation may arise when family relationships are violent, turbulent, or characterised by poor communication and a lack of warmth (Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009; Robinson et al., 2011; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Although recent literature on family connectedness focuses almost exclusively on the positive, the present study was open to young people viewing family connectedness negatively.

While the correlation between family connectedness and young people's wellbeing is well established, there is no clear causality (Bogard, 2005; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999). Family connectedness affects young people's wellbeing, while, at the same time, mental health disorders can impact family connectedness. For example, young people with a depressed mood may have difficulty recognising their family's efforts to sustain and build connectedness (Houlthberg et al., 2011). Family connectedness involves reciprocal relationships and young people are not passive recipients of family connectedness (Crespo et al., 2010; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999). While many variables impact on young people's wellbeing, adolescents' perceptions of family support appears critical for healthy development and preventing depression (Glover et al., 1998; Mueller et al., 2011).

### **3.5 Managing the Competing Needs of Independence and Connectedness**

Family connectedness, although crucial, is not the only aspect needed for youth wellbeing. Striking the delicate balance between connection to family and autonomy is considered vital (Berk, 2012; Kagitcibasi, 2005).

Parental monitoring and boundaries can assist young people to manage developmental changes and are considered important for adolescent health (AIHW, 2011; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009; Robinson et al., 2011). Developmental theorists note young people tend to prioritise short term outcomes, take more risks and are still building skills in effective and safe decision-making, which makes ongoing adult supervision important (Kerig & Wenar, 2006; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009). Parents need to strike a balance between granting more independence as adolescents get older and still providing guidance and boundaries when needed.

It is not unusual for tensions to arise between parents and teens as a result of parents' supervisory role, young people's desire to become more self-reliant, and conflicting ideas of independence (AIHW, 2003; Berk, 2012; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009; Smetana et al., 2009). Throughout adolescence, young people want more freedom than parents will allow (Smetana et al., 2009). Tensions may be exacerbated if parents are unaware of adolescent developments and see changes as stubborn or deviant behaviour (Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009). Regular time with parents and good communication can make boundary setting and encouraging safe behaviour easier (Berk, 2012; Elgar et al., 2013).

The popular idea that autonomy and connectedness are naturally opposed encourages the misconception that young people's growing independence means they have less need for family connections (Kagitcibasi, 2005). Greater autonomy need not result in family conflict - many young people maintain positive relationships with their parents during adolescence

(Noack & Puschner, 1999). When growing autonomy is understood as a need for greater agency and choice rather than complete independence from family, autonomy and connectedness can be seen as compatible goals and interdependent relationships with parents as normal (Kagitcibasi, 2005).

**Parenting style.** Achieving a balance between independence and connectedness is most effectively accomplished through an authoritative parenting style. Features of authoritative parenting include parental warmth, explaining why rules exist, consistency and promoting young people's autonomy (Baumrind, 2005; Gonzalez et al., 2002; Milevsky et al., 2007). This style of parenting encourages young people to explore, work through difficulties and build self-esteem, and better supports young people's wellbeing compared to more permissive or authoritarian approaches (Baumrind, 1966; Gonzalez et al., 2002).

Authoritarian parenting, on the other hand, is characterised by minimal warmth, low support, and punitive responses to misbehaviour, which encourages ongoing dependence on others for decision-making, poor self-concept and maladjustment (Baumrind, 2005; Gonzalez et al., 2002; Milevsky et al., 2007). In contrast, permissive parenting, which offers young people greater freedom but limited guidance, can leave young people with little resilience, putting them at greater risk of misbehaviour and experimentation with drugs (Gonzalez et al., 2002; Milevsky et al., 2007). Young people who experience extensive autonomy unmatched by a strong sense of relatedness to family are considered to be at greater risk for mental health and substance use issues (Noack & Puschner, 1999; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009). Permissive mothering has been found to have a greater impact on young people's wellbeing than permissive fathering (Milevsky et al., 2007).

Importantly, even parents that strive for a consistent approach will at times use all three of these parenting modes (authoritative, authoritarian and permissive) (Baumrind,

2005). For example, if parents are stressed they are more likely to adopt an authoritarian approach and be less approachable for young people (Cappa, Begle, Conger, Dumas, & Conger, 2011).

Autonomy, boundaries and connectedness are all important for young people's wellbeing. However, the lack of clear markers for adulthood, and the extension of adolescence – which sees many young people living at home and financially dependent on parents for longer – makes parents' choices around when and how much independence to give more difficult and transitions to more equal relationships with parents less clear (Lawrence, 2005; Vassallo et al., 2009).

### **3.6 Areas In Need of Further Consideration**

While the family connectedness literature comprehensively establishes the link between youth wellbeing and family relationships, there are a number of areas that would benefit from more exploration and critical engagement. Firstly, there is a need for further consideration of how different cultures manage family relationships and how social expectations of the support family should provide affects young people's satisfaction with these relationships. In addition, much of the literature assumes a base standard of living and family functionality that hinders our understanding of connections in difficult family relationships or circumstances.

The connectedness literature's grounding in developmental understandings of young people and its predominant use of quantitative studies has severely limited in-depth insights from young people themselves on effective connections. It would be beneficial to consider how these widely accepted developmental norms affect young people's relationships with their families, the support families provide, and how parents view their role in their children's adolescence.

The connectedness literature is largely focused on what is happening within families, leaving the impact of the broader social context largely unexplored. In addition there is limited focus on what young people themselves offer to families, and the importance of their role in effective relationships. More direct consideration of the causal link between youth mental illness and family connectedness is warranted.

It is beyond the scope of this PhD to address all of these matters. The study does, however, endeavour to understand young people's perspectives on family connectedness in depth and consider the impact of the broader social context on family relationships. The research is particularly aimed at developing understanding and insights that will support therapeutic interventions with families. It offers practical ways to build sustainable family connections and support youth wellbeing. The specific gaps addressed by the study are reviewed in more detail at the end of this chapter following a review of theoretical approaches to connectedness.

### **3.7 Theoretical Understandings of Connectedness**

While the importance and benefits of connectedness are well documented, any analysis of the voices of young people in relation to family connectedness needs to be situated within a broader understanding of just how and why that connectedness matters. A number of theoretical perspectives explain the benefits of connectedness for wellbeing, including understandings of connectedness, social capital theory, attachment theory, and systems theory. Each of these theories is presented and the reasons for adopting a systems theory approach in the present study is explained.

**Understandings of connectedness.** While there is no universal theory of connectedness, the various attempts to theorise connectedness have in common the understanding that belonging, relatedness and connectedness are fundamental human needs

(Hagerty, Lynch-Saucer, Patusky, & Bouwesema, 1993; Lee & Robbins, 1995). The main theoretical work used to support this understanding is that of humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow (Strongman, 2001). In Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, the need for belongingness and love are the most fundamental human needs after physiological and safety needs, and provide the foundation for personal growth and psychological health (Strongman, 2001). This understanding draws attention to the value of connectedness for providing people with a needed sense of belonging and companionship and avoiding loneliness and alienation.

**Social capital.** Social capital recognises the significance and value of social networks, the resources and support these networks provide, and the importance of participating in relationships, family and other groups (Barker, 2012; Neergaard et al., 2004). Bourdieu (1986) sees social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to...membership in a group” (p. 248). Social capital is created from social networks and relations based on mutual trust and reciprocity, provides a sense of belonging through shared experiences, and can be used to bring about action and solve problems (AIHW, 2011; Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008; Neergaard et al., 2004).

Building young people's social capital has been found to be as (or even more) influential than economic factors in protecting health (Morgan & Haglund, 2009). Benefits of social capital for young people include better mental and self-assessed health, increased likelihood of staying in school and positive employment outcomes, and a greater ability to manage stress and ill-health (AIHW, 2011). Young people also benefit from their parents being connected into strong family and community networks, where parents with high social capital are more able to provide for young people's needs (Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008).

Social connectedness helps protect against family dysfunction and when families are part of strong social networks they have better access to community support, information, and

other resources (AIHW, 2011; Denny et al., 2014). Building social capital can also minimise exclusion and protect against social changes including individualism and the weakening of social ties (Gale & Bolzan, 2008).

The concept of social capital was useful in this study as it acknowledged the health benefits of being socially connected and improving young people's social networks (Morgan & Haglund, 2009). In addition, a social capital framework reinforced the value of family, which is considered the key foundation for social capital (Barker, 2012; Winter, 2000). Despite these strengths, social capital's focus on relationships as solely a means to improve one's capital risks obscuring families' important role in providing young people with a sense of companionships and belonging which were central tenets of this research (Barker, 2012).

An alternative approach, which combines social capital theory with consideration of young people's resilience, is offered by social support theory. Social support theory identifies four key types of support – emotional, informational, companionship and tangible – which assist young people's wellbeing (Neergaard et al., 2004; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Emotional support develops self-esteem by accepting and valuing an individual for who they are through trusting, listening to, and showing concern for them. Companionship support boosts mood and minimises stress by relaxing with and spending time with others (Neergaard et al., 2004). Tangible support involves financial and material assistance, while informational support provides knowledge to help others respond to difficulties.

Support in each of these categories will likely come from a variety of sources, including immediate family and community, as well as formal institutions (Neergaard et al., 2004; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). While social support theory goes some way towards recognising young people's need for human companionship, it still does not capture all of the



factors that impact on wellbeing regardless of one's social capital – such as materialism and individualism.

**Attachment theory.** Attachment theory focuses on the crucial relationship between children and their parents and the ways this impacts children's psychological development (Cowie, 2012; Keenan & Evans, 2009). From this perspective, attachments to others are seen as normal and healthy throughout people's lives (John Bowlby, 1988; Cassidy, 1999; Meyer, Wood, & Stanley, 2013).

Types of attachment relationships are usually divided into secure and insecure attachments (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Cowie, 2012). Those who form secure attachments are likely to trust that their care givers will be available as needed and responsive to their needs, providing a 'secure base' for positive psychosocial development, positive future relationships, and developing a sense of self-worth (J. Bowlby, 1969; Cowie, 2012; Gallard, 2010, p. 45; Meyer et al., 2013).

Those who form insecure attachments are likely to be less trusting in relationships, experience difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships, not expect to be comforted when feeling distressed, or feel ambivalent towards others (Ainsworth et al., 1978; J. Bowlby, 1969; Cowie, 2012; Keenan & Evans, 2009). The importance of early attachments for young people's development is supported by neurobiology research. These early experiences become ingrained in people's neurobiology, affecting the part of the brain associated with social functioning, emotional responses and relationships (Meyer et al., 2013).

In the present study, attachment theory highlights the importance of young people's relationships with their families prior to adolescence and the ways these early attachments can influence how young people relate to others (John Bowlby, 1988; Gallard, 2010; Howe,

1995). Secure attachments in childhood help foster self-esteem and a sense of confidence in adolescence (Cowie, 2012; Howe, 1995). Attachment relationships continue to develop beyond childhood and, increasingly, the value of secure and supportive attachments to parents throughout adolescence is recognised (Gilligan, 2006; Keenan & Evans, 2009; Robinson et al., 2011). Young people are likely to have good emotional wellbeing and make the most of their experiences if they trust that their parents are available if needed, reinforcing the ability for autonomy and connectedness to support each other (John Bowlby, 1988; Schofield & Beek, 2009). This recognition of young people's ongoing need for attachments contrasts with the tendency to focus on young people's individuation during adolescence (Cretzmeyer, 2003).

Attachment theory provides a strong evidence base for the human need to connect to and be accepted by others (Schofield & Beek, 2009). Its main limitation, in the context of the present study, is its tendency to focus on one-to-one relationships (Jose & Pryor, 2010; Meyer et al., 2013). While individual connections are important for young people's sense of family connectedness, this research was interested in the family and its environment as a whole (Resnick et al., 1993).

**Systems theory.** Social capital, attachment theory, and theories of connectedness all support the present study's focus on the value of connectedness. On their own, however, none of these theories captured all the aspects of connectedness relevant to the present study. To capture the importance of connections for young people and recognise the ways in which families and young people are impacted by their broader environment, systems theory was chosen as the guiding theoretical framework. It recognises the ways people and their environment are interrelated and how this relationship impacts families and wellbeing (Crespo et al., 2010; Lesser & Pope, 2011; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014).

Systems theory has developed in three waves, building from general systems theory to include ecosystems perspectives and complex systems theory (Healy, 2005). The present study is particularly informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystems approach, which was developed in response to the tendency within developmental psychology to research children in laboratories and outside of their natural settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Keenan & Evans, 2009). He believed people should be researched within their environment and surrounding contexts to truly understand their experiences (Keenan & Evans, 2009).

Systems theory reinforces the way in which an individual's wellbeing is influenced by their interactions with their physical and social environments (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Lesser & Pope, 2011; Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2013). People interact with various systems including their friends, family and immediate community, and broader systems including organisations, wider social structures and policies (Healy, 2005). From a systems perspective, understanding and responding to young people's experiences within their wider social context are essential to achieve effective interventions to support wellbeing (Healy, 2005; Merrett, 2004).

In systems theory, the systems impacting on people are characterised by their degree of separation from the individual. Key system levels include micro, meso, exo and macro systems (Keenan & Evans, 2009). A microsystem is the relationship between a person and their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Examples of microsystems include key settings where interpersonal relationships occur, such as work, family and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Connolly & Harms, 2012). Mesosystems capture the way microsystems interact with each other, such as the connection between school, peers and home (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Connolly & Harms, 2012).

Exosystems refer to broader policy, structural systems and social institutions which indirectly impact people's lives. These include economic, political and communication systems, community health services, the mass media and the world of work (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Keenan & Evans, 2009). Examples of factors which can influence young people's development at the exosystems level include the availability of maternity leave, flexible work arrangements for parents, and affordable child care (Keenan & Evans, 2009).

Macrosystems refer to the broader culture and ideology which influences social, political, economic, educational and legal systems, and in which micro, meso and exo systems are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Connolly & Harms, 2012). Macrosystems influence people's expectations, meanings and behaviour and create assumptions about how things are done, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Connolly & Harms, 2012). It can be difficult for people to recognise how they are impacted by the broader culture in which they are embedded (Eckersley et al., 2006b).

These different systems are interconnected and change at any level has flow-on effects to the functioning of other system levels (Healy, 2005; J. Walsh, 2010). From this perspective, young people's wellbeing is the outcome of interactions across all system levels, where young people are seen to be affected by but also have an active influence on their surrounding systems and relationships (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2005).

Key concepts within systems theory include transaction, reciprocity, homeostasis, equifinality, emergence, and open and closed systems. Transaction captures the ways in which systems interact and affect each other and the feedback loop between people and their broader context, and considers issues to arise when there is a poor fit between an individual and their environment (Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Lesser & Pope, 2011). Reciprocity

identifies how change in one part of the system affects the whole system (Lesser & Pope, 2011).

Homeostasis refers to the way in which systems aim to maintain a sense of balance. While this stability was originally considered important for humans to grow and develop, complex systems theory sees change as useful within social systems (Healy, 2005). Equifinality captures how desired outcomes can be reached through a variety of pathways (Connolly & Harms, 2012). Emergence describes how parts of a system combine to form unique system identities and unpredictable outcomes, in which the whole system is greater than the sum of its parts (Lesser & Pope, 2011; Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Systems can be categorised into open and closed systems, defined by the way in which closed systems are isolated from external inputs, while open systems are responsive to outside influences (Lesser & Pope, 2011; O'Donohue, 2004). While these more in-depth concepts are important elements within systems theory, the present study primarily drew on the work of Bronfenbrenner to ensure the layers of systems affecting families and young people were kept in mind throughout the research. Childhood studies then provided the more critical lens for analysis within these layers.

***Systems theory and social work.*** Systems theory's focus on person-environment interactions mirrors an essential and distinguishing foundation of social work, in which the impact of one's immediate and broader networks are recognised (Crichton-Hill, 2004; Healy, 2005; O'Donohue, 2004). It is this consideration of the broader context and how it can be changed to support wellbeing which sets social work apart from psychology and other health professions (Healy, 2005). Systems theory is used effectively in social work practice to assess a family's protective and risk factors and its ability to access outside resources, while ensuring the complexity of family situations are recognised (Connolly & Harms, 2012).

Systems theory encourages social work practice to avoid a primarily individualistic focus and pathologising approach, to recognise client strengths, and encourage change at the micro, meso, exo and macro levels to support individuals and promote social justice (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2005). In the present study, systems theory guided the approach, analysis and recommendations of the research, bringing a social work perspective and a broader contextual lens to the research (Healy, 2005). This approach encouraged recognition of humans as interconnected, consideration of young people within their family context, and brought awareness of the broader context impacting on family connectedness and young people's wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crichton-Hill, 2004; J. Walsh, 2010). In addition, systems theory encouraged the complexities of the participants' experiences to be acknowledged rather than oversimplified, and ensured responsibility for effective connections was not placed solely on families (Healy, 2005).

It is important to consider the limitations of using systems theory in social work practice. These include the lack of direction provided for interventions and the difficulties of intervening at cultural and structural levels once an holistic analysis has been completed, and the potential to lose sight of the individual young person (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2005; Wakefield, 1996a). Wakefield (1996a) also criticises the abstract nature of the claim that people are inextricably connected with their environment and the lack of detail about the character of hypothesised connections. The present study goes some way in addressing this criticism by adding detail to our understanding of connectedness within families and the ways in which these relationships are influenced by the surrounding context.

Systems theory has also been criticised for being too value-neutral and not giving enough consideration to issues of power, disadvantage and social justice and for drawing on terms, concepts and jargon that originate in biology, maths and physics rather than social

sciences (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Martin, 2003; Wakefield, 1996b). There is also concern about the potential for homeostasis to put too much focus on maintaining system functioning and balance. Systems theory has also been challenged for its focus on circular, rather than linear cause and effect relationships, which can lead to suggestions that everyone in the family is responsible for the undesirable behaviour of one family member (Healy, 2005; Wakefield, 1996a). In the present study it was also important to be aware of feminist critiques of systems theory's presentation of effective family functioning and the ways this often relies on the maintenance of traditional gender roles (Healy, 2005).

It was important to be mindful of all these critiques and consider ways to address or minimise the impact of the limitations of systems theory on the research. Steps to monitor these limitations are explored in chapter 5 when looking at the methodology and the ways in which the integration of systems theory and childhood studies can mitigate the limitations of each approach.

### **3.8 Gaps in Family Connectedness Knowledge Addressed in the Present Study**

Quantitative family connectedness research has played an essential role in establishing the significance of family connectedness for young people's wellbeing. Despite this, we still know very little about the complexities of family connectedness and how young people experience it. In addition, there is limited empirical research on family connectedness and young people's wellbeing from a social work perspective. Few studies have been conducted in Australia in this area and there is a serious lack of qualitative studies. The present study addresses these key gaps by contributing qualitative research on young Australians' experiences of family connectedness from a social work perspective.

There is strong support for the value of building our knowledge of family connectedness through qualitative research. Bogard (2005) and Wilkinson-Lee, et al. (2011)

encourage further exploration of the factors that contribute to young people's wellbeing.

Mueller et al. (2011) recommend that future research into interpersonal relationships should use qualitative methods to better understand the experiences of individual adolescents.

Hardway and Fuligni (2006) suggest research needs to explore the nuances in the expression, negotiation and maintenance of family connectedness between adolescents and their families.

Resnick, et al. (1993) highlight the need to better understand how to support positive family connections and remind us that caring family relationships cannot be taken for granted. In the 2013 Mission Australia Youth Survey, 20% of young people rated their family's capacity to get along as fair or poor (Mission Australia, 2013). Parkinson (2011) encourages promotion of protective factors within families, including the development of community education programs that focus on parent-child relationships. The present study has similar goals and its findings will contribute to knowledge about supporting positive family connections. In addition, Denny, et al. (2014) encourage the need to better understand young people's views on family functioning and social connectedness to support interventions which are relevant to the whole family.

To address these gaps in family connectedness knowledge, the present study conducted qualitative interviews which explored how young people experience family connectedness. Interviewing young people directly is crucial for understanding young people's perspectives and developing effective interventions that support family connectedness and young people's wellbeing (Kidger et al., 2009; Noble & Toft, 2010; Parvizi & Ahmadi, 2009). The insights gained from the young people interviewed offer important information on what family connectedness looks like and how it can be achieved, and how parents and young people can navigate adolescence while maintaining positive relationships. While the present study did not directly research the link between family



connectedness and young people's wellbeing, the established importance of this link means the findings of the present study contributes to efforts to support young people's wellbeing by generating information for schools, social workers, counsellors and parents in building and maintaining family connectedness.

### **3.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explained how family is understood in the present study, explored key understandings of family connectedness and outlined its role in supporting young people's wellbeing. The findings of other research about the importance of family connectedness, the role of gender in relationships and the need to balance autonomy and connectedness were reviewed. Key theories that reinforce the importance of connections for wellbeing were presented and systems theory was established as a guiding framework for the study. To conclude the chapter, gaps in family connectedness knowledge, and how the present study aims to address these, were outlined. The following and final literature review chapter examines the broader context in which families and young people are embedded.

## **Chapter 4: Social Changes Impacting Families and Young People**

### **4.1 Introducing the Chapter**

Understanding the relationship between young people and their families will always be the first step in analysing the nature of connectedness and how it contributes to the wellbeing of young people. Those family dynamics, however, do not exist in isolation. To analyse in depth the insights offered by young people into family connectedness in the present study, it is important to understand the wider social context affecting families and young people. Changes in that broader environment can impact both the expectations of young people and the ability of the family unit to provide them with the necessary support. Only by appreciating the external as well as the internal factors shaping the dynamics within families is it possible to build stronger and sustainable family connections.

Accordingly, this chapter widens the focus beyond what is happening within families to consider how the broader social context is evolving for families and young people. It recognises the influence of social changes on mental health and uses the systems theory lens introduced in the previous chapter to consider the meso, exo, and macro factors affecting family connectedness. Recognising the broader context ensures family relationships are not seen in isolation from their surrounding environment and allows the recommendations of the present study to go beyond internal family dynamics to explore how families can be better supported to connect.

Introducing this contextual social analysis avoids individualising the problems faced by families and young people and provides the opportunity to recognise their strengths and the resources available to support them (Weeks, 2000). Importantly, it also allows consideration of the extent to which social changes mean that institutions other than the

family are becoming important sources of support. In this regard, exploring the changing role of schools, the second environment to which young people are most often exposed, provides a particularly valuable reference point.

#### **4.2 Social Changes Impacting Families and Young People**

Family connectedness and young people's wellbeing are affected by a range of factors outside the family unit. The impact on health and wellbeing of the environments in which we live, grow and work are well recognised (AIHW, 2011; Morgan & Haglund, 2009; Wyn, 2009b). Social wellbeing is an outcome of the key social institutions of family, state and market (Bittman & Pixley, 2000). While the impact of the environment on wellbeing is recognised in youth mental health literature, it is not commonly evident in family connectedness research, which has primarily focused on establishing the importance of connectedness for wellbeing. In addition, responsibility for good mental health is often targeted at individuals, ignoring the impact of social conditions (Gale & Bolzan, 2008; Kagitcibasi, 2005; Weeks, 2000). Recognising the broader social context was an important goal of the present study, reflecting both the systems theory approach to the research and the reality that wider social conditions affect family dynamics, the experiences of young people and the ability of families to care for and support them.

Young people today experience new and different opportunities and stresses compared to previous generations, and understanding their wellbeing in the context of today's social environment and culture is crucial (McGrath, Brennan, Dolan, & Barnett, 2012; Wyn, 2009b). Young face pressure from school, increased commitments and social demands, more young people are being affected by sleep disorders, and increased technology use can negatively affect young people's physical health, body image, mood, and social

engagement (AIHW, 2011). These issues can be exacerbated by low levels of exercise and parental monitoring (AIHW, 2011).

To understand the underlying cause of these new stressors we need to look beyond individual circumstances. Many researchers feel young people's poor mental health must be considered in the context of population-wide changes (Eckersley, 2011; Parkinson, 2011; R. White & Wyn, 2013). Eckersley et al. (2006b) promote an holistic approach to addressing youth health and wellbeing and consider the way social conditions might be shaped to support young people's needs. In addition, the underlying assumptions of the society in which we live and the impact of the surrounding culture are often invisible to us unless explicitly identified (Eckersley et al., 2006b). Revealing these hidden elements of Australian culture is important in helping people become conscious of and able to challenge the social pressures that impact their lives (Eckersley et al., 2006b).

The changes impacting upon families and young people have occurred in relation to economic conditions, education, work, family structure, values, and lifestyle (Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008; Sweeting et al., 2010; Wyn, 2009a). It is beyond the scope of this study to itself critically evaluate the nature and extent of the social changes that have occurred in recent decades. There is, however, an extensive literature identifying the major changes that have impacted on families that establishes an important frame of reference within which the insights emerging from the qualitative interviews can be considered.

The changes which have most impacted families include increased female workforce participation and the extent of work demands on parents, increased divorce rates, and the influences of individualism, materialism and more pervasive technology use. The overall decline in social connectedness in both Australia and the United States since the 1960s has also been attributed to many of these social changes (Leigh, 2010; Putnam, 2000; Ulichny et

al., 2014). This chapter considers these changes in depth, together with the increased rates of social change and uncertainty in young people's lives, and the impact of socio-economic status.

Before examining those changes in more detail, it is important to note two crucial caveats about how that broader contextual information should be understood. Firstly, in identifying those trends, the aim is not to establish a definitive list or finally resolve just what impact those changes have had. Indeed, as the discussion will show, a number of the studies in this area have reached differing conclusions. Rather, the purpose of reviewing that context is to ensure the analysis of the interview data considers how such factors can affect families and young people's experiences of connectedness. Secondly, when considering these social changes, the varied effect they can have on families and young people, with benefits and costs dependent on one's circumstances, needs to be recognised (Eckersley et al., 2006a).

**Parents' work demands and changes to female workforce participation.** At the structural level, the most significant social change in recent decades identified in the literature has been the increasing number of women in the workforce and the expectation that women will both pursue professional careers and take care of their families. A key catalyst for this was the shift towards greater economic rationalism<sup>5</sup> in Australia in the 1980s and 90s.

Between 1983 and 1996, successive Australian Labor Party governments introduced policies aligned with economic rationalism and a neoliberal agenda which promoted free market solutions, flexible labour, including extended work hours, and the deregulation and privatisation of industry, including university education (Cuervo, Wyn, & Cuervo, 2012; Head, 1988; Johnson & Tonkiss, 2002; Quiggin, 1997). Subsequent changes included

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<sup>5</sup> Economic rationalism is an ideology which promotes free market solutions, and the deregulation and privatisation of industry (Quiggin, 1997).

floating the Australian dollar, introducing enterprise bargaining and significant restrictions on trade unions, including their power to strike (Head, 1988; Johnson & Tonkiss, 2002). These neoliberal policies have continued under subsequent Liberal Party of Australia and Labor governments, with the Howard-led Liberal party extending labour market deregulation and privatisation, and welfare reforms (Johnson & Tonkiss, 2002).

These economic changes have created more unstable and casual work arrangements, competitive work environments, expectations of extensive work hours, and worth being measured by the level of market success one achieves (Quiggin, 1997; Weeks & Quinn, 2000; Wyn, 2012). These changes, together with the feminist movement – which helped create more equal opportunities for women – have resulted in greatly increased workforce participation by women since the 1970s (Jaumotte, 2003; Kinnear, 2002).

Economic pressures on families, including the rising cost of housing and children, have pressured many families to rely on dual incomes, which is now the norm for couples of working age (Bradbury, 2008; Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008). While many Australian women give high priority to caring for their children, economic pressures often demand they work at least part time (Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), 2011; Edgar, 2000).

Labour force participation by women increased from 34% in 1961 to 59% in 2011 (ABS, 2011a). While there has been a clear shift from single to dual incomes for couples with dependent children since the 1980s, mothers are typically in part time rather than full time work (AIFS, 2011). A quarter of couple families with dependent children see both parents working full time (AIFS, 2011). Although the increase in female workforce participation has driven a rise in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - the typically used barometer of national

progress and wellbeing – this measure does not recognise the potential impact of increased parental work hours on family wellbeing (Hamilton, 2003).

Informal care needs of the family do not go away when extra paid employment is taken on and it is important to consider how increased parental work hours affects time with family (Draper, 2000). An examination of changes in how women spend their time since the 1990s shows that on average they are spending more time in both paid and unpaid work. While women now spend more time caring for young children it is less clear how time spent caring for adolescents has changed.

Despite spending an extra 1 hour and 45 minutes per week on average in paid work in 2006 compared to 1992, women spent just as much time in unpaid household work, including care for children. During that same time period, men on average increased their household work per week by 1 hour and 25 minutes, while their time in paid work remained steady (ABS, 2009a).

Between 1997 and 2006, mothers spent, on average, an additional 37 minutes per day caring for their children aged 0-14, while fathers' time spent on care for children remained steady (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013). When their youngest child was aged 0-5, mothers and fathers both increased the daily time spent caring for their children, by 1 hour and 5 minutes and 17 minutes, respectively. For those whose youngest child was aged 6-14, however, the daily time spent caring for their children by mothers and fathers reduced, by 28 and 40 minutes, respectively (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013). It is unclear how parent time with older adolescents has changed, as ABS data for this measure is not collected for children older than 14.

Despite an overall increase in time spent with children between 1997 and 2006, parental work factors have clearly emerged as having an impact on the family environment and outcomes for children (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014). With increased demands on their professional and domestic labour, women and men are in danger of becoming overworked, which may affect the quality of care provided to young people in the home (Bittman & Pixley, 2000; Weeks & Quinn, 2000).

Quality parent time is important for young people's development, but time available to spend with family and the quality of interactions can be constrained by work commitments, and wealthy families are often time poor (Bittman & Rice, 2002; Eckersley, 2011; Wajcman, Bittman, & Brown, 2008). It is not uncommon for financial pressures to lead to overwork and stress of parents, and for this to have flow-on affects for the health of young people and the family (Cappa et al., 2011; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009). As Weeks and Quinn (2000) acknowledge:

... burdens placed on individual families, particularly women in families, for care of children...are impossible care burdens on families and do not lead to good quality of care...or to the maintenance of sustaining and sustainable family relationships (p. 17).

While set in a different context to the present study, Parvizy and Ahmadi's (2009) research with Iranian youth is useful in highlighting the relationship between work hours and the quality of family support. Young people in their study felt the emotional support they received diminished as their parents' time at work increased. They felt parents who were worn out from multiple jobs were unavailable and out of touch with their needs. Telling quotes from their study included "there won't be anyone to talk to, even a short chat; they have no more time and energy to pay attention to their children" and "they don't know that



we need their individual attention and care more than the money they give us” (Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009, p. 168).

While parents’ work commitments clearly have the potential to impact on family life, it is important to recognise that many work demands, and the ways in which families structure their time, are the result of broader social pressures (Bessell & with Mason, 2014). Pocock (2003) considers family life to be a casualty of the social and economic policies associated with the neoliberal approach in the 1990s. Wyn (2012) draws on the data from the longitudinal *Life Patterns* study in Australia, tracking people for over 20 years, to highlight how the neoliberal agenda of the 1990s and the associated job insecurity and extensive work expectations, have made achieving work-life balance very difficult and resulted in costs to family time, personal relationships, and mental health. The *Life Patterns* study makes clear the way that market forces and economic policies can affect social development and what it means to be an adult or young person (Wyn, 2012). Young people too have demands on their time that can interfere with being home with family and weaken family connections, including part time work, sport, online distractions and socialising with peers (Mueller et al., 2011).

This research is not arguing for a return of women to the home. Instead, these work demands on families have been highlighted to show that broader social pressures can affect family interactions and the quality of care provided. It is also important to recognise that for many adults, family is more important and interesting than work (Edgar, 2000). These are important considerations in the present study to ensure young people’s experiences of family connectedness do not lead to judgement about what is happening within families, without acknowledging the pressures families experience in their environment.

The present study supports Wiseman's (2000) call to address the relationship "between income and work so that both men and women can participate in paid and unpaid work – including caring responsibilities" (p. 144). Other researchers also promote community development and improved policies and social infrastructure to better enable Australian families to raise, care for, and support children and young people (Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), 2007; Edgar, 2000; Weeks & Quinn, 2000; Wyn, 2012).

**Changes to family structure.** The impacts of social change do not only relate to the time available for parenting and the quality of support for young people. Family relationships can also be affected when the family structure itself changes. Australian families have always been characterised by diversity, but the introduction of no-fault divorce in 1975, and the spate of divorces that followed, heralded significant change to the shape of families (AIHW, 2011; Kinnear, 2002). Conservative observers have linked many of the problems young people experience to the breakdown of the nuclear family idealised in the 1950s and 1960s. Comparing today's families to this time is misleading, however, as the post-war period's high rates of marriage and fertility were an historical anomaly (Kinnear, 2002).

In modern Australia, marriages are no longer a means of survival and, having been entered into on the basis of affective relationships, are more likely to end in divorce when they cease to be emotionally satisfying (Bittman & Pixley, 2000; Edgar, 2000). In addition, the increased social acceptability of divorce means people are less likely to stay in unhappy marriages (Bittman & Pixley, 2000; Edgar, 2000). Australian families have become far more diverse in recent decades than the traditional nuclear family model (Sweeting et al., 2010). While divorce rates have actually fallen since 2000, there has been an increase in sole parents, de facto relationships, people marrying later, and increased relationship breakdown (AIHW, 2011; Edgar, 2000).

The diversity of family types sees young Australians living in intact, step or blended couple families, single-parent families and non-parental or shared care (AIHW, 2011). The changes should not be overstated, however, as 73% of under 18s in Australia live with both their biological parents, a rate that has been steady since 1997 (ABS, 2011b; Kinnear, 2002).

Parkinson (2011) sees high divorce rates, more children born in de facto relationships, and increased parental separation to indicate Australian families are increasingly fragile. He predicts that this increase in fragile families will lead to negative outcomes for increasing numbers of children, and argues this has already played a major role in young people's poor mental health (Parkinson, 2011). A stable home environment is an important factor for young people's wellbeing, and family breakdown can cause changes to family life, especially when adjusting to new parents, siblings, parenting styles, living arrangements and financial pressures (AIHW, 2011).

Family transitions may impact negatively on youth wellbeing, with sole parent households at greater risk of economic disadvantage, which can affect housing and family health (AIHW, 2011; Parkinson, 2011). The commitment of marriage can lead to more stable relationships during difficult periods, with young people in lone- and step-parent families reporting more conflict than young people who live with both biological parents (Parkinson, 2011). In 2003, 20% of young Australians reported being dissatisfied with their relationship with their step-parents, compared to 5% of young people who were dissatisfied with their relationship with their biological parents (AIHW, 2003).

On average, children with separated parents score slightly worse on a range of wellbeing and development indicators (Kinnear, 2002). Children living apart from either or both of their biological parents are more likely to have poorer self-esteem and quality of life,

increased psychological and social problems, changed attitudes to relationships and difficulties adjusting to university (Parkinson, 2011; Sweeting et al., 2010; Wyn, 2009a).

The make-up of family does not, however, tell the full story. Quality communication and family dynamics have been found to be as, if not more, important than family structure for young people's wellbeing, with four out of five young people coping reasonably well after parental separation (AIHW, 2011; Bernat & Resnick, 2009; Brooks, 2010; Kinnear, 2002). Separation can even be beneficial, particularly in cases of high levels of marital conflict or violence (Kinnear, 2002; Sweeting et al., 2010). In fact, the difference in young people's wellbeing in divorced families has been mostly accounted for by conditions that existed prior to divorce (Kinnear, 2002). Smart (2000) advocates giving due consideration to the ethic and thoughtfulness of care within families rather than focusing purely on the more practical aspects of care or family structure, including in the ways that divorce is managed by families. She further encourages the need to better understand how families and children experience life post-divorce and avoid making purely negative assumptions (Smart, 2000).

Given the uncertainty surrounding the impact of divorce, the present study adopted Kinnear's (2002) perspective that it is what families do - not how they are structured - that is important for young people's wellbeing. This perspective ensured the present study did not make assumptions about the relative success of different family structures in achieving family connectedness.

Beyond questions of individual family structure and dynamics, broader social shifts in values and expectations also influence family relationships and young people's wellbeing. The impact of cultural changes on wellbeing, including the rise of materialism and individualism, is often underestimated (Eckersley et al., 2006a). Increased individualism and materialism are, in-part, outcomes of the neoliberal policies discussed earlier which promote

self-responsibility, and identity and citizenship through consumption (Wyn, 2012). These values present particular challenges to the importance of family connectedness promoted in this study.

**Individualism.** The rise of individualism has been a key social change in recent decades, with modern society increasingly characterised by an intense focus on individuals and their personal achievements (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Lawrence, 2005; Wyn, 2009b). Historically, the individualisation of society helped define people by who they are as individuals rather than social categorisations of class, gender and race (Eckersley, 2009). The individualisation of society has also helped children and young people be recognised as legitimate citizens with agency and the right to be heard (Mason & Bolzan, 2010).

Individualism frees people from limiting definitions, but it also increases uncertainty in people's lives (Eckersley et al., 2006a; Lawrence, 2005). This uncertainty is particularly evident for adolescents whose identity and place in the world are still being constructed (Lawrence, 2005).

Too great an emphasis on individualism in society is detrimental to youth wellbeing (Eckersley, 2009). Excessive individualism casts young people as wholly responsible for their outcomes - with the personal credit and blame this brings - without acknowledging the influence of social conditions (Eckersley, 2011b; Eckersley et al., 2006a; Wyn, 2009b). This personal responsibility for outcomes, alongside unpredictable social and economic conditions, plays a significant role in the high levels of depression, anxiety and mental health disorders among young Australians (Wyn, 2009b). Individualism places the burden for identity development on young people who often have little control over their lives (Wyn, 2009b).

Prioritising personal autonomy and individual fulfilment also devalues family, care for others and connectedness – all of which are central to young people's wellbeing (Eckersley et al., 2006a; Kagitcibasi, 2005). Individualism in Western cultures undermines the human need for connectedness and interdependent relationships with the wider community (Resnick et al., 1993).

This focus on the individual is also apparent in service provision where mental health disorders are often addressed at the individual level, despite the influence of the social environment on wellbeing (Lawrence, 2005). The present study reinforces the value of human connections and recognises the broader environment impacting families and young people; in doing so, it offers an important counterbalance to the focus on individual responsibility for wellbeing.

It is important to acknowledge that while in Australia and other Western societies identity development and autonomy are key priorities for young people, many immigrant and ethnic minority cultures place greater emphasis on family connectedness and support (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Lawrence, 2005). In countries where collectivism is prominent – such as Thailand, China, India and Sri Lanka – responsibility and care for one's family and community are traditionally valued above individual rights (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Mason & Bolzan, 2010). Identity development can be particularly difficult for young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, who must navigate through competing social values (Rathus, 2006).

**Materialism.** The rise of materialism – the emphasis on material possessions over cultural, intellectual or spiritual values – has also had a significant impact on what many young people seek and value in life (Eckersley, 2009; Hamilton, 2003; Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Entrenched in Western society by the dominant culture of consumer capitalism,

materialism encourages people to continually want and buy new things (Hamilton, 2003; Lawrence, 2005).

Materialism is problematic for mental health because of its promotion of the idea that happiness and success are found in the pursuit of external goals such as being rich, famous and attractive (Eckersley et al., 2006a; Hamilton, 1999). People who prioritise these external goals are more likely to have lower overall wellbeing than people who value internal goals of loving relationships, self-understanding, and giving to the community (Eckersley, 2009). People who pursue material goals are also more likely to have poorer wellbeing, be anxious, depressed, isolated, less satisfied, and less caring and trusting in relationships (Eckersley, 2009; Sweeting et al., 2010).

In contrast to those values promoted by materialism, young people's wellbeing is supported when they have a sense of meaning and control and are socially connected (Eckersley et al., 2006b). On a basic level, people feel content when there is little or no gap between what they want and what they have (Hamilton, 2003). Materialism breeds dissatisfaction and keeps people wanting more, making contentedness an elusive goal. As materialism reaches beyond the sale of goods to the marketing of self-improvement, consumers become dissatisfied not just with what they have, but with who they are (Eckersley, 2009). There is now immense focus on the responsibility of maintaining one's health, and the unrealistic body image presented in the media as desirable is almost impossible for most young people to obtain. This pressure to be physically flawless has been linked to elevated rates of anxiety in women (Wyn, 2005, 2009b).

In addition, the market distorts our true wants and diverts us from the internal goals that bring wellbeing (Hamilton, 2003). When considering the demands on parents from work

discussed earlier in the chapter, it is important to consider that some families may be working long hours to support a lifestyle that prioritises material desires over family connection.

**Communications technology and the speed of change.** A key element of materialism is access to, and the much more extensive use of, new and rapidly evolving technologies. Technological advances impact on young people and family connectedness in complex ways.

Innovations in communications technology, such as the ubiquitous mobile phone and social networking sites, have given us new ways to connect (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; S. P. Walsh, White, Cox, & Young, 2010). These technologies can be seen to enhance social connectedness and overcome social isolation by offering ever-present peer support and the potential to connect with people all over the world (K. Muir et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; S. P. Walsh et al., 2010). The internet also provides young people easy access to information and support on issues they may not be comfortable discussing in person (Mission Australia, 2013). There is, however, doubt as to whether online connections offer the same value as face-to-face relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

These technologies are pervasive in young people's lives and have eroded the division between peer and home time (Wajcman et al., 2008). Socialising with peers anytime and from anywhere is easier than ever and these technologies can entice young people away from family engagement (National Institute on Media and the Family, 2007; Schatorjé & Markopoulos, 2013). In a 2013 study of young Australians, just over 20% reported they were on social networking sites for more than 20 hours every week, with a further 12% using social networking sites for more than 30 hours a week (Mission Australia, 2013). Excessive screen time has been linked to poor attachment with parents, weight gain, and depression (AIHW, 2011). The constant availability of social networks can damage family



connectedness and mental health, and disrupt young people's sleep (K. Muir et al., 2009; Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2010).

This ever-present online access also has brought with it the potential for young people to be exploited and the spectre of cyber bullying, which can follow kids home from school and into their bedrooms (Davies & Cranston, 2008; K. Muir et al., 2009; Strasburger et al., 2010). Parents may struggle to support young people facing these challenges due to the difficulty of keeping up with rapidly changing communications technologies.

In step with technological innovations, education, lifestyle and career pathways are changing more rapidly than in previous generations (AIHW, 2003; Wyn, 2009a). This heightened pace of change is considered to play a role in increased mental health disorders, youth behavioural problems, and substance abuse (AIHW, 2003; Eckersley, 1998). School-to-work transitions have become harder for young people who must consistently develop new skills to survive in more flexible and insecure work environments (Wyn, 2009a).

Young people experience high levels of stress in their lives, with constant reminders about making good choices for their future (AIHW, 2011; Wyn, 2009b). The expectation for young people to undertake post-compulsory education has increased, but education no longer guarantees a job, and greater employment insecurity means young people need to work at being an attractive package to employers (Wyn, 2005, 2009a). Recognising these pressures in young people's lives is important for parents to be able to understand their children's needs and connect with their children in a meaningful way.

**The impact of socio-economic status.** What is interesting about recent social changes is that while a significant proportion of the Australian population is benefiting from an improved standard of living, greater affluence does not necessarily translate into better

mental health outcomes for young people (Parkinson, 2011; Sweeting et al., 2010; Wyn, 2009b). Low socio-economic status (SES) is seen as a major risk factor for childhood mortality and has been linked to poorer health and development (AIHW, 2011; Brooks, 2010). In comparison, richer families have greater access to resources for their children to support social, academic and overall healthy development (Bogard, 2005; Brooks, 2010). Money, however, only helps wellbeing up to a point; once basic needs have been met the relationship between wellbeing and money becomes much more complex (Hamilton, 2003).

In a 2011 review of young Australians' health and wellbeing, young people from the top SES locations were more likely to be satisfied with the relationship with their parents compared to those from the lowest SES areas (AIHW, 2011). However, in Sweeting, et al.'s (2010) study exploring increases in psychological health issues in Scottish youth, economic factors were found to have little impact, with family relationships and issues at school found to be the most influential factors. Similarly, a 2014 study of 218 Australian families, which examined social connectedness and family functioning across income groups, found little difference in family functioning between low and high income families (Denny et al., 2014). That study highlighted that low-income families can function well, and can adapt to hardships in a way that strengthens family relationships. Low-income families were also found to benefit more from being socially connected than high-income families, with this social support helping them to avoid isolation and maintain healthy relationships within the family (Denny et al., 2014).

All families experiences challenges at some point regardless of their economic status and young people from richer families are not automatically at less risk for mental health disorders (Bogard, 2005; Denny et al., 2014). Affluent youth have even been found to be at greater risk of depression and substance abuse, perhaps as a result of isolation from their

parents and other caring adults (Bogard, 2005). In a 2001 US study, young people from the wealthiest families were found to be less likely to feel close to their parents than adolescents from poorer families, including the very poorest (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). These studies further challenge the materialistic notion that money leads to happiness and wellbeing (Eckersley, 2009; Hamilton, 2003).

The contrasting findings on the influence of wealth highlight the complicated relationship between wealth, wellbeing and family relationships. It is difficult to precisely establish the impact of SES given it is one of many variables affecting mental health (Mueller et al., 2011; Parvizi & Ahmadi, 2009). Strong and supportive networks can protect families against the negative influences of socio-economic disadvantage, while high SES does not necessarily protect young people from mental health disorders (AIHW, 2011; Bogard, 2005). Clearly the role of family income in health is complex and all populations of youth need to be studied, not just those who appear more obviously vulnerable (Bogard, 2005; Yugo & Davidson, 2007).

It is important to recognise that the consideration of SES outlined here reflects experiences within Western developed countries, given the present study's Australian setting. For children in developing countries, the impact of differing economic circumstances may vary greatly (R. White & Wyn, 2013).

### **4.3 The Role of Schools in Supporting Young People and Families**

A clear indication that these broader social changes are presenting challenges for the wellbeing of young people is the way in which schools are now being asked to provide a much more comprehensive range of support services for their students (R. White & Wyn, 2013). Schools are well positioned to support the development of positive mental health and wellbeing given the daily contact they have with young people (Brooks, 2010; Noble & Toft,

2010; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). While schools were not a key focus of the present study, recommendations for schools are included in the final chapter in recognition of the important role they can play in assisting young people and families.

Schools must increase their focus on student wellbeing to respond to the changing realities of young people's lives and the high rates of youth mental health disorders (R. White & Wyn, 2013). Schools are well positioned to implement preventative interventions to support wellbeing for young people, especially during the transition to secondary school, which is a particularly vulnerable time for the onset of depression (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999; Kidger et al., 2009).

Researchers have argued that emotional and social wellbeing need to be even more central to education (Bernard et al., 2007; Butcher, 2010). Good mental health in young people also assists academic outcomes and lifelong resilience (Butcher, 2010; Weare, 2010). Whole school mental health programs that create caring environments, focus on development of mental health skills, and involve parents have been shown to increase positive social behaviour and school connectedness, and reduce bullying (Kidger et al., 2009; Weare, 2010). In a study of 270 school principals across Australia, 94% felt students' emotional and mental wellbeing was important for academic achievement and wanted more training and materials to support students and families in distress (Rowling, Vince Whitman, & Biewener, 2009).

Despite this recognised need for schools to more actively support youth wellbeing, many schools have failed to fully respond to young people's changing needs over the last 25 years (R. White & Wyn, 2013). To prepare young people to live and function well, and transition successfully to adulthood, mental health and wellbeing must be more strongly supported in schools (Wyn, 2005). It is important that schools become fully cognisant of their new social role and how their actions can complement those of the family.

Building links and ensuring consistency between home and school is crucial in tackling mental health disorders in young people, and many researchers argue for approaches that include both environments to support young people's mental health (Bernard et al., 2007; Weare, 2010; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Positive experiences at home and school can each protect against stress in the other environment, and those who experience stress in both environments are particularly vulnerable (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Schools can offer safety and security for students who have difficulties at home, and can promote young people's mental health by fostering family connectedness (Butcher, 2010; Noble & Toft, 2010). Schools cannot, however, completely buffer the effects of a stressful home environment, and can also be a source of distress, with difficult peer and teacher relationships, school work, and exams all potential stressors (Kidger et al., 2009; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011).

Young people also face increasing demands from peers and school which can create tensions at home if those demands compete with family obligations (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Many young people are involved in a variety of activities including sport, part time work, homework, hobbies and friends, which, although beneficial, can also take away from family time (Mueller et al., 2011).

It is important to clarify that, while school connectedness is of value in its own right, the present study is primarily interested in the role schools can play in supporting family connectedness (Denholm, 2006; Morgan & Haglund, 2009). Educating parents on parenting skills and adolescent health issues is an important contribution schools can make to support youth wellbeing and prevent mental health disorders from developing (Ford, Davenport, Meier, & McRee, 2009; Weare, 2010). Despite the support for these initiatives, in practice,

schools have struggled to get parents involved and interested, and the parents who most need this information may not receive it (Dennison, 2010).

In addition to parent education, schools can assist young people's mental health by creating a safe and friendly school atmosphere, educating students about mental health, providing confidential support services at school for young people at risk, and liaising with external services (Kidger et al., 2009; Weare, 2010). It is hoped that the findings of the present study can assist schools in supporting families to build connections, and to intervene when family connectedness breaks down, in a way considered appropriate and useful by young people.

#### **4.4 Chapter Summary**

What the preceding review of the broader social context makes clear is that the pressures and expectations impacting on families and young people's wellbeing are growing. The reasons for this relate not just to the specific dynamics within families but also to overall changes in society. Those changes have significant implications for young people's health and wellbeing, how they view family, and the ability of their family to support them. The review of social trends in this chapter reinforces the importance of adopting a systems theory lens to identify the meso, exo, and macro, as well as the micro, factors shaping family connectedness.

While connectedness to family remains for most young people their primary source of support, new understandings of young people's perspectives offered by the present study, and the support of broader social structures, are important to maintain and strengthen connectedness. Attempts to address the mental health needs of adolescents must consider the changing environments and demands that young people experience.

The systems theory approach to the present study ensures this broader social context is taken into account throughout the research, with consideration given to how young people's experiences of family connectedness may be affected by broader social supports or pressures. The role of schools in supporting families and youth wellbeing and delivering preventative strategies to young people has been established, and the decision to extend research recommendations to schools justified.

This chapter also demonstrates how the impact of broader social changes on family connectedness will vary considerably according to individual family circumstance. That recognition of the intersection between social change and specific family dynamics, and how young people can perceive situations in different ways from adults, underscores the value of the qualitative analysis in the present study.

The following chapter presents the conceptual framework guiding the research and the methodology. The methods for conducting the research are outlined, ethical considerations are reviewed, and the process for data analysis is detailed.

## **Chapter 5: Conceptual Framework and Methodology**

### **5.1 Introducing the Chapter**

In the preceding chapters, concerns about young people's mental health were recognised, family connectedness was established as a central factor for wellbeing, and the lack of qualitative insights from young people on family connectedness was identified. Drawing on that foundation, this chapter outlines the conceptual framework for the present study. It details the chosen methodology and describes how the fieldwork was undertaken, including: recruitment of participants; methods for data collection; the demographics of the young people interviewed; and, ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a description of how the data were analysed and introduces the overarching themes that emerged. These themes provide a framework in which the detailed interview responses can be effectively understood.

### **5.2 Conceptual Framework**

To address the research question, the present study used a qualitative methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of how young people experience family connectedness. The conceptual framework – including the guiding epistemology and theoretical perspectives – draws attention to the value of young people's insights and brings awareness of the broader context affecting family connectedness.

From a theoretical perspective, the value of using two different lenses to understand the different ways in which young people construct a sense of family connectedness in the context of their interactions with others and the surrounding environment, has already been established. Childhood studies reinforces the importance of understanding young people's perspectives on their own lives (Prout & James, 1997), while systems theory serves the dual purpose of, firstly, considering the context affecting families and young people and, secondly,



bringing a social work perspective to family connectedness research (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although the developmental perspective partly informed the understanding of young people in the present study, as outlined in chapter 2, it is not discussed in this chapter as it had little influence on the methodology and research approach.

To underpin the value of qualitatively exploring young people's experiences and interpreting them with an understanding of the social context affecting families, an appropriate epistemology was needed. The following discussion highlights why constructionism is well suited to that purpose and, when linked to the two theoretical lenses, supports the methodological approach set out in detail in the remainder of the chapter.

**Epistemology.** Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and “how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). The present study required an epistemological stance that recognised individual experiences. Constructionism met this criterion, and - in its acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of reality - also allowed for integration of the social work ‘person in environment’ perspective (Creswell, 2009; Healy, 2005).

A constructionist epistemology posits that meaning is constructed by people as they engage with the world. The constructionist viewpoint recognises there are both objective and subjective realities, but considers all knowledge or meaningful reality to be socially constructed (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, an object exists, but does not have meaning until a mind engages with it (Crotty, 1998). In the present study, young people's understanding of family connectedness was considered to be a construction influenced by the broader social context, including values such as individualism and assumptions about the role and purpose of family.

In constructionism, a person's approach to the world and systems of meaning are defined by the culture in which they live and their interaction with people around them (Pring, 2005). From this perspective, our culturally and socially embedded meanings allow us to function in society, but can also blind us to other ways of seeing, feeling and doing (Crotty, 1998).

A constructionist approach promotes questioning of why we make sense of things in the way we do. This critical aspect of constructionism was useful for questioning aspects of Australian culture that impact on young people, families, and their ability to connect. In addition, the interview results were interpreted within their cultural and historical context, including the impact of demands on families from work and school and of broader social values such as individualism and materialism (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism also encouraged questioning of how my historical and cultural position as a researcher may have impacted the research.

In line with the constructionist view, that individual perceptions and experiences are influenced by the surrounding context, the present study did not aim to develop a one-size-fits-all model for families, but rather sought to capture the variety of young people's experiences of family connectedness and what works for them.

**Theoretical perspectives.** Constructionism set the foundation for theoretical perspectives that value the experiences of individuals and recognise the wider cultural and social context in which young people and their families are embedded. Theoretical perspectives provide the philosophical stance behind the methodology and the context in which the research processes and logic are grounded (Crotty, 1998). The intersection of childhood studies (James & James, 2008) and systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) supported the choice of methodology and the interpretation of the data.

Importantly, these theories were not only valuable in giving proper recognition to young people and acknowledging the social context in the overall framing of the research, each played an active role in how the research was carried out.

Childhood studies, and its recognition of how young people's views differ from adults', reinforced the value of using qualitative interviews and broad questions to ensure young people had freedom to interpret family and family connectedness in their own way. This perspective further influenced the strategies used to conduct the interviews, the seeking of young people's advice at different stages of the research, and the adoption of strategies to highlight young people's voices, minimise power imbalances, ensure theme development was grounded in young people's responses, and monitor the impact of my adult researcher perspective.

Systems theory played an important role during analysis of interview content and development of recommendations from the research to ensure contextual factors were considered. To understand how those theoretical perspectives underpin the approach taken in the present study, it is useful to briefly recap their purpose and important features, before explaining the ways in which the research was conducted in depth.

***Childhood studies.*** A childhood studies perspective is critical to the present study because it recognises childhood as a socially constructed concept and acknowledges the impact of cultural and social factors on the way in which children and childhood are understood (James & James, 2008; Mayall, 1994). As outlined in chapter 2, it challenges the ideas, promoted through developmental psychology, that children are not competent, somehow less than adults, or that they are purely valued for the ways in which they are becoming adult. In childhood studies, children and young people are considered competent social actors rather than passive recipients of society and culture, and the value and

importance of talking to them about their experiences is increasingly evident in Australian and international research (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010b; James & James, 2008; Korbin, 2006).

From a childhood studies perspective, children are considered *subjects* rather than *objects* of research and are able to comment on their own lives (James & James, 2008; Korbin, 2006; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Research from this perspective sees young people as active citizens, who have different but equally important perspectives to adults and who deserve to have a say on issues affecting them (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010b; Moore, 2012). Childhood studies shifts from the traditional view of the adult expert researcher conducting research on the vulnerable and developing child, to the understanding that the complexities of childhood should be understood from the perspectives of children, with children actively involved throughout the research process (James & James, 2008; Kellett, 2005; Woodhead, 2008).

This approach contrasts with the largely quantitative nature of most of the research on family connectedness, reviewed in chapter 3, in which young people were asked relatively closed questions and given little opportunity to express their unique experiences. The present study used open questions to allow young people to discuss the issues that were important to them. The qualitative insights that resulted from young people being able to speak freely about family connectedness added clarity to already established connectedness factors such as time and trust, and identified new factors for connectedness.

Childhood studies encourages children's participation in all aspects of the research and keeps young people's perspectives central during the collection and analysis of data, and in the presentation of results (James & James, 2008). Including young people in the design

and analysis of research increases the credibility and robustness of findings by mediating the impact of the adult researcher's perspective and grounding the research as far as possible in young people's views so that the outcomes are more relevant to young people's lives (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Kellett, 2005). There is no evidence of young people being included in the design or analysis stage of the other family connectedness studies reviewed for this thesis.

In the vast majority of cases, adults define children's social position, expected maturity, and rights, and conduct research on their experiences (Woodhead, 2008). To manage this adult influence, researchers need to recognise the ways in which their position, history and views on childhood can impact the research, and devise strategies to actively include young people in the research process (James, 1999; Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor, & Graham, 2012; Woodhead, 2008).

In the present study, a childhood studies approach provided the basis for having young people participate throughout the research process (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; James & James, 2008; Korbin, 2006). A reference group of young people was established to seek young people's advice prior to conducting the interviews and after analysis. Their feedback helped make interviews more comfortable for young people, shaped which questions were asked and influenced how the results were reported.

In all research, children's voices will be mediated to some degree by the issues the researcher chooses to focus on, the lens adopted to interpret the data, and the quotes chosen to capture young people's views (James & James, 2008; Mayall, 1994; Powell et al., 2012). To ensure young people's perspectives remained integral to the present study, participants' responses were clarified during interviews and theme development was firmly grounded in the participants' responses. Direct quotes are used when presenting the data to limit the

filtering of young people's ideas through my adult perspective and ensure their voices are accurately documented.

Strategies to minimise power imbalances between young people and myself as an adult researcher were also implemented – an important concern in the hierarchical school setting where the interviews were conducted (James & James, 2008; Mayall, 1994; Thomas, 2007). The role of the reference group and strategies used to manage power imbalances and ensure researcher reflexivity are set out in detail later in this chapter.

As outlined in chapter 2, childhood studies has been criticised for lacking rigour and reflexivity, and focusing too narrowly on individual agency at the expense of the broader context and the vulnerability of children (Moore, 2012). Several strategies were adopted to address these limitations, including: adopting a systems lens to draw attention to the social context; ensuring researcher reflexivity and ethical conduct of the study to protect participants from harm; and, taking a robust and transparent approach to data analysis so that the key themes can be easily traced back to participant data.

The choice of childhood studies to guide the research was vindicated by the young people who were highly engaged in the interviews and very articulate about their experiences, and the valuable contributions made by the young person's reference group.

**Systems theory.** Systems theory complements childhood studies by recognising people within their surrounding social systems, encouraging consideration of how people interact with their physical and social environments, and considering the ways these systems interact and influence the wellbeing of individuals and communities (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2005; Lesser & Pope, 2011). It takes into account relationships with friends and family, one's immediate community, and the broader organisations and social structures

which impact people's lives (Healy, 2005). Systems theory also supports the emphasis in childhood studies on young people's agency, by acknowledging children's ability to influence their family and broader systems (Connolly & Harms, 2012; J. Walsh, 2010).

In the present study, systems theory brought a broader contextual lens to research on family connectedness, ensuring families and young people's experiences were not seen in isolation from their environment (Healy, 2005; O'Donohue, 2004). It reinforced the importance of understanding the full range of influences shaping young people's perspectives in order to achieve sustainable interventions that support family connectedness (Healy, 2005; Merrett, 2004; Wyn & White, 1997).

Systems theory was particularly valuable in ensuring the interview questions were not framed too narrowly and that the analysis of the interviews was sensitive to all the different factors shaping young people's responses. As outlined in chapter 3, systems theory recognises the micro, meso, exo and macro contexts in which people live. In the present study, the interviews with young people were primarily focused on the micro level interactions within the family environment that contribute to a sense of connectedness. However, the mesosystemic interactions between the micro systems of family, school, and work, and what this might say about influences in the social environment (exo) and wider culture (macro) impacting on families, such as economic pressures and individualist values, was also considered during analysis.

The value of adopting a systems approach to family connectedness was reinforced by the young people interviewed, who, without prompting, gave considerable weight to the wider context affecting families. Systems theory also ensured that conclusions and recommendations that arose from the findings of the study considered areas for change both

within the family system and in the broader context surrounding families (Connolly & Harms, 2012).

It was important to be mindful of the critiques of systems theory raised in chapter 3. Assessments based on systems theory have been criticised for being too difficult to respond to in practical work, not giving proper consideration to issues of power and disadvantage, and losing sight of the individual young person (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2005). Childhood studies was used to attenuate some of these limitations. Its use ensured individual experiences were recognised, children's voices were prioritised throughout the research, and power imbalances between participants and the adult researcher were minimised. Asking young people to define their own family without imposing any preconceived family roles helped alleviate concerns that systems approaches to effective family functioning might reinforce traditional gender roles. In addition, the model of family connectedness developed in the present study responds to concerns about the difficulty of acting on systemic assessments in practice by allowing the complex nature of family connectedness to be presented in an accessible way, readily applicable to practice (Healy, 2005).

Together, systems theory and childhood studies support a robust methodology well suited to the objectives of the research.

### **5.3 Methodology**

The present study used a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is typically set apart from quantitative research by using open-ended questions, exploring different perspectives, and focusing on words for data (Bodisch-Lynch, 1983; Creswell, 2009). As Ely, et al. (1997) outline:



The big job for a qualitative researcher is not to make a slick piece but to strive for writing a report that gets as close as possible to the essence...of what we studied, felt and tentatively made sense of in the field (p. 38).

Qualitative researchers work towards in-depth understandings and interpretations of meanings people attach to phenomena, and depict complexities rather than striving for a neat understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Ely et al., 1997). These approaches are particularly useful for exploring concepts that are complex and understood contextually (Creswell, 2009).

In the present study, a qualitative methodology added depth of understanding to the already established association between family connectedness and young people's wellbeing; it also identified complexities of family connectedness that have gone undetected in previous quantitative studies. Qualitative methodologies fit naturally with the conceptual framework outlined above as they generally recognise the socially constructed nature of reality, focus on how meaning is given to social experience, and consider the impact of the researcher on their area of study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Qualitative research has the potential to value rich descriptions of the social world and, like the present study, is often inductive, whereby "theory emerges from field work experiences and is grounded in the data" rather than testing hypotheses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Patton, 1990, p. 85).

The approach to qualitative research adopted in the present study draws on a number of processes used in grounded theory, where theory and new understanding are generated from the data (Punch, 2005). This approach was crucial for adding young people's insights to the literature on family connectedness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Punch, 2005). In grounded theory, research does not begin with an hypothesis to test, but instead inductively builds theory from the gathered data (Punch, 2005). Childhood studies and systems theory were important in defining the overall research space, but the development of themes was

undertaken inductively to keep young people's perspectives at the forefront of the analysis. This inductive approach fits the exploratory nature of the present study and responds to the lack of qualitative research on young people and family connectedness. Concepts from grounded theory were used, including theoretical saturation and continual data analysis, which is designed to adapt and improve the interview focus and technique throughout data collection (Punch, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1999). In addition, codes were developed from participants' data, rather than bringing pre-determined coding categories to analysis (Punch, 2005).

Guided by grounded theory, the data was approached with an open mind and no other research literature was read during the data analysis until the conceptual ideas and theoretical directions of the data became clear (Punch, 2005). These strategies minimised the influence of other knowledge when interpreting the participants' data and kept theme development grounded in the participants' experiences. The diversity of participant responses in the present study highlighted the value of using a qualitative approach and unearthed a level of detail unseen in quantitative family connectedness studies.

## 5.4 Methods

The qualitative methodology guided the methods used to collect and analyse the data (Crotty, 1998). Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to explore young people's experiences of family connectedness. Steps to prepare for and conduct fieldwork included: seeking advice from the young persons' reference group, recruiting participants, conducting interviews and considering ethical issues. This process began in March 2012 and was completed by November 2012.

**Young persons' reference group.** In line with the childhood studies approach adopted in the present study, young people were considered collaborators in the research

project, who could provide non-adult insights throughout the research (James & James, 2008). To increase young people's participation and input throughout the research, a reference group was established with 10 young people at the school at which I am employed as a counsellor. To minimise any prospect that the information provided by young people would be compromised by my position as a school counsellor, young people self-selected to participate and the role outlined for the group encouraged them to challenge my perspective. To recruit young people, the reference group was advertised during a year 10 assembly to students aged 15 and 16, after which ten young people volunteered to participate in the group.

The first reference group meeting, which preceded interviews, was designed to tap into the expertise of young people, refine the nature of questions to be asked and areas that should be the focus of the interviews, ensure that language and prompts were appropriate for young people, and gain a preliminary idea of how young people conceptualise family connectedness. The group discussed: how to ensure young people understood the consent process; how to create a comfortable environment for participants; what helped them feel connected to their families; and the nature and wording of possible interview questions.

During this first meeting the group decided that:

- The process of consent needed to be clearly explained. Participants should understand that - even after signing the consent form - they are free to withdraw at any time, choose which questions they answer, and decide after the interview if they did not wish for their data to be used.
- To make the interview atmosphere more comfortable for young people, food and drink should be provided, and breaks allowed as needed.
- Participants may draw a 'family map' to help explain who they considered family at the beginning of the interview.

- At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher must check whether the participants wished to change or add any information,
- A broad definition of family connectedness as, “the family’s sense of belonging and being psychologically close in ways perceived and defined by the adolescent” (Crespo et al., 2010, p. 1394), should be provided at the beginning of the interview to give participants an idea of what was meant by family connectedness.

In addition to these recommendations, the wording for some of the possible interview questions was refined and a question about changes in family connections over time was added, which ultimately led to the development of a key theme.

Once interviews had been conducted and data analysis was complete, the reference group met again to discuss and provide feedback on the themes that I had developed during analysis. At this second meeting the young people improved the wording or changed the title of themes to better reflect participants’ data, and provided advice on how the results should be communicated to parents. Their advice on the themes is detailed further in section 5.6 of this chapter and presented in more detail throughout chapters 6, 7 and 8 when presenting the results.

**Recruitment.** Sampling was both purposeful and convenience based, with recruitment deliberately focused on 15 and 16 year olds who have largely passed the early adolescent surge of hormones linked with increased risk of parental conflict, yet still exist primarily within the family unit (Berk, 2012). This age group were seen to offer the advantage of being more likely to give measured responses about their parents than those in early adolescence and, indeed, this was reinforced by some of the participants, who, during the interviews, indicated they may have been less measured or positive about parent relationships two years earlier. Throughout the research I was conscious that this choice to

focus on 15 and 16 years olds was based on developmental assumptions and effort was made to ensure this recruitment criterion did not lead to further assumptions about the participants. The implications of this age choice are explored further when reviewing the research process in the final chapter.

A decision was made to conduct interviews with both males and females to allow for the identification of any differences in responses based on gender. Schools were chosen as the key access point for their potential to advertise to large numbers of young people. My professional experience and connections in schools also helped to run a research project with minimal disruption and increased the possibility of principals agreeing to let interviews be advertised and conducted at their school. For convenience, schools in my home town of Canberra were targeted. Approval to approach schools about the research was received from the ACT Education and Training Directorate in May 2012 and from the Catholic Education Office in July 2012.

Initial recruitment efforts were focused on schools from the public sector with the hope of gaining a wide variety of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Information about the research was communicated to all public high schools in the ACT during June to August 2012. After limited response from schools and difficulties accessing public school principals directly, the approach to schools was refined to ensure schools were not overloaded with information, were clear about the small number of students required, and understood the voluntary nature of the research.

In addition, given the volume of research requests schools receive, a colleague recommended using established networks to build connections with schools. As a result, recruitment was widened to include Catholic and independent schools, where I had more

professional contacts. Following these changes, staff from two public schools, one Catholic school, and two independent schools agreed to meet with me about the research.

To recruit participants, the research was advertised through short presentations at year 10 assemblies in all five schools. These presentations covered the purpose of the research, what participation would entail and how to get involved. Young people were invited to participate in an individual interview up to one hour in length, discussing what helped them feel connected to their family. Information letters and consent forms for participants and their parents were left with a staff member at the school for interested young people to collect. Allowing young people to self-select to participate was designed to recruit those who wanted to talk about their experiences. At each school, a maximum of 10 interviews were offered to limit disruption and make the research easier for schools to host. No more than 10 young people volunteered at any one school.

At the first public school - despite staff being positive and young people expressing interest in participating - no young people returned permission forms, and so no interviews were conducted. It is difficult to say why no permission forms were returned, but there was limited staff support available to help organise interviews. This experience made clear the need for support from a staff member to help with the logistics of running interviews and providing reminders to students. Individual preferences of each school, such as the best times to offer interviews, were also discussed to make participation more feasible for schools and students. These strategies proved successful at the next four schools (two independent schools, one Catholic school, and one public school), recruiting 7, 9, 10 and 5 young people respectively.

**Sample.** The participant sample consisted of 31 young people from Canberra aged 15 and 16. The final number of participants reflects the point at which saturation of interview

content was reached – that is, interviews were continued until new interviews yielded no new data (Strauss & Corbin, 1999). Saturation was reached somewhat gradually. After approximately 22 interviews it seemed that interview content was reaching saturation and by the completion of interviews at the third school (after 26 interviews in total) it appeared that saturation had occurred. However, as the final school at which young people had volunteered was a public school and had the potential to increase the diversity of the sample, the final five interviews were still conducted. These interviews confirmed saturation and recruitment efforts were then ceased.

The characteristics of the sample and the number of participants in each demographic group – gender, type of school, family structure, cultural background and languages spoken at home - are summarised in Table 1 and then described in more detail.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

Gender		School		Family Structure		Cultural Background		Languages	
Males	18	Public	5	Intact	23	Australian	25	English only	26
Females	13	Independent	16	Blended	5	Other <sup>6</sup>	6	Two languages	5
		Catholic	10	Sole parent	3				
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>		<b>31</b>		<b>31</b>		<b>31</b>		<b>31</b>

The sample comprised 18 male and 13 female participants. A balance of male and female participants allowed exposure of any gender differences in experiences of family

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<sup>6</sup> Specific cultures are not specified to protect participants' confidentiality.

connectedness. The higher number of male participants was influenced by one of the schools being an all-boys school (the other three were co-educational). Six of the participants identified with a culture other than Australian and five of these participants spoke a language other than English at home. None of the participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Five of the participants attended a public school, 16 were drawn from two different independent schools, and 10 from a Catholic school.

There were no participation restrictions regarding family structure. As argued in chapter 3, to avoid imposing pre-conceived ideas about who does and does not count as family, young people were asked to describe their family at the beginning of the interview. This information allowed for consideration of any differences in descriptions of connectedness depending on young people's family structure. Of the 31 participants, 23 (74%) were living with both their biological parents, a similar rate to the broader Australian population, in which 73% of children live with both their biological parents (ABS, 2011b). Eight participants lived in either blended or sole parent families. Of these, seven participants had parents who were divorced or separated<sup>7</sup>, and one participant lived with her mother and made no mention of a father. Six participants had limited or no contact with their biological fathers. All the participants lived with their mothers for at least part of every week, except for one participant who was temporarily living with family friends. In addition to biological parents and siblings, participants lived with step-parents, grandparents, step- and foster siblings and pets. Two participants were only children, and the rest had between 1 and 5 siblings, some of whom were older and lived out of home.

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<sup>7</sup> Of these seven, two shared their time between their father's and mother's houses, in each case having a step-parent and step siblings in one of the houses. Three lived with their mother and step-father (and siblings if applicable), and two lived with their mothers (and siblings if applicable).



When participants described their family and the things that helped them feel connected to their family, they focused primarily on the people they lived with. The extent to which step-relationships were considered family varied, with some participants talking about them on par with blood relations and others living with step-relations but not considering them to be family. In those instances where step-relations were considered family, the young people had generally lived with them for many years.

The other groups mentioned as family - including aunts, uncles, cousins, non-residential grandparents, friends, Godparents, boyfriends and girlfriends - were typically not the main focus of the interview. These relationships were brought up when talking about particular factors for connectedness that these family members did well. Some young people also considered family friends, siblings' boyfriends and girlfriends, and supportive adults from school or sport to be family. For one young person, a sporting organisation had become like family due to the self-confidence it had given her.

Participants explained who their family were by drawing a family map or writing a list of family members. Examples of these, with identifying information removed, are provided (see Figure 1) to show the different ways in which family was conceptualised by the young people. Some drew cartoons, some positioned family at different points on the map to indicate closeness or to distinguish between Dad's family and Mum's family, while others drew genograms to demonstrate biological connections. Many participants identified only immediate family on their maps but then included other relationships in their verbal descriptions of family.

Figure 1: Family Maps



Overall, the concept of family was a powerful idea in the minds of most participants. The value participants attached to family was demonstrated when young people explained they were connected ‘*because we’re family*’, and through the expectations of care, support and connection young people had of family members. It is useful to keep the participants’ varying understanding of family in mind throughout the following chapters as some participant quotes make reference to individual family members, while others refer to family in a more general sense.

The ‘Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage’ (ICSEA) for Australian schools was used to provide a general idea about the socio-educational status of students at the participating schools (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2013b). A school’s ICSEA score represents “the average level of educational advantage” of the whole school’s population and the scores provide a rough idea of participants’ potential circumstances (ACARA, 2013a, p. 1).

All four schools have above average scores (>1000)<sup>8</sup> and young people at these schools are, as a cohort, relatively well positioned in terms of socio-educational status. The above-average ICSEA scores for all four schools are unsurprising given schools were recruited in the relatively affluent city of Canberra. Compared to the national mean, Canberra has higher income and tertiary education levels, and lower unemployment (ABS, 2005a; 2005b, 2012). To protect the identity of participating schools and young people, exact ICSEA scores are not provided, although they did allow me to compare participant responses across the four schools.

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<sup>8</sup> A score of 1000 “represents the ‘middle ground’ of educational advantage levels among Australian school students” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2013b, p. 1).

**Conducting the interviews.** The main data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews to ensure important questions were covered while still allowing room to explore individual experiences in some depth (Punch, 2005). A semi-structured interview guide provided some structure, and additional prompts were used to further explore experiences of family connectedness (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Punch, 2005). Open-ended questions allowed young people to share their individual experiences and ensured young people's stories were detailed in their own words.

The interview questions were broad and did not impose pre-conceived ideas about family connectedness on the participants. This allowed the researcher to compare what young people were saying about their experiences of family connectedness with other family connectedness research findings (see Appendix A for a copy of the semi-structured interview guide). The interview guide provided a basic outline of open-ended questions and ensured the key questions were covered with all participants. The tone of the interview was conversational and additional questions were used to encourage young people to expand their responses. Interview techniques to encourage rich descriptions included: active listening, interested body language and non-verbal encouragement, encouraging the young people to explain things in more depth, and paraphrasing to check for understanding.

Demographic data were also collected on participants' age, gender, cultural background, dominant language, and school sector (see Appendix B for a copy of the demographic data sheet). The literature suggests these factors may impact on young people's wellbeing and how families connect. After analysis was completed any differences in responses based on these demographic factors were considered.

Interviews were conducted in a private room at the young person's school. All interviews were conducted one-on-one to encourage the sharing of individual family

experiences that may otherwise have been suppressed by the dynamics of a group environment (Punch, 2005). Interviews were audio recorded with the young person's consent to ensure an accurate record of the interviews. If the participants were uncomfortable with recording, comprehensive notes were taken. Four of the 31 participants requested that interviews not be recorded, but did not explain their preference. On these occasions the participants checked the notes at the completion of the interview to make any changes and confirm that the notes accurately captured what they had said. Recorded interviews were transcribed and participants were offered to have their transcription sent to them so they could review the content and make any changes. After the digital recorder was turned off at the end of the interview, participants engaged in more relaxed conversation. During this time some valuable information was added and additional notes were taken.

Recorded interview length ranged from 17 to 58 minutes, with a mean of 33 minutes. These times did not include initial introductions, discussions of the interview process and wrapping up the interview. Participants with the shortest interviews fell into two categories – those who had difficulty explaining their family connectedness in depth and those who were straight to the point. In one interview, a female participant who was quite articulate only spoke for 18 minutes as she was very clear that time with family was essential for connecting and her family had lots of time together.

Longer interviews were either with young people who were naturally reflective on their family connections and therefore explained these in detail, or with young people who felt connected in some ways and not others. The latter group found it easier to highlight the sorts of things that did and did not help their feelings of connectedness and generally had more examples to share. Later interviews were also generally more in-depth as my prompting and inquisition skills improved.

## 5.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical conduct of research and the protection of participants' interests and wellbeing are essential. The *ACU National Human Research Ethics Committee* approved the research and determined that appropriate steps were taken to protect participants' interests, confidentiality and wellbeing (see Appendix C for a copy of the ethics approval). Before approaching schools, in-principle approval was obtained from the ACT Education and Training Directorate (for public schools) and the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn Catholic Education Office (for non-Congregational Catholic schools). For independent schools and Congregational Catholic schools, school principals were approached directly. In all cases, final approval to advertise the research to young people was provided by school principals.

As a social worker, my research was informed by the Australian Association of Social Workers' *AASW Code of Ethics*, particularly the ethical principles for research outlined in section 5.5.2 of the Code (AASW, 2010, pp. 36-38). These principles include: placing the interests of research participants first; thinking through the consequences of the research; ensuring participant confidentiality; informing participants of the purpose of the research; ensuring consent is given freely; and reporting results accurately. The research was also informed by the *National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans 2007*, particularly section 4.2 on research with children and young people (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). These guidelines included: considering young people's developmental capacity to understand and choose to participate in the research; and creating a research environment that provided for the safety and wellbeing of the young people involved. Below is a brief discussion of how ethical issues were handled.

**Informed consent.** A detailed information letter on the nature and purpose of the study was provided to all participants and their guardians (see Appendix D for information letters). As all the young people interviewed were under the age of 18, parental consent was required. To ensure young people had the final say on their participation, all participants and their guardians signed a consent form documenting that the young person was informed about the research, wanted to participate, and had parental permission to do so (see Appendix E for consent forms). In all documents provided to participants, the voluntary nature of participation was emphasised. These documents also explained that participants could withdraw at any time without consequence and that the research was completely independent from their school.

Dr Tim Moore from the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) provided guidance on explaining the process of consent to young people and ensuring young people were clear about their rights throughout the research process. His outline of young people's rights when participating in research was included in the information pamphlet about the research (see Appendix F for the information pamphlet). This pamphlet was provided in information packs given to young people who were interested in being interviewed following assembly presentations. The consent process was explained to young people in information sessions and at the beginning of interviews; ongoing choices after signing the consent form were discussed, including the choice to stop the interview at any stage, and to choose which questions they wanted to answer. Participants were given general information on how the interview would work and an opportunity to read through the interview guide and ask questions at the beginning of the interview.

**Confidentiality.** To protect participants' confidentiality, identifying information was removed from transcriptions. Only the researcher had access to participants' personal

information and in cases where the unique nature of a young person's experience risked exposing their identity, specific details were removed or altered to protect confidentiality. Participants' names were removed from all documents and replaced with a code known only to the researcher. These codes were later replaced with pseudonyms when referring to participant data in the thesis. Participants, parents, or staff from participating schools who requested results of the study will be provided with an aggregated summary of the findings without identifying information.

Participants were informed of the limits of confidentiality at the beginning of the interview, and that if they reported being unsafe or at risk of self-harm or abuse, the safety concerns would need to be passed on to an appropriate staff member at school in order to support their safety. Participants were then able to make an informed choice as to what they disclosed in the interview. No safety concerns were reported by participants.

**Protecting participants from harm.** Given the voluntary nature of participation and the focus of the interview on what *was* working to support family connectedness, it was not expected that interviews would cause discomfort or distress. In discussing family relationships, however, there was still the potential for issues to arise that caused stress, worry or sadness, and, therefore, a plan to manage such incidences was developed. Participant support was not required within the interviews but all participants were provided with information on support services for young people in Canberra in case they wanted to seek support following the interview (see Appendix G for the support services handout).

Protective interrupting was used on one occasion when a participant indicated a particular topic would be difficult to discuss. In this instance, the audio recording was stopped to check whether the participant was okay to continue. The young person revealed a childhood trauma had pulled her family closer together and helped her realise the level of



family support available. The protective interrupting helped prevent the participant from becoming distressed about a past experience and kept the interview focused on the positive element she wanted to share.

In addition to protecting participants from harm, it was hoped participants would benefit from participating in an interview. Children and young people's participation is seen to reinforce young people's important place within society and support self-esteem and wellbeing (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a, 2010b; Thomas, 2007). At the beginning of the interviews, I reinforced the expertise that young people had on their own experiences and the ways adults were limited in their ability to support young people without this knowledge. Many young people responded particularly well to the interview question asking what their advice for parents would be. The value of talking about family relationships more generally was reinforced by a number of participants. Comments from the young people interviewed included:

*Just talking about it today has enhanced the way that I look at my mum cause it's just like, wow, she is there a lot. And my dad, he is there, you know, and I can talk to him about a lot.... Yeah, so I think this helped me as well.*

*But they don't really give you the time to talk about your family like this. Like, it's good to talk about it because it makes you feel lighter.*

**Addressing power imbalances.** Steps were taken to minimise the potential power imbalance between myself as an adult researcher and the participants. Strategies used included: acknowledgement of young people's expertise; consideration of how I dressed and presented myself; and the use of appropriate language for young people. During information sessions and interview introductions, I reinforced that young people were the experts in this

area. Participants also received a double movie voucher to recognise the value of their knowledge and time. As suggested by the reference group, food and drinks were provided to help create a relaxed atmosphere. Involving young people throughout the research, and researcher reflexivity (discussed later in the chapter) helped to reduce power imbalances with the young people interviewed (Powell et al., 2012).

Further, interviews were conducted at the young person's school, in an effort to provide a comfortable and familiar environment (Krathwohl, 1998). Relaxed conversation with participants was used to establish rapport before beginning the interview. In most of the interviews, rapport was established quickly, and, in general, young people spoke openly and seemed relaxed. In two of the interviews, participants appeared slightly nervous and gave limited responses. In all the other interviews, young people appeared to enjoy the opportunity to share their opinion, be treated as experts, and be listened to. Many of the participants thanked me for the opportunity to talk about their families.

## **5.6 Data Analysis**

Individual interviews were transcribed and analysed in depth, and then compared to other interviews. The interview data were categorised using thematic analysis. Through coding, common themes across interviews were identified, based on the meanings and interpretations found in the transcriptions (Punch, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005). The data analysis software Nvivo 10 was used to manage the data. Nvivo was useful for organising the data into codes and linking back to the original transcripts to place coded data within the context of the whole interview. Nvivo was also used to run basic word searches after data analysis to confirm whether all relevant data for each theme had been coded.

A preliminary round of coding was conducted after the first seven interviews to ensure appropriate data were being collected. At this stage, overarching categories related to

the interview questions were used, including: **Helps connectedness** and **Interferes with connectedness**. In this initial round of coding, any data referring to things that helped or supported participants' sense of connectedness were coded under the theme helps connectedness. The coding of the first seven interviews gave some early ideas about what might be important for young people's sense of connectedness but also confirmed that the interviews were an effective tool for gathering information on how young people experience family connectedness.

This early coding also exposed the need for more probing in future interviews to better grasp *why* certain things such as eating dinner together helped a young person feel connected. Two set questions were added to the interview guide to encourage young people to reflect further on their family connectedness. The new questions asked young people what advice they would give parents to connect with young people, and whether there were unique things their parents did that helped them feel connected. These additional questions, and refined probing, elicited more detailed examples and explanations in later interviews. These first seven interviews were later coded again, together with the rest of the interviews, using the thematic networks analysis process described below.

Thematic networks was the key tool used for data analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Drawing on established techniques for qualitative and hermeneutic data analysis, thematic networks is a tool developed by Attride-Stirling (2001) to assist organised and robust analysis, encourage disclosure of the analysis process and visually display the analysis in thematic network maps. This approach provided a clear framework to structure the analysis and ensured theme development was grounded in the participants' responses.

Thematic networks analysis began by developing **basic themes** from the interview data. These basic themes, which reflected the participants' language, were grouped into

common ideas to form **organising themes**. Organising themes add meaning and context to basic themes. From these organising themes, a handful of **global themes** were developed to summarise and capture the essence of the qualitative data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The global themes present the key concepts that affected young people's experiences and sense of family connectedness. An example of the theme development process is outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Thematic Networks Example

A number of young people spoke about how activities they did with their family helped their sense of family connectedness. The activities young people mentioned, such as - **eating dinner together**, **daily activities**, and **family holidays** - each became **basic themes**.

*Basic themes:*

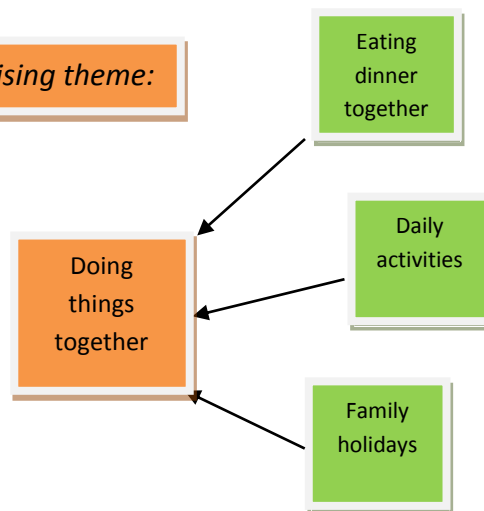
Eating dinner  
together

Daily activities

Family Holidays

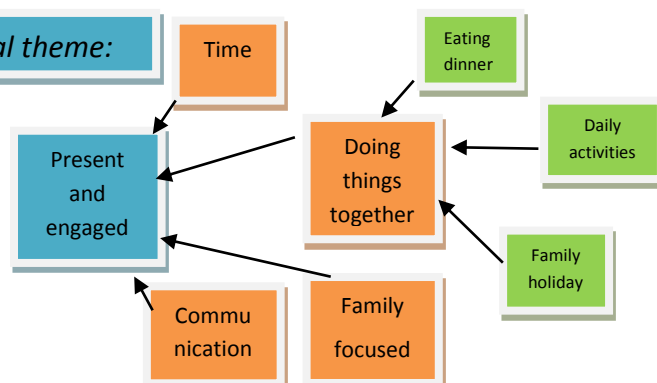
Through analysis, it became clear these basic themes all captured the value young people placed on doing things with family. Consequently, they were grouped together under the **organising theme** - **doing things together**.

*Organising theme:*



Finally, the organising theme of doing things together was grouped with other organising themes, including **time**, **communication** and **family focused** to form the **global theme** - **being present and engaged in family life**. This global theme, which developed from participants' stories, captured a major factor supporting young people's feelings of family connectedness – having family who were present and engaged in family life.

*Global theme:*



During this analysis, systems theory was used to ensure the broader contextual elements discussed or referred to by participants were considered. Key questions during analysis included: what does this say about the micro family environment? And what does this tell us about the broader context impacting on families? Six global themes were developed from the interview data. Four of the themes primarily focus on the micro interactions within families, and include:

- The importance of being present and engaged in family
- The benefits of having things in common
- Young people's need to feel valued, and
- Connections over time

The other two global themes reflect changing dynamics within the family environment and the broader meso, exo and macro factors that impacted young people's sense of family connectedness. They are, the impact of:

- Family dynamics, and
- Factors outside the family

These six themes are presented in thematic network maps in the following three chapters to efficiently demonstrate how themes were developed and allow readers to trace the global themes back to the basic themes and, ultimately, the participants' own words (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Selected quotes from interviews are used in the following chapters to illustrate the identified themes in the participants' language. Examples of the quote maps developed for each basic theme are provided in Appendix H.

**Reference group feedback on data analysis.** Following the completion of data analysis, the reference group was reconvened to provide feedback on the results and my

interpretations. Eight of the original ten young people, now aged 17 and 18, came to the second reference group meeting. The group was provided with the visual theme maps for each global theme (presented in chapters 6, 7 and 8) and the themes were explained in detail. The young people liked the straight forward themes and their presentation in visual maps. They appreciated the way the maps explained the global themes, but felt the maps needed to be accompanied by more detailed explanations of the basic themes.

Feedback from the reference group was largely positive and in agreement with the presented themes. However, some of the young people, now 2 years older, felt they were better placed to consider the perspectives of their parents and recommended caveats be added to some of the opinions expressed by the participants in the research interviews. These suggested caveats, such as recognising the value of young people earning positive feedback rather than being given positive feedback regardless of what they do, are provided throughout chapters 6, 7 and 8 in the presentation of results. Changes to some theme titles were also recommended, for example, 'sibling comparisons' was changed to 'avoid sibling comparisons' so its meaning could not be misinterpreted at a quick glance.

### **5.7 Reflexive Research: Considering the Researcher's Role in Analysis**

In addition to structured thematic analysis and feedback from the young persons' reference group, a number of strategies were used to increase the robustness of findings and for scrutinising my impact on the analysis. Reflexivity – "rigorous self-scrutiny" – was used to ensure I remained conscious of personal and theoretical beliefs and how these could impact the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 327). Reflexivity was particularly important given the inside knowledge of young people and the research environment gained from my work as a school counsellor (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Kanuha, 2000).

This inside knowledge and my counselling skills provided background knowledge of issues affecting young people and helped build rapport and create a comfortable interview atmosphere. Inside knowledge, can however, risk obscuring information that does not sit within a researcher's prior understandings (Kanuha, 2000). It was important to be aware that the young people who I counselled were not representative of all young people, and that this prior knowledge had the potential to create a more negative view of parent-child relationships and general family interactions. To ensure this inside knowledge did not overly influence the gathering and interpretation of data, unclear responses were clarified during interviews, participant data were continually referred to throughout analysis, and unexpected findings were thoroughly explored (Ely et al., 1997; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Kanuha, 2000). Inside researchers can also be influenced by their connection with the group being researched and feel pressured to report certain outcomes (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). This pressure was not evident in the present study, as genuinely understanding young people's points of view and accurately recording results was in the best interests of my professional practice and reputation as a school counsellor.

A number of strategies were used to manage inside knowledge, support reflexivity, and to ensure I remained open to new ideas. Firstly, a statement of stance towards the research topic was recorded in an effort to unearth potential biases (Ely et al., 1997). As outlined in section 1.6, this statement covered my personal and professional history and cultural and socio-economic location. Some bias is inevitable in any research, but being clear about these possible areas of bias can limit the impact they have on the findings (Fetterman, 1989).

Feedback from my PhD supervisors and a personal research journal were also used to ensure reflexivity (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). Supervisors asked difficult questions and



encouraged continual critique of the impact I was having on the research. Questions that challenged personal assumptions included: why does this resonate with you? And, what surprised you? Informal debriefing with colleagues also challenged my interpretations of the data (Ely et al., 1997). Participant and peer checking further ensured the credibility of interpretations made during content analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). During interviews, responses were paraphrased and participants were asked additional questions to clarify meaning. Quotes taken from the interviews are used in the presentation of results to increase the internal validity of the findings and allow readers to judge the researcher's interpretations of the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

A research journal was used to document personal and theoretical orientations and consider my location in the study. The journal tracked decision-making processes and the evidence behind decisions, it noted and challenged personal reactions during fieldwork, and kept a record of ethical considerations and choices (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). This journaling technique increased awareness of, and challenged the ways in which, inside knowledge impacted the research at all stages of the study (Ely et al., 1997; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). The research journal was also used to record data management techniques and ensure the process and decision-making trail behind interpretations and theme development could be clearly explained and justified (Ely et al., 1997; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Together, these strategies helped me to benefit from inside knowledge without closing off new information and ideas. They also enabled me to question, challenge and justify the choices made throughout the research process.

## **5.8 Presentation of Results**

To address the lack of qualitative insights from young people on family connectedness in previous studies, sharing young people's perspectives was paramount to the

present study. The following three chapters present the insights of the young people interviewed, focusing on the key themes developed from the interview data and thematic analysis. The same format will be used in all three chapters, each of which addresses two global themes. Each global theme is summarised before the subsidiary organising themes are explored in greater depth.

Each global theme is presented in a thematic network map to display the organising and basic themes from which it has been developed. While these maps provide a clear summary of each global theme, they are purely an illustrative and organising tool to facilitate researcher disclosure and assist the readers' understanding (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In isolation, they risk over-simplifying the data; it is important not to lose sight of the complexities of family connectedness and the ways in which the global themes overlap in everyday family life. The real value and qualitative complexity of family connectedness lies in the discussion that follows these maps and the presentation of young people's experiences.

Participants' quotes are used throughout these chapters to provide detail and explanation of the key ideas in the young people's own words. The quotes selected for these chapters were chosen to highlight key concepts, add understanding to abstract ideas, and, on some occasions, provide exceptions to the views of other young people. Participants' quotes are italicised to distinguish young people's voices from my own and other adult researchers'.

## **5.9 Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined how the research question was addressed, including the conceptual framework, methodology and chosen methods. These choices and the focus they bring to young people's perspectives and the wider social environment impacting families are evident throughout the thesis. Systems theory brought a social work perspective to research

on family connectedness and using a qualitative methodology addressed a key gap in the literature.

The process of recruiting participants and collecting data was explained, including the use of a reference group to develop the interview questions and process. The steps to obtain school approval to speak with young people were also detailed. The thematic networks approach to data analysis, which grounds theme development in participant data, was outlined, as were the techniques used for managing my inside knowledge.

In the following three results chapters, the data from the interviews are documented. The six global themes which emerged from analysis included key factors for young people's sense of family connection:

1. The importance of family **being present and engaged in family life**
2. The value of **having things in common**
3. **Young people's need to feel valued**, and
4. Positive **connections over time**

Young people also talked about factors that could affect their sense of connection, including:

5. **Family dynamics**, and
6. **Factors outside the family**, such as work and school.

The following chapter looks at the first two global themes - **being present and engaged in family life** and **having things in common**, which both focus on basic but important elements of interpersonal interactions within families. Chapter 7 presents and explores the other two global themes focused on the micro interactions within families - **young people's need to feel valued** and **connections over time**. Chapter 8 looks at the final two global themes - **family dynamics** and **factors outside the family**, where the meso, exo and macro

environments in which families are imbedded appear more prominently. The implications of these results will then be considered in chapter 9.

## Chapter 6: Valuing the Basics

### 6.1 Introducing the Chapter

Some of the simplest and most foundational aspects of family connectedness for the young people interviewed during the research for this study are the importance of family being physically and mentally engaged in family life, communicating effectively, supporting young people, and connecting through common factors and shared experiences. Young people's experiences highlight the value of daily interactions for supporting a sense of connection to family. These issues illuminate the ways in which young people interact with other members of their family and identify the types of shared issues and experiences that can promote connectedness.

To capture those insights, this chapter presents the first two global themes – **being present and engaged in family life** and **having things in common** – that emerged from the analysis of the data. In keeping with the systems theory approach to data analysis described in the previous chapter, both of these global themes presented in this chapter focus on interactions within the micro family system. The two themes are addressed sequentially. In each section the key factors for young people's sense of family connectedness are first presented in thematic network maps to provide a summary of the data (see Figures 3 and 4). These maps display the links between the basic themes (grounded in participant language), the organising themes (which draw together similar ideas), and the overarching global theme (which captures the essence of the data). The organising and basic themes are then presented in detail to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these factors for young people's sense of family connectedness.

## 6.2 Global Theme: Being Present and Engaged in Family Life

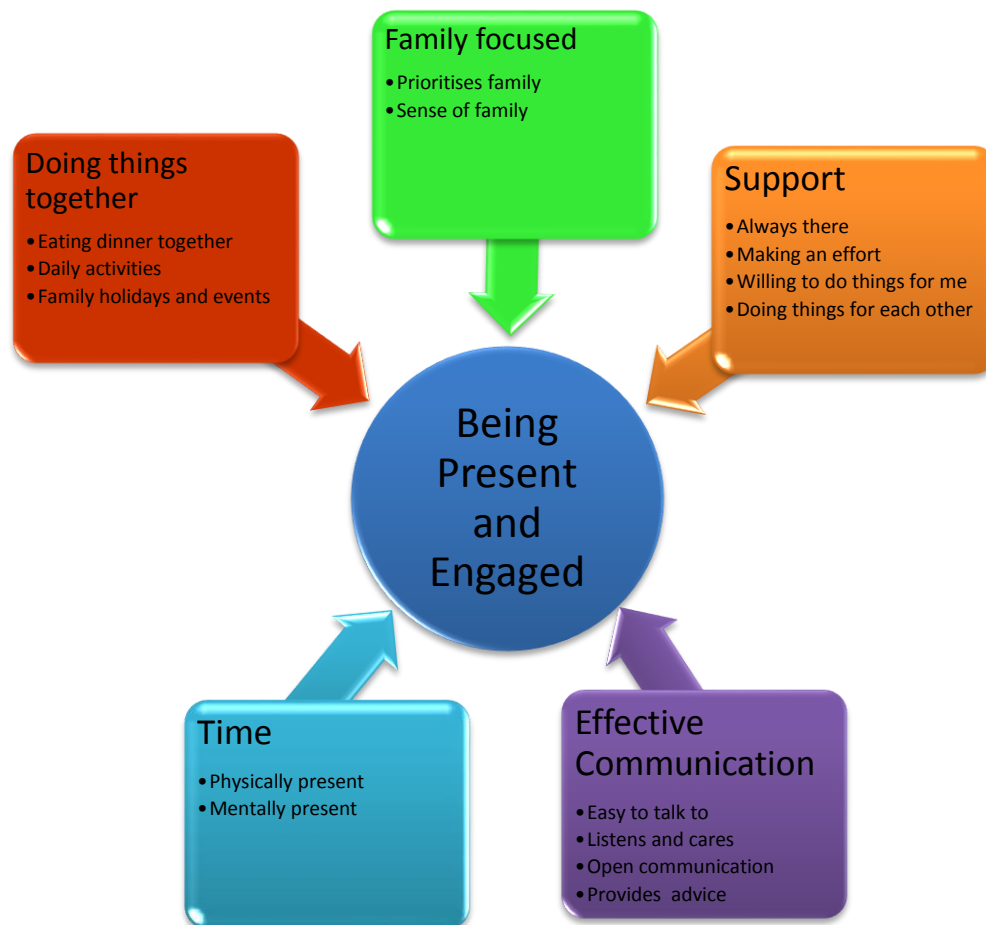
While the importance of family connectedness for young people's wellbeing is established, the present study argues that effective interventions to support family connectedness are only possible if we understand directly from young people what helps them feel connected to their family (Crespo et al., 2010; Houlberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011). Insight into some of the most valuable and simple daily factors supporting family connections for the participants in the present study are captured in the first global theme – being present and engaged in family life. Within this key idea, young people spoke about the need for **time** together and **effective communication**, and saw the importance of being **family focused**, **doing things together** and feeling **supported**.

Time together and effective communication were central elements for the young people interviewed to feel connected to family. The other organising themes - family focused, doing things together and support - provide tangible examples of what it means to be present and engaged in family life and in many ways were an extension of the time families had together and the ways in which they communicated. The thematic network map (see Figure 3) displays these organising themes and their supporting basic themes for the global theme being present and engaged in family life. These organising themes and their supporting data are presented in more detail below.

**Time.** Having time with family was central to young people's sense of family connectedness and was discussed by all interviewees. The central role that time together played in feelings of connectedness is captured by Scott:

*I spend more time with Dad than anyone else...whether it be sport or anything like that, I seem to spend a lot more time with Dad... so in that way I'm more connected to him than anyone else.*

The importance of this theme was reinforced by the way young people felt their parents underestimated their need for time with family. This was supported by Sophie's viewpoint: *"They think we don't want to spend time with them and like we're moody and stuff, but we actually do"*.



**Figure 3: Being Present and Engaged in Family Life**

Young people's responses offered insight into important aspects of time with family for young people, highlighting the need to be both **physically** and **mentally present** in family life. Young people expressed greater feelings of connectedness to those family members who were physically present in their lives. This was true within the family home – where young people were often closest to the people whom they saw most, as evidenced in the following quote from Michael:

*I see my Mum an average of 2 hours a day... when I get home my Mum leaves for work...But my brother, I see him for the rest of the day...So I would say [my relationship with my] brother... is the best, because I see the most of him.*

The value of living in the same house and generally spending time around each other demonstrated how the quantity of time together can support feelings of connectedness. Young people valued sitting on the couch with a parent watching television, even when there was minimal communication. Young people also generally felt closest to the extended family members they saw most often. Lily explained the benefits of having regular contact with extended family:

*My friends have family all over the country, but we're all here and we're all just together and we live 5 minutes away from each other. So I think that's what kept us connected... 'Cause otherwise if they lived at the coast then we probably wouldn't be as good friends with them as I am now, 'cause it would be like, we see each other a couple of times a year and that's about it.*

Other young people struggled to stay connected to family who lived interstate or overseas. Michael described how relationships could change when family moved further away:

*Ever since [my cousin] moved, it's kind of been distant. We used to be like brothers, he used to go to the same school as me, then we used to go to each other's houses every day, but it's not like that anymore. When people move, that's when you lose the relationship, because you can't see them anymore. Like, I see my cousin four times a year and I used to follow him around all the time.*

There were few exceptions to the value of living close to extended family in supporting feelings of connectedness. However, some young people saw extended family



infrequently despite them living nearby, while others maintained strong connections across physical distances due to effort from family to stay in contact and visit each other regularly. For a few participants, relationships with older siblings improved after their sibling moved out of home and they could enjoy the limited time together without getting on each other's nerves.

Although time together provided opportunities to connect and was regarded as a major factor for family connectedness, just being physically present was not enough to support a sense of family connectedness. Family members also needed to be mentally present and engaged in family life. Being mentally present is a fairly abstract idea but the following quotes from participants provide some insight into what it means to be mentally present and the value young people placed on it:

*When [Mum's] at home, she's at home, then that's where she is. She is there to be with us, rather than be off somewhere else in her head. Especially because she never keeps her phone on her, so that is not a problem. (Olivia)*

*Sometimes because you spend so much time with [your family], they end up being the furthest away from you because... they're always there so you don't really pay much attention to them. I think connected is when you spend time and actually take notice of each other. (Alexandra)*

Young people gave examples of being together at home with their family but gaining no connection from it when family members did not participate in family time. Examples included parents who worked at home all weekend and siblings who would stay in their rooms and avoid family interaction. As Isaac explained:

*I don't talk to Dad overly much, especially on the weekend if we're home the whole weekend, my brother and I will be upstairs or outside the whole time, Dad will be doing work and Mum will be doing something [else].*

These examples highlight how family members need to be both physically and mentally present in family time for it to be effective, and the two-way nature of connectedness – in which both parents and young people need to actively participate in family life for effective connections.

**Effective communication.** Effective communication was a major aspect of family connectedness for young people; Georgia explained its value for her: “*Communication is a really big thing, the more I talk to my Mum the more I want to tell her stuff*”. Young people described four key elements of effective communication: **easy to talk to, listens and cares, open communication**, and provides **advice**.

The importance of family members being easy to talk to was emphasised throughout the interviews. Young people largely focused on how parents could create an approachable atmosphere that made young people feel comfortable to talk. As Mandy explained:

*Mum [is] so approachable for me. And she is so open to anything that I'm willing to come and talk to her about. She's not judgemental but she will still be that really strong motherly figure that I really just will talk to, 'cause it's really easy.*

For other participants, talking regularly with their parents helped them feel comfortable in conversations and made it easy to approach parents as needed. Caleb explained that parents needed to be ready to talk when young people needed them, otherwise they may seek support elsewhere or not be in the mood to talk when parents were ready:

*If your son or daughter's in a good mood, take the most advantage to talk to them... If they want to talk to you, you [have] really got to just be ready to go, because if I went to my dad and wanted to ask him something but he was like, you know, busy busy busy, and I couldn't do it, I think it would be a lot different... if I had to wait for his schedule.*

The importance of how parents respond during conversation, in particular, listening and caring about what young people have to say, was also important. Dan demonstrated how poor listening could negatively impact connections:

*I thought about dropping a subject and I'd tried to sit [Dad] down and have a conversation about it. And he... literally didn't pay any attention in the conversation, sort of looking around and... I just felt really discouraged from trying to work that [out].*

Young people appreciated when their parents were open with them about issues affecting the family and when they could talk openly with their parents and not be judged. This allowed young people to be more honest with their parents as they were not fearful of their parents' reactions. As Jack articulated:

*If I get into trouble at school, Mum and I can talk about it. Like, I don't feel the need to lie... So, I guess that's how I feel connected.*

Some young people wanted to feel more open with their family and have their family be more open-minded. Michael longed for more openness so he could comfortably talk with his family and they could better understand who he is:

*I don't think my family really knows who I am... More openness would be a good thing, like you can sit down and talk. Some things you hate to admit, I mean, when I*

*was in year seven and had no friends and that, I was like, actually depressed...and I didn't want to admit that to my family because it shows great dishonour... There are times when I would love to be more open but [I am] self conscious.*

For Georgia, her father's failure to be open about his plans to move overseas made her feel like she was not a priority for him:

*I guess with something as big as [moving overseas] I thought he would give me [notice] months in advance. He only told me like 4 weeks before he was actually going... so I just felt, he was, you know, kind of like a split-[second] decision to leave me. And even though I don't talk to him that much and we're not that close because of previous things he has also done, I still feel like I should be kind of a priority in his life and he should still be able to tell me things in advance and I think what he was really afraid of was that I would get mad at him. But you know, I did get mad at him because he didn't give me enough warning and he didn't really give me a reason why he was leaving. And like didn't give me, didn't even say like whether he was going to keep in contact and he didn't even say goodbye before he left, so yeah. So that's why yeah, I don't really feel like I'm that close to my Dad because of stuff like that.*

Young people clarified that, while they valued open communication with their parents, they didn't necessarily tell their parents everything and for certain peer issues, age-related interests and things they thought their parents would worry about, they were more likely to talk to their siblings or friends.

The final aspect of effective communication was the advice family could provide to help manage issues in their lives. Examples of useful advice from family included: general problem solving; being able to sort through and prevent future negative situations; discussion

of pros and cons in decision-making; insights parents could provide based on their life experience; and advice on friends, tertiary education and work. Michael liked the way his mother provided advice and feedback on his music and the ways this helped him get better at something that was important to him. Andrew explained how useful advice from his parents encouraged him to talk to them more often:

*When I do want to talk to them, they're good about it and they have advice...if whenever I talk to them, they're going to have something for me, I talk to them more and more. It just evolves.*

Effective communication between parents and young people also assisted other connectedness factors discussed in the following chapter, including setting boundaries and keeping adolescents from harm. Olivia explained the way her grandmother was able to provide useful and neutral advice compared to peers who were more likely to get caught up in the situation:

*[My grandma has] got those years and wisdom to give some helpful advice and she is really good at not getting caught up in it herself. Which some people would if you talk to them, like friends would get caught up in stuff themselves if you talk to them, whereas if I talk to my grandmother she'll be there but she will also be objective.*

Advice from others was not always appreciated, though, if young people's interests were not respected. Blake, for example, appreciated his grandmother's advice on tertiary education, whereas Dan felt his father's advice did not show an understanding of the areas he was really interested in for further education. Aidan often went to his younger brother for advice as his brother did not make a big deal or worry about it after the conversation, in contrast to how his parents tended to react. Some young people also made it clear that, while

they generally valued advice from family, they would not always listen to or act on their parent's advice. Emily explained her mixed feelings about her parents' advice.

*I guess they give it to me from a different perspective and help me not to be so, like one minded and sometimes 'cause they have been around longer, they're always telling me you know, 'once you're older you have more experience you're more likely to look at things in a different way'. And so I guess they talk to me about it and sometimes what they say I'm not very happy with it but I know that it is true and it is one way of looking at it. And then sometimes there are times where it's really helpful and I've thought 'oh I haven't really thought about it that way'.*

Overall, family members could provide helpful advice in the lives of young people and were an important sounding board for talking through issues in their lives. Young people were, however, more likely to appreciate advice if the giver listened to where they were coming from and respected their perspective and interests.

**Doing things together.** Doing things together was a practical way to support family connectedness and help young people to feel family members were engaged and interested in family life. Practical examples provided by participants of what families might do together, included **eating dinner together**, **daily activities** and **family holidays**. Eating dinner with their family was an important part of connectedness for many young people, as it brought everyone together and helped them stay up to date on each other's lives as they talked about their day during dinner. Dinner was also a time to solve problems with family. Georgia provides an example of the value of family dinner time for her sense of connectedness:

*One really obvious one is just eating at a table. And I know lots of people will say that, but just eating as a family makes you feel connected because people could be doing other things at that time, but they take the time out to spend that time with you.*

Doing relatively mundane daily activities together, such as driving to school, grocery shopping, homework, house chores, weekend outings, and watching television helped these young people feel connected to family. As Alexandra said, *“We don’t really have any weekly rituals or anything...just certain moments that are good when everyone’s together”*. These activities also provided opportunities for one-on-one communication with their parents. As Caleb reported, *“That’s when I’ll tell [Dad] stories - when I’m drying the dishes and he’s washing”*. Sophie explained how such activities were also a way for parents to show they were there for their family: *“If we do activities on the weekend together, even if it is just doing jobs around the house, it is just like they are showing that they are there”*.

Finally, participants identified family holidays as a valuable time to connect. Holidays were an opportunity to relax and enjoy each other’s company without the distractions of everyday life. Holidays were described by Michael as a time to *“escape the rat race”*. For Sam, a different family atmosphere existed on holidays compared to being at home:

*[My parents] are more open, they can talk, have a laugh. It’s usually when they come back from a holiday or the coast because they haven’t been worrying about anything and then when they get home they get phone calls and then it starts again....it’s better [when we’re away] because... they’ve got nothing to worry about and they just put their phones down and have fun.*

Holidays were also an opportunity for families to do more together as a whole family and get to know each other better. Family gatherings and events were identified by some young

people as an opportunity to connect with extended family, often in the context of a celebratory occasion where people were relaxed and happy.

**Family focused.** Focusing on family and making time for family despite busy lives was an important way for parents to let young people know their **family was a priority**. Sam was most comfortable talking to his aunt because she made time for him and gave him her undivided attention. For other young people, their parents regularly told them how much they valued family, with some choosing to work fewer hours to have more family time or making sure they were available for young people in critical times despite work commitments. A major component of parent's ability to be family focused was the extent to which their work commitments interfered with their ability to be physically or mentally present at home. Sophie explained how a perceived focus on work instead of family made her feel undervalued by her parents:

*They are always on their phone...and I feel when they go out for work dinners they don't want to spend time with us. And that makes me so annoyed...I just get really angry and try and push them away, [it feels like] they don't want to be with us and they are choosing their work friends or whatever over us.*

The impact of work commitments on family connectedness will be further explored in chapter 7. A failure by parents to prioritise family, whether through a focus on work or other commitments, could lead to feelings of disconnection. As Olivia explained:

*I guess that breaks your connectedness when they aren't able to help you, or [drive] you round and stuff because they're busy with their own things... so you make yourself busy with your own things...and then you're both busy and then there is no space for that connectedness.*



Young people talked about having a sense of unity as a family. This feeling of unity came from a belief that there was something unique that tied them together as a family. Throughout the interviews, participants primarily focused on the tangible ways they connected with each individual member in their family. This theme – **sense of family** – while less tangible, captured young peoples' overall sense of belonging to family. Bec described her sense of family in the following way:

*It's as if when friends are over they're talking to 'the family', they are not necessarily talking to one person. It just feels like my mum, dad, brother and I, we're all one... one person talking to them.*

Bec's family appeared to share something unique that bound them together as a family unit. Dan, in comparison, despite having a strong connection with his mother, lacked this overarching sense of family and described his relationship with his family to be more like housemates living together, who ate dinner in different rooms.

The idea of having a sense of family goes some way towards capturing the complexity of family connectedness and the way some of the other more tangible gestures of connectedness can combine together to form this overarching sense of being connected as a family. It suggests that family connectedness is bigger than the sum of its parts, and may explain why some of the young people interviewed who were very confident that they felt connected to family could not always put their finger on exactly where this feeling of connection originated.

**Support.** Family support assisted young people's sense of family connectedness. It was defined by the efforts family members made to do things for them and young people's confidence that family would always be there for them. Young people also highlighted the

reciprocal nature of family support by recognising their own role in helping others in their family.

Knowing family were **always there** was significant for young people. Some young people described the physical ways family were there for them, such as being there when they got home from school or coming to their sporting events. Knowing family were there for them also reflected a deeper sense of trust in the support that would be available when needed, even if the young person had made a mistake. This confidence in the provision of future support was expressed by Mandy when she described her relationship with her brother: *“We’ve always been there for each other and...I really feel that if I couldn’t talk to anyone else he would always be there for me”*.

Consistent support over time was important in fostering connectedness. Georgia felt closest to her mum as she had been a constant in her life. Pets were also good providing consistent support: *“My cat is like my best friend... she’ll always just kind of sit next to you. She’s a bit like a dog, she follows you around and... she’s always there. If something bad happens I just cuddle her”* (Bec).

Parents’ attempts to support young people were valued by the participants even if they did not get it right all the time; just the effort itself seemed to let young people know they were cared for. Georgia articulated the value of family members **making an effort**: *“I think [my mum and step-dad] try their best and that’s what matters. They are trying, they are making an effort. I’m not sure if there is anything else they could do”*. Matching deeds to words was essential for parents to keep the trust of their young people. For Olivia, it was not enough for her Dad to say he wanted to see her; he needed to follow through on his words:

*My Dad actually making that follow through, that effort. Let's face it, for humans it's easier to believe through people's actions rather than what they say. It's kind of like show me that you care, show me that you want this, don't just tell me that you want this.*

Young people valued family who were **willing to do things for them** and had high expectations of the support that parents should provide. Young people felt their parents had greater support duties within the family than they did and were often reliant on them for transport, financial and material support. Georgia described being more connected to those family members who were willing to help her:

*Because [my mum and my sister] are willing to do things for me and when I ask they... at least give it a thought, whereas Dad instantly thinks of reasons why he can't do [something]. Whereas Mum and my sister will think of reasons why they can do something for me... For instance, if I wanted to be driven to netball, Mum would be like 'Yeah, I can do that, because I can fit that in', whereas Dad would be like 'No, catch a bus there'.*

Joel found it reassuring when his parents told him and his brothers they would pick them up from parties at any time to ensure they would get home safely.

Young people also recognised the support role they could play within the family, and the importance of **doing things for each other**. Some young people knew if they contributed more around the house their parents would be more relaxed. Alexandra commented on the different atmosphere at home when she and her brother helped out:

*If me and my brother aren't helping out then you know Mum will be in a bad mood, 'cause she has more to do. But if we're helping out then she doesn't have as much to*

*worry about. So she can have her down time and that puts her in a generally better mood... So just [us] helping out really helps to maintain a happy connection.*

Other young people talked about the support they provided to younger siblings and the way support could grow with a mentality of “*you help me, I’ll help you*” (Jack). The role of support in family connectedness appears in other themes discussed in the following chapters. Chapter 7 looks at changing support needs as young people develop and chapter 8 identifies the ways in which families can be supported by the wider community.

**Present and engaged in family life summary.** Engagement in family life was clearly valued by the young people interviewed and emerged as an important theme in family connectedness. All young people were clear about the importance of time and feeling comfortable to talk openly with their family. The qualitative insights from young people revealed the elements that make family time effective, highlighting the need to regularly spend time together and be mentally engaged in family life during that time. Feelings of connectedness were also well supported through routines such as eating dinner together and extended family time on holidays. Young people valued when their parents prioritised family and were consistently there for the young person. Connections at home were strengthened when young people supported other family members and contributed to the household.

As the factors that support family connectedness overlap and reinforce each other in the realities of everyday life, some of the connectedness factors discussed above are touched on again when discussing other elements of connectedness in the following chapters. Wider social factors that affect parents’ and young people’s ability to be physically and mentally engaged in family life are explored in chapter 8. The ongoing desire for time with family, and the challenges this poses to the developmental perspective of adolescence, are explored in chapter 9 when looking at the overall findings of the research and the broader implications

for families, schools and social workers. For now, the focus moves to the ways that having things in common can help family members relate to each other.

### 6.3 Global Theme: Having Things in Common

Having things in common was an important factor in family connectedness and is the next global theme explored. Young people identified commonalities which helped them to relate and connect with family, including: **common interests**, **shared experiences**, **shared values**, **gender**, **age** and **personality**. The thematic network map below displays the organising and basic themes for having things in common.

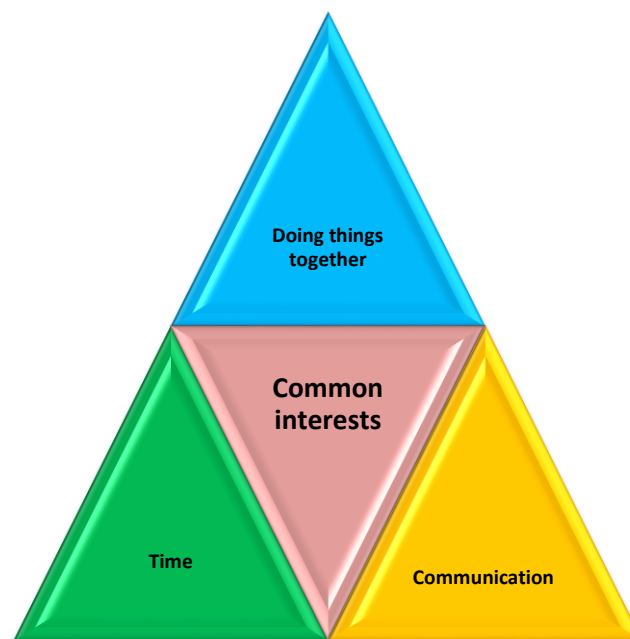


Figure 4: Having Things in Common

Common interests and shared experiences appeared to have the most profound impact on young people's sense of connection. The other four organising themes of personality,

gender, shared values and age all supported the young people's sense of connection to family, but are less or not changeable. In contrast, parents can make a conscious effort to become involved in young people's interests and to spend more time together creating shared experiences. Each of these organising themes and their supporting data are presented below.

**Common interests.** Almost all young people spoke about the role of common interests in helping them relate and feel connected to family. Sharing common interests was a key practical support for connectedness as it assisted some of the factors for connectedness discussed earlier, including time together, effective communication, and doing things together.



**Figure 5: Common Interests Triangle**

Sharing a common interest encouraged family members to **spend time together talking about and partaking in their shared interest**. Even if family members did not share a common interest, parents and young people could support their connections by

making a conscious effort to **understand or get involved in each other's interests**. Michael explained the ways common interests supported his family connectedness:

*The connectedness is really much better in one aspect of life, because my family is very musical and when we do music it's the most connected we usually get on a daily basis. I mean, our family loves music... like helping each other get better, I mean my Mum's helped me [with] tips for how to sing better and all that. Our family thinks music is important and... that's the most relaxed time I get on a daily basis.*

Many of the male participants spoke of bonding with their brothers or fathers over sport. For Caleb, common interests were the defining factor of his relationships with his brothers:

*I'm closest with my eldest brother than I am with my [middle brother]. That's just me and [my older brother] like football, [my middle brother] likes swimming. It's pretty much that simple.*

When young people had vastly different interests from other family members it often made it difficult to connect. Dan explained having a lot of trouble with his dad as “*he's all about maths and science and I love drawing and drama and stuff like that*”. Georgia sometimes felt left out as she did not share a common interest with her mum and step-dad like her sister did:

*I guess sometimes I feel kind of like I'm the outsider because they get along so much better with my sister and I'm kind of different in the family. I guess that is how I feel, that I'm a little bit different because, you know, I don't like the same things they do, and I don't do the same things that they do...So they kind of give me the impression that they like my sister better. But, you know, I'm pretty sure they love me the same.*

Young people gave many examples of the ways common interests led to talking and doing more with family. Examples included: going to football matches together; talking about favourite television shows; watching sport on television; driving to sport games together; or going to church as a family. For Isaac, a common interest in sport helped him talk with his father:

*So we can actually talk about something that we both know about. Because Dad being a fairly typical ex-army guy knows everything and he's always right. So sometimes it's hard to have a conversation with him or to tell him something, but if it's something along the lines of sport normally it's alright, [he] actually realises that I do know something, so that helps and then just in general 'cause normally I don't talk to Dad overly much.*

Some young people felt you could not expect others to like what you did, so you either shared interests or you did not. Other participants felt even when common interests did not naturally exist, connections could still be supported if parents made an effort to understand or get involved in their interests. Tim explained how his mum's efforts to understand his passions of cycling and football helped their connection:

*Probably do what Mum does... no matter what it is, just try and get in to what the person likes. The sort of things I like, they're not really for everyone... staying up [late] watching cycling can be a bit rough for people who don't understand... And initially Mum was probably like that, except she made an effort, not to say, no I don't like this, [instead she said,] I want to come and make sure I know this so I can have something with you. And so she put effort in and one trip coming back from Sydney she pretty much just set me free talking about cycling and football and so she knows a lot more and now she feels like she can join in some conversations and she can add*



*things. And I reckon that makes her feel a lot more connected to us, and us a lot more connected to her. I reckon that's probably the biggest thing that I can think of.*

Some young people also made an effort to get involved in their parents' interests. As Olivia explained:

*I think we weren't that close when I was really tiny... But when I was old enough to come and do his things that was cool. You know I learnt to sail a boat and we went sailing a couple of times and model trains and whatever and fishing. Fishing was interesting... Why did I enjoy it? I think of fishing, I'm like, what a dumb thing. I guess it was because it was time with [Dad]. And he was relaxed and chilling out and so that's always nice.*

For the young people in this research, shared interests with their family were one of the most practical and effective ways to build connections. Even when shared interests are not naturally occurring, with effort from parents or young people, they offer an important avenue for connection.

**Shared experiences.** Shared experiences were an important source of connection for the participants because of the common history they provided. This was clearly evident for Mandy, who felt closer to her mother because they shared more time and experiences together, than she did with her father who was often away for work.

*[Mum and I are] always living with each other 24/7, you know. So we're always together... 'Cause Mum and I are forced to live under the same roof we do connect a whole lot more and talk about a lot more things. When Dad comes home we're talking about something and Dad's like, 'What's this?' and we're just like, 'You don't*

*remember, you weren't there'. So a lot of the things are about that we're just always together.*

The most striking example of how important shared experiences were for feeling connected and providing a sense of belonging was shared by Emily when she described the ways her foster brother would try and feel included:

*If we're talking about something that happened before he came... so if we're talking about something that happened a couple of years ago, he'll say things like 'Oh yeah, that happened to me at my old house'. It's like he tries to get involved and connected into the conversation and it makes it really hard to know whether he's lying or telling the truth or whether he's just trying to feel part of things. I guess having things in common is really important and having experiences that you can talk about together, and joke about and laugh and things. And I guess that's what makes him feel isolated at times is because he hasn't been there and done those things. So it's pretty hard for him at times, so if we do lots of things with him and talk about things that have happened when he was there it makes him feel more connected and involved.*

A number of the participants spoke about the connecting value of just living together and “*all going through the same things*”. For others, having been through difficult times together allowed them to understand and connect through that common history. Difficult experiences often revealed the - sometimes hidden - support available within families. For young people, tough times in the family - such as a parent being unwell, or a relative dying - reinforced their sense of family connection. Key to these experiences was the way family came together to support each other. Elena described the way tough times impacted on her family's connections:

*In a way, bad things that have happened to my family have actually brought us closer together than what we were before... they've helped us understand each other more, 'cause if we hadn't had those bad experiences we wouldn't know what each other were like when we needed each other.*

For Mandy, the injury of a relative was the catalyst for her father to re-engage with the family:

*It's reminded Dad that work isn't everything. He has been reminded there is still real importance in family. And that's what Mum likes - that he's remembered that, 'Yep, we're here, you can talk to us, you can call us, it's not like you have to deal with this on your own'. So it has sort of brought Dad close to us.*

Difficult experiences also reminded young people that family members would not be around forever and they needed to make the most of the time they had together. Sharing difficult times also meant family members understood what was going on and could be a point of support and conversation for the young person. Only one young person reported that difficult experiences could also sometimes make it harder to connect. Given the interviews' focus on what helps connectedness, there may have been others who experienced negatives from difficult times but did not mention them in the context of the interview.

**Shared values.** Shared values provided an important avenue for young people to relate and connect to their family. Young people spoke about the role of **faith, culture, values and opinions** in supporting family connectedness. Sharing a fundamental way of thinking provided a strong basis for connecting. As Caleb explained:

*Christianity is the big thing, if you have a faith in Jesus it's the biggest thing in your life. So if you can share something which is so big in your life with other people, then you only need a couple of others things to line up for you to be really, really close.*

Other young people talked about how faith helped their family have the strength to work through things and get along or how sharing the same faith as their family supported them in their own faith journey. Aidan spoke about the common rules religion provided for his family, so they were all on the same page about what was right and wrong. Interestingly, Aidan also credited his religion with providing him answers to big questions about life, which resulted in a lesser need to talk things through with parents.

Shared values had an important impact on family connectedness. While young people generally had stronger relationships with those family members who shared similar values to them, they largely focused on the ways clashing values negatively impacted connections. Jacob explained how different values and lifestyle choices could impact connections:

*I don't really get along well with my other sister...and I'm pretty much the opposite of [both my sisters]. We can relate on a lot of things, but a lot of things we don't. Like they both smoke, but I'm firmly against that. There's been a lot of conflict in our house about their lifestyle choices...So we've had a lot of clashes on that.*

For Elena, despite having differences of opinions with both her parents, the contrasting ways her mother and father communicated these differences was crucial to their relationship. Elena was much closer to her mum – who listened to her point of view – than her father, who she felt was completely uninterested in others' viewpoints. Her experiences show how the impact of differing perspectives on connectedness can be mediated if they are managed in a way that is respectful of others' views.

A strong sense of shared culture could also support family connectedness. For some in the present study, the existence of a shared language other than English provided an obvious point of similarity and connection. For others, their cultural heritage prioritised family or they had numerous celebrations with extended family around cultural events. Michael, however, found it difficult to manage the different cultural values of home and school:

*To be honest, as a family as a whole, I'm not very close really. I mean I feel disconnected to everyone. Because I feel [there are] cultural boundaries... because I'm getting values from school that are different to what... my family does.*

These different cultural expectations could also lead to conflict at home.

*My Mum, me and her argue a lot... over stupid things...Because she's from [overseas], like she came from a boat to Australia. She has some cultural differences in rules and how life is meant to be lived and sometimes...her point of view and opinions are based off her cultural heritage. And yeah, that's why we have some misunderstandings sometimes. (Michael)*

**Age.** Young people felt **age gaps to siblings** and **generational differences** with parents and grandparents could affect their connectedness. Many young people felt most connected to the siblings who were closest in age to them, as they often did more together, and were going through similar age related experiences, interests and changes. Being close in age created common points of connection, but in some cases young people had better relationships with older siblings when their personalities and interests were more similar. Some young people felt a sense of responsibility for their younger siblings. Age gaps between siblings, however, generally became less significant as they got older:

*I guess because we're all in the same stage of our lives. So before... when [my older sister] was a teenager, obviously me and [my younger sister] were going to be close cause we're like 2 years apart so we're going to be the same. But now that we're all in the same stage of our life then obviously we can relate more to each other. (Elena)*

Being close in age was only one component of the age dynamic. Young people identified how generational differences could both help and hinder their connections. Many young people felt close to their grandparents – they appreciated their years of wisdom, and enjoyed hearing about life experiences different from their own. Parents' life experience and ability to help young people solve problems was also valued:

*My mum just gives really good advice and she's got that life thing going on. So it's just like, okay well she's got the experience, may as well listen to her, 'cause she seems pretty right all the time. (Lily)*

Young people also identified how generational differences could interfere with their family connections. Many young people felt their parents were out of touch with their lives:

*Both my parents are in their 50s and they tend to... do a lot of things how they think it should be done... I think a lot of parents, especially older parents in general, have to kind of realise that things have changed. I mean they have to still have some authority over everything but I think they have to realise that things are slightly different now [in] good and bad ways... there's not that complete authority from a parent anymore, everything is a lot more loose now. (Isaac)*

**Gender.** Although gender as a point of connection was not prominent throughout the interviews, for some young people, the gender of family members played an important role in their connectedness. In these cases, young people could more easily relate to their parent of

the same gender because they often shared common interests and understood the challenges of being a young man or young women. One young person explained how she and her mum liked to sit and chat or go shopping, whereas her brother liked to kick a football with her dad.

A few female participants valued the male perspectives offered by their brothers, with whom they felt they could speak frankly, without the worry of hurting their feelings. Andrew hypothesised that the different support his parents provided may be a product of gender differences:

*If I want to sit with one of them and have a chat, it would be Dad. So Mum's sort of more the comforter and Dad's who I'm more comfortable talking to. I'm not sure whether that is gender based, feel[ing] more relatable to Dad because he's a man as well, and Mum's sort of the mother figure who just cares for me when I need it.*

In many cases young people spent more time with and felt closer to their mothers, largely because they had fewer work demands compared to fathers. In all six cases in which young people lived with only one biological parent, they lived with their mother.

**Personality.** Sharing **similar personality** traits with family members and enjoying each other's company was an important element of connectedness. As Dan explained, "*Me and my mum get along really well cause we have similar personalities, very talkative, get along with people very well*". In contrast, clashing personalities made it difficult to connect:

*[My sister and I] get on each other's nerves a bit 'cause I'll be really open and confident and then she'll be shy and then bottle things in. And I'll just tell the problem if I have one and then she'll keep it bottled up till it just snaps....we're just different people and it's a bit hard to find similarities. (Lily)*

The strength of family bonds could override clashing personalities. Olivia described the ways in which her mum was vastly different from her two uncles and the ways they drove her mum ‘nuts’, but went on to explain, *“They’re still close and would still help each other out”*.

Young people generally found it easier to connect with family members who were approachable and nice, and found it difficult when family members had poor **emotional regulation** and were quick to anger. They were more likely to seek support from calmer, less reactive parents. Aidan chose to keep some things from his dad because of his tendency to be hot-headed, while Cassie found it difficult to open up because she often received angry responses from her mum and her mum’s boyfriend.

**Having things in common summary.** The value of having things in common appeared strongly throughout the interviews, emphasising its role in helping family members relate to each other and build strong connections. The diversity of factors young people discussed, including interests, experiences, values, age, gender, and personality, exemplifies the great variety of ways in which family members can relate to each other. Even though characteristics such as age, gender and personality are quite fixed, there are a number of practical pathways through which connections can be strengthened. Showing interest in each other’s hobbies offered an effective means to build stronger connections, and supporting each other in difficult times exposed the care available within families.

## 6.4 Chapter Summary

Taken together, the two global themes reviewed in this chapter – **being present and engaged in family life** and **having things in common** – show clearly that it is often the mundane aspects of day-to-day life that are essential to establishing a sense of family connectedness. These simple interactions, however, cannot be taken for granted; building and sustaining connectedness requires a deliberate effort by family members. The essential



building blocks of connectedness include developing effective and sensitive means of communication with other family members, sharing interests that both promote time together and provide a focus for interaction, and, most importantly, the commitment of all members to fully engage in and prioritise time spent with family.

At the same time, the young people's comments show the considerable diversity in the factors contributing to connectedness. While shared values or cultural background may provide an important foundation, in other cases, shared experiences or the simple willingness of family members to demonstrate an interest in what each other is doing may be a significant catalyst. Acknowledging that diversity and identifying the factors most important to developing and sustaining that connectedness in the individual family context are essential for connectedness interventions to be effective.

Even when those opportunities to be together exist, the strength of family connectedness depends on the quality of interactions. Critical to this are both how young people feel valued within the family context, and how that connectedness is sustained over time. Those dimensions of effectiveness – **feeling valued** and **connections over time** – are the focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter 7: Valuing Young People and Connecting Over Time

### 7.1 Introducing the Chapter

Listening to the voices of young people provided important insights not only into the different ways in which family connectedness can be developed and sustained, but also highlighted the importance of young people being accepted and treated as competent social actors. At the same time, families need to be sensitive to the changing support needs of young people and their desire for greater independence as they age. Balancing those two imperatives is not an easy exercise.

This chapter turns attention to these critical aspects of connectedness through its analysis of the next two global themes – **feeling valued** and **connections over time**. As in the previous chapter, the two global themes are addressed sequentially. At the beginning of each global theme discussion, a thematic network map is used to show the links between the basic themes (grounded in participant language), the organising themes (which draw together similar ideas), and the overarching global theme (which captures the essence of the data and is a key factor for family connectedness). The thematic network maps are presented in Figures 6 and 7. The organising and basic themes are then explored in more detail to provide an in-depth understanding of what these factors look like and how they play out within individual families.

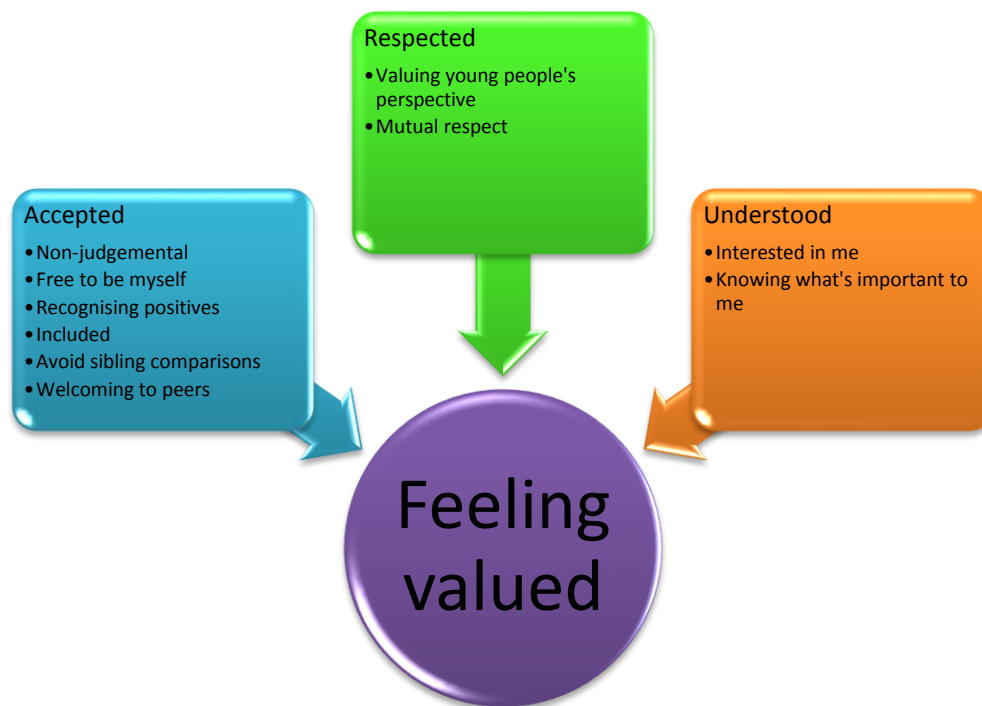
Both themes discussed in this chapter focus on interpersonal interactions within the micro family system, looking more specifically at young people's positioning within the family and extending the lens to consider how these connections have changed over time.

## 7.2 Global Theme: Feeling Valued

Feeling valued was an important aspect of family connectedness for young people. This included feeling they were an important part of the family and having their individuality and ideas respected. In particular, young people spoke about their desire to be **accepted**, **respected**, and **understood** by family. The experiences and language of the young people interviewed are particularly important for understanding these fairly abstract ideas, what they look like to young people, and how they can be achieved within families. Young people articulated their desire to be seen of value, competent and consulted on things that affect them and their family. This desire is pertinent in the context of the childhood studies approach to the research which critiques the idea that children are less competent than adults and values young people's views and perspectives on par with adult insights (James & James, 2008).

Key to this global theme is the need to recognise the individual worth of each young person. The data focus on the individual support and feedback young people need to feel valued as an important member of the family. See Figure 6 for the thematic network map displaying the global, organising and basic themes.

**Accepted.** Young people wanted to be accepted by their family. As Lily explained: *"Just make sure that everyone knows that they're loved and that they're special... the way that they are. 'Cause if your family can't love you for you who are then who can"*. Feeling accepted required family to be **non-judgemental**, **welcoming to peers**, and to **avoid sibling comparisons**. Young people also needed to have their **positives recognised**, feel **included**, be **free to be themselves** and follow their interests.



**Figure 6: Feeling Valued**

Lily further explained the wellbeing benefits of being accepted for who you are by family:

*If you grow up in a nice loving environment... it really helps that you've got this love nest around you. It just makes you into a better person and you [are] just happy and healthy within yourself... 'cause you've got this confidence that your family gives you, saying how much they love you and then you're like 'okay I'm loved I can go out into the world feeling loved right now' and feel good about [myself]'.*

Young people felt more connected to, and were more able to be open with, family members who did not judge them. Sam explained his greater connection to his aunt as a result of her non-judgemental responses:

*Probably out of everyone [I'm most connected to] my auntie.... I can tell her anything to do with my friends, my girlfriend or problems with my mum and step-dad. And she doesn't judge or anything, she helps you.*

When family members judged young people's decisions, interests or peers, young people's sense of connectedness could be negatively affected. Michael wanted his family to be less judgemental:

*You think they are going to judge you, which they do actually in my family. But if they could understand and be more open with each other and not judge each other, then that would be good. That's the main problem with my family.*

Judgements from parents were particularly hurtful to young people because their opinions were so valued by young people. As Cassie explained, “[Mum’s] opinion means a lot to me and I don’t think she realises just how much it actually means”. It is important for parents to recognise the power of their comments and actions in the lives of young people.

This was further supported by Michael’s experiences:

*If [they] do something wrong don’t judge [young people] so much that [they] hate [themselves] about it. Like when I argue with Mum, it’s like I have a sense of self-loathing, because she always makes me feel bad about small things [but my brother and grandma] actually forgive [me].*

Feeling free and comfortable to be themselves was also important for young people to feel accepted by their family. Matt valued the confidence his family gave him by accepting him unconditionally:

*I can feel very open with them and honest with them and know that they’ll accept me, no matter what mistakes I make, no matter what I do wrong and I guess I feel they’re very understanding in that way. I can also just really feel free to be myself around them, I guess they basically taught me that I can be myself around others as well.*

For two participants who had generally negative interactions with their parents, having their parents recognise their achievements was essential to help them feel some level of connection. While this recognition was only discussed by two young people, it was crucial for them as one of the only factors that promoted their connectedness. The other young people, who had more consistent feelings of connectedness to their family, may have taken such positive feedback for granted. The fact that recognising positives was such an important factor for two young people but not mentioned by the other participants in the study demonstrates how the relative importance of connectedness factors may change depending on family dynamics.

Emily highlighted the importance of being included in family activities when she explained how her foster brother felt a greater sense of belonging and acceptance the more he was included in family activities. It appeared that shared experiences with the family created a shared history and made it easier for her foster brother to participate in family conversation. There was also value in just inviting young people to participate in family outings as this was a clear sign that others wanted to be around them:

*Just wanting to be with me and sometimes they will go places without me and I kind of want the invitation even if I don't want to go. I just want to [feel] like they want me to be there. (Georgia)*

Young people struggled to feel accepted for who they are when parents compared them unfavourably to their siblings. Georgia explained the difficulties of being compared to her sister:

*Sometimes they do compare me to my sister and that's what really affects me when they want me to be like her but I'm someone totally different. And they'll say things*

*like 'oh [your sister] never did that'. And I'm like, 'well I'm not her'. And it gives me pressure to be like her but I don't really want to be. I don't think it is worth it to be exactly like my sister, just to be connected to my family. I want to be my own person.*

Angus captured an important distinction about treating siblings equally but also as unique individuals. He explained that while it was important to provide equal affection and attention to siblings, this did not mean everyone had to be treated exactly the same way. Sibling favouritism could have a negative impact on family connectedness even for the young person who received favouritism. Elena, who was favoured by her father, resented his unequal treatment of her and her sisters, and felt less connected to him as a result.

The final aspect of young people feeling accepted was when their family was welcoming of their friends, girlfriends and boyfriends. These peer relationships were obviously important to young people and when their peers were welcomed and accepted by family, this appeared to be further sign of accepting the young person and their choices. In addition, getting to know young people's friends allowed parents to be more involved in the young person's life and young people felt more comfortable bringing their friends home.

**Respected.** Respect was a significant element for young people to feel valued by their family. Young people wanted to be consulted, listened to and have their perspectives make an impact, and their sense of family connectedness was strengthened when their **perspectives were valued**. Elena explained the importance of listening to young people's ideas:

*It's important before you say anything just to listen to what someone else has to say first. Because often the way that a young person talks and views things can be different to the way an adult would be thinking.*

Bec suggested that parents might sometimes think the young person feels more connected to family than they actually do: *“From [a] parent’s perspective, sometimes they think they are super close to their child, when in fact the child is like, ‘oh well, I don’t think I’m close to my parents at all’”*. While it was unclear whether Bec was drawing on her own experiences or talking about young people more generally, it does indicate a need for parents to avoid making assumptions about their child's sense of connectedness.

Young people also appreciated when parents were flexible enough to change their viewpoints as a result of listening to the young person. As Dan said, *“that sort of open mindedness would really go a long way”*. One young person lamented that his parents viewed the issues in his life as more trivial than the issues they faced as adults. He felt parents need to appreciate that the issues in young people’s lives are real and important for them. Recognising that young people are more mature and capable than children was also identified as an important factor for young people to feel respected, as Jacob expressed: *“My mum respects me as a young man... and I think a lot of parents... treat their kids as kids, they don’t really treat them as 16 year olds and young men”*.

Connections often improved when parents respected young people’s viewpoints and treated them as capable decision-makers. Young people wanted to be trusted with decisions about school subject and career choices, and social choices, such as parties and going out at night. Young people became frustrated when their parents did not trust their decision-making. Dan expressed his frustration when his father did not respect his choices around elective subject choices at school: *“It just makes me feel a bit distrusted, like [Dad] doesn’t trust that I’ll make a good decision. And a bit disrespected as well”*; he felt more connected to his parents when they trusted his decision-making and ability to make an educated choice on his own.



One participant provided an example of how young people may assume that adults do not respect their perspective, when she told the researcher: *“I’m like heaps younger than you, so you probably don’t think that’s legit”*. Her comment provides an important insight into how young people are seen and treated in society and is explored more in chapter 9 when considering the implications of the present study. Young people also felt respected when parents kept them up to date on information affecting the family:

*That’s another thing, they usually tell us what’s going on... we’re not really kept in the dark about stuff. If there’s something that’s going on they tell us about it... I guess it’s a good thing ‘cause it means I don’t have to be wondering whether they’re keeping secrets from us. (Emily)*

Respect within families was not just about parents respecting young people. **Mutual respect** was needed, with young people also respecting their parents for effective family connections. Sam reported that his stepfather got very upset when he and his brother were disrespectful to him. Jacob’s sense of family connectedness was impacted by the way his sisters treated his mum:

*I think for the benefit for us as a family my sisters should show much more respect and also responsibility towards my mum... I do try my best to have a relationship with my mum and my dad which I don’t think the girls try to do. That’s a big issue for our family, if we were to be one family it has to involve the girls and my mum.*

**Understood.** Feeling valued by family was also about feeling understood for who they are. As Lily said: *“You’ve got to try and understand who they are and what’s happening for them today”*. Young people wanted family to be **interested in them** and **know what was important to them**. Young people’s desire to be understood is closely related to, but extends

beyond, the benefit of parents paying attention to young people's interests discussed in the previous chapter. The idea presented here extends the importance of shared interests and captures a need to value the whole young person and understand the young person as an individual, not just their interest in a particular sport or hobby.

Family members showed interest in young people through regular visits, being there for birthdays, and asking questions to show an interest in what was happening in their life. Despite a difficult relationship with his father, Isaac felt his father showed care for him by the interest he showed in his sport:

*Dad's very involved in my [sport]. I know a lot of parents just... send their kid off to do the sport [and] pick them up after training... A lot of parents aren't really into the sport [but] it's nice that Dad is...I think it's nice [Mum and Dad] both tend to get involved in my life a fair bit, it's good but other times it does get a bit annoying. But I mean you get some kids with parents who actually don't care about them almost. Yeah that's nice. (Isaac)*

In contrast, the lack of interest two participants felt from their fathers, who lived interstate or overseas, damaged their sense of connection:

*There isn't that weekly phone call...and when he is up here [in town] doing work, he still may not phone me or have dinner with me or anything and that just puts instant disconnection right there. (Olivia)*

For the young people in this study, some parental behaviours had the contradictory impact of annoying them and also letting them know their parents cared. Caleb explained the way questions from his mum after school helped him know she cared:

*When you come home and Mum will ask you a question, that always helps I find.*

*Sometimes it can be a bit frustrating if they ask a trillion questions, but I like when they take an interest because that means that they care.*

A key aspect of feeling understood was having family members who knew what was important to the young person. This was partly about showing interest in what was happening in each other's lives through regular conversations; as Joel explained, "*We'll talk about what I'm doing, we'll talk about what's happening in everyone's worlds*". Young people spoke about needing to know the young person really well, being able to tell when something was wrong, and being generally aware of how they were going. Dan advised parents to "*Make sure you're on the ball with everything that's going on... try not to lose track of anything*". Remembering what was happening in young people's lives and what was important to them over time, was also important for feeling understood, cared for and connected:

*My aunt made me feel connected when... she will do the birthday/Christmas call, but not just like 'Oh, I've got to go' but actually get in to a discussion of – 'How was that holiday? Where'd you go? What else is going on? How's that friend? I remember you had them over last time' – and I'm like, 'That was 3 months ago, wow'. Just that memory recall of stuff that was going on that comes in to that phone call, this isn't just a 'Happy Birthday' cause it's your birthday... she actually really cares and keeps track of and follows my life and where I am up to... it got stored in that Olivia file for next time. (Olivia)*

This kind of interest and knowledge about the young person over time is likely to be an outcome of being present and engaged in family life, as discussed in the previous chapter.

When discussing the research results with the young persons' reference group (now aged 17 and 18), they felt young people needed to be given honest and constructive feedback from their parents and earn their parents' respect, rather than being told that they are great at everything. They explained that while they can now see the benefits of not being told they are great all the time, at 15 and 16 they would have been more dependent on and needed the support from family more. They described middle adolescence as an awkward stage with less certainty around your friends and your own identity.

**Feeling valued summary.** Being treated as a valuable member of their family was clearly an important component of young people feeling connected. The interview responses from young people demonstrated their need to feel accepted, respected and understood by family, and the various ways family members could help young people feel they were an important member of the family. Prominent in their responses was young people's need to feel accepted for who they were and to not be judged. They wanted their family to value, respect, understand and show interest in them. This global theme provides the most insight into the individual attention needed within families and the importance of uniquely recognising, accepting and valuing each young person. While some young people in the study complained about parents asking too many questions, in general they found parents' interests in their lives comforting and a sign of care. The positives of parents showing close interest in their lives outweighed any negatives.

Judgements as to how young people are able to feel accepted, respected and understood within the family context need to recognise that family interactions will evolve as young people age. Accordingly, the focus now moves to consider how family connections develop and change over time. The next global theme - **connections over time** - explores the

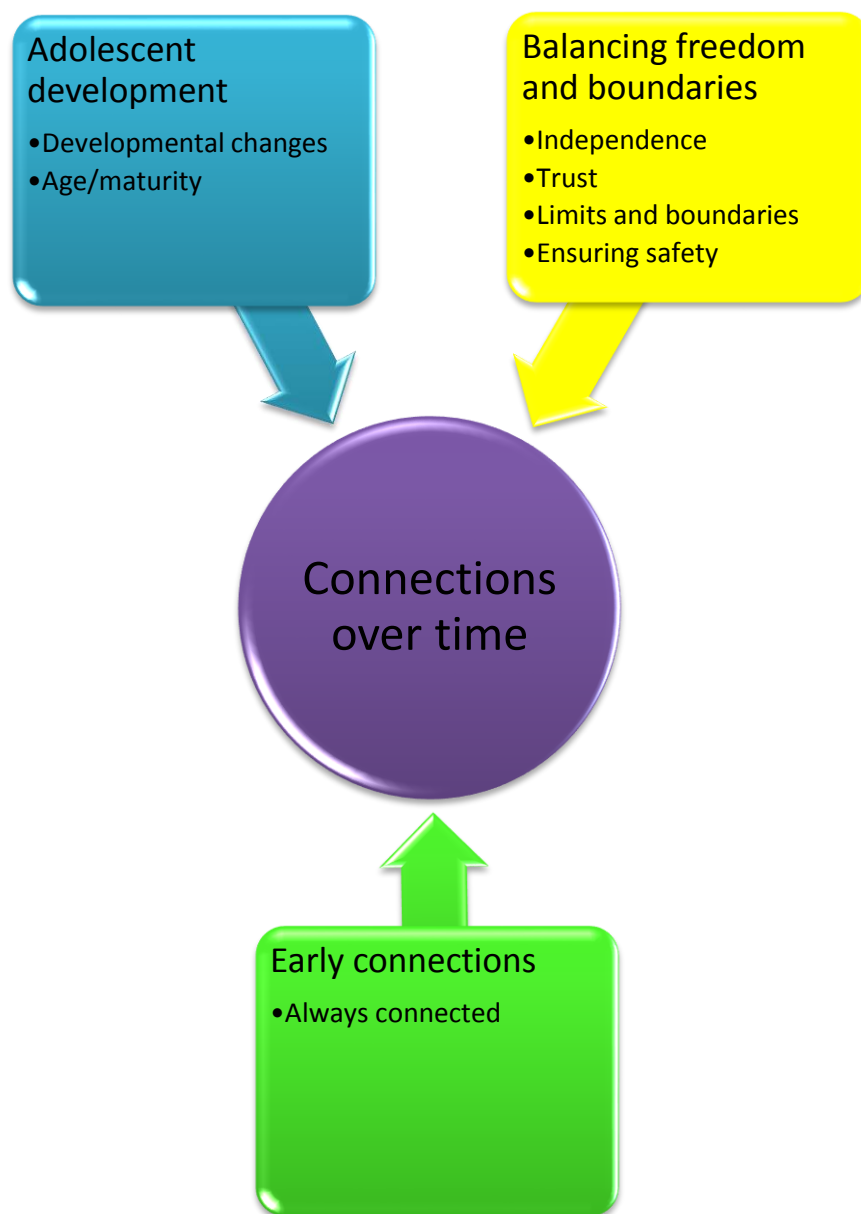
impact of connections prior to adolescence and the ways that young people's development can affect family connectedness.

### 7.3 Global Theme: Connections Over Time

*I think a connection has to be built over time. I don't think you can go from just not being connected to, say a year, [later] and your family's like this [Elena claps her hands together to indicate closeness].*

The global themes discussed thus far have largely focused on the factors that assist young people to feel connected to family in the here and now. Also emerging from the interviews was the way many of the factors supporting young people's sense of family connectedness in the present had been built over the long term. The groundwork for family connections had been laid long before adolescence. This was supported by some of the participants who struggled to articulate exactly why they felt connected to family; for them it had been that way for as long as they could remember.

The importance of creating positive family connections from an early age and the ways in which family connections shift as a result of young people's development and growing maturity during adolescence is explored in this next global theme - connections over time. Participants discussed the importance of **early connections**, the impact of **adolescent development** and the need to balance **freedom and boundaries** as they got older. The thematic network map (see Figure 7) displays the organising and basic themes for connections over time.



**Figure 7: Connections Over Time**

Early connections look at the foundations that assist positive connections during adolescence, while adolescent development and balancing freedom and boundaries concentrate on what is happening during the adolescent years.

**Early connections.** Clearly emerging from the interviews was how building connections *before* adolescence can help connectedness *during* adolescence. Many young people spoke of having **always been connected** - much of what helped them feel connected

to their family had occurred for as long as they could remember. As Tim articulated: *"My first memory is pretty much experiences like everyone in the family [being] around and so I suppose it's built up over time"*.

For most young people, positive relationships and feeling close as a family had been consistent over time:

*I think I've always been close, we're always open to things we want to talk about. So I think it hasn't been like an incident that's changed that, I think it's been like that all the way through. (Scott)*

Important connectedness factors, such as doing things together, being there for each other and talking about things, had often occurred from a very young age:

*It's nice and it always has been. [My grandparents] moved down to Canberra shortly after I was born and have always looked after me. I've always stayed at their house in the holidays, we have always gone and done things. I used to go and do lawn bowls with them and sewing with Nan. There would always be that opportunity for me to jump straight into their hobbies. (Olivia)*

Andrew explained how the benefits of his parents talking to him from an early age and showing interest in how his day went had built up over time, and he now felt confident to talk to them about school and friends.

Having known each other for a long time was also important for feeling connected. This was evident when Emily reflected on why she didn't feel as connected to her foster brother as the siblings she had grown up with. Lily further supported this idea when she explained: *"I get along well with my cousins because I've grown up with them and we've always been together"*. One young person, who had not seen his father since he was two but

had lived with his step father for many years, considered his oldest brother to be his most influential father figure because he had played the greatest and most consistent role in raising him over time.

Making connections long before adolescence was important in providing young people with a sense of security and allowed connections to build over time. Andrew captured its significance:

*It's always important to start young, 'cause if you start late, it's not going to have as much of an effect as if you were to start at say, preschool or kindergarten, cause you can build that relationship up into high school. (Andrew)*

While early relationships clearly influenced family connectedness during adolescence, these connections adapted as young people aged.

**Adolescent development.** Young people recognised how their **developmental changes** and growing **age and maturity** could impact the ways in which their family connected. Young people identified aspects of their development that both tested and strengthened their sense of family connectedness. Increased moodiness and angst was one factor some young people attributed to being a teenager which they felt could affect family relationships:

*We used to be all close before high school, but high school just brought on teen angst in me and then everyone stopped being really close and loving. It's still loving but not as loving as I remember. My mum often says to me, 'Whatever happened to you? You used to be a loving kid and nice but ever since high school a lot of arguing'.*  
(Michael)



Other participants, however, maintained positive relationships with their family throughout adolescence and did not report any increased moodiness. When Sophie referred to her sister as a “*really big teenager*” she revealed a stereotype of teenagers as moody and fixated on their phones and social life. Sophie saw her sister as fitting a stereotype that she and her brother did not, despite being very similar in age.

The manner in which parents responded to young people’s development was crucial to how these changes affected family connectedness. Cassie discussed the tension that could develop with parents as a result of growing up:

*I had a pretty good connection with my dad but with my mum it’s a bit different and it’s changed, just spilt further and further apart... I think it’s probably ‘cause I’m pulling away a bit because I’m trying to grow up and she’s trying to pull me back and I’m just like, ‘no’.*

Cassie maintained a positive perception of her father across adolescence despite a history of domestic violence and having limited or no contact with him for many years.

Some young people felt their sense of family connectedness at 15 or 16 had improved compared to when they were 13 or 14, when they had felt more negatively about family relationships and wanted to distance themselves from family:

*I get along pretty much with everyone really well. I remember in year eight I was like, ‘Oh, I hate my family’ kind of thing. But now I don’t have problems like that I guess...it was my problem, not theirs I think. (Jack)*

Other participants reported increased potential for sibling tension during adolescence, but these relationships had often settled and improved by the time they were 15 or 16:

*With my brother, we were pretty close when we were little, up to when I was 6 maybe. Then he got in to high school and didn't want to be with his little sister. Didn't want his little sister being friends with his friends... and then we got really antsy with each other, but then he's grown up and I've grown up and now we are pretty close again.*  
(Olivia)

One element that appeared very clearly throughout interviews was the ongoing importance of connections to parents throughout adolescence. Cassie explained how parents can underestimate their own significance: *"I guess parents don't really realise just how much kids actually look up to them and feel the need to have someone there"*. Young people's support needs changed as they developed; for many participants, the way connectedness was achieved altered as they got older, but the level of connectedness remained consistent. Bec noted the shift from physical support as a young child to greater mental and emotional support in adolescence:

*I think when you are younger you feel more connected in a way as you are not so independent and you need more things to be done for you... You feel more close when you are younger but more maturely close when you are older, like mentally or whatever, but you don't feel as physically close.*

Other young people identified the need to be treated differently now that they were young men or women, no longer children. Many participants felt their growing maturity and the greater complexity of issues with which they were dealing could lead to deeper connections in the family. For some, growing up helped them understand and better relate to their parents. Aidan predicted that family connections would become even more important in the next few years, with important milestones such as learning to drive, starting work and completing his final 2 years of school.

Young people could more easily talk to their parents about more sophisticated topics as they became more educated. As they got older, young people often found it easier to relate to their siblings because of the increased likelihood of having been through similar experiences, which diminished the significance of any age gaps. Participants felt they contributed to the household more readily as they aged and that this also assisted family connectedness.

An important aspect as young people got older was their desire for greater independence, and how this was balanced with their ongoing need for support and connectedness. The need to balance freedom and boundaries as young people age formed an organising theme.

**Balancing freedoms and boundaries.** An increasing desire for independence and the ways in which this was negotiated with their parents was an important aspect of family connectedness for the participants as they got older. Young people talked about their desire for **independence**, the importance of **trust**, the need for appropriate **limits and boundaries**, and the care they saw in their parents' efforts to **ensure their safety**. The need to balance autonomy and connectedness emerged clearly from the interviews, and young people explained how allowing them independence could increase their feelings of family connectedness.

Young people clearly desired and valued the freedom to act and make decisions independently. Being given privacy at home and the freedom to make their own mistakes were important aspects of independence for young people. Dan explained how independence in decision-making helped him feel connected to family:

*I think our parents are getting that we can make decision for ourselves. We know what we're talking about, we've got enough experience to make an educated decision as opposed to being told what to do... Yep [that helps me feel more connected], knowing that they know where I am at and what I'm doing.*

A lack of independence could lead to tensions with parents and to young people having a bad attitude at home, or rebelling against strict boundaries as is evidenced in the following comment by Dan:

*I've had a lot of trouble with Dad recently, cause he's really you know military drill and do what I say... and I don't respond to that very well. He's sort of authoritarian... and I like making my own decisions.*

Some young people wanted more freedom and wished their parents could see things from their point of view. Emily described her desire to take some risks:

*Being able to take more risks, not too many, nothing that's going to be really obviously dangerous like walking down the streets of Queanbeyan at night or something stupid... I feel like if your mum's scared of something you're not allowed to do it... Remembering that I'm not the same as her, like I don't have the same fears as her, and that can be a bit annoying at times if she's holding me back from doing things because she's scared of them or she's scared that something's going to happen. But just having the freedom to do more things, not try new things - she lets me do that a lot - but just doing things that potentially could be harmful maybe have a little risk factor.*

Emily's experiences demonstrate how parents and young people can have different ideas about appropriate levels of independence and acceptable risks.

The desire for independence also appeared to distinguish young people from children. Jacob felt the freedom he was given helped his connections, and advised other parents to do the same:

*My parents giving me freedom... we get along very well because of that. And there is no friction because there is a mutual respect. My mum respects me as a young man... I try to be and I'm not just a kid anymore, I'm a 16 year old. I think a lot of parents do that... they treat their kids as kids, they don't really treat them as 16 year olds and young men. They forget that in 2 years there is no more obligation towards your parents and that's a very rude awakening for the kids when suddenly all the shackles are [off]... I think it's good to give them a taste of responsibility and independence before [then]... it's almost like they are trying to hold on before the kids are off, they try to really spend time with them and like love, them so much, love them to death before they are adults. And I reckon that's the wrong way to go about it.*

Jacob also identified the practical realities of living between two households and how choosing to go between his parents' houses as he wished naturally led to greater independence. He also felt this greater independence required more responsibility from him to manage the freedom – *"I've got to respect that they've given me this freedom and that puts it back on me to be more of a man and not be so childish and exploit it"*. Jack also reported how having more lenient parents placed greater responsibility on him to do the right thing, and that, as a result, he was more inclined to talk openly with his parents and involve them in his life.

Young people reported a need to balance individual time with family time, seeing both as important. Olivia felt being too connected to family could hinder opportunities for learning:

*I'm so connected with [them], I don't know what else you could do to make it more connected and whether being any more connected would be beneficial. Sometimes, if you are too connected you're too in-tune and then there isn't that base for learning... It's good to have issues that you have to work through, and it's good to have them in families because you are always going to have family.*

Many young people viewed being granted independence as evidence of their parents' trust in them. Being trusted by their parents with important information and relied on to make decisions was important for young people's sense of family connectedness. Although young people could provide examples of feeling trusted by their parents, some of the participants struggled to articulate what trust looked like for their family. The examples shared below help to create a more tangible idea of what trust looks like in families. Young people felt trusted when they were given important information:

*I guess [my parents telling me what's going on] shows they trust me and that is really helpful... It just makes me feel they think I'm responsible enough to be able to handle the information they're giving me. (Emily)*

Trusting young people's reasoning was also important:

*At least have a conversation about decisions they're making. Like choosing electives going in to a new year, instead of going, 'Yes you can do this, no you can't do that' having a conversation, you know, trusting that they have reasoning. (Dan)*

Other participants valued when parents listened to their point of view and trusted their explanation when, for example, they got in to trouble at school. Jack talked about trust, independence and allowing young people to do things:

*Trusting them to make their own decisions. 'Cause really we all want to be relatively independent. Not fully, like I couldn't live by myself now or anything, it would get boring and lonely. But you have to trust that they'll make the right decision and if they don't you will find out anyway, so you can punish them once you find out if you have a problem with it... Within reason, let them do whatever they want, like clearly if I'm like, 'Oh, I'm going cliff diving or something' they can question it a little bit. But if it's something like, 'Oh, can I go to this person's house', like, why not? And I think that is the [right] attitude, like 'Why wouldn't you be allowed to? You haven't done anything that we know about'. (Jack)*

Jack further advocated for parents to trust young people when he clarified that they were unlikely to do something stupid if they were given freedom and privacy as most people he knew were not “*purposely going to do something that will hurt them*”.

Allowing young people some privacy and not monitoring them too closely were also ways to show trust:

*Dad doesn't always come in and be like, 'What are you doing?'... he trusts that I won't do anything wrong, which is like giving you privacy. If you trust someone you're not going to have to be checking up on them all the time... I can go to my room and do whatever I want and then he might come and [say], 'Dinner's ready', it doesn't have to be like, 'What are you doing? Why?'... I'll fill them in on anything that is happening anyway and I think he knows that... and I think that's why they trust me because I'm open anyway. I tell them what's going on and they recognise that. (Jack)*

Other young people expressed frustration when parents acted in a way that made them feel distrusted, such as parents checking the young person's Facebook page without permission or not allowing them to go to a friend's place. Parents could also make sure young people knew they were trusted by verbalising the trust they had in them.

The value and presence of trust could also become more evident when it was rebuilt after being broken. Alexandra explained her new respect for her mother's trust once she had regained it:

*I did something stupid [with the trust I'd been given, and] I kind of just realised that when I had her trust back I wasn't going to break it. And so now, you know, if I go to a party or something, then I'm good, I'm not going to do anything stupid like whatever everyone else is doing and she gets that, like she knows that, she trusts me.*  
(Alexandra)

When young people broke their parents' trust it could provide an opportunity to improve family connectedness in the long term, by defining limits and strengthening the young person's understanding of trust. Young people also talked about being given some "leash" to learn how to manage situations on their own.

For other young people, their parents trusted that they would do the right thing even if a situation got out of hand, and that they would not take too many risks. The difficulties of finding the right level of trust and working out which activities parents should question, and which are appropriate for young people to handle, were reflected in many interviews. Young people knew there would be limits on them, but generally felt parents should be more lenient. Finding a perfect medium of trust and limits that suited young people and their parents was



difficult. Parents could mitigate the frustrations of boundaries for young people by discussing these limits with them and listening to their point of view.

While young people valued parental leniency and accommodation of mistakes, many also appreciated or understood the need for some boundaries:

*We like the idea of having freedoms but then if you have complete freedom... No one really wants to be the guy who has all the parties... you get into that lifestyle if your parents don't take that much care of you... I think try and find a happy medium between giving teenagers complete freedom and not just completely ignoring them.*  
(Isaac)

Boundaries also provided young people with structure in their lives, which Emily felt gave her freedom in other ways:

*[Boundaries] give it structure, which I think is good. It's always been pretty structured but also pretty flexible at home and it means I know what I need to be doing but I can also have freedom to do other things.*

Despite this appreciation of some limits, young people could also become frustrated when they felt the boundaries were too tight. Participants found it difficult to explain what the ideal balance of freedom and boundaries might look like. One young person explained it would probably be different for everyone, and advised families might have to “figure it out as they went along”. Attempts to explain excessive freedom ranged from partying every night to going cliff diving.

Despite this difficulty in articulating where appropriate boundaries lay, discussing limits, understanding young people would make mistakes, and calmly talking things through when mistakes were made, were all important aspects of managing boundaries. Angus

explained he would stop listening to his parents if they were angry, but could learn from calm discussions and reflecting on what was wrong with his behaviour. Young people were more likely to be open with parents who trusted them, gave them space and privacy, and responded calmly when they made mistakes. Explaining what young people had done wrong helped them understand why they were in trouble and allowed them to improve their behaviour in the future. Importantly, participants did not think they should avoid consequences completely if they made a mistake.

Boundaries and discipline were often more complicated in separated and blended families. Jacob appreciated that his relatively new step-father left discipline to his mother:

*He doesn't try to be the boss of me... even when I'm being an idiot he sometimes just lets me be a clown and Mum will straighten me out which is good... We've never clashed because he's very passive, he could easily be the other way but I think it works well for both of us that he's quite passive. (Jacob)*

The experience of Jacob and his sisters also showed how young people could avoid limits and consequences if they moved between two households:

*My sisters tend to gravitate towards my dad. They live with my dad because he's a bit of a pushover... whereas my mum... she believes in punishment and she likes to tell them when they are out of line. But my dad doesn't as much, it's very free, it's almost like housemates rather than living with Dad, but with Mum, she's really our mum. (Jacob)*

Jacob's explanation highlights how young people may dislike consequences, but his final comment of “*she's really our mum*” also shows how young people see enforcing consequences as part of being a parent. Other young people talked about consequences or

lectures from parents for bad behaviour being normal or expected, even if they did not necessarily feel it was right at the time they were being disciplined.

The way connectedness factors may overlap was evident when young people interpreted tight boundaries as a lack of trust by parents. This intertwining of themes is an important reminder of the fluidity and complexity of these connectedness factors within the family context, compared to their more ordered presentation in these chapters. Dan described how imposed limits could feel like a lack of trust:

*I reckon a lot of trouble I had with my parents growing into adolescence was [with] limits. I reckon, instead of just going, 'You can't do this', 'You can't do that', and just putting limits on everything, I reckon [let] kids set their own [limits]. It might sound just like a teen going, 'I want to do this', 'I want to do that', but I reckon it really gave me a lot of trouble, I really hated being at home when I was limited. And that wasn't just because I wasn't getting what I wanted, I felt a lot trapped down. (Dan)*

While young people could be frustrated by boundaries, they also understood that parental worries and limits were about caring for them and wanting them to be safe:

*When I've spoken to some of my friends about the future they'll be, 'I'm just going to let my kids do whatever they want'. And I'm like 'Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you actually care about what your kids did?' (Elena)*

Knowing their parents were concerned about their safety did not entirely quell young people's frustrations when they felt restricted. Emily's mother worried about things such as her being in a car late at night, whereas Emily saw this as an acceptable risk:

*Sometimes it's just a little bit irritating that she won't let me do things that she thinks might be dangerous. I guess she's not the kind of person to take risks and I am a little bit. (Emily)*

Ensuring safety was also about finding balance between being protective and allowing appropriate freedoms. Henry advised parents: “*Not to be too worried about them. Obviously worry about them ‘cause they’re your kid, but not wrap them up in cotton wool or something*”. Some of the difficulties in finding a balance between freedom and boundaries that are acceptable for both parents and young people are explored in chapter 9.

**Connections over time summary.** Young people’s experiences of connections over time highlight the value of connections prior to adolescence for their feelings of family connectedness throughout adolescence. Many of the factors that supported young people’s sense of connectedness, such as time with family and regular conversations, had been present throughout their lives. Family connections did adapt, though, to accommodate young people’s growing maturity and the need for greater emotional and less physical support as they got older.

Young people often contributed more to the household, wanted to have more of a say in what they did and family matters more generally, and could connect on a deeper level with their parents as they got older. Some young people reported periods of tension and efforts to distance themselves from family during early adolescence that had since settled. Overall, though, feeling connected to family was of ongoing importance to young people as they got older.

The most prominent feature of young people’s development affecting family connectedness was their growing desire for independence, and the challenge this presented

for parents to balance freedoms and boundaries so that young people felt both cared for and trusted. For participants, family relationships and time with family remained significant priorities alongside their increased independence, demonstrating the need to allow young people to both build a sense of autonomy and remain connected to family. The differing ideas of young people and parents about appropriate levels of risk, and the importance of parents communicating with young people about boundaries and the reasons for them, were also evident.

## 7.4 Chapter Summary

Exploring the two global themes considered in this chapter – **feeling valued** and **connections over time** – has demonstrated clearly why it is so important to capture the perspectives of young people to fully understand family connectedness. Young people's sense of being valued and respected as individuals within the family builds on the more practical and concrete areas of interaction identified in Chapter 6.

While it is clear that the groundwork for family connectedness is often laid long before adolescence, sustaining those connections depends upon a recognition that what young people need from family is continually evolving. The need for balance appeared strongly as young people talked about their growing independence and desire for freedom but also understanding the value of limits and boundaries. Growing independence did not, however, mean a lesser need for family connectedness. Rather, it was the nature of the support that young people were looking for that changed. Allowing young people a degree of independence actually increased their sense of connection to family. Young people's growing maturity allowed deeper connections with their parents but also created some tensions in early adolescence.

How well families are able to promote connectedness depends, however, not just on the nature and quality of the interactions between young people and other family members but also the broader contextual issues shaping how the family itself functions. Those environmental factors, particularly the impact of different **family dynamics** within the home and **factors outside the family** more broadly, are discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 8 - Appreciating Difference, Widening Our Gaze

### 8.1 Introducing the Chapter

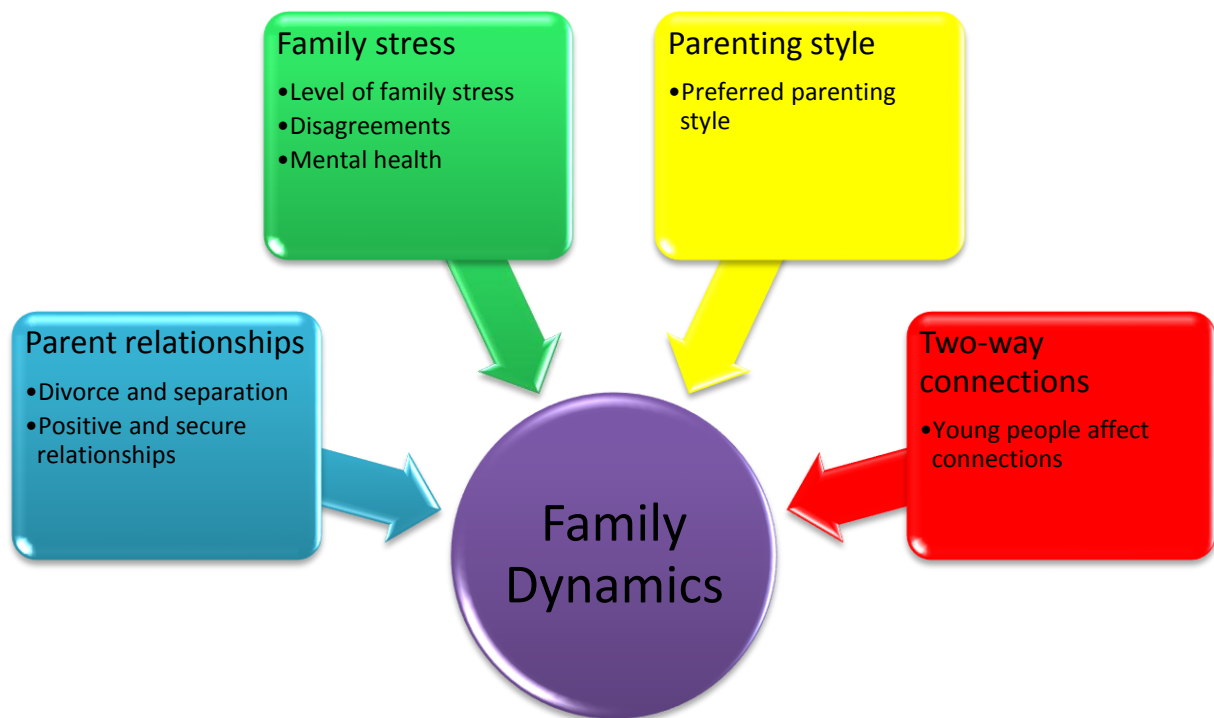
The final two global themes to emerge from the interviews with the young people – **family dynamics** and **factors outside the family** – highlight how the broader context within which a family functions can have important implications for connectedness. These themes ensure the meso, exo and macro factors impacting on families are considered. Recognising those factors ensures that the full range of issues potentially impacting upon family connectedness are identified, that any efforts to build family connectedness will be more sustainable, and consideration is given to how well families are being supported in achieving this goal.

In this chapter, family dynamics captures the ways in which the atmosphere within families can change in response to different pressures. The second global theme, factors outside the family, clearly highlights the impact of the broader social context on family connectedness. As in the preceding chapters, the two global themes are discussed sequentially. Again, each is introduced by a thematic network map which summarises the key elements that emerged from the interviews with the young people (see Figures 8 and 9). The identified organising and basic themes are then presented in more detail to provide a more in-depth picture of how these factors shape young people's sense of family connectedness.

### 8.2 Global Theme: Family dynamics

Young people identified how the atmosphere, level of stress and changing dynamics within families could affect their sense of family connectedness. When discussing family dynamics young people spoke about the impact of **parent relationships**, **family stress**, and **parenting style**. It was also evident that effective family connectedness was **two-way**, with

young people also influencing connections. The thematic network map below displays the organising and basic themes for family dynamics.



**Figure 8: Family Dynamics**

**Parent relationships.** A key element of family dynamics was how well parents got along with each other. Young people talked about how parents **divorcing or separating** affected family dynamics and the value they saw when parent relationships were **positive and secure**. Not surprisingly, young people's experiences and thoughts about the impact of parent relationships on family connectedness differed depending on whether their own parents were together or separated. The young people in the present study came from a variety of family structures - the majority lived with their biological parents and siblings, with a quarter living in blended or sole parent families. Although the majority of participants



identified that their parents were or had been married, comprehensive data was not collected on the marital status of the participants' parents or step-parents.

The potential impact of parental divorce or separation provided insight into how family dynamics can affect connectedness. Recent divorces or separations appeared more likely to impact family connectedness. The young person who most talked about the impact of her parents' separation on her sense of connection had experienced parental separation only months before the interview, with her father moving interstate as a result. In her case, the recent separation had dramatically changed the dynamics within the family and saw her rapidly shift from feeling closest to her father prior to the separation, to having a much closer connection with her mother and limited connectedness with her father. The extent of disconnection with her father was exacerbated by other connectedness factors being limited as a result of the separation, including less time, communication, and effort shown by her father:

*There's disconnection just because of the space and not seeing each other and not really talking. But I think there is even more disconnection from hurt. When they say they are going to do things and they don't. Or when you have to kind of give those really subtle hints of, 'I might want to have time with you on my birthday, um that might be an important thing for me'. (Olivia)*

Young people whose parents had been separated for a longer time could recall the friction, stress and sadness for their parents at that time, and the toll this took on them as children. In all these cases, however, these difficult feelings had now settled and the young people did not see their parents' ongoing separation as an issue that affected connectedness. For those who shared their time between two houses and had regular contact with both parents, good connections to both parents and an overall strong sense of family

connectedness were maintained. Some participants described this arrangement as having two families. Jacob even felt his family connectedness was stronger following his parents' divorce:

*There used to be so much fuel for these fights and these frictions but now there is nothing, we don't really have anything to fight about except what regular father and son and mother and son would argue about, you know, my room's dirty or whatever. But having been through that we've come closer because we keep that in mind, 'cause all of us have changed, especially Mum's changed a lot since she's come out of that phase and I definitely like the current Mum a lot better than my old Mum. But yeah, because of that we are all a bit closer, and those day to day things just seem a bit more insignificant.*

Not surprisingly, those young people who lived with their mothers and had limited or no contact with their fathers felt little connection to their fathers. This lack of contact with their fathers, however, did not seem to dilute their strong feelings of family connectedness overall, even though their fathers did not play a major role. The feelings of disconnection to their fathers seemed to occur more from the physical distance and lack of contact following the divorce, than the divorce itself. In the cases where fathers moved interstate or overseas, this definitely interfered with a young person's connection to their father. Those young people who described having a greater connection to the parent with whom they lived mirrored the experiences of other participants whose parents were still together but whose fathers were regularly away for work.

Divorce and separation then, appeared to be an issue of stress and change at the time of the separation but, for these young people, did not affect their sense of family

connectedness in the long term. The majority of young people in this research felt their families provided consistent and ongoing support regardless of their structure.

Some young people whose parents were still together feared the impact divorce would have on their sense of family connection. The potential impact these young people felt divorce would have on their family connectedness was greater than the actual experiences of the participants whose parents had divorced. Andrew was fearful that his parents' arguments could lead to divorce: *"When they have a big fight between just themselves, Mum and Dad... having had friends with divorced parents I always jump to that conclusion – this fight's going to lead somewhere bad"*. Andrew would have preferred his parents argued in private so that *"the kids still feel like nothing is wrong"* and suggested parents could *"still talk it out and resolve their own issues without bringing the kids into it"*. This view contrasts with young people's general desire to be informed on issues affecting the family.

Young people's fear of divorce also highlighted the practical difficulties following parental separation, such as, how new living arrangements would work and how that would affect access to family members and overall family connectedness. As Emily explained, *"If they were to split, you know, half of us would go with Dad and half of us would go with Mum. I don't know how things would turn out"*.

It is problematic to compare the perception of divorce with the reality, as young people with separated parents may have experienced a more stressful home environment when their parents were together and may have felt a sense of relief when they separated. Importantly, divorce did not exist in isolation from other connectedness factors, and had the greatest impact on connectedness when coupled with new limits on access to and communication with family members. The different experiences of the young people in this

research encourage us to avoid making assumptions about how divorce and separation will affect connectedness in any given family.

For the young people who lived with both biological parents, some felt the positive and secure nature of their parents' relationships helped their overall sense of family connectedness. Stable parent relationships provided a solid foundation for calm relations within the family and helped young people feel secure:

*I guess it's good that they have such a good relationship. I think it's particularly hard for people whose parents have split, I don't know, I've sort of noticed it seems like they don't feel connected because their parents aren't connected and so because they are together and they do have a pretty secure relationship [it] makes me feel more secure. (Emily)*

Young people also valued stable relationships with their siblings and other family, characterised by a lack of fights and the ability to get along smoothly and consistently. Sibling relationships were exceptional in one area, in that, for some participants their connection with older siblings actually improved when they moved out of home. This exception demonstrated that in some relationships more time together does not necessarily lead to greater connections. In cases where siblings had clashes of personality or interests, too much time together allowed them to get on each other's nerves, and reduced time allowed them to enjoy the limited time they had together. The improved relationships may also have been assisted by the growing maturity of all parties.

Parents' relationships with extended family also impacted young people's relationships with extended family. For example, Dan had not seen one of his uncles since he was 3 as his parents had not talked to his uncle since that time. Another participant did not

feel connected to his aunt due to a family argument. For young people in this study, their parents, and sometimes their grandparents, were a gateway to extended family.

**Family stress.** Family dynamics and connectedness were affected by the level of stress within families. The participants talked about how the **level of family stress**, **disagreements** and **mental health** disorders of family members could impact their sense of connectedness. Different families were affected by stress in varying ways, with different thresholds and expectations around family stress emerging. In general, young people reported that when family stress was low their sense of family connectedness was likely to be higher. Some young people found getting out of the house for an afternoon outing or a longer holiday with their family reduced stress and helped connections, as it physically took people away from homework, school and work pressure. As Jacob explained:

*I suppose it's a bit more out of the daily grind of home and the stress related to your life in general. When we're on holidays it's very relaxed and we get along very well and... come together a bit stronger. (Jacob)*

Mandy explained that while her father was often away for work, he was still able to call and help her mum relax, which in turn helped her connect more easily:

*The way [my dad calms] my mum makes me connect to her a lot better because, you know, she's having this really stressful day and he'll call and he'll just say to her, 'I love you, you know just remember that' and he makes her feel like she still is the most important person to him and it's not his work... And so that makes her so much more open to wanting to do something or be together and so that helps her and in turn just connects my brother and I together a lot better as well.*

In contrast, for some young people, high levels of family stress reduced their sense of family connectedness because of less access to their parents or less positive interactions due to low energy and short tempers. Sam explained:

*My step-dad... just had an operation so he's really moody and then my mum, she's pretty much bringing in all the income for our family. So them not bringing their stress home, it's not good, they just go off at you for the simplest things, so we just ignore it and go to our rooms and then they wonder why we don't come upstairs cause we don't want to be around the tension.*

For two participants, limiting contact with their fathers had improved their safety and wellbeing. Their experiences highlight that - while an overall sense of connection to family supports wellbeing - individual connections with family members may be harmful, particularly when these relationships are characterised by neglect, excessive stress or threats of violence to the young person. This potential for parent relationships to create safety concerns is an important consideration given the assumption of the present study that family connectedness is important for young people's wellbeing.

While less stress seemed to generally help connectedness, the majority of participants viewed disagreements as a normal part of family life. Disagreements could result in short term negative feelings towards the family member with whom they had argued, but generally did not affect their overall sense of family connectedness. Young people felt it was acceptable to not get along all the time, and that one could have arguments and still be happy as a family and love one's family. For Rachel, knowing that disagreements were normal in families lessened their impact:

*It is normal for people to have fights and arguments if you have been married for a while, I know that now, I've realised that it's not the end of the world I guess. So they're close but as any married, or any couple would, they have small fights... 'Cause everyone has to let their anger out sometimes.*

Jack felt conflict within families played an important role in identifying and resolving issues:

*Problems never get solved unless you talk about it and have a conflict... I'm all for conflict, 'cause if you have conflict it pretty much always ends with a resolution. The only reason you have conflict is because there was a problem beforehand so you've just solved that problem. Like, it's the way you have to do it... I love it... it just fixes [things]. To me I haven't had a bad conflict before really... and Mum, I think she's all for it too, my sister pretty much is, not necessarily like fighting but you have to argue. And I heard someone say how boring life would be if everyone agreed, 'cause it would be. And it's in an argument or conflict that you usually get people's true opinions which is always nice.*

The value of having issues to work through within family was reflected by another participant who saw this as a base for learning how to work through problems in a safe environment. Amelia felt resolving arguments and saying sorry could help you feel more connected than before as you needed to show how much you cared. Jack felt feeling free to argue could be a sign of closeness:

*Mum's boyfriend and my step-mum, obviously I'm not as close with them just 'cause when they're not your blood family or anything it's just a bit different... I feel like you can't really argue with them because they might hold on to it.*

For other young people, however, the times they were arguing with family were the times they felt most disconnected – “*When we are arguing it’s really disconnected, I don’t even know [who my mum] is anymore*” (Michael). In some families, small arguments always escalated into bigger ones. These young people still had good times with families but the periods when they were fighting had a larger impact on their sense of connectedness for that period:

*The snowballing thing, whenever we have a problem it always escalates. Like I don’t think we ever just, it never really dulls down, always escalates and they’re not one to forget about things so... it just gets bigger and bigger and then it goes away and then that is when we are in the good period. (Georgia)*

The differences in the impact of disagreements on young people’s sense of family connectedness may reflect the way in which arguments were managed, and to what degree they felt disagreements in families were normal. A number of participants felt the rarity of family arguments was evidence of their positive relationships and felt lucky they did not have major disputes. Their experiences suggest that the frequency and intensity of arguments contributes to how much family disagreements affect connectedness.

Three participants mentioned the specific stress of unmanaged *mental health* disorders within the family. For these young people, one family member’s mental health affected the whole family system. One young person had spent a considerable amount of time staying with friends due to the stress at home while his sister was dealing with her mental health. Another young person’s father was often low as a result of his depression, and the young person felt leaving his disorder untreated had played some part in his parents’ divorce. There was a sense that taking steps to address and manage mental health disorders would help overall family connectedness:



*I think if he dealt with it... he would reap the personal benefits but also as a family we would benefit from his general happiness and improved outlook on our family... But in saying that, it's not that our families going down the gurgler because of this, but it could improve I think... (Jacob)*

**Parenting style.** Young people felt it was important for parents to adopt a parenting style that struck a balance between parenting and friendship with young people. Parents treating young people with respect and developing a friendship with them ensured the young people in this study felt comfortable talking with their parents about their troubles. Young people largely focused on the importance of parents having a friendship with their children, but they also appreciated that at times parents needed to be stern, provide rules and assist young people to solve problems from an adult perspective. As Lily summarised: “*You’ve got to be a parent first and then a friend. It’s difficult, you can’t be too harsh as a parent but you can’t be too loose as a friend*”. Dan struggled with the strictness of his father’s parenting:

*I’ve had a lot of trouble with Dad recently, because he’s really military drill and do what I say, blah blah blah, and I don’t respond to that very well. He’s sort of authoritarian... and I like making my own decisions. (Dan)*

The preferred parenting style described by young people involved an expression of some of the other connectedness needs they identified, including being valued within the family, and appreciating parents’ boundaries and advice.

**Two-way connections.** Family dynamics and a broader sense of family connectedness could also be affected by young people. As explained by Caleb: “*I don’t want to make it sound like [my brother is] always the one at fault as well, because you know I’m not always 100% happy*”. This awareness of two-way connections, in which both parents and

**young people affect family connections**, is particularly important in offering some balance to the data presented so far. Given the nature of the interview questions, it is unsurprising that the participants largely focused on what those around them could do to help them feel connected to family. This resulted in a strong emphasis on what parents could do to support young people's feelings of family connectedness. The recognition of two-way connections by some participants revealed that, although young people were focused on what others in the family could do for them, they were also aware that they shared responsibility for creating effective family connections.

Many young people recognised that they could support their parents and felt a responsibility towards them. Mandy knew her mum appreciated her help: “[Mum] tells me, you know, ‘You are really just helping me today, you know if you weren’t here I would go nuts’”. Young people knew relationships were reciprocal and gave examples of how they could make an effort to get to know extended family members better, or how being well behaved reduced the need for parents to tell them off. In addition, just as parents’ stress could affect family dynamics, changes for young people could cause flow-on effects in the family:

*Everyone has changed from when I entered high school. That’s what I think, I think my change has influenced everyone else to change. (Michael)*

Young people were also aware of their potential to negatively impact connections if they had a bad attitude at home, said things to upset others, chose to shut parents out, acted ‘too cool’ for family, or withdrew into their room and on to the internet. Young people did not provide much insight into why they might act towards family in this way, and tended to talk about their friends’ or siblings’ negative behaviour towards their parents rather than their own. Young people’s potential contributions to family connectedness discussed during the interviews included being open to parents’ efforts to connect, communicating their needs, and

taking steps to support parents, contribute to family, and participate in family time. This theme is important in ensuring that interventions to address family connectedness include young people and consideration of the role they can play in connectedness.

**Family dynamics summary.** Young people's insights into family dynamics demonstrated the different ways in which changes to family structure and stress within the home can affect connectedness. The impact of parental separation and family arguments on young people's sense of connectedness varied according to young people's individual experiences and family context. In particular, the majority of young people with divorced parents did not feel this affected their overall sense of family connectedness, but some of those whose parents were still together were quite fearful of the potential impact of divorce. The initial stress around divorce and its impact on connectedness appeared to ease with the passage of time and the bedding down of new family structures.

High levels of stress could affect family connectedness and young people's desire to be around family, even if the stress originated outside the family. Weekend and afterschool outings and family holidays provided opportunities to put stressors aside and reconnect with family. The impact of disagreements on young people's sense of family connectedness was mitigated if they felt it was normal for families to argue. The majority of young people interviewed viewed disagreements as an expected and, on occasion, helpful aspect of family life. However, where disagreements were frequent and intense, family connectedness could be damaged.

Many young people wanted to be friends with their parents but also appreciated their parents' need to be stern and provide adult guidance on occasion. Finally, young people recognised their own role in achieving positive family connections.

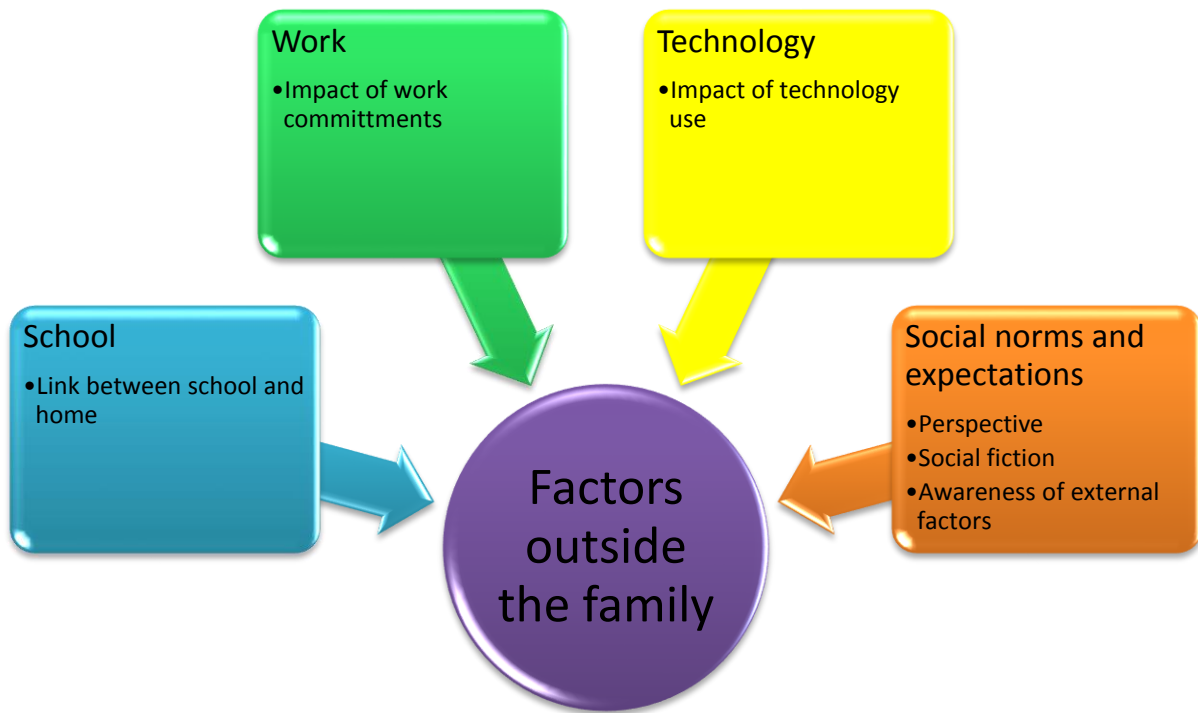
The varying experiences of young people in this study highlight the need to consider young people's individual experiences within their unique family context. The expertise that young people have on their own family dynamics was evident, as were the unpredictable outcomes of factors such as separated parents on young people's sense of family connectedness.

### 8.3 Global Theme: Factors Outside the Family

The themes presented so far have largely focused on what is happening within families. This final theme – **factors outside the family** – moves from the micro-level dynamics within families to consider how broader meso, exo and macro factors can impact family connections, bringing the use of systems theory and a social work perspective more prominently to the fore. The impact of meso systems, particularly work and school, had such profound influence on family connectedness for the young people, that they would have been highlighted even without a systems lens. Adopting a systems perspective does, however, give full weight to the effect of these environmental factors on family connectedness and ensures the recommendations of this research look at areas beyond the family.

All the participants referred to factors outside the family that could affect their sense of connectedness. Numerous examples were provided of how things happening outside their home could have flow-on affects into their home environment. Young people captured the impact of key organisations in which members of the family were involved when they spoke about the influence of **school** and **work** on family connectedness. The influence of **technology** was also evident, and while young people talked about the use of technology within the home, the ability for the outside world to increasingly reach in was clear. **Social norms and expectations** that reflected broader social views about families and young people were also raised in the interviews and could affect how young people thought about family.

Together, these factors raise important awareness of environmental influences on family connectedness. The thematic network map below displays the organising and basic themes for factors outside the family:



**Figure 9: Factors Outside the Family**

Each of these organising themes is explored in detail below.

**School.** Throughout the interviews it was clear that home and school were interrelated systems that could affect one another. This relationship was reciprocal with positives or negatives at school flowing into the home environment and conversely. Young people talked about the ways that school could help family connectedness. Having a good group of friends and ensuring young people were happy at school helped them feel happy when they went home and, in turn, helped the home environment. Schools also provided opportunities for families to connect - such as parents helping their child with an assignment or celebrating

school achievements. The knowledge young people learned from school often encouraged more stimulating conversations with parents.

The demands on time that school and extra-curricular activities placed on young people and their families occasionally hurt connections by minimising the leisure time that families had to relax with each other. One young person identified that school expectations of participation in extra-curricular activities and the added demands when multiple siblings had different commitments on different days, made it difficult for her whole family to be home together at the same time. Caleb attributed his close relationship with his father to being the youngest and having the least demands on his time from school, and as a result, having the most free time to spend with his dad.

When young people were having a bad time at school this could also lead to greater stress for the young person and affect their home life:

*In year seven I didn't know anyone... I have a lot of friends now, but back then I came here with no friends and I got bullied for like the first year! And then every time my mum picked me up I was like, 'Why would you bring me to this school?' and all that. And that started the arguing and then it got into more little things like 'How come you don't clean the house that often?', stuff like, 'How come you don't study more?'*

*(Michael)*

Points of tension could also arise at home when young people felt pressured by their parents to perform at school. One young person longed for greater understanding from his parents during busy periods at school, so that they might recognise his increased stress and reduce demands at home. Most participants identified school as a big part of their lives, reinforcing its potential to impact home life.

**Work.** The impact of parents' work commitments as a barrier to family connectedness was very prominent throughout the interviews, and was a theme discussed by the majority of participants. Parents' work commitments and work-related stress often flowed into the home environment, and for many young people, parents' work interfered with their time with parents and their parents' energy when they were together.

Working long hours affected family connectedness as parents spent less time at home with their children. Some parents left for work just after young people woke up and arrived home late in the evening, while others were away for extended periods when travelling for work. Young people tried to make the most of time with parents whose work occupied much of their time, but were often closer to the parents and siblings they saw more of. For Mandy, her military father's frequent time away affected their connection even though his care for her was clear:

*Dad's just been this aloof figure really, he's always there you know when you need him, he's there but he's not there. You know, he's not always present and physically able to hug him, but that's kind of just been the way it's always been throughout my childhood and everything, just with his line of work.*

In most, but not all cases, it was fathers who were more likely to be kept away from home by their work commitments. Young people's part time jobs could also restrict their time at home after school and on weekends. The work commitments of older siblings also affected family connectedness.

Some young people were frustrated by the difficulties of talking to parents who regularly worked late, or the uncertainty around when parents would be home and whether they would be having dinner together or on their own. These participants longed for their

parents to spend more time at home and attend activities and sport more regularly, and valued the time they had with parents while on holiday. For young people whose parents did not work excessive hours they valued always being able to eat dinner as a family.

Work stress affected the time families had together, causing parents to be mentally unavailable, tired or argumentative when they were home. In general, young people connected more easily to their more relaxed parent, and found it hard to connect with those wrapped up in work. Sophie described how the atmosphere at home could vary depending on what was happening at work for her parents:

*Mum and Dad have pretty high powered jobs... so when stuff happens at work, everything goes bad, it's like really just stressful and everything and they work late and stuff. But now everything is fantastic, [it] just depends.*

Other young people removed themselves from the common family space, avoided talking to parents, went to friends' houses, or made themselves busy to steer clear of parents' work stress:

*So them not bringing their stress home, it's not good and they just go off at you for the simplest things. So we just ignore it and go to our rooms and then they wonder why we don't come upstairs and watch TV or something, 'cause we don't want to be around the tension. (Sam)*

Young people's desire for time with family and frustration when work interfered with this time was reinforced by Sophie when she advised, "Don't work a lot! They think we don't want to spend time with them and we're moody and stuff, but we actually do".

The way adults handled work stress could mediate how much it affected family connectedness. Sam found it easier to talk to his aunt than his mum, as his aunt gave him time



even when she was busy at work and would devote her full attention to him when they were together. Another young person felt her father handled work much better than her mum and brought less stress home. Blake's mother had commenced full time work in the last year, but he felt he received just as much support as before, by cramming more things into less time. For others, parents' work commitments impacted far more on family time:

*Mum snaps a lot of the time because of her work and she comes home, has dinner and goes back to work until one in the morning. It's not great and then she's on her Blackberry all the time. It was good because she had a good job for a while and now she has a new job that she doesn't understand and it's so frustrating, she's in the car and at dinner all she talks about is work. (Bec)*

*Because my parents work a lot then they are always on their phone a lot and that really, really annoys me, I can get so angry at them. And then they have to go out for work dinners and I feel like when they go out for work dinners they don't want to spend time with us and that makes me so annoyed. (Sophie)*

Sophie's interpretation that her parents valued work commitments over family time was echoed by Olivia, who was surprised to hear her mother say, "*I never wanted to work that much, but I had to*" - she had previously just accepted that her mother prioritised work over family. In contrast, Tim's mother explained to him that her work was part of her care for the family:

*That's a fairly big thing, she always says we are the most important things in her life....Mum...was like, 'This is the reason I work, so I can take you to nice doctors and so you can have a quick recovery and not be sick for so long'. So that's always a good reminder when she points out how she really thinks we're really important to her.*

These experiences highlight the potential for stressful work periods to have a lesser impact on family connectedness if parents are clear with their children about their desire to be with family.

Young people were not oblivious to the reality of their parents needing to work to provide for the family, manage financial pressures and, in some cases, work more as families got bigger. Participants did not, however, want work to come at the expense of family time. Sophie felt parents often put too much emphasis on money as a way to care for family: *“It’s like they think money buys you love, but it doesn’t”*. Conversely, Matt’s parents chose not to work full time to ensure they had more time for him and his siblings, which he saw as a sign of how much they cared. As Matt explained, *“The reason why Mum and Dad don’t have full time jobs is because they specifically wanted to have enough time for us, to relate to us well”*.

The impact of parents’ work on family connectedness will be considered within the context of broader social pressures, including materialism, when looking at the implications of the research in the following chapter. The discussion in chapter 9 includes feedback from the young person’s reference group to be cautious of how this theme is presented and ensure the reasons parents need to work are recognised.

**Technology.** Young people’s descriptions of technology use within the home reflected wider social and technological advances that impact how we socialise and connect, increasingly bringing the outside world home. There were two key elements to technology use: its ability to support long distance connections and access to the outside world; and the potential to distract family members from the face-to-face connections available at home.

Technology provided a means to maintain regular contact with family who lived away from home. Examples from young people included: using their mobile phones to stay

connected with older siblings who had moved out of home or parents who were away for work; using phone and email to stay connected with interstate relatives; and using Skype to stay in touch when family members travelled.

*When my brother went to England... we [talked] over Skype every day. We felt really connected because even though he is half way around the world from me we talked every day. (Michael)*

The internet also provided one participant with the ability to safely stay in contact with her father without having to see him physically.

Despite these new avenues for connection, the use of phones and internet at home to some extent distracted parents and young people from interacting with each other. Young people risked isolating themselves from family if they spent a lot of time in their room on the computer. Joel described the lack of connection he saw between his friend and his friend's mother due to his friend's excessive internet use, which severely limited how much they talked. Young people could become frustrated if their parents were frequently on their phones dealing with work issues, while at home. Olivia appreciated that her mother did not keep her phone on her once she was home, and felt this helped her to be more mentally engaged in family life.

It was clear that more pervasive technologies and greater social and professional expectations for after-hours access could bring work stress and social issues more readily into the home environment. The clear exception to technology use interfering with connections at home was when technology was used in a shared space. Using technology in shared family spaces seemed to minimise the risk of family not engaging with each other and allowed them to talk and share with family while they were on their phone or computer:

*Just being around each other and maybe if we notice something on Facebook or something, then we talk to someone else about it. Yeah, see something funny or show a video someone sent us or something like that. I reckon just being in the same space helps a lot more than being, like our family isn't really a family that you go into your rooms and just do stuff, everyone pretty much sits out in the lounge room, talks and watches the same show. (Tim)*

Henry's family always watched television together which allowed them to chat and have a laugh about things, not necessarily to do with what was on television. Joel captured the importance of not letting modern technology overshadow the value of face-to-face communication and connections:

*Well [adolescents are still] people is what I would say. Even though it's not the 80s anymore or the 70s, technology's improved, things have changed. They're still people and people want to talk to people, people want to know people. So if you talk to someone that's how you're going to get something, rather than saying because they have Facebook I'm not going to be able to talk to them, or because they have an iPod I'm not going to be able to talk to them. If you set aside time to talk, then you're going to find out what their problems are and how you can best improve them.*

Young people's experiences clearly show the need to consider the ways in which technology is used at home and the extent to which this limits family engagement. It is particularly important not to lose sight of the value of face-to-face connections for this generation of digital natives, for whom advanced communications technology have always been a part of their lives.

**Social norms and expectations.** Throughout the interviews, comments from young people demonstrated how social norms and expectations can impact young people's sense of connectedness. In particular, some young people had a sense of **perspective** on how their experiences compared with others' and were conscious of how well their family provided for them, even as they had ideas on how their relationships could be improved. Young people were also aware of **external influences** that impacted on their family relationships.

Many young people said they felt lucky compared to others and knew how positive their overall family connectedness was. Isaac reported that sometimes when he was feeling negative about his relationship with his father he was probably over thinking it, and things were not as bad as they seemed. For others, participating in the interview and reflecting on family relationships made them aware of how connected they were. These young people reflected that, while on some days if things went wrong they might not feel connected, when they took a step back and looked at their relationships overall, they were in fact connected. Bec explained that being able to live together was, in itself, a sign of connection.

Some young people felt that, while some things in their family relationships could be improved, there would always be different personalities within families and it was impossible to have things exactly how they wanted all the time. Participants also recognised and appreciated the care and effort their parents made to connect with them, even if they did not get it right all of the time. Many young people felt it was normal to have some friction with family and to find them annoying at times. Hearing about the problems that others faced or witnessing hardship while travelling also helped young people appreciate how positive their family connections, and life opportunities in general were. Young people's ability to reflect on factors such as the desire for time, effective communication and feeling valued, is evidence of how well their basic needs were being met.

Together with these more measured perspectives presented above, an element of **social fiction** around young people and families was also evident. Caleb felt his relationship with his parents was particularly good compared to how parent-teenage relationships were presented on television. Sam's parents thought he was 'an angel' given what they heard about other teenagers.

Other assumptions about what close relationships look like were evident when young people talked about being a lot closer to their cousins than 'normal cousin relationships', and feeling their friends must have closer relationships with their siblings because they said 'I love you' at the end of phone calls. Dan explained how movies had created, for him, a social fiction around how normal families should behave:

*When I was about 10, I was really unhappy with [my family relationships], 'cause I watched movies... and I'd go 'We're not like that', 'Were not like this' and then it made me really angry. But then as I've gotten older I'm not very worried about that... and [now] knowing that not everything is going to be like the movies.*

Participants were also aware of other social pressures that affected family connections. These included: knowing that parents had to work to afford housing; being conscious of the general busyness and stress of life; and appreciating how the dynamics of extended family could create flow-on effects with immediate family. In addition, a number of young people identified the importance of families being supported by others, or in Matt's words: *"Even though it's good to be connected as a family, it's good to be connected to other families also"*. These examples demonstrated how family relationships do not exist in isolation and encourage us to consider what is happening in a family's environment when addressing family connections.

**Factors outside the family summary.** Central to this global theme is the reality that family connectedness is intertwined with other aspects of people's lives. Work and school, and the stressors and positives that occur in these environments have flow-on effects to the home environment and relationships. Broader macro factors including social pressures and expectations, and advances in technology also filter into homes and affect how families interact and how they feel about their relationships. Young people's insights clearly validated the use of a systems approach to understanding family connectedness.

This theme offers a unique contribution to research on family connectedness – it brings into view the factors outside the family that play an important role in family connectedness, drawing family connectedness research together with the critiques of modern Western society present in more sociological mental health literature. The broader implications of these environmental pressures for families and family connectedness, and what young people's experiences tell us about work pressure, busy lives, and various social values, will be considered in the following chapter.

## **8.4 Chapter Summary**

Much of the contemporary research on family connectedness primarily focuses on the relationships within families. By adopting a wider lens, this chapter has highlighted the importance of recognising that the way in which young people connect with their families can be significantly shaped by the broader context of their lives. Difficult relationships and changes in the family, particularly where these result in distance or disagreement, can clearly impact on the strength and nature of the connectedness young people feel.

It is, however, important to recognise that how individual families respond to external stressors and internal changes will depend very much on the particular circumstances. Young people had strikingly different perspectives on the impact divorce would have on family

connectedness, largely depending on whether their family had been through divorce or not. In general, parental separation did not affect young people's overall sense of family connectedness in the long term, even if the separation resulted in a lesser connection to a parent with whom they had lost regular contact. Disagreements were generally considered a normal part of family life, but had a different impact on connections depending on their frequency, intensity and how they were managed. Generally, families were most able to connect during relaxed times, while periods of high stress interfered with family connectedness.

Connectedness within a family was also influenced by societal demands that take time from family involvement, reduce family members' ability to prioritise family, introduce stress, and - through technology - offer alternative sources of connection and potentially competing frames of reference. The interviews illustrated how young people themselves have pressures that can compete with family time and, that they have an important and influential role to play in the success of family connectedness. This insight provides a counterweight to young people's tendency to focus on what those around them could do to support connectedness.

Consideration of the broader context also highlighted how much perception matters. Unless parents explained to their children that their work was necessary for the family and was an expression of care, the time they spent at work could be misconstrued as them valuing work over family time. Taking the time to explain their actions helped to mitigate the influence of competing priorities, which could reduce the time available for, and quality of, parental involvement. Many young people recognised that most of their needs were being met and were aware that other family members may have competing commitments and needs.



Taken together, the six global themes addressed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 provide a comprehensive insight into how young people view family connectedness, the things they consider most important, and the factors within the family and broader society which impact on the effectiveness of connections for them. The following and final chapter positions young people's experiences – and the six global themes presented – in the context of other literature, to demonstrate the contribution and new knowledge offered by the present study. To meet the objective of developing practical guidance to support family connectedness interventions, the implications of this research for young people, families, schools and social workers are also considered.

## **Chapter 9: Implications and Contributions**

### **9.1 Introducing the Chapter**

Young people have delivered important insights into family connectedness ranging from their desire for more time with family to the ways in which their family relationships are affected by external pressures. This chapter addresses the key implications arising from their experiences and insights and considers: how the results of the present study fit with what we already know about family connectedness; the contributions made to our understanding of family connectedness for young people; and, the implications of these new understandings for families, schools, social workers, and others who work with children, young people, and families. The overarching map of themes is presented as a model of family connectedness to support therapeutic efforts aimed at building family connectedness.

### **9.2 Summary of the Research Process and Aims**

The present study aimed to explore and better understand young people's experiences of family connectedness. It responded to increased rates of mental health disorders experienced by young people and recognised family connectedness as a key foundation for wellbeing. Qualitatively exploring young people's experiences of family connectedness addresses an important gap in current connectedness literature.

The importance of talking to young people directly, rather than making assumptions about what young people need, was emphasised by the childhood studies approach to the research (James & James, 2008; Mayall, 1994). The young people interviewed underscored the importance of recognising that young people see things differently from adults. A clear understanding of young people's perspectives is essential for building effective family connections.

Systems theory was used throughout the analysis to bring a social work perspective to the research on family connectedness. This approach offered a new element to research on family connectedness by drawing attention to the factors outside families that pressure and impact on what happens within them. By extending the focus beyond what is happening within families, interventions to support family connectedness become more sustainable and less judgemental of families (Crichton-Hill, 2004; Healy, 2005).

Analysis of the interview data revealed six key themes regarding young people's experiences of family connectedness. Key factors that supported young people's sense of connectedness emerged, including: being present and engaged in family life; having things in common with family; and young people's need to feel valued as individuals. The role of early connections, and the way in which these connections developed as young people aged, were also significant. Finally, environmental influences on connections - inside and outside the family - were identified; changing family dynamics, stress within families and pressure from work and school all impacted connectedness.

### **9.3 Comparing the Global Themes to the Findings of Other Research**

Many of the factors for connectedness discussed by the young people interviewed are common to findings in the wider literature. These include: open and responsive communication, frequent contact with family members, shared daily activities, inclusion in each other's lives, high levels of trust; and, parents who are warm and supportive, knowledgeable about adolescent developmental changes and respectful of young people's interests (K. E. Davis, 2009; Houlberg, et al. 2011; Parvizi & Ahmadi, 2009; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Together with these common connectedness factors, the present study also reinforced elements known to support young people's wellbeing. These included the importance of young people's relationship with the parent of the same gender, the value of

eating dinner with family, and recognition of young people's interests and unique worth (AIHW, 2011; Bogard, 2005; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009).

The similarities of the findings in the present study and those in Parvizy and Ahmadi's (2009) study with Iranian youth (discussed in chapter 3), is particularly useful in highlighting how young people in different social and cultural settings share similar connectedness needs. In common with the present study, Parvizy and Ahmadi (2009) found that young people valued effective communication, wanted parents to nurture their self-esteem, felt the generation gap to parents could cause communication difficulties, and were critical when work pressures interfered with emotional support at home.

There were, however, ideas unique to each study. In the present study, young people identified the importance of having things in common with their family and the different ways family dynamics affected connectedness. In Parvizy and Ahmadi's (2009) study, young people discussed the importance of families providing comfort and peace. These points of difference indicate that the value of some elements of connectedness varies in different settings. As discussed in chapter 2, expectations of children within families and the way adolescence is constructed varies across cultures and lead to a diverse range of experiences for young people (Cottle, 2002; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Hawley, 2011).

The overlap of findings between previous research on family connectedness and the present study adds credibility to the findings of this study. The present study also reinforces the results of previous quantitative research, as similar themes emerged even when young people were able to speak freely about their experiences (see Bogard, 2005; Crespo et al., 2010; Houlberg et al., 2011; Mueller et al., 2011; Yugo & Davidson, 2007). The qualitative interviews did, however, bring out a more nuanced understanding of established connectedness factors.

**The contribution of young people's qualitative insights.** In addition to reinforcing many of the known connectedness factors, the qualitative approach highlighted a number of elements that have been under-reported in the literature. These include: the importance of prioritising family in the face of busy lives and work commitments; the ways that shared experiences and commonalities could provide an avenue to build connections; and the need to recognise young people as valuable members of the family. It was also clear that the foundations for connectedness were laid long before adolescence; connections changed as young people aged; and, both parents and young people affected family connectedness. The impact of changing family dynamics and disagreements was dependent on how they were managed by the family and viewed by young people. Young people's stories also highlighted the ways in which school, work, technology and broader social values influenced connections.

A summary of the key factors for young people's sense of family connectedness and the global, organising and basic themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented together to form an overarching model of family connectedness (see Figure 10).

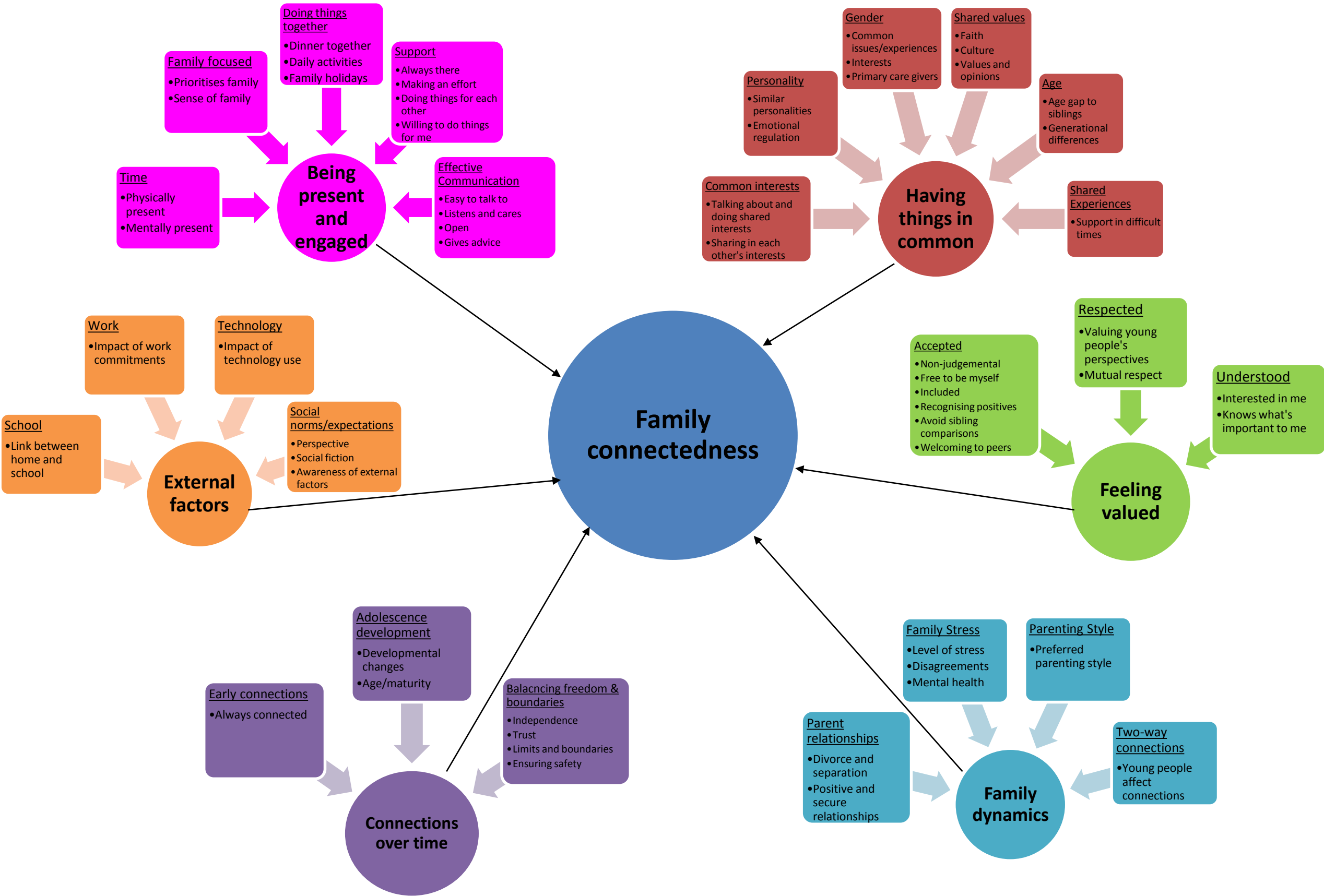


Figure 10: Family Connectedness Model

The findings of the present study revealed valuable insights into how factors for connectedness work within families. Abstract factors such as time and what constitutes effective communication are made tangible, making them easier for families to appreciate, understand and implement. The importance of spending time with young people may appear self-evident, but understanding what valuable time means to young people adds clarity for parents and social workers. This was confirmed in discussions with colleagues about the research results, who were unsurprised by the importance of time for connectedness, but were confronted by the need to be mentally engaged. Many expressed the difficulties they experience in staying engaged after work hours and were surprised how aware young people were that they had mentally checked out.

The findings of the present study offer an essential and nuanced picture of family connectedness. The additional depth of understanding that they offer, and useful distinctions from the current literature, will assist parents, schools and those who support families and young people to grasp how important these factors are for young people and how they can be achieved within families.

#### **9.4 Key Findings: Areas of Support and Distinction**

The insights from the present study variously support, challenge and expand on what we already know about family connectedness. In contrast to the understandings offered by the existing literature, the young people's experiences challenged many developmental assumptions about adolescence, conservative views on the impact of divorce, and the extent to which gender affects connectedness factors.

**Comparing young people's experiences to the developmental perspective.** In the present study, young people's experiences in some ways support, and in other ways challenge, developmental understandings of adolescence. These areas of difference are

important given the dominance of the developmental perspective in the ways in which children and young people are perceived in Western societies (Moore, 2012; D. Muir, 1999).

**Temperamental teenagers.** From a developmental perspective, hormonal and developmental changes are seen to create unpredictable changes of mood in adolescents (Marotz & Allen, 2013). The findings of the present study provide an alternative explanation for teenage moodiness. Some young people reported getting moody or frustrated when they did not get enough time with their parents, or choosing to spend time alone to avoid their parents' stress. In addition, while some participants reported being moody, others had consistently smooth interactions with their family. The positive family relationships described by young people in this research support challenges to the idea that storm and stress is a normal part of adolescence (Coleman, 1978; Rathus, 2006). When Sophie commented that her sister was a '*really big teenager*' and she and her brother were not, she highlighted both the existence of a moody teenage stereotype and the reality that it does not fit all young people.

Young people in the present study also described deeper connections with family as they aged and many longed for greater engagement with mentally distant parents. This finding contrasts with other research which reports stronger perceptions of family connectedness in younger adolescents (Crespo et al., 2010).<sup>9</sup> The insights from young people also offer an important challenge to negative community attitudes about young people originating from the media (Bolzan, 2003). Participants themselves highlighted how their own experiences were different from the social fiction about young people.

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<sup>9</sup> In Crespo, et al.'s (2010) study of family connectedness and body satisfaction over a 2 year period, participants were 10 to 15 years old at the beginning of the study and 12 to 17 years old by the end of data collection. Their perceptions of family connectedness decreased across the 2 years of the study for the whole sample.



***Time with and independence from family.*** In developmental psychology, adolescence is seen as a time when peer relationships become increasingly important for young people and young people desire greater independence (Rathus, 2006). These changes imply that family becomes less important for young people as they emerge from childhood (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007).

In the present study, however, young people greatly valued family relationships and, in many cases, wanted to spend more time with family. They sought more independence as they got older but family relationships did not lose their significance. Parents continued to be important in young people's lives, but the type of support young people wanted changed as they aged. Young people had increased emotional support needs and required less practical support compared to when they were children. Parents need to recognise this ongoing need for support as young people age, despite their growing independence. Rather than distancing themselves from their children, parents need to adapt their parenting style and recognise adolescents' greater need for emotional support.

Young people's desire for time with family is well supported in the literature. Research findings and recent theories on raising children emphasise the importance of quality time with parents and family for young people's wellbeing (AIHW, 2011; Edgar, 2000; Houlberg et al., 2011). The insights from young people in the present study provide important detail as to how valuable time with family can be achieved and shows how both quantity and quality of time are important.

Frequent interactions and knowing each other for a long time are considered important for supportive social relationships (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). This was true for the young people in the present study who valued the consistency of relationships over time and were often closest to those with whom they spent the most time. Young people felt valued

when their parents made time for family and the more time they spent with their family, the greater opportunity they had to connect.

Importantly, young people's emphasis of the need to be mentally present during time with family highlights that the worth of family time is measured by both its quantity and quality. Young people knew when family members were mentally absent, a finding that challenges adults to stay engaged during family interactions and consider the barriers to their doing so.

***Balancing autonomy, boundaries and connectedness.*** The ongoing value of family connectedness should not overshadow the importance of having independence from family. While autonomy *from* family and connectedness *to* family may seem like opposing forces, for the young people in the present study, a degree of independence actually enhanced their family connectedness. Young people's feeling of being trusted when they were given some independence goes some way to explain this link. Jack explained that young people did not want to be completely independent from family, as that would be "*boring and lonely*". These insights from the present study suggest it may be more appropriate to see adolescents as moving from dependence towards a position of interdependence or mutually dependent relationships, rather than suggesting complete independence is healthy or normal (Noble, Barker, McArthur, & Woodman, 2014; Robinson et al., 2011). Other research also emphasises interdependence as normal and important for young people's wellbeing (Noble et al., 2014; F. Walsh, 2006). The concept of interdependence is particularly helpful in keeping the value of connectedness central in the face of Australian society's focus on autonomy and personal development (Wyn, 2005).

Adult supervision and boundaries are encouraged to manage young people's increased impulsivity and risk-taking while they are learning to make decisions around safe behaviour

(Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). It was, however, surprising to hear that young people in the present study valued these boundaries and saw them as a sign of their parents' care, even if they sometimes found these boundaries, together with questions from parents, frustrating. An explanation for young people's valuing of boundaries in this study is the concept of young people having contrasting internal and external voices (Fuller, 2014). For example, while young people might express dislike for boundaries and parental nagging, internally they may value the parental care these gestures imply. The opportunity to reflect on their family relationships in the interviews may have allowed these internal voices to be heard.

Young people's experiences documented in the present study support the need to grant adolescents more independence as they get older, while still providing guidance and boundaries (Berk, 2012). The need to balance independence and boundaries is a feature of authoritative parenting, which involves parental warmth, justification of rules, consistency, and promotion of young people's autonomy (Baumrind, 2005; Gonzalez et al., 2002; Milevsky et al., 2007). The contrasting internal and external voices of young people which can result in appreciating and resenting boundaries at the same time, shows how difficult it can be for parents to get the balance right.

Young people largely desired more independence than they were granted, demonstrating the difference between parents' and young people's ideas of appropriate levels of independence. Other literature also identifies that the majority of young people want more independence than parents are prepared to allow, with the clash between parents' supervisory role and adolescents' increased desire for independence often leading to conflict or tension (Parkinson, 2011; Smetana, et al. 2009).

While the findings of the present study encourage parents to find the right balance between freedom and boundaries, this task is made more difficult by the lack of definite

markers for adulthood in modern Australia (Lawrence, 2005). Independence and partial adulthood are gained incrementally over the course of adolescence, with turning 18, finishing school, moving out of home and getting a job all steps in this process (Berk, 2012; Rathus, 2006; D. Woodman & Wyn, 2013). Young people also take on adult experiences such as part time work and sexual experiences earlier, and study, stay at home and rely financially on their parents for longer than previous generations (Lawrence, 2005; Wyn, 2005).

***Recognising the competence of young people.*** The developmental focus on the ways in which young people develop towards their adult self across adolescence risks promoting the idea that young people are less competent than adults (James & James, 2008; Wyn & White, 1997). In the present study, young people wanted to be valued as important and competent members of the family. Feeling valued, of significance, accepted, and respected are all important for young people's wellbeing and overall mental health (Butcher, 2010; Weare, 2010).

The young people interviewed wanted their parents to respect them and treat them as friends, yet also provide guidance and support when needed. These wants most closely resemble the authoritative parenting style discussed earlier in the chapter and contrast starkly with the "superior/inferior relationship between parent and child" characteristic of autocratic parenting (Milevsky et al., 2007, p. 39). In the present study, when explaining how connections went both ways, young people talked about contributing more to the family as they got older. Having responsibilities within the family can assist young people's sense of family connectedness (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006) and may be a way of letting young people know they have an important and valued role within the family.

It is unsurprising that young people want their worth and individuality recognised, especially given the identity formation that occurs during adolescence and young people's

increased concern with self image (Marotz & Allen, 2013; Schulz & Kerig, 2012). Working out who they are and what they believe in are key tasks for young people in Western cultures, and the external feedback from social relationships can be particularly important for maintaining a sense of self-worth while they are questioning their own relevance and individuality (Rathus, 2006). Middle adolescence, in particular, is seen as a time to develop a sense of self, which may explain the extent to which the participants in the present study, aged 15 and 16, talked about feeling valued as an individual within their family (Berk, 2012).

Exploring whether other age groups express this need to feel valued to the same degree would help determine to what extent being valued is a need specific to this age group or is a more general connectedness need. Some differences were already evident between the interview participants (aged 15 and 16) and the perspectives expressed by the young persons' reference group (aged 17 and 18) at the second meeting, following the interviews. The reference group, when discussing young people's need to feel valued, felt that positive feedback lost its value if it was given too freely. They felt young people needed to be given honest and constructive feedback from parents and earn their parents' respect. They did, however, describe middle adolescence as an awkward stage with less certainty around friendship and identity, and conceded that at 15 or 16 they would have been more dependent on their family's support and positive feedback.

***Flexible understandings of development.*** The present study challenges the linear and universal application of developmental understandings of adolescence and encourages recognition of the diversity of young people and their experiences. The variety of responses from young people in the present study reinforces the need to avoid making assumptions about adolescents. Despite this caveat, there is much consensus about normal developmental changes in adolescence (see Berger, 2009; Santrock, 2011; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012).

Knowing what is normal and expected for teenagers in a given context can also be helpful for parents and can mediate conflict between parents and young people (Parkinson, 2011; Raising Children Network with the Center for Adolescent Health, 2010). The present study suggests parents need more information about adolescent development. This was most evidently displayed in the tension Michael reported between him and his mother since he began high school and her exclamations of ‘*Whatever happened to you?*’.

In the present study, young people felt that parents should remember what it was like to be a teenager, but also recognised that society has changed since their parents were young. Support for other aspects of developmental understandings also emerged, with their desire for privacy at home and to be valued by family. These aspects may reflect the ways adolescents are seen to become more self-conscious and sensitive to how others view them (Rathus, 2006).

The experiences of young people in the present study encourage us to understand the developmental perspective, while also supporting the childhood studies approach. Childhood studies avoids seeing young people as purely adult *becomings*, accords value to their perspectives, and reinforces the need to be flexible and to not expect all young people to develop in the same way (James & James, 2008; Korbin, 2006; Qvortrup, 1994). When considering the results of the present study, similar caveats are required. While the results provide important insights, they should be understood with a level of flexibility and with recognition of the unique circumstances of individual young people and their families.

This need to appreciate unique experiences and context is underplayed in quantitative studies on family connectedness. Future research to further understand young people’s experiences of family connectedness, especially research which pursues a more

representative sample, must ensure these cautions around flexible application and recognition of unique experiences are heeded.

**Family structure and the impact of divorce and separation.** In addition to developmental considerations, the present study offers some broader insights into the study of family connectedness, particularly in relation to the impact of divorce and how gender affects young people's experiences.

In the present study, young people from a variety of family structures reported ongoing positive family connections. The participants came from intact, separated and blended families and lived with different combinations of parents, step-parents, grandparents, siblings, step-siblings and foster siblings. In Jacobson and Rowe's (1999) study, unrelated and half siblings were more likely to report a lower sense of family connectedness than full siblings. In the present study, young people were more likely to consider half siblings, step-siblings, and step-parents an important part of family connectedness if they had lived together for a long time. Step-fathers who had been around since the participants were young children were considered important father figures. When young people did not live with step-relations or had only done so for a couple of years, they did not consider them to be family.

In the present study, divorce and separation had a limited impact on young people's sense of family connectedness in the long term. This finding contrasts with the higher likelihood of negative outcomes for those with divorced parents in general (Sweeting et al., 2010). Parkinson (2011) predicts that the increase in 'fragile families' (that is, children living other than with their two biological parents) will lead to adverse outcomes for increasing numbers of children. Direct comparisons to Parkinson's report (2011) are difficult as he does not specifically refer to family connectedness. In the present study it was clear, however, that parental separation did not affect young people's overall sense of connectedness in the long-

term, even if the initial period of parental separation was stressful. This finding is supported by Smart's (2006) research in which children reported that, over time, divorce became unremarkable.

Six of the participants saw their biological fathers rarely or not at all. In these cases, young people's sense of connection to their fathers was significantly diminished, but their overall sense of family connectedness did not appear greatly affected. Connections to their fathers were weakened by having little contact, time and communication with them, together with a lack of effort or interest from their fathers. Their experiences are supported by other research findings which highlight children's view of "proper parents" being those who continue to provide moral and emotional support post-separation (Smart, 2000). In the present study, the practical changes that can affect family life following parental separation were evident when fathers moved interstate or overseas for work.

Divorce can also be positive for young people (Smart, 2000; Sweeting et al., 2010). This was true for Jacob who had closer and calmer relationships with both his parents following their divorce. He reported less friction in his two households and a new strength from knowing they could get through difficult times. Two other young people reported that their safety and wellbeing had improved after ceasing contact with their fathers, demonstrating that families can be a cause of stress and violence as well as a source of support (Wilkinson-Lee, et al. 2011). These experiences reinforce that it is what families do - not how they are structured - that is important for young people's wellbeing and connectedness (Kinnear, 2002).

While family tension is typically seen to affect the bond between family members and to have a negative impact on adolescent mental health (AIHW, 2011; Mueller et al., 2011), in the present study, young people generally saw disagreements as a normal part of family life.



There were, however, some exceptions where family conflict made young people feel disconnected. Those young people most affected by family arguments also appeared to have less positive daily interactions than the other participants. This may suggest that positive points of connection may be necessary to buffer the impact of disagreements, or that regular disagreements can have flow-on effects to daily interactions. Arguments were most likely to occur due to stress originating from work, busy lifestyles or school.

Parkinson (2011) argues the commitment of marriage increases resilience and stability in families during difficult times. Many of the young people in this study who lived with both of their biological parents felt the security of their parents' relationship helped them feel secure. However, during difficult times, high levels of family support were evident for the participants regardless of how their family was structured. For many participants difficult times reinforced their sense of connectedness. Being able to cope with stressful times and periods of change are seen as signs of a strong family (AIHW, 2011), and this was true for the majority of the families in this research, whether the young person was living with their two biological parents or not.

In the present study, for some of the young people whose parents were married, their fear of the effects of divorce far outstripped the reality for the young people whose parents had divorced or separated.<sup>10</sup> The ways that stable home environments are seen to assist family connectedness and promote adolescent health may explain why divorce was more of an issue in the immediate aftermath for young people in the present study, but not so in the long run when a sense of stability had returned (AIHW, 2011).

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<sup>10</sup> For these young people, divorce may be a comparatively bigger disruption if their home environment is currently peaceful.

**Considering the impact of gender in relationships.** There was great similarity in the responses from male and female participants when describing what supported their sense of family connectedness. In other studies, gendered ways of defining wellbeing have appeared, with masculine constructions of wellbeing drawing attention to the value of technical mastery and shared activities, in comparison to the value placed on relationships and emotional closeness for wellbeing in young women (Berk, 2012; Wyn, 2009b). This distinction was only evident to a small degree in the present study, with male participants speaking regularly about the value of sharing an interest in sport with their brothers and fathers. In general, however, both male and female participants valued shared activities and emotional closeness. Some young people described being able to connect with their parent of the same gender because they shared similar interests and experiences, although the importance of relationships with the same gender parent did not appear as strongly in this study as it has in others (Bogard, 2005).

Other studies have reported a greater tendency for girls to be affected by family relationships and a lack of closeness to parents than boys (Crespo et al., 2010; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999; Mueller et al., 2011). In this study, while most young people felt very connected to their families and highly valued those connections, four of the male participants appeared relatively unconcerned about their family's ability to connect well all the time. Both genders were more likely to report closer relationships with their mothers than their fathers; they explained this was often because their mothers spent more time at home with them and filled the dominant caring role. Andrew's descriptions of going to his father for advice and seeking his mother when he needed to be comforted, are reflective of other research which views paternal relationships as including more shared leisure time and advice seeking, compared to maternal relationships which are characterised by more support, time together,

communication, and emotional closeness (Houlberg et al., 2011; Milevsky et al., 2007; Mueller et al., 2011).

Despite the similarity of gender responses in the present study, it is worth acknowledging the potential for gender variations in which factors best support feelings of connectedness and how much family relationships affect wellbeing. Future studies may further explore differences in male and female experiences of family connectedness and the connectedness factors they value most. The lack of gender differences in responses from young people in this study shows that many connectedness factors are important to young people regardless of gender.

### **9.5 Micro Reflections: Considering Key Insights into Young People and Families**

Having established how family connectedness is experienced by young people, the present study has identified factors at both the micro and macro levels that contribute to achieving and maintaining that sense of belonging and engagement. Key insights and points of reflection emerged about what young people need for family connectedness. In particular, participants provided insights into what is important to young people and the ways in which connectedness factors play out in the realities of daily life. With that knowledge, it is possible and valuable to develop practical recommendations for strengthening the relationship between young people and their families.

**Valuing the basics.** Young people's experiences highlight how simple routines and daily interactions can support connectedness. When family were mentally engaged with each other, fairly mundane daily interactions emerged as a central component for young people's connectedness with family. The value young people placed on time, communication, family support and doing things together – and the support found for these factors in the wider

literature – encourage us to acknowledge the importance of daily routines for family connectedness, and recognise the worth young people themselves place on that time.

**Valuing young people and their insights.** Having respect for young people's perspectives was a strong connectedness factor in the present study. This factor is supported by other research, in which children have also articulated their desire to be acknowledged and recognised as valuable members of society, with unique and valuable opinions (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010a). This study, guided by childhood studies, was grounded in the belief that young people have important and valid perspectives which are different from the way adults think (James & James, 2008). Throughout the interviews, young people identified how their views differed from adult ways of thinking; this reinforced the need to listen to what young people had to say about what was important for connecting to their family, rather than making assumptions.

The value of young people's perspectives was given additional depth by the nuanced understandings of connectedness that emerged from the qualitative interviews. Young people felt that parents could make incorrect assumptions about what they want, what they were thinking, and whether they felt connected. For example, Sophie reported that her parents thought her moodiness meant she wanted to be left alone, when in fact she was frustrated by the lack of time she had with them. This experience highlights how important it is for parents to communicate with young people and seek their point of view. The insights shared also demonstrate that young people are equipped to comment on and make decisions about the issues that affect them, and deserve opportunities for meaningful participation (Woodhead, 2010).

For the young people in this study, being treated as an individual was important, and they particularly resented being compared to their siblings. Angus advised parents to treat

siblings as individuals, while providing them with equal affection. Differential treatment of siblings by parents has been found in other research to have a strong influence on young people's mood and family connectedness (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999).

Throughout the interviews, young people were primarily focused on what the adults in their family could do to support connectedness. This raises questions about the influence young people feel they have on their family, and what responsibility they hold to make connections work effectively. Society positions young people to have little control over their lives (Wyn, 2009b) and this undervaluing of their perspectives was reflected in Alexandra's comment to me: *"I'm heaps younger than you so you probably don't think that's legit"*.

The present study supports the call from the Department for Children Schools and Families in the United Kingdom for young people to be more recognised and valued in society (DCSF, 2007). The findings of the present study encourage parents to communicate with young people, value what they have to say, and understand their connectedness needs. Young people's perspectives must be included for family connectedness interventions to be effective and including them in these interventions reinforces their role in achieving positive family outcomes.

**Recognising unique experiences and family contexts.** In the present study, there was very little difference in responses based on young people's gender, family structure, culture and type of school attended. The similarity of factors found between participants in the present study, and between the results of this study and the wider research, suggests common connectedness factors exist across different young people and population groups. Despite this commonality amongst the participant responses, there were only two connectedness factors discussed by all the young people interviewed – time and effective communication. Outside of these two major themes they were at least some young people for

whom the other themes were not relevant, highlighting the variety of the participants' experiences. This suggests that despite similarities, each family must be considered in its unique context.

The diversity of responses indicates that some connectedness factors are more or less important depending on the specific family context. For many of the young people, a strong sense of family culture enhanced their sense of connection to family. Michael, however, experienced a clash between school and family cultural values, demonstrating how culture, peers, and the school environment can affect young people's perceptions of what is normal and valuable within families. Other researchers have found different ways of connecting and varying levels of emphasis placed on connectedness factors depending on one's ethnicity (see Gonzalez et al., 2002; and Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

There was also variety in the way in which connectedness factors were expressed, negotiated and maintained across different families in the present study. For example, some families managed disagreements by ensuring they were resolved and not taken to heart, while others failed to resolve issues, leading to more intense arguments in the future. Other research has highlighted how, even within the same family, siblings can experience different environments (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999). This variety of experiences, across different families and even within families, highlights the individual needs of young people, the importance of speaking with each young person about what they need to feel connected, and the need for caution in any generalising of results.

While many important connectedness factors and examples of what they look like within families have been identified, it is essential to consider the individual needs of young people within their unique family context. One must avoid assumptions about what is needed to build connectedness and must not impose a one-size fits all model of connectedness. The

present study reinforces the findings of other research which acknowledges the variety among families and cultures, encourages recognition of young people's family context, and urges families to meet the individual needs of young people (Gonzalez et al., 2002; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Weare, 2010; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Families must - in consultation with young people - work out their own balance of connectedness factors and how they will achieve a sense of family connectedness.

**Variety of supporters.** Participants related to those around them in a variety of ways and found different points of connection with different family members. No one family member provided all the elements of connectedness discussed. Young people's sense of family connectedness was the result of many different relationships, each of which met different needs. These experiences are supported by other researchers who note how unlikely it is for one person to provide young people with all their support needs, and the value of having a variety of supporters for better perceived wellbeing (Neergaard et al., 2004; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007).

**Starting early.** Positive connections during childhood set a good foundation for young people's connections during adolescence. The experiences of those interviewed highlight the value of support prior to adolescence, the potential benefits of earlier interventions, and the need to consider extending recommendations of the research to include parents and practitioners involved with younger children. Bernat and Resnick (2009) note the powerful role these early relationships have in preventing health risk behaviours developing in adolescence. The importance of early connections is unsurprising considering the importance of positive experiences and secure attachments in childhood (Keenan & Evans, 2009; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). To help young people feel connected to family during adolescence, we also need to consider what happens before the teenage years.

Some interventions also need to be directed at the beginning stage of adolescence (Lawrence, 2005). In the present study, connectedness factors changed as young people aged; they often wanted more independence and emotional support as they got older. The young people reported deeper connections with parents as they aged because they could more easily relate to their parents' interests and have more in-depth conversations. These changes suggest education and intervention at the beginning of adolescence can play an important role in preventing issues, assisting parents to adapt as young people age, and maintaining connections throughout adolescence.

The majority of participants in the present study had experienced positive family connections for as long as they could remember. Therefore, it is hard to predict how implementing the identified connectedness factors at adolescence would support families who had limited family connectedness prior to adolescence. The importance of connections over time also highlights some of the difficulties for young people who live in out of home care, and those who support these young people, in building a sense of connectedness (Noble et al., 2014). It is important to consider how we can build a strong sense of connectedness for young people who have not had stable relationships in their childhood. The potency of family for the young people interviewed suggests young people are likely to remain open to parents' efforts to connect. This was particularly evidenced by the young person who continued to feel a sense of connection to her father despite not having seen him for many years due to safety concerns.

**Young people's influence on connectedness.** In the present study, young people largely focused on what those around them, particularly their parents, did to assist their feelings of connectedness. Yet it cannot be assumed that low family connectedness or difficult family relationships are primarily due to parents' behaviour. Other researchers note



that established links between young people's wellbeing and family connectedness are correlated, with the causal direction not established (Bogard, 2005; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999). They note that adolescents who are depressed may view their family more negatively and isolate themselves from family. Depression can affect how young people perceive family connectedness and how they interact with other family members, just as poor family connectedness influences young people's mood (Bogard, 2005; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999). Young people play an active role within their family environments and their issues can negatively impact family relationships over time (Crespo et al., 2010; Jacobson & Rowe, 1999).

Few of the young people in the present study acknowledged their own role in making connections work effectively. Acknowledging young people's role in achieving positive connections is important to help us recognise the influential role of young people within families and ensure the focus and responsibility for effective connections does not rest solely with parents. Systems theory reinforces that individuals within a family are interdependent and can all influence the functioning of the whole family system (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Crespo et al., 2010). Young people also understood they could not have everything their own way all the time and that other family members had their own needs.

Young people, particularly those with a depressed mood, may need assistance to recognise the family connectedness that exists for them and the efforts of others in their family to connect (Houlberg et al., 2011). Young people in the present study reported sometimes losing sight of their family connectedness in everyday life. The opportunity to reflect on their family connectedness during the interviews made some of the participants more aware of how positive their family connections were and helped them recognise the efforts their parents made.

In addition to helping young people recognise the connections within their family, it is important to consider how the higher likelihood of positive responses in the interview context may have affected the results of the present study. At the second reference group meeting to discuss the interview results, the young people also suggested that the responses in the interviews were likely to be more positive than they would feel on a daily basis because they were taking the time to think about their relationships. Young people's mood on the day of the interview may also have affected their feelings toward family. The higher likelihood of positive perceptions of family in the interviews is not a significant issue for the present study given its aim was primarily to discover what works for young people's connectedness.

In concluding the reflections on interpersonal family relations, it is worth noting how the connectedness factors discussed overlapped and supported each other. This was most evident in the way common interests supported other factors like effective communication, doing things together and enjoying each other's company. This intertwining of connectedness factors reminds us of the complex fashion in which these factors operate within families. Some of the young people who felt very connected to their family felt there was something intangible about the way their family worked that seemed to exist above and beyond the more concrete factors they could identify. Achieving positive family connections will involve a unique style and balance of factors within each family.

## **9.6 Macro Reflections: Considering Young People's Experiences in the Broader Social Context**

Importantly, the dynamics within families do not exist in isolation from the broader social context. While young people's insights in the present study highlight important details about the internal workings of family connectedness, there are also bigger ideas evident in

young people's stories that need to be considered. The social determinants of health are well recognised and the present study demonstrates how broader social conditions affect everyday family life and family connectedness (AIHW, 2011; Morgan & Haglund, 2009; Wyn, 2009b).

Other research suggests social issues are too commonly addressed as issues of the individual and we need to better understand changes across the population, and respond at the policy level to effectively support children's wellbeing (Parkinson, 2011; Weeks, 2000). Recognising the influence of the social context on young people and families is important for designing sustainable interventions. It ensures individual families are viewed within the broader social context, their strengths and resources are recognised, and the underlying reasons for the degree, presence or absence of connectedness are identified (Weeks, 2000).

Social changes that appeared particularly relevant to young people's experiences in the present study included: the rise individualism (macro) and the increasing reach of work, school and social life into the home (meso and exo). Relating the global themes discussed in the previous three chapters to broader social developments provides valuable insights into the meso, exo and macro context affecting families and young people.

**Support in the immediate environment.** The social context within which families function has several levels. While young people primarily focused on the support within their immediate family, some participants acknowledged the presence and value of being supported by other families or their school community. Parents and their children benefit from being connected into strong family and community networks; families with weak networks struggle to support young people's social, psychological and educational development (Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008). Well networked families, in comparison, can

access greater social support, material capital and information on a daily basis and during difficult times (AIHW, 2011).

In the present study, it was clear that the key organisations in family members' lives, particularly work and school, were interrelated with family life and could affect family connectedness. The potential for work, school and young people's social lives to increasingly encroach into the home environment is exacerbated by technological advances and increased use of social media which has created an expectation that we will be available all the time (Strasburger et al., 2010; Wajcman et al., 2008). While the primary focus of this study was exploring what was happening within families, the impact of mesosystemic interactions and outside pressures and expectations was clear.

Young people's connections to peers, school and the wider community are all important for wellbeing, but they do not appear to replace the important role of connections to family for young people (Yugo & Davidson, 2007). The idea of family has great currency and resiliency in Australian society (Barker, 2012). In the present study, young people clearly desired to be connected to their family and had definite ideas about what support was normal and expected from families. This was exemplified by Cassie who had an ongoing desire to stay connected with her father despite a history of domestic violence. Olivia expected her father to show ongoing effort, support and interest in her despite him moving interstate after her parents' separation. Barker (2012) notes how resilient young people's hopes for a normal family can be. In his research with homeless youth, many longed for ongoing contact with their families despite difficult relationships. Dwyer and Miller (2006) also note how young people who have been removed or run away from their family continue to long for connection to family.

**Individualism.** Beyond the ways families can be supported by their immediate environment, broader social structures and values also affect family connectedness. An influential social change, in which young people's experiences should be examined, is the increasing individualisation of society (Wyn, 2005). Individualism and its focus on personal success and fulfilment, is a defining feature of modern society and the social change that has occurred over the last few decades (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Wyn, 2005).

Individualism creates a perception that people are disconnected from other people and their environment and overshadows the importance of family, care for others and connectedness (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Lawrence, 2005). Eckersley, et al. (2006b) note how the idea of the "separate self" can impact on family life and the value of family interactions (p. 14).

The ways in which societal developments stemming from individualism have undermined the value of family connectedness contrast with the participants' desire for strong family connections (Eckersley et al., 2006b). The young people interviewed clearly valued being engaged in family life and having engaged family members. They also noted that family members were not always mentally engaged during the time they had together. In the context of social values which devalue connections, and the reality that we are often blind to the impact of the culture in which we live, family members need to make a conscious effort to prioritise family time and engage with each other (Eckersley et al., 2006b). For some young people in the present study their ethnic culture or sense of faith placed high value on family togetherness. Their experiences suggest that cultural values that prioritise connection with family may temper the influence of individualistic values.

Young people's strong desire to be valued as individuals by their family may also reflect increased individualism in Australian society. Individualism has played an important

role in defining people as individuals, and allowing them to pursue a greater diversity of pathways. It has, however, also placed an increased emphasis on autonomy, personal responsibility for one's health, and developing one's unique identity (Eckersley et al., 2006b; Lawrence, 2005; Wyn, 2009b). While it is important to show interest in young people and help them feel valued, we must be cautious not to exacerbate the already high expectations on them for personal success in an individualistic society (Eckersley et al., 2006b). The present study provides an important counterbalance to individualism by critiquing individualistic values and highlighting the importance of the family environment.

**Time, work expectations and materialism.** The second key factor which needs to be considered in the broader context is the importance young people in the present study placed on time with family and, in some cases, their desire for more time. This desire for more time with family contrasts with the developmental view of adolescents moving away from family towards increasingly important peer relationships (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). If this desire for time was found to be representative of young people more generally, it raises questions about the pressures on families and the need for broader family and societal interventions.

Many young people were particularly frustrated with the ways their parents' work commitments interfered with their ability to be at home, and to be mentally engaged in family life when they were at home. Similar concerns were shared by the Iranian youth in Parvizy and Ahmadi's (2009) study, who felt the more their parents worked, the less emotional support and attention they gave to their children. These concerns highlight some of the social costs associated with the prioritisation of economic outcomes at the expense of social wellbeing and relationships (Wyn, 2012).

Before criticising parents for working too much, the broader social context must be taken in to account. Parents do not necessarily want to choose work over family life, indeed, for many adults, family life is more interesting and satisfying than work (Edgar, 2000). Pressure to work long hours comes from a number of sources including: rising costs of living, peer pressure, more volatile work conditions, changing priorities and values – including the rise of materialism and the economic rationalism associated with neoliberal policies, and expectations that people will be contactable by phone and email after work hours (Bessell & with Mason, 2014; Weeks & Quinn, 2000; Wyn, 2005). The cost of living and social pressures now often demand families have dual incomes and make it difficult for parents to work part time even though many wish to prioritise raising their children (Bittman & Pixley, 2000; Edgar, 2000).

In the present study, both mothers' and fathers' work could interfere with family time. In the majority of cases, fathers worked longer hours than mothers, although all mothers worked at least part-time and some had very extensive work commitments. Due to their generally more flexible work commitments, mothers were more likely to be home when participants got home from school. Many young people identified this greater contact with their mothers led to stronger connections than they had with their fathers.

Young people in the interviews understood the reality of parents needing to work, but were still very critical of the ways it impacted on family time. This was supported by the young people, aged 11-19, in Parvizy and Ahamdi's (2009) study. In their study, when parents lost sight of young people's emotional needs as a result of financial pressures, the young people were more critical of their parents' behaviour than the money problems themselves.

In contrast, the young persons' reference group in the present study, now aged 17 and 18, recognised their parents' work as necessary to provide for their material needs and were cautious about offending their parents or appearing selfish for complaining about the impact of parents' work hours. They advised me to be careful in communicating young people's concerns about the impact of parents' work. Their advice reinforces the need to acknowledge wider pressures on parents and the necessity of work when discussing young people's desire for more family time. The reference group's increased acceptance of their parents' work commitments may also reflect changing needs and attitudes as adolescents age.

The experiences of young people in the present study promote the importance of family connectedness in an increasingly individualistic and materially-focused society. It was difficult to assess the impact of materialism on the families of those interviewed as the present study did not collect data on parents' work hours or their reasons for working. Young people's frustrations at their parents for being distracted by work, alongside the prevalence of materialism in Australia culture, should encourage parents to question their assumptions about work, time and commitments.

While the present study encourages parents to examine their work commitments and the reasons for them, it does not wish to judge parents for their choices. Rather, it encourages further critique of the competing financial, structural and social demands placed on families, and the ways that policy frameworks and economic developments can play out in people's lives, affecting personal relationships and mental health (Wyn, 2012). To reduce pressure on parents and help them find the time and energy to fully engage in family life, this study supports Wiseman's (2000) call to address the relationship between income and work so that



men and women can both fully participate in their employment while still providing quality care for their children.

**Stress, busy lives and the rate of change.** Families can be a source of stress as well as support (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). In the present study, high levels of stress within families negatively affected young people's sense of family connectedness. Families were more able to engage with each other when the home environment was relaxed. Parents' work stress and how they handle it have flow-on effects for young people's wellbeing and the parent-child relationship. Young people also experience stress outside the home (Cappa et al., 2011; Glover et al., 1998).

The increasing demands on young people from peers and school can create tension at home if those demands interfere with family obligations (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Many young people are also involved in a variety of external activities including sport, casual employment, and other groups or activities that reduce family time and may lessen family connectedness (Mueller et al., 2011). These pressures do not apply only to adolescents; in Bessell and Mason's (2014) study with 8-12 year olds, the participants also wanted more time with parents, and identified how long working hours of parents and their own extra-curricular activities and homework affected time and connections with family. Clearly, any critique of the stress and busyness experienced by families should not be limited to parents.

Young people's lives are fundamentally different from when their parents were young and new technologies and the more rapid rates of change risk widening the gap of understanding between parents and young people (Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009; Wyn, 2005). In the present study, young people felt the generation gap to their parents made it difficult to relate to each other as they felt their parents did not understand what it was like to be a

teenager today. To bridge the gap between generations, factors for connectedness identified by the young people in the present study, such as communication and valuing young people's perspectives, are particularly important.

In concluding the consideration of how the broader social context impacts young people's experiences of family connectedness, it is worth revisiting a few key points. Firstly, it is crucial to recognise the influence of the environment in which families are embedded and consider the effects of social change on young people's mental health (R. White & Wyn, 2013). In the present study, the participants were clear that work, school and technology use impacted what happens inside families. Secondly, the participants' experiences, together with the use of systems theory during analysis, encouraged further consideration of the broader societal values which can devalue connections, including materialism and individualism. Using systems theory in practice settings not only encourages recognition of a family's strengths, but can also be used to help families unearth and take more control of taken-for-granted factors impacting on their lives, such as extensive work hours. Finally, policy-makers need to consider how the structures in which families are embedded can provide a positive and supportive environment for family connectedness.

### **9.7 What Does This Mean for Families, Social Workers and Schools?**

The qualitative insights into young people's experiences of family connectedness offer essential information for understanding, building and maintaining family connectedness. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the implications of the study and specific recommendations for young people, parents, schools and social workers.

**Recommendations for parents.** The present study provides detailed information and examples to help parents understand and connect with young people in the years leading up

to and during adolescence. To summarise the insights from the young people in the present study, a number of recommendations have been developed.

To connect with their children, and foster overall family connectedness, it can be helpful for parents to:

- Spend time with young people, eat dinner as a family, communicate openly and listen to what young people have to say,
- Prioritise family time and try to ensure they have the time and energy to engage fully in family life,
- Remember that their opinions hold great weight in young people's lives and that family is of ongoing importance for young people despite increasing independence and the growing significance of peer relationships,
- Value young people for their individuality and avoid making sibling comparisons,
- Respect young people as important members of the family who have valuable opinions, and
- Consider ways to manage and reduce family stress, while still keeping young people aware of and involved in family issues and decision-making.

In addition, it is important to:

- Connect with children as early as possible,
- Adapt their parenting as young people age and mature,
- Remember that young people value boundaries and parents showing interest in their lives (even if they tell you to stop nagging them),
- Balance boundaries with appropriate freedom and trust, and
- Consider the impact of their family's technology use on connectedness.

When considering these recommendations to help connect with their children, it is important for parents to communicate with young people about their individual needs.

When trying to improve family connectedness, it is also helpful for parents to consider how broader social pressures and values are influencing their lives. One of the most important, but difficult, tasks for parents is to balance work and family time. While most time and energy spent on work is likely non-negotiable, parents may still examine why, for example, they are working overtime or whether the family needs a new car, and the impact of these decisions on family time and connections. If work commitments are unavoidable but interfere with family time, parents can explain to young people their reasons for working and be clear that they value family time. Paying attention to young people's interests offers an easy and practical way to connect with young people and further support connectedness by encouraging more time together and opening another avenue to communication.

**Recommendations for young people.** While the young people interviewed largely focused on what others in the family can do to support connectedness, and the recommendations of the study are primarily aimed at adults, many of the recommendations for building connectedness are also useful for young people. Communicating openly, showing interest in their parents' lives, prioritising family time, and considering the impact of their outside activities and technology use on this time are all important ways young people can contribute to family connectedness. Young people should consider the role they can play in supporting family connectedness, and remain open to parents' efforts and new attempts to connect. Young people have different and important insights from adults, and need to clearly communicate their needs for adults to be able to effectively support them.

**Recommendations for schools.** While schools were not a major focus of the present study, they can play a key role in supporting young people's mental health and family

connectedness (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999; Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011). Young people in the present study reported that the school environment could indirectly influence their connectedness, with positive experiences likely to send them home in a good mood and difficult times at school having a negative impact on connections at home. The present study argues that schools can assist family connectedness by creating a safe and friendly school atmosphere; educating young people and parents about family connectedness; and providing additional support for disconnected families and young people at risk. Young people's desire for time with family, and the way their own commitments can interfere with this, should encourage schools to consider how academic and extra-curricular expectations of young people may intrude on family time.

While more active support for family connectedness might not immediately appear to be the responsibility of schools, helping families connect supports young people's wellbeing, which is, in turn, central to academic success (Kidger et al., 2009; Weare, 2010). Schools are an ideal setting for delivering preventative health strategies to a large audience of parents and young people; schools could provide educational seminars on family connectedness to support their students' wellbeing. Parenting education programs have been used to help parents understand young people's needs and their parenting roles, and improve parent-adolescent skills in communication and building and maintaining relationships within the family (Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008; Parkinson, 2011; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009).

The transition to high school is an appropriate time for these programs, although young people's experiences in the present study suggest parents of younger children would also benefit from similar information (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999; Parkinson, 2011). The findings of the present study and the model of family connectedness make an important contribution to information available for parent education on connecting with young people.

In addition to these preventative measures, school welfare staff could also use the findings of the present study to assist families and young people when connectedness breaks down. In the present study, it was those young people who were least connected to their family that saw the greatest potential for schools to support family connectedness. The ways the research findings can assist therapeutic interventions are considered in the recommendations for social workers outlined below.

**Contributions to social work.** The present study offers important contributions to social work practice. The findings will assist those working with young people and families to build connectedness, and, as a result, support young people's wellbeing and mental health. Consideration of young people's unique family circumstances and working with all family members to improve relationships are well supported strategies for assisting young people's mental health (Mueller et al., 2011; Weare, 2010). The potential for this study to support therapeutic work with young people and families should not be limited to social workers. Psychologists, counsellors, family therapists and school welfare staff can also benefit from young people's insights into family connectedness and the use of systems theory to consider the broader context when supporting young people's mental health.

The family connectedness model provides a useful assessment and therapeutic tool for practice. The model can be used to assess strengths and areas for improvement, and provides a useful discussion point when working with families to build stronger connections. The model may help young people and their families find comfort in knowing others share similar concerns and encourage them to consider the range of factors influencing connectedness. To ensure individual experiences are accounted for, young people should be prompted to add new factors to the model that are important to their unique sense of connectedness. Ensuring young people are consulted and their voices are heard, valued and play a role in directing

interventions is essential. The model of family connectedness, and its consideration of factors outside the family, implements the recommendations of other researchers to look at the broader context when addressing youth wellbeing (Wilkinson-Lee et al., 2011).

The findings of the present study also provide support for the social work profession and the types of interventions social workers offer. The results support a flexible approach to working with families that recognises young people's expertise and considers the role of broader environmental factors. The present study provides an evidence base for such an approach, and also validates key theoretical perspectives that underpin social work, including systems theory, the strengths perspective, and postmodernism. In addition, the findings of the present study support key ethical guidelines of the profession, including recognition of the unique worth of each individual, responding to people in their environment, and avoiding blaming and pathologising approaches (AASW, 2010; J. Walsh, 2010).

Evidence-based practice is increasingly demanded by health professionals and social workers. However, much of the research available for social workers to draw on, particularly in the area of family connectedness, are quantitative studies by psychologists and other health professionals, which often downplay the individuality of experiences and circumstances (Miller, 2001; Plath, 2009). Social work has struggled to balance remaining flexible in responding to its diverse client base with the need to use evidenced based practice to ensure professional credibility in a society that values scientific knowledge (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman, & Howard, 2006; D Plath, 2006; E. Woodman, 2012). Social workers play a unique and valuable role in the health setting and need to be able to draw on evidence-based studies that justify their approaches in an environment dominated by medical and scientific perspectives (Macdonald, 2006; Miller & Nilsson, 2009; Yip, 2004). The present study offers empirical research findings on which social workers can draw on to support their

practice by encouraging flexibility in practice and ensuring individual circumstances and environmental factors are considered.

**Contributions to youth wellbeing.** The present study began from the premise that family connectedness is central to young people's wellbeing. While this link between the two was not a major focus of the present study, it is important to consider how the insights about family connectedness that have emerged relate to wellbeing. Many of the elements identified by the young people in the present study as important for their sense of family connectedness are also important for wellbeing. Family connectedness has been established as central for young people's wellbeing because it provides them with care, a sense of belonging and a secure base, and helps their sense of self-worth (Glover et al., 1998; Robinson et al., 2011; Tummalala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2013).

The participants' desire to be supported, listened to, accepted, and valued by their family, and the sense of belonging and relatedness that developed through having things in common, mirrors elements of wellbeing identified in other research. Eating dinner as a family and recognition of young people's interests and unique worth have also been established as supportive of youth mental health (AIHW, 2011; Bogard, 2005; Parvizy & Ahmadi, 2009). These areas of alignment reinforce the established link between wellbeing and connectedness. In addition, the greater understanding of family connectedness emerging from the present study will help build connections within families and, subsequently, improve youth wellbeing. In doing so, the findings respond to the high rates of mental health disorders experienced by young Australians and a decline in social connectedness.

Young people's strong desire for ongoing relationships with their family in the present study supports intrinsic elements of wellbeing, including the importance of family, loving relationships, care for others and connectedness (Eckersley et al., 2006a; Kagitcibasi,



2005). The participants' experiences challenge the values promoted by materialistic and individualistic ideals and the notion that young people are working towards a state of independence from family. The most important overarching sentiment of the participants – how greatly they valued family relationships - reinforces the human need for connectedness and the ways contentment and meaning are found in interdependent relationships with people and the wider community (Resnick et al., 1993). The research findings can also, therefore, be used to promote youth wellbeing by reinforcing the value of interdependent relationships and ongoing connections to family as young people get older, and challenging broader social values that undermine the importance of connections.

**Theoretical contributions.** The findings of the present study make an important contribution to our knowledge of family connectedness. The research has generated new theory about the elements of family connectedness and what those elements looks like in depth. In addition to its practical applications for work with families and young people, the model of family connectedness can be further explored and tested to determine how relevant and applicable it is to other young people.

The model of family connectedness also ensures individual experiences and family dynamics are considered alongside a broader view of the context in which families exist. As argued throughout the thesis, this consideration of both individual family interactions and the context that surrounds families ensures interventions to support family will be more effective and sustainable, and relevant to unique family situations. It also promotes challenges to the broader pressures affecting families, not just the behaviour within them.

In addition, while there is much research at the micro level of young people's mental health and family relationships, and broader critiques of the macro social changes that impact on families and young people's health, the use of systems theory to guide the present study

has drawn these two viewpoints together – bridging the gap between social critiques and individual families' experiences of connectedness. Speaking to young people about their families and using a systems lens throughout analysis has provided clear examples of how social changes affect individual young people and their families.

The present study demonstrates the value of using systems theory to guide research; it ensures research to support mental health considers the broader environment, and provides an evidence base which supports and guides social workers and their approaches to working with people, families and communities. More social workers should conduct research using a systems lens to build a greater evidence base for practice that is still flexible in considering the micro, meso, exo, and macro environments and unique experiences. This research has highlighted the benefits of a social work lens for both research and practice.

The combination of systems theory and childhood studies provides a particularly useful lens for ensuring young people's perspectives are valued and research respects the need for flexible approaches which recognise the broader context of people's lives. For the study of family connectedness, these two perspectives allowed the study to address two research gaps simultaneously by adding the voices of young people and also considering contextual factors affecting families. In addition, the success of this combined theoretical approach offers an important example of how the use of multiple perspectives can expand research approaches, and keep numerous elements in mind during the design, implementation and analysis of research.

**Contributions to conducting qualitative research.** While childhood studies and systems theory are not uncommonly used to guide research, it is uncommon to have their perspectives combined within the one research project. Used together, they succeed in mitigating each other's limitations and considering issues from both the perspective of those

who experience them and from the wider contextual level. Combining these two levels of insight is essential to achieve effective outcomes that are readily applicable to people's lives but also respond to the surrounding environment.

The particular methods used also provide an example of how credible and robust qualitative research can be conducted while ensuring participants' views remain central and the researcher's subjectivity is managed. The engagement of the young persons' reference group, strategies used to ensure reflexivity and the use of thematic analysis were all important parts of this process. The young persons' reference group ensured greater involvement and direction of the research by the group under study, and their suggestions played an important role in keeping interpretations grounded in participants' experiences.

In combination with the reference group and the other strategies used to manage researcher subjectivity, thematic networks analysis provided a structured and thorough analysis method that can be easily understood and critiqued by others. The combination of approaches and methods used in this study proved particularly useful in exploring the diversity of people's experiences, while also ensuring a structured and rigorous study. This approach offers an holistic view of the different system levels impacting on families and young people and a credible approach to research that can extend beyond the social work profession.

## **9.8 Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

**Final reflections on the research process.** The findings of the present study make an important contribution to knowledge of family connectedness from the perspectives of young people and, in doing so, responds to the high rates of mental health disorders among young Australians. The rigour of the research process, including the design, implementation and analysis of the study adds certainty to the findings. In particular, the combination of the

young persons' reference group, thematic networks analysis to structure data analysis, a research journal to assist with reflexivity, and systems theory to highlight the broader social context, helped ensure credible and robust findings.

Although the original plan for conducting the research was carried out largely as intended, some roadblocks were encountered. In particular, getting access to young people through schools proved more difficult than expected. Of the 36 schools contacted about the research, only five responded and allowed access to speak with their students about the research. The number of young people from these schools proved sufficient to reach a point of saturation. If saturation had not occurred within the schools that allowed access, alternative methods for advertising directly to young people, through the use of social media or peer recommendations may have been required.

While the present study achieved its objective of building greater depth of knowledge about connectedness within families, in reflecting on the completed study, some areas could have been managed differently. The study may have benefited from having collected more detailed demographic information from the participants. In particular, more detail about their parents' employment and marital status may have proved useful during analysis and comparison of young people's experiences.

In addition, more use could have been made of the young person's reference group. In both reference group meetings, young people's input impacted and changed the research in important ways, including what questions were asked in interviews and how themes were labelled and explained. Their positive influence and my increased appreciation of the childhood studies approach suggest that having young people even more actively involved in the design and analysis of the research may have been beneficial.

I recognise that adults have an ongoing role in research with children, that valid and important research can still be conducted at varying levels of child participation, and that we must be careful not to suggest that young people's expertise on their own lives makes them expert in the lives of other young people (Thomas, 2007; Tisdall, 2012; Woodhead, 2008). I can, however, see that having had young people assist with the analysis and allowing young people to develop the interview questions from scratch may have led to further insights into young people's views on family connectedness. It would be interesting to see the conclusions to which young people would come, from analysing the same data and what questions they would develop to explore young people's experiences of family connectedness.

The original decision to focus on 15 and 16 year old participants given the developmental view that they have passed hormonal conflict with parents, but are still more invested in things working well at home than older adolescents, might, in hindsight, also be reconsidered. I was conscious throughout the research to avoid assumptions about those I interviewed, and have used young people's experiences to challenge common developmental assumptions about young people throughout this chapter. I have, however, on another level (unintentionally) encouraged aged-based assumptions about normal teenage behaviour and implied that 15 and 16 year olds' perspectives may be more legitimate than 13 and 14 year olds'.

I still believe narrowing the sample by age is an appropriate choice, given the even greater diversity that will exist across 11 to 18 year olds. With the greater understanding I have gained of childhood studies, however, I believe I could have reasoned this age choice purely based on the potential for greater similarities between those close in age, without reinforcing normative assumptions or suggesting that one age group's viewpoint may be more valuable than another. This final point of reflection and my initial acceptance of

elements of the developmental perspective reinforce the importance of researchers continuing to reflect on and challenge their position throughout the course of the research.

**Recommendations for future research.** While this study has offered much to our understanding of family connectedness and ways to support young people's mental health, there are a number of areas that would benefit from further research. Saturation was reached with the particular group of young people interviewed, but there was no scope within the research timeframe to comprehensively compare different population groups. Future research could determine how representative the experiences of the young people in the present study are. Research with other population groups and those in early or late adolescence will also be useful in identifying any differences in family connectedness due to circumstances, culture or age. In the present study, young people's gender and culture were not largely influential in what supported their sense of family connectedness.

The different viewpoint offered by the young persons' reference group at 17 and 18 years of age, suggest the most important differences might emerge from interviewing young people of different ages. Interviewing 11-14 year olds may be useful given this is a time commonly assumed to involve increased arguments with parents and is also considered an important age for preventative interventions (Berk, 2012). Older adolescents (17+) may be able to give more reasoned responses about their parents, be more empathetic to adult decisions and reflect on the impact of parent behaviour in earlier years, as was evidenced by the young people's reference group in this study. A longitudinal study which tracks the same young people and their experiences of family connectedness throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood would likely reveal important data on how perspectives on connectedness can change over time. Such an approach is supported by Bernat and Resnik (2009) who highlight the dynamic nature of connections and changing connectedness needs

throughout adolescence. A longitudinal study, with multiple interviews, may also mitigate the higher likelihood of positive perceptions of family connectedness that can arise from a one-off opportunity to reflect on connections, such as in the present study.

In the present study, recruiting participants from schools excluded young people who were not in school and may be disconnected from support structures. The focus of this research was on what *does* work for young people feeling connected to family, but talking to young people who are disconnected from family and formal supports such as school would also deepen our understanding of family connectedness and the factors which lead to disconnection.

Young people's assertion that they have different perspectives from their parents suggests research into parents' experiences of family connectedness would also make an important contribution. Understanding adult perspectives would help ensure differing viewpoints within families are understood and connections can be achieved in a way valued by all family members. Future research could examine the effectiveness of the family connectedness model as a therapeutic tool.

## 9.9 Conclusions

The present study responded to the lack of qualitative research into young people's experiences of family connectedness. This research makes an important contribution to supporting family connectedness and the mental health of young Australians. It expands our understanding of family connectedness and young people's experiences within families. This research is indebted to the 31 young people who shared their experiences and the 10 young people in the reference group who assisted with the design of the interviews and review of results. Their contributions allow us a valuable insight into young people's experiences of family connectedness.

The insights offered by young people and the six global themes that emerged from the interviews provide nuanced understandings of family connectedness and important detail and examples of how connectedness can be achieved within families. These tangible examples, which reflect the realities of family life, will support efforts to build and maintain family connectedness across adolescence and to educate parents on young people's needs.

The present study reinforces the importance of talking to young people. Young people demonstrated their capacity to reflect on and share their experiences, articulate their needs, and understand their impact on family connections. The quality and depth of their insights and the ways their perspectives could be undervalued by their family suggest we need to challenge the social positioning of young people as 'less' than adults, recognise their competence, and consult young people on matters that affect them.

The variety of responses from young people demonstrates that a one-size-fits-all approach to family connectedness is not appropriate and that individual young people need to be consulted on what works for them within their family context. The experiences of the young people in the present study encourage us to be aware of expected developments across adolescence, while avoiding assumptions and stereotypes that stop us from seeing the competence and individuality of young people. It is also important that we recognise when young people are struggling and do not reflexively attribute all moodiness to hormonal or developmental changes. While young people desire greater independence as they age, the importance of parents and families in their lives, and the way boundaries help young people know they are cared for, should not be forgotten.

Schools can play an important role in educating parents on family connectedness and the changing needs of young people. Broader social pressures and values must be considered in efforts to support family connectedness and families should be encouraged to identify the



social values that affect their priorities and interfere with family connections. To underpin changes within families, policy-makers need to consider how they can influence the broader social context to ensure Australian families have the time and energy for strong and lasting connections.

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## **Appendix A – Interview Guide**

### **Introduction**

The interview process is explained to participants, including the ongoing process of consent, how the semi-structured interview would work, audio recording, confidentiality, and the purpose of the research. Participants are then provided with the following definition of family connectedness:

Family connectedness is defined as “the family’s sense of belonging and being psychologically close in ways perceived and defined by the adolescent” (Crespo et al., 2010, p. 1394).

Participants are given a copy of the interview questions to read through and clarify anything before the interview begins.

### **Interview questions**

Questions about you and your family:

- Who is in your family?
- Can you tell me about the relationships in your family? Or - How do people in your family get on?
- What things make you feel connected to your family or give you a sense of belonging?
- Are there any family members you feel particularly connected to? Why?
- Can you give me an example that captures your experience of family connectedness?
- Has this feeling of being connected changed over time?
- Is there anything unique your parents do that helps you feel more connected than some of your peers?

At this point aspects of connectedness discussed so far are summarised to check for understanding and allow participants to add information.

- Is there anything you want your family to do differently to help you feel more connected?

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how your family connects? Is there anything else you want to add before we move on to more general questions?
- If there was one bit of advice you could give to parents to help them connect with their teenagers, what would it be?

Questions about whether schools can help:

- Do you think schools can support families to connect?
- What support could they provide?

**Conclusion** - Participants are asked if they would like to change or add any information. The 'thank you' gift and information on supports available to young people in Canberra is provided. Participants are asked if they would like to be sent the transcriptions if they are interested or would like to change or add any information. The researcher asks for participant feedback on the questions and interview process.

## Appendix B – Demographic Data Sheet

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

IDENTIFIER #: \_\_\_\_\_

This information is collected by the researcher to get a general understanding of the young people participating in this study and check whether people with common details have similar ideas about family connectedness. For example this will help the researcher see if, in general, females need different factors to feel connected to family than males.

#### 1. Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

#### 2. Age

- ☐ 15 years
- ☐ 16 years

#### 3. Type of School

- ☐ Public
- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Independent

#### 4. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

- ☐ Aboriginal
- ☐ Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- ☐ No

#### 5. Do you identify with a culture other than Australian?

- ☐ Yes (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No

#### 6. What language do you speak at home?

- ☐ English
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C – Ethics Approval



### Human Research Ethics Committee Committee Approval Form

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Prof Morag McArthur

Co-Investigators: [REDACTED]

Student Researcher: Elise Woodman

Ethics approval has been granted for the following project:

Young people's experiences of family connectedness

for the period: 1/5/2012 – 31/05/2013

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Register Number: 2012 59N

#### Special Condition/s of Approval

*Prior to commencement of your research*, the following permissions are required to be submitted to the ACU HREC:

[REDACTED]

The following standard conditions as stipulated in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (2007) apply:

- (i) that Principal Investigators / Supervisors provide, on the form supplied by the Human Research Ethics Committee, annual reports on matters such as:
  - security of records
  - compliance with approved consent procedures and documentation
  - compliance with special conditions, and
- (ii) that researchers report to the HREC immediately any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol, such as:
  - proposed changes to the protocol
  - unforeseen circumstances or events
  - adverse effects on participants

The HREC will conduct an audit each year of all projects deemed to be of more than low risk. There will also be random audits of a sample of projects considered to be of negligible risk and low risk on all campuses each year.

Within one month of the conclusion of the project, researchers are required to complete a *Final Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer.

If the project continues for more than one year, researchers are required to complete an *Annual Progress Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer within one month of the anniversary date of the ethics approval.

Signed: Jo Mushin Date: 04/04/2012  
(Research Services Officer, Melbourne Campus)

## Appendix D – Information Letters



### INFORMATION LETTER TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

#### RESEARCH PROJECT: WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Morag McArthur

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Elise Woodman

PROGRAMME IN WHICH ENROLLED: Social Work PhD

Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are writing to invite you to consent to your child participating in a research project about what creates a sense of connection to family for young people. This letter is designed to provide information to help you decide whether you want your child to contribute to this research. Through the project, we hope to find out more about what things help young people feel connected to their families, as family connectedness is important for young people's wellbeing. This research is conducted as part of a Social Work PhD degree and is designed to gather information that will be useful to parents, schools and counsellors in supporting family connectedness and young people's wellbeing.

This stage of this research involves talking to young people individually about what things give them a sense of connection to family and whether they think schools can support family connectedness. We would very much appreciate hearing your child's experiences and ideas. We are inviting your 15 or 16 year old child to participate in stage two of this research - a face-to face interview with a student researcher from the Australian Catholic University. The interview will usually take around an hour of your child's time and s/he can choose to do the interview at her/his school or the Australian Catholic University in Watson, at a time convenient for her/him. There are no foreseeable risks with this project.

Your child will be encouraged to only participate in a manner they are happy with and for as long as s/he is comfortable. The interviews will be audiotaped to ensure that the researchers have an accurate record. If your child requests that the tape be stopped, the researcher will do so and will take notes instead. The tapes will be used by researchers when writing the research report and will not be accessible to anyone outside the research team.

Your child's participation will contribute to building important knowledge about family connectedness from young people's perspectives. Individual participants may benefit from the time to reflect on the things that give them a sense of connectedness to family, and the knowledge that they are helping other young people by sharing their experiences. All participants will be offered a double movie voucher to thank them for their time.

The results of this research will be presented in a PhD thesis, we may also develop some articles which we will publish for others to read and a presentation for schools and parents. However, we will ensure that nothing in the report, articles, or presentation will identify particular young people or families.

Young people and their families have the choice about whether or not to participate- it is completely voluntary. Your child can withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason; including after the activities have begun. This research is separate from your child's school and if s/he chooses not to participate or withdraws consent at any stage this will have no impact on her/him at school.

Information provided by young people and families will remain confidential unless researchers are concerned about the health or wellbeing of children. If a young person discloses that they are being harmed, researchers are obliged to report their concerns to the appropriate authorities.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the Principal Supervisor:

Professor Morag McArthur  
 Australian Catholic University  
 Institute of Child Protection Studies  
 223 Antill Street  
 Watson ACT 2602  
 Phone: 02 6209 1225

At the end of the project, we will send interested families a summary of our findings. If you would like a copy of this summary, please check the box on the attached consent form.

This project is conducted with the approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. The research has also been approved by the ACT Education and Training Directorate and the Principal of your child's school.

If, during the course of the research, you have any complaint about the way that you have been treated or if you have a query that you think has not been dealt with by the project researchers, you may contact:

Human Research Ethics Committee Chair  
 Research Services  
 Australian Catholic University

Strathfield Campus

Locked Bag 2002

STRATHFIELD NSW 2135

Ph: 02 9701 4159

Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the result of your complaint.

If you are willing to consent to your child participating in this research, please complete and sign both copies of the attached Consent Form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Principal Supervisor or Student Researcher using the attached prepaid envelope or having your child return it to the locked box in the main reception of his/her school. Please provide a contact number on the consent form so that we can communicate with you and confirm the date, venue and time of the interview.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Morag McArthur

Principal Supervisor

Ms Elise Woodman

Student Researcher

**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B



## **INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS**

### **RESEARCH PROJECT: WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES?**

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Morag McArthur

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Elise Woodman

PROGRAMME IN WHICH ENROLLED: Social Work PhD

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project about what creates a sense of connection to family for young people. This letter is designed to provide information to help you decide whether you want to contribute to this research. Through the project, we hope to find out more about what things help young people feel connected to their families, as family connectedness is important for young people's wellbeing. This research is conducted as part of a Social Work PhD degree and is designed to gather information that will be useful to parents, schools and counsellors in supporting family connectedness and young people's wellbeing.

This stage of this research involves talking to young people individually about what things help them feel connected to family and give them a sense of belonging. These interviews will also ask young people for their opinion on whether schools can support families to connect and how schools might do this. We would very much appreciate hearing your experiences and ideas. We are inviting you to participate in stage two of this research - a face-to face interview with a student researcher from the Australian Catholic University. The interview will usually take around an hour of your time. You can choose to do the interview at your school or at the Australian Catholic University in Watson, at a time convenient for you. There are no foreseeable risks with this project.

The interview is completely voluntary – you can choose to be involved or not, as well as choosing which questions you wish to answer. At any stage, you can decide to no longer participate – without having to give a reason. This research is separate from your school and if you choose not to participate or withdraw consent at any stage this will have no impact at school.

Everything you share with the researcher is confidential. This means that we will only use information for the purposes of our research project, and only with permission. The only time when this may not be possible is if the researcher has serious concerns about the health or wellbeing of anyone involved in the research. In this case the researcher may have to let someone at school know so they can check whether that person is OK. In the research report no one will be identified either by name or any other information.

We may also write up the findings in an academic journal and develop a presentation for schools. However such articles and presentations will not identify you or your family.

With your permission, interviews may be audio taped to ensure that the researchers have an accurate account of what you say. However, if you request this, the tape can be stopped and the interviewer will take notes. The tapes will be used by the researcher when writing the research report and will not be accessible to anyone outside the research team.

Your participation will contribute to building important knowledge about family connectedness from young people's perspectives. This information will be useful in supporting the wellbeing of young people, by informing parents, schools and counsellors on how to support family connectedness. You may benefit from the time to discuss your family and reflect on the things that give you a sense of connectedness, and the knowledge that you are helping other young people by sharing your experiences. You will be offered a double movie voucher to thank you for sharing your time and knowledge.

At the end of the project, we will send interested participants a summary of our findings. If you would like a copy of this summary, please check the box on the attached consent form. You may also request a copy of the full report.

If you have any questions about the project, you can contact the Principal Supervisor:

Professor Morag McArthur  
 Australian Catholic University  
 223 Antill Street  
 Watson ACT 2602  
 Phone: 02 6209 1225  
 Email: [morag.mcarthur@acu.edu.au](mailto:morag.mcarthur@acu.edu.au)

This project is conducted with approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. The research has also been approved by the ACT Education and Training Directorate and the Principal of your school. If, during the course of the research, you have any complaint about the way that you have been treated or if you have a query that you think has not been dealt with by the project researchers, you may contact:

Human Research Ethics Committee Chair  
 Research Services  
 Australian Catholic University

Strathfield Campus  
Locked Bag 2002  
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135  
Ph: 02 9701 4159

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please complete and sign both copies of the attached Consent Form, keep one for your records and give one to the researcher. You can return your consent forms by post in the attached prepaid envelope, or bring them to school and put them in the locked box in the main reception. Please provide your email address or a contact number on the consent form so that the researcher can contact you to set-up and confirm the date, time and venue of the interview.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Morag McArthur  
Principal Supervisor  
Australian Catholic University

Ms Elise Woodman

Student Researcher

**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B

## Appendix E – Consent Forms



### CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

#### *Copy for researcher*

TITLE OF PROJECT: WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES?

NAME OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR MORAG McARTHUR

NAME OF STUDENT RESERACHER: MS ELISE WOODMAN

I, ..... (parent / guardian) have read and understood the information provided in the *Letter to Parents/Guardians*. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that my child, who is nominated below, may, if they agree, participate in:

- ☐ an audiotaped interview
- ☐ an interview that is not audiotaped

The interview will take around an hour of their time.

Realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time, I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify my child in any way.

- ☐ I would like a summary of the report to be sent to me at the end of the project.

Please provide your email or postal address here if you would like to receive a summary of the report:

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Please select your child's preferred venue and time for the interview:

☐ After school interview at school (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – Please circle day)

☐ Lunch time interview at school (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – Please circle day)

If you have a preferred date for the interview please indicate here: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_ (interviews will be conducted between the following dates \_\_/\_\_/\_\_ to \_\_/\_\_/\_\_)

Please provide a contact number so we can confirm the interview time and date with you and provide exact details on the room for the interview and where to meet the researcher on the day:

---

NAME OF PARENT / GUARDIAN: .....

SIGNATURE: .....

DATE: ...../...../.....

NAME OF CHILD: .....

SIGNATURE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE...../...../.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE...../...../.....

**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
 PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
 Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
 CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B



## CONSENT FORM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

### *Copy for researcher*

TITLE OF PROJECT: WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR FAMILIES?

NAME OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR MORAG McARTHUR

NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: MS ELISE WOODMAN

I, ..... (participant) have read (or had read to me) and understood the information provided in the *Letter to Participants*. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in:

- ☐ an audiotaped interview
- ☐ an interview that is not audiotaped

The interview will take one hour.

Realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time, I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

- ☐ I would like a summary of the report to be sent to me at the end of the project.

Please provide your email or postal address here if you would like to receive a summary of the report:

---



---

---



---

Please select your preferred venue and time for the interview:

☐ After school interview at school (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – Please circle day)

☐ Lunch time interview at school (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – Please circle day)

If you have a preferred date for the interview please indicate here: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_ (interviews will be conducted between the following dates \_\_/\_\_/\_\_ to \_\_/\_\_/\_\_)

Please provide a contact number or email so we can confirm the interview time and date with you and provide exact details on the room for the interview and where to meet the researcher on the day: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

SIGNATURE: .....

DATE: ...../...../.....

SIGNATURE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE...../...../.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE...../...../.....

**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
 PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
 Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
 CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B

## Appendix F – Young People’s Information Pamphlet

### Audio Taping

With your permission, interviews may be audio taped to ensure that the researcher has an accurate account of what you say. However, if you request this, the tape can be stopped and Elise will take notes.

The tapes will be used by Elise when writing the research report and will not be accessible to anyone outside the research team.



### What are my rights?

If you choose to participate in the project you have a number of rights around how you get involved. These include:

- The right to be **informed** about the project and your involvement in it
- The right to **choose** whether you get involved and how you get involved in the project and whether you want to **continue your involvement**
- The right to be **treated with respect** and to **not be harmed** or negatively affected because of your involvement
- The right to **not be discriminated against** because of who you are or what your background is
- The right to **benefit from the project (you will get a double movie voucher as a way of saying thanks)**
- The right to **stop** at any time
- The right to **complain** if you are not happy about how you are treated

Attributed to Tim Moore—Institute of Child Protection studies

### What do I do if I want to be involved?

If you would like to be involved, you and your parent/guardian need to sign the “Consent Form” and return it to the nominated staff member at your school. You will then be able to sign up for an interview time that suits you best.

### What if I have some more questions?

If you have any questions you can email Elise at: [eawood001@myacu.edu.au](mailto:eawood001@myacu.edu.au). She is the student researcher and will be the person you meet at your school. You can also contact Morag the Principal Supervisor who works at the uni and is overseeing the whole project.

Dr. Morag McArthur  
Australian Catholic University  
223 Antill Street  
Watson ACT 2602  
Phone: 02 6209 1225  
Email: [morag.mcarthur@acu.edu.au](mailto:morag.mcarthur@acu.edu.au)



### Any complaints?

If, during the course of the research, you have any complaint about the way that you have been treated or if you have a query that you think has not been dealt with by the project researcher, you may contact:

Human Research Ethics Committee Chair  
Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
Strathfield Campus  
Locked Bag 2002  
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135  
Ph: 02 9701 4159

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated.



≡
Australian Catholic University

**PhD Research Project**

## What Makes Young People Feel Connected to Their Families?

## What’s this all about?

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## What makes young people feel connected to their families?

### What’s the Project About?

Feeling connected to family is important for young people’s wellbeing. But little is known about what makes young people feel connected to their families.

Without knowing what young people think, it is hard to build family connectedness and support young people’s wellbeing.

We want to find out a bit more about what creates a sense of connection to family for young people. The project hopes to find out more about what young people think - to help parents, schools and counsellors support family connectedness and young people’s wellbeing.



This research is part of a social work PhD project and the results will be published in journal articles for schools and parents to help them understand what young people want and need to feel connected to their families.

If you are 15 or 16 and attend school in Canberra you are invited to participate in this research. This brochure is designed to provide information to help you decide whether you want to contribute to this research.

### Why we want your advice?

To improve ways to support young people’s wellbeing we need the advice and experiences of young people themselves. The information that you share may help other families to connect **and** help young people’s wellbeing.

You may benefit from the time to think about what your family does that makes you feel connected. We would very much appreciate hearing about your experiences and ideas.

### How are we going to find out about young people’s lives?

In this project we are hoping to talk to young people one-on-one about their lives. These interviews, which will take about an hour, can take place at your school (outside of class hours) at a time convenient for you.

### Who will be talking to young people?

The interviewer on this project will be Elise Woodman. Elise is a social worker and PhD student who has a lot of experience working with young people.

### If I got involved — what will I be asked?

The interview will ask questions about what things help you feel connected to your family and give you a sense of belonging. We will also be asking your opinions on whether schools can help families to connect and how they might do this.

### If I got involved — what choices would I have?

Your involvement in the project is completely voluntary. This means you can choose whether you want to be involved in an interview and what things you want to talk about (and things you don’t). At ANY time you can decide to no longer participate — without having to give a reason.



This research is separate from your school and if you choose not to participate at any stage this will have no impact at school.



### Is what I say confidential?

We will not personally identify you as having said particular things in the interview.

Elise may have to tell someone if she thinks you or someone else are unsafe, so they can check whether that person is OK. Elise will give all young people who participate information on where they can get support if needed and she may recommend you talk to someone if she thinks you might need extra help.

Otherwise we will do our best to keep what you say anonymous. In the research report no one will be identified either by name or any other information. If the findings of the research are published in an academic journal we will not identify you or your family.

## Appendix G – Support Services Handout



This information sheet lists some of the supports available for young people in Canberra. You will find information on what the support services offer and how to get in contact with them.

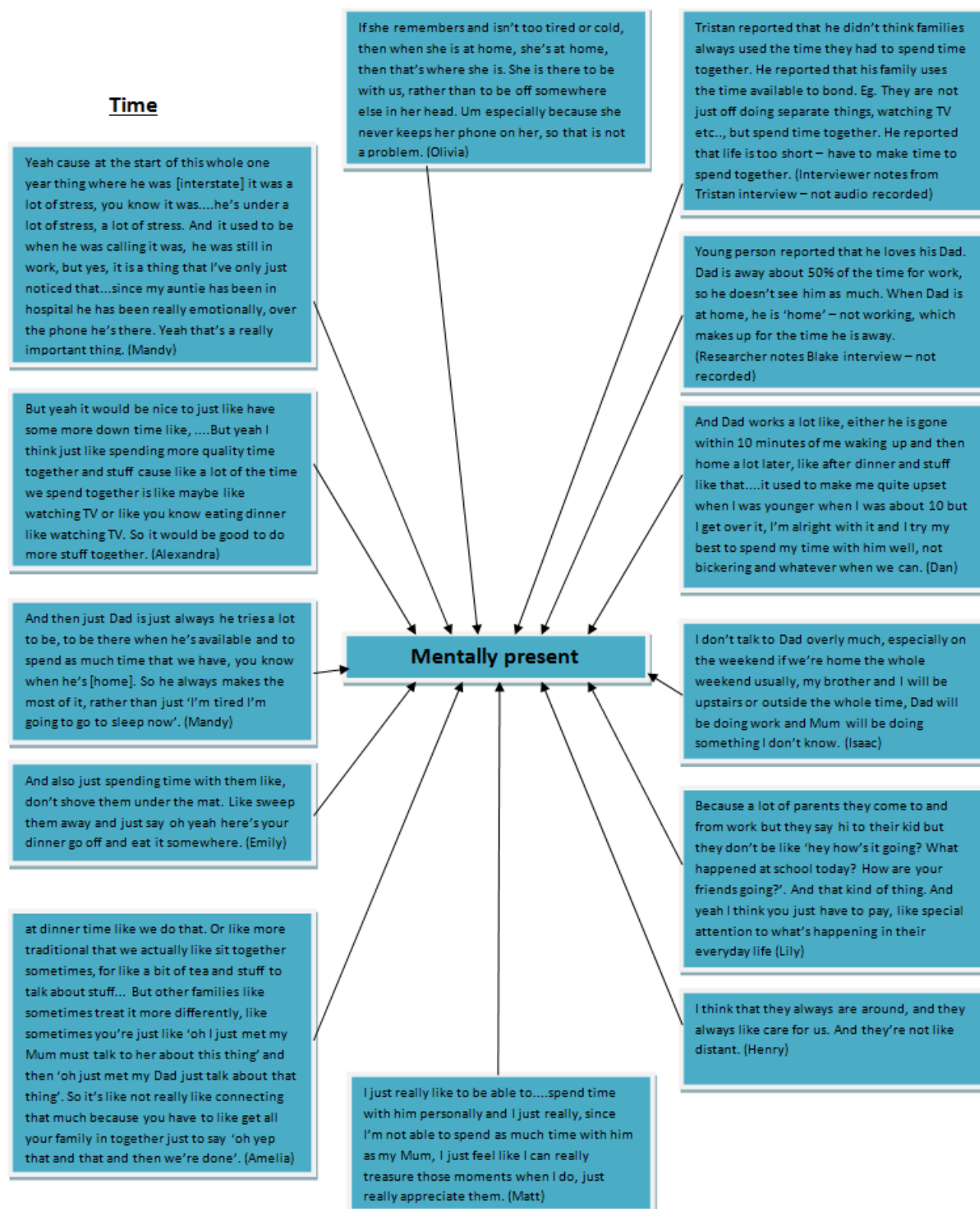
For more information check out their websites.

- **Kids Helpline**—1800 55 1800 ([www.kidshelp.com.au/](http://www.kidshelp.com.au/))  
A free, private and confidential, 24 hour counselling service for young people. Counselling is offered over the phone, email and web.
- **Lifeline**—13 11 14 ([www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au))  
Provides 24-hour telephone support.
- **The Junction - Youth Health Service**—6232 2423 ([www.thejunction.org.au](http://www.thejunction.org.au))  
A free health service for young people aged 12-25. Access to doctors, nurses, counsellors, and youth workers.
- **Cyclops**—6278 8444 ([www.cyclopsact.org](http://www.cyclopsact.org))  
Support service for young carers aged 11-18 who care for a family member with a chronic illness, disability or mental illness and their families.
- **Headspace ACT**—6201 5343 (<http://www.headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/headspace-act>)  
Counselling support for young people aged 12-25. ([headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au) for online counselling)
- **FACES**—6162 6100 ([www.catholiccare.cg.org.au](http://www.catholiccare.cg.org.au))  
Conflict resolution and family therapy for adolescents and their families
- **SCOPE Youth Service**—6257 1640 ([www.ywca-canberra.org.au](http://www.ywca-canberra.org.au))  
An outreach service offering support and information to young people in the ACT aged 12-15.
- **Reconnect**—6163 7600 ([www.catholiccare.cg.org.au](http://www.catholiccare.cg.org.au))  
A free service for young people aged 12-18 who are at risk of homelessness or are already homeless.
- **Youth Centers**— For people aged 12-25 to hang out and have a chat
  - Gungahlin Indigenous Youth Centre—6231 9555
  - Gungahlin Youth Centre—6123 4411
  - Mura Lanyon Youth and Community Centre—6294 4633
  - Youth in the City—6232 2444
  - Woden Youth Centre—6282 3037
- **Mental Health Crisis Team**—1800 629 354 (24-hour number)
- **Qnet—Queer Youth Canberra** ([qnet.or.au](http://qnet.or.au))  
An online community for gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered and intersex people under the age of 25.

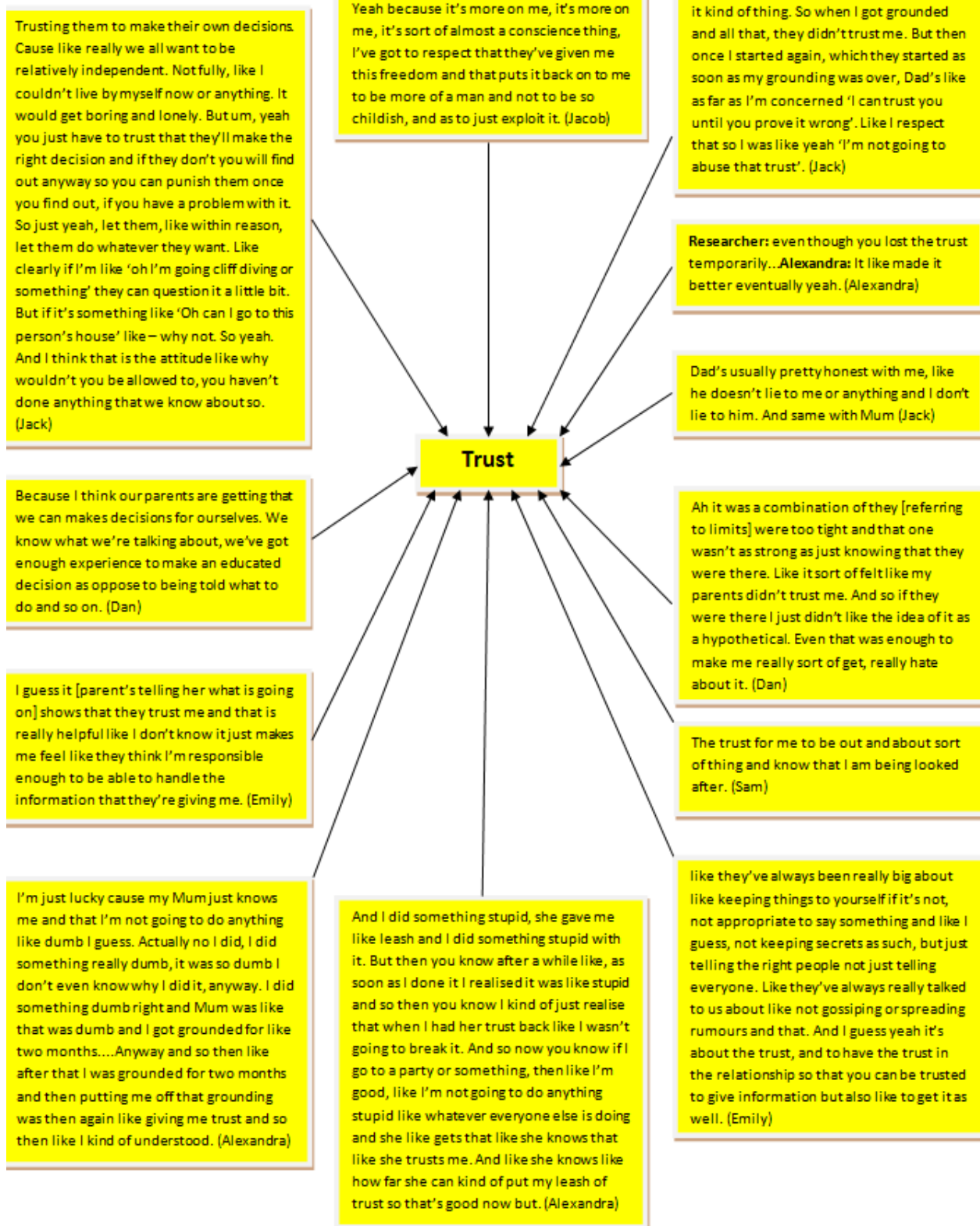
## Appendix H – Sample Basic Theme Maps

Visual maps displaying all supporting quotes were created for each basic theme.

Sample pages from three of the basic themes are provided below.



## Balancing freedoms and boundaries





## Work

