

## School Age Care in Australia

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The history and recent trends in Australian outside hours school care are reviewed. Commentaries by practitioners and advocates from several states within Australia are included.

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<sup>1</sup> Bumgarner, M.A. (2002) School Age Child Care in Australia: What Can We Learn? *School-Age Review: The Journal of the National School-Age Care Alliance*, No. 5, Spring.

Just up the hill from the Dutton Park ferry landing in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, in northeastern Australia, is a school that inhabits several buildings surrounding a church. One building, an old house in the style called a "Queenslander" by local residents, perches on the side of the hill on stilts and risers. During a recent visit to Australia I spent several weeks in Brisbane, and as I walked from the ferry to my lodgings each evening, I usually paused to watch the children playing in and around the fenced area surrounding this building. Most children would still be wearing their school uniform, although some would have changed partly or completely into more casual clothing, or have added a coat, a scarf, an apron. Almost every child I saw at these times -- indeed, nearly every child I saw during my entire visit -- was wearing the Australian trademark outback hat. In this instance they were in a bright shade of blue to match the school uniforms<sup>2</sup>. A pile of school satchels would usually be leaning against a wall, and a variety of balls and bats seemed always present; sometimes lunch pails and sacks would also be sitting about, and occasionally I saw a child munching on an apple or a sandwich as he moved between groups of children or sat quietly on a bench.

Most afternoons the children were busily engaged a variety of activities with their companions -- One day I wrote in my journal that I saw three children balancing on shiny new skateboard scooters, one tiny boy clinging tenaciously to a high-flying swing, a rather large group of boys and girls building what seemed to be a fort out of sticks and seed pods in the shade of a jacaranda tree, and a small group of girls writing intensely into an exercise book. That day a small group of children, playing with marbles on the ground

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<sup>2</sup>This is specified by most Australian state child care regulations. For example, this one from New South Wales: "All children will wear sunhats whilst outdoors. Children's hats must be well fitting or with elastic and must shade the face, ears and the back of the neck, children without hats will be kept indoors until a hat is provided. Children are encouraged to remind each other to wear hats. Staff become role models by wearing hats, protective clothing and sunscreen. Volunteers are requested to take similar precautions." (Canterbury City Council, NSW)

beside the fence, smiled shyly as I watched. Most days the children ignored me; people walk along the path all day and I imagine they are accustomed to it.

During these diversions I would think about my own four children, grown now and at home in California, who spent so many years of afternoons waiting for me to come home from work, and would remember, as I so often do, that thousands of children around the world today count on their parents, their schools, their communities, to make this part of their day pleasant and safe.

Every afternoon, in many nations, children leave school while their parents are still working, and go . . . where? Some go home to tend their younger siblings; some go to work themselves; others avoid going anywhere in particular and end up on street corners in groups. The lucky ones have adults to care for them and about them. Many do not. This is very different from the childhood I remember, but it is increasingly the common experience.

Increasingly, where children go and what they do after the school day ends is a concern that goes far beyond the family. Social workers, educational professionals, law-enforcement officials, government policy makers and others in nation after nation are being drawn into discussion with youth workers, child-care providers, parents and the children themselves about how and where they spend their out-of-school time.

It is certainly not only in the United States that mothers and fathers both work outside the home or head single-parent households; as global realities reach more and more of the world's markets, so does the challenge of supervising and nurturing the children in those countries as their parents labor. And children haven't changed -- only childhood has.

How do we rise to the challenge? It seems defensible to me to encourage an exchange of ideas on these pages between the people who develop and implement school-age programs in different countries. We may very well have something to learn from one another. I began that exchange last year when I visited school-age programs and staff in

Queensland and New South Wales.

As Australia was gearing up for the Olympics in Sydney, I was flying to Brisbane, where I met with several groups of school-age staff and government employees as they worked together to develop state-level standards for Outside School Hours Care (known there as OSH). And although I was asked primarily because, as a board member of the California School-Age Consortium, I could shed light on how things were being done back home, I felt that I left most meetings with more than I brought to the table.

Just as in the United States, governmental awareness of the need for before- and after-school care has come on rather abruptly and recently, primarily during the last decade. As a child living in Victoria (in southeastern Australia) in the 1950s, I remember going to a special after-school activity room when my mother worked in the afternoons at a plastics factory, but I learned that national and state child care regulations did not include specific provisions for school age children until 1994. At that time a draft national standards document was circulated for review and comment throughout Australia.

It is clear, however, that caregivers and others were thinking -- and worrying -- about the problem much earlier than that. Judith Finlason, who is writing a history of out-of-school-hours care in Australia (which she calls OOSH<sup>3</sup>), recently came upon this cautionary excerpt from a 1972 report on 'latch-key' children undertaken by the New South Wales Health Department:

. . .in our complex society, the caring and preparation of the future generations cannot be left to parents alone ... it is a community responsibility... if this modern society does not study and act to prevent the imposition we are placing on our children, we will perhaps get the kind of future generations we justly deserve.

(Dan Christie, Health Education Officer 1972 )

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<sup>3</sup> As in the US, the acronym used to represent out-of-school hours care is not standardized throughout Australia.

Grass roots services began where and when they were needed, and apparently have been providing care for school-age children since the 1920s, but they were not supported by the government funding that exists for early childhood education programs (known as "long day care centers") until very recently, by which time every community had sprouted several independent supported primarily by parent fees. In a retrospective presentation at an national OOSH conference in 1993, Ms. Finlason shared some history:

Throughout Australia in the 1960s and 70s, as in most industrialised countries, there was an increasing awareness of the need for children to have somewhere safe to go after school. An increasing number of women were in the work-force. The Department of Labour (Australia, 1968) reported an increase of married women in the female work force from 15% in 1947 to 48% in 1966.

Children whose mothers worked had no alternative but to go home alone. The term "latchkey children" was commonly used. This was seen as a derogatory term by many, and blame was often laid on the parents - usually the mother. Although this issue had been identified as being an increasing problem, little was done.

Some pilot After School programs were organised during the 1960's such as those run by the Victorian Council of Social Services which was started. . ."because they felt that a child is victimised through a mother's 'need' to work". The child was seen to be prematurely thrust upon its own resources." (Finlason, 1993)

The earliest institutionalized government funding seems to have been in 1974, when the newly established Children's Commission issued grants to 342 after-school centers throughout Australia. In a society that supports the care of preschool-aged children with

generous government subsidies, this was an important milestone:

Funding was based on an adult/staff ratio of 1/40 at the rate of \$3.50 per hour for face to face contact with children, with a small allowance for equipment . . .

Although the government acknowledged the need for Out of School Hours Services, funding was limited and levels were extremely low. It was not seen as a priority which is probably understandable considering the overall lack of child care for younger children. (Finlason, 1993)

However, by 1996, there were 162,000 children in government-funded out-of-school-hours care services in Australia (DHFS, 1996), and OSHC<sup>2</sup> had become the largest provider of community based child care in Australia (Miller, 1998). The 1999 Census of Child Care Services shows that 73,303 families were being served by 2200 government-funded programs (DHFS, 2000), a real improvement over the 1974 figures.<sup>4</sup>

Staff-child ratios have also improved. Early programs were frequently forced to place 20 or more children with an adult leader, but The Australian National Standards document, used now as a guide by most states as they promulgate regulations, stipulates “a maximum of 15 children to 1 staff member, with 8 children to 1 carer [sic] for excursions and 5 to 1 for swimming.” (CSMC, 1995) Salaries have increased during this period, but, as in the U.S., are still behind the curve of other professions. In South

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<sup>4</sup>Be aware that numbers like these can be misleading. Child care census reporting is voluntary, and busy administrators may not return their forms (Miller, 2000). In addition, Australia has large areas that are sparsely populated, and only a handful of densely populated regions. When I was speaking at the Office of Child Care in Brisbane, I was asked to compare Queensland figures to those from California. The population of California at the 1990 census was 33.5 million, with 7 million children under the age of 14. By comparison, there are 19 million people in Queensland, with 1.5 million children in all forms of care. The reason for including these numbers, which seem small by comparison with California, is merely to show a trend of increasing societal support for out-of-school-time care.

Australia, I was told by one after-school director from that state, salaries are reasonable but management are unable to pay for the time it really takes to plan and administer a good quality program.

The real news in Australian out-of-school-time care, however, is not in the facts and figures, which in many ways mirror the experience of the United States, but in the programs and in the fierce insistence on quality of the people who staff them. Different countries and cultures provide care for their school-aged children in different ways, and we can learn a great deal about a society, I believe, by examining how they do so. Through government policy, families receive cultural messages about the value of parents in the workplace, and of children. Child care providers in turn receive messages from parents about how they want their children to spend their time (Ochiltree, 1994; Bowes & Hayes, 1999). The value of childhood, as well as the relative value of women and men, often plays out in the programmatic realities of before- and after- school programs.

Australians, much like Americans, have mixed feelings about whether families or the government should be fiscally responsible for protecting and guiding children while their parents work (Brennan, 1994; Perry, 1997; Leach, 1994). All Australian residents are entitled to reduced child care fees if they are registered with the equivalent of Social Security. However, although the childcare benefit is based on family income, priority of access to services favors working parents, parents who are in training or studying, and children at risk, which seems to reflect a high regard for gainful employment.

When I remarked that government financial support for out-of-school-hours care was limited only to low income families in the U.S., I was met with amazement. However, child care staff did remark that their system requires complicated calculations at the child care site, as everyone pays a different rate, and parents are entitled to get money back from the fees they pay if they submit the necessary paperwork. "If they do not get it as they go," explains Fiona Patterson, coordinator of Camp Hill Outside School Hours Care in

Queensland, “they can claim it off their tax at the end of the financial year. This record keeping is considered a "nightmare" by many school-age administrators .

During some of the conversations I had with school-age professionals in Australia it was mentioned that there are still some people, in government and in the private sector, who disparage mothers for going to work, and who believe that the government should not be helping them to do so by supporting after-school care in this way. However, there seems to be a trend of individual programs (following the U.S. lead, it was suggested) appealing to the business community to help finance the growth of out-of-school care, and as more private and corporate money is invested, public perception of "the legitimacy of the enterprise" seems also to be growing (R. Rivera, personal communication, June 2000). I didn't actually get to see any examples of these business partnerships, but apparently the major thrust of the last few years in all sectors -- private, public and business – has been to develop and expand the infrastructure of care and make it available to everyone.

Another trend, familiar to U.S. readers, seems to be standardizing terminology and improving quality. Minimum national standards were agreed upon by all state, commonwealth and territory Ministers in 1995. Australians make a distinction between regulation of OSHC services based on the National Standards, which is the case in the Australian Capital Territory, and implementation of the Standards. For instance, in South Australia, OSHC services that operate on public school sites are required to meet the national standards, while other programs participate in the process voluntarily. Other states and territories are in the process of deciding between regulation and other methods of implementing standards, such as voluntary accreditation that is linked in some way to funding.

Throughout all our discussions there seemed to be a sincere desire among all segments of the field -- government agencies, individual practitioners, and support networks -- to work toward a higher standard of quality for all programs, public and

private. Leaders in the state-level organizations are working on quality improvement, and there is clearly a move toward a standardized, national, accreditation document.

The short term challenge, however, is to develop and communicate a common understanding of the aim and the focus of school-age care in Australia. The main thrust of this seems to be that out-of-school time programming should be much less structured and less stressful than the school day. I heard this view for the first time from Ken Morris of the Queensland Children's Activities Network (QCAN). After a discussion about collaboration between schools and programs the potential mutual benefits, he raised his hand to speak. "We need to remember something when we are talking with teachers and parents about partnerships and shared goals," he said. "We need to remember that the most valuable thing a child can do in his or her outside school hours time is *play*. No matter how badly children may need to improve their reading skills, or their knowledge of geography, or even their ability to kick a ball, if they don't play they won't grow and develop and learn the way they should."

Suzy Mc Kenna, of the Department of Education, Training and Employment, Adelaide, South Australia, supported this view when she wrote to me a few months later. "I think services need to look at providing learning/practice activities, particularly for older children, that are not 'curricularised'. The approach to planning children's experiences should recognise that 'hanging out' activities, such as chatting with friends, playing Gameboys, eating together and listening to music are pleasures even adults choose in leisure time."

For example, the National Children's Services Competency Standards, which underpin the national childcare training and qualifications framework, focus on developing staff skills to meet the full range of children's developmental needs, especially fostering autonomy and life skills. Program staff are expected to incorporate education *inside recreation*. The program planning handbook published by the Queensland Office of

Childcare reflects that goal when it stipulates that "school age children's physical development is linked to adequate nutrition, sound health practices, and opportunities to use and practice physical skills." The handbook continues:

School age children need space indoors and outdoors:

- \* to stretch muscles;
- \* for running, climbing, tumbling and active games;
- \* for equipment and furniture to suit growing bodies;
- \* for play materials which can be used flexibly as ideas grow.

(Mobbs & DiNailo, 1992)

*The Queensland Child Care 2000-20005 Strategic Plan* (Office of Child Care, 2000) lists among its guiding principles, "Children have the right to be cared for in safe environments in which they can learn and play," South Australia's *OSHC Sample Policies* specifies that "the programs will be balanced, providing a range of indoor/outdoor experiences, quiet/active times and settings, structured/unstructured activities, and opportunities to learn and practice life and social skills. [They] will be flexible enough to allow for spontaneity, enjoyment and the unexpected. " (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000). The National Standards for Outside School Hours Care (1995), makes a strong statement in which it supports and emphasizes Australia's ratification in 1990 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts". This support for the child's need and right to play was echoed in every government-sponsored report I read, as well as by every individual in the field who talked to me during my visit and upon my return.

I asked one provider what children like to do during the leisure time that is so

fiercely championed. Favorite sports in Australian out-of-school programs, I was told, include basketball, soccer or Australian rules football and cricket. Children like to play with games and puzzles and read books, sit around in small groups and play music, or just talk with one another. A typical OSHC day, one director told me, might include time to chat and eat a snack directly after school, some free play and organized sports or games outside depending upon the weather, and also time when children pull apart into quiet groups to read, study, or just "veg out." (S. McKenna and F. Patterson, private communication). But what about "enrichment," I asked? Aren't parents, or teachers, or the government, as worried about their children's school success as we are in the U.S.?

The response was that there is no pressure in Australia (yet) for outside school hours care programs to provide academic remediation. "OSHC should be a qualitatively different experience for children." said one director "After all, if a child is finding it difficult in the classroom, [s/he] will not respond well to more of the same. Most people involved are clear that OSHC is a recreation/care program." (McKenna, private communication, October 2000). This statement beautifully reflects the attitude that I heard from friends, relatives, and in the public press just as much as I heard it from out of school hours staff. After my return home, a colleague in Melbourne, Victoria, sent me a wonderful document entitled *Shared Visions for School Aged Child Care*, which summarizes this valuing of children's play:

Childhood [today] is similar to previous generations and also different. Children still grow and develop mostly in families, go to school and have needs, such as the need for love, adequate shelter, good food, regular exercise and play, that remain constant over generations. . . Nostalgia for the unstructured, unhurried and relatively unfettered childhood we experienced may blind us to the excitement and the potential for childhood [today], which after all must prepare children for a new

era. Staff need to remember and be confident that children in each generation always adapt to new things in their world through their play. (Commonwealth of Victoria Youth and Family Services Division, 2000).

In describing how practitioners assure that play happens in outside school hours care, Suzy McKenna, of the Department of Education, Training and Employment in Adelaide, South Australia, suggested that practitioners need to use what she calls “SAC Eyes.” When asked for clarification she provided this response:

*SAC eyes are actually OSHC eyes. The acronym OSHC comes from Out of School Hours Care, which is what we call it in Australia. Those of us who work in the sector have developed a special way of seeing the mess, chaos, noise and dirt that is the sign of kids really enjoying themselves and having a say about what happens in their own time. Adults/visitors who just put their head in the door, even though they may be early childhood experts or teachers, sometimes need to be educated about what SAC/OSHC is.*

*One way to do that is to issue them with a special set of 'eyes' or glasses(made by the kids, of course) that enable them to 'see' the environment from a school age kid's perspective. Let the kids explain to visitors how they interpret their environment. It's quite magic ...and a gentle way to make the point.*

*Don't see dirt - see kid's learning about cleaning up at the end of an activity or before they go home.*

*Don't hear noise (you need special 'ears' for this one) - hear kids who can freely laugh and squeal and verbalise their thoughts and feelings to each other.*

*Don't see chaos - see an understanding and learning organisation; see kids who have been in a classroom all day letting off steam before they settle into an after school activity.*

*Don't see mess - see creativity; see kids working and being together.*

(Posted on SAC-L mailing list, September 2000 -- used with permission)

As I read her posting, I remembered the children in the play yard near the Dutton Park Ferry. No one, as I recall, was doing homework, or if they were, no one was standing over them to make them do it. No one was organizing a game, or coercing the children to participate in a craft. What I remembered the most of those afternoons was the fort under the jacaranda tree, the happy faces under the blue outback hats, and the squeals of childish joy. And those, in my view, are the very best indicators of high quality out-of-school time. Play is safe, I think, after school in Australia.

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<sup>5</sup>Australian Capitol Territory