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Counting kids

Developing a new national collection for child care and preschool services

Introduction

Child care enables parents to participate in employment, education and training, and community activities, and to pursue personal interests. It provides children with opportunities for companionship and play and promotes their general development (AIHW 2003:228). Care may be either formal or informal—formal care is provided through services like long day care centres, before and after school care and preschools, whereas informal care is provided by grandparents, other relatives, friends or babysitters.

In 2002, there were nearly 3.5 million children aged 12 years and under in Australia, representing the population who may need some form of child care. According to the latest Child Care Survey, about half (49%) the children aged 0–11 years used some type of child care in that year (ABS 2003:3). Over the past decade, this figure has not changed. However, the proportion of children aged under 12 years using formal child care has gradually increased from 19% in 1993 to 25% in 2002, while the proportion using informal care has decreased (ABS 2003:13). Many social and economic factors have contributed to these trends, including changes in the working patterns of women and men, the increase in single-parent families, and high mobility rates which can separate people from the support of extended families. During this period, the availability of formal care has increased substantially.

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Data available on children's services

Children's services encompass formal child care services which provide care and developmental activities for children usually aged between 0 and 12 years, and preschool services which offer educational and developmental programs for children in the year or two before full-time schooling. In Australia, these services may be administered by Australian government departments and bodies, and/or by education departments and community services departments in the states and territories. Further, some services such as preschools are provided in both a child care and an education setting. This means that within the same jurisdiction, different departments may be responsible for the same service. The challenges of collecting accurate and complete data within such a complex system are considerable.

A number of organisations currently collect information on children's services:

- the Australian Government and individual states and territories collect data on children's services that they provide, fund or support within their jurisdictions; and
- the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collects data on child care in regular household surveys.

Other surveys include questions on the use of child care as part of a broader range of topics. Among these are the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey and Growing up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children. While neither of these surveys is suitable for providing regular snapshots of children's services, they do offer useful contextual data about the demographic profiles of different care types and shed light on issues such as transitions from one type of care to another.

All of these data collections are undertaken at different times, collect different information and use different data definitions. While there is some duplication of information across the collections, there are also notable gaps, and no single collection, or combination of collections, is able to provide an accurate measure of the number and proportion of children who attend child care and/or preschool. Therefore, despite a high level of government and community interest in the provision of children's services and the number of children who use them, no one data collection currently exists which gives a comprehensive and comparable picture of children's services across Australia.

Box 1: Child care and preschool services data collections

The **Australian Bureau of Statistics Child Care Survey** is conducted every 3 years and is a supplement to the ABS Labour Force Survey. The latest survey was conducted in 2002. This is an Australia-wide sample survey on the use of and demand for child care and preschool services.

The **Commonwealth Child Care Census** is a census of Commonwealth-supported child care service providers, conducted by the Department of Family and Community Services. The Census collects information from Australian Government approved service providers on their staff, the children and parents using the service and various other aspects of service provision. The latest census of Australian Government funded services was carried out in March 2004.

State and territory government data collections contain information about the child care and preschool services that these governments fund and/or license. There are, however, great variations in the nature and extent of these collections. The best source of this data is the Report on Government Services (SCRGSP 2004), produced annually, and available online at <http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2004/>.

The **Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey** is a longitudinal survey that began in 2001. It collects information about child care use that can be related to other aspects of the survey including household structure, family background and formation, education, employment history, current employment, income, health and wellbeing and housing. For more information, see <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/>.

Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children, will explore family and social issues relevant to children's development, and address a range of research questions including non-parental child care and education. It will examine the impact of non-parental child care on a child's developmental outcomes over time, and the impact of various risk factors such as multiple care arrangements, type of care and age of entry into child care. The first report is due for release in April 2005. For more information see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/home.html>.



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The need for a Children's Services National Minimum Data Set

The Australian Government and state and territory governments have differing but complementary roles in supporting children's services. However, both levels of government are involved in funding and offering information and advice to parents and service providers, as well as helping to plan, set and maintain operating standards. To fulfil these roles, all levels of government rely on accurate and timely data to ensure that quality child care and preschool services are available and accessible to Australia's children.

A national minimum data set on children's services will provide such a data collection. It will overcome the shortcomings of existing sources of data, outlined above, and supply nationally comparable data across jurisdictions and departments for all children's services. For the first time, it will provide answers to the following key questions:

- How many children are receiving child care and preschool activities in Australia?
- What are the characteristics of these children?
- How many child care and preschool services are there in Australia?
- Where are these services and what type of activities do they provide to children?
- How much of the available child care and preschool services is being used?
- What are the characteristics of workers providing children's services?
- What are the relevant qualifications and/or experience of workers in the child care sector?

Developing a National Minimum Data Set (NMDS) creates an agreed set of nationally significant data items (or questions) that will be collected in all Australian jurisdictions on a regular basis.

Who is responsible for the development of the Children's Services National Minimum Data Set?

As previously stated, there is no one body or organisation that has prime responsibility for all children's services and could take the lead in responding to the demand for nationally consistent and comparable data. Consequently, in 1998, the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) set up a Children's Services Data Working Group (DWG) to take on this role.

The Children's Services DWG is composed of representatives from each of the Australian Government departments of Family and Community Services, and Education, Science and Training, state and territory departments responsible for child care and preschool services, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Productivity Commission.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is the secretariat for the Working Group and has been given responsibility for the development of data items, and the design, conduct and analysis of two pilot tests (or trials) for the Children's Services NMDS.

Box 2: Terms of reference of the Children's Services Data Working Group

- *To contribute to the development of the relevant data definitions and standards for the National Community Services Data Committee.*
- *To define the scope of and develop a minimum data set for children's services, reflecting the priorities of the NCSIMG.*
- *To provide a forum to identify and promote opportunities for co-operation between the Commonwealth and states and territories in the development and streamlining of children's services data collections.*

Privacy and confidentiality

Because the AIHW is the data custodian of the pilot test, there are certain legislative protections in place to ensure privacy is protected. The Privacy Act 1988 contains 11 Privacy Principles which govern the conduct of Australian and Australian Capital Territory government agencies in the collection, management, use and disclosure of records containing personal information. Further, the AIHW, as data custodian, is bound by the strict provisions of Section 29 of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987 to ensure confidentiality of its data holdings. All AIHW collections must be cleared by its Ethics Committee before commencement. The two pilot tests of the Children's Services NMDS have received clearance from that committee.

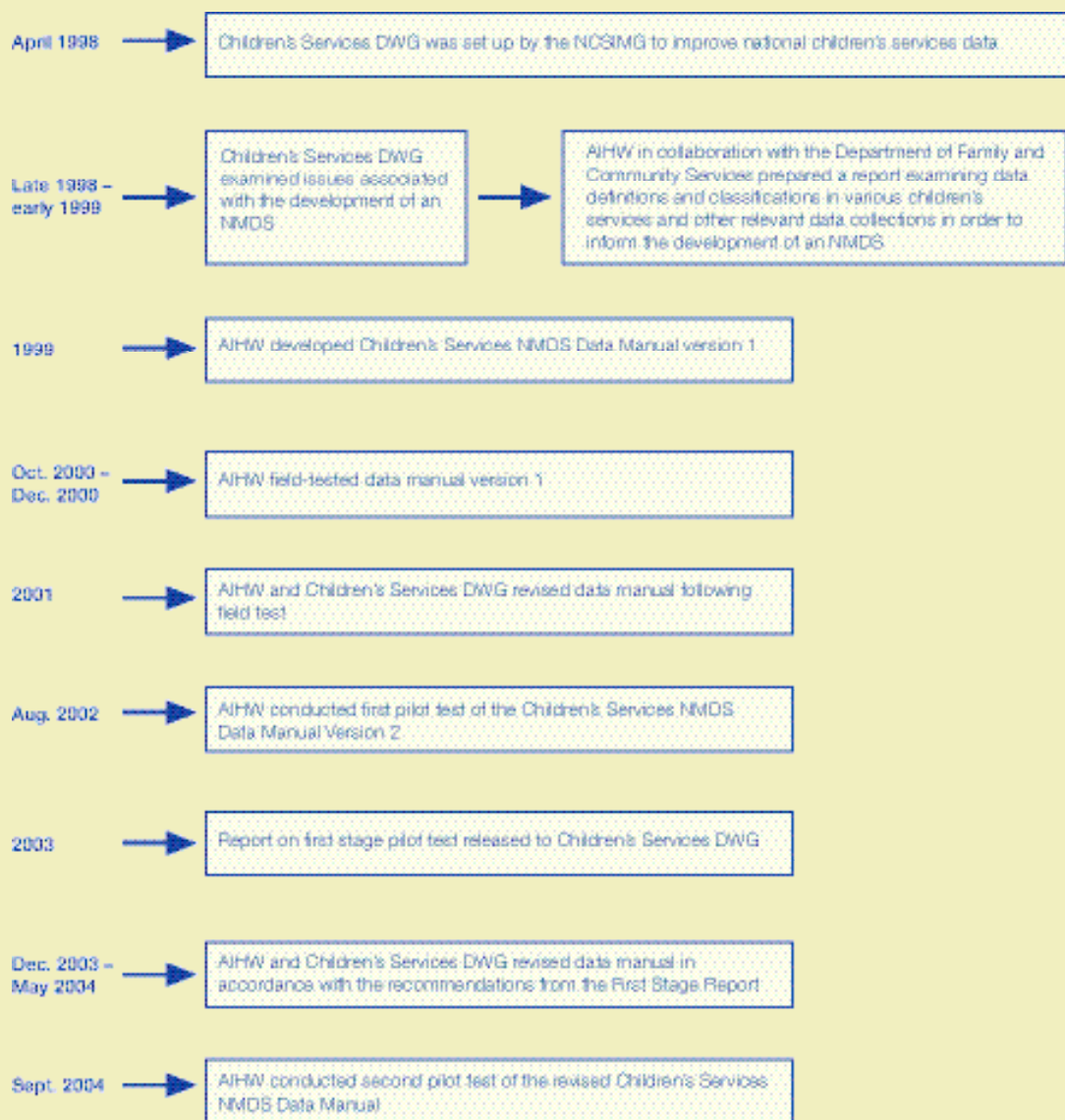
These provisions combine to ensure that the data holdings will be protected from unauthorised access, alteration or loss and meet all accepted compliance standards.

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Key stages in the development of the Children's Services National Minimum Data Set

Since 1998, there have been a number of advancements in the development of the Children's Services NMDS. Many of these are outlined in Box 3.

Box 3: Developmental stages of the Children's Services National Minimum Data Set



Scope of the Children's Services NMDS

Before the Children's Services Data Working Group could agree on specific data items, they defined the scope of the collection and the level at which data would be collected.

It was agreed that the Children's Services NMDS should describe:

- the children who use child care and preschool services;
- the organisations (services) that provide child care and preschool activities and the nature of the activities provided; and
- the workers who deliver child care and preschool activities to children.

To achieve this, it was decided that the Children's Services NMDS would be a data set based on administrative, client-centred data that would collect basic information about child care and preschool activities that are funded at a service by Australian or state and territory governments¹.

Playgroups, toy libraries and other activities that require the attendance of both the parent and the child are excluded from the scope of the Children's Services NMDS.

Hence the Children's Services NMDS will cover a major portion of children's services—those defined as child care and preschool services and for which a service receives Australian or state/territory government funding—but not all children's services. It will not cover 'full-time primary education services' for children or services which are funded entirely by local governments.

Information to be collected by the Children's Services NMDS

Table 1 provides a summary of all of the data items that have been developed for the Children's Services NMDS. These data items have been comprehensively defined and described in a data manual to be published by the AIHW, and are consistent with national data definition standards.

Two pilot tests of the Children's Services NMDS have been conducted by the AIHW on behalf of the Children's Services DWG—the first in 2002 and the second in 2004. Both measured aspects of the feasibility of the proposed data collection, including the scope of the collection and the set of data items, and its potential to produce nationally consistent, comparable, accurate and meaningful data for child care and preschool services.

¹ Government funding may be in the form of capital grants, operational funding, per capita funding and/or funding to reduce charges to parents (e.g. approved for Child Care Benefit).



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Each pilot test covered about 50 children's services from around Australia, chosen to represent the complexity of children's services delivery in terms of type of service, service delivery model (fixed or mobile), service delivery setting (centre, school or home-based) and geographic location (metropolitan, regional and rural). Some services catering specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and for children with disabilities, were also included.

The first pilot test collected limited information about the service and the children who attended. The qualification status of paid workers was also collected. The second pilot test covered a wider range of information on the services, children and workers. It included all possible questions that could be included in the NMDS and this required using two versions of the collection form (see Table 1). It is probable that not all the questions tested in the second pilot test will be included in the final data collection.

In the second pilot test, data was collected which would allow the creation of a statistical linkage key for each child. The linkage key consists of date of birth, sex and letters of the child's name, and allows a child's records to be linked within the same collection, at one point in time or across different years. For example, the number of children using multiple services at one point in time could be identified. Further, trends in children's use of services could be mapped, from child care in early years, to outside school hours care in later years. By using a non-identifying linkage key, the confidentiality of personal data is protected. Further safeguarding of individual privacy in the use of the statistical linkage key has been ensured by receiving clearance from the AIHW Ethics Committee and endorsement of NCSIMG.

Implementation of the Children's Services NMDS

Using the information collected in both pilot tests, data items will be refined and the AIHW will provide recommendations to the Children's Services DWG about the final content and structure of the Children's Services NMDS. Much of the AIHW's post pilot-test analysis will concentrate on ensuring that the Children's Services NMDS provides consistent, comparable, accurate and meaningful information about children's services in Australia.

It is expected that the development stages for the Children's Services NMDS will be finalised by June 2005, when a final report will be published by the AIHW. It is envisaged that the Children's Services NMDS will be implemented across Australia on a biannual basis and will continue to be guided by the Children's Services DWG.

Table 1: Data items tested in second pilot test of the Children's Services NMDS

Service	Worker/caregiver	Child
Service ID	Worker ID	Child ID
Service address	Date of birth	Date of birth
Weeks of operation—per year	Sex	Sex
Days of operation—per week	Indigenous status	Indigenous status
Start time	Total hours worked	School child status
Finish time	Paid /unpaid	Main language other than English spoken at home
Service delivery mode	Type of work performed	Disability status
Service delivery setting	Specific role	Arrival times at service
Management type	Working full-time /part-time	Service departure times
Legal entity	Employment type (permanent /fixed-term contract /casual)	Preschool service provided to this child
Main service activity type	Relief worker	Family type
Other service activities	Qualification field	Sex of parent(s) /guardian(s)
Fee schedules	Qualification level	Working arrangements of parent(s) /guardian(s)
Licensed places	Educational enrolment status	
Places offered	Length of experience	
	Length of time with current service	

The challenges associated with implementation of the Children's Services NMDS should not be underestimated. Among these are:

- All child care and preschool services that receive Australian or state/territory government funding will take part in the data collection. In 2002, this amounted to well over 10,000 services, over 80,000 workers (AIHW 2003:235, 241), and over one million children (SCRGSP 2004:14.7, 14.9).
- A register of the participating services will need to be developed and maintained.
- Issues of the feasibility of electronic data collection will need to be resolved, as this provides a means of minimising the time needed by staff to provide information.
- Decisions need to be made about who should collect the data, report on it and have access to it. Associated with these issues is how the collection should be funded.



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Against these challenges stand the significant gains to be made. The implementation of the Children's Services NMDS will fill a longstanding gap in data requirements, by providing the only source of nationally comparable data on children's services. It is anticipated that considerable efficiencies in data collection can be achieved by reducing existing duplication in current collections and inconsistent reporting. As a result, a major advance in understanding the provision and use of children's services will be achieved, allowing better policy development and planning.

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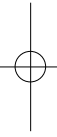
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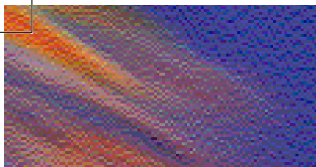
Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
DWG	Data Working Group
NMDS	National Minimum Data Set
NCSIMG	National Community Services Information Management Group
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision

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