

CHAPTER 7

THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES PROGRAM AND PREVENTIVE SERVICES

7.1 The Commonwealth Government provides funds through the Children's Services Program for the establishment and operation of a range of child care and related welfare activities for children and families. The Office of Child Care within the Commonwealth Department of Community Services is responsible for the administration of the Program under which grants are made available for projects sponsored by local government authorities and non-profit community organisations. When the Program first commenced operation in June 1976, funds were directed mainly towards the development of pre-school services. However, with the subsequent establishment of a network of pre-schools throughout Australia by 1978, together with the acknowledgement by State governments that pre-school funding was primarily their responsibility and also growing public demand for other types of services for children, funding priorities within the Program inevitably changed.¹ While a block grant arrangement has been maintained with the States and the Northern Territory to provide recurrent funding for pre-schools², the Children's Services Program now provides funding for a wider range of services.³

Range of services

7.2 Projects supported under the Children's Services Program fall within three broad categories: early childhood services and services for school-aged children; services for children with particular needs; and services for families provided through the Family Support Services Scheme. Until January this year the Children's Services Program also funded emergency accommodation and ancillary services for homeless youth under the Youth Services Scheme. This Scheme is now administered by the Commonwealth Government's Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. Since its inception the Children's Services Program has also supported research activities, the evaluation of projects, the conduct of conferences and workshops, and the dissemination of information to improve public awareness of particular aspects of child care.⁴ The Office of Child Care also co-operates with professional and voluntary organisations which have an interest in early childhood development including kindergarten unions, day nursery associations and the Australian Early Childhood Association. The table on the following page sets out the range of services and activities funded under the Program in 1984.

7.3 In the last Budget the Commonwealth allocated \$160.8 million to the Children's Services Program for 1984-85. This included \$124.6 million for early childhood services, services for school-aged children and services for children with special needs; \$33.09 million for grants to the States and the Northern Territory for pre-schools; and \$3.1 million for projects funded under the Family Support Services Scheme. Additionally, the Office of Child Care stated in January this year that State, Territory and local governments would provide \$14 million during 1984-85 plus approximately 140 blocks of land and supervisory staff to oversee the construction of new child care centres. As a result of these combined efforts, the Commonwealth Government has undertaken to provide an extra 20 000 child care places over the next two financial years.⁵

7.4 Under the Children's Services Program funds can be provided either as capital grants for the provision of facilities and the purchase of equipment; as recurrent grants which contribute towards service operating costs, including staff salaries, administrative expenses and fixed overheads; or as special needs subsidies which enable service administrators to offer rebates of fees for low income families. Some services supported by the Program are funded wholly by the Commonwealth and others are funded jointly by the Commonwealth and the States or the Northern Territory.

Number of Services by State and Territory and Service Type Receiving or Approved to Receive Children's Services Program Support as at 30 June 1984 (Excluding Pre-School and Vacation Care Services)

<i>Service type</i>	<i>N.S.W.</i>	<i>Vic.</i>	<i>Qld</i>	<i>S.A.</i>	<i>W.A.</i>	<i>Tas.</i>	<i>A.C.T.</i>	<i>N.T.</i>	<i>Total</i>
Child care services and neighbourhood centres	181	170	82	61	68	32	18	23	635
Family day care	74	67	44	27	7	10	8	4	241
Outside school hours care	121	72	47	25	36	18	19	4	342
Family and child assistance services	51	41	24	21	31	3	6	5	182
Advice and resource services	44	47	12	9	12	6	10	4	144
Family Support Services Scheme	22	26	11	10	15	14	5	8	111
Youth Services Scheme	21	22	13	5	6	6	1	1	75
Adolescent services	—	—	3	2	1	—	1	—	7
Child care in women's refuges	36	17	21	11	13	6	2	2	108
Research/development	4	1	2	2	2	—	—	1	12
Miscellaneous services	1	1	—	2	1	—	1	1	7
Total	555	464	259	175	192	95	71	53	1864

Note: "Advice and resource services" includes services previously shown under titles "children's service staff" and "playgroup association support"; family and child assistance services includes services previously shown under title "services for disabled children" and other family support services not funded through the Scheme.

Source: Department of Social Security, *Annual Report 1983-84*, AGPS, Canberra, 1984, p. 90.

Early childhood services and services for school-aged children

7.5 Early childhood services and services for school-aged children include pre-school education; centre-based and home-based day care provided on a full-day, occasional or emergency care basis; playgroup care; child care in women's refuges⁶; before-school and after-school care; and vacation care. In supporting the development of child care services, the Commonwealth Government has three major priorities: the expansion of the number of available child care places; the maintenance of existing services; and the introduction of an effective fee relief system for day care users.⁷ In outlining the Government's objectives in funding these services, the Office of Child Care has stated that the provision of an adequate network of children's services is recognised as essential to participation in the workforce for many families but, more importantly, single parent families and particularly those headed by women.⁸ Special attention is now being given to the development of work-related child care facilities which is regarded as a high priority in the context of the Government's policies on 'equality of opportunity in employment and affirmative action'.⁹ Increased emphasis is also being given to the provision of occasional care places in recognition of the needs of mothers at home.¹⁰

7.6 In the funding of general purpose child care projects, priority of access is given to children (and families) considered to be in special need because of their social or economic circumstances.¹¹ Children with particular social needs include those of working or sole parents, children who are considered to be at risk and children with sick or incapacitated parents. For families in economic need who cannot afford to pay the

maximum child care fee, subsidisation of fees is provided on a sliding scale from a pool of funds available to the child care facility.¹²

Services for children with special needs

7.7 The Children's Services Program provides financial assistance for a range of day care and other related services for special groups of children within the community such as disabled children, Aboriginal children, children of newly arrived migrant families, and geographically isolated children. Services for children with disabilities include early intervention programs; parent relief and support services; training and counselling for parents, child care workers and disabled children; mobile toy libraries; special playgroups; and transport services. These projects are, in part, designed to avert the need to institutionalise disabled children wherever possible.

7.8 Services for Aboriginal children include those provided by Aboriginal organisations, particularly Aboriginal child care agencies which receive special grants under the Program. Similarly, the Program funds a number of special projects that recognise the need for children from non-English speaking backgrounds to have access to child care services that are suitable to their needs. These include grants to ethnic organisations to establish their own child care centres; grants to other groups to provide bilingual resource material, teaching aids and advisory assistance to child care personnel working with pre-school aged migrant children in day care centres, kindergartens, neighbourhood houses and family day care schemes; and grants to family support programs to assist migrant families, particularly migrant women.¹³

Family Support Services Scheme

7.9 The Family Support Services Scheme began in 1978 and was originally a national three-year pilot scheme funded by the Commonwealth Government through the Children's Services Program. The Scheme was introduced in order to test various types of community-based services designed to enhance family functioning and assist parents in their child-rearing responsibilities, particularly in times of crisis. Information obtained from the pilot scheme was intended for use in policy formulation regarding the provision of services for families. Following the most recent extension of the Scheme, approved in the 1984-85 Budget context, a separate Budget allocation of \$2.39 million was provided for the nine-month period to 30 September 1985. These funds were appropriated to maintain existing services pending the report of a joint Commonwealth-State working party on the future funding of family support services.

7.10 Projects selected for funding under the Family Support Services Scheme include homemaker services; financial counselling; family and child counselling; advocacy in income security claims, rent arrears and legal matters; emergency housing and material aid for families where children run the risk of being placed in substitute care; child abuse prevention programs; and crisis and respite care for parents with disabled children.¹⁴ Family support service delivery methods vary from project to project: some are centre-based, that is, they operate from an office, a church or other community centre, while others operate using outreach workers visiting families in their homes.

7.11 Support provided through these services is intended to help prevent family breakdown and assist in reducing the number of children requiring substitute care.¹⁵ A further objective of the Scheme is 'to provide a stimulus to innovative thinking in State and non-government organisations regarding the provision of child and family support services'.¹⁶ The Scheme also aims to promote flexibility of service delivery and, where possible, client groups are encouraged to design their own projects within broad

guidelines according to their own community needs and perceptions. In this regard, the Scheme acknowledges the multicultural nature of Australian society and the stress placed on families because of cultural differences: submissions for funding from Aboriginal and ethnic organisations have therefore been particularly sought. Importance is also attached to developing programs that facilitate local access to and management of projects by sponsoring agencies that have local community acceptance and are able to promote maximum community participation and self-help in the planning and administration of services.

7.12 During its initial stages, it was suggested that if the Scheme were to contribute to the effectiveness of local child care and family support service delivery networks, a more co-ordinated approach towards the provision of these services at the grass roots level was required. This has been achieved in some areas by the development through the Scheme of multi-purpose facilities or neighbourhood centres which act as focal points for the location of several services and for the provision of information and advice about other services available within the community.

Effectiveness of the Children's Services Program

7.13 There was general agreement among those contributing to the inquiry that the Commonwealth Government's initiative in promoting the development of primary-based preventive services through the Children's Services Program has assisted many families in fulfilling their child-rearing responsibilities and has helped avoid the need to relinquish children to the care of the State or non-government welfare agencies. It was also claimed that the Program has provided a new impetus for welfare organisations to develop alternative strategies towards the delivery of welfare services for children and families.

7.14 In relation to the latter point, the Western Australian Department for Community Welfare stated that projects funded under the Children's Services Program have encouraged leadership and innovation at the local level and have provided evidence of the capacity of communities to plan, develop and implement their own child care and family support services. On the other hand, it was argued that the extent of the Commonwealth's influence in promoting new ideas and initiatives through the Program has been more limited and that the Office of Child Care is viewed in and by the States solely as a source of financial support, rather than as a stimulus for the development of new ideas on child and family welfare matters.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Program has provided a potential basis for the development of new concepts in this area and has offered the opportunity for innovation, particularly in relation to wider community participation in service delivery. The Committee agrees with the view that, regrettably, government and non-government welfare organisations have not, by and large, taken full advantage of that opportunity.¹⁸

7.15 Despite the Commonwealth Government's expanding role in this area, there are indications that a strong element of ambivalence towards child and family welfare matters continues to exist on the part of the Commonwealth. Until 1983 this was particularly apparent when viewed in light of the level of Commonwealth funding provided for the Children's Services Program which had declined progressively in real terms since 1976.¹⁹ This occurred in spite of the fact that the scope of the Program was continually broadened from providing funds for pre-school and early childhood day care services to funding family support schemes, care for school-aged children and services for youth.

7.16 Increases in funding for the Program since 1983 have permitted the development of new and expanded child care services, notably extended hours services, 24-hour services, and the establishment of work-based child care centres. Although the Government announced in May this year that it would reduce funding under the Program by '\$15 million in 1985-86 and \$30 million in a full year', it also stated that it would not allow these cuts to affect its 'undertaking to provide an additional 20 000 child care places over the next three years'.²⁰ Nevertheless, many voluntary agencies and local government welfare groups sponsoring child care and family support services maintained prior to this change that increases granted since 1983 had been insufficient to absorb the constantly growing number of referrals to their services, and argued that the Commonwealth's planning under the Program did not take sufficient account of rising infrastructure costs or constantly increasing requests for assistance resulting from worsening economic conditions.

7.17 Because demand continues to exceed the provision of services in this area, it is essential that the available funds be put to the most effective use. In this respect, the Committee welcomes the Government's recent introduction of a needs-based planning approach towards the distribution of funds through the Children's Services Program as opposed to the former submission-based funding model which favoured more articulate and organised (although perhaps less needy) applicant groups. The purpose of the planning approach is to ensure that funds are directed towards the provision of services in areas of greatest need and that a more equitable distribution of resources is achieved. This new policy should also minimise the ad hoc and discretionary distribution of funds that has at times characterised the support of projects under the Program. The Committee believes, however, that the success of the Government's revised approach towards funding will depend largely on the effectiveness of consultations between the Commonwealth and State government and non-government welfare organisations to develop appropriate criteria for identifying target groups and determining funding priorities.

7.18 The Children's Services Program was also criticised for its emphasis on the provision of child care services which was considered to be detrimental to the provision of other services, especially other forms of community-based preventive services. It was claimed that while the availability of child care is an important factor in promoting family stability, it is nevertheless only one of many forms of support required to assist the family unit. It became apparent to the Committee that there is growing demand within the community for a wider range of locally-based preventive services such as those sponsored by the Family Support Services Scheme. In particular, local agencies identified the need for more resources to be directed towards parent education programs, pre-marital and family counselling services, respite care services for parents with disabled children, child abuse prevention programs, financial counselling services, homemaker services, and the publication and dissemination of information about the availability of community services.

7.19 While there were moves within the former Department of Social Security to make child care centres more multifunctional, progress in this direction has been limited by funding arrangements. The Committee believes there is a need for the federal Government to assess its overall role in relation to child care and to general community-based preventive services for both children and families. It therefore hopes that the joint Commonwealth-State review of the Family Support Services Scheme will not judge the Scheme in isolation but will evaluate it in relation to the provision of complementary child care services.

7.20 The Committee considers it is unrealistic to expect State and Territory governments to assume sole responsibility for the funding of universal preventive services for families with dependent children and accepts that the demand for assistance by families in crisis must take priority in the planning and delivery of State welfare programs. Attempts by State governments in the past to provide preventive services at the local level have invariably suffered from the need to divert limited resources to helping those in immediate need. Bearing in mind these considerations, the Committee believes that the Commonwealth, through the Family Support Services Scheme, should play a more significant role in the support of preventive care services, particularly at the primary level and act as a catalyst in the development of preventive programs for children and families. **It therefore recommends that the Family Support Services Scheme be continued and expanded by the Commonwealth Government.**

7.21 Many contributors to the inquiry maintained that the Commonwealth should provide more assistance and advice in the planning, design and administration of community child care and family services and accept greater responsibility for the outcome of projects supported under the Children's Services Program. The Committee agrees with the view that there has been a tendency in the past for some agencies to establish new services as quickly as possible in order to satisfy growing demand but that such services have been established without sufficient regard to their appropriateness for the communities they serve. At times, lack of project planning and co-ordination have resulted in unsatisfactory design of child care centres and neighbourhood facilities, inappropriate methods of management (whether through a neighbourhood management committee or a local government council) and, in certain instances, unsatisfactory mechanisms for community participation.

7.22 It was also argued that the effectiveness of the Program has been limited by the absence of any explicit statement by the Commonwealth Government concerning the Program's overall aims and objectives, although certain statements concerning the purpose of particular aspects of the Program, such as the funding of child care services, have been made from time to time.²¹ It was suggested that this, together with the lack of guaranteed funding for some projects, has given the Program an air of uncertainty and has reduced its potential value. The Committee believes the Commonwealth's future participation in the Children's Services Program should be accompanied by a clear statement of policy regarding its objectives in this area.

7.23 The development of such policy should also entail a review of the legislative basis for the Commonwealth's involvement in child care and family welfare matters. In particular, the relevance of the *Child Care Act* 1972 requires close examination. This Act provides principally for the allocation of grants to the States for the purpose of establishing child care centres. Under the Act child care is defined as 'the care of pre-school aged children'. In view of the range of services and facilities now supported by the Commonwealth through the Children's Services Program, the Committee considers the Act is an inappropriate basis for the Commonwealth to be providing funds in this area. Accordingly, **it recommends that the *Child Care Act* 1972 be either amended or replaced to reflect more accurately the Commonwealth's present and future role and policy direction in the provision of assistance for child care and associated family support services.**

ENDNOTES

1. By 1978 the provision of capital funding to assist in the implementation of the Children's Services Program was completed and pre-school education was almost universally available.
2. Due to legislative requirements, pre-schools in the Australian Capital Territory are funded through the Commonwealth Department of Education (via the Australian Capital Territory Schools Authority) rather than under the Children's Services Program. This was also the case in the Northern Territory until 1979 when pre-school funding was transferred from the Commonwealth Department of Education to the Department of Social Security and became part of the Children's Services Program.
3. On 14 May 1985 the Treasurer announced during his speech to the Parliament on the 1985-86 Budget cuts that the Government would terminate grants to the States for pre-schools from 31 December 1985. For further details see P.J. Keating, M.P., Treasurer, *1985-86 Budget Initial Expenditure Savings Measures — Statement*, 14 May 1985, AGPS, Canberra, 1985, p. 24.
4. Examples of conferences and workshops supported by the Office of Child Care have included conferences of Family Day Care Scheme co-ordinators and training workshops for administrators and staff of Aboriginal child care organisations.
5. Department of Community Services, Office of Child Care, *The Commonwealth Government and the Provision of Children's Services*, Canberra, January 1985.
6. Child care services in women's refuges became eligible for funding under the Children's Services Program in 1978-79. This enabled refuges to employ child care workers, purchase toys and equipment, and provide financial assistance towards the use of outside child care services.
7. Department of Community Services, Office of Child Care, op. cit.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. In 1979 the Department of Social Security estimated that 95 per cent of children attending family day care and 78 per cent of children attending centre-based day care were from groups considered by the Commonwealth to require priority of access due to special need. The incidence of special needs children was highest in the regular care types of services. For example, 88 per cent of children in regular centre-based day care were classified as being in special need of care. (Department of Social Security, *Annual Report 1979-80*, AGPS, Canberra, 1980, p. 43.)
12. The basis for determining whether a family is in economic need and, if so, the amount of reduction to be offered, varies from service to service reflecting both the needs of the locality and the circumstances of the individual. The rebate is available for one parent families, migrant families in which either parent is in the first three years of permanent settlement in Australia, families where one of the parents is sick or incapacitated, and families in possession of a Health Benefit Card, a Health Care Card or a Pensioner Health Benefit Card.
13. Department of Social Security, *Annual Report 1978-79*, AGPS, Canberra, 1979, p. 36.
14. A small amount of funds may also be used for emergency cash relief purposes.
15. Department of Social Security, Office of Child Care, *National Overview of the Family Support Services Scheme*, March 1984, pp. 4-6.
16. *ibid.*, p. 4.
17. C. Picton and P. Boss, *Child Welfare in Australia: An Introduction*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1981.
18. *ibid.*
19. T. Sweeney, *An Analysis of Federal Funding of Children's Services — A Sourcebook*, SWRC Reports and Proceedings No. 22, Social Welfare Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, May 1982, p. 6.
20. P.J. Keating, M.P., Treasurer, op. cit., p. 11. The apparent inconsistency between the Treasurer's reference to the fact that an additional 20 000 child care places would be provided over the next three years and the earlier statement by the Office of Child Care that these places would be provided over the next two financial years may be due to the use of calendar years in one case and financial years in the other.
21. Department of Community Services, Office of Child Care, op. cit.