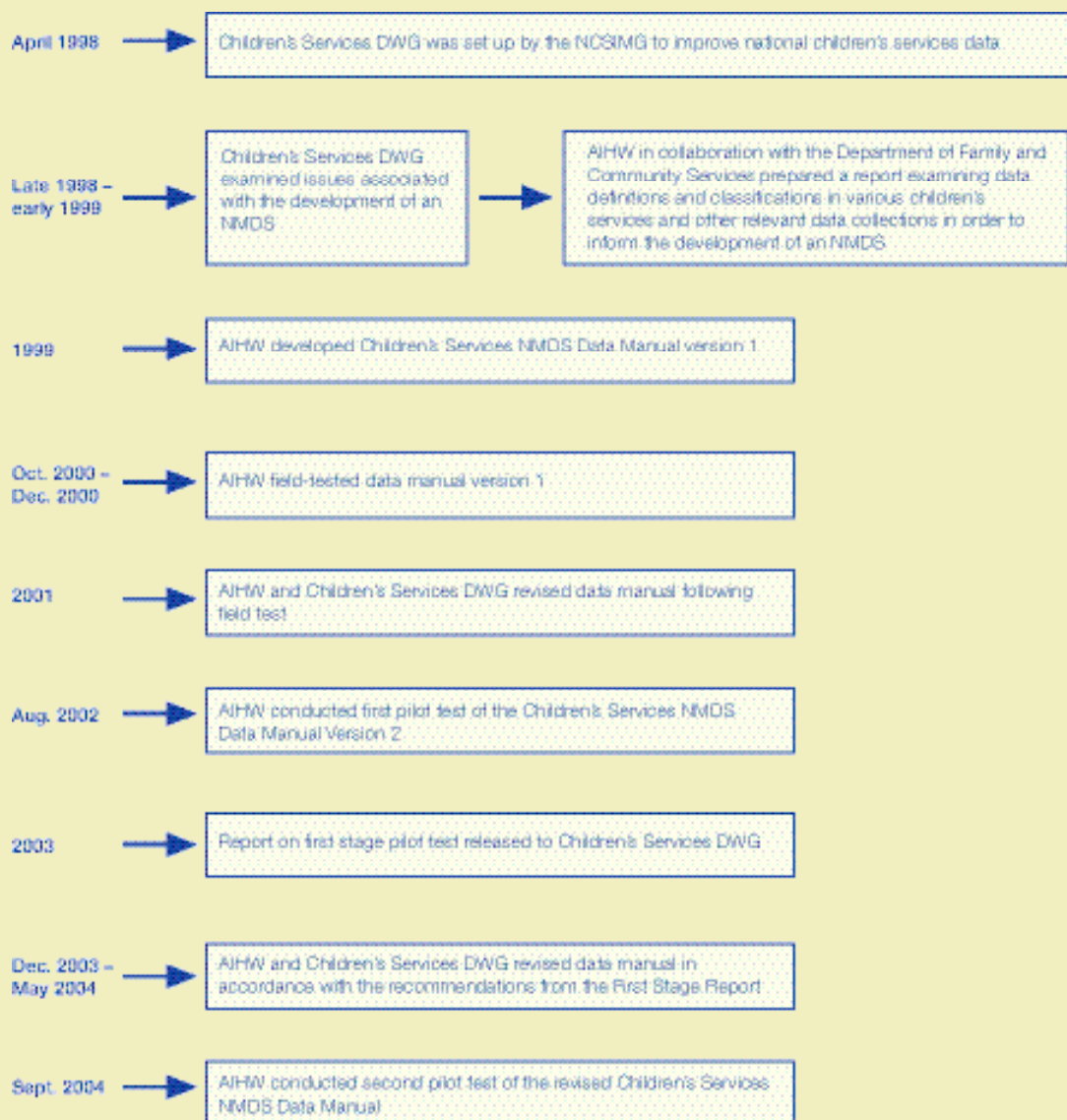


Counting kids

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).



Counting kids

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.