



## Counting kids

### **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.