

2 The Children's Services Data Working Group

In December 1998, the report of the Senate Inquiry on Child Care Funding recommended that 'a more coordinated approach to data collection' be adopted (SCARC 1998). Improving the available information about children's services, and enhancing its consistency on a national basis, are strategic developments in seeking better planning and management. However, most existing administrative data collections in this field are fragmented, resulting in both duplication and notable gaps. Consequently, in 1998, the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) set up the Children's Services Data Working Group (CSDWG) to take on this role (see Figure 1).

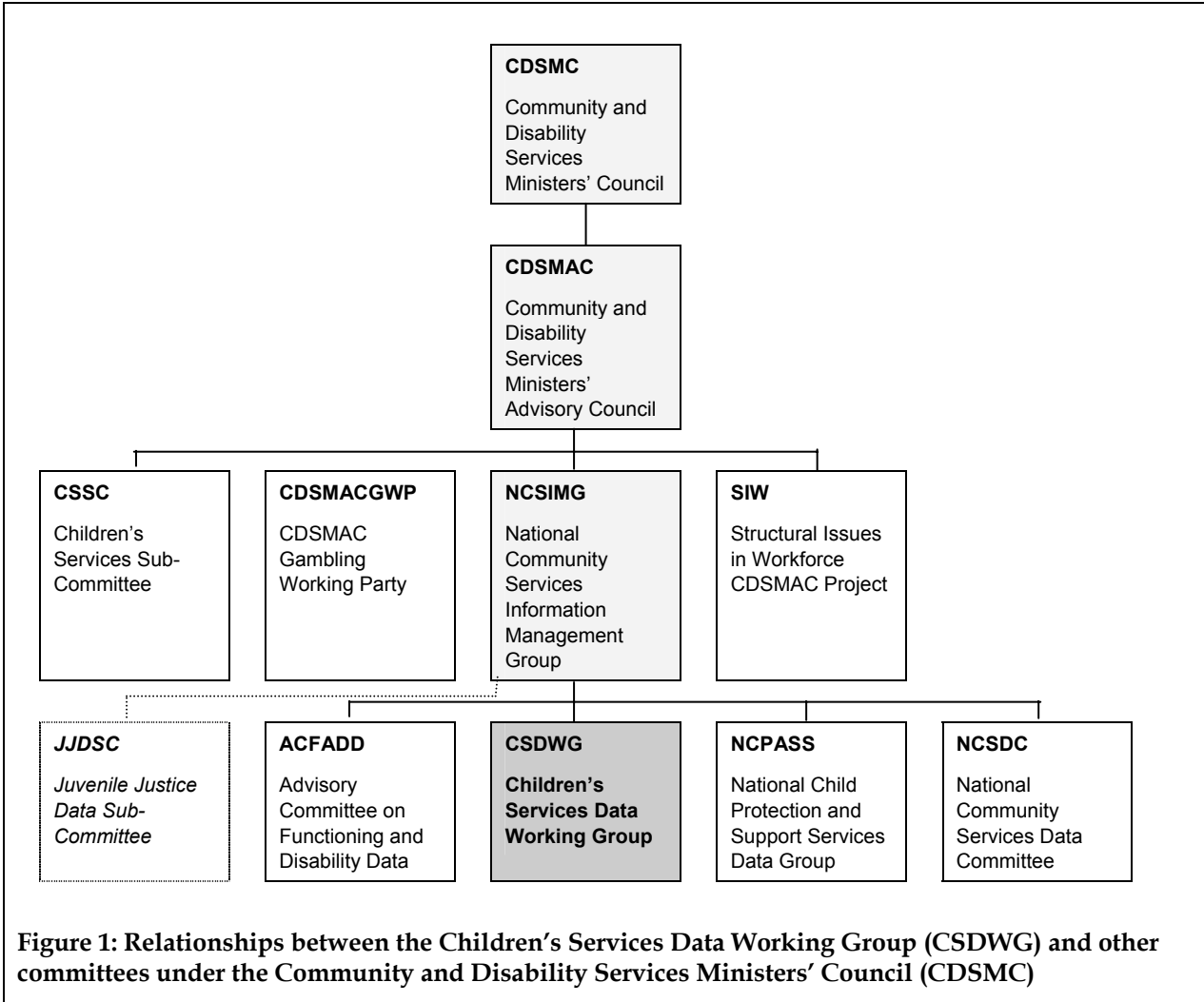


Figure 1: Relationships between the Children's Services Data Working Group (CSDWG) and other committees under the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Council (CDSMC)

The primary role of the CSDWG was to develop and implement a national minimum data set that would provide the first complete picture of children participating in child care and preschool in Australia. Its terms of reference were to:

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

The CSDWG initially comprised representatives of the Australian Government, state and territory children's services departments, the AIHW and the ABS. In 2002, the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, and representatives of the state and territory departments of education (those where child care and preschools are the responsibility of two different departments) were invited to join the CSDWG. Appendix B lists the CSDWG members as at 2 June 2005.

Secretariat services for the CSDWG were initially provided by the then Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services. The AIHW was responsible for providing secretariat services from 2003.

After the initial phase one pilot testing (see Section 4 for further details) in July 2003, the NCSIMG considered these preliminary results and endorsed further work on the CSNMDS. This work was subsequently presented to, and endorsed by, the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CDSMAC) in October 2003.

The role of the CSDWG was further confirmed in 2003 when the Australian Government developed the National Agenda for Early Childhood. The agenda aims to give all Australian children the best start to life, in key areas, including early learning and care. The agenda highlighted a number of priority areas, including the need for good information for policy development:

In a political environment of competing priorities, the role of data and information in shaping policy and setting government agendas is critical. Good information has the capacity to influence decision makers to focus attention and commitment in areas of need. There is increasing recognition internationally that the development of good information systems, reliable data and well-researched indicators are central to any agenda for children. (FaCSIA 2003).