

1 Introduction

This is the final report of the Children's Services Data Working Group (herein referred to as the CSDWG) on the development of the Children's Services National Minimum Data Set (CSNMDS). Importantly, the scope of the CSNMDS encompasses both child care and preschool services. This report describes the background to the CSNMDS, its development, testing and final approval. It also touches on the issue of further implementation of the CSNMDS, including possible implications for current and future children's services data collections.

Children's services are an integral part of Australian society. 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 school. These services enable parents to participate in employment, education and community activities, while making a positive contribution to meeting the care, education and developmental needs of children. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS's) 2005 Child Care Survey found that in June 2005, 23% of children aged between 0–12 years received some type of formal child care in the reference week. Formal care is defined as paid and unpaid regulated care away from the child's home and which includes preschool, outside school hours care, long day care, family day care, occasional care and other formal care. This is up from 19% in 2002 and continues the upward trend observed since 1996 (ABS 2006).

Changing social and economic factors are impacting on the use of both formal and informal child care. Factors such as 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, have impacted on the use of formal child care and the provision of child care places. Between 1993 and 2001, the number of Australian government-funded child care places rose from 208,000 to 500,000 ABS 2004.

Child care and preschool services have always been recognised as important, but in recent years they have received increasing political attention as an important part of early childhood development. Many jurisdictions have policies concerning early childhood, with children's services being a notable focus in many of these. The National Agenda for Early Childhood FaCSIA 2003 explicitly states the importance of children's services to Australia, as well as the need for data to shape policy in this area.

In Australia, responsibility for children's services is spread across education and family and community services departments at both Australian Government and state and territory levels. Reflecting both the diversity of responsibility for children's services and the wider community interest, many organisations currently collect information on the use of child care and preschools. These include:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Child Care Survey
- other national surveys with questions related to child care, e.g. the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Australian Institute of Family Studies' Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children (LSAC)
- Australian Government Census of Child Care Services
- individual states' and territories' collections on children's services that they provide, fund or support within their jurisdictions.

See Appendix A for further details.

All of these data collections are undertaken at different times, collect different information and use different data definitions. 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, and a high level of data collection activity, no one data collection currently exists which gives a comprehensive and comparable picture of child care and preschool services across Australia.