

Mobile Playscheme



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In 1980 Save the Children Queensland received funding from the Department of Housing to employ a Masters Graduate to research the social problems within caravan parks. One of the issues identified during this research was concern over the safety of children and the need for the provision of safe play opportunities was evident.

Caravan parks have become an alternative form of accommodation for an increasing number of families, who due to prior residential history are considered 'undesirable' as both public and private tenants. Bond is rarely required, utilities are affordable, sometimes even fixed, and yet contrary to popular belief, rent is not cheap. Average rent is approximately \$130.00 per week without a toilet or shower, however if families are forced to reside temporarily in 'holiday' style park cabins, costs can exceed \$200 per week. For some families, there is no alternative.

Children under five years living with their parents and carers in caravan parks in marginalized, socially isolated circumstances, are at high risk of abuse and neglect. Child protection issues are magnified in caravan parks as many children live in dysfunctional, economically deprived families who are highly mobile and lack supporting networks of family and friends. Children are constantly exposed to issues of substance abuse, criminal activities and domestic violence because of the overcrowded and isolated environment in which they live. This can include impact from other residents, not just the family unit.

In 1982 as a response to this environment Save the Children began operating the Mobile Playscheme, a supported playgroup program for pre-school age children and their carers residing in suburban caravan parks.

Residence in a caravan park often means there are limited opportunities to provide children with the types of experiences vital to development in the early childhood years. Limiting factors often include lack of space, poor communal facilities, social isolation and reduced access to local services.

The Mobile Playscheme seeks to address these factors by conducting activities from a purpose fitted van equipped with a comprehensive range of toys, games, craft and gross motor equipment to enable children to engage in safe, appropriate and constructive play. In addition the program provides an opportunity for carers to participate in activities with

their children, interact with each other and seek advice and information regarding a variety of areas.

Currently the Mobile Playscheme has three vans which service the Brisbane North, Brisbane South and the Gold Coast/Tweed Heads regions, providing free, weekly, two-hour playgroups in 15 caravan parks.

Each service has two staff, one an Early Childhood specialist, and the other a Community Worker with social welfare qualifications. The Early Childhood Worker's focus is to ensure that appropriate play and craft activities are available, that give children and their carers input that is educational, challenging and above all fun! The Community Worker has a particular focus on engaging carers and working with them informally on a range of issues including child health and development, parenting information, education and support, self-concept, relationship and living skills.

Playscheme has successfully engaged families living in marginalized circumstances for over 20 years and has seen many positive outcomes for families. Our model of service delivery has remained predominantly unchanged, but has continually striven to meet the changing needs of the communities in which we work. Like many successful projects, our strength is the program's simplicity. The playgroup has an inviting appearance, and we find that parents therefore feel comfortable to engage in an activity that focuses on their children in a positive way without feeling judged. Our playgroups are free of charge and place no immediate responsibility or expectations on parents. We have a 'no exclusions' policy and would never turn a child away regardless of their presentation. We encourage participation, in a relaxed, informal environment.

We focus on establishing relationships with our families. Taking the time to develop real rapport and to establish trust enables us to better engage carers around issues of concern as they arise. In our experience, many families residing in Caravan parks expect rejection, criticism and disapproval, as this is commonly their experience of the wider community. Playscheme staff focus on the strengths of families, using humour, modeling and encouraging our carers towards the best outcome for their children. Our creed is simple: if you lose the relationship, you lose the ability and the opportunity to influence change. We model positive interaction with the children, and share all achievements that carer and child make, no matter how small or insignificant.

One of the main aims of the Mobile Playscheme is to reduce the sense of social isolation felt by many park families by



encouraging small links to the wider community and thereby assisting parents to further address their issues. Over the years we have worked hard to develop links with services within the wider community, and even harder at supporting parents to access these services. It is evident that many residents struggle to move out of the park to access external services. They are often hampered in doing this by fear of how they will be treated and issues such as lack of affordable transport. Coupled with this, many community services have limited opportunities to provide genuine outreach services to this community, so often families from caravan parks are not accessing any other service than the Playscheme. Hence our results have been mixed, and the difference between success and failure has ultimately rested with community services ability and willingness to adjust their service delivery to include the needs of this client group.

Families living in caravan parks do not typically own or have access to private cars. Most caravan parks are in isolated areas with limited access to public transport. Profiles of park residents demonstrate an over representation of high unemployment, low educational achievements including low literacy, poor budgeting and financial management, and poor family and social support networks. More inhibiting however, is the increasing stigma attached to living in a caravan park.

In response to these issues, Playscheme is currently participating in a National Pilot Project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services under the Families in Crisis Program. This pilot has taken the existing supported playgroup model and incorporated the skill of a Family Support Worker (a trained social worker/psychologist) who is able to work more intensively and provide greater individual support to park families, outside of Playscheme group time. Nearly eighteen months into the pilot, we have seen some remarkable outcomes for families, who with additional guidance and encouragement have been able to navigate real change for themselves.

Caravan parks continue to have many residents who are struggling to provide a safe environment for their children. The Mobile Playscheme has been a highly successful program for over twenty years, which has continued to engage successfully with families to provide an opportunity for them to see their role as carers as important. This program has afforded Save the Children the privilege of meeting many families who are struggling to meet the needs of their children and allowed us to add to their efforts in a positive way.

For further information contact *Lisa Hillan*, Save the Children Queensland, 349 Queen Street, Brisbane, Queensland 4000. Phone: (07) 3221 4600.

SCOUTS AUSTRALIA RELEASE NEW BOOKLET

Protecting your children – A parent's guide

On 9 September 2002 Mr James Priest, Chief Commissioner of Scouts Queensland announced the launch of a new booklet which aims to help both parents and the wider community talk about and address the serious issue of child abuse in Australia.

The 38-page booklet was launched by the Honourable Paul de Jersey, AC, Chief Justice of Queensland who congratulated the Scout Association for its "pro-active and up-front approach to the vexing issue of child protection" and said that the new booklet is an excellent and practical publication of "great potential value to all parents".

Scouts Australia is the largest Youth Organisation in the country and maintains a zero tolerance level for any and all forms of abuse. Chief Commissioner Priest states that: "Unfortunately, historically, children

have been accorded little, if any, status in society. Deprived of rights and perceived as the property of their parents, children used to be treated any way their 'owners' saw fit".

The Chief Commissioner suggested that "there is a tremendous misconception that any application of the notion of children's rights will mean an erosion of parent's rights, which is absolute nonsense". Mr Priest also said that educating parents on the issue of child abuse is one way that Scouts can help protect the children of Queensland.

The *Protecting Your Children* booklet explains the various types of child abuse and signs which may indicate that a child has been abused, how to prevent child abuse, basic rules of safety for children and it also offers advice for those who work with children. The booklet is one of a series of guides



for parents and is available free of charge from Scouts Queensland. It can be ordered on Phone: (07) 3870 7000 or via email qldhq@qldhq.scouts.com.au