

# SHIRE OF SHERBROOKE

## FAMILY DAY CARE SCHEME

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Family day care is part of the range of services available to families seeking child care for children under five. It is a form of care desired and used by large numbers of people in the community. It has come a long way since its inception in Australia in the early 1970's and, as would be expected, a number of changes have been introduced to the original concept.

One family day care scheme, operated by the Shire of Sherbrooke in Victoria, has developed some interesting arrangements to cater for the characteristics of the community it serves.

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHEME

The Scheme was established in October 1979 with the appointment of the Co-ordinator. The first three or four months of operation were largely spent in initial groundwork — visits to local community groups, kindergartens, infant welfare centres, doctors, community houses and also visits to other family day care schemes.

Because the Children's Services Worker and the local Day Care Centre had lists of people waiting for child care, it was possible to place a small number of children in care with mothers who were already offering it. The quiet period over the Christmas vacation enabled more liaison work to be carried out, so that in February 1980, when people were returning to work, a reasonable network of care-givers and care-seekers had been established.

There has been very rapid development of the scheme over the past six months. At present there are 92 families involved, with a gross total of 119 children in care — the equivalent full-time number being 78.

Of the 92 families, 13 are single parent families, 79 are two parent families and 12 families received Government subsidies.

35% of the children are in full-time

care, 40% in part-time care, 22% in occasional care and approx. 6% use emergency care.

### UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHEME

The Shire of Sherbrooke embraces a large, mountainous region which consists of a number of scattered, village-like communities.

To facilitate the task of the Co-ordinator, local *Contact Persons* have been appointed in each community, each woman being responsible for her own mini network of care-givers and seekers. Most of the Contact Persons have lived in their own area for at least 10 years.

At present the number of women serving as child-minders in each of our areas is:— Emerald 29, Belgrave 19, Upwey 19, Ferny Creek 4, Upper Ferntree Gully 16, Sassafra 1.

When a woman seeking care initially contacts the Co-ordinator, she is interviewed to establish the type of care sought and is then referred to the local Contact Person, who provides her with a choice of three mothers offering care. The care-seeker then makes her own selection of the care-giver.

When women first indicate that they wish to offer care, they are interviewed by the Contact Person and the Co-ordinator to determine their suitability. In general the Contact Persons have known these care-givers over a number of years, in fact, in many cases they have been at school together. The Contact Persons, therefore, usually have a close knowledge of the care-givers in their area.

The Contact Person is a resource person for the area. She will often take toys, clothes, prams, high chairs, cots, or car seats to the care-givers — these items have been requested in our Newsletter.

The Contact Person will often collect children from school and return them at the home of the care-giver, especially if that person is offering 24 hours care.

In addition, each fortnight the Contact Person provides a playgroup (usually in the local Community

House or Infant Welfare Centre) and the Co-ordinator attends to offer support.

The Co-ordinator, conducts quarterly meetings with the Contact Persons to discuss matters of mutual concern, to exchange ideas. Regular weekly contact is maintained by telephone and often by visits to the Shire Offices.

Many people have criticised the Contact Person idea, suggesting that a weekly retainer of \$20.00 is mere exploitation. This \$20.00 payment is intended as reimbursement for telephone and petrol expenses and is not intended as a wage. On a number of occasions the Contact Persons have stated that they do not feel they are exploited at all. They see the scheme as an opportunity to develop themselves, to serve their community and to learn more about the people in their community. They have all stated that if they were not happy they would withdraw from the scheme.

### SUPPORT PROVIDED BY CARE-GIVERS

The Co-ordinator makes regular visits to each area to ensure that all is well and that morale is high. Not all care-givers regularly attend playgroups — some are grandmothers.

In-service Training is offered for these persons. The training will focus on understanding young children, the elements of quality care and maximising self-esteem of the care-givers. It is also intended to offer similar in-service to care-seekers.

### ADDITIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

There is a wide range of support services in the Shire of Sherbrooke, such as Home Help (the Co-ordinator of this Scheme has been very supportive of the Family Day Care Scheme), the Social Planner, Children's Services Worker, Social Worker, Pre-School Adviser, Infant Welfare Sisters, Occupational Therapist, Doctors, Hospitals, Community Houses, Physiotherapist, etc.

Regular meetings of these groups are held at the Shire Offices to

The business of passing on a heritage which includes so much new content matter (essential for employment or to be better informed of the wider world, or to the acquisition of skills in new contexts of office, schoolroom, health centre, discuss matters of mutual concern.

Local people making use of the scheme are offered occasional opportunities to meet with the Co-

ordinator and Contact Person in each area to discuss the services offered, and means of improving them.

#### ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

I see my role as offering non-threatening support to care-seekers and givers involved in the scheme. Feedback so far received would suggest that we have gained the support and confidence of all

participants and there is no doubt that this has been made possible by the professional services offered by the Shire.

The Co-ordinator's major role so far has been to visit with playgroups, home visits, records and other administration, meetings, talks to interested groups, conferences, provision of emergency care (evenings and weekends).

## THE ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES HERITAGE PROJECT

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garage, etc.), would be easier if non-Aborigines involved recognised Aboriginal styles, respected them and ensured them a more overt operation than at present.

One way of perceiving Aboriginal styles is to observe contrasts between Aboriginal styles, respected them and of learning and doing things and those of their non-Aboriginal workmates, or teachers, or employers and employees.

The examples here come from Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land, Melville and Bathurst Islands off North Australia and Belyuen, near Darwin. Yet they appear to hold for Aboriginal learning styles everywhere in Australia.

1. For an Aboriginal person learning to perform a task, *the social cost of making a mistake is greater than that of admitting ignorance*. An Aboriginal person who says, "I don't know," is not taking the lazy or easy way out. He or she often means precisely what is said and, additionally, "I am not ready yet". He or she can also mean, "It is not my right to speak on this matter," or "You are the teacher. You know the answer to this question. Why embarrass me by asking me to emphasise that I know less than you?" This stands in stark contrast to the often heard European-Australian contention that one can learn only by making mistakes. Individual children will have their own inclinations, of course, which will vary within and sometimes differ from a prevailing cultural style. My point is that in the wider social context, European-Australian parents and families value one behaviour and Aborigines the other. This kind of emphasis is a cultural value, one of the cores of any heritage.

It is critical to recognise this particular Aboriginal value in any

teaching and learning situation where they are involved.

2. *Another crucial emphasis is that many rural Aborigines have not, as Western Europeans have, 'invented childhood'* (Plumb, 1978:4). Their children still live in an adult-centred world. Elaborate mass produced trips, games, books and entertainment are not needed in Aboriginal socialisation (although, of course, children enjoy them). Children throughout most of human history have not been kept separate from the world and activities of adults and many Aboriginal settlements and camps are like this today. Perhaps the need for literacy and numeracy in a rapidly changing social and economic environment — like the industrial revolution — initiated the custom of keeping children secluded from adults, for learning the skills is a long-term task. But we can still ask if children, even in wider Australia, need to be separated from adult activities as much as they are in the modern world?

3. *Aboriginal children are socialised not only by their own parents, but by a wider extended family*. The structures of social service benefits in Australia assumes a nuclear family usually with a male bread-winner. Most Aboriginal families are of the wider, extended family type which includes grandparents and grandchildren and cousins and aunties and uncles and even more distant kin. Moreover, it is Aboriginal women who have always been the stable bread-winners, and whose responsibility it is to feed and clothe children. When jobs are offered only to men, or when unemployment benefit cheques are paid to fathers, the rights and responsibilities of women are ignored. Yet the

expectations of their own family remain and women and children often face great hardships as a result in trying to meet them (Bell and Brandl, 1980).

#### SUMMARY

The heritage of Aboriginal children throughout Australia is endangered. Today it is not often a deliberate threat but is nonetheless damaging, perhaps especially, because it is unacknowledged. New skills and knowledge are not, of themselves, a danger, but the ways and contexts in which these are imparted can create problems. Aboriginal people everywhere state the need for new skills and new information for themselves and for their children, but they are not asking for the cultural styles and manners that almost everywhere inevitably accompany and impede the teaching and learning of new information.

In the styles of learning and doing, of living and dying, lie a people's heritage, their distinctiveness, those traits that enable them to be able to state like Lorna Tennant of Belyuen:

*My father could not read or write the white man way as we do today. He was proud to call himself a Kiuk, as we are proud to be called today.*

To enable more Aboriginal people to feel like this, government officials, teachers and workmates are needed who, like a European-Australian teacher at Yirrkala, are able to recognise that:

*Aboriginal parents want new skills for their children, but above all, they want them to grow up to be Aborigines.*

#### REFERENCES

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