

A Middle Years Framework for OSHC

DISCUSSION PAPER

PREPARED BY KYLIE BRANNELLY (OCAN) AND ROBYN MONRO MILLER
(NETWORK OF COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES)

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There is increasing acceptance and promotion within the Out of School Hours (OSHC) sector for a framework to be developed which supports the experiences of school age children who attend OSHC services in Australia.

Such a framework would endeavour to provide a means of articulating the value of play and the importance of collaboration with children as a fundamental principle for school age care. This framework would provide a structure from which services can develop programs for children that promote and build resilience.

This discussion paper serves to commence discussion and debate around current practice in OSHC services throughout Australia and gauge support for the development of a Middle Years Framework for OSHC.

A framework that must essentially:

- Acknowledge and enhance the delivery of appropriate programs for school age children;
- Be innovative, flexible and responsive;
- Include children's' opinions and levels of participation;
- Reflect the individual needs, interests and choices of children within their own services and communities;
- Extend children's experiences through the provision of new and diverse activities and opportunities;
- Provide opportunities for children to engage in safe risk taking and experience challenge;
- Utilise information technology effectively;
- Provide a language to support effective dialogue among stakeholders;
- Build relationships within the community and with school leaders;
- Support existing systemic structures such as QA and Regulation;
- Enhance outcomes for school age children in care services through the building of resilience.

A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

A framework for middle childhood services should aim to uphold the principles in the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child. The United Nations General assembly in 1989 unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC), Australia ratified CROC in 1991 and every other nation in Oceania did so within six years.

There are two pertinent Articles in the Convention that should be embedded in a Middle Years framework in Out of School Hours services.

ARTICLE 31¹ of the Convention promotes that children have the right to pursue and engage in play-based, recreational experiences.

ARTICLE 12² of the Convention promotes the children's right to be consulted on and listened to in matters affecting them. In this way OSHC services can ensure that children have ample opportunities to collaborate together on projects, have input into the program and be consulted with regarding the program and day to day routines that impact on them.

Whilst there appears to be open articulation and wide spread acceptance of children's rights, there is however a significant gap in the suitability of policy and frameworks which appropriately support service providers to promote these rights, particularly for school age children.

The Early Years Learning Framework serves to connect the value of play to learning in services for children under 5. Though in its early stages, this framework will promote professional practice for the early childhood and care sector. However, it has been acknowledged by the sector and Government that this framework will not be suitable for achieving a like outcome for OSHC.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MIDDLE YEARS 5-12 YEARS

Whilst the tendency is to overlook the time a child spends in an Out of School Hours Service as less significant to their time in formal school, there is significant research to indicate that this would be a critical error in judgment if Government was truly committed to the development of healthy children.

Erik Erikson identified that the wider social contexts that children move into in their middle years have the potential to strongly influence their development.

Children's participation and competence in these new social roles were the means by which they acquire social status and if not mastered he predicted they would develop a "sense of inferiority" resulting in anxiety, withdrawal and depression.³ Furthermore, children develop a more abstract sense of competency and self-concept during middle childhood which becomes more complex and elaborate, far less focused on external characteristics and more and more on internal qualities.

The middle-childhood years of 5-12 marks a key transition in children's lives, which is their entry to school and increasing involvement in other activities away from their parent's supervision. At this point in their lives children spend less time with their family and increasingly under the influence of other adults and their peers. A child may spend up to 50 waking hours a week in an OSHC service during school holiday periods and 30 during term time. This increased individual freedom impacts on children's self concept as they navigate alone the different social contexts and experience success or failure in a more public arena. The way children respond and adjust to these new complex social institutions has long-term impact on their wellbeing and mental health.⁴

Eckersley (2008) promotes that contrary to the official view that health of children and youth in Australia is improving, there is a growing body of evidence that their well being is declining. The absence of a proper framework for OSHC that supports the development of children's competence has implications for the mental health of our community.

School age children need real life experiences which support not only the short term provision of quality care services, but the long term implications with a sustainable quality of a well balanced life.

A POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

A middle years framework for OSHC should build on the current existing understandings around the critical factors for the development and promotion of resilience in children; ⁵

- Develop children's' capacity and access to play
- Provide opportunities for safe social activity and play with peers while offering a balance of more organised activities
- Offer access for children to social contacts outside the immediate family
- Promote the development of positive firming relationships with adults outside the family structure that focus on strength and reward autonomy
- Create opportunities for children to develop and improve their communication skills
- Offer a context for clear behavioural strategies to be implemented and developed
- Create opportunities for the children to receive unconditional praise and affirmation for effort. Out of School Hours Services have an important role to play in Children's lives and therefore in children's development, we are in the words of Sven Silburn "a critical leverage point".

"Current approaches to prevention aim to identify the critical 'leverage' points in human development and to create opportunities in the environments most proximal to children. This includes policies and initiatives to build the capacity of communities and services to ensure that families and schools are properly supported in their shared task of child rearing." ⁶

The development of a middle years framework for Out of School Hours Services would be one such initiative that is properly constructed to have a positive influence in the development of children and the embedding of a culture of resilience within the community.

"OSHC services have been referred to as the 'Cinderella' of the care services because they attract the least amount of funding and have the poorest work conditions." (Gammage, 2003; Cartmel, 2007)

With this thought in mind, we advocate that OSHC services should challenge the idea that they are the 'Cinderella' of the care services and begin work on a Middle Years Framework that is developed by the sector, for the sector.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do we need a middle years Framework for OSHC?
2. What are the diverse play needs of children who attend OSHC?

3. How does the service respond to children's play needs through providing a diverse range of experiences and opportunities?
4. How can OSHC services give children a voice?
5. How can we best educate and train in the delivery of a framework for OSHC?
6. How should engagement with the community be facilitated to maximise the effectiveness of service delivery?
7. What are the differing state, territory and federal government frameworks and legislative structures that impact on the delivery of appropriate OSHC services and how can these be enhanced or improved?
8. What are the workforce issues that may impact on the capacity for a framework to be successful?
9. How does the cost of care impact on a Parent/Family decision to utilise a service?
10. How do we engage the sector, families & children in the development of a middle years framework for OSHC?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kylie Brannelly is the Executive Officer of the Queensland Children's Activities Network (QCAN) Inc which is the peak body for OSHC in Queensland. Kylie has 20 years experience in early, special and middle childhood care and education as a carer, teacher and advisor.

Robyn Monro Miller is the Executive Officer of Network of Community Activities. Network is the peak body for school age care in NSW and ACT. With a background in Primary Education, Robyn has 20 years experience working in direct service provision in OSHC, resourcing and training and is currently a parent user of her local OSHC service.

1 "The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and art."

2 "The right of the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child."

3 Erikson EH. Identity, Youth and Crisis. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968.

4 Eccles JS. The development of children ages 6 to 14. The Future of Children, 9(2): 30-44, 1999.

5 Sven Silburn; Resilience Summit Parliament House Canberra, June 16 2009

6 Silburn, S. (2003) Guest Editorial. Improving the Developmental Health of Australian Children. Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health 2(1)