



## Mobile Children's Services in Australia

Australia's vastness, relatively low population concentrated mainly along the coastal fringes, combined with a history of immigration and colonisation has resulted in families living in isolation not only due to the geographic environment but also through social and cultural factors.

Isolation through the lack of contact with other people, services and resources can be evidenced in the vastness of Australia's outback, in rural and regional areas as well as urban and city environment. A sense of isolation may be due not only as a result of distance but through social circumstances, such as culture, the inability to speak or read English, disability, ill health, lack of money, the unavailability of or inability to access transport.

Over the years, there have been many innovative ways developed to combat isolation, provide supports for children and their families and to help to alleviate the concerns associated with child rearing particularly child rearing in isolation.

For the women of the outback the establishment of the Flying Doctor Service in 1928 and the advent of the pedal radio in 1929 provided access not only to health services and information but also to a social network. The "galah" sessions offered on the Flying Doctor Service radio network each day enabled women in the outback air time and as such time to talk with each other.

The development of communication networks and modern transport in Australia has allowed the evolution of a range of new approaches to reach people living in isolated circumstances through mobile programs including health and dental services, preschools, child care, family and children support programs, libraries, toy libraries and information vans.

Focussing on the needs of families with children, Mobile Children's Services have a long history in Australia. The very first known Mobile Children's Service established was the Canberra Mobile Kindergarten in 1949 (Australian Capital Territory ACT) which was followed by the development of other services in each state and territory in NSW (1958); Tasmania (1969), Victoria (1971), South Australia and Western Australia (1975); Queensland (1980) and the Northern Territory (1987).

Mobile Children's Services have been defined as:

*A Mobile Children's Service provides an itinerant educational and support service for isolated children and families living in isolated communities or disadvantaged localities, or where a stand-alone service is not viable. A vehicle (car, bus, plane or train) is used to transport staff, equipment and appropriate materials to these localities as an integral part of the educational programs being provided.*

*Contact Inc. 1993*

Mobiles provide a flexible, responsive and innovative service, reaching out, responding to needs and being capable of "moving" having kept Mobiles at the forefront as they adapt to the varied and complex community changes in Australia. As a consequence, Mobiles are as varied as the Australian community, offering services to children, parents and adults.

Each state or territory tells a different story ranging from Mobiles that link up with the children and families on a regular weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis through to outback areas so vast that the Mobile may visit a family only three or four times a year.

Services offered are almost as diverse as the number of Mobiles in Australia (estimated at 150 plus), offering programs such as preschool, child care; family support; toy and resource libraries, play sessions, playgroup, youth programs, services for the aged, out of school hours care, holiday programs, early intervention and programs for developmentally delayed children, and cultural programs.

In general, most services have either evolved in direct response to the needs of the socially, culturally or geographically isolated families, often because there were no services at all or in response to identified gaps in existing service provision.

Often socially isolated groups such as Aboriginal communities, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, low income and single parent families and families living in disadvantaged localities are not accessing existing mainstream services. This may be due to a range of reasons such as poor or non-existent transport services, the costs associated with using the mainstream service or simply the families may not feel comfortable or sense a relevance of the service to their personal needs. Throughout Australia, Mobiles successfully deliver a range of programs specifically targeting these very population groups.

Mobiles are an ideal cost effective way of bringing services to small, widespread or isolated areas. Mobiles operate out of a range of venues including purposed built facilities, through to under utilised community facilities such as community halls, open spaces such as in parks, shopping centres, homestead verandas, wool sheds, schools, hospitals and neighbourhood centres on the coast, inland or in remote regions.

Operating as an itinerant service, Mobiles are able to reach out to several communities and provide not only programs for children but often as the Mobile staff become more aware of the needs of the families, are able to link them with other families or professionals such as health care workers.

Funding for Mobiles in Australia is derived from State, Federal or philanthropic sources, each providing differing levels of contribution and support. The uniqueness and diversity of Mobile services has caused them to evolve their own network and training programs in order to address specific Mobile service needs and issues. There are two Mobile specific peak organisations in Australia. On a State basis, the New South Wales Mobile Children's Services Association (MCSA) was formed and incorporated in 1988 and the National Association of Mobile Services for Rural and Remote Children and Families (NAMS) was established in 1994.

Mobiles have the potential to play an ongoing and increasing role in delivering services sensitive to community need. Credit needs to be given to the flexibility, energy, hard work and imagination of staff, management and government personnel and Mobile support agencies who have established Mobiles as an integral part of the services offered to the Australian community.

## **Mobiles in action ..... some case studies**

**Magic Yellow Bus**, Marrickville (Sydney) New South Wales is funded by the State Government and is a free activities and community information service for children aged six weeks to 12 years and their parents/carers. The Magic Yellow Bus provides Mobile playgroup and operates 50 weeks a year however it does not operate in wet weather conditions or extreme heat where temperatures are in excess of 35 C and does not operate during public holidays. Group time reading with staff from Marrickville Library occurs throughout the first week of every month.

**CCOWS (Child Care on Wheels Service)** operating on the Limestone Coast, South Australia offers child care five days a week in three different rural communities. The service employs two permanent child care staff, one permanent part-time and numerous casual staff members. Families that access the Mobile are employed in a range of activities including farming, crayfish fishing, Atlantic salmon farming and wineries.

**Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise Inc. (RICE)**, Port Augusta, South Australia provides services to families living in remote towns, communities, stations and highway camps and is concerned with the health, welfare and education of children aged 0-8 years. Programs provided include child care in the home of the child through Outback Childcare SA, crèche care whilst parents attend training days or meetings, activity days at agricultural field day and Kindergarten by Air.

**West Pilbara Mobile Children's Service**, South Hedland, Western Australia offers a multicultural weekly playgroup in the park as well as visiting eight isolated communities and two station properties.

**Gnowangerup Family Support Association Inc**, Great Southern area, Western Australia operates two Mobile child care services which provide seven hours of occasional child care, one day a week at eight different venues. Care is provided for 180 families in a service area of 450 square kilometres.

**The Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS)**, Northern Territory provides Northern Territory station (properties) children with a chance to socialise through a Mobile playgroup. Providing a service for 400 children per annum and travelling in an area that covers 600,000 square kilometres.

**Tangentyere Mobile Playgroup**, Alice Springs, Northern Territory provides playgroup services to town camps (aboriginal communities) around Alice Springs and currently operates at four town camps. Participation of aboriginal families is high, with sessions offered outdoors. The Mobile brings toys and equipment to set up activities and encourage the involvement of the children and their parents.

**Corangamite Shire Mobile Child Care Service**, Victoria operates throughout the Corangamite region offering five hours of child care, one day a week at nine different venues.

**The Outback Mobile Resource Unit Inc**, New South Wales offers toy library, child care and playgroup sessions to children and families in the remote far western areas of New South Wales and the service travels to various towns, communities and properties in the area.

**Noah's Ark Toy Library** for children with special needs (multiple locations) is a Mobile toy library that lends quality toys and play equipment to families and groups who care for children with additional needs.