



'For the Little Ones, the Best' SDN Children's Services 1905–2005 *Leone Huntsman*



Front cover image: Surry Hills 1934



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

SYDNEY 2000

Message from Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir AC

As Patron of SDN Children's Services, it is my great pleasure to congratulate this wonderful Australian institution on its Centenary, and to express my considerable appreciation for the invaluable care which it has provided for our children. One of the earliest office bearers of the Association, Mrs Orwell Phillips, eloquently described the intent of the Association when she said '*Our aim is to surround the children with loving care whilst their mothers are working*'.

Indeed, generous, impartial and practical support has characterised the ethos of SDN. Its story is a testament to the unstinting commitment of many people across the decades. In the early years of the Association's foundation, the support provided was virtually life-saving for many mothers who, as single parents, were compelled to seek paid work to sustain their family. Today, similar stresses can impact on families, but we also know from many research studies, that young children can make significant progress in their development, in a creative learning, safe and caring preschool environment.

Like the wives of former Governors of New South Wales, I am delighted to be associated with this fine institution which has assisted countless children and parents in the City of Sydney. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed over the years to the excellence of this service, and to wish the Association every success as it continues this important work into the future.

Marie R Bashir AC
Governor of New South Wales

May 2005

Thank you

The Author's Acknowledgements

The facts from which this history has been drawn are largely taken from SDN Annual and Committee reports. Accounts of the social and economic history of the period have been consulted in order to understand the context in which SDN developed its services.

The following have also been useful: Deborah Brennan's *The politics of child care: from feminism to philanthropy and beyond* and Jan Robert's *Maybanke Anderson 1845-1927: Sex, suffrage and social reform*. I am especially indebted to Jan Kelly's 1988 Ph.D. thesis *Not Merely Minded: Care and education for the young children of working women in Sydney: The Sydney Day Nursery & Nursery Schools Association 1905-1945*, a model of thorough scholarship and a mine of information on the early history of SDN. I also had unlimited access to the substantial archival records of the Association which are being processed and preserved in the SDN History Room at Woolloomooloo.

I cannot adequately express my gratitude to the devoted members of the History Committee, especially Adrienne Miles, Marion Taylor and the tireless Effie Bland, who has done so much to bring the History Room into being and to shape the future course of its development. To Luke Touhill, Barbara Selby and Margi Barns for photographs and information, and to Jane Miller for her proofreading and shepherding of the work through its final stages, my thanks. I have very much appreciated SDN Board members' interest and steady support throughout this period.

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Leone Huntsman

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thank you



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SDN — a history



Free play – wheeled toys, 1939

'For the Little Ones, the Best' SDN Children's Services 1905–2005

In 2005 SDN Children's Services (formerly the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association, formerly the Sydney Day Nursery Association) celebrated one hundred years of existence.¹

The motto adopted by SDN's Nursery School Teachers College in 1946 'For the Little Ones, the Best' truly sums up the aspirations of the organisation. As with most human hopes and ambitions, realisation of this ideal has always been constrained by financial, social and political realities.

Nevertheless, achievements over the past century have been substantial. Today SDN Children's Services reaches around 5000 children through its range of services for children, families and other child care providers. SDN runs 25 Children's Education and Care Centres including two Preschools. With funding secured from federal and state governments as well as grant making foundations, it also runs a variety of family support services with an emphasis on vulnerable at-risk families. These services include inclusion support, supporting children with additional needs, and programs which provide resources and support for both families and early childhood educators.

¹ For the story prior to 1999, this account will usually refer simply to 'the Association'. However, for the sake of brevity and avoidance of repetition, it will at other times be referred to as 'SDN'.

*This is the story of SDN; of the people who have shaped, supported and sustained it;
and the children who were, and are, its reason for being.*

1905–2005

Phase I: Foundation and the early Day Nurseries: 1905 to 1932

In the first decade of the twentieth century Sydney was slowly recovering from effects of the drought and depression of the 1890s. The bitter years of hardship so recently endured cast a shadow over festivities celebrating the achievement of Federation.

Newspapers and magazines of the time reported lively public debate over 'baby farming', the welfare of children in institutions, child labour and working conditions, and the poor health of many working-class children. Concern was fuelled by nationalistic fervour: Australia's future as a great nation depended on the quality of its people. A NSW member of parliament declared in 1905 that *'if we want to build up a higher standard of civilisation in the future we must begin with child life'*.

A Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birthrate and on the Mortality of Infants in NSW was established in 1904. Not much could be done about a slight decline in the birthrate; even more worrying were high rates of infant mortality, especially in the poor areas of Sydney, and the truly shocking deathrate in children's institutions. At one foundling Home where 529 children were admitted in four years, 423 children died during that same period. Other 'Homes' were not much better. A Matron of one of these institutions summed up a

terrible state of affairs: *'They fade away, and it is not known what is the cause. There is no good reason why they should not thrive; but they do not. I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing for the child but motherly care'*.

For some mothers, however, social conditions made the provision of such 'motherly care' extremely difficult. Babies were placed in institutions at this time because of the stigma against unmarried mothers, or because their mothers simply could not afford to keep them. Women without husbands (widowed or single) or whose husbands had left them or were unemployed or

disabled through injury, illness or drunkenness were often in a desperate situation. There were no child or family allowances or pensions, although the mortality rate in children's institutions led governments to pay mothers a 'boarding out' allowance so that they could keep their children with them. Such allowances were a pittance; only a minority received them, in any case. Women earned much less than men (they received 44.54% of the male rate of pay in 1919). Nevertheless, they had to work if they lacked family support and if a male wage was not coming into the household.

But what was a mother to do with her children while she was at work? A neighbour might volunteer or be asked to mind the children and perhaps be paid a small sum for doing so; but she was probably busy, poor and overburdened as well. Babies could be left with a slightly older brother or sister, often locked in the house. On the other hand, sometimes children were locked out of the house, in the hope that they could fend for themselves on the street and that the neighbours would keep an eye on them. Maybanke Anderson, founder of the Free Kindergarten established in 1896 in Woolloomooloo, told of a woman there who said she went out to work: *'What do I do with the children? Well, you know, I couldn't leave the door open, so I 'ave to lock 'em out'. And there they were, three grubby mites, sitting on the narrow kerb, with their feet in the gutter.'* The anxiety of these mothers during the hours away from their children can easily be imagined.

Dr Charles Clubbe, a prominent witness at the 1904 Royal Commission and later an important figure in the history of SDN, told the Commission that *'It would be well to establish a creche in connection with all large factories'*. The term 'creche' for a child care facility goes back to the first Nursery for infants in Paris, established in 1801. Creche means manger, *'the manger of our Savior, also an unhomed babe'* as one journalist put it. There had been reports of a few single creches opened in different parts of Sydney from time to time, but no previous sustained effort to deal with this urgent need.

A group of women were moved to action by the Report of the Royal Commission, and by their own awareness of the distress it described. Their aim was *'to relieve the mothers of their overwhelming burden of care and anxiety, to give the little ones wholesome and loving care... and to enable them to keep the home and family together'*. To this end, they arranged a meeting *'for the purpose of organizing a movement to establish a Creche'*. This first meeting was held on the premises of the Kindergarten Training College at Roslyn Gardens, Darlinghurst, on August 3, 1905.



Children such as those described by Maybanke Anderson in an inner city lane, early 20th century.

Who were the Founding Mothers?

The women who assembled in Darlinghurst on that day in August came from a very different social class from those they were planning to help. Their addresses indicate that nearly all came from the most salubrious of the eastern suburbs not far from the city – Potts Point, Point Piper, Hyde Park, Darling Point... They were following a tradition established in the early days. Lady Darling, the Governor's wife, set up a Female School of Industry in 1832 with assistance from wives of prominent men of the colony. By late in the century a formidable network of women was working in support of feminist causes – divorce law reform, votes for women, equal pay for equal work – and for education of the poor, setting up 'Ragged Schools' in the 1860s and the Free Kindergartens and the Kindergarten Union in the 1890s.

Several of the founding women were members of the Kindergarten Union, which had been established in Sydney in 1895 to provide educational experiences for preschool-aged children. In 1903 the KU had decided to exclude children under 3 from its kindergartens. It was this lack of provision for babies and very young children, and for the care of young children of working mothers generally, that these KU members, in concert with other women, sought to address.

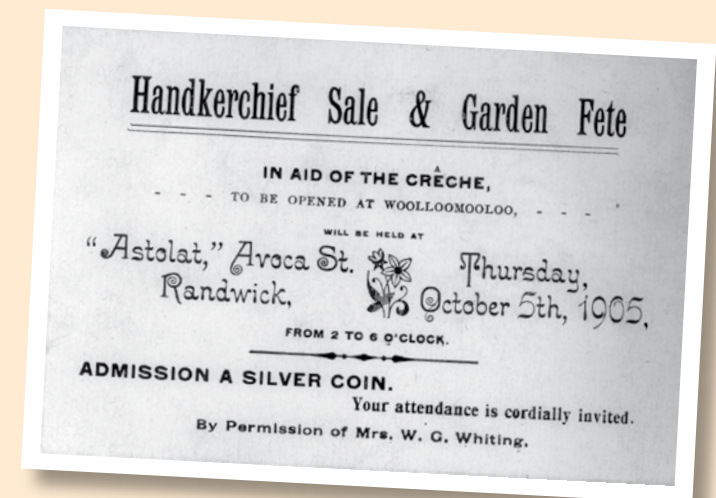
Wealthy married women who worked for charitable causes in the past were often portrayed as patronising and condescending, 'filling in time between bridge parties', or intent on imposing a system of social control over the poor whom they purported to help. Indeed, respectable married women often had 'a bad press' in colonial Australia, the Bulletin deriding them as 'do-gooders' and 'wowsers' (many women supported temperance movements not so much because they were anti-alcohol on principle, but because they observed the disastrous consequences for wives and families of male drunkenness). Some twentieth century writers perpetuated this unfavourable image, labelling such women as 'God's police'.

SDN would never have come into being had it not been for the energy and the commitment of these women. They identified and empathised with those they sought to help: SDN 'is an institution started by fellow women, who fully realise the difficulties that beset the paths of working mothers' as the Honorary Secretary proclaimed in 1918. But they also shared with most members of their class the perception that there were two categories of 'the poor': the 'undeserving', who were irremediably vicious and beyond help; and the 'deserving', who were poor because of circumstances beyond their control. These attitudes were to shape the Association's rules and practices, which sought to ensure that only 'deserving' mothers who genuinely needed and wanted to support their children would be helped.

Some at the first meeting brought much valuable experience to the group. The first Secretary, Mrs Dane, had been Acting Principal of the Kindergarten Teachers College in 1901 and helped produce an early Australian song book for children, *Song Stories for Australia*. She was an effective advocate for the Association in its early days, and was said to be a charming, tactful person. The founding President, Mrs Davenport, was Honorary Secretary of the Kindergarten Union. Others were young, still in their teens or recently married, but full of energy and enthusiasm; for in the short space of that first meeting, five officer-bearers, an Executive Committee, an Advisory Committee and a general Council had been established, a schedule of monthly meetings arranged, as well as a money-raising Fete and Handkerchief Sale. Most importantly, they decided that a creche should be established in Woolloomooloo, one of the suburbs where the need was greatest.

Given the lack of financial independence that was the common lot of women in those days, the founders had to enlist the support of husbands and male acquaintances if the organisation was to prosper. The inaugural Advisory Committee comprised a majority of men (doctors). Frank Davenport, of the law firm of Davenport and Mant, was the husband of the first President and the Association's Honorary Solicitor and giver of wise financial advice over many years. Businessmen husbands of committee members often gave generously of time and money. Still remembered today is the customary response by Mrs Katherine Thyne Reid, a prominent committee member for many years, to news of yet another financial shortfall: 'I'll speak to Thyne' (Andrew Thyne Reid, her husband).

In 1964 a Men's Advisory Panel was formed to give advice on finance, fundraising and publicity. But for most of its history the control and management of the Association was firmly in the hands of the remarkable women who ran its committees.



The first fundraiser.



Darlington Nursery in 1908, showing cots endowed by Circles and Individuals whose names are affixed to the cots they maintain.



126 Dowling St Woolloomooloo, site of the first Day Nursery.

Establishing the first Creche (Day Nursery)

The women at the inaugural meeting of the Association were enthusiastic and competent, but to realise their dream, they needed money. Their first fundraising effort was crucial: if the response had been half-hearted or unsuccessful, consequent discouragement might have proved a fatal setback. As it was, things moved briskly in those first months: the fete raised nearly £50, as well as £12 from the raffle of a sewing machine. Donations and 'many offers of help' were received, and friends became members of the Association, paying an annual subscription of 5/- (50 cents). By October the Committee had decided to open a creche immediately; by December a terrace house at 126 Dowling Street Woolloomooloo was rented for 19 shillings a week, the walls kalsomined and the doors opened. Two children were 'the first to enjoy the benefits of the Creche' on December 7. Early in November it had been decided that the new organisation would call itself the 'Sydney Creche Association'. By January 1906, it was realised that many people didn't know what 'creche' meant, and the name was changed to the 'Sydney Day Nursery Association'.

In just over four months, then, the Sydney Day Nursery Association had come into existence, employed staff, rented premises, and established a functioning creche for the children of working mothers in Woolloomooloo.

Day Nursery 1905-1930s: a place staffed by nurses and assistants with a Matron in charge where children under school age, including babies, of mothers in the paid workforce were looked after for a small fee.

In January 1906 £50 was put into the Bank of NSW to meet current expenses, the first deposit in the Association's first operating account. In that month also, the first Circle was formed – a scheme that was to be an important source of practical and financial support for many years. Circles consisted of a group of supporters, usually living in the same suburb, who agreed to raise £10 annually to 'maintain a cot' in the Nursery. Circle members could visit 'their' Nursery any day after 11 am. The first circle was formed in Beecroft, and in a short time there were another four – at Potts Point, Strathfield, Woollahra and Hyde Park. A Circle at Manly 'adopted' Forest Lodge; Surry Hills had a similar link with the Ravenswood Circle. In 1909, Circles produced 30% of the Association's income; by 1932 this had declined to 12% as times changed and women found other outlets for their energies.

Day Nursery for Babies of Working Mothers, 126 Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo.

Babies taken Charge of for 3d. a Day. Open from 7 a.m. to 6.30 p.m.

REGULATIONS FOR PARENTS.

NO child will be received in the Day Nursery until satisfactory proof has been given to the Committee that, by taking charge of the child, the mother will be enabled and intends to use her time in earning her living. It shall also be necessary for the parent to bring a letter from a responsible person, known to the Committee, showing that the case is a genuine one, and giving a reasonable guarantee that the child will be removed at the close of the day.

When possible the mother should bring the child herself. The Matron must be informed if it is proposed that anyone other than the person leaving the child in her care has arranged to remove the child in the evening, otherwise the Matron will not entrust the child to anyone but the person who left it in her care in the morning.

During the hours spent by the child in the Day Nursery it will be given suitable food at proper intervals. Parents or Guardians will be instructed by the Matron with regard to the proper food to be given during the time spent at home, and it is particularly requested that NO other food than that specified by the Matron shall be given.

In the case of mothers nursing their infants, arrangements may be made for the mother to attend at convenient intervals for the purpose of feeding her child.

Parents or Guardians must at once report to the Matron the existence and nature of any infectious disease that may occur in the child's home. Should it be proved that this rule has been broken in any instance, the attendance of the child must forthwith cease.

Children will be received up to the age of THREE years.

The House Committee meets on Monday mornings at 11, and will receive any applications from Parents or Guardians wishing to leave children at the Day Nursery.

MRS. F. DAVENPORT,

President Sydney Day Nursery Association.

Regulations for Parents, 1906, showing the concern that only 'genuine' cases would be cared for. The upper age limit was soon relaxed as there was nowhere else for children to go until they started school.



Smiling faces at the Forest Lodge Day Nursery, 1921. By the end of World War 1 there were Association Day Nurseries (called branches) at Surry Hills, Forest Lodge, Chippendale and Woolloomooloo.

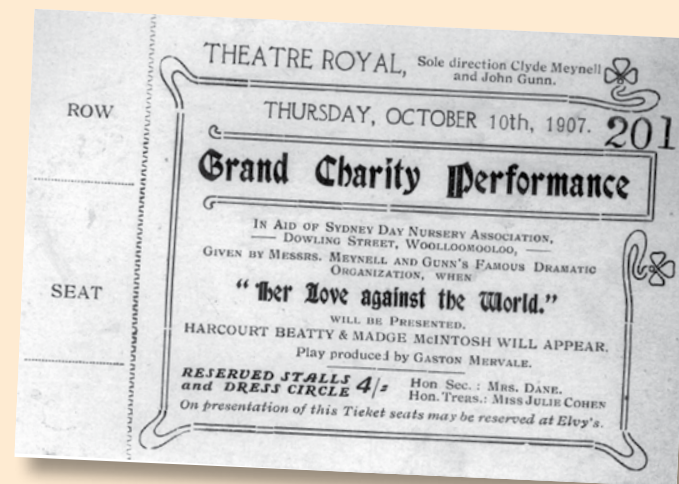
Another source of funds was parents' fees. The Association felt that the payment of a regular amount was important for the self-respect of the mothers, and a sign that they were genuinely 'deserving' cases; given their very poor circumstances, however, and their desperate need to support their children financially, it was also important that fees be set low. The major costs of maintaining the Nurseries (later the Nursery Schools as well) and increasing their number would have to come from other sources. So the initial fee was set at threepence a day – a modest sum even in those days.

Almost as soon as the nurseries started operating, the need for discretion in dealing with cases of unusual hardship arose. At the end of 1906 one parent lost his job, and it was decided that Matron should visit and see if the children in the family could be taken in again, given that fees were still owing. As the Depression started to bite, many children were fed and cared for free of charge, and fees, which had been raised to ninepence, were reduced back to sixpence per day. From this time onwards discretion was allowed in determining the level of fees to be charged, taking into account the financial and other circumstances of families.

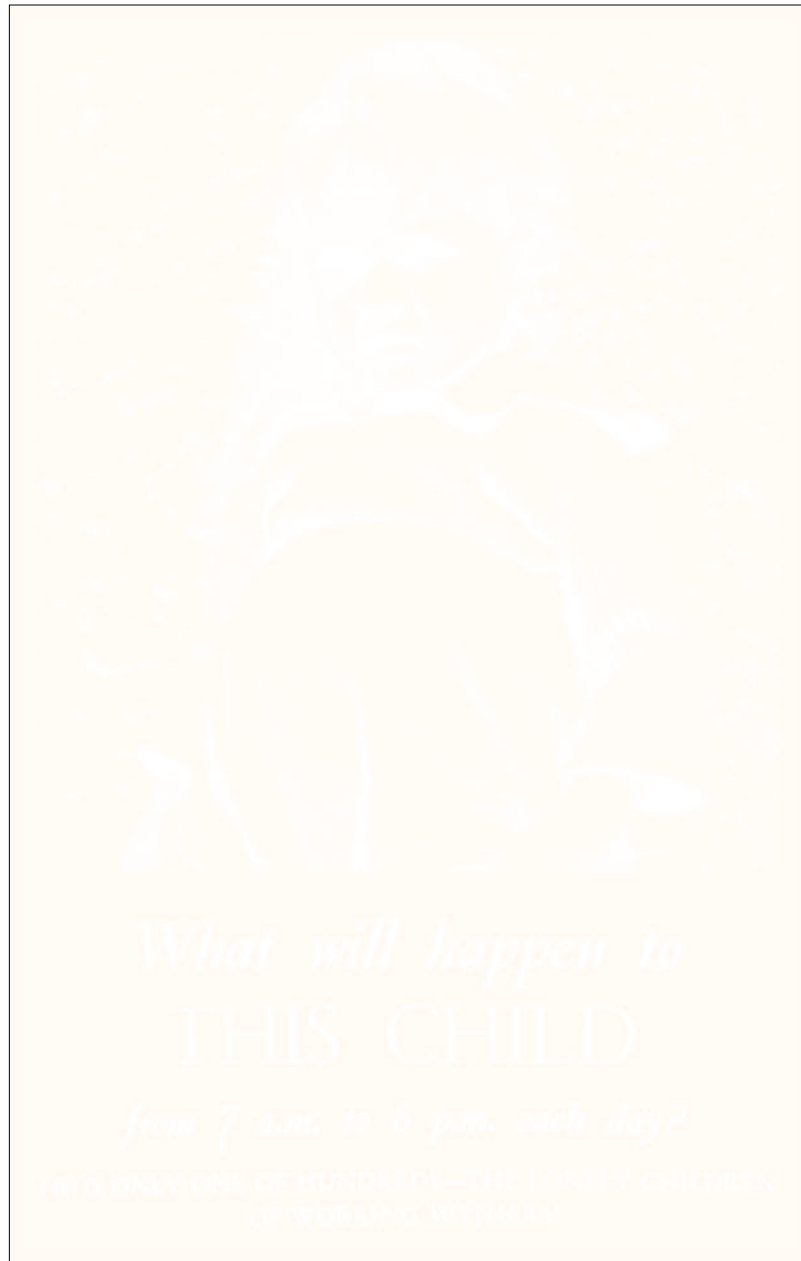
By September 1906 the Committee was already looking for more suitable premises. The Nursery moved to Rose Street Darlington, but another Woolloomooloo nursery was established in 1908, in a house in Brougham Street (it seceded from SDN in 1912, with a bald announcement that *'it [felt that] it could do better work if it were not joined to the Association'*. It rejoined the Association in 1917, to general 'great satisfaction').

By 1911 the New South Wales government evidently decided SDN was here to stay, and for the first time an annual subsidy, initially £250 (an equal sum per branch became the usual payment) was given and gratefully received. But there was never a time when centres were sufficiently well funded to allow the Committees to rest on their laurels. Raising money to enable their work to survive, let alone prosper, required a major contribution of effort, imagination and persistence on the part of Committee members.

Fundraising was the largest source of Association income until World War I. Much money was raised locally by the branch committees, and local communities showed their appreciation of SDN by the generosity of their contributions. Early on there were gifts from many sewing guilds of clothing that was used in the nurseries or distributed in cases of distress. Balls and dances were organised in local town halls, as were jumble sales. Mr. Solomon, proprietor of the Forest Lodge Hotel, took a keen interest in the local Nursery during the twenties. He made the men in his bar pay a fine for swearing, the proceeds going towards small treats for the children. The Committee thanked Mr Solomon and also Mr Cape, who *'made us a strong box for collecting these fines'*.



Theatrical & musical productions were common fundraising events.



Poster used by SDN in fund-raising campaigns.

There was also continuing support by prominent city businesses and charitable trusts. It would be invidious to name some and leave out others; suffice to say that loyal and steady support, enabling the Association to survive through hard times, was given by well known commercial firms. Then there was the generosity and acts of kindness of individuals – often committee members, sometimes families, who maintained a commitment to the Association for generations. Comprehensive acknowledgement of significant donors would take up the rest of this history; names can be found in the Association’s Annual Reports, except where gifts were made anonymously.

It was soon evident, however, that private philanthropy was not enough and that government support for SDN was essential. Executive Committee members were consistent and forceful lobbyists and were not above threatening unfavourable publicity when they felt the government to be dilatory. There is a view today that ‘child care’ as an issue only came onto the social and political agenda during the 1970s; but SDN had done its best for many years before that to bring to public attention the urgent need for quality care. In 1919, deploring the useless state of the building at Woolloomooloo, the Association stated that that ‘we would be forced to close in a month’s time and if nothing was done we would be forced to advertise closing and the reason for so doing in the Press’.²

The ceiling of the Woolloomooloo building collapsed soon after SDN’s complaint was made. Fortunately no-one was injured. As the government dithered over providing new premises, Woolloomooloo closed its doors in early 1920. Shortly afterwards, the government began building the new Model Welfare Centre at Woolloomooloo, but the nursery was temporarily homeless.

Finding accommodation for Woolloomooloo staff and children after the ceiling fell in tested the resourcefulness of SDN; its members were equal to the task. In 1916 the Domain Anzac Buffet, a ‘Tea Garden for the use of soldiers’ had been established near the St Mary’s Road entrance to the Domain. By the time it closed in 1920, it had served as a rendezvous for thousands of sick and wounded soldiers returning from the War. SDN applied to use the Buffet for temporary accommodation. There had been much opposition to the Anzac Buffet in the first place, especially by the Director of the Botanic Gardens, Hyde Park and the Domain, and even more to the suggestion that its existence might be prolonged by SDN occupation. Still, the Association took possession of the Buffet in the middle of 1920, staying there until October 1921. When an application was sought to set up an Anti-Tuberculosis Dispensary in the building, it was decided that ‘enough was enough’, and the Anzac Buffet was demolished four days later.

² Resorting to the Press was no idle threat: the Fairfaxes, members of the family that owned and produced the Sydney Morning Herald, had been involved with SDN from the beginning, and it is probably no coincidence that stories about SDN Nurseries, the kind that would be called ‘media releases’ today, regularly appeared in the Herald (and in other newspapers or magazines as well).

Woolloomooloo branch then moved into the new Welfare Centre on a site still occupied by SDN today. The Annual Report observed stiffly that *'It was regretted that on that occasion the good work of this Society was not specifically referred to by the representative of the Government'*.

Welfare centres were meant to provide a comprehensive range of services including home visiting and prenatal advice, midwife delivery, postnatal home visiting by trained aides, centre-based child health and nutrition advisory services, and a kindergarten and a day nursery. Only two were built, this one and Surry Hills. The vision of Welfare Centres, together with the portfolio of Minister for Motherhood, disappeared when a new government took office.



This plaque in today's Domain commemorates the Anzac Buffet, temporary home of Woolloomooloo Day Nursery.

Attendances were steadily rising in all the branches, and many 'worthy' applicants had to be turned away. New branches were formed: Paddington (later Eastern Suburbs) in 1924; Northern Suburbs in 1926; Newtown and District in 1930. In 1924 three eastern suburbs Councils agreed to pay £100 each towards the first year of maintenance of the Day Nursery in their area. This was the first time municipal support was accorded to the work of the Day Nurseries. SDN partnerships with local councils were a feature of many of the later Nursery Schools. Some Councils gave grants, others waived the payment of rates; some provided buildings and equipment while the Association staffed and managed the centres.

But even as new branches were opening, there were ominous signs that the Great Depression was beginning to bite deep. *'A great deal of distress and unemployment among the mothers'* at Forest Lodge was reported in May 1929 and at Woolloomooloo a month later. While attendances declined as unemployed mothers withdrew their children because they could not find work and therefore could look after them at home, an abnormally high percentage of admissions for children whose fathers were out of work were received. It was decided that Matron's discretion should be used in these cases, and that babies should have first claim on Nursery places.

Economies were proposed — reducing staff, reducing staff salaries, increasing workloads, consideration of closing nurseries or not opening on Saturdays — and some practised. Lady MacCallum, the indefatigable President, liaised with a Relief Committee which gave SDN funding to care for some children free of charge while their mothers sought work, enabling them to give much-needed food to the children and employing mothers temporarily where possible. Some of these previously unskilled women were later employed by the Association.

There was a marked decline in all sources of income during the Depression. The cash-strapped government reduced its subsidy and paid it at irregular intervals. Money given each month by the Relief Committee did not always cover the extra SDN expenses, for how could children whose mothers could not afford fees be turned away when they *'had not been properly fed for some considerable time?'* It was even suggested that children other than those of breadwinning mothers, their parents paying a higher fee, should be admitted to Nurseries at Matron's discretion, but that on no account should they take the place of needy children. Not until 1935 was it noted that a 'diminishing free list' was a sign that conditions were improving, and many families experienced extra hardship long after that.

Enjoying the morning sun, 1939

The history of SDN during the Depression is testimony to the tenacity and extraordinary ability of the Association's leaders. Faced with steep declines in attendance and financial resources and acute misery among the families they served, they showed flexibility and compassion combined with firmness in the battle for survival. Yet the truly astounding fact is this: at this dark time in the history of the Association and the State, when SDN's bank balance was 'not sufficient to meet this month's commitments' and serious consideration was given to temporarily closing the Surry Hills branch until better times returned, the Executive Committee was taking active steps towards training and appointing teachers to work in the Day Nurseries. At the time such an audacious decision must have seemed reckless and irrational; in retrospect, it was courageous and visionary.

Phase II: Teacher education and the expansion of the Nursery Schools: 1932 to 1972

In the 1936/1937 Annual Report, when announcing the change in the Association's name to the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association it was noted that *'We were the first body in New South Wales to introduce the system of Nursery Schools in spite of much opposition and criticism at the outset'*. But SDN's faith had been justified, with the demand for places greater than ever: *'Is it a mere coincidence that the large increase in numbers began in most Nurseries when they started a Nursery School?'* The Association was at pains to point out that a special kind of education was envisaged:

'IN NO SENSE does 'school' imply formal education. [B]eing preliminary even to the partial formality of Kindergarten work...[nursery school education is] the nurture and development, physical, social, psychological, of very young children by means of simple and carefully directed play and free physical activity'.

SDN's commitment to this goal led to the establishment of what became the Nursery School Teachers College. Its story is told later in this history.

The value of education in enhancing the development of very young children was recognised very early in the history of SDN. The first Advisory Committee contained three representatives of the Kindergarten Union of NSW, which had set up the Kindergarten Training College in 1897. Mrs Marguerite Fairfax, one of the first Vice-Presidents, recalled that *'they [the College] sent students to amuse the children, from hence grew our Nursery Schools'*.

Of course, it was not that simple. In 1906 a newspaper report noted that *'young ladies training to be Kindergarten teachers come every day to teach the elder of the children'*. Children's need to play was clearly recognised, by some Matrons more than others. In 1917, Matron Gratton lamented that *'there is nothing under God's blue sky so tragic as a joyless child. Many of the bairns that come to us have to be taught to play. Can you in your wildest dreams imagine anything so tragic?'* The nurseries did their best to occupy the children with donated toys; the actual purchase of play equipment had a low priority.

Day Nurseries and Nursery Schools 1930s-1970s:

Nursery Schools: long day care centres with an educational program provided by qualified teaching staff for children aged 2 to school age.

Day Nurseries: long day care centres for children under 2 with qualified nursing staff.



This early (1906) picture shows Woolloomooloo children playing with some of the 'cast-off' toys donated by benefactors.

They also sought as far as practicable to provide Kindergarten experiences for the older children. Free Kindergartens had been set up by the Kindergarten Union to provide educational experiences for preschool children. Where there was a Free Kindergarten nearby, it was arranged that Day Nursery children would attend for part of each day. This happened at Woolloomooloo, Chippendale, and Paddington; Forest Lodge employed a Kindergarten teacher from 1916 to 1932, the Committee remarking when she was first employed that *'the improvement in the manners and deportment of the children is certainly marvellous'*.

As the Kindergarten Union's view was that children under school age should be at home with their mothers, the Kindergartens' hours of opening (3 hours in the morning, later extended in some places but never covering the working day) were of no use to working mothers. Continuance of these arrangements would have entrenched a division between the nurseries – providing 'mere child-minding' – and kindergartens, which had a specifically educational purpose.

The alternative was a combination of care and education, as in the Nursery Schools which had been set up in England and America. SDN 'followed with keen interest the development of the Nursery School [movement]' and noted in 1930 that it was hoped to open a Nursery School at the new Newtown (Linthorpe Street) branch and to initiate a course of [teacher] training for Day Nursery work. Then in late 1931 an educational windfall came SDN's way. A Mrs Hamilton from the US, highly qualified in preschool education, volunteered to organise and conduct a demonstration Nursery School at the Woolloomooloo branch during her stay in Sydney. Her offer was gratefully accepted and so successful was the experiment deemed to be, that the Association wanted the Nursery School to continue after Mrs Hamilton left.

Key SDN members, Lady MacCallum leading the way, pledged donations towards the first year of the teacher-to-be's salary. Only a trained Nursery Teacher would do, and she had to be recruited from overseas because none was available here: graduates of the Kindergarten Teachers College were trained to work with children 3 and over in sessional kindergartens, not with those under 3 in long day care. Money for her passage from the UK to Sydney was cabled to a Miss Gillespie; her appointment as Nursery School Director was approved by the Executive Committee in early 1932.

Meanwhile, friction had been developing between the Association and the Kindergarten Union over the Day Nursery children's attendance at the Kindergartens and the fair sharing of expenses. Despite this, the amalgamation of KU and SDN was suggested at various times during the 1930s and the Kindergarten Union was initially involved in SDN's efforts to establish a course of Nursery School teacher training. However, KU soon withdrew and the two organisations went their separate ways, their different philosophies and purposes colouring the attitudes of each towards the other.

Given the dire financial situation, it would have been surprising had the decision to recruit Miss Gillespie been universally supported. There was friction at Woolloomooloo because of the disruption entailed in setting up a Nursery School there, and the Matron resigned. The Forest Lodge Committee passed a motion regretting that '*under the present conditions so much expense has been incurred in importing a teacher from England*'. The President of the Surry Hills committee submitted her resignation, but was asked to re-consider. Miss Gillespie duly arrived, but her term of service was cut short after 9 months by illness.

Despite these setbacks, the resolve of the Executive Committee was undiminished. With the departure of Miss Gillespie, two local students working with her who had a course of lectures on Nursery School work specially devised for them by the Principal of Melbourne Kindergarten Training College temporarily took her place; in 1933 one became Director of the Woolloomooloo Nursery School, the other, Director of a Nursery School at Northern Suburbs. Thus the first Nursery Schools run by the Association came into being.

SDN gradually lifted itself out of the black hole of the Depression and there was a burst of activity as Nursery Schools were established in new locations as well as in existing branches alongside the nurseries for under 2s. Thanks to the generosity of the Johnson family who donated property in Pitt Street Redfern, a large new branch was opened, comprising not only the original gift for a Nursery but also five adjoining terraces (bought by Mr J P Johnson just before his death in 1940). A centre still operates on this site today, in a building that is also home to SDN's Head Office.



The Johnson family took a keen interest in the Nursery they had so generously endowed. Mrs Johnson took the children on outings and accompanied them when they were evacuated. Daily Telegraph, 11 Jan 1939

Meanwhile, portents of war in Europe were becoming more ominous. Germany declared war in 1939, and in December 1941 when the Pacific phase of the war started as the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, SDN, like the Australian population at large, became preoccupied by fears of invasion.

Plans for the evacuation of children from Sydney to safer country areas began to take shape. Mosman Nursery School set up an 'evacuation committee' with a training course to instruct women in charge of young children in evacuation and other emergency procedures. The Executive Committee looked for holiday places that might be suitable for the nursery children. Tahmoor, a school holiday camp south of Sydney, could accommodate over 20 children. The President of the Shire Council at Ariaiah Park, near Temora in southern New South Wales, suggested that provision could be made in the small town's School of Arts, Church halls, and a vacant shop for over 300 children. In February it was decided to send children to Ariaiah Park, and to Tahmoor and Burradoo as well. Mrs Johnson, of the Redfern committee, personally supervised and travelled with the Redfern children. Mrs McElhone, the President of SDN, visited and stayed with teachers and children at Ariaiah Park, and also at Tahmoor and Burradoo.

It is perhaps a measure of the panic that gripped the population that such a scheme, involving separation of preschool children from their mothers for an indefinite period, was implemented. It may also indicate that concern over mother-child separation was not as intense in those days as it became later. In any case, the Committee noted that the evacuated children were 'well and happy'; it is doubtful, however, that the young teachers who were caring for the children would have agreed. They were trying to cope with large numbers of small children in isolated places that were ill-equipped for the purpose. As was the case for many other women and children evacuated during those fear-filled months, the miseries of exile from home induced a fairly prompt return to Sydney as threat of imminent invasion subsided. By May it was decided 'not to send any more children to Ariaiah Park', and by July the Ariaiah Park children were all back in to Sydney. Children remained at Burradoo a while longer, and Tahmoor Holiday Home continued to be used as a country holiday place for inner city SDN children until the mid-1950s.

*Newspaper clipping shown - Ida Rayward in evacuation practice with children.
Daily Telegraph, 8 Jan 1942*



EVACUATION PRACTICE at Woolloomooloo Day Nursery yesterday. The director, Miss I. Rayward, ties an identification tag on little May, while fellow-pupils Robin and sun-bonneted Judy watch the proceedings.

Small Pupils Have Their Bags Ready Packed For Emergency

"If and when we are called upon by the Government to evacuate, we intend to ensure that everything will run as smoothly as clockwork," said the principal of the Nursery Schools Training College, Miss M. Bird, yesterday.

She was referring to the preparations made to evacuate in an emergency the 600 children attending eight day nurseries in Sydney.

These preparations are being rapidly completed at the Training College at 3 Linthorpe Street, Newtown.

"Identification tags have been made out for the children, and each child has one small suitcase packed so that the evacuation can take place at a minute's notice.

"We have received generous offers of assistance regarding transport and accommodation, but we do need many more voluntary helpers," said Miss Bird.

In addition to members of the trained staffs of the nursery schools, who are "standing by," a number of voluntary helpers are undergoing a special course in theoretical and practical training.

The course began this week with lectures by Miss Bird and Miss M. Blythe at the Newtown Training College.

Yesterday voluntary helpers at the nursery schools at Woolloomooloo, Surry Hills, and Newtown were given practical training in child guidance and management.

During the next month three days a week have been set aside for the special training course. Morning talks will be given at Newtown College on Tuesdays and Thursdays and the practical training will be held on Wednesday mornings at the nurseries.

Mrs. A. Clinics Ross, who was in England at the beginning of the war and has had first-hand experience in child evacuation work, will give a special lecture for staff and voluntary helpers at the Newtown College on January 13, at 7.30 p.m.

Wartime memories of Tahmoor

Joan Fry, Teacher: *'We didn't have a radio, didn't have a telephone, and didn't know till we went down to the school to get the children that we found out we'd been bombed [shells had been fired from a Japanese midget submarine in Sydney Harbour, falling on the eastern suburbs one night at the end of May 1942]. We had to walk about a mile to a pub phone every night. You had to boil the copper and bathe the children. You had someone dressing and undressing the children and someone in the other room telling stories. And the sanitary man ceased coming. So we thought, 'here goes, we have to do it'. So we tied a handkerchief round our mouths and dug a hole miles away and we got the giggles carrying the can...*

Sixteen went down with measles in one fell swoop. We rang the doctor in Picton. There was no petrol. He couldn't come out. We tried to get a nurse. We couldn't get a nurse. We sent 10 children home. Two of the children developed pneumonia so for three days we (the teachers) sat on a mattress in front of the fire eating oranges because the children kept crying and waking up. And I'll never forget the smell of measles, ever.'

As the war effort required the labours of women, for the first time the Commonwealth Government provided a modest level of funding for day care during the war, to encourage existing centres to cater for the children of women war workers. Centres at Kingsford and Erskineville were subsidised in this way, as well as Katoomba Nursery School, which was intended primarily for children whose mothers worked at the Small Arms Factory in Lithgow. In 1944 the 'deplorable consequences' of the Commonwealth's niggardly refusal to extend day care facilities (even though SDN stated that it was willing and had money available for this purpose) were pointed out: soldiers were forcibly absent from service to care for their children because of their wives' illness or confinement. It was reported that the children of servicemen constituted 40 to 50% of centre enrolments. Their mothers received 50% of their soldier husbands' pay, but this was often insufficient to support a family.

The NSW Government subsidy doubled in 1944 and SDN embarked on a new phase of expansion. (On the other hand, after the war ended Commonwealth grants for the 3 centres it had subsidised were promptly withdrawn.). By 1965 there were 15 Nursery Schools and 6 Day Nurseries. Country centres opened in Bathurst and Goulburn and different administrative and financial arrangements with various organisations rather than direct ownership of centres became more common – with local councils, as in the cases of Marrickville and St Peters Nursery Schools (Marrickville Council) for example; and with the State government Housing Commission in the case of Herne Bay (later Riverwood). A looser form of association prevailed where SDN supervised Council centres (Chatswood West, Gordon, Highlett (Haberfield), Hurstville, Botany, and Yass Nursery Schools in 1953).



*SDN children at the Tahmoor Holiday Home.
A nice dose of country air. but evacuation in wartime was no picnic.*

The War may have been over, but the need to take family hardship into account in determining fees continued. High inflation in the early 1950s and a severe housing shortage meant that entire families were sometimes forced to live in a single room and more mothers had to work to supplement family incomes. Since 'an unsatisfactory or unhealthy home environment' was one of the eligibility criteria for enrolment in a centre, waiting lists swelled still further.

As the 'baby boom' of the postwar period continued and new suburbs sprawled outwards from the city, the number of kindergartens rapidly increased. Unlike the original Free Kindergartens run by the Kindergarten Union, these new community kindergartens –

or preschools, which became a more popular name for them, were often set up by local councils or cooperatives and proliferated in middle class suburbs. The division between 'day care' and 'preschool education' became sharper as the positive contribution of early childhood education to children's development received widespread attention and publicity. Disapproval of group care for children under three increased as theories linked to the name of the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby gained currency. Bowlby's findings about the ill-effects of 'maternal deprivation' were continually used to oppose provision of day care services, though his work had mainly been conducted with children living in hospitals and residential institutions long-term.



Newspaper cuttings, from left to right:

From just after World War II to the 1960s SDN ran a creche at the Royal Easter Show. Sydney Morning Herald, 14 Mar 1953.

Parents of each child in the playpen were working in essential wartime services. Sunday Sun, 13 Feb 1943.

'A constant refrain...' For its advocates and many of its users, there have never been enough places nor sufficient government financial support for child care. The Sunday Sun, 9 July 1944.



Recalling her days as a Nursery School teacher in the 1960s, a College graduate said *'I would go to parties and people would ask me what I did and I'd say I was a Nursery School teacher. 'Oh, you mean you're a kindergarten teacher.' 'No, I work in long day care.'* And people would physically pull away from you, like you had the plague.'

Often College students shared the general attitude that day care was 'bad for children'. Many sought and found work in private and church schools or community preschools rather than working in the Nursery Schools.

Even as disapproval of working mothers increased, the percentage of mothers in the workforce was rising; so were pressures for the provision of child care facilities. There was public concern about the unknown number of children being looked after by unregulated 'backyard minders'. In 1969 the Annual Conference of the Australian Preschools Association (APA) recommended that steps should be taken at a Federal level to set up a Government Enquiry on Day Care to ascertain the extent of the need, taking into account the emotional, social and educational, as well as the health needs of young children. APA had come to support the expansion of child care only gradually and reluctantly, viewing group child care as a necessary evil, not a choice that could be positive for both mothers (fathers were little spoken of) and children.

The need for more child care places had been a constant refrain of SDN's from the very beginning. During the postwar years it was just as forceful in lamenting the shortage of trained Nursery School teachers. Although a steady stream of graduates emerged from the Teachers College the numbers did not meet the need. These problems received significant press coverage, and in the background intense lobbying of politicians went on. In apparent response to these pressures, the federal government provided capital funds from 1968 to 1971 to allow private preschool colleges to double their capacity. This enabled the building of the new Teachers College at Burren Street, Newtown.

While state government subsidies increased steadily after World War II, the Association could not keep pace with rapidly rising expenses. As preschool teachers came under the cover of industrial awards, their salaries rose by 60% between 1969 and 1973. Postwar inflation and rising costs led to a declaration in the 1971 Annual Report that *'we are still giving the best possible care, but rising costs may make it impossible to go on'*. A new source of funding appeared to be emerging in October 1972 as the Child Care Act was introduced into Federal Parliament, enabling the government to make capital and recurrent grants to not-for-profit child care centres. The Coalition government lost office at the election but the new Labor government continued with its implementation of the Act.

With the entry of the Commonwealth government into child care provision and funding after 1972, a new era for SDN and for the provision of child care services in Australia began. And for the first time (apart from its miniscule contribution during the war and the funding of the Lady Gowrie model centres) the Commonwealth committed itself to the nationwide funding of child care facilities. In the years to come, the policies of various federal governments were to exert a critical influence on the way child care developed in Australia. While federal funding seemed to promise a more reliable, secure and adequate source of income, the appropriate level of child care provision became a fiercely contested area within both major political parties and a 'hot' political issue, introducing a new element of unpredictability and instability into children's services in the decades ahead.



Lord Mayor of Sydney, Pat Hills, with children blowing out candles on the jubilee celebrations cake at Sydney Town Hall, 1955.



Nursery school children dress up as kings and queens during the Royal visit in 1954.

Phase III: Turbulent times for child care: 1972 to 2005

In 1970 only 40 centres throughout Australia received any form of Commonwealth government financial assistance. Nearly all the subsidised centres in New South Wales were operated by SDN. Now SDN was to become just one provider among many.

Early in this period there was bitter conflict between the traditional providers of preschool education and feminists. The 'traditionalists' were primarily concerned with quality early childhood education focussed on children's development. Feminists, strongly committed to improving women's access to paid work through the universal provision of child care, saw the preschool lobby as elitist, preoccupied with defending its professional territory, and opposed to long day care. SDN fell between these two stools: its centres supported working mothers and it was also committed to employing qualified preschool teachers. The new Whitlam government found the arguments for child care more persuasive, funding for preschools was frozen and the bulk of federal government funding for children's services was allocated to long day care.

After federal funding was introduced, many new not-for-profit child care centres were established. 'Community involvement' became the catchphrase and high levels of parent participation in planning and management were favoured. SDN was widely regarded as an old-fashioned model of charitable or philanthropic provision, out of touch with modern times. Politically active feminists had little interest in or sympathy for the work carried out by SDN.

However, as the decade progressed it became obvious that those who supported non-commercial services for children and who lobbied governments to fund these services – whether called preschools or day care centres or anything else – shared many common values and needed to work together. The term 'children's services' came increasingly into use, and the 'care' versus 'education' dichotomy was blurred as long day care centres introduced preschool-type programs; preschools were asked to run programs that were 'integrated' with other services; and licensing regulations required the same standards for preschools and day care centres (in NSW only). In 1976 the Australian Preschools Association changed its name to the Australian Early Childhood Association.

SDN did not fare too badly in the early days of federal funding. The Association's administrative experience gave it an advantage in preparing submissions for funding, and during the 1970s it completed the updating and refurbishment of many of its older centres. But income was again failing to keep pace with rising costs, fees increased substantially and staffing patterns were reorganised to make more effective use of trained personnel.

In 1990 the government extended fee relief to the users of private child care centres. This move, first proposed by government in the 1970s, had always been intensely opposed by community-based and not-for-profit services. They argued that commercial centres employed fewer and less trained staff, lacked parent involvement and were generally interested in profit rather than quality of service. Nevertheless, government looked to private interests to sustain growth, and by early in the 21st century for-profit centres were the main providers of centre-based care.

In 1997 the Federal government ended the payment of operational subsidies to centres, instead providing the bulk of its financial support for child care through subsidies to parents. This meant a loss of some \$870,000 to SDN, and a consequent steep rise in fees led many parents to withdraw their children. This financial crisis made organisational change imperative. SDN accepted a government offer of financial assistance to obtain the advice of consultants on strategies for the future, and consulted with parents about future directions and priorities.

In 1999 the name of the Association was changed to SDN Children's Services Inc., reflecting the diversity of SDN's interests: it was expanding into Out of Hours School Care and support programs for children and families needing extra assistance. Programs were set up to provide intensive support to children and families with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds. A new logo and corporate colours were adopted, but the commitment to quality care, strongly supported by parents, was maintained.

Leaving SDN for the moment on the brink of its second century of existence, it is time to pause and look briefly at distinctive features of the Association which have made it such a unique and valuable organisation.



Bath time, 1939

Children's health and nutrition: an abiding concern

The 1904 Royal Commission on the Decline in the Birthrate and Infant Mortality was chaired by Dr C K MacKellar, the father of poet Dorothea MacKellar, author of *'My Country'*, who for a time was among SDN's committee members. In the early days of the century MacKellar was much more famous than his daughter. President of the State Children's Relief Department and a campaigner for the reform of laws relating to child welfare, he set up an administrative system that came to include medical examinations for all school children, special medical care for inner city children, government baby health clinics (administered by the Department of Health from 1914) and hospitals for babies.

The health of inner city children was the focus of special attention, and around 1909 organised visiting of mothers and babies by women visitors in inner suburbs began. An outbreak of plague in 1901 had highlighted the squalid conditions in many inner suburbs, and child mortality rates were much higher in the city than they were in the country.

The main cause of infant mortality was feeding and digestive disorders, followed by respiratory conditions. Poor diets and feeding practices were deplored as major contributors to children's poor health and failure to thrive. Starchy food, arrowroot, weak sago, a mixture of boiled then grated flour, all these were favourite foods for babies, and a magazine in 1904 noted that *'It is a common practice to stuff the unhappy child with all sorts of poisonous material such as cornflour bread and milk, biscuits and even potatoes and gravy, before it is six months old'*. For Lewis Rodd, a Darlinghurst lad born in 1907, the basic diet at home was stale bread fried in dripping, dumplings and golden syrup, and boiled bread with a few tiny pieces of chopped dates for dessert. He had never eaten jam, sausages or steak. Sunday fare was stewed rabbit and a 'few microscopic sardines'. The 'ignorance of mothers about babies' needs' pointed to the urgent need to instruct them in these matters. Campaigns to improve maternal and child health were strongly backed by the National Council of Women, who in 1908 established the Alice Rawson School for Mothers to instruct mothers in the care of their children.

MacKellar's prominence reflected the leading role played by doctors in both educating the population and shaping public policy relating to maternal and child health. Doctors published advice on reproduction and childrearing and were seen as 'experts' on these issues. The appointment of four doctors to the seven-person first Advisory Committee of SDN followed naturally from the prestige accorded the medical profession in matters to do with mothers and their children, and the willingness of doctors to accept these responsibilities.



A doctor checks the health of children before they leave to start school, Paddington Nursery School in the 1960s.

These first SDN doctors were all acting, of course, in an honorary capacity. They would have been well known to each other as visiting honorary specialists at such large public hospitals as Royal Prince Alfred and the Children's Hospital. Dr Wilfred Fairfax was also the husband of one of the first committee members. He inspected the dairy that provided milk to the day nursery at Woolloomooloo and instructed it on the Nursery's special needs. The doctors do not appear to have met regularly, but shared the monthly visiting of each nursery. If Matron needed advice on whether children who seemed off-colour should be sent home, she could call on one of the honorary doctors. Children were often referred to the Children's Hospital or to a dentist for free treatment.

Doctors checked the health and condition of children when they first enrolled in one of the Nurseries, and staff were instructed to measure children's height and weight every week; there was a great interest at this time in the collection of such data, and indeed it provided a systematic means of monitoring children's overall physical development. The scientific rigour of these medical inspections may have left something to be desired, however: in the 37th SDN Annual Report Dr Edgar Stephen was reported as saying: *'I think the best way to judge a healthy child is to squeeze its legs...until the child is 6 years old. Yesterday I squeezed 30 legs and can honestly say that all these children have the sturdiest legs of any I have seen'*.



*The weekly checking of children's weight, 1939.
Providing children with sufficient nutritious food was a high priority.*

The children's diet was a continuing preoccupation. Dr Blackburn of the first Advisory Committee (later Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn, long-lived Chancellor of Sydney University) drew up diet sheets and rules. In principle, SDN supported mothers' breastfeeding of their infants; in practice, however, this must have been largely impracticable, and cows milk (by 1914 a mixture of condensed milk and barley water, safer in pre-refrigeration days) was given. Toddlers were gradually introduced to a variety of foods, in a diet that we would criticise today as bland and lacking in fibre and important vitamins (which were then unknown). But it was enlightened and healthy from the viewpoint of that time.

During the flu epidemic at the end of World War I all Day Nurseries closed, with Woolloomooloo being run as a Food Depot during the epidemic for a fortnight so that children could receive at least one meal a day. Children from Forest Lodge were sent to Austinmer for a holiday so their mothers could continue to work.

More systematic medical supervision of the Nurseries occurred after Dr Charles Clubbe became the Senior Consulting Honorary Medical Officer in 1922. When he died in 1932, committee members stood in silence as Lady MacCallum paid tribute to a life devoted to the care of the nurseries and to the welfare of the community generally. Lady (then Mrs) MacCallum had become SDN President a year after Dr Clubbe's advent, and she worked with the doctors to develop a new diet, featuring a balanced diet of three meals a day with a supplementary dose of cod liver oil.

An early teacher Ida Rayward recalled that *'every day when the children arrived they were given a spoonful of cod-liver oil. They all hated it'*. Donations of fresh fruit and vegetables were encouraged, for these were expensive to buy and could only be afforded 2 or 3 times a week. At the end of 1945 power shortages due to postwar rationing meant that the hot lunches regularly served at the Day Nurseries and Nursery Schools were replaced by cold 'Oslo' (sandwich) lunches.

There were regular reports of epidemics – of measles, whooping cough, 'the dreaded gastro' – in Committee minutes and Annual Reports. In 1916 the Association cooperated with the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children and District Nursing Association in devising a scheme for the treatment of gastroenteritis. Diphtheria was a much feared and frequent deadly visitor. When every child at Surry Hills branch was immunised against diphtheria in 1927, SDN proudly proclaimed that *'this was the first institutional immunisation'* in Sydney.

For nearly ten years the Association pressured the state government to provide free immunisation for all children in all SDN centres, but even Lady MacCallum was powerless to end the Minister for Health's procrastination over the issue. Eventually in 1937 the government informed the Association that responsibility for immunisation had been given to local government; Matrons in each branch then had the task of arranging or monitoring routine immunisations.

So poor was the health of many children entering SDN nurseries that there were more than a dozen cases of children dying at the nurseries, mostly from infectious diseases, even though every effort was made to prevent this by excluding children with contagious diseases from attending. The Association was exonerated from blame in all cases, but children's health was always a heavy responsibility.

In 1941 it was noted that of 63 children at Erskineville Nursery School, all but 2 lost weight after being away from the centre for the two week Christmas break. With fathers unemployed, in the army or dead, mothers simply couldn't afford food and milk to feed their children.

Almost half a century after the founding of SDN the Sydney Morning Herald of 12 April 1949 could still report that 'malnutrition is no unusual discovery at the medical check when a child is admitted' citing the case of Gerald, who at 2 weighed 19 pounds (8.5 kilos) when admitted, gaining 4 pounds (1.8 kilos) after 3 weeks in the Nursery.

The 1904 Royal Commission had found tooth decay to be nearly universal among children in New South Wales, so dental inspection and treatment were part of SDN's program for children in its care. Children were sent to the Dental Hospital for free treatment. Mrs Cherry was an Honorary dentist at the Eastern Suburbs Nursery School (Paddington) from the time it opened in 1924 until she retired in 1937, and in 1944 it was reported that dental clinics had been established by the government at 8 out of 13 centres during the past year. Dentists examining children at Redfern found that the majority had teeth that were in 'splendid condition'; they attributed this pleasing and unusual finding to the Nursery diet. Dental technicians checked and treated children's teeth until funding ceased in 1992.

Seeking to update the Association's dietary practices, in 1961 SDN Director Maria Byron approached the Health Department for its help in devising meals which enabled centres to provide at least half (in fact, three-quarters) of the daily food requirements for children. While meals were more tasty, varied and nutritious, they were also more economical, thanks to a careful calculation of quantities per child per day, as summed up in an ordering guide published with a book of recipes. Meals became a time for conversation and socialising among children and staff, rather than a time for discipline and training in table manners along with feeding. Doctors commented on the improvement in children's health as the new approach to mealtimes was more widely implemented. Today training sessions on children's nutrition, together with an information package on child nutrition prepared by the Central Sydney Area Health Service are available to all SDN centres.

With rising standards of living in recent times, the basic survival needs of children have not been so urgent a priority; parents and staff today are more likely to be concerned about childhood obesity than malnutrition. However, evidence of tooth decay in very young children and lack of knowledge of healthy infant feeding practices in some families are reminders that good health can never be taken for granted.



Feeding the youngest baby in the nursery, 1939.

Nursery Schools and the training of Nursery School teachers

As the Association struggled to set up a course in Nursery School teacher preparation after the arrival from England of Miss Gillespie, a special meeting was held to discuss and approve a proposed training syllabus in May 1932. With no qualified staff to organise or provide training, however, it was not possible to establish a formal course in 1933, although some lectures were given to meet the needs of Tresillian (mothercraft) students, Matrons and staff. A few students were admitted early in 1934 in anticipation of the arrival from England of Elizabeth Town, the new Superintendent of Students who had been recruited in England by a later President of the Association, Mrs Donald McElhone. The first students were accommodated in one room at Woolloomooloo Nursery School, with part-time use of the staff dining room.

In 1935 Lady MacCallum lobbied the state Department of Education to approve the attendance of SDN students at Sydney Teachers College classes. The Department agreed, but asked SDN to pay a substantial fee per student, to be refunded if and when students achieved satisfactory standards. Students were duly enrolled at the beginning of each year, met Teachers' College standards at yearly exams, but the bills remained unpaid despite pressure from Departmental officials. By 1938 the Minister for Education accepted this de facto arrangement which persisted until 1948, when the influx of postwar students into the Teachers College meant that Nursery School students could no longer be accommodated.

This initially somewhat reluctant subsidy from the Department of Education was the only form

of government assistance for Nursery School teacher education until 1968. Students had to pay fees, though some Nursery Schools provided scholarships for bonded students, and a private benefactor provided scholarships for girls whose families could not afford to pay.

Visiting specialists taught English literature, child health, eurythmics, art and toy making. Other courses were taken at Sydney Teachers College with Infant School teacher trainees. Mental health lectures were given by the Social Work department of Sydney University (formerly the Board of Social Study and Training, set up by the National Council of Women to train social workers). Practical aspects of the course included intensive observations of children from 2 weeks to 5 years, practical work with children aged from 2 to 5, and

practical work with children aged 5-8 at Blackfriars Infant Demonstration School. Classes were conducted around a table, the Principal, Mary Bird, who had replaced Miss Town in 1939, being responsible for the administration of 6 centres and for teaching courses in Study Methods, Education, History of Education, Child Development, Research Method, Piano and Children's Handiwork.

In 1941 the Training Centre moved to Linthorpe Street, Newtown, changing its name to the Nursery School Training College. Entry qualifications were determined (Intermediate Certificate plus Headmistress Report) and in 1941, Miss Bird determined that the requirement for graduation was successful completion of a 3-year course. Students were able to use the Sydney Teachers College library. Joan Fry, an early student and later Principal of the College, felt later that whatever the course lacked in terms of present day academic standards, the students benefited greatly from face to face experience with staff and students in a number of settings and with children on a regular and frequent basis.



'Miss Town has turned a discarded broom-handle into a set of skittles with a saw, a file and some bright paints'

This ingenious re-use of materials for children's play equipment by the first Superintendent of Students was to become a characteristic skill of nursery school teachers.



'The Retreat', Burren Street Newtown, home of the Nursery School Teachers College from 1945 to the early 1970s.

Mary Bird (Martin)'s successor, Eleanor Green, became Principal of the Training College in 1945. In September of that year, staff and students moved into 'The Retreat', a beautiful old 1830s stone building that had been the Frances Willard Hostel in Burren Street, Newtown. Gratitude was expressed to 'Mrs Alexander and the Newtown Committee' who through hard work at the SDN Tuck Shop in the Showground during the war had raised £12,000. This provided the purchase money and enabled the furnishing and equipping of the new College. As the College vacated the SDN premises in Linthorpe Street, a hostel for country students which became known as 'College House' was established there, alongside the Nursery School.



First year students made dresses and pants for a 2 year old, open down the front with buttons large enough for small children to handle. Pants with elastic legs were made in the Craft class.

In their new premises students attended lectures given by a small core of College lecturers supported by visiting University lecturers, and engaged in practical work with children from 2 weeks to 8 years of age. **In 1946 the motto Pro Parvis Optima – 'For the little ones, the best' – was chosen for the College.**



Music: The percussion band, 1939. All students learned the piano and were expected to provide a musical experience for the children every day. When NSTC became autonomous in the 1970s SDN committee members were most concerned that students were no longer required to learn the piano.

The training provided by the Nursery School Teachers College (NSTC) prepared its graduates to present a wide variety of activities and experiences to be enjoyed by the Nursery School children, designed to develop their curiosity and skills and generally enhance their development. Because there would never be enough money to buy equipment, students were educated 'to be able to do and make and repair everything'. Students learnt to make and repair toys, equipment and teaching materials. Joan Fry recalled that 'I made a table and two chairs, and we were expected to give the toys we made to the school when we left... [people] gave us off-cuts of timber and they were the only blocks we had'. They developed skills in observing children and planning activities for them based on their knowledge of child development and what they learned from their observations.

In their third and final year, students worked in centres for four days a week and 'sorted everything out' in College on the fifth day. While the course may have lacked the theoretical underpinning that was later provided, students graduating at that time felt that they gained a very broad and very useful training.



Students observing a demonstration lesson.

The number of College students steadily increased in the postwar years, exceeding 100 by 1963. There were now Colombo Plan students from south-east Asian countries, and the Commonwealth paid the fees of a few students bonded to work with Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory. The Thyne Reid family bought a former stable adjoining the College and by 1957 it had been refurbished as an attractive hall, providing extra facilities and classrooms. Melanie Alexander Nursery School, built as a demonstration school with money provided by an anonymous benefactor, opened on 18th September 1957 in the College grounds 'after two years building and disorder'. It was named after the President of the Newtown Day Nursery and Nursery School Committee, who had died suddenly in 1947, a few months after the Canteen she had so successfully managed closed.

In 1968 the Commonwealth Government through its Preschool Colleges Grants Act gave funds for the expansion of the College so that it could take double the existing number of students. The old stone building in Burren Street was demolished so that a new 'purpose-built' College could be erected. A Catholic school in nearby Golden Grove was vacant and the parish offered it rent-free as temporary accommodation to the College until the new building was finished – an offer gratefully accepted.



The new College building at Burren Street.

After a rather uncomfortable and crowded couple of years at Golden Grove all members of the SDN community were ready to celebrate 'a joyous and sparkling occasion' when the lovely new College building was opened, free of debt, by the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Malcolm Fraser, in October 1972. 'College House' at Linthorpe Street no longer served as a hostel, for society was on the verge of a period of great social change. Greater freedom and diversity of choice for young people meant that few were now willing to live in a supervised residence.



Students at a tutorial, 'The Retreat', early 1960s.

Joan Fry, Principal of the College, resigned in 1973 to become Chairman of a committee to report on Preschool Education for the Commonwealth Government. For the first time the College was to be led by a Principal who was not from a Nursery School background. The new Principal, Jenny Simons, faced new challenges: guiding the College towards autonomy – as a College of Advanced Education, not an arm of SDN – and towards entry into the Australia-wide system of higher education, re-shaped and transformed in its early stages by John Dawkins, Education Minister in the 1972-1975 Labor government. She was also to direct the development of a program of studies that would have high academic standing, as well as preparing graduates for work with children.

All this lay in the future on that happy opening day and in the next few busy years as new staff were appointed, many without Nursery School training but well qualified academically. The number of students rose to 225, and they were a more diverse group than previously. For the first time there were male students. And the women were not predominantly girls who thought – or whose parents thought – teaching little children would be a pleasant and appropriate occupation to fill in the years before marriage. There were still girls with these conventional attitudes, but they mixed with others of a radical bent who regarded child care as an important feminist issue and looked forward to the opportunities for women's advancement that readier access to child care would provide. Their numbers were augmented by 'mature age students', mothers who took advantage of the opportunity provided by the introduction of free tertiary education by the 1972 Labor government to gain early childhood qualifications.

By November 1975 the transfer of ownership of the College from SDN to the Commonwealth was complete. 'Satisfactory monetary arrangements with state and federal governments' had been concluded and SDN relinquished its involvement in teacher education after 43 hard but fruitful years.

The new College building was not to remain dedicated to early childhood education for long. In 1982 the Nursery School Teachers College amalgamated with Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College to become the Institute of Early Childhood Studies, one of five Institutes in the newly formed Sydney College of Advanced Education (SCAE). The building in Burren Street was sold in 1988 to help fund the expenses of relocating the Institute. In 1989 SCAE was dissolved and the Institute, now the Institute of Early Childhood, became part of Macquarie University, moving into a fine new building there in 1994.



Changes in social attitudes over the intervening period are reflected in the much more informal dress and relaxed attitudes of the graduating class of 1975.

The people who have made SDN

Parents and committees

As the General Secretary of the Association had stated in 1918, in a sense the women of the committees who ran the Association were 'fellows' of the parents who benefited from the care it provided, although the differences between them, especially with respect to class background and financial circumstances, were very great. Their common concern was the welfare of children in SDN's care. Staff and Committee members alike never seemed in the least concerned about whether mothers were married or not – surely an unusually non-judgemental attitude for the early twentieth century. The overriding consideration was that the mother was genuinely trying to support her children, and that she was the family breadwinner.

Committee members often paid rent and supplied food and clothing when children were ill or parents out of work. There is no record of any child being excluded from a centre because fees had not been paid in the days before fees were subsidised by government. If staff were absent in the days before relief staff were available, committee members would 'get in and help'.

Responsibility for making policy, planning for the future, financial management and staff appointments lay with SDN's Executive Committee. As new branches were established Branch Committees were appointed by the Executive Committee to raise funds and look after the day-to-day management of each branch. While Branch Committees worked hard at raising funds, it was the Executive Committee that decided how these funds were to be spent, a fact which often led to tensions arising between branches and the central body. A Visiting Committee inspected the branches as a form of quality control until professional officers took over this role. The Executive Committee has evolved to become today's Board of Directors. In an era when the responsibilities of Boards have become much more onerous, Board members, all volunteers, bring to SDN a diversity of valuable skills and experience.

In the second half of its existence, committee members often embodied and helped to preserve the memory of the Association's past. But times were changing, and political pressures for greater involvement of parents were to play a big part in transforming the way the branches, and SDN itself, would be managed.



Committee women and staff members, Surry Hills 1934. The tall figure in the centre is Lady MacCallum; Mrs Orwell Phillips, former President, is behind Lady MacCallum. Mrs McElhone, a later President, is on the extreme left. Staff wore veils as protection against head lice.

The changing role of parents

At the inaugural meeting of the Association it was reported that the working mothers of Woolloomooloo were so strongly in support of the proposal to establish a creche that they wanted to raise funds through sale of their handwork. Matrons admired the brave way these women shouldered their heavy burdens, and made 'the hard, ceaseless, unselfish struggle to try and keep home and family together.' Matron Jessie Gratton wrote: 'I am constantly coming into contact with homes where there is not enough money to buy the necessary comforts and food; not enough money for proper lighting facilities, thus compelling the children to read or study in the dim light, and the sleeping quarter crowded and the ventilation poor. So the lives of the children are barren of comforts and joy...'

Often the meagre dwellings of the poor had to be shared with others: the Lewis Rodd family lived in a dwelling that also included the landlady, her two daughters and grandchild, a man in the shed, two overhead in the attic and two boarders in the kitchen. The Association's testimony to a 1928 Royal Commission on Child Endowment stated that *'most of the children – in fact, almost all – came from a '1-room home', with insulation insufficient and cooking facilities totally inadequate...'*

The archives of SDN contain many letters from parents grateful for the care their children have received. Many could not have kept their families together but for the Association, and Joan Fry recalled that some children who spent their first five years in day care were placed in institutions when they reached school age.

Mothers' clubs were established in the branches but were never really successful: mothers were working full-time and were too tired and busy to attend meetings or to help out at the centre. In the 1950s and 1960s especially, when there was strong disapproval of working mothers, guilt over 'leaving the children' inhibited parents in their dealings with centres. Rushing to get to work in the mornings, home to other children or to prepare meals at night, there was no time to linger and chat with staff. If fees were overdue and there was no money to pay them, this was another good reason to avoid contact with staff.

With this lack of parental involvement, parents were not routinely members of committees until governments encouraged their participation from the 1980s onwards. In 1986 parent/staff meetings were introduced in all centres, and by the 1990s receipt of government funding required that parent involvement in centre management could be proved. In 1995 branch committees were dissolved and centre committees, attended and advised by senior staff members, were established by 1996. Parents are now involved in discussion of policy issues as a matter of course. The Board is always ready to respond to requests for assistance from centre committees, and a visit from Board members to each centre occurs at least once a year.

Women of the committees

No short history can do justice to the individuals who shaped events within the Association. Some worked exclusively for a particular branch committee (the story of each individual branch being a worthy project for future historians). Others, like the formidable Lady MacCallum (President from 1923 to 1937) exercised their influence through the Executive Committee.

The life of Doretta MacCallum exemplifies the range of activities and steadfast commitment to community service so characteristic of many notable SDN women. She was one of the founders of the National Council of Women in 1896, and played a major role in the life of

the Ashfield Infants Home from 1890 until 1945. She also worked for the State Children's Relief Board, the Kindergarten Union, the Australian Board of Missions, the New Settlers' League of Australia, the Royal Society for the Welfare of Women and Babies, and the Sydney University Settlement. Somehow, among all this activity, she also found time to be an expert cook who entertained frequently and loved gardening!

Lady MacCallum guided the organisation through the hard years of the Depression and played a decisive role in the creation of the Nursery Schools. When she was absent from the Chair on brief periods of leave, decisions were often deferred until her return. She was strategic as well as generous with her donations: the £100 she gave enabled the purchase of the Linthorpe Street property which housed the Newtown Day Nursery; in 1932 she was one of those who guaranteed a year's salary for Miss Gillespie, the first Nursery School teacher-cum-director to be employed by SDN.

Lady MacCallum was succeeded by Donalda McElhone, another effective lobbyist of politicians and long-term president from 1938 to 1963, a period of strong growth and expansion.

In an era where women's career opportunities were limited, the Association benefited from the drive and competence of women whose ability would have assured them of success today. A notable example was Frances Norton, one of only 10 qualified women accountants in Australia in 1938. From 1959 to 1981, her business acumen helped to guide the Association through years of change, and as a member of the NSTC Council she played a leading role in ensuring that the College was transferred to the Commonwealth on terms favourable to the Association.

Some notable families have maintained their links to SDN through their generosity and hard work through generations, or even throughout the history of the Association. Marguerite Fairfax was Vice-President of the founding committee and her husband was one of the first honorary doctors; a member of the Fairfax family is on the SDN Board today. Julie Cohen, the first Secretary, married into the Phillips family. Her sister-in-law, Mrs Orwell (Helene) Phillips, was an early president, and the family association continues today.



Redfern benefactor Mrs Johnson and longtime SDN President Donalda McElhone socialise with Bertram Stevens, Premier of NSW, at the opening of Redfern Nursery School in 1938. Keeping up the pressure on politicians was a necessary skill for SDN office-bearers.



Joan Fry – the first Thyne Reid Scholar, Principal of Nursery School Teachers College and effective advocate for early childhood education.

Joan Fry — an outstanding advocate for quality child care

Joan Fry was one of the early graduates of the Nursery School Teacher training program. Her first teaching appointment was with 25 two-year-old children at Woolloomooloo, where she was appointed Director in 1944. In 1946 Joan was awarded the first Thyne Reid Travelling Scholarship which enabled her to study at the London University Department of Child Development.

During her time in London Joan Fry attended lectures given at the Tavistock Clinic by David Winnicott and John Bowlby, famous and sometimes (in Bowlby's case, at any rate) controversial names in the history of child development research. Child development remained her major academic interest, and she taught the subject to students in all three years of the program until she left in 1973.

Upon her return to Sydney, Joan Fry was appointed Vice-Principal, then Director of Pre-School Training, then Principal of the College. In September 1952 she attended the 6th biennial Conference of the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development (later APA – the Australian Preschools Association). This was the first time, according to Joan, that SDN was tolerated within the ranks of the preschool professionals' Association. The following year she attended an AAPCD meeting as an official representative of SDN. From this time on, SDN representatives were fully represented in APA and the College, together with the Kindergarten Union, co-hosted and organised the APA triennial conference in 1958.

Throughout the 1960s Joan raised the profile of the College and the Association by her involvement with the APA and her political skills. Through Annual Reports and adroit use of publicity she clearly reiterated three main messages: there was a critical shortage of qualified preschool teachers; the enhancement of young children's intellectual, social and emotional development through high quality preschool education was of the utmost importance; women were returning to work in increasing numbers and quality care, of the same standards as that provided for other children of the same age, should be provided for the children of those mothers.

In promoting these messages, Joan displayed and further developed her considerable charm and political acumen. With other APA members she applied for the Federal Government's assistance to extend teacher training, producing cogent facts and statistics to support the argument for such assistance. She contacted 'various Ministers of the NSW Government and Opposition' as well as Federal politicians, and came to be on good terms with Prime Minister Gorton in 1965.



Music and movement room, Nursery School Teachers College Newtown.

The construction of this beautiful working space owes much to Joan Fry's shrewd frugality. She and the building's architect discovered that offcuts of Tasmanian timber, for soundproofing, could be obtained for the cost of cartage – cheaper than buying timber in NSW. According to Joan, this and other similar costcutting solutions prompted a question from Minister Malcolm Fraser at the opening of the College: 'Did you get all this with the money we gave you?'

The Commonwealth funding of preschool teacher education was due in no small measure to Joan Fry's advocacy. Joan and Kim Beazley Senior, the Minister for Education in the new Labor government, had a high regard for each other, so it was not surprising that she was asked to chair the Australian Pre-Schools Committee to advise the government on future directions. Joan resigned to take up this new position in 1973, moving to Canberra and leaving the new building she had helped so much to bring into being.

Joan ascribed her character and her commitment to teaching to the influences of her early years. Her father was an engineer for the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission and Joan's early years were spent in camps along the banks of the Murray River. The contrast between the people she met along the river and those in more settled communities so intrigued her that she decided to become a teacher not out of any interest in teaching, but out of a desire to understand 'why people behaved in what appeared to me to be very strange ways'. Her father bequeathed to her a keen sense of humour, a great respect for learning and a belief that money should be one's servant and not one's God – 'a prerequisite for anyone foolish enough to become a preschool teacher and then to work in child care!'

The staff and the children

The first paid employee of the Association was the Matron, appointed to take charge of the first Day Nursery at Woolloomooloo. Thereafter, all Day Nurseries were run by Matrons, women with a general nursing qualification, assisted by 'lady help', nurses and untrained assistants (the last Matron in charge of a day nursery retired in the late 1960s). NNEB graduates (nurses with an English nursery nursing qualification) have always been highly sought after as SDN staff, but circumstances have often dictated that nurses working in Day Nurseries have not had child-related training.

Hours were long: until 1930, 11 hours per day from Monday to Friday, 7 hours on Saturday – a 62 hour week. Staff lived in so that they would be ready to receive the children who arrived at or before the starting time of 7 am. It was taken for granted that Matrons resigned upon marriage.

The dedication expected of those working for the Association has been described as the 'compassion trap': women were traditionally expected to devote their lives to the care of others without need of encouragement nor expectation of reward. These expectations were resistant to change, have only gradually diminished, and are still exploited by society today in its apparent acceptance of relatively low levels of remuneration considered appropriate for those working in human services.

Children's services today aim to foster and enhance all aspects of children's development. In the hard early days, it is not surprising that safety and meeting the children's basic physical needs took precedence over other goals. Many babies and toddlers were undernourished when they first arrived at the day nursery, so the need to feed them properly and improve their health and weight was paramount. Because supervising children in premises that were not purpose-built was difficult, they were often kept in cots, fed and tended there, until they were able to walk.



Fun in the Nursery?

Children confined to cots, Darlington Nursery 1908. In premises not designed for young children, it was unsafe and impracticable to allow them the free rein expected today.



Children in their smocks, saying grace. They were taught habits of politeness to adults and kindness to other children.

The children were dressed in uniform – white for babies, red ‘turkey twill’ overalls once they were walking. ‘Very bonnie and bright they looked’ according to Mrs Fairfax, a member of the founding committee; but not everyone shared this view. A Director of Woolloomooloo KU Kindergarten in the 1920s spoke of ‘a day nursery next door...run by a strict matron who made the children wear bright red pinafores which they hated’. By 1927 the uniforms had changed to other colours, firstly blue and pink. There was a strong emphasis on the importance of uniforms, Visiting Committees sometimes noting with disapproval that ‘there were children not in uniform’ after a visit.

Children’s activities in the nurseries probably became more restricted in the 1920s and 1930s as the strict eating, sleeping and toileting routines advocated by nurses in the Baby Health Centre were more widely adopted. At the same time, however, the newly established Nursery Schools were implementing programs with an educational purpose. Here children were divided into two groups, 20 in the toddler, 30 in the older group, (later, group sizes became smaller) with one teacher and one helper for each group, providing free play sessions interspersed with group activities. The essential washing, eating, sleeping and toileting routines, managed by a skilful teacher, could also be turned into valuable learning experiences.

Staff took children on occasional excursions to the Zoo, picnics, the beach or the Gardens. They trained them in habits of cleanliness, politeness to each other and to adults, and kindness to other children. Corporal punishment was frowned upon, and a nurse was dismissed in 1930 for beating a child. By 1950 the following principles had been laid down:

No smacking, No child left unattended, No force feeding, No tying children down, All children should have material for expression, occupation and interest, Children not to be left to cry, Affection and approval to outweigh discipline.

Teachers and nursing staff wore distinctive uniforms until the 1930s, and initially attempts were made to enforce the wearing of caps by teachers; but uniforms had gone by the 1960s. In 1974 a Director noted that ‘two staff wore jeans today...a first in the history of the Association’. It is interesting to note in a recent discussion of staff uniforms in SDN Community Times (April 7 2004) that ‘many staff, especially in the under 2s room, have expressed interest in staff uniforms’. It was suggested that staff wear clothing in SDN’s corporate colours of dark blue and orange while at work.

As the Nursery Schools expanded, conflict emerged over the respective roles and responsibilities of Matrons and teachers in charge, called Directors (or Directresses). Teachers in the early 1940s pressed a Log of Claims on the Association and made some headway in improving their working conditions. To the horror of the Association the teachers formed a union, but it was never formally registered as such. By 1944 ‘things were getting pretty hostile’ according to Joan Fry, and all the directors resigned when the Committee decided in favour of the nurses at a meeting held to sort matters out. Teachers were then stated to be in charge of children 2 and over, nurses those under 2 in centres where a day nursery and Nursery School co-existed; but clear lines of demarcation were hard to determine, individual personalities played their part, and tensions persisted for some time.

Salaries initially were privately negotiated between staff and Association. One of the earliest Nursery School teachers recalled that ‘If I got, say, £5 per week and it was considered that I had done a good job I was often given £5/10/- and told not to tell anyone else’. It was 1970 before teachers were covered by an industrial award; Nursery Nurses gained their award in 1969.

From early days a General Secretary was employed, and other administrative and clerical staff were employed in Head Office as SDN’s work expanded. From the 1970s advisers, later consultants, were a vital link between the branches and the central organisation, supporting and resourcing centre staff and dealing with issues of quality control and programming, staff recruitment, licensing and other essential matters.

As children’s physical health improved with rising standards of living and advances in medical science, more attention was focussed on children’s psychological health, especially as the negative effects of adverse social circumstances became more clearly recognised. Directors could contact specialist services for assistance for children with behavioural or learning problems.



Nurse brushing a child's hair with others, crouched in their lockers, looking on. Children often liked to go and sit in their lockers, a quiet space in the hurly-burly of the nursery and the last place of contact with their mothers before they left for work.

Theories of child development in vogue during the 1950s and 1960s held that children's abilities unfolded universally and naturally in an orderly sequence, and that provision of appropriate materials and a suitable environment was all that was needed for learning to take place. Later it was realised that interaction with, and guidance by adults was essential, for some children more than others, and that adult-child conversation was vital for children's language development. During the 1970s there was increased emphasis on cognitive development in early childhood, and graduates of NSTC were well-equipped with knowledge and skills that enabled them to provide a whole range of activities to stimulate such development.

Teachers in the Nursery Schools worked with children from aged 2 to school age, with under 2s being cared for in the Day Nurseries by Mothercraft nurses and/or Child Care Certificate workers (TAFE graduates), as well as helpers (later called Child Care Workers). In the late 1970s Nursery Schools and Day Nurseries collectively came to be known as centres. In the 1980s financial stringencies led to a reduction in staff numbers; teachers, being the most costly to employ, were most affected. To make the most effective use of trained personnel, teaching Directors became more involved in programs for younger children, reducing the division that had existed between the under and over 2s.

Early NSTC graduates mainly worked in Nursery Schools, but many did so for only a short time. It is not hard to understand why. Even though for many years NSTC graduates completed a 3-year course and primary/infants school trainees only 2 years, infant teachers were paid more. Working hours in day care are much longer, holidays less, than in schools and preschools. Jan Kelly noted that in 1932 Miss Gillespie, the first Nursery School Director, was 'the first Nursery School teacher in Australia to fall victim to the burnout syndrome'; she would not be the last.

Nursery School teaching is both demanding and exhausting; and, far from being commended by the community for their dedication, many teachers felt that their work was looked down upon, especially as disapproval of working mothers became more vocal in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps the name 'Nursery School' created an impression of a custodial welfare service, not a truly educational one. To add to this sense of a lack of respect, teachers often felt unappreciated by the Association itself: 'No visitor or committee member thanked the teaching staff for the work they had done. We were very disappointed and discouraged' (a Director after a Christmas party for 64 children at one of the centres). In the 1970s and 1980s, as child care became a fiercely contested political issue, some graduating teachers were ideologically committed to working in day care and many became influential, effective advocates of quality care.

Today children and staff in SDN centres are a mirror of Australia's increasingly diverse population, and values of living in harmony and respect for difference are encouraged. Newer styles and philosophies of early childhood education continue to shape program and curriculum development. But the time-honoured activities that have enduring appeal for children – play, exploration, learning to manipulate and to discover, interacting with other children and adults and learning to get along with them – all are provided, managed and directed when necessary by staff whose overriding aim remains that of promoting the optimal development of all the children in their care.

Throughout its history, SDN has attracted and retained staff who love their work with children and are secure in their awareness of its importance. For there can be few more crucial tasks for a society than that of nurturing the next generation of its members.

SDN today

SDN's philosophy states that we have always believed, since our beginnings in 1905, that the world can be a better and more equitable place, and that we can help to make it so. This belief is woven through the history of the organisation and is reflected in our stated vision and values, which in turn informs our mission and all that we do. SDN Children's Services has now grown to be a large not-for-profit organisation which supports children and families through 25 Children's Education and Care Centres in NSW and ACT, and 24 government-funded programs, including several where we coach non-SDN services in inclusive practice.

In SDN's 2013–2015 Strategic Plan we re-affirmed our commitment to enhancing children's quality of life and life chances through the services we provide and support; and to social inclusion.

Early intervention literature and brain research over several decades have demonstrated that the quality of environments that children experience in their earliest years is related to their future opportunities and quality of life. SDN works with families and other agencies to support the capacity of families and communities to meet the full range of physical, psychological and early education needs of children. Providing these environments consistently in all our services enhances quality of life for children now and lays firm foundations for all later learning, thus enhancing children's life chances in the future.

Families today are facing increasing demands, and services that can provide well-coordinated support that is part of a sustainable community base will be more effective for children, and they will be more convenient for families. SDN values of creativity and innovation are encouraging us to contribute to the emerging knowledge and skill base of what it takes to be an integrated organisation capable of assisting children and families in a variety of ways.

Part of SDN's vision is for children's services to be valued and well-resourced and we believe that increasing the knowledge and capability of practitioners through professional development, reflection and research will help achieve this vision. We are proud of our long history in teacher education and the provision of a range of children's services. Not only did we establish the Nursery School Teachers' College, we were the first to employ qualified teachers to work in our centres. SDN continues to support the education of early childhood professionals through structured student placements in our centres that support university and TAFE students to gain practical experience. SDN also awards a number of scholarships and prizes each year to university and TAFE students studying early childhood education and other courses relevant to the work they do. These scholarships and prizes recognise and acknowledge leadership as well as academic performance, and are given in honour of the women who built SDN through their hard work, perseverance and vision.

Well into our second century of service, SDN remains committed to our vision and mission, and continues to work towards a future where the promise and potential of every child is realised, families and communities are strong and caring, and children's services are valued and well resourced.



About the Author

Dr Leone Huntsman, historian and retired Senior Lecturer in Child Development and Family Studies, is also a mother of five children. In 1998 Leone completed a PhD in Australian Literature, writing a thesis which was adapted to become *Sand in our Souls: the beach in Australian history*, published by Melbourne University Press in 2001. *Sand in our Souls* was awarded two literary prizes: the ISAA (Independent Scholars Association of Australia) Book Prize in 2002, and the Frank Broeze Memorial Maritime History prize in 2003.

Since retirement in 1992, Leone has coordinated a pilot program for Aboriginal early childhood students in rural New South Wales and worked on a number of consultancies in the area of research on early childhood services and family support programs.



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