

The Brotherhood of St Laurence

Statement for Review of Children's Services Regulations 2007

The Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Early Years, along with three other areas, has been identified as a key life transition towards which the Brotherhood of St Laurence will focus our work. This transition phase, the primary focus of ***Child and Family at the Brotherhood*** is seen as critical in establishing future trajectories and essential to the healthy functioning of strong communities. Engagement with children and parents as they navigate the challenges of family life, especially in difficult circumstances, has been an enduring part of the work of the Brotherhood from our pioneering work in the early 1970's with the establishment of the first Family Day Care scheme in Australia to the recent completion of a major research project through Best Start.

Brotherhood St Laurence Vision and Objectives

An Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence will work with others to create:

- an inclusive society in which everyone is treated with dignity and respect
- a compassionate and just society which challenges inequity
- a society in which all create and share prosperity, and share responsibility for each other
- a sustainable society for our generation and future generations.

In working towards an Australia free of poverty, we recognise the indigenous custodians of this country. We are committed to understanding the effects of the dispossession of indigenous Australians and to achieving reconciliation.

The Brotherhood's work in 'Child and Family'

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) has a long history and a strong track record in practice, research and advocacy in the early childhood field. Through this the BSL seeks to address the impact of poverty on children and families.

Engagement with children and parents as they navigate the challenges of family life, especially in difficult circumstances, has been an enduring part of the work of BSL from the pioneering work in the early 1970's with the establishment of the first Family Day Care scheme in Australia to the recent completion of a major research project through Best Start.

Fundamental to this work is the belief that equitable access to universal child and family services is critical to successful outcomes for children and families who experience disadvantage. Specifically, the BSL is committed to implementing effective local strategies matched with the transformation of existing universal services into socially inclusive institutions that are accessible and affordable for all

children and families. This view reflects Brotherhood's own and others' research and reinforces our commitment to making inclusive universal services a key to building strong futures.

BSL contributions to children's services in Victoria include the introduction of milk into schools; the first Family Day Care program; piloting the first Preschool Support Program; the Promise the Children Campaign; the Life Chances Study and more recently the introduction of Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) into Australia and involvement in the Best Start initiative through the Breaking Cycles, Building Futures project.

Currently, the responsibility for the provision of services, advocacy and policy change in several areas including Child and Family Services at Brotherhood lies with the Community Services Division. Some of the Child and Family programs operating are: Napier St, Child and Family Services; Family Day Care; HIPPY; Family Relationship Support Services; Hume Communities for Children project and Breakfast Club.

The Brotherhood welcomes the opportunity to comment on the children's services regulations particularly as it relates to children, families and staff who experience significant disadvantage.

The following responses address areas of particular interest to the Brotherhood:

1. Qualifications

Research confirms that highly qualified staff make a significant differences to the impact of early childhood programs. Work in early childhood is becoming increasingly complex in particular the challenges of working with children and families in disadvantaged communities.

The Brotherhood believes that **all** staff working with children should have a basic level of training and that those in leadership positions should hold at a degree qualification in early childhood or recreation for Outside School Hours Care.

A move in this direction whilst adding to the quality of care for children should be delivered in such a way as to not disadvantage staff members especially those on very low incomes. Therefore bridging courses and support for acquiring the training could be considered as a reasonable way to ensure that the qualifications of staff are sustained.

2. Child:Staff Ratios

Child:Staff ratios are another critical factor in the determination of quality services for young children. The Brotherhoods own research, in particular the Breaking Cycles Building Futures Study identified that in order to support the equitable participation of children in vulnerable circumstances extra resources need to be made available. More adequate Child:Staff ratios will assist these children to make stronger connections with services and importantly establish positive future trajectories.

The Brotherhood believes that Child:Staff ratios should therefore be:

- In centre based programs
 - 1:3 under three
 - 1:8 over three

- Family Day Care: child ratios should be 1:4 for under school aged children, plus up to 3 school aged children.
- In Outside School Hours Care staff: child ratios should be:
 - 1:10 for all age groups, for the first staff member
 - 1:15 for second and subsequent staff members

3. Group Size

Group size alongside the previous two areas has a significant impact on the quality of the interactions and outcomes for children in services. Large groups can result in children falling through the gaps, this is particularly true for children who are newly arrived and who experience difficulties in their home life. Smaller sizes increase the capacity for the quality interactions and a more effective response to these children.

Therefore the Brotherhood suggest a limits in group size:

- In centre based care for under fives
 - 9 children under two
 - 16 children between two and three
 - 24 children over three.
- In Family Day Care the current arrangement of 1:4 children under the age of 6 years including the Care provider's own children, with the existing limits on the number of children over the age of 5 years.
- In Outside School hours programs a maximum of 80 children

4. Coverage of the Act and Regulations.

The Brotherhood endorses the proposal to include Family Day Care and Out of School Hours Services in the Coverage of the Act and Regulations.

It is important to note that minimum standards in care and education are made available to all children irrespective of capacity to access.

5. Model of regulations

Regulation of Service 'type' should recognise the uniqueness and flexibility of each service. We recommend having specific regulations that pay particular notice of the nature of service type.

6. Information release: sharing information with parents and other governments.

Communication with parents using children services is critical. Navigating the complex task of access and participation is a sometimes daunting task even more so for those experiencing a range of difficult issues.

The Brotherhood endorses and reinforces the importance of the current obligations to provide accessible information to parents. Furthermore the Brotherhood encourages reference to a range of strategies and methods to ensure this task is undertaken for all parents. Specifically the Brotherhood supports the inclusion of the following requirements in the regulations.

- All personal information requires protection and sensitivity.

- Where breaches to the Act and Regulations have occurred in a service, these need to be confirmed and also the fact that a remedy has been implemented and this information made available to all service users.
- Information in available community languages and that interpreters are used wherever possible.

7. Relationship between the criminal history check and the Working with Children Check

The Brotherhood supports measures that ensure that those who work with children are fit and proper persons. However the current requirement of the Working with Children checks covering different aspects is clumsy and potentially costly, consideration could be given to bringing these two together as one overall checking process.

8. Social Justice implications

The Brotherhood is committed to building a society where everyone is treated with respect and has equal access to the services and institutions that provide opportunities for future success.

It is important, therefore, to note that the suggestions detailed above are made in the best interests of children and their families but will in some case mean that the cost associated with delivering such services will necessarily rise. The Brotherhood cautions the State Government to undertake measures to ensure that the costs associated with delivering a higher standard of care not be shifted to parents. A move like this would seriously impact on the capacity of low income earners to access quality children's services. The result is many children and families will miss out on these valuable services. This would be regressive and erode the gains made in recent time.

Other submissions

The Brotherhood would like to draw attention to our submission from Craigieburn & Districts Family Day Care Scheme. The issues relating specifically to Family Day Care have been detailed in this submission.