



PLAY ENVIRONMENT
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**SUBMISSION
BY
PLAY ENVIRONMENT CONSULTING
TO
PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE
AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
October 2005**

1. Focus of submission

This submission primarily addresses two of the Inquiry's terms of reference:

- (i) *trends, changes and issues for children and young people in the development, implementation and co-ordination of policy, design and planning for the built environment;*
- (ii) *strategies to ensure that built environment issues affecting children and young people are readily identified and receive coordinated attention across portfolios and different levels of government;*

The factual basis of this submission relates to the built environment of younger children (0–8 years), and is based on detailed consideration to the implications to the development of overall competency skills in children, which will affect the rest of their lives. It is stressed that it is adults alone who make 95% of the decisions which impact upon young children; the level of expertise is, to say the least, uneven across the decision-maker spectrum.

2. Interaction of Government instruments and quality of built environments

While well intentioned, it is common for Government instruments to be well behind the changes in society. This is associated not only with the time lags in gaining broad acceptance across portfolios, but also with the departmental reliance on in-house expertise. If regulatory instruments are supported by more easily updated guidelines or publication of precedents/examples, then a more effective array of information will be available to the society. The table below sets out some of these.

Government instruments	Supplementary information
<u>Formal</u> Legislation, accreditation Development control plans	Best Practice guidelines, court precedents (eg Burwood DCP); research
<u>Informal</u> Policies, coordination	Societal changes in demand (eg. childcare), changes in lifestyle (eg. obesity), and narrow interest groups (eg. Kidsafe)

If the supplementary information is to be effective, it needs to be disseminated and supported (even funded) by Government. Without supplementary information the Government will never meet societal needs in a timely fashion.

Case study : Burwood DCP

In 1999, Burwood Council took legal action under its DCP to prevent a substandard childcare facility from going ahead. It complied with regulations. However, on evidence based on Best Practice¹, the QC for the developers withdrew the defence 24 hours before it came to court. When Local Councils know their rights, then quality results; but network dissemination is vital to this.

¹ Walsh PA (1996). Best Practice Guidelines in Early Childhood Physical Environments. NSW Department of Community Services. ISBN 0 7310 4243 3.

3. Impact of Physical settings on quality of play in built environments

While Governments are drawn to “one size fits all” instruments (as being “fair to all”), this tends to foster a checklist (or “black letter”) approach. While the black letter approach is common in the USA (reinforced by litigation), the Australian body of law rests on in principle or intent. Governments need to be wary of Prescriptive Regulation, as for example that of safety in playgrounds [AS4585:2004]:

Safety Standards consider	Standards do not consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> materials engineering strengths design (like spaces, swing arc, fall height) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> how children use a swing assembly on a platform whether a piece of equipment has any play value or developmental value

Again, this comes back to the need for guidelines to supplement regulation. But these guidelines must be valid in practice, noting that as has been pointed out² adults tend to see physical settings as functional, whereas children see them as locations for play, learning, interaction and stimulation.

Too often well-intentioned regulation is compromised by narrow perspectives (ie. Not interdepartmental and excludes field expertise). Quality of play needs expert design.

Case study: Obesity

There is Government and community concern about growing levels of obesity in children, but this is seen in terms of diet and lack of exercise which are immediate factors. However, it can be asked whether professionals should also look at built environments to see whether an individual has access to an inviting and developmentally appropriate playspace. In designing playgrounds, I continually experience a real lack of understanding about invitational play—and how to build in invitation to participate. “One size fits all” cannot cover inner city, suburban and remote community needs.

² Parliament of NSW, Committee on Childcare and Young People, (2005). Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment Issue Paper 1 (page 6).

4. Improved approaches

In my 20 years of designing and assisting with the design of facilities for young children, I see field operatives struggling against the current suite of intergovernmental and intra-governmental regulations, policies and often misinformed officials (see Appendix 3³). It is to be hoped that this Inquiry can take on board some suggestions which are driven by the practical problems and unintended consequences of Government actions. Although interrelated, the Committee may wish to consider actions associated with three main fields.

4.1 External expertise

Whilst not questioning government officers as administrators, they are less effective in developing policies across portfolios or in accessing external (specialist) expertise. There is constructive benefit in using external specialists on a get-in get-out basis for:

- (a) policy development (broader base)
- (b) guidelines (Best Practice) for built environments or accreditation
- (c) advising individual facilities (evaluation or design).

A balance between research and practical knowledge will impact on timelines and delivery respectively. Regulation will be better complied with.

4.2 Information to supplement regulation

There is a need for more emphasis on performance based regulation⁴ to be recognised by government. This should be accessed within a multi-media approach.

The role of the internet as a disseminator (as per the British Columbia⁵) should be explored for issues about young children. Networking is a powerful ownership tool. It is also suggested that the Australian Land Care network (and its annual award system) could be considered as a role model for this community/professional interaction approach.

There is no intent to replace legislation although Best Practice can identify how or where updating is needed only to provide information to increase its effectiveness through channelling information.

4.3 Holistic funding for projects

There is a need for Government to recognise that funding of facilities and community centres will be more effective if the built environment is seen as a whole (as opposed to *ad hoc* alterations). An effective community asset is one which is integrated with complementary facilities. For example, a childcare centre as part of a multiservice hub, or public playspaces integrated with whole-of-shire (or town, or suburb, or remote community) planning. However, integrated planning tends to be initially more expensive and more time consuming. In practice I have found that additional support and guidance is needed to steer implementation of the plans and by doing so there is an assurance of better quality finished buildings and product which will be long term viable. Given that DCPs are the responsibility of Local Government, but funding of facilities can be a mix of government/non-government sources, a rethink of appropriate processes, could well deliver quality facilities otherwise unobtainable. It

³ Walsh PA (2004). When the quick fix won't do. *Rattler* 72, summer 2004, p17–20.

⁴ Graham I (2002). Standards referenced in legislation. *The Australian Standards*, March 2002, p4–5.

⁵ Parliament of NSW, Committee on Children and Young People (2005). Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment Issue Paper 2 (page 5).

should also be noted that the cost (capital outlay) for inner city sites may need special funding arrangements and agreements—such as a one-off seeding grant for site purchase or funding for the building bound by Best Practice design parameters.

5. Conclusion

In making this submission, I am drawing on an unusual breadth of practical experience in the field. The generalisations developed here, can be substantiated by reference to early childhood projects and case studies with which I have personally been involved. I believe that my statements have solid roots in research in the early childhood field and I believe that the children, the staff and the administrators will benefit by the new approaches advocated here.

Appendix.

Walsh (2004) Rattler article.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

WHEN THE QUICK FIX WON'T DO

CHILDCARE CENTRES IN INNER-CITY OR ESTABLISHED SUBURBAN AREAS WAGE A CONSTANT BATTLE TO DELIVER A QUALITY PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT. COMPROMISES OFTEN SEEM LIKE THE ONLY SOLUTION, BUT THESE USUALLY PROVIDE SHORT-TERM RESULTS. **PRUE WALSH** WRITES THAT THE KEY TO AVOIDING CONTINUAL COMPROMISES IS TO SELL A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO DECISION-MAKERS.



Establishing services in city areas

In any city in Australia, it is costly to establish a childcare centre. High costs often result in buying or leasing a site which is too small, or which can not easily be converted into an integrated indoor-outdoor learning experience for children. If the decision to buy a property uses up the majority of your funds, then it is more than likely that you will be walking into layer on layer of compromises. Even worse, it is the children and the staff who will bear the consequences of a lower quality service.

In my consultancy work, I see many centres (both private and community-owned) where childcare professionals are at breaking point. Their centres are characterised by poor initial planning and implementation followed by ad hoc alterations. Constant scenarios in a large number of early childhood centres include closing off doorways to create sufficient setting-up zones in a playroom; blocking-in verandahs to make a playroom larger; shifting fence lines to create adequate space for a playground; creating more storage by tacking on

shelves onto any spare space of wall; storing chairs and boxes of records in disability access toilets; and placing soft-fall surfaces in playgrounds in the middle of a lawn area so that children don't have any running space. Of particular concern is that tight spaces are poorly designed, offering insufficient variety and diversity in a number of play options. Planning and design that inhibits ease of supervision is an underlying cause of major stress to both children and staff. How did it get to this point? And can it be avoided?

In fact there is no single cause; rather a number of factors which compound the problems:

- **Licensing requirements.** Too often a proposal uses minimum licensing requirements as 'good practice', whereas in reality this produces an inflexible facility with built-in failure tendencies. The licensing requirements legislation may not be based on sound practice or on quality research. It is a sad fact that many government-designed facilities fall into this category, and as such are not good role models. Every proposal needs to use



Early Childhood Australia's policy on physical environment and the Department of Community Services' Best Practice Guidelines in Early Childhood Physical Environments to ensure effective spatial provision and organisation.

- **No design brief.** Too often, a facility is built (or converted) by well-meaning professionals who have no idea how to prepare a design brief based on how children play. And even worse, the experts who could do this for them are 'too expensive'—a case of 'penny wise and pound foolish' as the old saying goes. People may not set out to build an ineffective centre, but that is what they do by not employing design professionals.
- **Budget constraints.** Under-funding is a major cause of problems, particularly the pattern of offering small grants for specific projects, which are not seen in the context of the whole physical environment. The in-principle decision to be made is: Do you focus spending on structural elements such as buildings and sandpits? Or do you spread the funds thinly and end up with poor quality implementation? There is a middle way. It involves staged development and is the most cost-effective in the long-term.

The blame game

It is tempting to blame others for creating a battling childcare centre. The cry is always for more funding; at worst it is a constant cry (not without some validity): 'If we raise the fees the children who need it most won't be able to attend the centre; 'We need more qualified staff but we can't afford it'; 'We try to improve the facilities but it is too expensive'; 'We could squeeze three more children in if we had the funds to glass in a verandah'.

The pattern of blame is obvious, but what disturbs me is that it is all short-term thinking. If prevention is better than cure then perhaps we need a new approach. We need to lift our game and take a pro-active early childhood leadership role, which conveys a sound and effective long-term vision for development.

I am seeing new purpose-built establishments, along with converted houses, converted bowls clubs, community halls. Some are thriving vibrant centres and others are sad, unhappy places. They all work within the same society. They are all under the same level of government funding. The difference is that decisions are based on long-term viability (or short-term viability) and the reality is that the government solution of one-size-fits-all cannot work to meet the diversity of needs within the community. The services that are most at risk are the rural and remote communities and the inner-city centres.

'I dreamed a thousand new paths—I woke and walked my old one.'

—Chinese Proverb

Land costs

Land costs are a significant part of establishing an urban childcare centre and often they will dictate the size/quality of the service. For example:

- \$1 million in a provincial city in Queensland will deliver a 75 place centre built to best practice standards
- \$1 million in Sydney delivered a 29-place centre in a converted house at below best practice standards. This is reality. But there are ways to think creatively about changing the Sydney cost-balk, when establishing a new service or upgrading an existing service. Think about the following options:
- The local council is also a stakeholder in services to the community; and sometimes they have property, which could be used for early childhood services. Their assistance should be sought to see if they are willing to provide land and assist in the development of a community run facility or perhaps to provide additional land needed for an existing service. Their assistance in interpreting a development control plan will need to be carefully assessed.
- Local councils can vary enormously with their approach towards the advent of a childcare centre. Some see it as a valuable community asset while others see only the negative impacts of traffic or noise on the site's neighbours and a difficult service to run. However, until they are provided with an informed and enthusiastic approach, they will never really know the true picture from a child's perspective and how they can assist meeting this within the community.

Apart from the land cost, you need to think carefully about how to make the most of the site. Clever and highly-skilled design can maximise even tight sites. Ask the basic questions, such as how will the children use this site and how can it best be integrated for an early learning indoor environment? Seek additional advice on interpretation of this information during the initial planning stages. If the answer means that the site is too small it means that it does not provide more than basic licensing requirements. You will know that it cannot provide facilities needed to support meeting the ongoing developmental needs of children and will inhibit the quality of program no matter how good the staff may be.

Planning costs

- A clear project definition (how many children, what type of service, urgency of demand) should be parallel to the assessment of various sites; it will be needed in any funding submission. The statistical basis has to be more than anecdotal (the 'people are crying out for this' approach). If you want to



impress a fund manager you need to do what a number of centres have been doing; conducting a survey to assess demand, to establish if there are additional support services for children and their families that are needed in the area and whether there are any particularly ethnic/cultural requirements needing to be met.

- Seek the support of individual parties so that you can create a multi-disciplinary, collaborative team each providing additional areas of expertise. For example, a bank manager parent or chartered accountant as the project treasurer, an architect or builder who can raise questions relating to implementation and others who may be called in only for small sections of work particularly relating to their expertise, e.g. arborist or a surveyor.
- Early childhood professionals are rarely skilled in drawing up a design brief—but then not all architects are skilled in designing early childhood facilities. Use the Department of Community Services Best Practice document as a basis for the design brief. Choose your Architect and other specialists wisely. Seek initial grants to cover professional fees. This is particularly important during establishment of new centres where surveyors, architects, engineers, play environment specialists should be used along with the services of a quantity surveyor to enable true cost estimates to be established.
- For existing early childhood services, a grant may be required for employing a specialist. A master plan can be established to ensure that it will cover development over 10 years. Careful evaluation will determine whether it needs to be done in stages or whether it is more effective to seek a large grant or bank loan to pay for the upgrade, with the payments coming out of funds for the next 10 years.
- In all of this, it is most important to draw on specialists who understand the developmental needs of young children—like the levels of support, graduated challenge, risk assessment, the basics of 'quiet play' areas, etc. After all, children and staff will spend eight to twelve hours of every weekday in this facility. It needs to be properly designed.
- It is most important for the early childhood educator to work collaboratively within the team and not to attempt to take it all on their shoulders. No matter how worthwhile the intentions of early childhood educators, sometimes they feel overly responsible for the grant expenditure and for saving money. It all too often results in the teacher's role becoming one of a jack-of-all-trades and master of nothing, when the point of their role should be as the early childhood user group representative within the team.

Costs of inadequate decisions

One of the benefits of developing a master plan, par-

ticularly for upgrading existing facilities is that installation can be done in stages. These are organised so that the work of latter stages does not replace or disrupt work already done. This is the real difference between staged work and ad hoc alterations: the latter is characterised by compromise and disruption, and it always costs more to remove structures so they can be improved. This is partly why most funding bodies are less inclined to support piecemeal construction, than if this was always planned to be done.

At the day-to-day operational level, a poorly designed centre makes everything more difficult. For example:

- A playroom with insufficient setting up zones means that there isn't enough for the children to do.
- The same playroom, if it has multiple access and egress points throughout the room, is inviting intrusions to activities when they are occurring.
- Rooms without clear viewing panels into adjoining child accessible spaces, for example, hallways, toilets create a supervision problems and impede the independence of the child.
- Inadequate storage facilities result in materials being stretched in funny pokey spaces often resulting in materials being hard to access and find. Storage then gets spread through many rooms and spaces impeding quick access to materials during implementation of the program
- Going to the toilet: It is more difficult when a child playing outside has to traipse through the playroom to go (perhaps disrupting quiet play en route. If the child needs to be supervised in toileting, the staff are faced with a choice of either not helping the child or abandoning their post outside.
- The maintenance can be more difficult. For example, when (not if!) the sandpit needs topping up, do you have to bring bagged sand in through the building, or wheelbarrow it from the footpath, or are there truck-sized gates into the playground? Compromises can lead to time wasting and greater cost; in my view prevention through design is better than cure.

Can *ad hoc* alterations be useful? Certainly in the short-term. Take the classic example: A community centre wanted to install a bench for mothers (before they went to work) to sit and observe and understand more about their children's daily activities. Solution: knock a hole in the wall, build the bench and install a coffee machine. A parent tripped over a box, was injured and took legal advice. Or in other words, there was a specific problem and an *ad hoc* solution decided without considering the whole physical environment. In reality, all too often, a quick tally of funds spent on *ad hoc* alterations over a ten year period is well in excess of \$250,000–\$300,000 without any real long-

term benefits being shown.

The above list is not exhaustive, but inadequate decisions can obviously cause a funding decision to fail; be disruptive; cost more; create supervising problems; create maintenance problems; lead to injury. The list goes on. Yet short-term solutions may seem adequate at the time. It is not through lack of goodwill, but through not understanding that advice to prevent problems is available when you need it.

Some constructive suggestions

1. Remember that the reason behind the alterations you want to make is always valid. What may not be effective is the impact of that alteration on other facilities within the building and playground.
2. Always assess demand and site options for appropriateness and consult the local council for input (there are precedents for this). Always keep long-term viability in view and develop a master plan so that you have flexibility with effectiveness of expensive infrastructure (in buildings and playgrounds); this should be built into all funding submissions.
3. Always check your local government council requirements and seek their input and assistance. These can vary enormously and may prove supportive of what you are trying to do and conversely hold you back due to unrealistic demands on things such as car-parking and boundary setbacks. Seek their support and clarify your situation, they need to understand your needs representing young children in your community as well as they understand the traffic requirements.
4. Persuade both State and Federal Governments to see the critical need for more effective long-term planning and the benefits of holistic staged development. Also highlight the fact that services need changes to the funding criteria and a measured approach of assessment. Staged checking should be carried out to determine whether centres are worth upgrading and if so, how much this will cost. It is important that this is done in one stage rather than the funds being spent on piecemeal over too many centres.
5. Seek agreement with the State regulators to be given a license for a bigger centre by projecting what you realistically need to do, e.g. require new land to redevelop the building and playground and the costs, which this will incur.
6. It is my understanding that the projected norm for 75-place centres is for between \$75,000 and \$120,000 going to the original investor (per annum). This should be taken into account and a loan established so that the redevelopment can occur in a more cost effective one-stage as the potential for funds could make an enormous difference to the loan repayments. Careful evaluation

needs to be given as to whether a small increase in fees could make a major difference.

A childcare centre, which makes good decisions on funding and infrastructure, is more likely to deliver support for child development needs over the long-term. Short-term solutions or squeezing in more children, actually degrade the quality of the teaching program for all the children. The design of the physical environments is critical to day-to-day operations. A good solution is worth the effort, so we need to go beyond 'what we know'. ●

Ours is a rapidly changing world, with new challenges. It means we must view children's needs and services more broadly than we once did. We must move 'beyond the front door'.

—Carmel Tebbutt (2002)¹

Prue Walsh is an early childhood educator whose work specialises primarily in physical environments in early childhood settings. She has worked in every Australian state and internationally for more than 20 years. Her work also extends to schools and public playspaces. For more detail visit www.playconsulting.com

References

1. C. Tebbutt, *Rattler*, Summer 2002, pp.8-10.

POSITIVE MOVES IN CHILDCARE PLANNING:

- Best practice guidelines [NSW, Lutheran Education Qld, NT];
- Changes in local government attitudes, all-of-shire planning and positive Development Control Plans, which require more than legislative minimums;
- Soon-to-be-released ANZ Playground Standards, including a supervised early childhood category;
- Federal Government interdepartmental policy, which brings together all of the diverse aspects of early childhood, including health, childcare, family policies, unified guidelines.

Unfortunately, such new developments often open up a whole new area of issues. This just highlights how a complex and far more detailed assessment of physical environment issues must occur.