

Children's Protection Society

1906 – 1994?

Details

The Children's Protection Society (the Society) was established in Perth in 1906 as the extent of 'child cruelty and neglect' became more visible to the public. At a time when neglected children were seen as criminals, the Society showed that children were victims. It was a volunteer service aimed mainly at ensuring that illegitimate children (and their mothers) were not abandoned by their fathers and that those children were cared for and did not become State Children. The Society had a greatly reduced role in out of home care after the 1930s.

Once it started, the Children's Protection Society was actively involved in out of home care. Children who could not live with their own family were placed with foster mothers ('boarded out'). Fathers paid maintenance monies to the Society who then paid the carers. The Society also arranged adoptions and marriages, and investigated cases of cruelty to children. From 1908, the Society also ran a crèche for working mothers. This received some government funding and mothers who could afford to do so paid a daily rate. The Society did not receive government funding for boarding out activities. Its revenue came from 'responsible people' who paid for their children to be boarded out, members' subscriptions, fundraising (from the Royal Agricultural Show and Wattle Day League, for example), and private donations. From the 1920s, the Society helped establish Infant Health Centres, day care and kindergartens in the State. It remained active in day care for the rest of the century, but from the 1930s the Society's role in out of home care was winding down.

The Annual Report of the Children's Protection Society ('the Society') 1972-73 noted that many previous annual reports were missing. A brief history 'compiled from available sources of information' was therefore included in that year's report and this excerpt has been included in the Find & Connect web resource as a digital object.

An overview of the Children's Protection Society up to 1918 is given in the evidence of its Chairman, Rabbi David Freedman and Secretary, Jessie Gover, to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the State Children Act Amendment Bill in 1918. Rabbi Freedman stated that the Society was involved only with 'those children of parents who want to keep their parenthood, but who for the time being are unable to look after the children themselves'.

In her evidence Mrs Gover (a founding member who served for 31 years as Secretary) described the functions of the Society as 'boarding out' and attending to 'cruelty cases that are reported. Those cases are investigated and we see what we can do' (p.16). In its first ten years, Mrs Gover said, the Society placed 759 children, and all but 15 percent of those children were returned to their parents, which was one of the society's aims: 'We feel we have no right to put the child to be supported by the State when it has parents'. The Society was vigorous in its pursuit of fathers, going even to army camps to soldier fathers 'either pay or marry the girl' (p.17). Sixty-nine marriages of young women 'under the care' of the Society had been arranged in the 10 years of operations that were reported to the Select Committee: 'If the girl marries the father of the child, it is right enough, but if the mother does not marry the father of the child we are dubious over the child and watch it'.

Mrs Gover described how children came to the notice of the Society:

A child is born in a registered home. The mother has to sign a paper before she goes out as to where she is going, and where she has taken the child, or where she intends to take it. She either takes the child to us or to the State. The State writes immediately to the girls no matter whether she is in her home or not, and asks her what she has done with the child and if it has been placed in a registered home. If the child is brought to us we put it in a foster home... We say to the girl... 'What are you going to do?' She says she will take a Situation... We pay for the child. Our first question to her is, 'Who is the father of the child and are you going to get support from him or not?' If not we say we are going to deal with the father, and do so immediately (Select Committee, evidence pp.17-18).

The Society was concerned that the State Children Act 1907 did not deal with parents being cruel to their children. The Act was designed to regulate the behaviours of institutions and foster-mothers, but unlike other States, did not inquire into how children were treated in the family home. The Society filled this gap energetically, but received no government funding. Edith Cowan gave evidence to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council into the State Children Act Amendment Bill in 1918 (p.8) that the Government had 'positively refused to assist or to subsidise the [Society's] boarded-out children' for many years, though at first 'for a year or so' the Department paid half the subsidy in cases where the Society arranged for the parents of the boarded-out child to pay the other half. Cowan said that the Society 'should have been recognised as scheduled institution' under the State Children Act but was 'entirely left out, and we were sent to the wall as far as any Government recognition was concerned.'

In her evidence, the Society Secretary, Mrs Gover (p.18) explained that the government subsidy had been withdrawn because the Society had managed to achieve a positive balance in their bank account. She attempted to make the situation of Society volunteers clear to the Committee: 'You must understand that every penny has to be raised. Every girl has to be interviewed, and every cruelty case has to be investigated. Look at the amount of time that is involved. We walk considerable distances to save expenses when we ought really to take the tram.' Before 1916, the Society recorded an average of 3,345 visits per year (by the salaried Inspector and lady visitors) to children and families (Rowe, p.121).

From the 1920s, the Society became increasingly involved with maternal education programs – consistent with contemporary wisdom that children's prospects were greatly enhanced by expert mothering. This had both positive and negative outcomes. Child neglect once again was 'invisible, because their problems became submerged in the new form of educative environment' (Rowe, p.122). The Society collaborated with the Silver Chain League to set up WA's first Infant Health Centres in 1923 and the Society was one of the founding members of the Infant Health Association. The Infant Health Centres were funded in part by government but operated as community services, with unregulated functions. Although the Society's focus in its Infant Health Centres was on maternal education and infant health, it did continue to offer traditional 'welfare' services to the families with whom it came into contact. The Golden Age Centre was the focus of these types of activities.

In May 1926, the Society opened the 'Golden Age' in Leederville, which was a combined day nursery, 'nursery school', infant health centre and Women's Club. The Women's Club developed into a short-term refuge for women and children in need. During the Depression, the day nurseries in Perth and Leederville were extremely busy as women searched for work. They were 'used as places of relief for children during the Depression' (Rowe, p.130).

The Depression had a detrimental impact on the Society's boarding out system. Over time, it became difficult for the Society to collect maintenance from parents. The Society continued to pay foster-mothers until it could no longer afford to do so. Children were then either returned to their parents or handed over to the Child Welfare Department. In 1938, a report in *The Daily News* said that the Society had debts of £600 from monies paid to foster-mothers that it couldn't recoup from the parents. While the Society continued to play a significant role in Day Care in Western Australia, its role in out of home care was winding down through lack of funds.

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In her evidence to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the State Children Act Amendment Bill in 1918, the Secretary of the Children's Protection Society Jessie Annie Gover said that adoptions organised by the Society were 'legally attended to at Mr. Cowan's office'.

Resources

- [Labour of Love](#), The West Australian, 23 January 1941
 - Battye, JS, [The Cyclopedia of Western Australia \(1912\)](#), 1912. *Relevance*: p.504
 - Children's Protection Society of Western Australia, *Annual report and balance sheet [Children's Protection Society]*, 1907 - 1970
 - [S.P.C.C. \[Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children\]](#), Western Mail, 7 July 1906
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