



Making the Invisible Visible: Consulting with Children

REPORT TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

15 APRIL 2024

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To Make the Invisible Visible: Consulting with children

April 2024

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Note: The term Outside School Hours Care Services (OSHC services) has been used throughout this report. However it is recognised that the services provide much more than ‘care’ and referring to the as Outside School Hours Care services may diminish their significance to the wellbeing, learning and development of children and young people.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services have become the new spaces of childhood. These services are the fastest growing sector of childcare services and have become important contexts of childhood, particularly as they can constitute the main locations outside school where children play and socialise.

OSHC services play a crucial role in supporting families, providing a safe and stimulating environment that primary-aged children can attend before and after school and during school holidays. There are challenges associated with delivery of OSHC services, such as the fact that majority of services are located on host sites such as schools, which may have limited space available to be utilised by OSHC services. Evidence suggests that there is limited research about the physical requirements for school age care services.

Extensive site visits have been undertaken to services in all states and territories in Australia to gather information for this report, and ask children about their perceptions of the services they attend on a regular basis.

There are limited empirical studies that examine the delivery of OSHC services. The OSHC services sector has not been examined to the same extent as early childhood centre based services. The recent formation of the *World Education Research Association Taskforce Global Research in Extended Education* (2023) is intended to synthesize the state of research worldwide in OSHC services, and to enhance international research collaboration. The Australian OSHC services have been included in the umbrella term 'extended education'.

The children that were consulted to contribute to this report were extremely enthusiastic to have the opportunity to present their thoughts and ideas, knowing that they may be used by policy makers and administrators to modify and enhance the provision of the OSHC services that they attend.

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KEY INSIGHTS

3.1 A community- neighbourhood of childhood

- The right to play and leisure are significant to building social capital, agency and resilience of children to take their place in the community.
- The children illuminated that an OSHC service is not a waiting space between home and school, rather it is a space of childhood being lived with rich opportunities for social connections through friendships, relaxation and learning, and mastering all kinds of skills and knowledge.

3.2 Children's expectations of quality

- Children have expectations about the quality of the social and physical environment in OSHC services.
- They are expecting safe relationships with caring educators whom they can trust to provide opportunities that are appropriate to their needs and interests.
- When services are located on school sites children expect that there should be opportunities to access the facilities that are available to them during school time such as halls, playgrounds.

3.3 Collaboration between OSHC and Schools

- Regular opportunities for collaboration between the OSHC services and the host site are essential to provide opportunities to develop understandings about the responsibilities of delivering an OSHC service - particularly about the configuration of the physical environment.
- A collaborative relationship would play a key role in ensuring the quality of the program and children's safety is not compromised.
- The concept of an OSHC services precinct on school sites would support easy transition between locations used on school sites and linked to quality practices.

3.4 Meeting the needs of older children

- The professional learning of educators needs to include knowledge and strategies to support the wellbeing, learning and development of multi-age groups of children.
- Particular focus needs to be included on older children who may be a member of the OSHC services community at a particular site for a period of up to seven years.

3.5 Digital divide

- Educator knowledge about the digital opportunities for children in the age range 5-12 years is important to ensure they are able to make appropriate decisions about incorporating a breadth of digital technologies in the program that have synergy between the child's worlds.
- Children in OSHC services are deserving of opportunities that are for 'now' and for the future - spaces need to be resourced to effectively support digital technologies and innovation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research project

Children and young people's view of their own lives happens through the dialogical and transactional processes they have encountered through their everyday lived experiences. As children develop, they learn to use communication to represent their identity, and to make sense of their social world (van Nijnatten, 2013). It is mostly through verbal communication that children's understandings and feelings are revealed. Therefore, having conversations with children is a way of making meaning out of their everyday lived experiences. For meaning making to take place in everyday conversations between professionals or researchers and children it needs to be a cooperative process.

This project seeks to make a contribution to understandings that will support affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality OSHC services that reduces barriers to workforce participation and at the same time supports children's well-being, learning and development. In undertaking this project, extensive site visits were undertaken to seek responses from and consult with children and young people in all Australian states and territories.

1.2 Project overview

Consultation undertaken to inform this report included both dialogic and visual representations of children experiences in OSHC services. This approach was selected as it provides an opportunity to draw authentic and meaningful responses from children and young people. The analysis of the responses provided by the children includes an ecological approach to better understand the contextual features of the outside school hours care settings, as well as the way in which children and young people make meaning of their OSHC experiences, including opportunities for change.

The team of researchers were all experienced at working in OSHC services. The researchers' expertise and familiarity with OSHC services meant that they were able to quickly build rapport with the children who were selected to participate in the 'talking circles'. The culturally safe approach using drawing and conversation supported the building of trust between the children and the researchers which contributed to the authenticity of the children's responses.

Research Questions:

- What are children's perceptions of OSHC?
- How do children perceive their experiences in OSHC and School?

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2. METHODS

2.1 Methodology

The aim of the research undertaken to inform this report was to comprehensively inform the Productivity Commission of children's experiences in Outside School Hour Care in Australia. In order to ensure the delivery of quality Outside School Hour Care (OSHC) services to Australian children there is a need to include voices of the children who participate in these services (UNCRC, 1989; AGDE, 2022). As such, a narrative methodological approach was undertaken to gain insights into how children experience and feel about attending OSHC services in Australia.

Narrative research seeks to hear different and sometime contradictory perspectives on a phenomenon. Bringing the narratives together helps to understand more about individual and group experiences for the purpose of creating change (Squire, et al., 2008). The narrative process used to gather data for this project was based on the 'Talking Circle' process for talking with and listening to children (Cartmel & Casley, 2014). The Talking Circle is based on a conversational process that requires the researcher to go deeper into a conversation that enables children to have their perspectives heard, and contributions respected on matters that affect them. The Talking Circles use everyday life narratives to enable co-construction of meaning within the conversation and helps to make sense of a child's views of the world. This type of open conversation enables children to be participative and leads to exploring innovative ideas and future possibilities with them.

Not all children communicate in the same way. Subsequently, additional media other than verbal explanations must always be used (Barblett, et al., 2022; Cartmel & Casley, 2014). This process ensures that children of differing abilities are equally able to participate in the conversations. For this project 'circle stories' were used. The Circle (see Appendix 1) complemented the conversation by giving children the opportunity to draw or write about how they spend their time in OSHC services and to describe their favourite activities. This visual representation process supported the children to make concrete their ideas.

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The following questions were designed to converse with the children:

Program Opportunities

1. What happens at OSHC for you?
2. How do you feel about that?
3. What could be different at OSHC?

Relationships between OSHC and School

4. What is the difference between what you do at OSHC and at school?
5. What can you do at OSHC that you cannot do at school, and what can you do at school that you cannot do at after school care?
6. What are your favourite activities at vacation care? What can you do in vacation care that you also do at afterschool care?

Relational Pedagogy

7. What do you think are the most important things educators do for you at OSHC?
8. What do you think is the most important things teachers do for you at school?
9. How do you feel about that?

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2.1.1 Participants

The target group for this project were children between the ages of 5 and 12 years who attend an OSHC service in Australia. Purposive Sampling was used based on the research aims and time frame to collect data. Services were identified by the research team through existing networks and previous engagement in research projects about OSHC services. Purposive sampling allowed for those participants who meet the characteristics needed in the sample to be selected to meet the research objectives.

Ethics approval for the research project was obtained from Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU ref no: 2023/924). The services were contacted by email. The email included information sheets and consent forms (for services and parents) outlining the research project and a description of the participation requirements. Information sheets and consent forms were provided for parents to recruit child participants for the 'talking circles'. These information sheets explained the purpose of the study, procedures, benefits and risks. This information was also shared with the children. Children whose parents had consented were verbally asked to consent on the day and advised they could withdraw at any time.

A total of 15 individual sites in ten locations participated in the research (Figure 1: Location of sites) across all Australian States and Territories. Services located in both regional (n=4) and metropolitan (n=8) areas participated. The sites were ACECQA approved providers of Outside of School Hours Care services (n=14) with one site in Queensland being an approved Family Day Care provider (n=1) offering Outside School Hours Care.



Figure 1: Locations of sites across Australia

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ACECQA ratings listed the sites as either Meeting or Exceeding (See Table 1: Sites and participant numbers). Two of the sites were 'pop up' sites and rated as Provisional. Three sites in one area were licensed to the same authorised provider, with another organisation comprised of two sites. Each of these multi sites were analysed as one cohort as each of the organisations' sites were closely located and in similar demographic areas. Of the 15 sites - nine sites were classed as 'Not for Profit' with six sites owned and operated by 'For Profit Pty Ltd' companies. Sites varied in size - services with 30 approved places being the smallest site and 210 being the largest. Educator numbers indicated that the greatest use of OSHC was in the after-school time offering across all sites.

Site	Region l or Metro	Number of Participants	Number of talking circles	Approved Providers	NQS Rating
Site 1 (Qld)	Regional	23	3	Not for profit (Parent committee)	Exceeding
Site 2 (Qld)	Regional	26	4	Not for profit (Parent committee)	Meeting
Site 3 (Qld)	Regional	8	2	For profit	Exceeding
Site 4 (WA) 3 venues	Regional	33	8	For profit	Provisional Provisional Meeting
Site 5 (SA)	Metro	12	2	Not for profit (Parent committee)	Meeting
Site 6 (NT) 2 venues	Metro	32	8	Not for profit (Faith-based organisation)	Meeting Meeting
Site 7 (NSW)	Metro	22	4	Not for profit (Parent committee)	Meeting
Site 8 (QLD)	Metro	25	4	For profit	Meeting
Site 9 (ACT)	Metro	19	3	Not for profit (Parent committee)	Excellent
Site 10 (Tas)	Metro	21	7	Not for profit (Local council)	Exceeding
Site 11 (VIC)	Metro	29	6	Not for profit (Parent committee)	Exceeding
Site 12 (NSW)	Metro	19	3	For profit	Meeting

Table 1: Sites and participant numbers

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A total of 54 'talking circles' were held with a total of 270 participants (n=270) between January and March 2024. Some children (n=199) were attending vacation care programs and others (n=71) engaged in talking circles in the after-school program. See Table 1 for sites and participant numbers. There was generally an even mix of genders across the cohort with only two sites having greater numbers of males compared to females (n=20/26 and n=24/33) of males in total group. Services were located in both metropolitan and regional areas. More children from metropolitan areas reported their experiences (see Figure 2: Children from services based in metro and regional areas).

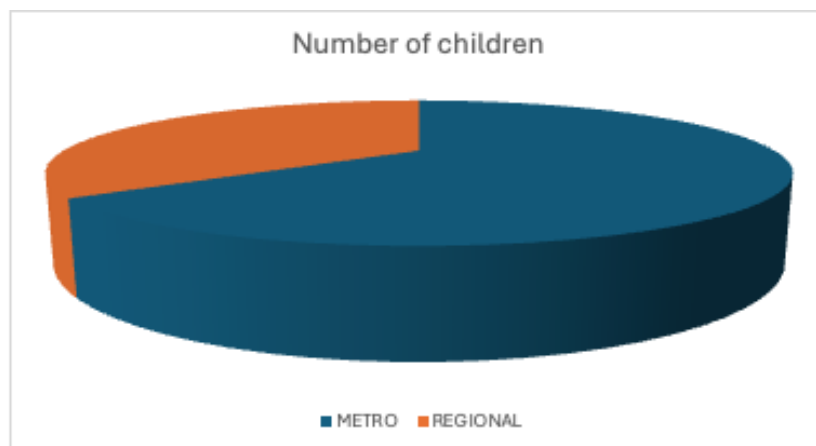


Figure 2: Children from services based in metro and regional areas

2.1.2 Consultation Process

The focus groups with the children were called 'talking circles' and were conducted in person at the services. Children were gathered in small groups 3 – 6 participants and were supplied with the blank circle (see Appendix 1) on which to record their ideas (See Figure 3). Duration of each talking circle was 20 to 30 minutes, dependent on the children's engagement in the process. Some children stayed as long as one hour drawing and talking to the researcher at intermittent intervals.

Notes were taken during the talking circles to capture the essence and key words of what was discussed and to assist with descriptions of the context at the time of the drawings and of the general attributes of the service. The 'talking circles' were recorded and post data collection the recordings were transcribed. Researchers were required to listen to conversations following the groups to qualify notes taken or to capture wording of key quotes and link to the drawings and writing supplied by the children. The majority of the children drew or wrote and orally discussed their perspectives with the researcher. Five children chose just to orally describe their perspectives.

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Figure 3: Ready to begin conversations with children

2.1.3 Analysis

Three phases of analysis were used to interpret the data from the talking circles and the drawings. Phase one was deductive and included an initial analysis of the transcripts using the interview questions as a guide to identify what was similar or different across the groups and scanning the drawings and text provided by the children in the 'circles' (See Appendix 2: Sample of the groupings of circles).

The second phase of analysis was inductive in nature to allow for the themes and concepts to emerge. The researchers reviewed notes and findings from first review separately to identify more targeted concepts.

The third stage of analysis involved the researchers coming together on three occasions to discuss and consider their shared findings resulting in the identification of key insights drawn from the perspectives of children about their experiences in OSHC services.

Thematic analysis was used in each of the phases, and results presented according to the common and unique themes identified.

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3. KEY INSIGHTS

The perception that OSHC services are temporary childcare arrangements and that they are being hosted on a school site as visitors reinforces the misconception about the validity and impact of OSHC services on a children's development, learning, wellbeing and safety. This perception weakens the sense of responsibility to provide high quality services for primary aged children.

If OSHC did not have fun activities it would be plain.

We are happy at OSHC if we weren't happy, we might not learn or play.



Figure 4: OSHC Services, Child - 7 years

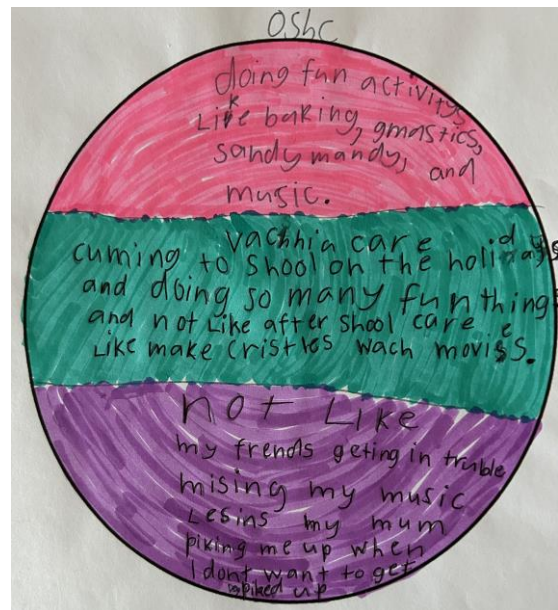


Figure 5: OSHC Services, Child - 7 years

The legitimacy of OSHC services as a permanent feature of Australian childhood influences the communication and relationships between OSHC services and schools. OSHC is a place where children may spend as much time as they do in school. As the researchers viewed the sites and the conversations of the children, they were highly aware of this context. It was apparent that the OSHC services were a place where 'childhood is lived' and contributed to the social networks and opportunities in their childhood.

The following section contains five key insights that have emerged during this consultation with children. The key insights are:

1. A community-neighbourhood of childhood,
2. Expectations of quality,
3. Effective use of the physical environments,
4. Meeting the needs of older children, and
5. Digital divide.

These insights are supported with some examples from research available about the practices in OSHC services and the reflections on discussions raised in the draft report from the Productivity Commission.

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3.1 A community-neighbourhood of childhood

Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships between children; between children and adults; and amongst adults provide the foundation upon which the community in school age care settings is established (AGDE, 2023; Westoby, et al.). This is underpinned by advances in neuroscience which tells us the earlier we nurture children's minds and hearts, the better outcomes they will have for their future life trajectories (Perry & Jackson, 2014).

The opportunity that OSHC can offer children should not be missed; as it is a time when children can explore healthy relationships, try out their novel and creative ideas, and practice skills needed to become productive citizens. For example, many of the children stated their service was a place for playing with friends, having fun, freedom and choices of things to do in a safe place.

[At] OSHC, you get to interact with people more than school.

Here we learn by trying out different things.

We get to play more and... Because in school time we've got two breaks, recess and lunch, and we only get to play 40 and 30 minutes. But at OSHC we've got a lot of resources, we get to choose what we like to do, like building, arts and crafts, or even just playing.

It was also noted that to build trusting relationships with children and between children it was expected that there is consistency of the workforce. This helped children feel safe to be themselves in the space they shared with adults and other children. They wanted educators who knew them – what they like to eat, what they like to do, and would take time to talk to them.

They plan activities. They look after us. They are like our guardians.

The educators help me to calm down, but the teachers just tell me to stop!

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Play and playing

Play is a crucial element in a child's development and well-being. The world of today and the future is interconnected, reminding us that children require new skill sets as they grow and develop. Having fun lights up our brains as emotions are integral to the neural networks responsible for learning (Zosh, et al., 2017).

The joy one feels during play is part of the brain's reward system which is linked to memory, attention, mental shifting, creativity and motivation. Therefore, healthy growth and development requires play experiences for children to develop creative thinking skills and positive relational experiences necessary to navigate their world now and in the future.

A consistent comment made by the children in this project suggests that play at OSHC is highly valued by them.

You learn at school, you play at OSHC.

OSHC is funner, because you don't have to work and stuff.

More freedom.

You don't work as much in OSHC, you just have fun.



Figure 6: Educator qualities, Child - 8 years and Child - 6 years

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Friendships

Friendships were reported by the children as a very important element for how they felt about being at OSHC. Developing friendships is a very important part of a child's development during their primary years.

That I'm able to hang out with my friends, even if they're from other schools.

Feels emotional if friends are not here.

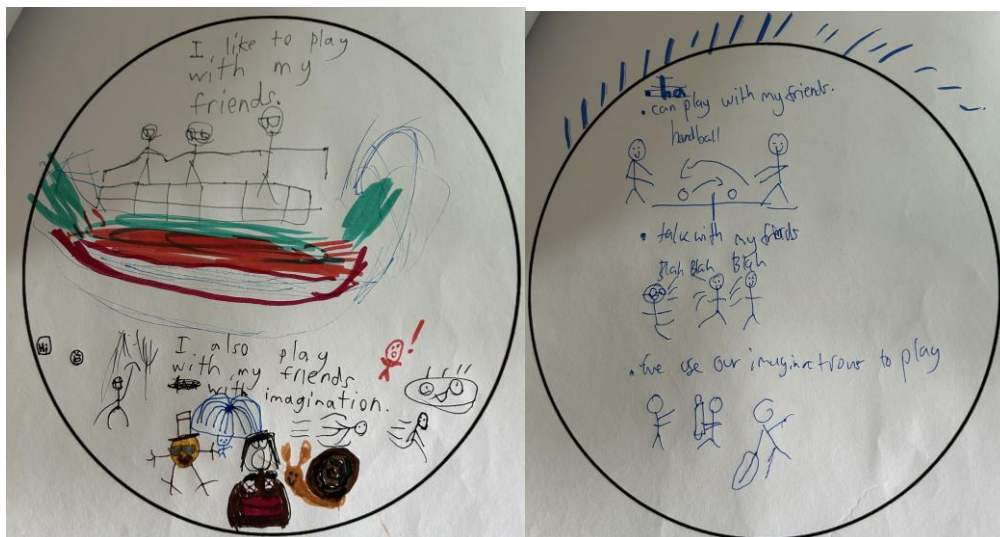


Figure 7: Playing with friends

OSHC services extend beyond a service to families simply to hold their children while they are working. It is where childhoods are lived. OSHC services should be legitimised as supporting children's growth and development. The following points need to be embedded into policy that describes and regulate the delivery of OSHC services.

- The right to play and leisure are significant to building social capital, agency and resilience of children to take their place in the community. The children illuminated that OSHC is not a waiting space between home and school rather it is a space of childhood being lived with rich opportunities for social connections through friendships; relaxation and learning and mastering all kinds of skills and knowledge.
- Connecting play opportunities with education is essential if we want primary school aged children to have the freedom to connect learned concepts in their world. During play children can apply what they know in different situations, creating new ideas and problem-solving techniques in a collaborative and joyful way.
- A focus on neuroscience on how children's development, learning and wellbeing are missing in education policy and in educational content for preparing the workforce to work with children in middle childhood. Even though it informs the most important work for preparing children for a rapidly changing society.

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3.2 Expectations of quality

Children expected that the services they attended would be in their best interests. The quality of physical space and the pedagogical practices of the workforce should place children's interests at the forefront of the decision making of policy makers and management of services.

A critical practice within OSHC services is the right of children to access opportunities to make choices. The importance of decision making associated with making choices should not be underestimated as it is critical to children's holistic growth. Having the opportunities to make choices supports children to initiate and sustain social relationships and manage risks. Choice making opportunities were noted in the provision of meals and other activities both indoors and outdoors.

Choices of Food

Food was a highlight from the children's perspectives in before, after and vacation care. There were opportunities to have autonomy serving meals such as breakfast. Children appreciated the efforts of those who prepared the meals to make food that was enjoyed by the children. Choice was mentioned in relation to food. Children spoke highly of the food platters were there were choices to be made in contrast to a serving of spaghetti bolognese.



Figure 8: Afternoon tea choices - Spinach and cheese sausage rolls and the fruit platter

Choices of Activities

Playing in a safe space encourages the self-confidence needed to explore and experiment, and for taking risks. Giving children opportunities to direct their own play activities and to learn through trial and error helps children learn and understand more about the world around them (Zosh, et al., 2017). Providing children with opportunities to plan their environment shows a level of trust not always given to them in other environments or situations. This level of participation engages the brain's networks related to listening to others' perspectives, open communication and negotiation.

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Furthermore, during middle childhood, some children will be experiencing physiological changes that increase their need for novelty and risk-taking. Therefore, if children are given these kinds of opportunities in a supportive environment there may be less need for children to participate in more dangerous risk-taking as they grow.

As researchers we were given insight into how several ADHD children experience the difference between OSHC and school. Their comments were similar:

As I was going to say to what is the difference between the educators and the teachers - we don't have to learn to sit down and focus on one thing.

I have to sit and focus in class and I have ADHD. It is much easier at OSHC.

In OSHC it's a lot easier to focus on everything at once. (Child – 4 days attendance – 11 years)

*The educators help me to calm down, but the teachers just tell me to stop!
Sometimes I get a little bored because I do the same thing over and over.*

In the services the researchers visited there were different levels of opportunities for children to make choices in the activities and spaces provided to them. It was noted that when children were able to make more choices they reported a more positive experience in the service.

The children also noted that OSHC programs had opportunities to offer more choices compared to school. However, in one site there was only a choice of four activities (pack up pack down service) and children commented unfavourably (Field note from researcher). Making choices is a form of decision making which is critical to health neural development.

At our service the educators take suggestions every week or every two weeks or so, and then they input that into their schedule.

In morning OSHC, sometimes we get to make our own breakfast and eat breakfast".

The opportunities to make choices is important to children's holistic development.



Figure 9: Lots of choice

Children's capacity to choose spaces or activities of interest increased their engagement and overall wellbeing (see Figure 10: Lots of choice). Children were interested in activities that had a creative element such as Lego. Outdoor activities were high on the list.

Older children reported comparisons with other services that they had attended, or reported changes they had noticed when the service provider changed. More opportunities for choices in the programs meant that children were happier and trusted that educators cared about their interests and needs. This state of positivity about attending OSHC services flows into family wellbeing. There is the potential that parents can engage in their places of work more effectively when they are confident their children feel safe and happy.

Having fun. I think that's important 'cause before there wasn't really as popular, but as more students came, I think it got engaging and I think it's really important for people to have fun, especially when there's a lot of people around you. (Child -11 years)

This was not the case in all sites.

Key Points for Consideration

- Regular opportunities for collaboration between the OSHC and the host site is essential to provide opportunities to develop understandings about the responsibilities of delivering an OSHC service particularly about the configuration of the physical environment. A collaborative relationship would support with actions to ensure the quality of the program and children's safety is not compromised.

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Cultural responsiveness

At one of the sites children participated in an immersion language and cultural program. One child drew the walnuts that the educator had provided to tell the children about ‘Bureom’ (See Figure 10: Bureom). “Bureom” is a Korean tradition to ‘test your strength’.

At another site grandparents had been invited to participate in an intergenerational program during the holidays. The educators translated between the children and the grandparents discussing childhood experiences. This service offered only vegetarian food to meet the requests of the parent community (Researcher fieldnotes, 24/01/24).



Figure 10: The activity with walnuts, Child – 5 years (Saturday attendance)

Relationships with Educators

Children’s learning and development in the middle years is a partnership between home, school and outside school hours care. Qualified staff are more likely to be able to demonstrate a high level of child development knowledge, high level of observation skills, capacity to use playwork practice strategies and work with intentionality. Ishimine (2011) reported that staff knowledge and dedication was crucial to quality practices associated with nurturing children’s development. Highly qualified educators are more likely to be able to navigate the complex, relational and dynamic settings such as those of OSHC services (Jinnah-Ghelain & Stoneman, 2009; Sumsion, Harrison & Stapleton, 2018).

Children’s image of OSHC services was a place where they felt safe and had autonomy to make choices and decisions about what they did, who they did it with and when they could do it. This was a place where they wanted opportunities to display their competence and autonomy. Even if adults make provisions and structure the environment, children crafted the opportunities as much as they could to make them their initiatives. The children had expectations that this was their place to play.

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Older children's discontent had to do with their growing sense of responsibility to manage their own lives. Children had expectations about 'freedom'. Even though it was in an institutional setting, children created opportunities for themselves so they felt they had some control over what they were doing. These older children were aware of what their peers did after school if they did not attend an afterschool service but rather spent time at home, in their neighbourhood or sporting clubs and other leisure pursuits. The older children had expectations they could partake in similar opportunities.



Figure 11: Characteristics of educators, Child -11 years (4 days attendance)

Some children commented on the employment status of the educators. Hogleung, Klinge & Hosan (2015) noted that to reduce staff turnover and burnout it was important to have a team of suitable qualified professionals working together to program activities for children.

Being a educator is a part-time job before they get a real job. ...The educators leave us - and betray us (10 years)

"There's lots of new ones". "A lot. "

Children desired consistent connections with adults. Some children liked to have the teacher aides also work at OSHC. They also said that sometimes they saw the teachers and educators talking to each other, indicating that children were conscious of the system of support that wraps around their wellbeing and learning. During the site visits the researchers noted the tensions for educators. One site had to reduce numbers as they could not recruit educators to staff the services.

The Coordinator is based interstate and we will reduce our capacity by one third
(Researcher fieldnotes)

REPORT: [MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: CONSULTING WITH CHILDREN \(GU ETHICS 2023/924\)](#)

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In areas that struggle with recruitment and retaining staff, a greater collaboration between school and OSHC service may create positions of employment that are more attractive with longer hours of work. This arrangement would also foster the positive relationships between children and educators and create a stronger conduit between home, OSHC and School.

Key Points for Consideration

- Ensure that high quality standards are available, Reflective of children 5-12 years.
- Providing opportunities and resources to support the collaboration between OSHC management and service leaders with school principals and administrators is essential. Increasing opportunities for school principals, key personnel in schools, OSHC service leaders to have a deeper awareness of the Australian School Age Care Framework (curriculum guidelines for a quality program in OSHC) would strengthen collaborative actions.

3.3 Effective use of the physical environments



Figure 12: Outdoor environment – the ropes; Indoor environment – quiet reading space

Effective use of physical space in OSHC services is contingent on the age and interests of the children. OSHC services need to have facilities that have ease of access to maximise the choices of activities that children can select as part of a quality program. The physical space of OSHC services contributes to children’s behaviours and subsequent psychosocial and psychomotor development of children (Redmond, et al., 2016). OSHC services with a larger range of choices of spaces signifying a higher quality program.

I wish we could go to the library.

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Children reported on places where they could be very active both indoors and outdoor. Equally they favoured place for rest and relaxation both indoors and outdoors (See Figures 13 & 14).

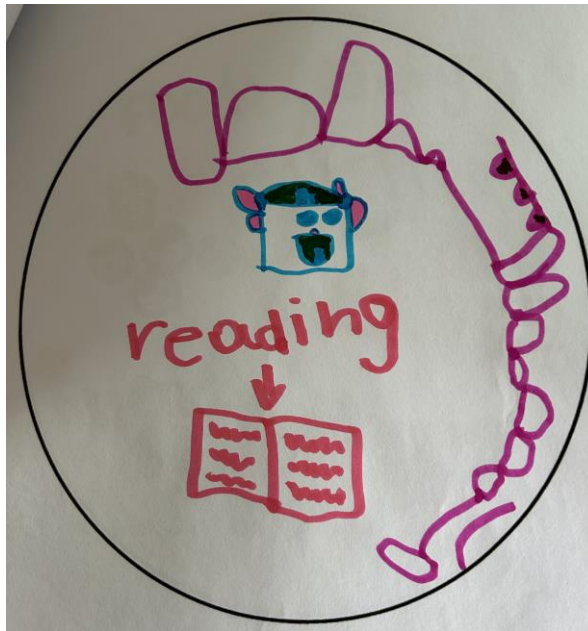


Figure 13: The reading nook

Some children were concerned about not being able to play in certain areas. The indoor areas that were approved areas limited the number of children that could participate in activities at any one time (Researcher fieldnotes). Large open indoor spaces were divided by flexible room dividers to create smaller more intimate spaces where children were able to play in small groups.

Children expressed a desire for large indoor spaces that can also be used for active pursuits when the climate is not suitable for outdoor play and leisure pursuits. This was noted at five of the sites where children knew there were parts of the school that were vacant during the holidays or after school and were questioning why the space was not available to them. Researchers also noted the climatic conditions, particularly as this research was undertaken during the summer vacation and commencement of the school year. The configuration of the spaces available were not conducive to quality programs.

I wish we could use the school hall (10year old)

Sometimes there is not enough educators so we can use parts of the school.

We used to use the computer room but we were banned by the new principal.

(11 year old)

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Observations in all settings found that older children utilise indoor and outdoor spaces in different ways to very young children. Older children report that sometimes OSHC settings do not support challenging play experiences (Hurst, 2015). There needs to be variety in the access to space so that older children can utilise different environments to support interests and provide challenge when required. The physical requirements for space are contingent on a range of conditions including the program of activities, climate, and available venues. OSHC programs are recreationally focused, requiring adequate space for children to engage in a range of active play, quiet play and relaxation activities.



Figure 14: Outdoor activities – hanging out under the trees, playing soccer Children – 5 years

Generally, school sites are used as venues for OSHC services, in Australia and internationally. The diversity of the service users, as well as the complexity of the venues that are used for OSHC services contribute to the multiple factors that influence the configuration of the space requirements.

During the consultations it was noted that children have a preference for outdoor activities in after-school programs. The outdoor environments provide many opportunities for physical movement, which is critical to ensure positive health outcomes and positive wellbeing (Cleveland, Newton & Bower, 2018; Hinkson et al., 2016). The outdoor spaces appeared to be more flexible and able to provide children with choices for small and large gatherings. The opportunity to move freely between outdoor and indoor environments contrasted to the school experience. Tanic, Nikolic, et al., (2015) recommend that the physical environment for school age children needs to be organised to ensure a smooth transition between activities.

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Six sites had management for the service that was located interstate (Researcher fieldnotes). In these services the educators felt removed from the decision making about the organisation of the context for the host site. This can lead to poor quality spaces and pedagogical practice as educators are unable to use the environment as the ‘third teacher’. Children feel less comfortable, without agency, bored, and have a reduced range of activities and subsequently children are less likely to attend. Children made comparisons between services and between providers based on their experiences. The space, structure, size and mobility, and flexibility of the space should allow for the realisation of pedagogical process that support the interests of the children. The relationship between the school principal and the OSHC management and leadership team appears to be a critical factor in the negotiation for space.

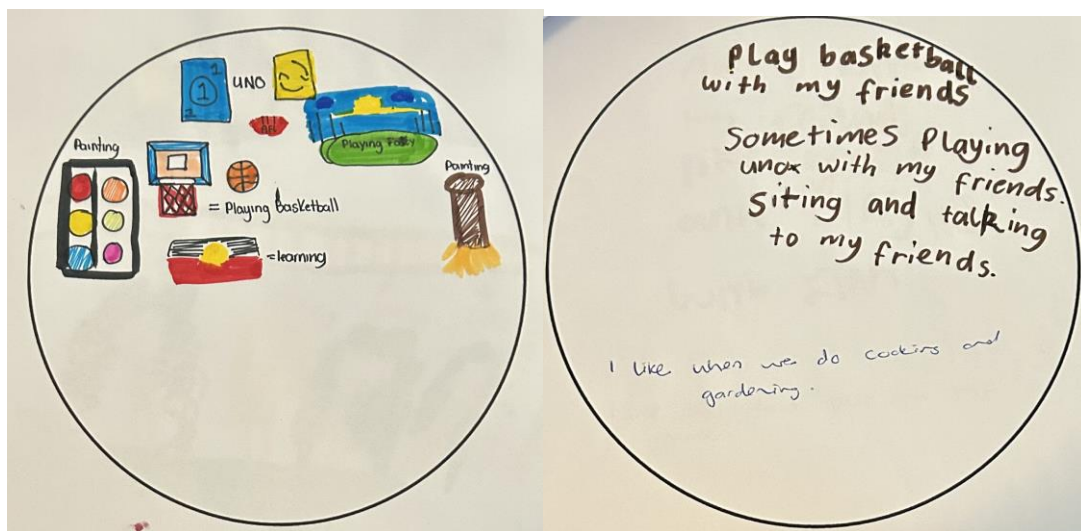


Figure 15: Diversity of opportunities

Key Points for Consideration

- The concept of an OSHC service precinct on school sites would support easy transition between locations used on school sites and is linked to quality practice. Planning of precincts should be prioritised for all school sites, particularly when planning new builds. Rethinking the use of physical space in schools for OSHC services is highlighted in the reports - *The Next Generation of Australian Schools* (Cleveland et al., 2018); *Space to Grow* (Scottish Government, 2017, 2024 (revised)).
- Making sure that the venues provided for OSHC services have appropriate air conditioning or large shade areas or effective ventilation to make sure that children and staff are comfortable in all climatic conditions.
- Workforce with qualifications for understanding how children develop.

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3.4 Meeting the needs of older children

Older children communicated that OSHC was not always a desirable place for them, and that they sometimes experienced boredom and a lack of friends. Their contributions reflect much of what is already known about children aged 9 to 12 years in OSHC. Older children are a minority in OSHC with few same-age peers. OSHC is also a place that can privilege the needs of younger children, and lack challenging, age-appropriate experiences (Hurst, 2015). If settings catered better for older children, it would likely improve their participation levels and perceptions of OSHC.

If we could go online we could chat to our friends who have gone home.

I would like there it be more things for older children because most of the time it is boring.

More things for older children to do eg orienteering, sports for a week.

Little kids are happy the older children get bored.

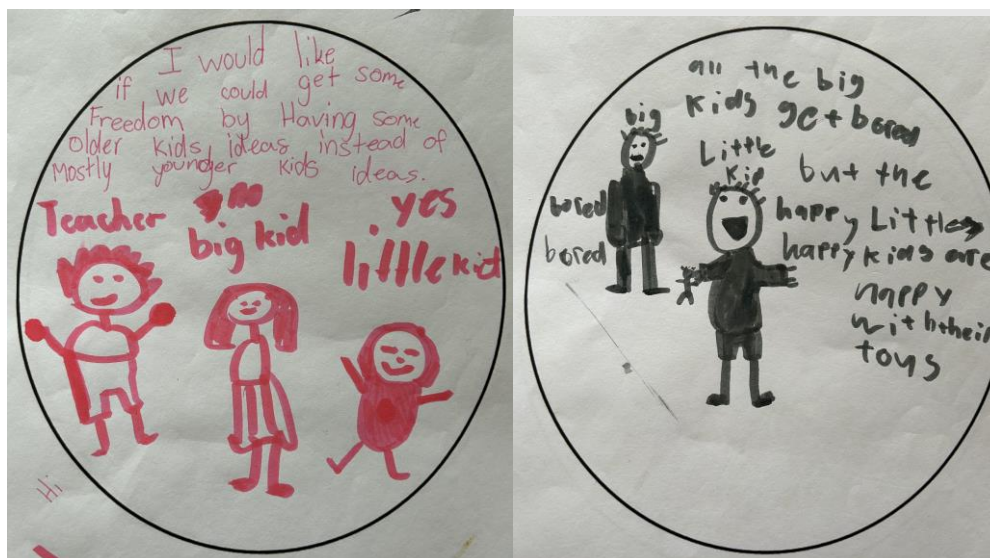


Figure 16: Perceived relationships between older and young children, Child – 8 years (5 days attendance) and Child - 11years (5 days attendance)

What I like and don't like: I like OSHC because we get the freedom to play outside but they don't have as many interesting activities for older students. (Child – 10 years)

What can improve: More activities; more programs I can do – footy, cricket, running; make sure no one like younger kids interfere without alone time! (Child – 11 years)

Key Points for Consideration

- The education and professional learning of educators in OSHC services needs to include knowledge and skills for working simultaneously with multi-age groups of children.
- OSHC educators need to develop skills and feel confident supporting the more challenging play experiences required by older children.
- Older children have different needs than children aged 5-8 years. A focus on play that is physically and cognitively challenging, life skills, equipping older children with capabilities and support in areas not offered through the school curriculum or home are some of the things they require.
- The design of spaces for OSHC services need to be flexible to facilitate the gathering of children in small or large groups. Flexible furniture for OSHC services needs to accommodate the physical size of school age children and their interests. Strategic use of furniture can increase the flexibility of the available space in an OSHC service.
- Digital and visual media needs to reflect the broad ages of children who attend OSHC. Spaces need to be flexible to support older children to access age-appropriate media.

3.5 Digital divide

Programming in OSHC services needs to consider what is required from children adapting to a society where digital media is part of children's everyday experiences (Wallner & Jansson, 2024). Children communicated that greater access to digital media would improve their time in OSHC. This was particularly the case for older children.

There are significant barriers to providing digital media in OSHC. Adult attitudes are often characterised by moral panic and discourses of innocence and vulnerability that overstate the risks posed by digital play. Adults are more open to digital engagement that is perceived to have educational benefit rather than as a form of leisure. However, digital play can also be a rich site of social engagement (Mavoa, Gibbs & Carter, 2017). Some children were frustrated that they had access to devices during the school day for educational use but not for play at OSHC. Others valued the fact that their OSHC supported digital play.

At OSHC we can play computer games but at school we can't

Well I mean you can do homework on your laptop.... with a homework pass from the teacher.

Electronics are so important because they help as well they're very fun and after you play board games for a while, sometimes it gets a bit boring after you play over and over again. And then with video games, it's really fun, basically you don't really get bored with it.

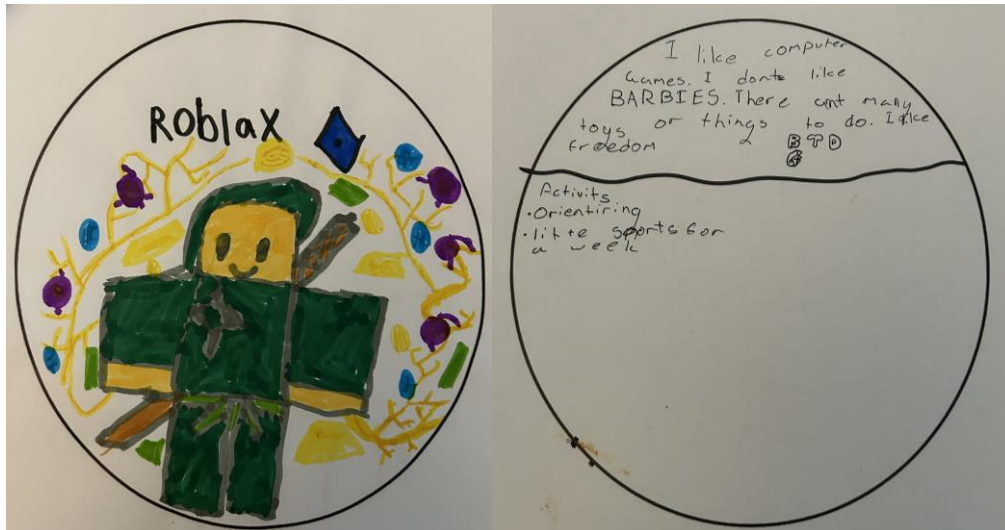


Figure 17: Digital technology preferences, Child – 5 years and Child 11- years

At two sites the children told the researchers that the digital policy was decided by parents. This positions educators as gatekeepers acting on behalf of parents whilst marginalising the perspectives of children. Many of the children possessed fine-grained knowledge of digital media and the possibilities it offers.

You should be here on electronics day I find it actually gives me a chance to relax and play something. I actually want to be playing games connecting on the computer, but the parents complained so we don't usually do it. (Child – 10 years)

Child: More free time on the computer. Just add five more minutes.

Educator: Your parents want us to cut computers all together.

Child: Just add five more minutes, and then we're okay. Just 20 minutes. The average human is allowed to be on a computer. It's the two hours limit. The average human is allowed to take in two hours of technology. 20 minutes of two hours is less than when your own device. 200 hours. And also, brand new technology, like a Nintendo Switch, or- the Wii. ...Wiis and tennis were extended. Except for Wii Sports. I have a PS4 with the Crash Bandicoot ...

Key Points for Consideration

- The education and professional learning of educators in OSHC services needs to support positive attitudes to digital play and equip educators to be able to make informed decisions about including the breadth of digital technologies in the program that have synergy between the child's worlds. Children in OSHC are deserving of opportunities that are for 'now' and for the future.
- Children have detailed knowledge about digital play and should be seen as partners who can support educators to make informed decisions about inclusion in program.
- Collaborative digital play has great potential for older children in OSHC whose same-age peers are often in other locations. Older children can build and maintain friendships in online spaces.

4. Limitations

4.1 One visit

The participatory research process is associated with building collaborative relationships with children and young people in the OSHC services. One limitation to this research process is trying to make generalisations from one visit to sites. The research team met on a regular basis to discuss and reflect on insights and discussed fieldnotes in conjunction with transcriptions and children's drawings in order to construct perspectives.

In addition, even though the research methodology was designed with the principles of collaboration in mind, this was sometimes difficult for children as they were aware of the researcher position and this may have led to preconceived ideas of authority which at times may have made it difficult to engage openly or in the desired manner. Reasons for these preconceived ideas can be linked to two key considerations. Firstly, children may see the researcher as an 'expert'. Secondly, the children may not have had any past experiences where the 'adult' is a fellow collaborator, and this may have caused the children to provide answers and comments based on what they think the researcher wants to hear.

This being acknowledged, the children were observed to have answered candidly and were forthcoming in their expression of thoughts around the conversations in which they engaged. However, the inclusion of inviting the children to represent their thoughts and feelings as the talking circles progressed, certainly built a quick avenue for authentic feelings from the children.

This project was limited to one visit to each of the fifteen school age care sites, and two talking circles being conducted at each site. This limits the ability to re-engage with the children. This has meant only one cycle of data collection was possible limiting being able to look more deeply at defining the narrative. The extrapolation of findings is therefore specific to the participants engaged in this research but nevertheless contribute to postulating useful ways in determining policy reforms moving forward for school age care services across Australia.

4.2 Limitations of the project related to homeschooling cohort

The research team recognise that they were not able to engage with children who did not go to OSHC services. There are children who do not go to school and subsequently unable to access OSHC services. Across Australia, homeschooling is experiencing a significant rise, with the number of children being homeschooled doubling since the Covid-19 pandemic (Cassidy, 2023). Official statistics put the number of homeschooling children across Australia at over 40 000, however, the actual number is likely much higher than this as many parents choose not to register their homeschooled children (English, 2023).

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State/territory	2019	2022	2023	Percentage change 2019-2023
QLD	3,411	8,461	10,048	195%
WA	3,720	6,151	6,466	73%
VIC	6,072	11,332	10,481	72%
NT	124	206	189	52%
SA	1,360	2,443	2,443	79%
NSW	5,906	12,359	12,359	110%
ACT	305	415	465	52%
TAS	1,068	1,303	1,441	35%
AUS	21,966	42,670	43,892	100%

Table 2: Home schooling in Australia. *NSW and SA data as of 31 December 2022.

Source: Cassidy, 2023.

There are a multitude of reasons why parents may choose to homeschool their children, including:

- School bullying
- School refusal
- Mental health challenges of the child
- Children with disabilities whose needs are not met in mainstream schooling
- Overcrowding in classrooms
- Religious reasons (Chapman, 2021)
- Inability to attend an OSHC service based on disability

Data from Queensland found that two in three registered homeschooled children in the state have a disability (Queensland Government, 2022), compared to 1 in 10 students in mainstream schooling (AIHW, 2022). This is driven by the poor experiences of children with disabilities in mainstream schooling environments (Locke, 2017). Although there is no data available, it is thought that homeschooled children are unlikely to attend OSHC. As a result, the homeschooling cohort of children will not be included in this research and as a result, the data gathered will not be representative of the full educational spectrum for Australian children.

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4.3 Limitations of the project related to children who are not registered for school and subsequently OSHC services

Not all school-aged children have similar experiences. Some children may have been exposed to early adverse experiences come to school with high levels of risk factors and very few protective factors. The onset of developmental trauma is often seen as problematic behaviour in schools which can often lead to interrupted education or school exclusion for this cohort of children. In Queensland alone there was 571,550 exclusions in 2022(<https://qed.qld.gov.au/our-publications/reports/statistics/Documents/sda-by-region.pdf>). Indicating a real need for change in supporting our most vulnerable young citizens.

Studies on substance misuse and exposure to the youth justice system in primary school aged children and adolescents indicate that children experiencing vulnerabilities can experience positive change through community methods that help them to develop a positive identity and a sense of belonging and connection (Casley, et al., 2022; Tyson, et al., 2023). For example, a study conducted by (Casley & Tilbury, 2020) found the function and maintenance of anti-social behaviour and drug misuse was seen to be due to the life experiences of children and young people, which included family dysfunction, child removal and expulsion and/or disengagement from school. As a result, children and young people used substances to escape from their lack of social connectedness, disadvantage, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

Many of the children and young people interviewed in this project spoke of their need for a safe place, having something to do to occupy their time and someone to support them to keep them on track. They wanted opportunities to attend programs for play, education, training, and cultural activities. However, opportunities to attend programs that are protective by nature are limited. Outside School Hour Care is a missed opportunity for vulnerable children and their rights to safety, play and education.



5. Concluding Remarks

OSHC services are a complex identity. On the surface they appear as a physical and social space to hold children waiting for their parents. They are simultaneously a place for children to have time for play and leisure, and they are a community. It is micro community where children can participate as a citizen. OSHC services perform a dual function for children and families, they provide peace of mind for parents who work long hours, yet far exceed the role of child care.

OSHC services provide a safe and enriching environment that has the capacity to honour children as equal participants and decision makers within their own community, facilitating the development of resilience, agency and social skills during key developmental periods. A significant investment of energy is required to develop and expand the knowledge base about the specific needs of school age children and OSHC services and cultivate alliances that promote the significant responsibilities of the sector to children, their families and society. The OSHC services sector is required to effectively operate within a system of diverse stakeholders most importantly the children who attend services each week and during vacation care.

The terminology used to describe services before and after school and during vacations is more than 'care'. Children spoke about how they valued 'care', however their expectations is that it should be so much more. There is a need to acknowledge the significance of the opportunities that can be provided by an OSHC program to children's wellbeing, learning and development.

OSHC programs may have begun as a service to help parents stay at work. However they have the potential to bolster children's development and learning through mentorship, a safe place to learn and play, belonging to a nurturing environment. These programs offer a holistic approach to child development, addressing social, emotional and behavioral aspects. Educators in OSHC programs provide invaluable guidance, instilling values of perseverance, resilience and self-confidence.

The OSHC programs provide opportunities to have a sense of friendship with peers in a nurturing environment outside the classroom. It should be noted that sometimes the children with the greatest needs feel most acutely the impact of not being able to participate in OSHC programs as they miss out on opportunities that could support their learning and development and future opportunities (Cartmel & Hurst, 2021; Englis, et al., 2024).

OSHC services are sites where children develop social skills and a sense of citizenship. Whilst those skills are important to the 'now', they are also important to the future of the community. Children who feel secure and have a sense of wellbeing are more likely to be resilient and to cope with day-to-day stress and challenges. These strengths of these personal qualities build

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perseverance and persistence and ensure that children and young people can effectively sustain their roles and responsibilities as future citizens.

Post Covid research found that children who were schooled through a computer screen and have fallen behind in significant areas of learning and socialization.

Services need to ensure that they are meeting the high expectation of children and the community. In general, the seven elements of the National Quality Framework apply to ensure the fidelity of programs offered to children. However, some of the practices encapsulated by the descriptors of the framework will look different to those offered to children aged birth to five. It is important to create policy that differentiates between the services for children birth to 5 and 5 to 12 years.

We can't do random stuff at school.

We are happy at OSHC if we weren't happy, we might not learn or play

6. Appendix

6.1 Appendix 1 – Summary of Key Insights and Points for Consideration

Key Insights	Points for Consideration
A community-neighbourhood of childhood	<p>The right to play and leisure are significant to building social capital, agency and resilience of children to take their place in the community. The children illuminated that OSHC is not a waiting space between home and school rather it is a space of childhood being lived with rich opportunities for social connections through friendships; relaxation and learning and mastering all kinds of skills and knowledge.</p>
	<p>Connecting play opportunities with education is essential if we want primary school aged children to have the freedom to connect learned concepts in their world. During play children can apply what they know in different situations, creating new ideas and problem-solving techniques in a collaborative and joyful way.</p>
	<p>A focus on neuroscience on how children’s development, learning and wellbeing are missing in education policy and in educational content for preparing the workforce to work with children in middle childhood. Even though it informs the most important work for preparing children for a rapidly changing society.</p>
Expectations of Quality	<p>Regular opportunities for collaboration between the OSHC and the host site is essential to provide opportunities to develop understandings about the responsibilities of delivering an OSHC service particularly about the configuration of the physical environment. A collaborative relationship would support with actions to ensure the quality of the program and children’s safety is not compromised.</p>
	<p>Ensure that high quality standards are available, Reflective of children 5-12 years.</p>
	<p>Providing opportunities and resources to support the collaboration between OSHC management and service leaders with school principals and administrators is essential. Increasing opportunities for school principals, key personnel in schools, OSHC service leaders to have a deeper awareness of the Australian School Age Care Framework (curriculum guidelines for a quality program in OSHC) would strengthen collaborative actions.</p>

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Effective use of the physical environments	The concept of an OSHC service precinct on school sites would support easy transition between locations used on school sites and is linked to quality practice. Planning of precincts should be prioritised for all school sites, particularly when planning new builds. Rethinking the use of physical space in schools for OSHC services is highlighted in the reports - <i>The Next Generation of Australian Schools</i> (Cleveland et al., 2018); <i>Space to Grow</i> (Scottish Government, 2017, 2024 (revised)).
	Making sure that the venues provided for OSHC services have appropriate air conditioning or large shade areas or effective ventilation to make sure that children and staff are comfortable in all climatic conditions.
	Workforce with qualifications for understanding how children develop.
Meeting the needs of older children	The education and professional learning of educators in OSHC services needs to include knowledge and skills for working simultaneously with multi-age groups of children.
	OSHC educators need to develop skills and feel confident supporting the more challenging play experiences required by older children.
	Older children have different needs than children aged 5-8 years. A focus on play that is physically and cognitively challenging, life skills, equipping older children with capabilities and support in areas not offered through the school curriculum or home are some of the things they require.
	The design of spaces for OSHC services need to be flexible to facilitate the gathering of children in small or large groups. Flexible furniture for OSHC services needs to accommodate the physical size of school age children and their interests. Strategic use of furniture can increase the flexibility of the available space in an OSHC service.
	Digital and visual media needs to reflect the broad ages of children who attend OSHC. Spaces need to be flexible to support older children to access age-appropriate media.

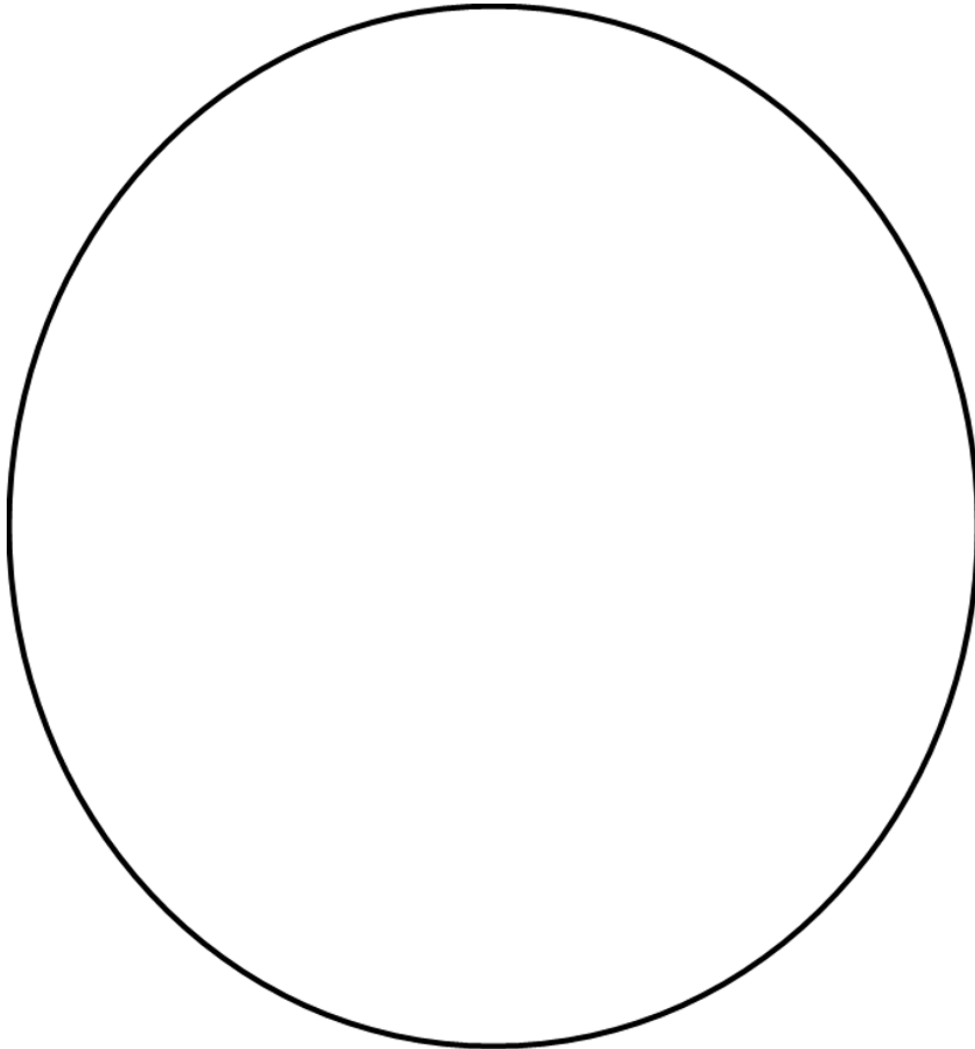
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Digital Divide	<p>The education and professional learning of educators in OSHC services needs to support positive attitudes to digital play and equip educators to be able to make informed decisions about including the breadth of digital technologies in the program that have synergy between the child's worlds. Children in OSHC are deserving of opportunities that are for 'now' and for the future.</p>
	<p>Children have detailed knowledge about digital play and should be seen as partners who can support educators to make informed decisions about inclusion in program.</p>
	<p>Collaborative digital play has great potential for older children in OSHC whose same-age peers are often in other locations. Older children can build and maintain friendships in online spaces.</p>

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6.2 Appendix 2 – the Circle Template

What do you experience in OSHC? What is important to you?



- Name:
 - Age:
 - Class:
 - Site:
 - Days of attendance:
-

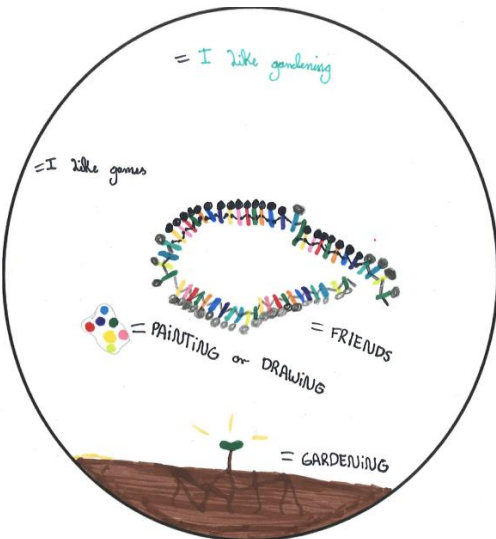
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6.3 Appendix 3 – Samples of children’s data

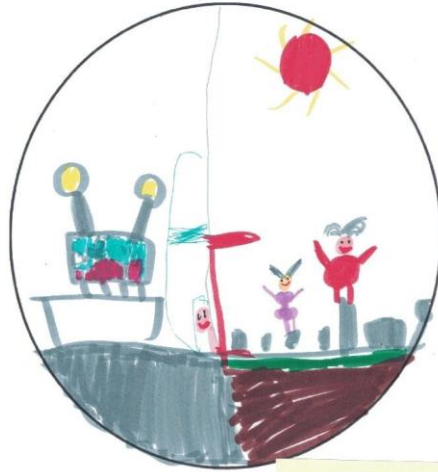
RELATIONSHIPS - FRIENDS



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I like to read books and playing with my friends.

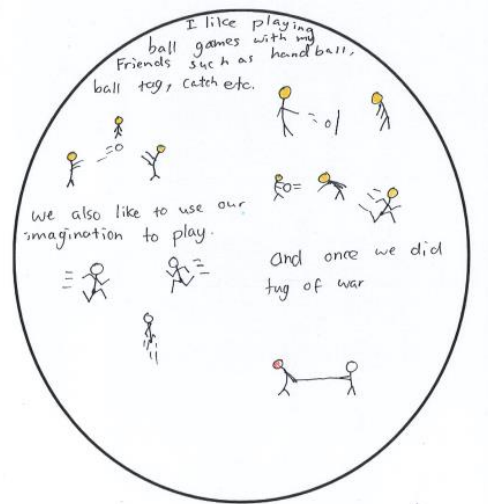
OSHC= is fun
I like to spend time with my friends.



OSHC
Being with my friend and having the time with my friends.

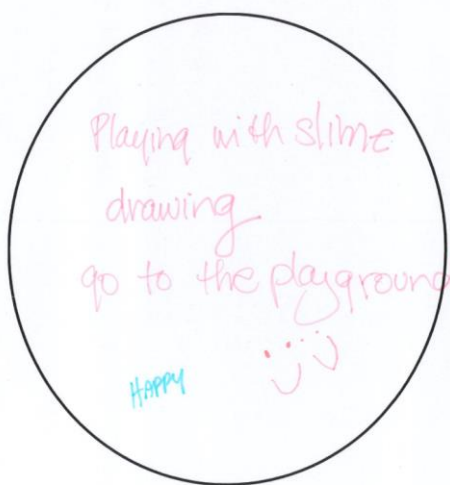


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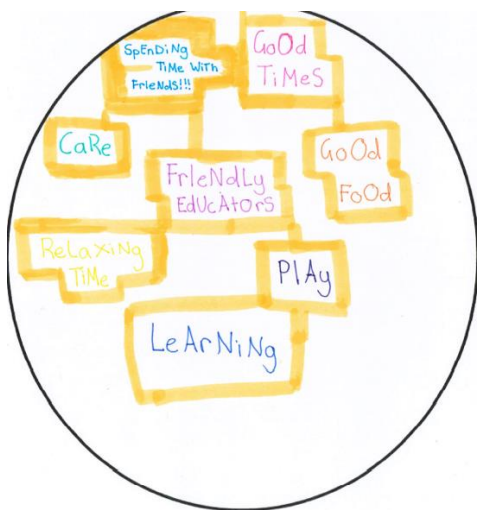


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ENVIRONMENT – outdoors and indoor



playing in baces
 * and doing gymnastics in the baces and hand stands against walls
 * and playing war with hockey sticks but we put rules on the war so we do not get hurt.
 * I also like playing on the monkey bars and practicing skip bars and jump bars.
 * I also like hanging with my friends and talking and hanging out with the educators.



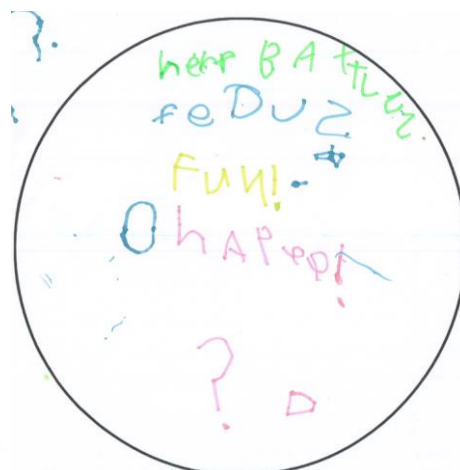
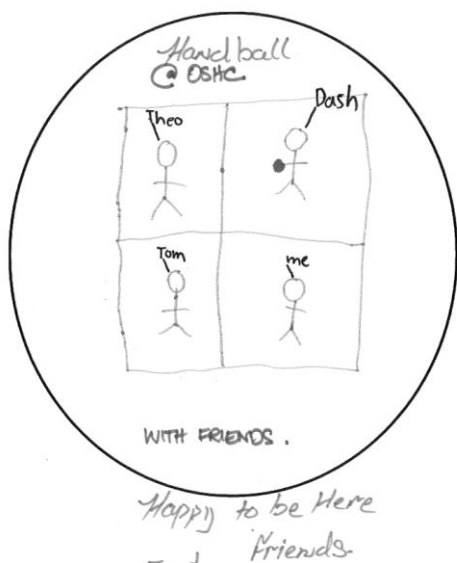
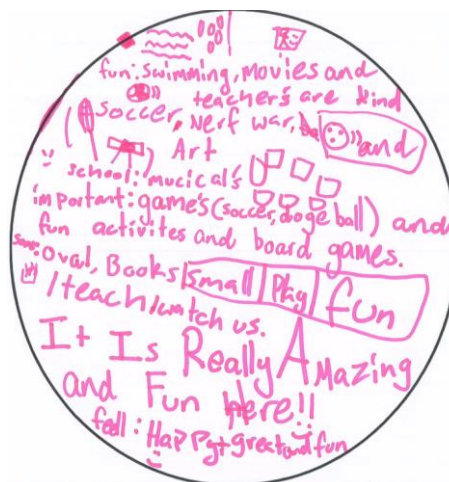
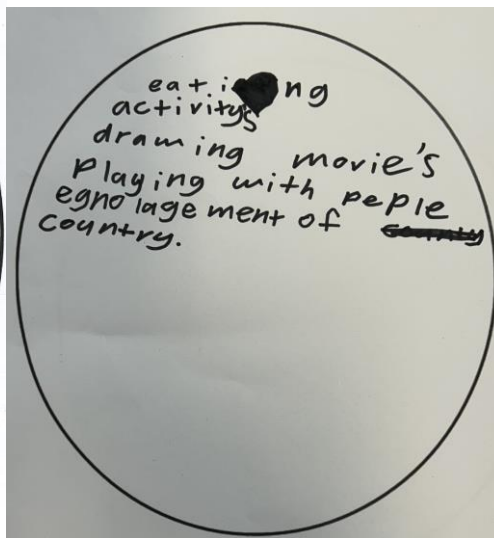
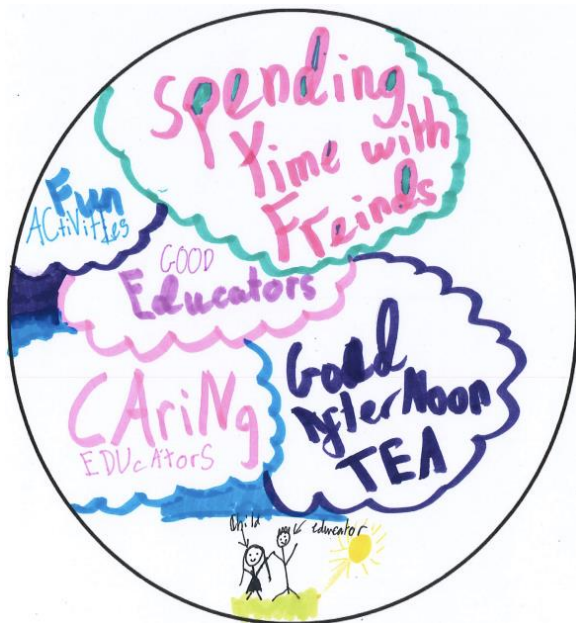
♥
 Food
 Educators
 Freedom
 Front plater
 Sand Pit
 ♥

Family
Being kind
Faithfulness
 I experience fun things in oshc such as playing, gardening, eating, ETC.

Respectfulness
Friends
resilience
nature

having no limit of play.
 • help mree mack food.
 • I like mooves.
 • fan acti f i s .
 • at cr a s s .
 • feet uss .
 • t e c h s e e .
 • it i s i t o v e r w e l m i n g
 • it n o t o v r o m i n g

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I like:
 The room for older kids
 The fun options
 The kind OSHC members
 The variety of fun days in holiday programs
 Could improve:
 Learning time in OSHC
 Fairness (not saying there unfair)
 More sport time in gym
 I don't like:
 Some kids who are over free time

We go on excursions and incursions we do lots of fun activities!

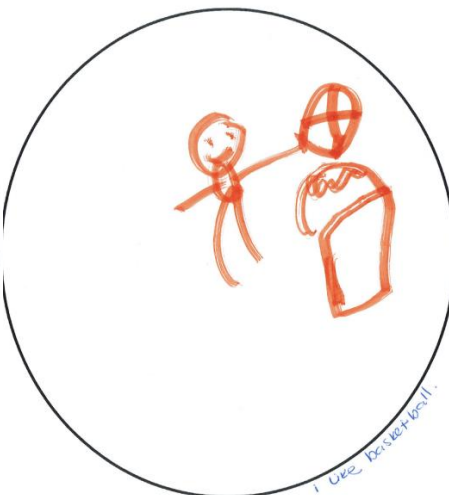
- I like to play with my friends that are girls
- I like reading and playing with the toys
- I like watching movies at osh sometimes
- I like kicking the footy

Sometimes I get bored

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ACTIVITIES



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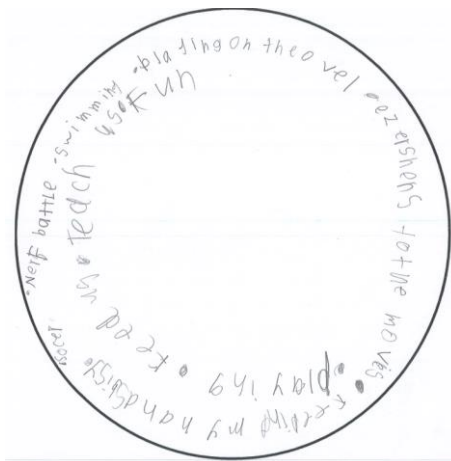
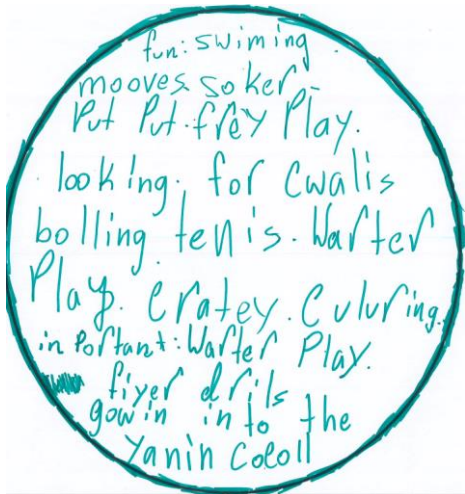


we play board games
 • urban xtreme
 • read
 • relaxing & fun

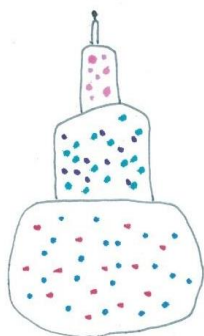


Cart, Whooing, making friends, TV, great food, I do not like
 on over I do like having friends. going in the hall Me
 feeding checks don't like being hard. Not having things to do.
 happy I do not like hady amon Sun Screen
 A going home when teachers take they are who

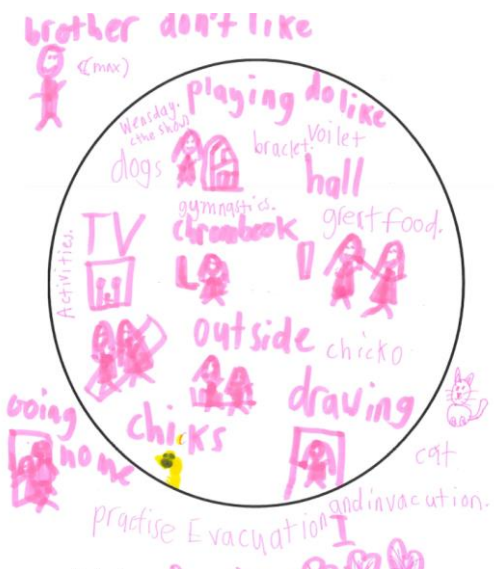
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Baking
cake's

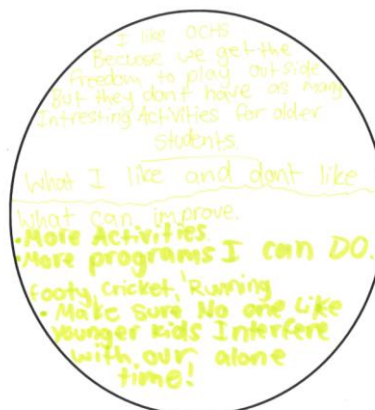
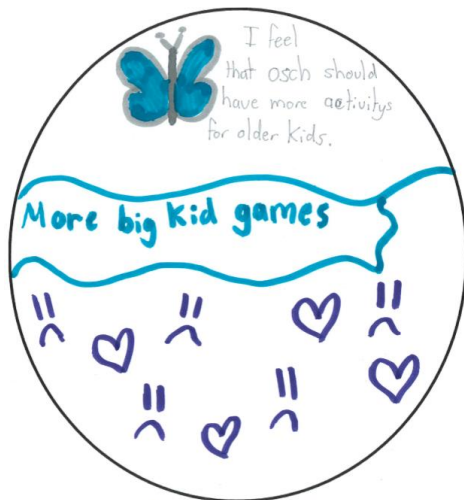
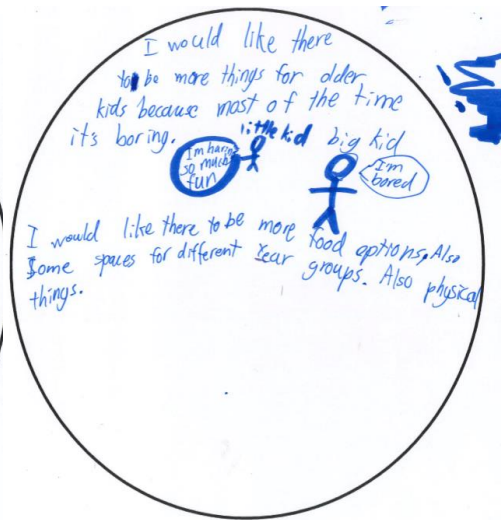
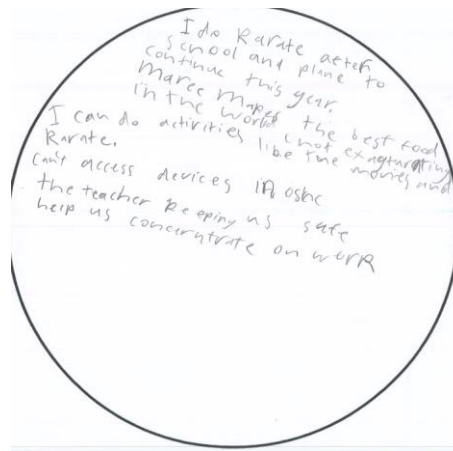
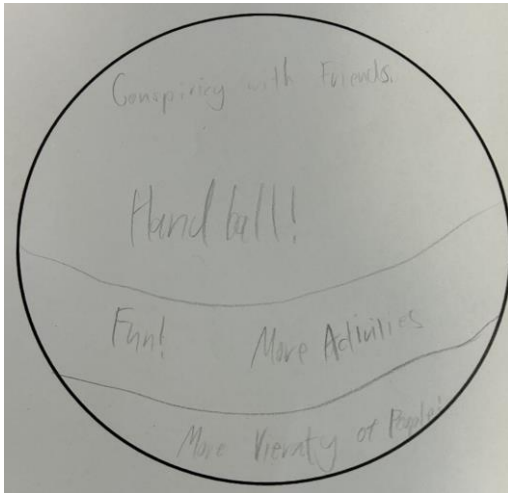


**cheese
cake**



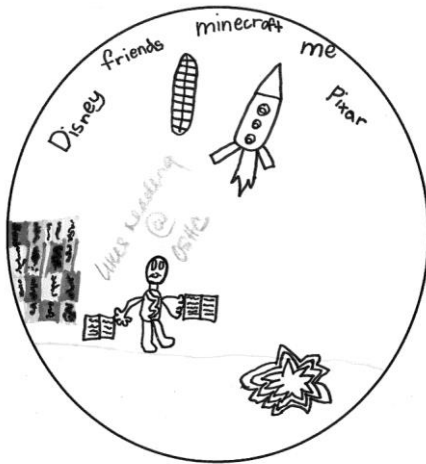
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OLDER CHILDREN



Be more stern on the little ones

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DIGITAL EXPERIENCES



we play on
the overland play
ground, much less
learning, we cant use
tech though, going
to bounce, water
the plant, water
me to ~~the~~ light

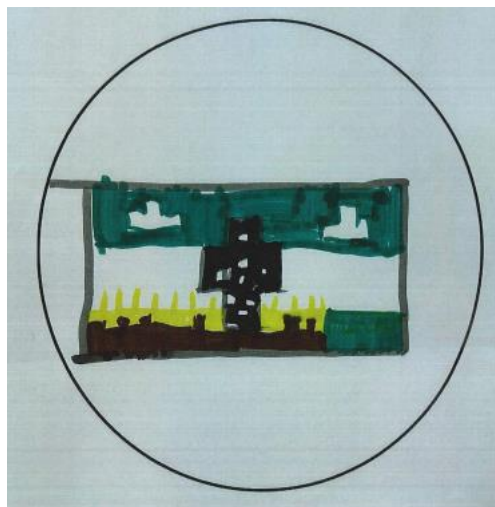
Something

Electronics
Outside playing
Soccer

Devices



Just dance
Mario Kart
Movie
excursions
ihursions
Collage

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DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OSHC AND SCHOOL

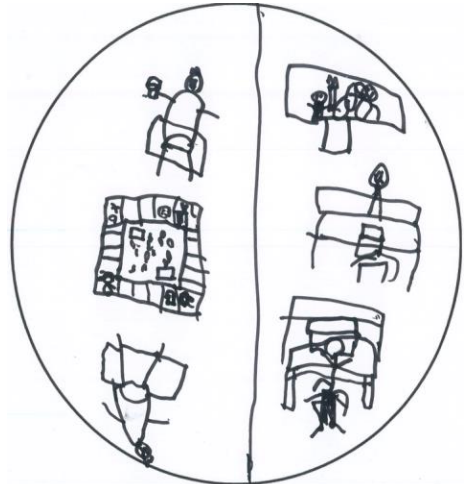
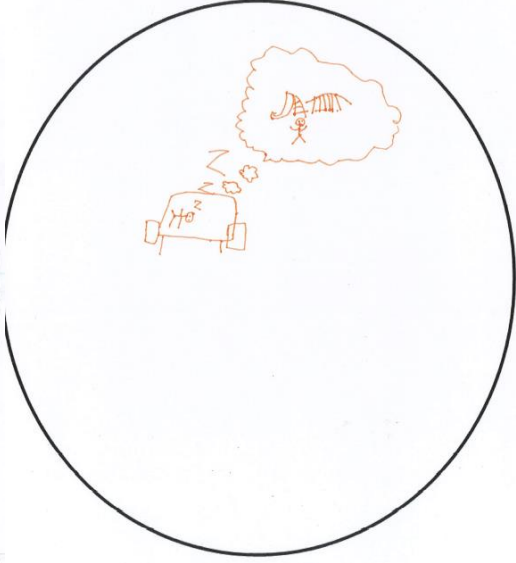
Y1_9years

Y8_6years

OSHC
 I do OSHC in the afternoon I like doing the activities and eating the afternoon tea which is in ~~the~~ seprate meals
 A diffrence between OSHC & school Oshc is that you can go on excursions. And the difference between school & OSHC school is when you have access to things like computers, Note books etc. some things that are the same are that we ~~are~~ all ways eat morning tea, Lunch and afternoon tea.



I do morning OSHC and afternoon OSHC so I get to do different things at different times. In morning OSHC I can cook and eat breakfast wich is always delicious. In afternoon OSHC I get to eat more delicious food and have great fun. In OSHC we get to have great food and fun as much as we do different activities every day. At school we don't get to interact as much but we can learn new thing have some fun screen time. In OSHC we cant do as many things as vacation care like the pool, putt putt, bounce and so much more. I wish in OSHC we could do swimming, dancing and making shirts. My teachers and OSHC carers look after me, make sure I'm ok and work hard.
 WE
 SCHOOL



we play in the oval. OSHC is just playtime. We cant go in classrooms or use tech. BOUNCE! kevin plays with us. He is fun. help from teachers. makes me feel happy. Fun. happy:

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what happens -> We get lots of fun and they let us go to the playground, oval and the library, bowling and Karate. And do lots of other things. my friend, teacher, eating having lots of energy and lots of fun.

what's important -> we usually do work in school but we have fun in oshc we watch movies, free dress learn, go to the class whenever you want.

what's the interesting -> swimming, movies, swimming, play games to a restaurant, horse riding, give us food (and school)

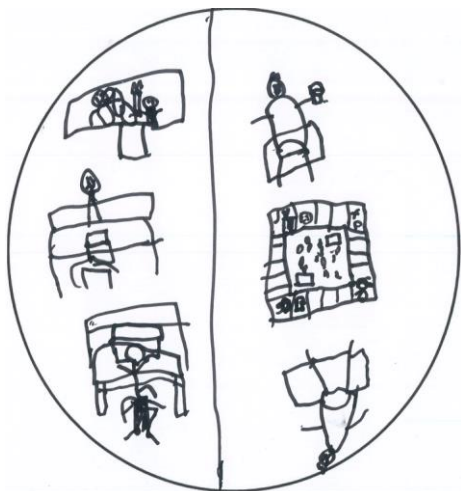
what can you do in oshc -> you can do anything you want at school the opposite of what you wish you could do in oshc

what's your favourite activity -> what is the important thing the teacher

We doht
heed to
Cwm to
oshc if
wee doht
woht to.

Sport
(Physical activiteis)
more tecknology
used in school than
in Oshc movies
a variety fun activiteis
Play on the oval
feed us supervise us
teach us someth
AWESOME
happ

Play and eat yumx saks
with our Friends: !!
lira !! - school
Go to the movies !! - Osh
Monsand hama Bidsj lira | hors ridin
Hich ase | Fun! /AMAZING



In school is fun!
but oshc boring!
Oshc has bad food.

Do more scaringa hunts.
Less favretisem!

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DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OSHC AND VACATION CARE

I do morning OSHC and afternoon OSHC so I get to do different things at different times. In morning OSHC I can cook and eat breakfast which is always delicious. In afternoon OSHC I get to eat Mares delicious food and have great fun. In OSHC we get to have great food and fun as much as we do different activities every day. At school we don't get to interact as much but we can learn new things have some fun screen time. In OSHC we can do as many things as vacation care like the pool, putt putt, bounce and so much more. I wish in OSHC we could do swimming, dancing and making shirts. My teachers and OSHC carers look after me, make sure I'm ok and work hard!

WE
♥
SCHOOL

Holiday care is better than after school care

dog and cat



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