

Beginnings of SDN Surry Hills



"...the Executive Committee has felt the necessity to open another Branch in Surry Hills, as several working mothers have written asking for it in that suburb."

- Sydney Day Nursery Association, Annual Report 1911-1912

SDN Children's Services begins in 1905

In 1905 a determined group of women from Sydney's upper classes who understood 'the difficulties that beset the paths of working mothers' founded the Sydney Day Nursery Association (now SDN Children's Services). The Association aimed to improve the welfare of children whose mothers were facing poverty and had to work to provide for their family. Infant mortality was high and the Kindergarten Union was only able to provide day care services for a few hours a day. With no other option, these young children were often left to fend for themselves among the streets of working class Sydney.

In response, the Association opened its first Day Nursery in a terrace house in Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo in 1905, the first long day care centre in NSW. For just three pence a day, babies and children were bathed, fed, clothed and cared for from 7.00am to 6.30pm.

Due to overwhelming demand, the Association opened Day Nurseries in other locations in the inner city soon after. These were all areas of need in Sydney with large working populations.

History of Surry Hills

The traditional owners of the land are the Gadigal people of the Eora nation.

The area was a varied landscape of swamp, sandstone ridges, sandhills, and clay. Colonial land grants started in the 1790s, creating large estates, the first being Captain Foveaux's residence, Surrey Hills

Farm. By the 1820s, the estates began to be subdivided and used for market gardens, quarrying, grazing and brick kilns. It was, however, still considered a place of 'country estates' compared to Sydney town.

An economic boom in the 1830s saw Surry Hills become a desirable residential location. Terrace houses and small businesses came to dominate the area, which by the end of the 1800s had become very crowded. Unchecked housing growth, poor drainage systems, the 1890s depression and 1900 plague all created poor health and social conditions for the inhabitants and the area became known as a 'slum'.



Above: Surry Hills Welfare Centre, 1922. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

"Although the matter has been diligently followed up by a specially appointed Sub-Committee the difficulty has always been - a house."

- SDN Association, Annual Report 1911-1912, discussing the aim to open a Surry Hills nursery

SDN Opens Surry Hills Nursery in 1918

The Sydney Day Nursery Association was always seeking to

expand into the deprived areas of Sydney.

In 1918, wealthy philanthropist Mrs Hugh Dixon (later Lady Dixon) offered the Association two terrace houses in Riley Street, Surry Hills rent-free. This generous offer provided an opportunity for the Association to establish a much-needed service in the area, and the nursery opened on 8 April 1918.

"We anticipated building at Surry Hills, but Mrs. Hugh Dixon and the Medical Mission Trustees have made us a wonderfully generous offer. The terrace of houses in Riley Street, in the corner, two of which our Nursery is now situated, has been handed over to the Welfare Society, and the Day Nursery is for all time to have its home in its present position"

- Sydney Day Nursery Association, Annual Report 1918-1919

The Surry Hills 'Welfare Centre'

In 1919, Mrs Dixon donated the whole row of six adjoining terraces on Riley Street to the Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies, supported by the NSW Department of Health, to establish a multi-organisational welfare centre, which would include the nursery.

The Surry Hills terrace houses were extensively remodelled to form one large building, and one roof and façade unified the exterior.

The 'Emma Elizabeth Dixon' welfare centre was officially opened by Lady Dixon's daughter, Mrs Thornett, on 14 June 1922. Sadly, Lady Dixon had died in April that

year so didn't see her generous donation fulfilled.

The welfare centre operated as a one-stop-shop for families in the community to access a baby health centre, pure milk depot, a kindergarten and our day nursery.

The improvement in the lives of the children in the Surry Hills nursery was evident, with regular visits by doctors confirming their improved health.

One of the nursery staff in the 1930s recalled how they fed the children extra before bedtime, because they knew the impoverished families did not have much food at home.



Above: Surry Hills Welfare Centre, June 1922. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

Community Spirit

Fundraising events such as dances, jumble sales, and (Association President) Mrs McElhone's Bridge Afternoon provided much needed funds for the Surry Hills nursery.

Donor 'circles' could also give money towards the upkeep of a cot. A circle was formed in 1924 by the 'old girls' of Ravenswood school, who not only sponsored a cot, but also donated toys, flowers and 'little garments', and hosted parties for the children. Ravenswood founder, Mabel Fidler, also sponsored a cot and served on the Surry Hills Day Nursery and Nursery School Committee for many years. In fact,

the support from Ravenswood continued into the 1960s.



Above: Children enjoying the sunshine in the Surry Hills Day Nursery playground, 1934/35. SDN Archive

A New Building

In 1957 the Sydney City Council purchased the 'terrace houses' building, and a new agreement gave SDN the use of the whole building.

However, the old building no longer met requirements. The children were temporarily relocated to a family centre in Hyde Park and the Royal Agricultural Society's nursery building at the Showgrounds (where they enjoyed motor, boat and other shows!) in 1974 while the building was demolished and rebuilt (funded by the Commonwealth Government).

On 27 July, 1977 the new building was opened by the Lord Mayor of Sydney. This continues to be the home of SDN Surry Hills today.



Above: Morning tea time at the Surry Hills Day Nursery, 1934/35. SDN Archive

SDN Surry Hills Today

Since its beginnings as an integrated 'welfare centre', SDN Surry Hills has undergone many changes, reflecting a strong connection with our families within a vibrant and diverse community.



The changes in the sector to increase the quality of early childhood education and care have affirmed our own approach to professional skilled staff and services since our beginnings.



What hasn't changed is our vision and commitment to addressing social inequalities, improving children's quality of life and enhancing the life chances for all children.



Above: Photos of children and staff at SDN Surry Hills taken by Anna Zhu, June 2022

About this history and the SDN Archive

This history was put together from documents held in the SDN Archive and the Dictionary of Sydney. The SDN Archive, established in 2002, is a unique resource in Australia's early childhood education sector. SDN Children's Services runs 26 children's education and care centres throughout NSW and the ACT, as well as offering disability services for children and young people, and delivering government funded programs supporting children and families and other sector organisations.

