

THE ALEXANDRA CHILDMINDING PROJECT

The previous article looked at the situation of working mothers, children, and childminders in Soweto. The article that is to follow shows how childminders in Alexandra township are getting organised to improve their situation and that of the children in their care.

This article is based on questions asked by Helen Rees, and answers given by the women from the Alexandra Childminding Project.

The Committee

In 1981, a committee was set up in Alexandra to look at facilities for pre-school children in the township. The committee was made up of Alexandra residents, creche workers and councillors, and a social worker from the Infant Welfare Department.

Conditions of Childcare in Alexandra

One of the Committee's first tasks was to find out how many pre-school children there were in Alexandra. An initial survey showed that there were about 10 000 pre-school children in Alexandra. The five creches in the township provided places for only five hundred children from eighteen months onwards. Most pre-school children were in the care of childminders. There were no records or controls to ensure good childminding standards.

As more and more information on childminding was collected, it became clear that conditions for childcare were, on the whole, very bad, so that both childminders and children were suffering.

The Children's Act specifies that no minder should have more than six children in her care. But in Alexandra, the number of children in the care of one childminder

was far higher. Childminders were shown to care for up to 17 children each. Even the number of six children, as it is specified in the Children's Act, is very high, if one looks at the living conditions of people in Alexandria. With the small houses, the children are often confined to one or two small rooms.

The childminding situation in Alexandria was found to be so bad that the committee decided that something must be done about it.



The tasks of the Committee

The Alexandria childminding working committee applied for and received three years' funding from the Genesis Foundation to establish a childminding project. Subsequently, one co-ordinator and four supervisors were employed. They were given the following three tasks:

- to visit childminders and to encourage them to participate in the project
- to run a training programme for childminders
- to give practical support to childminders, for instance through bulk buying of food, etc.

The initial problem was to find all the childminders working in the area. Then there was the childminders' understandable suspicion and hostility that had to be overcome. For the first month, the workers tried to make contact with childminders. A social worker who was based in the community centre, helped them in their efforts. The workers employed by the committee addressed women's organisations, and particularly clubs for the aged, as many childminders are elderly women. They also made door-to-door visits.

After the first month, six childminders were in touch with the project. By the end of February 1985, 52 childminders were participating in the project. Together they were caring for 197 children.

Training programme and organisation

The childminding training programme was carefully introduced. New ideas were presented in a way that supported the existing ways of caring for children. Together, childminders and members of the committee looked at the daily routines of childminding. Some of these were changed slightly. Much attention was paid to feeding and food. Traditional practices, such as children sharing one and the same bowl of porridge, were discussed. Some childminders felt that such ways of doing things should be changed. Another problem was that children often got inadequate food. The children's parents usually gave food to the childminder. As many childminders do not have fridges, this food often goes off during the day. To overcome this problem, a food bulk buying scheme was introduced. Parents were asked to pay R10 per month to the childminder. The childminder, in turn, was provided with subsidised food necessary for a balanced diet. Apart from nutrition itself, food preparation and general hygiene were discussed. Other basic ideas of preventive health care, such as immunisation and the management of common infectious diseases, for example diarrhoea, were also taught.

Great emphasis was put on ways of stimulating children. Within the old framework of childcare, singing and story-telling are traditional. This was developed, and new ideas and resources, such as the toy library, were introduced.

The people who were to go around and discuss these new ideas were chosen from the local population. Workers from Alexandra creches taught about principles of nursery supervision. Occasionally, people who were respected in the community were asked to address women about their childminding practice.

Of the five workers on the project, three were local Alexandra residents. Their knowledge and presence within the community has allowed them to be the most effective of all the workers on the project. They visit childminders two to three times a week, and give them ongoing support and education.



Response from childminders

From the childminders' point of view, the project allowed them to improve their working conditions.

In 1981, the average fee for childminding was R5 to R7 per week, and often this fee was not paid at all. After much discussion, a new fee was fixed at R41 per month for 12 hours' service, and R51 for 24 hours' service. Of this money, R1 went on fuel, and R10 for the food bulk buying scheme.

Although 52 childminders are now involved in the scheme, they care for only 197 of the estimated 10 000 pre-school children in Alexandra. With only five members of the project team, the project workers feel that they would not cope if they had to take on too many more childminders. The scheme is desperately in need of accomodation. Finding a suitable base to work from is particularly difficult in Alexandra, where there is an acute housing shortage.

There is no doubt in the minds of the organisers that childminding facilities are, on the whole, inadequate. Their experience has shown that, far from being hostile, the women involved in childcare are interested in improving the conditions of their work, and are increasingly coming forward to get get involved in the scheme. If the interest continues, childminding schemes such as the one in Alexandra need to 'expand and extend into other townships.

