

Beginnings of SDN Redfern

sdn
children's services

"The Redfern Nursery School has been open for a year [...] it is most pleasing to see the improvement in these children..."

- Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association Annual Report 1938-39

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 Redfern

The traditional owners of the area are the Gadigal people of the Eora nation.¹

The area was given the name Redfern after the Estate of surgeon and former convict William Redfern.

Originally the terrain was sand hills and marshlands, and then

became known for its market gardens.

From the 1920s, there was an influx of workers, including many Aboriginal peoples, who had moved to the Redfern area because of the employment opportunities in local factories, especially the Eveleigh Railway Yards.

"This is essentially an industrial locality, many hundreds of women being employed in the factories there, and certainly nowhere in the metropolitan area is a Day Nursery so badly needed"

- Sydney Day Nursery Association
Annual Report 1924-25

SDN plans a Nursery School in Redfern

1924, the Sydney Day Nursery Association was approached by a Child Welfare Department officer, who requested a Day Nursery in the Alexandria-Redfern-Erskineville area where many women worked in the factories. The area was densely populated and industrialised.

The men employed at the Eveleigh workshops (now home to the Australian Technology Park) promised to contribute to the running of a nursery.

Despite the Newtown Day Nursery and Erskineville Nursery School opening in subsequent years, no suitable location in Redfern had been found.

Finally in April 1937, the Association gratefully received 'the most magnificent gift ever made to the Association', promising

a building on 143 Pitt Street, completely equipped for a Nursery School and with a playground. Nursery schools had recently been introduced in NSW in the early 1930s by the Association, who had also pioneered a training college for nursery school teachers. Nursery schools provided an educational program for children aged two to five years in a long day care setting.



Above: Eveleigh Railway Yards workers, c. 1938.
Courtesy State Library of NSW.

The Nursery School was gifted by philanthropist and wealthy Sydney woolbroker Mr J.P. Johnson and his wife, with the purpose of establishing a 'Model Nursery Centre'.

The Johnson's daughter-in-law, Mrs Cecil Johnson, was the first President of SDN's Redfern Branch Committee and selected all the fittings and equipment for the Nursery School.



Above: Playtime on the veranda outdoors,
c. 1948-50. SDN Archive

Redfern Nursery School opens in 1938!

The Redfern Nursery School was officially opened by Redfern-born Premier the Hon. B.S.B. Stevens on 20 June 1938.

In attendance were Mrs Donald McElhone, President of the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery Schools Association, the Mayor of Redfern, the Minister for Health and the donors Mr and Mrs J.P. Johnson.

There were places for 80 children to attend the Nursery School, which quickly filled to capacity in its first year.



Above: The opening of the Redfern Nursery School on 20 June 1938. SDN Archive

The Annual Report of 1938-39 noted how much the health of the children had improved by attending the Nursery School, despite a measles outbreak!

All of the children were subsequently immunised by the Redfern Municipal Council and Dr Heather Evans from the nearby Rachel Foster Hospital for Women. Dr Evans was also the Honorary Medical Officer and sat on the Nursery School's Committee, providing valuable medical advice to families.

All of the Association's day nurseries and nursery schools in the inner city area, including Redfern, served densely populated communities. It was important to provide sunlight and fresh air, good

¹Spelling sourced from: City of Sydney Council

nutrition and regular medical care on site, as well as integrating with other services. Playing was seen as essential in developing physical and social skills.

In 1939 a dental clinic was opened at the Redfern Nursery School to provide dental care for the Redfern children and six other branches.

An article in *Pix Magazine* in 1941 showed the difference made to the children's lives through the Redfern centre. Outdoor activities, such as gardening and beach outings, were made available to children, some of whom were used to spending the whole day at home in one room.

A Mothers' club and library was also formed, providing an opportunity for support and guidance for families.

Redfern Day Nursery and Nursery School

In 1941, two adjoining houses on Douglas Street were donated by Mr J.P. Johnson, and altered to become a day nursery.

Now providing care for babies it changed its name to the Redfern Day Nursery and Nursery School.

The property at 145 Pitt Street next door was leased by the Association as staff premises and a medical office.

The staff struggled with the old building that needed constant repairs until 1977, when the centre closed for a demolition and a total redevelopment. Re-opening in August 1980, the centre had expanded to 141-145 Pitt Street, and the new buildings provided a modern and comfortable setting for the education and care of the children. SDN's head office was located upstairs from the end of 1982 until 2006.



Above: Music and movement at the Redfern Day Nursery and Nursery School, c. 1965. SDN Archive

Supporting families at SDN Redfern

In 2006, SDN's Brighter Futures (now Family Preservation) family support program moved in upstairs. This is in addition to the community room that also provides a space for families to access our Children's Therapies.



Above: Children at SDN Redfern, 2019.

SDN Redfern today

Since its beginnings, SDN Redfern has undergone many changes, but continues to reflect a strong connection with our families within a vibrant and diverse community; and continues to nurture respectful relationships with Aboriginal families.

The changes in the sector to increase the quality of early childhood education and care have confirmed 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.

About this history and the SDN Archive

This history was put together from documents held in the SDN Archive, and information from the City of Sydney Council 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.

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