

## Anyway, What is a Children's Services Advisor?

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As part of my studies in a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, I completed a Professional Internship in my final semester. The internship was an opportunity to take on the role of an early childhood professional.

*"Kylie, how would you like to go to DoCS?"*

I found myself answering without thinking. I would not want to appear uninterested to a lecturer now would I? It was when I took the time to actually think about my decision I became a little apprehensive. Yes, admittedly flashes of damaged children came to mind. How could I possibly deal with this? The reaction from my peers, family and friends didn't exactly ease my reservations. Anyway, what is a Children's Services Advisor? What do they do? I was about to find out.

Going into a placement for my Professional Internship without any expectations obviously meant that I could not possibly be disappointed. My greatest concern was what could I get out of this placement, as a fourth year joining the profession next year. I made a decision that whatever this experience was going to be like I could tackle it head on and use it to my advantage.

On my first day I was anxious to say the least. It was raining and I was struggling to find a park that would not leave me drenched or with a ticket upon my return. My mind was racing. What was I doing? On arrival into the building I was faced with a code locked door - not very comforting. I was informed it was due to "trouble" in the past. Fantastic! Was my life going to be threatened and how was I going to remember the codes? My initial meeting with the CSA I was to be working with suddenly put all my fears and apprehensions at ease. A light amid all this confusion. I suddenly saw my placement as being a pleasant experience.

### The Experience

The phone did not stop ringing that entire time we were in the office. How were we possibly expected to even get out and see the services in person when they constantly rang? If the phone wasn't being used there were meetings to attend, places to be and people to see. Initially I spent some time reading about what is expected of CSAs and what their specific role is within the Department and within the community. As licensing is a major component of a CSA's duties, becoming familiar with the licensing document was of major importance. This was harder than expected, as anyone who works with the manual would already know.

Getting out and about and becoming familiar with the people in the field is imperative. Therefore travelling is a large part of rural CSA's work. As the area is so big there is an awful lot of time spent in the car. It was during this time that I was able to "pick the brains" of my CSA. This was in turn very valuable for me in order to fully grasp the concept of what the job really entails and the issues that arise.

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Funding is a major issue when it comes to children's services and CSAs play an important role in the allocation of funding. Funding is not an easy topic to grasp although I did try. In my opinion, due to the convenience of shooting the messenger, CSAs tend to attract a lot of criticism from the services as a result of the lack of funding.

I was involved in conducting mock risk assessments on many of the services that we visited and it was this task that I found most difficult. There are so many things to look for in services that are required by licensing and assure "good quality" practice and there are many things that only a trained eye can see. It was easy for me to be critical without having spent a long period of time working in a particular service. It is important that you put yourself in the shoes of those who you are critiquing. This is a huge factor in rural NSW. I had to come to the realisation that money is a major consideration and there is a shortage of it in rural areas. Building better fencing for safety regulations is not as easy as it sounds. It can take months for services to raise the money needed. Some services have to make do with what they have there and then. This is especially true for mobile services that go out to properties in the "middle of nowhere". CSAs need to be sympathetic to each individual service's situation. There is also a need to employ a degree of tact when stating problem areas in a service. The laws and standards obviously need to be followed and it is the CSA's job to ensure that each service in their area reflects these regulations, which can in turn make the job unpleasant and can lead to hostility between the two parties. CSAs have a responsibility to uphold the rights of each individual child and the community as a whole.

When visiting each service a lot of time was spent talking to the director or supervisor about the issues that they were facing. These included very basic problems through to the very large problems. Sometimes it was purely a contact visit to see how things were going. CSAs need to be able to communicate well with others in order to uncover the major issues that are facing children's services in rural NSW and be advocates for the profession. I sat in on many conversations and listened intently and still managed to miss vital points that the CSA had picked up on - something I will put down to experience, if only to make myself feel better.

During the internship I saw many things and was actively involved in familiarising myself with the role of DoCS in the licensing, funding, monitoring and development of children's services. I had the opportunity to experience every aspect of what a CSA in the Orana Far West Area in NSW office does each day. Being a country girl I knew that the "rurality" of the setting was a factor, but nothing really prepared me for the impact that this had on the job the CSAs do.

I was fortunate enough to make many visits to different children's services and saw a variety of settings that were reflections of their surrounding environment. Each service is distinct from each other, which obviously creates a challenge for the CSA - a challenge that their urban counterparts may not face to such an extent. For many of the services that are in the remote far west CSAs take on many different roles that are not necessarily part of their job description.

I attended many meetings during my internship and found a common thread, which was people working together toward bettering the quality of care and education for children in the Orana Far West of NSW. I, like so many people, had only heard the horror stories of DoCS but during my internship all I saw was a group of people working extremely hard to accommodate the needs of a large area and of people who are all different.

Children's Service Advisors provide a service to each individual service in their area. They are irreplaceable. They talk to anyone working in a children's service and I guarantee that many turn to their CSA on many occasions for advice or help. It takes a special kind of person to do such an important job, a job that ensures our children are being cared for and educated in the best possible way. When thinking of an early childhood professional it is not often that a CSA would come to mind. CSAs play an integral part of the early childhood profession. They are an important player in a team striving for the best quality care and education for younger generations and frequently without thanks. I take my hat off to them all!