

National Inquiry into Children in Detention, 2014.

**Immigration Detention Facility: Brisbane Immigration Detention Accommodation
(BITA)**

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Introduction

Occupational therapy is a client-centred health profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation. The primary goal of occupational therapy is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life. Occupational therapists achieve this outcome by working with people and communities to enhance their ability to engage in the occupations they want to, need to, or are expected to do, or by modifying the occupation or the environment to better support their occupational engagement.

The Occupational Justice Special Interest Group of Occupational Therapy Australia exists to research, lobby and influence best practice occupational therapy amongst marginalised people groups. Occupational therapists are employed throughout the public, private and community sectors. There are approximately 3000 registered OTs working in Queensland.

In the recent budget the government announced major reforms to its delivery of programs for refugees and asylum seekers. From July 2015 the Government will combine the Department of Immigration and Border Protection and the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service to create a single agency, The Australian Border Force.

The government has said it will spend \$2.963 billion on detention and community placements services inside and outside of Australia. Over \$1.85 billion has been allocated in 2014-15 for detention services and community placements of asylum seekers within Australia. The Government will close nine detention facilities (Aqua and Liliac on Christmas Island, Curtin, Darwin Airport Lodge, Inverbrackie, Lenora, Northern, Pontville, Port Augusta, and Scherger) – seeking to save \$288.3 million over four years.

The focus of this submission is on the delivery of services within the Brisbane Immigration Detention Accommodation. It is important to acknowledge these significant structural changes to the delivery of services to refugees and asylum seekers as they provide the context to this review and the funding direction of detention and processing arrangements.

From an occupational therapy perspective, environments play an important role in creating opportunities for children to engage in childhood activities which are integral to healthy childhood development (Rodger and Ziviani, 2006; Willard, Crepeau, Cohn and Schell, 2009; Cara and Cara, 2013; Kronenberg, Pollard, and Sakellariou, 2011; Dunn, 2011; Christiansen, Baum, and Bass-Haugen, 2005).

According to research, environments impact children's

- physical skills (Barnett, Hinkley, Okely, and Salmon, 2013; Gabbard, 2008),
- cognitive development (Tong, Baghurst, Vimpani and McMichael, 2007; Andrade, Santos Bastos et al., 2005),
- engagement in play (Vickerius and Sandberg, 2006), and
- social and emotional wellbeing (Koponen, Kalland and Autti-Rämö, 2009; Verza, Bratu, Folostină, 2012; Arndt, 2012).

Detention is known to be detrimental to the social and emotional development of children (Byers and Bao-Er, 2012; Shields, Statihs, Mahoay et. al., 2004; Dudley, Steel, Mares and Newman, 2012); Calvert, 2004; Jureidini and Burnside, 2011). The Queensland Occupational Justice Special Interest Group, an initiative of Occupational Therapy Australia, has identified concerns regarding the social and emotional development of children in detention. In response to these concerns, since March 2013 the group has delivered a one-hour, weekly program (the Saturday program) to support the children at Brisbane Immigration and Transit Accommodation (BITA) detention facility.

From an occupational therapy perspective, it is important to consider the person, environment, and meaningful childhood activities during program planning and implementation (Law et al. 1996). The Saturday program aims to support the social and emotional wellbeing of children (and their families) in detention through

- identifying, acknowledging and building on the children's existing skills, strengths, and capacities (considering the person)
- maximizing the available environment to support the children's social and emotional

development (environment)

- creating opportunities for engagement in childhood activities that might be restricted in the detention environment (childhood activities – children’s ‘occupations’)

The program is delivered by up to five occupational therapists (from a pool of approximately 20 occupational therapists who are involved) in each weekly session. It provides the children with

- a predictable routine and environment on Saturday mornings
- engagement in age appropriate activities (for example, sensory play for toddlers, construction activities for young children, imaginary play appropriate to children of a range of ages, and leadership roles in organising activities for older children)
- support to develop skills in emotional regulation (e.g. learning to physically express and verbally label emotions through games, seeking sensory input to manage emotions, normalising feelings of loss when friends leave the detention centre, relaxation strategies such as deep-breathing and a child-friendly version of progressive muscle relaxation)
- skills for classroom and peer engagement (e.g. turn taking with friends, listening to others, following directions, speaking in front of a group following classroom/session rules)
- opportunities for success and positive attention (e.g. completing an artwork and receiving praise, talking with the group while all eyes and ears are directed at the child)
- cultural exchange (e.g. children sharing songs from their home countries)

The children in BITA often show signs of developmental delays which have arisen from disadvantage, previous trauma, a lack of opportunity for schooling during their journeys to Australia, changing childhood environments as they leave their homes and move to Australia. They require rich environments supportive of social and emotional wellbeing and healthy childhood development - spending a long time in the detention environment does not provide children who are asylum seekers with rich environments to support their social and emotional development.

Methods

The information for this report has been gathered through weekly session notes, weekly debriefing meetings, and questions posted to the occupational therapists involved in the program over an online forum. With consideration of the Inquiry Terms of Reference, the findings are presented with consideration of the physical, social, time, and institutional aspects of the environment. Implications for the wellbeing of the children at BITA are considered.

Findings

An ongoing needs analysis regarding the children in BITA detention facility is carried out at weekly meetings by the group and in session notes. The needs analysis indicates that the children in this facility struggle with *awareness of routine, accessing age appropriate spaces and activities, emotional regulation (especially self-calming when upset or over-excited), coping with loss, skills for engaging in groups or with peers, and experiencing success and positive attention*. Clinical observations by the occupational therapists involved in the program indicate that almost all children in the detention facility experience delays in one or more areas of development (learning, play, social skills, emotional regulation, cognition, physical development). It is postulated that these childhood challenges arise out of a combination of past experiences, moving across cultures, language barriers, and the conditions in the detention facility and environment (described below). Engagement in childhood activities decline and social and emotional skills deteriorate the longer children live in a detention environment.

One occupational therapist commented on:

Notable delays in almost all children in the centre, as compared to children of a relative age in an Australian demographic ...We could say that these children are not meeting developmental milestones according to Australian research, but also keeping in mind that each child does develop differently, and the influence that cultural, environmental and social spheres have on development.

In terms of the physical environment, the movement of children in BITA is limited to their private family space (i.e. bedroom), the activities and meals area, a gym area where a limited number of toys are available, and the outdoor area. Children do not have opportunities to leave the detention facility to engage in childhood activities such as playing at a park, visiting friends, or accompanying parents/caregivers on errands (e.g. buying groceries). Facility fences, a glass security door at the entrance, and monitoring by security cameras limit movement of the children.

As a result of restricted movement, children do not have access to

- a private family home where it would be expected families would spend time away from other people sharing meals, engaging in shared activities, and having rest-time on their own
- parks where children would play, develop motor skills, engage in games with other children, explore novel environments
- streets (where it would be expected children might learn about monitoring their own safety)

Children do have access to school during week days where they can learn and spend time with other children. Supervision of children is variable and often areas where children play (because more child-friendly play spaces are not available) are unsafe. One of the occupational therapists involved in the Saturday program explained:

Due to the lack of designated, purposeful play spaces, children have adapted adult facilities for use in play. These areas are often unsupervised and not age appropriate. For example, using the volleyball pit as a sandpit; this is away from incidental parent supervision and often unsafe (sand very grainy with rocks causing cuts).

A group of occupational therapists reflected after a Saturday program session:

There is a basic playground for some gross motor activity (not vestibular though), there is a small carpeted reading space with access to books and toys. This is

located in the gym, so it's not the ideal location for children to be within parental observation, but be independent.

Overall, the environment at BITA is generally clean, although there is often a stale or dirty smell in the activities room. The environment is relatively sparse and devoid of decoration or personalised items so it could not be described as pleasant.

Resources for children to engage in construction activities (e.g. making robots out of cardboard), colouring activities, learning activities, and play activities are limited in the detention centre. For example, one occupational therapist who visits the detention centre for the Saturday program commented:

They have limited access to resources such as paper, colours, things that they probably enjoy doing most... may be that's why they are so hyper and excited on Saturdays because they get to explore things of their interests.... Apart from the play area (not age appropriate for all) there is no activity room for the children.

Occupational therapists described few toys and resources being readily available for children to access independently:

Mostly kept in locked storage space. One boy recently was very excited just to have a single pencil in his room.

Another occupational therapist who attends the program explained that when one of the children who was enjoying colouring-in did not want to end the activity at the end of the session. She suggested to him that he could keep the picture and finish his colouring-in during the following week, he returned the incomplete colouring paper back to her saying:

I don't have colours to complete it, there is no point keeping the paper.

This illustrates a feeling of helplessness by the child in that he felt he would not be able to complete the activity he was enjoying because the resources were not available and he was unable to do anything about it.

Parents, siblings, friends and teachers are important people in children's social environments. The environment in BITA does not always allow parents/caregivers to support their children with emotional regulation. For example:

When a child's emotions become dysregulated it's important for the parent to be able to reassure and organise the child within a predictable, familiar space.

Within the facility there is a lack of child friendly, semi-private space that children can routinely access for play and that can be utilised by parents to reassure their children in a flexible way.

There are high levels of monitoring, with security guards/staff observed to be present in all shared spaces at all times. Families have privacy in their sleeping areas (bedrooms).

Many children come and leave the detention facility, while others have remained in the centre without leaving. No support is offered for children to cope when other children in the detention facility, who may have become their friends, have left. One occupational therapist explained:

There is also little support for children when friends leave, especially those who have been in detention for long periods of time and formed communal, familial bonds. The concept of a friend being gone and unseen but still 'alive' is difficult for a child, and there is little support around this. The system is far from transparent and information isn't routinely disseminated, which has a detrimental impact on children to whom their immediate surrounding are what they conceptualize as their universe.

An occupational therapist raised the issue of power in relationships between staff and parents:

I think there are also issues related to power and parenting within this environment.

One occupational therapist who is involved in the program reported:

The nature of the centre means it is a structured environment: meal time, activity time etc. is all planned and you [as a child in BITA] are dependent on people in authority. I imagine being responsive to children and their needs can be a challenge within this environment.

While issues of power, authority, and the unusual situation of children being surrounded by security and other staff in their 'home' living environment exist, relationships with staff vary. Some staff at BITA are extremely supportive and caring towards children. The Activities Coordinator at BITA has been supportive of the Occupational Therapy Saturday Program and has made arrangements for the therapists to bring resources to the detention centre and use a range of spaces. He has also expressed a concern regarding the diets of children at the detention centre and discussed incorporating healthy eating into the occupational therapy program. While the environment is not ideal, and the social environment is unusual and detrimental to the children's healthy development, staff at BITA have been observed to treat children humanely and no cruel treatment has been observed.

Regarding the time aspect of the environment in which children live at BITA, length of stay, irregular routines, ongoing uncertainty, and a lack of hope about the future are concerning. An occupational therapist involved in the program commented:

The length of stay, combined with irregularity and scarcity of activities results in children becoming very disorientated. For example, turning up to the group on Saturday in school uniform. Some are so young they are still developing concepts

around time, comparisons (longer, shorter, more, less) and waiting, and this situation distorts these basic concepts.

Another occupational therapist elaborated:

The uncertainty of the situation effects parents and children in terms of planning and hoping and dreaming. Are kids able to dream beyond their circumstances to think about what they want to be when 'they grow up'?

The longer the timeframe, the harder it is to imagine a future. Part of childhood is dreaming, but when you are worried about safety and security this can be difficult.

Furthermore, the routine at the detention centre leaves a large amount of time 'unfilled' for children due to a lack of opportunities to engage in usual family activities including cooking and cleaning with parents, family outings, and inability to leave the detention centre. One of the occupational therapists who attends the Saturday program stated:

I would also say the 'rest time' is disproportionate to what it may be in the real world.

Within BITA detention facility, the cultural environment is diverse, complex, and dynamic. Diversity arises amongst the many families and single people in BITA who come from many different countries and ethnicities; staff from predominantly Western backgrounds; and the visiting occupational therapists during the Saturday program. Complexity arises because there is a mismatch between the securitized detention centre culture, the children's experiences and own cultures, and the Australian expectations that are often placed on the children. The detention institution in which the children live is corporately owned and managed with high levels of security; the children are learning to shift between their home-culture, the diversity of cultures in the detention centre; and Western (Australian) cultural expectations placed on them now that they are in Australian territory (e.g. meal times, daily routines, schooling, toys available at the detention centre). The cultural environment is dynamic because as new families enter BITA from different backgrounds, the context changes.

To overcome the many challenges faced by the children in this complex cultural environment, the occupational therapists involved in the Saturday program incorporate a variety of strategies including:

- Discussing expectations of children in a culturally sensitive manner during debriefing meetings
- Engaging with parents/caregivers to support the children in ways parents/caregivers feel are best (e.g. encouraging participation, developing skills, behaviour management)
- Incorporating culturally relevant activities into the program (e.g. when children were doing face-painting during a session, mothers were supplied with henna materials to apply if they wished because some of the mothers had mentioned henna during a previous face painting activity)
- Inviting children to share aspects of their culture with the group during a ‘show-and-tell’ style activity and during singing activities (e.g. children are invited to “sing a song from your home”)
- Discussing drawing children have done, which often depict experiences in their home countries, travelling to Australia, and in Australia.
- Taking a child-led approach to the sessions – so that if children or parents/caregivers initiate a culturally relevant activity or idea, support for that idea can be provided and materials can be sought to follow up with that idea in following weeks.

Few mechanisms appear to be available more broadly in the detention centre to support children to negotiate the securitized culture of the detention centre; the new and unfamiliar toys, activities, and expectations in Australia; and the diverse, complex, and dynamic cultural environment in which they live at BITA.

Considering the institutional environment, the children live in an extremely rule bound setting. For example, there are “designated 'play' times “when children are allowed access to play resources (e.g. toys) and certain spaces where they can play. There are high levels of security and monitoring. The children live amongst people in authority who dictate daily routines and access to resources. These institutional aspects of the environment at BITA are unusual for a child to experience.

Safety and activities are monitored by parents, other asylum seekers and staff at the detention centre. For some families from collectivist cultures this is a cultural norm. The occupational therapists that attend the program have noted that parents/caregivers often appear dis-engaged or uninvolved in their children’s activities. While shared-parenting is a norm for many families in BITA, the level of dis-engagement with children by parents/caregivers might also be reflective of parents’ lack of freedom to parent/caregiver in private; influence of security measures in parenting; as well as depression, anxiety and responses to trauma experienced by many parents. Children are often seeking affection, attention, and care from adult figures (e.g. parents, the occupational therapists) in a way that suggests attachment with parents/caregivers has been affected by the institutionalized environment in the detention facility.

As far as the program goes, we have changed from a family centred approach to more a child centred one due to the fact that parents rarely engaged. It can be hard to target a child's parent because everyone looks out for everyone else and shared parenting seems common. There isn't much privacy or space for parent to take kids and focus on them alone which may contribute [to the parents not engaging]. The positive change I have noticed is how new parents and families will encourage shy kids to join us; maybe word has spread and trust built?

Many parent-child interactions occur in the context of day-to-day activities such as chores,

cooking, travelling to appointments in the community, and getting dressed in the morning. During these day-to-day activities children learn and engage with their parents. However, many day-to-day activities are not available to families in the detention facility because it is an institutionalised setting. For example, families are unable to make their own arrangements for their spare time, or to do their own cooking, cleaning, home maintenance, or grocery shopping. According to an occupational therapist involved in the program:

Many parental roles are usurped by the centre.

Conclusion

From an occupational therapy perspective, children's environments influence their social and emotional development. Detention centres are environments which are detrimental to the developmental, social and emotional wellbeing of children, and therefore a weekly occupational therapy program was established at BITA detention facility.

The program has allowed for ongoing needs analysis considering the children at BITA detention facility and weekly reviews have indicated that children in detention struggle with *awareness of routine, accessing age appropriate spaces and activities, emotional regulation (especially self-calming when upset or over-excited), coping with loss, skills for engaging in groups or with peers, and experiencing success and positive attention.*

The physical environment in detention is restrictive, poorly designed for children, and there are few resources. The social environment poses challenges to relationships with parents, developing social skills, emotional regulation and coping with loss. Detrimental aspects of the environment in detention when considering time include length of stay, irregular routines, ongoing uncertainty, and a lack of hope about the future are concerning. The cultural environment is diverse, complex and dynamic. For the children in detention cultural expectations, activities, and toys are unfamiliar. There is little support in the detention centre for children to negotiate this complex cultural environment. Finally, institutionalisation in the detention environment results in children living in securitized, highly rule-bound environment which is unusual for children and impacts on child-parent/caregiver relationships.

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