

Child Rescue

c. 1880 – c. 1910

Other Names: • Child Saving

Details

The child rescue movement was an outgrowth of the evangelical revival in England, it captured the imagination of many Australian philanthropists during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, leaving a particular mark on colonial and state child welfare services. Child rescuers argued that the existing orphanages and statutory organisations were too passive in their approach to children at risk. Identifying inner-city slums as breeding grounds of vice and crime, child rescuers argued that society's future depended on children being removed from such environments. Positing the parent as the enemy of the child, they sought to have total control, reconstructing rescued children as honest workers.

The philosophy of child rescue found its natural home in the inner-city missions where workers were confronted daily with behaviours they read as evidence of sin. The possibility of rescuing 'innocent' children from such situations became a religious crusade.

An article published in the *Methodist Spectator* newspaper in 1899 appealed to readers to support the many child rescue agencies that were by then operating in Melbourne:

When we remember that in thousands of homes the name of God or Christ is never used except for purposes of profanity, that the sacred name of mother has lost its true propriety and loveliness, and mother and daughter, with father and son, pass a parasitic existence preying upon others, is it any wonder that the children of such homes have literally to be DRAGGED OUT ere they can be rescued? ... How can we expect morality when there is almost an entire absence of ordinary family life? These children, aye, and parents too, must be RESCUED FROM THEIR SURROUNDINGS before permanent reformatory work can be done.

Child welfare laws passed in the late nineteenth century provided legal sanction for the work of child rescuers. For example, Tasmanian child rescuers played a part in the introduction of that colony's [Youthful Offenders, Destitute and Neglected Children's Act](#) in 1896. Some of the child rescuers were involved with the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), established in Tasmania in 1885. The members of the WCTU were advocates of alcoholic abstinence and 'moral purity', which really meant no sex without marriage. They were supporters of motherhood and wanted to raise its status through the vote. In order to justify that status, they were concerned that mothers should avoid alcohol and sex outside marriage so that they could teach their children to do the same. They saw child neglect as an extreme result of the parents', especially the mother's, tendency to drink alcohol or failure to behave in a sexually modest way, and inability, usually because of the first two behaviours, to look after their children properly. The Union did not see poverty as a cause of child neglect.

In the colony of Victoria, the [Neglected Children's Act 1887](#) conferred new powers on 'approved private persons' for the apprehension and guardianship of children. Shurlee Swain writes that the legislation gave child rescuers powers of intervention 'which paralleled those of the police' (Swain, 1998).

Internationally, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was established in New York in 1875, with British branches created in 1883 (Liverpool) and 1884 (London). In the colony of Victoria, child rescue organisations came together in 1896 to found [a local branch of the Society](#).

The child rescue movement was losing its fervour by the 1910s. Many organisations that ran orphanages and other children's institutions have roots in the child rescue movement.

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Resources

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