

CADET RETENTION STRATEGY



Introduction

In October 2021, the Club Cadet Captain (Stuart Braine) and two of last season's U14 Age Managers (Ben Schneider and Isabel Workman) surveyed former Crays members who had not continued their membership into the senior ranks of Cronulla SLSC.

The survey was commissioned to explore why kids (and their families) join Nippers, and why many of them do not continue into the senior club.

The following notes are based on the data from the survey. They provide a summary of observations, along with recommendations for improvement to increase the retention and recruitment of members.

Summary of observations

1. We are not inclusive. There is a culture at Cronulla SLSC that unless you are sporty, strong, fit or you are good mates with another long standing member, then you don't belong or fit the mould.
2. We are far too competitive and we exhibit favouritism towards competitive kids at the expense of non-competitive kids. This is evident from nippers into senior club. This was a significant message from the majority of responses.
3. Members want nippers to be fun, unstructured and allowed to spend time with friends. They are not concerned with competition, this is NOT the reason they join in the first place.
4. Families spend too much time at the beach on Sundays. It's too crowded and not much value gained for the time spent on the beach.
5. Cronulla SLSC is very good at providing a healthy environment for all ages to learn new surf skills. This was also a significant message from the majority of responses.
6. Social connection is extremely important for our members across all age groups, including the parents. Members want to remain with their friends. Whether on patrol, in a nipper age group or any other time, people want to stay connected to their friends. We are not encouraging this enough.
7. Communicating a path from nippers to senior club is poor. We are not providing direction or guidance for nippers and our future lifesavers.

What are we doing well?

1. Surf Education – rips, ocean awareness, SRC, Bronze Medallion and other courses, etc.
2. Skill Development (not fitness) – swimming, bodysurfing, board paddling, rescues, etc.
3. Promotion of Nippers as a healthy activity to be enjoyed with friends and family, while learning and improving surf skills. Being part of the community and giving back while learning new skills.

Recommendations for improvement

We identified three key themes across the responses: be more inclusive, improve communication, and provide a clearer pathway into the senior club.

Implementing the recommendations below would address these key areas, improve the experience of Nippers and, by extension, improve our retention of Cadets and their families.

Inclusiveness and a better Nipper experience

1. **More fun/less competition** – for nippers, the ‘non-championship’ days are fun days. On these days there is no competition, no races, just play in the water, catch waves, or whatever the age manager thinks will give most enjoyment to the kids. Then unstructured free time with friends and parents.
2. **Flexibility** – allow nippers to join other age groups. Allow them to stay with their friends. Do not separate their friendship groups for any reason – even if the patrol is full.
3. **More space, less time** – keep U6, U7, U8s at Gunnamatta permanently. U9s to U14s at Cronulla Beach permanently. Reduce the time commitment of Sunday nippers. Suggest max 90 minutes commitment then option to leave. Sundays are precious.
4. **Social** – implement regular non-competition social activities. Open bar Sundays, Thursday night dinners, fun activities that kids and parents both attend.
5. **Implement Cronulla SLSC surfing section** – some members would like a stronger board riding presence rather than traditional nipper activities. No competition, no training, turn up on Sundays, grab a board and go surfing.

Communication

6. **Welcome Pack** – give new members (and parents) a welcome pack. This is as simple as an email with contact names, sectional leaders, information on how to get involved, options for involvement, location of the club and the bay shed, explanations of ‘ski’, ‘board’, ‘tempo’, ‘bronze medallion’, ‘SRC’, what’s involved in patrolling, etc.
7. **Brand position** – reposition Cronulla SLSC as an inclusive club, fun, healthy, family friendly, where everyone is welcome from all backgrounds regardless of gender, religion, status, fitness level or other.

Pathway

8. **Start early** – provide a clear pathway to senior club starting at U10s. Don’t wait until the U13s or U14s. Offer early guidance on pathway options for all members, not just competitors.
9. **Cadet Room** – allocate a meeting place for Cadets to hang out inside the club. A place where they can meet, play, be loud, eat, drink etc without ‘club police’ overlooking their every move. Have this room available at all times the club is open and on patrol.
10. **Count water safety towards patrol hours** for competitors (as mentors) to encourage more experienced water safety volunteers.

Survey responses: a snapshot of our community's views

The following are direct quotes from some of the survey responses. Some of them are tough to read, but we have asked, so now we need to listen and act.

What did you like about Nippers at Cronulla SLSC?

"Excitement of Competition days inside the Club and between Clubs (obviously better if you have a strong group , which comes from specific skills coaching)."

"Club Official on microphone commentating on Champo Days (moving from Age Group to Age Group)."

"As the kids got older, less kids were in the group and more activity occurred which made me happy as that's why we were there at the beach, the BBQ made for a social aspect, trips away to carnivals... my kids never did well at them but they were good experiences on the whole."

What didn't you like about Nippers at Cronulla SLSC?

"The [limited] participation of nipper mornings; hours were spent sitting as the elite kids had 4 or 5 more goes at each activity, e.g. flags - make that an occasional activity not a core activity - it is so failure oriented that only 1 person from the group comes away happy."

"Not enough technical training, for example I was providing water safety for many years and could see the same kids getting dumped in the surf because they had no idea on how or when to shift position on the board ... More focus on assisted technique would really boost these kids' ability and confidence at an earlier stage."

"To accommodate the non-competitive kids more (which are the majority), Nippers needs to set up one or two cans on a shorter course to slowly enable their confidence to grow. Many nippers had the ability but were afraid."

Why didn't you or your child transition into Senior Club?

"No clubhouse for last few years."

"More time (patrols) and money required to enter into senior club"

"Patrols were time wasting and new skills or active involvement wasn't being fostered and encouraged which we have noticed other clubs"

"I believe my girls and other nippers finishing U14s would've stayed if a similar structure like nippers was implemented for U15s to allow for a smoother transition."

What improvements would you recommend to keep kids involved?

“It is not all about competition! Connecting with the less competitive kids is the real key. I have witnessed many Age Managers dismiss many of the nippers who aren't committed and competitive.”

“Skills days need to be more specific in terms of teaching actual surf and sand skills via repetition. Use Seniors to coach the kids.”

“Improve participation levels by keeping kids as active as possible for the morning, sitting in the sand and waiting is the worst selling point for this sport. Get everyone running, get everyone swimming, get everyone paddling. Who cares about the club champion, that can be sorted at inter club and state carnivals, not at weekly nippers. It's all upside down!”

“Have a space in the club where kids can gather and form friendships - should be a social, safe, fun area they can occupy without parents. This is the reward for doing patrols, nippers, and all the other things we ask of them as a nipper or cadet.”

“Keep kids in age groups for competition days, however for all the other days (non-competition days) let the kids choose where they want to go and what groups they want to be in.”

What improvements would you recommend to keep parents involved?

“Being encouraged to participate in the Senior club. We did not know what the progression was.”

“More social and training events where the age manager organises fun activities for the kids and the parents can attend as well. A training afternoon where parents come as well to get fit would be good.”

“A parental Bronze course must be established. Maybe more roles for parents on the beach, to get involved instead many sit around have coffee or just chat to others.”

General comments

“The culture of the club is too closed. The segregation between elder members and the other parents is enormous. You have to be minimum second generation to get a look in.”

“During his time at Nippers, my son was thankful for the opportunity to be introduced and to learn new skills. Unfortunately a clique mentality exists and we perhaps did not fit into the stereotype of the SLSC. So the Nipper experience for my son is mixed with positive and negative emotions. I still think well of the Nipper movement and recommend it to parents but with a proviso.”

“More leniency with Patrol hours (maybe reduce 25 hours to 15-20 hours to be eligible to compete).”

“Our daughter left when she wasn't that competitive and felt out of place when the focus of the club was to retain the competitive kids and develop them further to win medals.”

