

1. Accessibility to childcare

Accessibility to childcare is not just about the ability to pay for childcare – it is also about the ability to find a place in a quality child care centre where the parent is confident in the standard of care delivered. I currently have a 16 month old child. Prior to her birth I was employed on a full time basis at a State Government department in WA where luckily I was able to take one year off from my position with the option to take off further leave if needed. However I decided to go back after 12 months of leave at a reduced FTE of two days per week. Well in advance of this I searched for local daycare centres in my area and found three that I thought were suitable. Of these three only one had availability that coincided with my return to work date – but only on certain days and even then it was a gamble as other people could overtake me in the waiting list if they had children already in the centre. Luckily I was able to negotiate the days I would return to work with my employer and have now been working two days per week since March 2014. I have the option of increasing my return to work every six months however recently I was not able to do this as there was no further availability at the daycare centre my child is enrolled in. I now have to wait a further six months to increase my working days if there is availability.

I am an educated and skilled employee. I have studied hard and worked hard to increase my skills and knowledge, I have a large HELP debt that paid for my education and have been paying my HELP debt back through my taxes. I like to think I am a valuable employee to my organisation, but also more broadly to the State and the Nation as I contribute to the economy as an employee and a tax payer and consumer. I wanted to return to work, but it was difficult to find a childcare centre in my local area that would take my child so that I could. I am very lucky that I was able to negotiate returning to work at a reduced FTE and on specific days, and that the Child Care Rebate exists so that it is economically feasible for me to return to work, otherwise I would not have been able to as I do not have any informal childcare support options. Most people would not have been able to do this, and I have a feeling those people are less likely to return to the workforce and earn an income of their own, and are much more likely to earn Centrelink benefits. By using childcare and working, overall I am saving the government money!

2. Quality of care and staffing

I am also concerned about the lack of childcare places available and that the demand for childcare is primarily driven by this lack of places as opposed to quality care. If the recommendation to reduce qualifications for the under age three group was implemented I would be extremely concerned that the quality of care would decrease across the nation for this age group. Firstly I am concerned from a workforce point of view – that decreased levels of qualifications would have significant impacts on those educators already highly qualified and employed in appropriate positions. Removing the minimum qualification requirement would significantly affect those carers in a negative way, effectively making their education and qualifications “redundant” when they are in fact quite essential and important. If my employer suddenly reduced the qualification requirements for my own position I would feel absolutely demoralised and devalued and that even though the knowledge and skills I worked so hard for and paid for are essential to my everyday work they are not “required” by my employer.

Secondly I am concerned this measure is aimed at increasing staffing levels (and therefore places available) at the cost of quality care and I do not think this is a robust way of addressing this problem. Quality care is extremely important in the first few years of child-rearing and this is especially so for those children who are in long-daycare on a fulltime basis because their parents are working. I am unsure what a better approach would be but I certainly do not endorse any reduction in minimum levels of educator qualifications because of an ill conceived idea that children aged 0-3 don't need such high quality care or that it is wasted on them at the expense of older children.

3. Economics is the bottom line.

I find it very frustrating that carers are so stretched and that the economics of running a day care

centre means that my child does not get as much supervision as I would like and I am not as well informed as I would like. At the end of each day, I would like to know more about what she has done, fun things, playing, reading, painting, etc. I know if she did a poo and how much lunch she ate but I have no idea what else she did that day. If there were more staff the quality of care would improve so much but the economics just don't support it. Why must economics dictate how these service models run, instead of sound research? I would much rather have my fees go up and have minimum qualifications for carers and staff ratios than cheaper lower quality care with fewer carers. Do a literature search and you will find it is much better to invest in children in the very early years by delivering quality and consistent care across all aspects of modern life, this applies to health care and so it should to education and early childhood learning and not just focus on the school age education. It is more popular to say "we are increasing literacy and numeracy in our schools" than "we are investing in the development of well adjusted little people". Long day care can have its downsides on the development of children for those that are in full time care, so why gamble on that, why not invest in their development to avoid or lessen the negative impacts? Then everyone benefits, the children in full time day care, the carers, and the children like my daughter that are only in long day care a couple of days per week, from having higher levels of supervision and quality early learning opportunities.

Reference: Barker, Robin. 2009. *The Mighty Toddler (The Vexed Topic of Child Care, pp 413-439.)* Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney.