

Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare - 29.01.2014

By Bronwyn Batten

Have you experienced difficulty accessing suitable care for your child? If so is this due to a lack of services in your area or available places at the times you require?

I have three children and am returning to work after a period of maternity leave after the birth of my third child. My two older children are at school. It took approx 18 months to get a childcare place for my baby. We still have not been able to secure before and after care for our school children and are on a waiting list.

Thankfully my workplace has been understanding and is allowing me to work short days. We have an onsite service at our school (Beverly Hills PS) but many parents have been unable to secure a place and are on the wait list. There are other providers in the area that service multiple schools, picking up kids by bus, but they don't service our school as we have our own provider on site. When there is no choice of alternate providers parents have no option but to sit out wait lists, not knowing how long it will take. Alternatively an extreme move would be to remove our children from their local school (one that we can walk to) and put them in a school which has after care vacancies – this is not something parents should be forced to do. There are also no occasional care services available in our area or before or after care available on a casual basis. This kind of flexible care is needed by all parents at times (beyond regular weekly child care services) but for most people friends and family fill the gap. For those who do not have family or friends readily available the absence of casual before/after care or occasional care is a real issue.

Have you had any problems with a childcare centre's management of their waiting list? How could this be improved?

Centre policies with regards to waiting lists vary a lot. Some centres put you at the back of the waiting list if you refuse a place when it is offered (even if it is offered before you are ready to return to work e.g. at 6 months instead of 12 months). Other centres keep you at the top of the list if you don't accept a place. I feel that it is wrong to put parents back at the beginning of the list if they do not accept a place. It can lead to parents accepting a place out of fear that they won't get care at a later date and forcing them to return to work before they are ready to.

What factors influence whether you use early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, care for your child at home or have your child cared for by another family member?

Availability of care, cost and quality of care, age of child (I prefer not to put very young children e.g. under 2) into full time care, ability to get by on one income whilst children are young (e.g. costs of living).

Is affordability a significant barrier to your use of ECEC services or does it influence the type of service you use?

It is an issue. I would prefer to use a nanny and have them care for my toddler and also do before/after care for my older children but such an arrangement is inaccessible financially. If I had more than one child in long day care costs of these services would also be an issue.

Do you feel you are able to make an informed assessment of the quality of different ECEC services?

I feel that quality often comes down to the personalities and skills of the staff and until you meet them it is hard to judge. Where the environment of a centre is not of good quality (run down, lack of books or toys for children) it is easy to judge.

Would you accept lower quality care if that care is closer to where you live or work, or enables you to work preferred days or times?

If I could afford not to work I would rather not work than send my child to a centre I thought was inadequate (staff who did not engage emotionally with my child etc).

Would you pay more for ECEC shown to contribute to better learning and development outcomes for your child?

I believe learning in early childhood is all about play. I would not pay more for a service offering 'educational opportunities' as I want my child to be allowed to be a child.

Are problems with access to, or the flexibility, cost or quality of ECEC preventing you from undertaking work or study (or the number of hours you would prefer to work or study)?

Yes. I would prefer to work 2 days a week but cannot do that as I have not got a before/after care place. Instead I am working three short days (within school hours). I am also studying and need to undertake a full time placement of 5 weeks for my study. I cannot get casual care for my children to enable me to do my placement so I will only be able to do it if family help care for them.

How should any problems be addressed? Would, for example, extending childcare centre hours or the length of the school day make it easier for you to work?

An increase in child care places, before and after care places and the availability of casual care at these services.

Is current support for families (mainly through the Child Care Benefit, Child Care Rebate and Jobs, Education and Training Childcare Fee Assistance) adequate?

I think it is largely adequate. However, I believe the government should provide universal preschool education for all children the year before school so all parents can provide this for their children.

Do you have any specific comments about access to, flexibility or the cost of occasional care; outside school hours care (including vacation programs); or preschool?

We placed my son on 15 waiting lists for preschools when he was a baby. When he was of preschool age he was only offered one place. Waiting lists are ridiculous. If families need to unexpectedly move to a different locality they can have next to no chance of finding care locally. The availability of occasional care is non-existent locally for us. Long day care is at least a year wait and before and after care is the same.

What factors other than ECEC are influencing your decisions about participation in work or study?

Wanting emotionally to stay at home with my children whilst they are young yet balancing this with a need to stay in touch with the workplace so I am not in a spot where I'm unable to get work in the future because of a lack of recent experience.