

Productivity Commission Early Childhood

Early Childhood education is one of the most important factors that influence a child's development. Accessible, appropriate and educational care needs to be provided to all children and families no matter their location or socio-economic status. I am an early childhood teacher who currently works in an early childhood classroom in a school, but my previous employment has included working as a community engagement officer with a childcare centre in a remote setting and as a nanny in an urban setting.

I am addressing two issues in this very brief submission- home-based care and remote early childhood education. I would be happy to discuss these in more detail.

Home-based care is important

Every family has the right to decide what type of care is right for their child. While some may prefer centre based childcare centres, home based care with qualified nannies is becoming more socially and educationally acceptable. Now it is no longer only economically privileged families and celebrities that use nannies, but everyday working families as well. Qualified nannies provide quality care and education to children during normal working hours, but more importantly outside of the normal 8-6pm. Who works 8 am to 6pm anyway? I certainly don't; I work from 7am-to about 5pm and there are no childcare centres in my area that operate with those hours. A nanny is able to work flexible hours to meet the needs of the family. If you are running late you don't have to worry about the \$10 a minute some childcare centres charge for a late pick-up. A nanny works flexible hours, generally in a family home and provides an early childhood based program. For many families (and therefore businesses) home based care works and it needs to be recognised by the government. The government needs to consider work force participation once a woman has children. Consider a woman who has a great job and works 7am-6pm. She has a baby, takes maternity leave, and then wants to go back to work. She tells her boss she can't start till later and she gets a 7.30am start. The child still needs to be driven to childcare, dropped off and then the mother still needs to get to work- and home again to collect the child. Having a nanny and more flexible child care can take much of the stress out of combining work and family responsibilities. There needs to be increased funding for qualified nannies, and programs that would ensure they are qualified to an Australian standard and assure a high standard of care. There needs to be government assistance to ensure that families who cannot access childcare centres due to location or work hours receive childcare subsidies and/or tax benefits. Has anyone considered special visas for home-based child care workers from developing countries, like Singapore or many European countries have? Australia has a growing population and we need to ensure young women such as myself remain in the workforce and that working full-time is not as hard for us as it was for our mothers. As such the government needs to consider all options and my experience, both working as a nanny for a range of families and seeing the support it gave parents in their work and family life has made me want to have the option of a nanny once I have children. Home-based care via 'nannies' or 'au pairs' is definitely something younger women want- and we are the workforce of the future.

Childcare in remote communities

Early childhood education is important for all children no matter what their background. I used to work in a very remote community as a Community Liaison Manager and it was my job to increase childcare enrolments and ensure that as many children as possible had access to an early children program. This was very hard to do as there were many factors that influenced families' access to early childhood programs. At the community that I worked in and many other communities these factors included cultural differences, the majority of the families were Indigenous Australians, but they were from a range of different clans and many were not able to associate with one another. There was a fear of having your Centrelink money taken away if you accessed the 'white' childcare service. There was a fear of the unknown, little knowledge of childcare and lack of understanding about what happens in that centre. Having an open door policy and explaining that the childcare centre didn't take money was very important in increasing our enrolments. But the biggest factor in increasing enrolments was community engagement. Small things like smiling, going to the shops everyday and just being seen were all important. One day I was in a shop and one of the children from crèche ran over and gave me a big hug – everyone was looking and I had ten new enrolments the next day. Over time, families came to know and trust me and so felt comfortable sending their children to the crèche. In remote communities if you want increased workforce participation, parents need to access childcare which is culturally suitable. Somewhere where they are able to come and go, or where they can come and have lunch with their child and it isn't seen as odd. These children that are accessing the centre are also receiving a good quality early childhood program that the government has approved. Importantly this childcare centre provided a learning base for children and helped with the transition to school. Given that most of the children who attended the crèche were vulnerable or at risk children this was a great outcome. There were several cases where children's only meals came from the food we provided at crèche. So we provided a valuable service in this sense too.

Australia's population is growing and there needs to be a new formula for childcare in Australia, where it is flexible, accessible and affordable for all families.