

My name is Michelle Beakley, I am a 47 year old mother of 3 grown children and owner/Director of Gaia's Nest Early Childhood Education and Care on the outskirts of Hobart Tasmania. I employ 10 permanent and 3 casual educators with a blend of qualifications and wealth of experience. Our centre has been running for 10 years this year and has seen many positive changes in the early childhood education and care (E.C.E.C) sector as we strive for recognition as professionals.

I welcome the opportunity to provide my submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on behalf of all my educators.

I wish for this commission to begin to understand the depth of work that is undertaken in E.C.E.C every day. This goes far beyond the education and care of the children. We form ongoing, high quality relationships with families and community, providing education on all matters; child development, health, nutrition, behavior, education and at times become social workers for families as we seek out government agencies and provide further support. We identify cases where early intervention is required, enabling early diagnoses of disorders and medical conditions and continue to work and dialogue with these professionals and provide honest support to families. We work with Registered Training Authorities and deliver training across all qualifications to our employed educators and also to students undertaking their practical placement from other training groups, schools and universities. We liaise closely with their education professionals and assist in assessing their outcomes.

We go above and beyond the daily expectations of child care in that we will pick children up from home when parents are ill or their motor vehicle has broken down or from school when parents jobs do not support collection by themselves or even by supporting grandparents with care by collecting and returning their grandchild from a child's birthday party of a weekend which we often attend also. We do this free of charge. There is nothing we won't do for the children and their families to make their life a little easier. At the heart of our centre is the fact that we genuinely care for our children and their families. We can share up to 5 days a week for 5 to 8 years with families. We can't do anything but build a beautiful relationship and share in the highs and lows of family life.

I feel the Government has a wonderful tool at its fingertips in these E.C.E.C facilities in the matter of community support, transfer of information and training. If they could only recognize what they have. Our little centre is unique in that its environment is set in the bush and all natural, guided by the philosophical approaches of Reggio Emilia, Rudolf Steiner and many social constructivist theorists throughout time. We have a total of 37 children every day (soon to become 47) but that is where we will stop. Our uniqueness is also our size, enabling us to maintain a very personal approach to families. Our centre is full and we are struggling to accommodate our families and those wishing to attend. The demand for our type of centre is both validating and inspiring and demonstrates what families are seeking.

Factors that effected my own childhood make it very clear to me the importance of E.C.E.C being a place that provides a safe, secure and supportive environment for all children whether or not they are at risk of harm. The impact positive people have on young people is life affirming and in this regard consistency in educators is crucial for our children. E.C.E.C has attracted some amazing and unique people. I have met a handful of these individuals who are so passionate and inspired about the early years and they inspire me. As educators we research and immerse ourselves in life-long learning, discovering the best evidence based practice from around the world and ensuring that we share our knowledge with others through professional development and networking. Our educators demonstrate these qualities and our centre breathes passion, excitement and magic as we learn from the children as much as they can learn from us and we resource our learning together.

I believe there are benefits to Australia if we could become a proactive country. By recognizing the positive impact of high quality engagement and relationships in the early years, the raising of resilient, confident and respectful children would be supported. The effects of which I believe could be to build capable and competent teenagers and therefore adults who become productive citizens, instead of the reactive society that we are today as we continue to fund mental health, the judicial system and work to fix the problems we have in our current times.

I believe if we have the right people in these positions in the early years we can assist in supporting a generation that is happy and productive. We need to attract these people. If E.C.E.C was promoted as a career of choice, the likes of other professionals with attractive wages then we may make a start. Educators have to be dedicated and passionate with a desire for ongoing learning and the reward for this would be that there is a job waiting for them; one that is recognized in a professional capacity and respected and that makes all the study worthwhile. Ongoing professional development costs money and there are some inspiring places in the world to visit to obtain more knowledge.

Our philosophy is to learn through play, educators are constantly researching with children and implementing programs and environments that facilitate the child's interests and to scaffold their learning. Our deep understanding of the Early Years Learning Framework enables us to evaluate children's achievements against the outcomes and identify future lines of enquiry. Children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development are all being nurtured on a daily basis through the environments that we create and the relationships that we build with them all. They develop a deep knowledge base and social grounding, including empathy, care and respect to prepare them for their life ahead. An award system that recognizes and matches the skills and knowledge required for this career would at least inspire prospective educators to look further and not be turned off by the lack of recognition identified by its current low wages and the subsequent lack of respect that this demonstrates as being held for this profession by those that are not involved in it.

I have been involved in a group in Tasmania; The Training and Professional Development Resource Group and we have just designed a careers brochure outlining the skills and

knowledge we believe are required for this career. This document contributes to the pathway plans in schools informing students of expectations, pre-requisites. We see this as a positive start and as a way to inform schools that our sector is professional and one of high responsibility.

At the end of the day for me personally, it's not all about the money. The children are not a dollar sign and they don't represent profits for me or anyone else. We manage to break even and enjoy making our environment beautiful for the children and families and help out where ever we can.

It has taken me 10 years to find the right educators that believe in our philosophy and are passionate, loving and caring and I am extremely proud of all that we have achieved as a team. My educators are so passionate they work out of hours and work within the centre on their days off. They are so inspired and are great role models for this industry.

I wish to attach a blog written by one of our parents about the 'business of caring' and posted on the Gaia's Nest Facebook page. It was a beautiful article which we believe sums up the relationships we work so hard to build, but sadly it also identifies some shortfalls in our sector, and we wonder how good this is for our children. It is imperative that we begin to attract high quality educators whose image of the child is of the highest level and to do this we need remuneration packages that reflect the professionalism, commitment and passion of this sector.

# The Business of Caring and the Caring of Business

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*By: Derek Hagstrom*

I would imagine in our modern world, that there are very few parents who would not do anything to ensure the best outcome for their children. This is manifest in many ways. Some parents spend thousands of dollars on cots, prams, toys decorations; all in an attempt to ensure the best possible environment.

My wife and I are these people. We would stop at nothing to make sure our little boy had everything he needed to be happy, successful, and feel loved. Part of that journey for us was a difficult quest to find childcare. Even before our son was born, my wife and I decided to shop around the various childcare facilities in our hometown of Hobart, Tasmania. We spent nearly every day for more than a week looking at childcare facilities,

meeting with educators, and discussing options. Mostly we were scared, scared that all we could find were what I like to call “bulk baby care facilities”. Emotionless buildings filled with unengaged staff, dirty floors, old equipment, and miserable children. I vividly recall seeing 8 children lined up in high chairs and being fed lunch like an assembly line. Nothing about this environment was edifying. Nothing encouraged play, or creativity, or happiness. It was purpose built to “store” your children for the day while you were at work, efficiently, cheaply, and soullessly. I was terrified. I had visions of my then unknown child sitting in a filthy diaper in a steel cot, on old sheets, in a cold room. The image of a Chernobyl orphanage filling my brain until I struggled to breathe. And then we found it.

One day after trying to set up an appointment at yet another childcare facility that was too full for my child, the worker I was speaking to recommend a place then called Care Bears Cottage (Now renamed Gaia’s Nest). I promptly looked up their webpage and made an appointment to go see the facility. On the phone with the owner Michelle, I instantly got the feeling that this was important to her; she CARED about this. This wasn’t a job, this was a cause, and she would do whatever it took to make my child happy.

The site tour was great. The staff were friendly, the rooms were clean, the environment was filled with warm things; wooden blocks, wooden cots, doilies, old loved and worn toys, and most of all, every last child was smiling.

This was it, we found it. We immediately reserved a spot, and went on about our days.

12 months later, our 7 month old boy began attending. My wife was encouraged by the staff to begin bringing him early, before the date of his enrolment, in order to help him acclimate to the staff and the centre. In this time, my wife got to spend time at Gaia’s Nest, seeing the carers in action with the other children. As their title is “carers” it should not have been a surprise to us that they cared about the children, but it was a revelation. It became clear that what set this facility apart is that every last person cared about the children.

As time went on, this became more and more apparent. Centre staff went out of their way to make both my wife and I feel like part of a family. They made me feel like I was leaving my son with a loving aunt, rather than some stranger. That mattered.

Each day, I would receive in my facebook feed, a update on what the children had done for the day, as well as photos of them doing it. We also received a book, that had everything my son had done that day logged into it, down to when and what he had eaten, and even when he'd peed. THIS was what caring was about.

I have since thought about this model. Obviously, the key was caring. Michelle had made it a drive of her life to make children strong, confident and happy. She cared about it. Not only that, but she'd surrounded herself with strong people who felt the same way. Caring is their business at Gaia's Nest, but if it wasn't their business, they still would. This is the key to their success.

Other business has potential to learn from this model. So much of business is the drive to maximise profit. However, I believe that a true caring about a final product eventually results in maximised profit. As a consumer, I would rather have a coffee at a café that cared that I got the best coffee possible, than just gave me a coffee hoping it was good enough to warrant me spending \$4 on it.

I believe that big business, small business, and childcare facilities in general, have an awful lot they can learn from the Gaia's Nest model. Maybe one day, the business community will get smart, and care. If you are in the Hobart area and are looking for quality childcare, Gaia's Nest can be contacted here:

<http://www.gaiasnest.com.au/>

And for more information on why the people who look after your children should probably make more money than the people who look after your toilet, go here and read up:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-25/hermant-the-childcare-conundrum/5046312>