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## **A Letter to the Royal Commission**

1<sup>st</sup> Impressions ELC has been opened from September 2019 and our experience as a long day-care centre for the past 3 years has made us gain insight on the arising issues in the early childhood education and care sector. We are writing this formal submission to bring light to some concerns and important matters that we believe will be helpful to improve the early childhood education and care services in South Australia.

When thinking about early childhood services, it is important for us that the focus is on building a strong foundation for the first 5 years of the child's life as this is a crucial period for development and learning. We have seen the advantages of focusing on early childhood learning needs and the disadvantages when these needs are not satisfactorily met. Based on our firsthand experience, we can note the issues and concerns that have we, as a service provider, have witnessed during our years of operation.

### **Effect of migration and residency on early childhood**

We have noticed the recent growth in the number of new immigrant families in our service's community. This includes families who are still on temporary visas therefore are not yet eligible for government fundings or government subsidies. This results in barriers to families accessing ECEC. It leads to long-term problems for the family and in turn to the community. The demand to fully understand the Australian early childhood education system also increases with new families coming from overseas. We have around 10-15% of the enrolled families who are currently facing this dilemma. For these families, childcare can be too costly without any government subsidy as they will be paying full fees. This becomes an issue for families especially for low-income ones, therefore most of them decide to keep their children home instead of sending to childcare until they reach the age that they are required to attend primary school.

In effect, families waiting for their residency approval has caused mental stress for some parents, so they opt to stay home for a while keeping children with them. Some parents obtain high education overseas but job finding can also be an issue due to the language barrier or their credentials and educational attainments are not credited here, therefore some parents have no choice but to stay home for some time. This in turn raises some behavioural issues for children and we believe mental health support is strongly needed for these parents with young children. We advocate for welfare and development support for these families especially when it comes to English communication support.

Because of this, we have found that no exposure to early learning may show signs of needing extra support and can be a cause of learning barrier. Most families who had a visit at our centre usually waited until their children are around 3-4 years old before they decided to send to childcare as they think this can be enough preparation for the child before going to school. We believe that children's learning is not just directly from teachers or educators but will also come from engaging with other children. This will greatly contribute to their development as they meet other children with different backgrounds, ages and experiences. This is possible through letting children be exposed with childcare or early learning experience.

### **Children's Learning and Development**

Based on our experience and personal research, we believe that Early Childhood Teachers (ECT) should be engaged as early as the starter age as we have seen that for children who begin school at the age 3 or 4 years old, starting with the actual education learning can already be quite late and intimidating. We know that some families want to primarily focus on their children's academic learning, but we also understand that children can learn at different paces. Some can be really advanced, and some may take extra time. For some children who begin with their education from 3 years old, we have found that it may not be enough time for them to get ready for Reception and for primary school. With this knowledge and observation, we want to advocate for funding for more ECTs in the early childhood education and care sector and even push for ECT training at an earlier age.

### **Out of School Hours Care**

We have initially offered after school hours care as a request from our enrolled families with 2 or more older children attending school and a younger child attending our centre. This was also to mainly cater our staff who are rostered on late shifts and have school-age children. Some of the parents are rostered on shifts works, work in healthcare or work second jobs and have no family members to look after their children after school. Some families also have their own businesses and won't close until or after 7 PM. These are only few of the reasons which we believe are the core purpose of out of school hours care.

Based on listening to the families' insights, we understand that it is important for them that we use the after-school hours to focus mainly on supporting their children's homework and as a downtime before going home. After a long day's work, families wish to use this time at home intended for rest and some quality bonding time. We have come to know that homework or study that hasn't been completed seems to be an added stress or workload if parents must still focus on it at home. With this, an extended period of study at home may cause the child lack of sleep or rest and in turn lack enough energy for the next day at school – which can be a detrimental and unhealthy cycle for both children and parents. It is an important factor that the child's physical wellbeing is well- looked after. Using it as a downtime also relieves the children's stress after a long day at school. This also caters to their leisure activities and expending their energy on their interests or hobbies.

For after-school care, we have developed a program based on working collaboratively with culturally diverse families. We recognize that we have a diversity of enrolled families with different cultures, beliefs, languages and family backgrounds. As our centre has been

established for more than 3 years and have a few children who have graduated from us and moved to Reception, we understand what parents mainly value in terms of their children's learning and development. Some families value safety as the most important factor when leaving their children under our care, some put extreme value on the food they eat as a healthy diet equates for a productive lifestyle, in some cultures they take serious consideration with their Maths and Literacy, and so on. We engage in shared decision-making with the families to support their child's learning and to support parents as well.

To make OSCH available, we are hoping for increased subsidy, increased entitlements, ease of subsidy application and approval for new residents or immigrants. Barriers include but not limited to no subsidy due to ineligibility, transportation costs and unavailability and time constraints/ limits of OSCH hours.

### **Workforce**

One of the factors why the early childhood sector has been going downhill especially after the pandemic was the low pay. A reasonable increase in pay will definitely improve the sector workforce supply and even encourage the youth to take up Certificate III or pursue Diploma studies. There is also a significant lack in experienced educators trained with children with developmental needs due to the high turnover which causes added stress to the educators.. There is also an immense load of paperwork requirement from the Department that somehow supersedes the true core of early learning, which is mainly on supervision, safety, engaging with play and focusing on children's developmental milestones. We know that some educators still need some experience with writing and documentation but are efficient and amazing educators, which really takes away from their skills. Some even choose to pursue a different career path as they feel the early childhood sector is not motivating and fulfilling enough. Some of our current educators are working part-time and studying part time to be healthcare workers, which means in a few months or years' time, they will be leaving the profession to pursue the healthcare setting as it is undoubtedly with higher pay. We have previously employed some international students who are passionate and capable but have no full working rights and their study does not even have a pathway to residency, therefore they will still choose to go back into their home country or pursue another field of study. We deeply regret these situations as we have greatly invested in training these students and they have contributed so much to our company and they have so much potential not only educators or teachers, but also as future leaders or managers. It will impact businesses such as ours if South Australia's supply initiative is to boost employment and training of international students or temporary workers.

We are hoping this submission will be our voice for the early childhood education and care sector and will make a difference no matter how small.