

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present today. My name is Ruth Harper and this is my friend and colleague Felicity Nabbs. We work together at East West Childcare (Early Learning) Association, where we are part of a team that provides high quality long day care, operating a family grouping model: where children between the ages of 12 months and 6 years play and learn together in an environment tailored to meet their developmental, social and educational needs. We also have a child each and between us have used a combination of Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care and family provided care.

We are a small centre with a current enrolment of 42 families. Our parents are employed in professions as diverse as medical, legal and education; hospitably, engineering & architecture; with almost half (19) being small business owners. What is common to all of our parents, irrespective of their background or profession, is their concern that the education and care their children receive be of the **HIGHEST** quality. In fact all of our parents have indicated (some with letters of support - that we have with us here today) that they are not just prepared, but are **HAPPY** to pay more for that quality.

We have 11 staff working regularly with children with a combined total of 128 years of teaching experience of those 11, 8 are diploma qualified or higher, with 2 (Felicity & myself) holding bachelors. Length of employment time ranges from 4 to 24 years with an average of 11.5 years, which are extraordinary figures for this field. We have been operating on or above the current child:staff ratios (1:4 <3, 1:12 >3) as outlined in the National Quality Framework since 2011, 1-2 years prior to them being mandated. The decision to implement these ratios earlier than required was made by the parent management committee who recognised the importance lower ratios play in supporting high quality. Despite there being an associated fee increase (\$) it was clear to all involved that the benefits of the improved child : staff ratios far outweighed any associated costs.

What is this high quality that we are all talking about?

It's really hard to define 'high quality' as it is a subjective concept, dependant upon perspective, needs and understandings. We **ARE** however able to clearly set out some of the principal elements of centre based care that have consistently produced positive impacts on young children's development. As defined by the Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University some of these elements include, but not limited to:

- highly-skilled, regular teachers,
- small group sizes and high adult-to-child ratios,
- a language-rich environment,
- age-appropriate curricula and
- stimulating materials in a safe physical setting,
- warm, responsive interactions between staff and children

National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation and National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007. *It is worth noting here that each of these elements is identified & supported by the National Quality Standard.*

There is a significant body of evidence that demonstrates the importance of the period birth to three years for children's social, emotional and cognitive development. These reports have been widely endorsed in documents produced by state and territory governments (OECD 2014). Neuroscientists have found that the first three years of life are the period of the most rapid brain growth during which there are specific sensitive periods for optimal learning in particular areas. We

are all born with the same number of neurons. At birth each neuron in the cerebral cortex has 2,500 synapses but by the age of 2-3 it has multiplied (grown) to 15,000 per neuron (twice as much as avg adult brain), over the next few years this number is constantly influenced by experience/learning. Experience determines which connections will be strengthened and which will be pruned; connections that have been activated most frequently are preserved. Neurons must have a purpose to survive. It is also now understood that the impact of early experience has a greater influence on development than heredity (Shore 2001). By the time a child is three years old, 90% of their brain has all ready been developed (Perry 2000).

There is also significant and widely accepted evidence that demonstrates the contribution that high quality care and education makes to children's brain development, learning, and wellbeing outcomes (Cleveland & Krashinsky n.d.; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2012; OECD 2014; Shonkoff 2010).

From such accumulating evidence it is clear that rather than the years before formal schooling being viewed as a period where the primary concern is providing just loving care and protection, we need to think of this as a time that actually offers critical opportunities for **life learning and development**.

There is clearly no doubt as to the lasting benefits high quality education and care has for young children. It is also worth noting the flow on effect it has, (as all of our parents testimonies state) enabling work force participation, employee engagement and productivity not withstanding the overarching impact it has by producing well educated and balanced individuals for the future health and wellbeing of society as a whole.

The link between the provision of high quality care and parents being able to return to and remain in the work force would seem undisputable

All of which would seem to provide a strong incentive and justification for government to continue its investment in high quality early childhood services as a way of ensuring Australia's long-term productivity. Which is supported by the Heckman Equation which shows the - returns to a unit dollar invested - and states that *"Investments of time and money in the early years have shown to be far more cost effective than investments made at any other time"* Also it goes a long way to addressing social inequities, and fulfilling Australia's obligations under the UN convention on the Rights of the Child.

ECEC services can contribute to Australia's productivity in the short-term by supporting families' participation in the workforce and, in the long-term by giving young children the best possible start in life. There is a risk that the former can overshadow the latter, whereby the focus of debate regarding ECEC becomes workforce participation, rather than high quality early childhood education and care. It is important that the value of ECEC in both the short- and long-term – for parents and for young children – is acknowledged.

It may seem obvious, but it is important to always bear in mind that the children of today are the adults of tomorrow. It is them who will shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and growing our economy protecting and caring for our environment and ultimately caring for us.

## **ASPIRATIONS**

We see our aspirations for our daughter's ongoing development as being symbiotic to our hopes and expectations of the childcare environment to which she is exposed. I believe it is safe to assume that largely children under three are inquisitive, creative thinkers, already expressive, with the process of personality development well under way.

We saw in our daughter's case that this was a pivotal stage for her to benefit from greater social inclusion and the conditions to grow within an environment that propagates them as 'people', allowing them to forge their own identity and personal attributes. Personal experience has shaped our opinion of how critical access to 'quality' early childhood education and care is, and the resultant outcomes that not only demonstrate significant impact in nurturing young children, but also the increased potential of successful transition from pre-school education to school and ongoing life opportunities.

## **A PARENT'S VIEW OF ECEC LANDSCAPE**

### **Care assessment:**

Whilst the difficulties that inevitably arise in finding ECEC are well known – locality, cost effectiveness, quality of education and care and availability of days inline with working commitments. What this isn't is simply a standard purchase decision where cheapest is best – the overriding issue is one of quality of care – knowing that your child is receiving a high standard of education and care is of paramount importance.

### **Productivity:**

A 'financially sustainable' ECEC provision is but one aspect of a much more far reaching issue – productivity impacts parents returning to work – ability to perform your role knowing your child's development and well-being 'is in good care'; businesses – and their focus on building positive workplace culture and more broadly the economy. As shown by recent UK studies that worker stress related issues cost the UK economy an estimated £26 billion per year; the issue of work-life balance should be recognised in direct proximity to productivity.

### **Progression not regression:**

Continual staff development and improvement; childhood education will improve by meaningful investment in the knowledge and skill of educators. There should be high expectations on qualifications required to work in childcare as well as assistance for those seeking to progress and gain higher qualifications. The trickle-down effect transforming standards of childhood education and care; where staff are better equipped and qualified to provide a learning environment that promotes questioning and curiosity, that stimulates creativity and connects learning to real world experiences. Bottom line: children meeting their learning potential should be the instrumental purpose.

### **Be brilliant and inspire brilliance:**

As a subset issue to the above: attracting and retaining 'best' talent should be a priority – as the theory goes, students who live their lives in the presence of adults who are engaged in continuous learning and improvement will themselves become self-managed learners. High quality workforce is a major factor in driving quality in education; in the face of increasing competition in the labour market for talented people, there should be support for the best talent to perform their role as effectively as possible.

Lastly I would think that public perception is also an important factor: the Government's well-publicised desire for a "world-class education system" should not be a hollow gesture; recognising the community value of early childhood education instead its economic wealth should be enshrined as a core aspect of the policymaker's mission. '

As a parent with two children (4 & 2 yrs) at East West, I cannot stress enough the importance of the National Quality Framework and a quality Early Learning environment. What it ensures is that children get both a great start on their learning journey towards school and life, and also that parents are supported by highly qualified teachers to be well balanced and fully able to participate in the workforce.

If it were not for the highly qualified and experienced staff at East West, my family would be on Centrelink payments in order to get by. Initially we thought we would not utilise long day care for our children, however my wife became ill in the second half of 2011 and it became impossible for her to work. This meant it also became very difficult for her to look after our children. I was considering leaving my full time job as a teacher to look after the family, and the only option would have been to rely upon Centrelink payments until my wife's illness was under control.

Thankfully, the incredible staff at East West recognised the impact my wife's illness was having on the family, and were able to fit in and provide additional care for our children into their program. Having our children at East West didn't only mean that my wife could take the time to concentrate on regaining her health, but our children were immersed in rich, purposeful learning that enhanced not only their confidence as learners, but nurtured their wellbeing and social/emotional growth as well. On the work front, I was able to retain my full time job and by early 2012 my wife was able to work casually.

In order for families to balance their children thriving educationally and for parents to be able to pursue their careers in the workforce, the NQF must be implemented whole-heartedly and without compromise and for quality learning environments to continue and grow. This means retaining staff-to-children ratios and ensuring the high qualifications of staff is maintained.

Our priority for our son is always his emotional, physical and intellectual well being. We value high quality child care that maintains good staff to child ratios with highly qualified teachers. This enables our son to have the best possible start in life, provides the support for all of us as a family and allows both myself and my partner peace of mind for our son's welfare whilst we are at work.

When our child was born my partner and I made the decision to only work part time for the first year so that our son could remain at home with us full time. We felt this was the most beneficial for him at this time and for us in getting to know him and his needs. We have always understood and appreciated that this a luxury few families can have.

However after the first year it became necessary for us both to increase our working hours for financial reasons. We then began looking for childcare on a part time weekly basis. From the beginning of our search our goals were always to find childcare that was not only safe and secure, but nurturing and challenging for our son.

His initial childcare was safe and secure, the staff were gentle and loving, however we found that he lacked the intellectual stimulation, the education that he needed. With a minimal ratio of staff to children and only the base amount of structured teaching we found our son began to fall through the cracks, becoming listless and emotionally withdrawn after his days at the childcare.

Finally our son asked to leave his childcare.

Talking to other people from the community we heard again and again of the wonderful inspiring atmosphere at East West Childcare. Contacting them we found them to be encouraging and supportive.

Once our son began attending East West we saw positive changes in his emotional and intellectual states. In East West we have found a childcare that has a high ratio of well educated and experienced teachers that have the time and knowledge to create a safe and supportive environment to assist our son to be the best and happiest person he can be. We are confident that he is getting the best quality pre-school education as we can see our son flourishing. This is further enhanced by a high level of open communication and support from the staff to us as parents, meaning we are able to work on our son's well being together in a coordinated and cohesive way. East West Childcare supports and develops our son's social interactions, his physical abilities, his emotional well being, and his cognitive development through a carefully considered programme of activities and routines. Going forward we are confident that because of the high level of quality and educated care he's received our well rounded son is ready to transition to school next year.

## Statement – Childcare:

### My story

I am a single mother to my 20 month old son Oliver. He began attending East West childcare in January of this year 3 days/week, allowing me to return to work as a lawyer on a part-time basis. We do not have any family in Melbourne able to help provide care for Oliver, and we are fully supported by Centrelink, now supplemented by my income.

When I visited East West prior to Oliver's acceptance, I felt positive he would thrive under their care – the high ratio of staff to children, the thoughtful learning activities taking place, the happiness of the children, and dedication and high education of the staff were all immediately obvious to me. I felt a sense of family within the childcare centre, which is what I hoped for Oliver, being from such a small family of mostly two.

Since Oliver began attending East West he has benefitted in many ways, becoming a social, exuberant and happy little boy. He is always doing something different when I pick him up, under supervision, and he comes home sometimes saying a new word relating to a special activity done that day.

If I had not found childcare of such high quality I would not have chosen to put Oliver into childcare at all, despite acceptance. I would not have felt comfortable leaving him under sub-standard care or conditions. As I only began working in the legal profession 2012, to take such a long break from the workforce would have been very detrimental/possibly fatal to my career. This would have caused us to be dependent on Centrelink for much longer. I am so grateful to East West for the invaluable care they provide, giving Oliver and myself the opportunity for a bright and happy future.

We are parents of 20 month old twins. Both my husband and I run our own seperate businesses. Both twins were put on every list in our suburb as well as surrounding suburbs. We paid fees to be on almost every waiting list and all of these fees times two. Most centres told us we would be waiting two years to receive even one place. The issue with twins is you may be offered a place but then you cannot just send one child, you have to give up that one place until two places become avail at the same time.

I was desperate to return to work as after 18 months having my business on hold (unable to work during the pregnancy) it was in danger of failing. I was in a position where the only thing stopping me from returning to work was not having positions at daycare. For us, having two children in long daycare is expensive, I do not take a wage for I am building up my own business. This means we are both working but the family is supported on one wage. This means we can only afford to send our kids two days a week. If it was less expensive I may be able to work more.

We received 2x places at East West which was a miracle for us not only because of the things above, but they are known within the area for being the best centre to care for your children. They were so accommodating to us and the level of care my children receive is wonderful. They work tirelessly meeting the needs of the children and they're families and it was eye opening for me to learn the level of fundraising needed to sustain the centre.

Our girls took a long time to adjust and we felt very supported by all the carers (and still do) through this transition. We are surprised every evening that they return home with new words and they have developed at such a rapid rate which I attribute directly to the care and education they receive there. It is obvious they are being exposed to the education and activities the older children are learning at the centre.

If we did not receive the places at East West when we did, My business would have definitely ceased running and I would have been forced to stay home as a full time mum. We would not have been able to afford a nanny. I also think developmentally and socially I would not have met my children's needs at home. I think if they were at home until kindergarten, they would not adapt to the kindergarten environment well at all.

For a first time parent of a young boy with limitless energy and a need for clear direction, we as a family appreciate the need for highly qualified educators, to provide high quality care, education and nurturing. This level of professionalism and concern for a child's wellbeing instils values within a child, when at this stage in their young lives it's imperative to relay such remodelling due to their spongelike characters.

Due to a geographical change our son has now been in 3 different centres, commencing 3 days per week at the tender age of 8 months and increasing to 5 days after the 12 months mark. Fortunately 2 of these 3 centres have matched our philosophy, both as people and as parents with a keen interest in the curriculum and care that is offered to all children. On paper and in practice, both centre's housed a similar number of children and offered almost mirror like educational opportunities. In terms of educators the similarities were evident. Seemingly in both, staff are given professional development opportunities along with employing staff who have a certain level of qualification and experience, therefore creating an environment which houses multidisciplinary conversations. Conversely the 3<sup>rd</sup> centre operated as a business, with limited vested interest in the education and wellbeing of the children, the centre employing various staff with only a base level of education. The majority of the staff employed were also transient and therefore were unhappy or seeking employment for the purpose of making money, certainly not for appreciating the privileged position one is in when nurturing such inquisitive minds. Unfortunately due to limited spacing and long wait times for a high quality service, my son's placement in this centre was grossly extended however the experience has increased awareness of the need for encouragement and opportunity to be provided to ALL staff within the field.

Working in the social justice field I am aware that community members are increasingly becoming more aware of the benefits of early preventative services being provided and readily available for young people. A greater emphasis could be placed on the education and care provided to children and the benefits it supplies. For some children the respite that education and care provides can be larger than most may understand, therefore it proves great respect should be shown to the staff that are employed who have an in depth knowledge of child development and a genuine interest in supporting and educating each child.

To have your child in a centre where you see the staff are fluid and flexible in their approach and look to explore and support all means in growth and development, whether this be through parental discussion, educational training, attending various forums and conferences and seeking secondary consult, I feel assured that upon leaving my son he will have a fantastic 8 hour day. His day will be filled with various educational activities, materials and mediums and general healthy role modelling.

As I and my husband choose to work I feel safe knowing my most prized possession is with people whom I respect. His personality is largely due to the time each individual has invested in him and I am thankful.

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16 August 2014

**Australian Productivity Commission**  
**Childcare and early childhood learning – Draft report**

I am the parent of a 3-year old child who attends long day care at EastWest childcare in Fitzroy, Victoria. I have read the Australian Productivity Commission's draft report on childcare and early childhood learning and make the following submission.

I am a young professional in the early stages of my career in a competitive industry. My current job requires that I divide my time working in Melbourne and interstate. My wife is a full-time student in a demanding professional degree, with a view also to entering a highly competitive workforce. We live in Fitzroy, Victoria; but our respective families are interstate and overseas. Childcare is critical in providing our child with high quality care and education, while allowing my wife and I to enter and remain in, respectively, the workforce.

A number of essential elements have (fortunately) been met which allow us to obtain childcare. First: funding support. If we did not receive the current level of childcare benefit and rebate we would not be able to meet the costs of childcare. As it is, but only just, my income enables me to support my wife as she completes her studies. Second: availability. We applied to over twenty childcare centres, at considerable expense, and to some over a year in advance, without any assurance of an offer. We received only two offers before the time when care was needed (other offers did come, but too late). And of those two offers only one was practicable, because of the third element: location. It is essential that our childcare centre is located, as it is, near to where we live because, amongst other reasons, of the fourth element: opening hours. My working hours do not meet with childcare opening

hours. My wife's ideal hours would not either, and she often skips university contact hours so that she can meet opening hours.

Each of the above elements is necessary. But other elements are ultimately more important to us. Principally, our childcare centre provides a high level of care and education to our child. The number of children at the centre is low and it has an excellent education programme. Each of the teachers is highly qualified and experienced, but also genuinely caring, engaged and supportive of each child and each family. And the teachers share a similar outlook to us. That gives us confidence that our child is not only receiving a high level of education and care, but that she is receiving care of a quality and content which is consistent with what we offer her in our own home. That is facilitated by communication between the teachers and families about each child's needs, and about the child's life inside and outside childcare. Finally, and in furtherance of the location element already identified, the majority of teachers and other families are members of our local community. We rely upon our local community in Fitzroy for support and friendship, and it is important to us that our child, and my wife and I, develop strong bonds with other children and families in our neighbourhood, and that we experience a wider community engagement.

Given my family's circumstances, I welcome recommendations in the Commission's draft report which would simplify but maintain (if not increase) the level of funding support, and which would help to expand the availability of childcare services. But I do not welcome recommendations which would see those developments come at a cost to the quality of care, by affecting teacher:child ratios, the requisite qualifications and checks for teachers and appropriate teacher remuneration.