

Response to Draft report into Childcare and Early Learning

I thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the current inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning.

I am the parent (mother) of three young children, now aged 12,10 and 4, and have a broad experience over the past decade of a range of early childhood care and learning facilities, including family day care, occasional care, after school care and early learning care.

Key points

- The access to learning for children between 0-3 should not be sacrificed for cost savings;
- Deemed cost is a dangerous measure to base rebates or payments on and will not reflect the true cost to families
- Access to early learning is essential to enable return to work and therefore critical to the ability of the parent to be productive.

Reducing the qualifications of those caring for under 3s: I would like to strongly oppose the *Draft recommendation 7.2* to reduce the qualifications of those with the care of children under 3 years of age and provide my views (*information request 7.1*) on the anticipated outcome of this action.

I have some experience of the impact of reduced ratios and qualifications on the care of young children as both my elder boys were in care between 2004-2007 prior to the introduction of the current 1:4 ratio for this age group and in facilities where young, certificate only or student staff were used to reduce costs.

This was a traumatic period for both myself and particularly my younger son, who as a result of a takeover of the local family-run centre in Moonee Ponds, ended up in a facility run by the then expanding ABC Learning (for profit centre). The combination of small children who have a much higher need for one on one attention, the lower staffing ratios and the inexperience of staff was very upsetting and added tremendously to the guilt I felt at returning to work and to my ability to work while in a state of anxiety over my son's care. The inexperienced/young staff simply did not have the knowledge, capacity, confidence and maturity to manage the very particular needs of this young age group, or engage them and frequently seemed completely unable to cope. Staff were remote and formal in their dealings with the children, lacking warmth and engagement. There was no sense of commitment and passion in the job, but rather a feeling that these were kids fresh out of school who had taken the job because they thought babies would be cute and had found themselves utterly out of their depth. Sick leave was high, so this impacted on continuity for the children. Rooms were clinical and engagement with children was limited to putting them in front of a box of toys, or watching them from the sidelines. It was common to walk into a room with children aimlessly drifting about, several children crying, babies lying on their backs unattended or needing noses wiped while the one or two frazzled-looking staff changed nappies or dealt with

arriving parents. It felt like children were being parked out of the way until they were collected again, with staff merely keeping an eye on them from a distance. Children were by necessity left to their own devices. My son cried hysterically every time I left him and I found him flat and listless and tired at the end of the day when I collected him. Heartbreaking.

By extreme contrast, our youngest child currently attends the exceptional community-run, not-for-profit, East West Early Learning centre in Fitzroy, which began operating on or above the current child:staff ratios for this age group well ahead of their introduction. Of the 11 staff working there, eight are diploma qualified or higher and length of employment averages 11.5 years. This is a centre where everywhere you look kids are enthusiastically grouped around an engaged and experienced adult exploring colour, or shape, dance, or imaginative play – you can see the joy of discovery on their face. This is not just pulling a jigsaw or lego out of a box. Activities, drawn from staff experience and training of age requirements and learning stages, are planned and executed with discovery and education in mind. The high staff to child ratio, with frequently 6 adults visible across a small centre that holds 25, means if a child is not interested in a particular activity, there is someone at hand to engage him or her in something else. Staff are warm and engaging with the children, drawing them into the activities. They seem confident and in control. You can plainly see that the children feel safe and at home and cared for. Spaces around the room are reinvented on a daily basis creating a never-ending sense of discovery. The feeling is of passionate staff, working together as a team to do a job that they love, where children are not simply being ‘parked’ but are being given the most precious gift of all – learning. These people are wonderful and their happy camaraderie and enthusiasm for their charges makes it a very special place. My daughter never wants to leave, is full of stories of what she did, is articulate and creative and confident. Attending East West makes us both happy.

Scarred as I am by the ABC Learning experience, I regard it as a very retrograde and dangerous step to wind back the ratios of staff to children in this age group and reduce the requirement for their qualifications.

I passionately disagree with the idea that younger children require less experienced care. If anything, it is this age group of 0-3 that requires the most experienced care as they are not as self sufficient, or able to find their own play, and are just reaching out to learn. They are like sponges, reaching out for so many new experiences and moving on to the next one so quickly. They are highly emotional and easily frustrated and very high maintenance. It takes lots of experience and patience to manage and direct this energy and emotion and inquisitiveness. But everything they see or grasp is a voyage of discovery and learning. If this burgeoning inquisitiveness is met with indifference or a lack of experienced care, it could have a lifetime impact on their keenness to learn and their confidence as learners. Young children need experienced encouragement and a fostering of that inquisitiveness at this age. Properly trained and experienced teachers, who are well supported, are best placed to provide this.

We should not be trading off the welfare of children for cost. Our children are our future and the better they are as learners the better that future will be. Engaged children will be engaged employees of the future and give back in spades in terms of productivity and reduced dependence on welfare. My children are the most precious things in my life and I would happily pay MORE to have my daughter cared for and educated in the way she currently is.

Deeming costs (Recommendation 12.4): I strongly oppose the idea we could use a Medicare model of deemed costs to assess childcare costs. As we know with Medicare, this leaves a gap of often close to 50pc between what the Government 'deems' the cost is and what is actually paid. Government deemed medical cost figures continually lag behind reality and there is every reason to fear that they would do so in the childcare industry also.

Furthermore I fear this would penalize centres which employ qualified, and more costly teachers and would act as a deterrent to them to do so as it would force them to charge more than the deemed fee.

In this era of computerized record keeping, the Government is well able to collect accurate records of fees paid and reimburse. Stay away from deemed fees.

I support the proposal to means test the benefits (although I will lose certainly lose a proportion of my rebate as a result). Assistance should be targeted to those who need it most.

Access to childcare essential for parental return to work: It is essential that any review of the productivity of the Childcare and Early Learning industry also considers the broader impact on the productivity of those of us who use or wish to use the industry.

Returning to work post children is extremely challenging and requires finding a perfect alignment of childcare, parental support and an employer prepared to offer flexible working arrangements. If that happens to be in a field you are experienced in and want to pursue, that is a bonus. (In my view security of employment/flexibility to return after having children is infinitely more important than a few weeks of parental pay.)

Due to long waiting lists at local child care centres after the birth of my daughter in 2010 I was forced to use a mix of family-day care and occasional care. Family day care was effectively twice as expensive as elsewhere as the provider I used was registered, but did not see the point in going through the approval process (nothing in it for her as she did not get any financial advantage and had plenty of children regardless) so I was unable to access the rebate. I had no other option, so to work, I had to pay unrebated fees until I was fortunate enough to be offered a place at East West Early Learning centre.

As I have been unable to find a job I can do part time on a permanent basis since having my third child, I work as a freelance media consultant, running my own business from home. It is impossible for me to work from home with small

children at hand. My ability to be productive, contribute to the economy and pay taxes is entirely dependant on the fact I have my daughter in care at East West. Attending East West facilitates my productivity as I am able to seek and undertake work, confident that I can give it my full attention and commitment to my business as my child is being cared for and educated in a supportive, nurturing and engaging environment, whereby she is, if anything learning MORE than she would in my care.

Related observations

- Rebating childcare fees does not make childcare more affordable to parents, it simply leads to increased fees due to a tolerance for fee rises up to the old price paid.
- Payments direct to centres don't necessarily make for reduced fees
- Chicken before the egg – It is impossible to apply for work without childcare locked in, yet you need to satisfy the work test to get rebates – this unnecessarily penalizes people trying to return to work.

I returned to permanent part time employment after my first child in 2003 (pre rebate) and second child in 2005 (post rebate). The escalation of fees in the wake of the introduction of the rebate was dramatic and far outstripped inflation. Whereas we paid around \$55 a day in 2003, it jumped sharply into the \$80s after the introduction of the rebate and we are now paying \$100 a day. I firmly believe a significant part of this increase has been due to centres taking advantage of the tolerance for fee increases up to the level parents were paying before. There has to be a better model for reducing the cost to parents.

A note on our experience of the **preschool payments**. Our elder boys attended an Early Learning Centre (not East West) where initially the funded pre school places were a little cheaper than the 3-year-old places. Then the centre argued that they needed that money for their programmes and just put the fees up to the same level as the 'unfunded' places. Then they said the 3-year-olds should actually pay more because they could fill the centre with 'funded' four year olds and be financially better off, and so it goes...

I would like to raise an issue with the eligibility for childcare benefits and rebates resting on the **work/study test**. As highlighted above, it is impossible to return to work until childcare is locked in. Only then can you begin to look for work. Therefore there is a period when you may not be working, but of necessity paying childcare. It unreasonably penalizes the person trying to find work if they do not qualify for the rebate until they find work. It also acts against the self employed/own business, such as myself, where I may have gaps between work, but am constantly trying to find new work. I cannot cancel my childcare between jobs and do not know when I will secure the next contract. Some provision for self employed, or actively looking for work should be included within this criteria.

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