

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

As a person who has worked with young children for many years and remembers a time when the early years were mostly overlooked, it is quite heartening to see a 900 page report about early childhood.

Childhood Learning and Development

Much has been done with the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Framework to address children's learning and development needs, but children's development needs also include being able to spend quality time with someone who gives them unconditional love. "Research, both in Australia and overseas, indicates that long hours of care (more than 30 hours per week) . . . were associated with behavioural problems" [page168] I love working with children and watching their progress, but I personally find working with the individual children who spend eleven hours a day in care, heartbreaking. They are weary and bored, regardless of the quality of care. Subsidised hours should be capped at eight or nine hours per day and additional hours should be charged at the true cost to discourage leaving young children in care so long.

Government subsidy of long hours of child care is a hidden subsidy for employers, which allows them to be tyrannical in their demands on employees' time. Elimination of the disincentives for employers to employ more staff for shorter hours might be more cost effective and beneficial to young children than escalating the provision of child care. If there was a labour shortage at the present time, employers would be forced to be more efficient, effective and flexible in their use of people's time in order to attract workers. Government support for child care effectively insulates employers from reality and robs employees of leverage in negotiating for better family-friendly working conditions. "The potential for employer provided child care " is for employers to provide greater opportunity for employees to care for their children themselves.

Options for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare

The extensive financial analysis in the draft is daunting but a factor that appears to have been overlooked is real estate. In some areas, services are not located where they are needed because the price of the physical location would make the service unviable (market forces at work).

The cost of premises is extremely variable, unlike the cost of staff, which is relatively consistent across the country and across care providers, due to the system of award wages. When community based services are taken into account, differences are even greater. Some community based services use buildings that belong to the parent organisation (for example, a church) at no or low cost. Other community initiated services were established years ago with a government grant that paid all the costs of the land, building and equipment. Today these services compete “equally” with services which pay exorbitant leases or services repaying large debts on the building and land.

The commission should consider the model of Defence Housing Australia. Equalisation of capital costs would allow service providers to compete more equitably and help reduce costs. Services could opt in voluntarily initially. An organisation similar to DHA would be able to identify localities where supply is inadequate and build then lease the facility to an operator. This would enable a much broader perspective than is possible by relying on individual entrepreneurs or local community organisations to meet needs.

Safety

In proposing that government subsidy be extended to qualified nannies, there appears to be little discussion of working conditions. I believe that from the point of view of safety, it is highly undesirable for carers to be working alone. This includes family day care, nannies, and au pairs. If a carer is working alone and anything happens to one of the children which requires the carer’s full attention (something as simple as vomiting, for example), the other children become effectively unattended. A carer working alone doesn’t get the meal breaks or toilet breaks that most workers take for granted. Home based carers usually work longer hours than the working parents because the children are still in care while the parent is travelling to and from

work. Having worked many years in Family Day Care before working in Long Day Care, I considered it a wonderful luxury to be able to go home at the end of a shift rather than wait for the last parents to come.

Carers working alone for a family under private arrangements are at risk of harassment and exploitation with little recourse except to resign. The work is lonely and demanding and the children are placed at risk if the carer is not coping with the physical and emotional demands of the work with no one except the children as witnesses.

Alternative model of care

The potential of Family Day Care as the ultimate flexible solution has been lost in the rigid structure which has evolved since its inception. If the three basic elements - carer, location, and transportation - were separated, it would open possibilities to suit diverse situations.

There are people who have areas in their homes, suitable for family day care, who do not want to be care providers and there are qualified carers who do not have suitable premises to work from. A family with a suitable home for family day care, could be paid an amount for providing the premises. The location would not necessarily have to be a home. An educational program could be run by carers in suitable premises (such as a hall) in a rural or other setting where there might not be sufficient numbers for a full scale service.

Two carers, working together, with the usual carer/child ratios, should be the preferred option for safety reasons. The carers would come to work at the location and be paid the same as they would if they were working in a centre. There could be provision for their shifts to be slightly staggered to cover low numbers morning or evening depending upon the needs of the individual families. Parents on shift work could arrange to combine their children at one convenient location with carers who would also be shift workers rather than a carer working overtime.

Someone able to provide transport would not need full childcare qualifications but would be able to pick up a child from school and take them to the carer, avoiding the situation where a younger, sleeping child has to be put in the car for the "school run". A transportation person could also pick up a child from school and take them to after

school activities. A parent could leave their children with carers in the morning but one or even more transportation people could take the older ones on to school or another service. A parent leaving a child with the carers might be able to take other children to school on the way to work and would be credited for the cost of transport against their own childcare expenses.

A central office would manage the allocation of costs, billing and payments. These arrangements happen all the time through informal networks. A flexible Family Day Care service would provide coordination, put a dollar value on such arrangements, and provide oversight on quality of care.

About fifteen years ago, I developed a detailed plan for this type of service but the regulations did not allow for such a radical departure from conventional wisdom. I would be happy to provide further information if there was any interest in the concept. A flexible model such as this could meet the needs for other types of care. People in the workforce can find themselves with responsibilities for older relatives or someone with a disability, as well as children.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on discussion about the future of early childhood services.

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