

About Boundary Lane Children Centre

Boundary Lane Children's Centre (BLCC) is a Long Day Care Centre located at the University of Sydney. BLCC is a not-for-profit centre, with a reputation for providing the highest quality education and care, while maintaining fees at one of the lowest rates in the area for 28 years.

BLCC is licensed to care for up to 62 children within the centre at any one time. We currently have 91 children enrolled over the course of the week, 70% of whom are children of academics and general staff of the University. BLCC has 3 separate rooms:

- A Nursery (0-2 years) with up to 20 children;
- A Toddler room (2-3 years) with up to 16 children;
- A Preschool room (3-5 years) with up to 26 children.

The BLCC team is made up of 16 permanent educators, and 7 casual educators as well as an in-house cook. A notable feature of BLCC is our low staff turnover. Five of our educators have worked with us for more than 15 years; another eight have worked with us for more than 9 years.

About the authors of this submission

I have held the position of Centre Director and Nominated Supervisor at BLCC for 9 years. I have worked in childcare for 16 years, and hold a Master of Education (Early Childhood Education), which I completed in 2005. We have written this submission in consultation with members of our staff, families and board at BLCC. This submission therefore reflects our collective experience, of working for many years directly with children and families in the Early Childhood sector.

Our response to the overall thrust of the Draft Report

We are concerned about a number of recommendations in the Draft Report, as well as the overarching policy thinking that underlies those recommendations. In short, we think that the Commission has placed a high priority on a particular vision of 'access', without thinking through either other priorities (including priorities of people working in the sector), or what the broader impacts of the Commission's vision of care would be for families and particularly for women's choices.

We are very conscious of the importance of access and affordability of good quality childcare. As a centre we constantly strive to provide high quality care while keeping our fees low. We are very conscious that raising fees can impact on parents' capacity to join the workforce. Like many inner city childcare centres, we always have a waiting list for positions in the centre.

In short however, we are very concerned that the Productivity Commission has put excessive priority on access and affordability at the expense of quality.

Not only is this contrary to everything the sector has been working towards for many years, but we also believe that these recommendations would have a number of unanticipated consequences. The Commission's recommendations could exacerbate the problem of high staff turnovers and thus increase costs in unintended ways. We are also concerned that the Commission's vision of care, particularly in the period from birth to three years, is not one that would be shared by many parents. We think that care in the form proposed by the Commission does not present families, and particularly women, with the kind of choice that will encourage them to re-enter the workforce.

We have been extremely disappointed to read the Productivity Commission Draft Report and its recommendations. While the world is moving forward in recognising the critical importance of education in early years, the Commission's suggestions will take the entire field of Early Childhood Education and Care backward for many years. Young children are the future of our country, and indeed the world. They deserve the best possible start to life. Current research proves that education starts before birth. We find it extraordinary that the Commission could treat the first 3 years of life so lightly.

We, the educators, children and families of Boundary Lane Children's Centre hope the Productivity Commission will hear the ECEC field, listen to our concerns and make the necessary amendments to this draft report.

While we have views on many of the Commission's recommendations, we would like to focus on just two, where we have day-to-day experience which the Commission should take into account.

Draft Recommendation 7.2 (reducing qualifications for birth-36 months)

As educators who have accumulated many years' experience working in the sector, we strongly believe that training and qualifications are as important for staff working with children between birth and three years, as for preschool age children. Quality education and care in the very early years are critical. This cannot be provided without adequately qualified teachers and educators.

Within the first three years of life, a significant number of **major** developmental milestones happen, including language development, and the move to physical independence (from rolling, to sitting up, crawling and walking). During this time, research shows that there is exponential growth in neural pathways in the brain. The impacts of this period are lasting, through preschool, primary and secondary education and beyond.

We also know, from experience, that child's desire for and love of learning is present and grows from the very earliest period in their life. In this period between birth and three years, that love of learning can be encouraged and fostered. Quite simply, care at this age is **not baby-sitting**, it is **education**.

A degree in Early Childhood Education involves in-depth study and practice of many aspects of child development (typical and atypical, physical, emotional, social, cognitive, etc) and pedagogy. Educators holding this qualification are therefore in a position to support each child's early development, to identify concerns regarding development, and to work with families from assessment to future transitions. This degree provides the knowledge to work with all children with each of their unique abilities and challenges. Early Childhood Teachers

are also leaders within rooms: their knowledge acquired through study gives them the ability to identify and utilise teaching strategies that can be followed on by Diploma and Certificate III trained educators.

BLCC places a strong emphasis on the qualifications of our staff. We have 3 Early Childhood Teachers (including myself), 8 Diploma-trained educators, and 4 Certificate III educators. Our casual staff are Early Childhood Teachers, or hold Diplomas or Certificate III qualifications, so as to ensure that the children in our care receive the highest quality educational experience at all times. This has been possible with the strong support of our board of management and the University of Sydney. We are conscious that not every centre is as fortunate as us in this regard.

The Commission appears to be putting a lower priority on the goal of pursuing quality at this early age, in order to put an emphasis on access and affordability, with a view to improving women's workforce participation. In our view, the Commission's strategy carries a serious risk of backfiring:

1. The recommendations could have the effect of increasing staff turnover. A key reason staff leave the sector is because of the lack of career progression and recognition for higher qualifications. Recognition for Early Childhood Teachers, of the importance of qualifications and encouragement to acquire further skills and knowledge all play an essential role in attracting and retaining quality teachers and educators. At BLCC we know this from experience: we have an extraordinary track record of retaining quality staff, and we attribute this in part to our acknowledgement and appreciation of their personal skills, as well as their qualifications. It is worth noting that a high staff turnover increases costs in the sector (attracting and training new staff, and covering gaps with casual staff, is expensive), which would undermine the Commission's overall goals.
2. A key goal of the Commission is to improve women's workforce participation. Families, and women in particular, already face a difficult choice: between staying home to provide individualised care, encouragement, and learning opportunities for their children, or joining the workforce and entrusting that care in the important early years to others. We strongly believe that the Commission's recommendations will decrease the quality of education and care. This is going to make the choice between staying home and the returning to work even harder for families, and could well mean that more parents choose to stay home or work part time only, not because care is unavailable but because they cannot or do not trust the level of care provided to their children.

Education is the great enabler and the great equaliser. It is an important role of government to share in the responsibility for ensuring its equal provision. If the government wishes to provide accessible and affordable *quality* services, they should financially support the Early Childhood sector to retain the quality educators. There should be some motivation to pursue further study; there should be acknowledgement of Early Childhood Teachers and the years they have devoted to study.

Draft Recommendation 7.5 (averaged ratios)

The management, staff and parents at BLCC are strong believers in the importance of qualified, committed educators and a low staff-child ratio. We instituted a 1:4 ratio for under 2s age group, long before this was required by regulation. We also have a 1:7-8 ratio for toddlers and preschoolers. Again, this has been possible with the strong support of our board of management and the University. Again, we are conscious that not every centre is as fortunate as us in this regard.

Should ratio changes be implemented, this prospectively would cause more accidents, less one-on-one time and attention for individual children, more physical work and increased emotional workload for teachers and educators. Again, increasing the stress levels for staff is highly likely to contribute to burn out, staff turnover and increased costs for the sector.

Averaged ratios during the week could result in having 20 preschool children with 1 educator, or 16 toddlers with 1 educator, which means a *significant reduction* in education and care and in fact serious work, health and safety risk, both for the children and educators. Based on our experience, we strongly believe even the current minimum ratios are often not adequate, depending on individual children's needs:

- For example, in a nursery, where you may have 20 children between birth and two years, even with 5 educators on hand it can be extremely difficult to maintain a safe, sanitary and sustainable learning environment.
- At a preschool age, the current ratio of 1 educator to 10 children is challenging as it is; should this be lowered, as at current levels the ability to provide adequate prior-to-school learning experiences is at risk.

Averaged ratios will have a particular impact on children who attend only one or two days per week. Reduced individual attention generally has a greater impact on these children, who may therefore feel more alienated and less engaged with activities in the centre and with staff. It is also a very big risk in terms of child protection issues.

Another perhaps unappreciated factor is the cost to communication with parents. The less staff there are, the more difficult it can be for staff and parents to find the time to talk about each child's day and their development.

Finally, reduced staff ratios make it difficult for educators to find the time to talk, plan learning experiences, communicate about individual children and generally ensure continuity and engagement within a room. Educators need the time to talk and to plan for learning experiences for group and individual children.

Summary

In short, while BLCC supports the goals of improved access to childcare, we do not believe that the recommendations in the draft report will achieve the goals set out. Quality, not quantity, of childcare is absolutely critical, and we must find other ways to make childcare accessible, that don't jeopardise the future for young Australians, working women and their families.