



Bunny Cottage Preschool and Long Day Care Centre



6 Kenyon Road Bexley
A.B.N. 27 063 870 833
Ph: 9570 4153 Fax: 9570 1093

Productivity Commission Submission

Background to this submission:

I opened my centre in May 1994.

I have a bachelor of Teaching in Early Childhood

The centre has 29 children, 4 between 0-2years, 8 from 2-3 and 17 from 3-5.

We employ 7 staff:

2 Diploma trained staff, both working part time

3 Cert III, one of which is studying her Diploma, all 3 are full time

1 lady who has worked with us for 15 years, no formal qualifications, part time

Myself, Bachelor of Teaching, full time teaching with 1 office day per week.

I have outlined the issues I feel are relevant to the Productivity Commission Investigation.

Some issues are relevant to my service and some to the Early Childhood industry as a whole. They are not necessarily in order of importance.

I came to day 2 in Sydney, Friday 15th, for the hearings and I feel there were a lot of things missed, ignored or misrepresented by many of the speakers.

1. The suggestion that children from birth to 3 years do not need qualified staff.

Almost all the speakers referenced the importance of brain development in children in this age group. Having to prove this with research insults anyone who has ever worked in a childcare centre, or further still has had their own child.

Someone mentioned that removing the requirement for qualified staff in this age group would result in centres opening up just catering for this age group to cash in on the lack of expense in staff. This will never happen for the same reasons there are few centres who actually take babies – they are hard work and too expensive due to ratios.

I was disgusted to hear a speaker say that ‘group care is stressful for children under three’. Where did she get this information from? What studies is her statement based on?

She also suggested that the ‘Paid Parental Leave’ be extended. This is not enough to run a family on and many families don’t have a choice to just ‘stay home longer’ for fear of like she suggested damaging their child or putting them in a ‘stressful’ situation.

She also mentioned that nannies should be given priority. Please see my section below on Nannies.

2. Nannies being brought into the funding system.

How can anyone suggest that a person with no (real) formal training, little, or possibly no experience, with no supervision be funded to be a child’s primary caregiver outside their immediate family?

I cannot imagine how this type of 'care' could ever meet the high standards of the NQF, especially with respect to safety, supervision, community involvement, educational outcomes and child focused program?

I feel undermines the brilliant work that is being done in all regulated, quality childcare centres throughout the country.

This is the age where children most need trained, experienced and closely supported staff. It is the age where children can:

- experience their first life threatening allergic reaction
- have their first febrile convulsion
- fall over as they are learning to walk
- have developmental delays and learning difficulties become apparent.
- Begin all the foundations of learning they will use for their whole life.

The suggestion funding should support, and encourage, children to be cared for in a home environment in a Nanny type situation is I believe a misuse of funding that is needed and could be used for children being cared for in safe environments with qualified supported staff with high provisions for health and safety.

Suggestions:

Additional funding for centres who provide care for children from Birth to 24 months to encourage centres to provide care for these children, opening up more positions for them.

3. **Making small centres unviable and my story**

I opened my centre because I wanted to provide a high quality service for the children in my local area and to make the most of my Early Childhood qualifications. It is a family centre. My mother does the books and the pays. My father does the maintenance and general handyman roles around the centre.

They do all this for NO FINANCIAL BENEFIT. They do not get paid for their jobs.

I am a 3 year trained Early Childhood Teacher with 20 years' experience. Last year I earned \$46 000. Many weeks I just don't get paid.

Throughout the 20 years we have been opened we have always been rated High Quality and recently 'Meeting National Quality Standard'. I employ 1 staff over ratios so we always have higher ratios than needed.

We opened a small centre because I believe children under 5 years should be in smaller centres where they can be close to their siblings and the staff can get to know the families well. Our new families always comment on the atmosphere of our centre, how it's a 'home like' environment.

Over the years the increases in staffing, wages, regulations and overall service delivery responsibilities have caused many centres my size to simply close their doors. I believe this has been a huge loss to our industry.

My service is virtually unsellable. Therefore if I was to sell who would be a prospective buyer?

- A company or business investor: It doesn't make any profit (despite what many members of the sector claim about 'private' centres) so they would not be interested. Added to that from what I hear finding an ECT to work in a small centre is virtually impossible so they would not be able to meet their licencing requirements.

- A family with and ECT to make it a family business. With my earnings of \$46 000 who would be willing to pay \$300 000+ for a business that will be lucky to pay them a wage?

So at the end of the day when I want to retire or leave the industry my 20+ years will have been for no other reason than to have taken pride in my ECT role and the children and families whose lives I have been lucky to share. It won't have been for profit or for wages or for social recognition. There are not many like me left.

Council centres are closing their doors because providing high quality care is expensive and parents can only bear the ever increasing costs for so long. I have no idea how services in lower socio economic areas survive. The regulatory responsibilities are the same and the operating costs are the same but the family ability to pay fees to make the service viable are severely limited.

At some point the Government of our Nation MUST realise that Early Childhood Education is imperative and integral responsibility that must be taken seriously from a funding perspective. Families cannot afford to keep paying for wage rises, regulation changes, ratio changes, and skill upgrades etc.

4. Ratio change from 1:8 to 1:5 for two year olds.

We always took 5 children from birth to 24 months with 1 staff person. When the ratios changed in 2011 we went to 8 babies and had 2 staff. This **did not** make the care these children received higher or better quality. It actually made it worse. Even with two staff it was more hectic, more difficult for staff to manage and I felt did not provide the quality of care I want to provide. So we now have 4 babies. 1 family has lost its position in an age group that is almost impossible to find care for. The remaining families pay a higher rate to cover this loss i.e.: they pay 20% more for each child to cover the loss of the one child's place.

So with this in mind the suggestion that going to 1:5 for 2 year olds will possibly do the same. Some services will, if local government restrictions allow them to, go from 8 children with 1 educator (under the current 1:8 ratio requirements for 2-3 year olds) to 10 therefore placing these children in a group of 10 with two educators (under the ratios scheduled to commence 1 January 2016)

Others, like myself, will cut back from the existing eight children to five. Parents will pay more and 3 children will not have childcare. This is the immediate result of this change. No amount of forward planning will make any difference to this outcome.

5. Cert 111 for all staff and staff Qualifications

There should be still room for people with experience to be counted as valuable staff.

While I believe all *new staff* who want to take on an Early Childhood career should have some formal training, this requirement will result in many long term, often older, and good dedicated workers to leave the industry. At our centre our educator with no formal qualifications will resign, she believes her 15 years in the industry and 3 grown children is more important and valuable than any Cert III, I agree with her.

I have two staff who have a Diploma. Both are lovely people and dedicated workers but they also have English as a second language. This affects their confidence and their ability to make some decisions as their language barrier often gets in the way. So working *with* my staff member who has been with us for 15 years and my educator who is studying the Diploma they work *together* in my absence to make important decisions. STAFF QUALIFICATIONS ARE NOT THE BE ALL AND END ALL. Centres must be allowed to have a mix of experiences, qualifications and skills.

6. Work Test for all families

This will have a devastating effect of families, children and centres.

Children will be disadvantaged as this concept implies that early childhood education has no value in itself, it's only necessary for children whose families have *no choice* but to go to work. It undervalues the quality care and education that all children should have the opportunity to experience and enjoy.

Parents will suffer as they will not be able to place their children in a quality facility for no other reason than to give them the opportunity to develop social skills and experience all the wonderful educational outcomes that Early Childhood facilities offer. Many families find ECEC a godsend

when a new baby enters the family. It allows the mother time to settle the new baby in, and the older child to continue with their peer relationships and their education in their Early Childhood facility.

Centres in areas where families have low employment rates will not be able to offer care to these children and this will make many of them (who are already struggling with remaining viable due to high running costs) unable to remain open.

Throughout the NQF there is reference to quality and education and this recommendation completely undermines this philosophy. It implies these things are *only* important for children whose families *have to work or study*.

I have surveyed my families and found expected results that indicate this recommendation will have negative effects on all concerned:

If the work/study test came in 21.75% of my families would NOT fit into the test criteria.
Of these families who do not meet the criteria 58.82% would not be able to pay full fees and would have to withdraw their child from childcare.
11.76% would have to drop back their days of attendance.
Result: Viability of EC Education facilities would be jeopardy. This means that jobs will be lost for EC educators, and of course the follow on to all the services connected with them.
Asked to mark the reasons they believe early childhood education should be funded for all children (they could tick more than 1) For my child's social development 100% For my child's emotional development 82.61% For my child's early learning 82.61%
Evaluation: All families believe that EC education should be funded and supported by government for the benefit of all children, not just to provide them somewhere to go while parents <i>have to work</i>.

Recommendations/options:

- ECT Shortage: Small centres (or centres who are unable to access an ECT e.g. rural centres) can employ ECT on a *consultant basis*. They would have the responsibility to oversee the program and service delivery on a regular basis and ensure the Regulations are being met. They will then be able to be paid a higher rate than what centres can currently pay on a full time basis and the ECT could factor in some of the flexibility and conditions they may receive from the School system (where we currently loose so many graduates to)
- 1:5 ratio change for 2 year olds. Realise that this change will result in increased fees for families and less positons for children, two outcomes that I believe are unacceptable. Are we absolutely sure the change will increase the 'quality' of care enough to justify the definite negative results? This change must be more carefully considered and contingency plans developed to save positons for children and costs to families.
- Value *experience* in existing staff. Reconsider the requirements for long term experienced staff to have to get Cert 111.
- Continue to allow all children access to some form of ECEC regardless of the reasons the families are choosing care, not locking out those children whose families do not meet the work study test.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

Sharon Graham, Bachelor of Teaching ~ Early Childhood.