

Submission to the Productivity Commission's Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

This submission is a personal account of trying to find the right childcare to meet my family's needs with recommendations for Government policy and funding decisions in relation to Childcare and Early Childhood Learning to better support Australian families.

Nannies

I believe the Government should provide the same financial assistance to families who choose to have a nanny as it does for families who choose to use a childcare centre. There are many reasons families choose a nanny – I choose to have a nanny for my children because I strongly believe that babies and children under three are less stressed and happier with a nanny caring for them in their own home than in a childcare centre. I use a nanny for my five year old because he found childcare centres very stressful and upsetting. I have used both services. Nannies provide dedicated one on one care to young babies and children who need lots of care and attention in a familiar environment and in my experience the turnover is much lower so children are able to develop secure attachments with consistent caregivers.

I work because I enjoy my work, it is important to me, and I have no leave left to enable me to stay home any longer with my children. I am not wealthy – after tax I earn \$1117 per fortnight of which I spend around \$825 on the nanny which covers only my working hours and short travel to and from work. I am fortunate that my husband can cover our living costs but even so we are spending more than we are earning and will continue to do so at least until my daughter is three, when I will send her to a preschool for some of the week.

The cost of a nanny is prohibitive to most people regardless of whether they would prefer it for childcare. I can't really afford a nanny either but I have one so I can keep my job and because I feel very strongly that it is the best available option for my children.

Nannies should not be only for the wealthy.

Regulating childcare

I understand that the main reason that childcare centres receive so much more financial support from the Government than nannies is because they are easier to regulate. This does not address different families needs or the best outcome for all children. It is a one size fits all policy and forces many families to use childcare centres regardless of how well their children are coping in that environment.

I believe that it should be possible to devise a workable policy that enables families to choose the childcare that is best for their circumstances and their children. The rebate should be the same amount per hour or per day of

childcare regardless of whether it is a nanny or a childcare centre or some other form of childcare.

In terms of regulations/guidelines for nannies to meet the requirements for rebates - they should not be so difficult to achieve that it is difficult to find a nanny that meets the requirements. Some credit must be given to parents to choose someone who will take good care of their children. My nanny is wonderful and experienced with a police check, good driving record and excellent referees but she is not formally trained.

I received about 40 responses to my ad for a nanny and only three had a certificate three in childcare services or greater relevant qualifications. Of these I would not have felt comfortable leaving my children with one of them, one cost too much and one was not available when I needed her. Most of the others were studying at university and looking for part time work. Most of them would have been perfectly suitable as a nanny and at least as good as, if not better, than most of the carers I have come across in childcare centres.

The requirements to be eligible for funding should be reasonable and minimal so that children's safety and wellbeing are covered but so that it is workable and people are readily able to find nannies that meet the requirements.

Childcare Centres

Childcare centres and family day care are the only affordable paid childcare in Australia because of Government subsidies.

However, childcare centres do not meet the needs of all children or all families, and family day care often involves unacceptable child/carer ratios as well as often being unobtainable. Family day care seems to be over-regulated so that it is sometimes like child care at home, rather than a family home. These should not be the only affordable paid childcare.

My experience with childcare centres:

My son is a well behaved, sweet, kind, intelligent and sensitive boy. In order to feel comfortable and secure in an environment he needs to build trust and confidence in an adult carer who is his 'safe' person.

When he was three I wanted to give him the benefits of socialisation and stimulation of a pre-school educational environment. Ideally I wanted to send him to a playschool for three year olds or school hours centre rather than long day daycare. I think the hours of long day care are very long for young children and if it is not necessary for work/family reasons then shorter hours are highly preferable. However, I wasn't able to get him in to the very few places that do this because of long waiting lists. So I visited most of the long daycare childcare centres in my area – about ten. Of these, there was one absolute stand out – it had wonderful carers, very low staff turnover and a lovely physical environment with lots of different spaces for the children. Of course, the waiting list was so

long I could not get a place for my son. So I put my son in another childcare centre.

Childcare centre one:

This childcare centre was also very popular and had long waiting lists *because of its convenient location*. I was able to secure a place for my son because of preferences for placements through my work. While I noticed there were a couple of lovely, enthusiastic, experienced carers in other rooms in the centre, in my son's room the carers appeared lazy and uninterested. They appeared to take the view that they were there primarily for emergencies and safety. For example, while I was there helping my son to adjust they left to cry a little girl who's parent had just left.

The carers in my son's room barely acknowledged my son when he arrived in the mornings and made no effort to engage him or make him feel comfortable and secure. He was not able to build the trust and confidence he needed with an adult carer.

Even though I had advised the centre that he was a fussy eater and gave them a list of simple foods they had readily available that he would eat, they did not always provide something that he would eat at snack time.

Even though he no longer napped they insisted that he had to lie down on a mat and *do nothing* for an hour at nap time – they would not allow him to do quiet play in a corner.

One day in his first couple of weeks when he was not lining up properly to wash his hands for lunch one of the carers spoke to him quite harshly and raised his voice (for my sensitive son this was very upsetting). The carer had made no effort to help him line up or to explain how to line up properly given my son was new to childcare and to the concept of lining up – and did not take into account the fact that my son was extremely hungry by this time having had no snack earlier in the day. To me this was unacceptable behaviour from a 'carer' and showed a complete lack of understanding of children. When lunch did come it was one solid mass of horribly overcooked pasta. This would not have been served to any adult or older child and should not have been served to these children.

After a couple of weeks at the centre my son came to me upset because the carers kept asking him to put things in and out of his locker – even though they hadn't bothered to assign him a locker.

This was not a centre in which I felt comfortable leaving my child for the day so I moved him. I know many people who have and have had their children at this childcare centre and despite its long waiting list and high demand not a single person has spoken highly of the quality of care or recommended it beyond its convenient location.

Childcare centre two:

Childcare centre two was, in my opinion, the second best in my area after the outstanding one I couldn't get a place in. I was lucky to be able to secure a place for my son – only because he was older and some space had just come available because of children leaving for Government preschools. Had he been any younger I would not have been able to get a place for him.

The staff were lovely, the environment was lovely, the food was great, and at nap time children had the choice of napping or quiet play. The staff were attentive and interested and caring and creative and enthusiastic. Children were engaged and included and made to feel safe and over time my son was able to build trust and confidence in the carers.

However, less than six months after we arrived the centre changed management and the centre's new management and its staff changed dramatically for the worse.

Childcare centre three:

While I acknowledge that there will always be a few bumps in any transition of this kind, the group that took over the management of the centre was very experienced and manages a lot of other centres and should have been able to manage the transition better.

The first thing the management did was to rearrange the rooms so the children were no longer just surrounded by unfamiliar faces but in an unfamiliar space where they knew no longer knew where things were.

Five of the first six days my son attended the centre with the new management I was expected to drop him off with a complete stranger – a completely new strange carer every day for five days. Not only were they different carers every time – but most did not have any training or experience or understanding about transitions for children.

For example, on one of these five mornings when we arrived the only carer in the room (a complete stranger to us) was busily taking photos of two children playing on a mat while nearby two boys and a girl were physically fighting and the girl was getting very upset, and another mother had just arrived with her little girl hiding behind and clinging to her skirt tails. At no stage did the 'carer' address the children fighting, nor did she try and engage the girl clinging to her mother's skirt to help her to settle in to the room. These are the most basic requirements a carer should be meeting.

My son was not able to build the trust and confidence he needed with staff in this centre. He found all these changes very difficult and after persisting for some time I had to take him out of the centre because he was unable to settle and was finding attending quite traumatic.

Summary on childcare centres

There is a vast difference in the quality of childcare centres. My son is not a difficult child, he does not have special needs, and he was not the only child struggling to cope in the childcare centre environment. I feel strongly that babies are usually better off being cared for in their own home with a loving, dedicated carer than in a childcare centre where carers have a number of babies to look after, where illness spreads easily, and where carers turnover frequently. I do not think that babies *need* socialisation or 'education' in a formal setting. I think that they need love and security and they need their needs met quickly and caringly – which is best done by a dedicated carer.

However, not all families have the option of other forms of childcare because there are no other affordable options for childcare and it is very difficult (almost impossible) to get places in the few really well run centres.

The childcare centre industry is obviously straining under the rapid expansion and demand of a one size fits all funding policy. The solution is to widen the options and choice of affordable childcare for families.

Conclusion

Policy change and related funding is urgently needed to support Australian families fund their childcare needs and to meet the needs of children. I believe the Government should provide equivalent funding (same \$ per day or hour) for a range of childcare options including at a minimum nannies, family day care and childcare centres. The regulation of nannies and family day care should not be so onerous as to make it difficult to meet the requirements for funding support.

Other options which would be very worthwhile the Government considering are: funding support for three year old playschools (like those in the ACT) to make more places available for care for three year olds who do not require long daycare but would benefit from the stimulation and socialisation of these environments and allow their parents to work at least part-time; and, more flexible visas for nannies from overseas to come and live and work in Australia.