

I am writing this submission in my capacity as a working mother with three small boys currently under 3 years of age. I'd like to address the following issues raised in the scope of this Inquiry:

- 1 – The impact of childcare on workforce participation
- 2 – The impact of childcare on early learning and development
- 3 – Access to quality childcare
- 4 – Affordability of childcare

The impact of childcare on workforce participation

I believe the **major impediment** to female workforce participation is the lack of quality childcare options for women who wish to work. It is not the need for extra maternity leave payments or more flexible working conditions (although both would help – they aren't the **most** pressing issue).

When we had our first son nearly 3 years ago, we knew it wasn't going to be a 'cheap' experience so things like the initial set-up for him and the time I had off work was planned for and manageable. What we didn't expect is that it was going to be so challenging to find a place for him in a quality childcare centre when we felt it was time for him to be cared for outside the home. We managed by caring for him as much as possible ourselves (mostly me as the lower income earner and happy to be home with him as a small baby) and then later using nannies and babysitters at home as I tried to do more hours in the office. While the caregivers we had were generally loving and focussed on learning, it was a little hit and miss. It also meant a considerable financial burden which most people can't afford as well as stress when the caregiver was sick or requested holidays.

Our search for formal childcare commenced just after his first birthday when we discovered I was pregnant with twins. It was in short a nightmare as many suburbs in Newcastle have a serious lack of childcare centre places. While sites like www.mychild.gov.au would show places, when I'd actually enquire I'd find they actually had nothing suitable or regular. And then it is a waiting game of putting names on lists, trying to call without coming off as an annoyance hoping that by some miracle someone had pulled their child out that day and you would call at the right moment before they consulted the wait list and emailing constantly. Most of the mums I knew were doing the same thing so it effectively becomes a race against your friends.

Fortunately we were able to secure 2 days a week from his 2nd birthday due to a new centre opening. I put the twins on a wait-list at 3 months of age and now just after their first birthday I've been able to secure them 2 days also at the same great centre, meaning I have been able to return to work for longer periods. Many of my friends and other working mums I have met have not been so 'lucky' and face even longer periods out of the workforce.

As a highly educated woman (I have degrees in law and commerce and an MBA) I feel I can make considerable contribution to the workforce. In particular, my husband and I run a large medical clinic in Newcastle and there is a clear nexus between the efficiency of our business and me being able to work in it. While we would not want any of our kids in long day care 5 days a week, to not be able to access even 2 days initially prevented me from returning to work in the office as much as we would have liked.

The impact of childcare on early learning and development

Our main focus in obtaining spots for our boys in childcare was to facilitate my return to work, however we still cared greatly that they would be in caring environments and getting the right amount of social interaction. We probably focussed less on the quality educational experiences they would be offered as the kids are all quite young but this has been a very positive outcome of their attendance. Particularly in the case of our older son, we are often thrilled to him recalling new books the teachers have read with the class or to see him show off craft work and describe what it is and how he made it. Our centre links activities back to particular objectives and while it isn't a formal, 'classroom' style, we like that the centre isn't just 'baby sitting' but learning through play. As parents it is easy to fall into the rut of activities and while we try to do new things during our time together as a family, we regard the extra stimulation from childcare as very positive.

As our boys start preparing for school in the next few years, we feel the experiences in the centre will be valuable in that transition.

Access to quality childcare

As I outlined above, access to quality childcare was a significant challenge. Most centres in inner Newcastle have very long wait lists for children under 2 and it is now at the point that unless you register before the birth of a child that you don't have a chance. From talking to the management of our current centre, it is clear I would have been unable to secure a spot for my twins had their older brother not already been going due to the sibling priority as now the centre has been operating for a couple of years the demand and waitlists far outstrip supply.

Another professional woman I know who also has 3 small children has not been so lucky. As a result her return to work has to be limited to 1 day a week in an area of high demand health services. So she misses out and so does the community.

I don't believe it is right that luck effectively determines a woman's ability to return to her chosen profession.

Affordability of childcare

For our family with 3 children in childcare, the cost is significant - **\$297 per day** which would be completely unaffordable without the 50% childcare rebate. I urge the government to continue to offer this rebate as it is a major element in the decision to return to work. Of course, additional rebates for those working more days per week would be better, especially at the \$7500 cap is regularly reached by parents working full-time.

I was dismayed late last year that the government had decided not to deliver the promised increases in funding to centres to assist in raising wages and lowering ratios for staff. For centres to remain affordable for the majority of working parents while offering best practice care standards, this subsidy should be available.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I hope that experiences like mine help the understanding of the impact of childcare on working mothers, fathers and their children.