

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

Firstly I would like to thank the Australian Government for taking the time and resources to look into such a crucial subject for the future of all Australians. Whether you have young children or not the quality, availability and affordability of childcare affects our society. From parents who need to earn a wage that ensures basic needs are provided for, equality for women who are often the lower paid of a couple having an opportunity to contribute to the provision of their family and the continuation of her career, to businesses who need people with families to be able to commit to regular work hours for the sake of productivity and Australian children who deserve to have care, development and education that is competitive with other developed countries around the world.

I feel strongly about the fact that Australia's early childhood learning right through to school age children are putting up with a system that may have worked 30+ years ago when most mothers stayed at home to care for their children. The fact that children over 5 years old have school hours from 9am to 3pm with 13 weeks a year holidays makes it virtually impossible for both parents to have a career that isn't interrupted and/or lower paid.

We are lucky enough to have our son in a childcare that is clean, caring and educational. However, I know of many mothers who have not been able to return to work as they cannot get their children enrolled in a centre as there are not enough places. It is difficult and expensive for new centres to open and, from my limited understanding, there are no longer the tax incentives that existed many years ago to assist with private childcare centres that we all relied on. I know of mothers who have lost their workplace positions that were held for them while on maternity leave because they cannot return to work. The family also struggles financially as any savings or maternity allowances run out.

My situation is that I am the main wage earner and I must work fulltime. We do not live luxuriously, have a small block of land with an average size house in the far outer suburbs of Canberra. We do not go on holidays or eat out. Next year, when our son starts school, my husband will probably have to reduce his hours as school finishes at 3pm.

Not only is there the issue of families struggling to provide a modest but sufficient income for their family's needs but also the affect this has on the broader community and the prosperity of Australia. We must grow-up into a productive nation where we can all contribute to the workforce. We need workers to be skilled and experienced in their career. There is always reports of skill shortages in Australia. Maybe if we as a nation support families by having a modern childcare service there would be many parents who could remain in the workforce and grow in their career choice and continue corporate knowledge they hold?

Businesses need to be confident that they can hire the best person regardless of whether that person needs to take 13 weeks leave a year for their school age children or only work a couple of days a week as they need to juggle children, limited hours of childcare, friends and family who may help the family.

It is not just the care of children that should be considered but their education and development. Children in Australia are not expected to be educated until pre-school or even kindergarten. This is not good enough. It may only be in the ACT, but in this Territory Preschools, where formal education starts to prepare children for school, operates 2 to 3 days per week, 9am to 3pm. How can a family be expected to cater for these hours and keep paying the huge living costs the ACT demands?

There are not enough childcare facilities; hours of the public education system is not commensurate with life in 2014; education for young children, ie under 5, is not seen as important; in relation to the fees that are charged I don't believe Childcare Workers are paid anywhere near enough for their chosen career (this also hints that Australia does not hold this career in high enough esteem); grandparents are forced to give up their time to help with childcare which takes some pressure off the system but does not consider the carer's needs; and so many more consequences of an inadequate and archaic childcare system that badly needs an overhaul.

The Sunday Telegraph (Sydney) had an article (2 Feb 2014) that stated the cost of childcare has increased by 50% in 6 years, and nearly 1 in 3 Australian families with children under 12 use childcare. These are huge figures. In 2011-2012 the Gillard Government reduced the cap on the amount of childcare rebate to \$7500 per year while Centrelink still espouses that the rebate covers 50% of childcare. Ummmm..... \$7500 is not even close to half!! We pay \$890 per fortnight. This is very normal in Canberra, whether the childcare centre is public or private, and some centres were charging more than the one which had a space for our son (another problem: parents can't choose the centre best for the child and family but has to accept the centre that can fit their child in) with many then asking you to provide some food, nappies and other provisions on top of their huge fees.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I sincerely hope that the Commission does look into this issue in a complete and balanced way with the view to bring Australian society and families into 2014 and beyond.

Regards

Lisa