

Productivity Commission into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

We wish to make a submission to the Productivity Commission based on our experiences as Early Childhood Educators in a sessional kindergarten located in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. We work in a highly diverse community, culturally and socio-economically. We work with many children who have English as a second language and we work with a number of children with additional needs. We run a play based program, based around the children's interest. We have a large and stimulating outdoor play space, with many natural features, this is heavily utilised by the children.

There are a number of issues which we would like to focus on:

Staff child ratio: For many children attending 3 year old kindergarten program or 4 year old kindergarten program, this is the first time they are involved in an experience independently of their family. Some children settle easily, develop relationships with staff and their peers and are quickly involved in play experiences. Other children find it much more difficult to separate from parents and become involved in play experiences and relationship development. There may be many children in a group, who find it difficult to settle at the beginning of the year and need a lot of staff support to adjust to their new situation. Some children will initially settle and later in the year become unsettled. All these children need a lot of staff support and individual attention to settle at kindergarten. If there are only 2 staff in a large group of children, one staff member may be dealing with a number of tearful children; leaving the other staff member to work with 20 or more children. So low staff child ratios are really important to work with the children's emotional wellbeing throughout the year.

At our service, we have a number of children with English as a second language. Some bi-lingual children come to us with good English language skills and others will come to us with no spoken English. Kindergarten provides a wonderful opportunity for staff to work with these children and build up their English vocabulary and language skills. Once again a low staff child ratio is needed to ensure this important individual work can be achieved.

Our service also works with many children with additional needs (typically children with intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder). A low staff child ratio enables staff to work with these children developing their language, social and play skills, and self-care.

Finally all the children in kindergarten group, benefit from low staff child ratios; children who are experiencing anxiety, children from culturally diverse backgrounds, children with additional needs AND all the other children in the program will benefit from staff involvement whilst they are developing their play skills, social relationships, language skills, capacity to problem solve and negotiate, emotional self-regulation. How can a group of 4 year olds work out who can wear the 'Princess' dress or use the best digger without staff support and intervention?

Qualifications: We see it as imperative that staff are highly educated and continue to be involved in professional development and education. Kindergartens and childcare services need to employ University trained teachers to develop, deliver and evaluate programs, to work with children and families and to liaise with other services. As kindergarten can be the first service which children access independently of their families, early childhood teachers can be the first professionals to pick up issue in the child's development, and then make appropriate referrals. It is also important that the rest of the staff are well educated and trained to Diploma or Certificate level with courses focussing on programming, assessing and documenting children's learning and development and working with families.