

Petra Stock - Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

21 February 2014

I make this submission as an environmental engineer, and working mum with of two children, one aged 4 and the other aged 1. My first child has been in childcare, for three days a week at our local council-run (long daycare) centre since about 18 months of age. This child has recently started kindergarten. My second child, who is one year old, has recently started childcare, two days a week at the same council-run long daycare centre.

- ***The contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development***

Every time I hear a mother, or a newspaper report assess the cost of childcare solely against the mother's earnings it makes me cringe.

The cost of childcare comes out of the *joint* household income, not simply the mother's. Often people fail to mention the earnings of the primary breadwinner in this discussion, which is patently ridiculous.

I especially hate it when someone says something along the lines of 'it is barely worth me going back to work'. My answer to that would be, 'if you don't think it is worth it, then don't do it'.

Even though I barely make enough to cover the cost of childcare and kindergarten for our children, it is absolutely worth it to me and my husband, and our children. As we have no grandparents living in Victoria, childcare provides me with the opportunity to pursue my career, to take up interesting volunteer opportunities, and to generally use my brain and stay sane. When my first child started childcare, it provided my husband with this opportunity (at the time I was the primary breadwinner). Childcare workers do an important and demanding job providing parents with this opportunity and we value their work extremely highly.

In relation to workforce participation, I wish to point out that childcare:

1. Is a significant contributor the workforce participation and productivity of *both* parents, and potentially *grandparents* (by providing an alternative care option for parents).
2. Is in itself a significant employer of skilled workers, particularly women. Their work satisfaction levels, wages and conditions are critical (and must not be eroded) to keep these people working in the sector, especially given families' reliance on childcare.
3. Standards affect the future productivity of those children who are in care. With high quality education and care provided in these years being a significant contributor to a child's literacy, numeracy, social skills and therefore future prospects and productivity.

In my mind, the only way to make childcare cheaper is:

1. provide more government subsidies (already quite high, I wouldn't ask for more)
2. reduce wages and conditions of workers (already extremely low for the work they do)
3. reduce regulations (these act as an important safety net when things go wrong, and should absolutely not be touched)
4. reduce or remove the National Quality Framework (an important change to ensure childcare is not simply regarded as child-minding).

None of these options represents an acceptable step in my mind.

- ***current and future need for childcare in Australia, particularly given changes in work patterns, early learning needs, childcare affordability and government assistance***

Cost

The *cost* of childcare is not too high.

Consider the resources needed to care for very young children – providing safe accommodation, managing childrens' high emotional needs, toileting, nappy changes and sleeptimes, cooking and serving healthy food, and managing complex health needs (anaphylaxis in particular). In addition, many childcare centres (like ours) provide high quality early education and stimulating activities for the children in their care.

Our childcare costs about \$90 a day per child. Most people leave their child in for a minimum of eight hours to cover a full working day (usually more to cover transport to and from work). This equates to \$11 or less an hour. This is not a large sum to cover the requirements of a child under 5. Further, most people receive the childcare rebate which covers about 40% of the cost, so parents are really only paying around \$6 an hour. By comparison, hiring a babysitter (who one does not expect to provide any form of education, nor to provide food, nappies, accommodation) costs a minimum of \$25 an hour.

The cost of childcare should actually be higher. The job of caring for young children is an extremely important.

I am uncomfortable with how the Terms of Reference for this inquiry describe the sector as a 'market' for childcare. I struggle to see how quality childcare can be provided in a for-profit market environment. The childcare sector should be seen as equating more closely to schools, where even private schools are required to be not-for-profit.

- ***options - within existing funding parameters - for improving the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families with diverse circumstances***

Access

One problem with the current system, particularly in the inner city where we live is *access* to childcare.

There is a huge demand for childcare places in the inner city, which is not met by the available centres in close proximity.

It took eighteen months on a waiting list to secure a place for our first child. This is quite a long time.

Choice of centre only operates in terms of which waiting lists you choose to go on. Once your child is accepted into a centre (and you subsequently turn down other places) it is very difficult to move centres if you experience problems.

There is limited scope (well none really) to move your child if you experience any issues within the centre. We have firsthand experience of this. We had problems with one of the carers in our centre, and if these problems were not resolved, we were faced with the taking our child out of childcare and potentially another long wait to move to another centre.

I do not necessarily regard this limited access and lack of choice as a huge problem, except that it reinforces the need for effective regulation and oversight of the sector through the measures outlined in the National Quality Framework. The lack of choice either forces parents to focus on resolving problems within the centre (the approach we took), or possibly simply putting up with problems because they have no other childcare options.

- ***the impacts of regulatory changes, including the implementation of the National Quality Framework, on the childcare sector over the past decade.***

I fully support the implementation of the National Quality Framework, regardless of the flow-on costs to parents and/or the government. The framework is an absolutely essential development and should not be wound back or delayed in any manner.

In our local council-run centre I have been incredibly impressed with the philosophy and educational program and practice. In 2013, staff ran a whole program around plants and the natural world, which brought in age-appropriate English, maths and science skills. Children planted seeds and watched them grow, they experimented with cut flowers in water versus water with food dye, experienced and described the different textures, smells and look of different plants and seeds, and continued this theme in their art and craft. I am an engineer, and I was blown away when discussing this program with one of the carers, who explained to me how they had thought about explaining complex scientific concepts such as xylem and phloem to the children. Another theme that inspired my child was around volcanoes, where the children constructed a volcano over several weeks, and during this time read both fictional and nonfiction works about volcanoes.

These types of activities and learning experiences foster a love of learning in both the children and staff, and I see firsthand how it gives my child something to look forward to every day, every week. Without a doubt it makes the job more satisfying for the staff who can take the initiative to plan and implement such programs and see the children learning and developing as a result.

Further, when I was going through the orientation process with my second child, I was able to witness firsthand how relentless the day is for the staff and how small the breaks are. The commitment of staff to the children often saw the carers' breaks be delayed or shortened, for example if they were needed to help get a child to sleep.

The carers are absolutely essential in all of this. We are basically *lucky* that such high quality people are willing to work in our childcare centres for what I understand is a pretty meager wage. Any attempt to reduce the wages or conditions of the carers, or reduce the scope of their role in education should be resisted at all costs.

Childcare workers are professionals who should be treated with admiration and respect, and rewarded with wages more fitting of the important role that they play. They should be regarded as early childhood educators with a critical role to play in children's education. I personally would be more than happy to pay double the fees for childcare if these were directed to improving the wages and conditions of staff.

The National Quality Framework is a critical element in ensuring *quality care* for children, and importantly, *satisfying careers* for those in the childcare sector. I have met one impressive trainee at our centre who was at the time planning a career around the introduction of the National Quality Framework. However I was so disappointed this trainee is now looking into other career options after the Abbott Government's pre-election commitment to delay the introduction of the National Quality Framework.

Childcare should not be simply child-minding. I am aware of private centres where children are allowed to watch movies or television. This happened once in our centre, and I was absolutely appalled. But, thanks to the excellent leadership and management at our centre it was dealt with and will not be repeated.

Adequate regulations and strong quality assurance and accountability systems are also critical. Last year we had some concerns about one of the staff. Speaking with other parents, I quickly found this was not an isolated case. When I raised this issue with the centre management and it was not resolved as I thought appropriate – I was able to pursue the issue through the various levels of management within council as well as state government I was able to pursue this issue to a satisfactory outcome.

Regulation and oversight is particularly important for these very young children who have often have limited communication skills (especially for under threes) and confidence to speak out against adults in positions of power.

Regulations and systems of oversight are in place for when things go wrong. These aspects of the system are critical given the limited ability to move centres, parents reliance on childcare for their work and the very young children in care.