

Wednesday, 2 July 2008

Productivity Commission
Inquiry Into Paid Maternity, Paternity & Paternal Leave
GPO Box 1428
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry
Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave 2008**

I write further to the recent call for public submissions on a national, Government funded, paid maternity leave scheme.

I ask for consideration to be given that maternity leave be paid at the minimum wage for at least 14 weeks including the compulsory 9% superannuation contribution and an additional top up of this payment to fully replace the income of working women earning more than the minimum wage.

I believe that the Australia Federal Government needs to address this issue as a priority.

Available data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency Annual Survey supports a conclusion that a majority of Australian women workers do not have access to paid maternity leave.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 34% of women were able to use paid maternity leave to take time off work for the birth of their child, with greater prevalence in the public sector than the private sector.

Paid maternity leave is usually available to highly skilled professional workers. Very few unskilled women workers are able to access this form of support. I believe that all Australian women should have the right to paid maternity leave.

Existing support measures are not an adequate alternative to a sound system of paid maternity leave, as they do not serve to subsidise income around the birth of a child.

I would also like to bring to your attention the issues surrounding the appropriateness of early childhood care by including a few of the findings from a study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development - Negative Effects of Early Childhood Care.

Two studies published in 2003 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, build on evidence that those children who spend long hours in child care may experience more stress and are at increased risk of becoming overly aggressive and developing other behaviour problems.

One of the studies found that the more time children spent in child care, the more likely they were to be disobedient and have trouble getting along with others, though it suggested that factors like a mother's sensitivity to the child's needs could moderate that outcome.

This report is from the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, the largest long-term study of child care in the United States, which was undertaken by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a branch of the National Institutes of Health.

The other study found that in children younger than 3, levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, rose in the afternoon during full days they spent in day care, but fell as the hours passed on days they spent at home. This study's researchers, from the Institute of Child Development of the University of Minnesota, had earlier found the same pattern in 3- and 4-year-olds.

Cortisol levels in the saliva of day care children were highest and rose most steeply in those judged by day care centre personnel to be the shyest. The study's lead author, Dr. Megan R. Gunnar suggested these children struggle in group situations and find them stressful and while none of the cortisol levels measured were high enough to be considered signs of psychological trauma, they were nonetheless a cause for concern.

The study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development followed more than 1,000 children in 10 cities who were in the full range of childcare arrangements, including day care centres, preschools, care with nannies and care with relatives other than their mothers. The study, which began in 1991, found that the more hours the children spent in childcare, the higher the incidence of problem behaviour and the greater its severity.

Over all, about 17 percent of the children had above-average levels of problem behaviour like disobedience and over assertiveness.

Most of the children in the study spent 10 or more hours a week in childcare, and 10 percent spent more than 45 hours a week there. The correlation between quantity of child care and behaviour problems remained even when other variables were taken into account, including the quality and type of the child care, the mother's sensitivity to her child's needs and the family's socio-economic status. Indeed, the study found that the time spent in childcare was linked more strongly with children's behaviour than was the quality of care.

Whilst I acknowledge that the quality of child care matters a great deal in fostering young children's social and emotional development and I believe that greater maternal sensitivity and a family's socio-economic status and education play a significant roll in the behaviour of children, the findings of such studies noted above cannot be ignored.

As it stands the current circumstances surrounding maternity leave are unjust, and as such, I strongly supports the introduction of a national scheme for paid maternity leave.

Yours sincerely

Hon. Allison Ritchie, MLC
MEMBER FOR PEMBROKE