

Opinion: Underfire childcare workers don't get the respect they deserve ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When news broke this week that one in four Queensland childcare operators is failing to meet national quality standards, workers on the frontline came under fire, yet again, for the job they do.

Amid feedback from disgruntled parents, irate childcare managers who slammed the assessment criteria, and people who have never outsourced childcare but believe they are qualified to make smug comments such as "any wonder so many children are getting all sorts of serious diseases and getting hurt", it is those at the coalface of caring for society's littlest people whose voices must be heard.

Childcare workers are saints.

OK, so there are exceptions as in any profession, but in my experience - my son attended day care from five months of age - most do the very best they can for minimal reward.

Theirs can be described as a labour of love - would you put yourself through tertiary training to end up earning \$21 an hour? Cashiers at McDonalds make more money.

That is not to dismiss the role of a cashier but let's keep things in perspective.

Childcare workers are the people with whom we entrust our children when they are arguably at their most vulnerable.

They do tasks others would balk at - wiping bottoms, cleaning up vomit and dealing with brattish behaviour of OTHER people's children - and the best of them are also early educators, role models and kindness experts whose patience and enthusiasm are, frankly, astounding.

What happens to kids before they start formal schooling is crucial to their future development and well-being.

As Australia's Raising Children Network says: "In the first five years of life, your child's brain develops more and faster than at any other time in his life. The early experiences your child has - the things he sees, hears, touches, smells and tastes - stimulate his brain, creating millions of connections. This is when foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life are laid down. Both genes and the environment influence your child's development."

Parents are only part of the equation.

A child's relationship with others and with their surroundings will shape the person he or she becomes.

In assessing 605 childcare operators in Queensland (and hundreds are yet to be evaluated), the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority found one quarter failed to meet basic national standards in many of the required seven categories.

These categories are: education program, health and safety, physical environment, staffing arrangements, relationships with the children, partnerships with the community and leadership.

While one in four received a "significant improvement required" rating, the majority are doing OK.

Three in four childcare operators are "working towards", "meeting" or "exceeding" guidelines.

The challenge, then, is to raise the bar for all, as national standards aim to do, while retaining and attracting the best people.

Jennifer Millar worked in childcare for more than 30 years but left due to burn out.

She says there is an "enormously high burnout rate for employees within this profession".

In a Facebook post Ms Millar said: "I spent a lot of hours, unpaid, providing extra resources, research, upgrading qualifications, unpaid overtime covering for sick staff or mass resignations due to overcrowding and understaffing."

"I can guarantee there are a lot of people who go unnoticed but are also personally committed to providing excellent care for children."

These people should be applauded and recognised, financially and otherwise, for the valuable work they do in shaping the future adults of society.

-reprinted from The Courier Mail

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