

Parents forced to put babies in childcare for more than 42 hours a week^[1]

Author: Lines-Mackenzie, Jo

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EXCERPTS

Katie Peters has no option but to put her seven-month-old son in daycare for over 40 hours a week.

She is not alone, with the latest government statistics showing children are staying in daycare for extended periods – sometimes longer than the adult working week.

The figures show 10 per cent of babies aged under 12 months were in childcare for over 42 hours a week.

The proportion of babies and toddlers in childcare for long periods tripled from 2000 to 2015, according to Ministry of Education figures.

Peters and her husband Brad took 11 weeks' maternity leave before deciding to use a daycare facility. Peters placed Brody at Cubby House daycare in Palmerston North six weeks ago, for five days a week. They drop him off between 7.45am and 8am, and pick him up by 5.30pm.

She and Brad both work fulltime and don't have access to family help, so the long hours of childcare are a necessity. Katie drives to Levin and back daily to work as a teacher, leaving Brody in the Manawatu.

"He loves going there, he always has big smiles," she says. "He has a ball – we have been able to see photos of him there and he just loves it. He comes home and it's boring at home.

"He spends a lot of time developing his skills."

Brody recently played in a sandpit for the first time and did some painting. The environment is good for him developmentally, says Peters.

They don't feel that he is missing out in any way by being away from them. "Not at all, because we just reinforce it at home, and the daycare reinforces what we are doing as well.

Peters admits that it is really hard having him in daycare, but both are comfortable with where he goes. It was necessary, and they try to make the most of the time they have with him when he's at home.

"We had to make the decision which was best for our family, and that was both of us going to work and putting our son in daycare."

There is a little bit of guilt that comes occasionally for Katie, but knowing that it's what is best for their family unit and that Brody is happy is what counts.

She said guilt also came as a result of others' perceptions.

"I've had quite a few people look at me sideways or ask why we are doing it, there are still some judgmental people out there, particularly older people."

Education Minister Hekia Parata said families needed to find their own balance with regard to parental and non-parental care.

"There is no one best way.

"The important consideration is that the ECE service needs to provide quality care and education that complements the care provided by the child's family.

"ECE for under-tuos is regulated to ensure that ratios are appropriate and enable the personalised care that supports young children's development and learning. We have one of the best adult to child ratios in the world," Parata added.

There are no regulated limits on the hours a child can spend in ECE. However, the government subsidy is capped at 6 hours per day.

In the year to March 2016, 96.6 per cent of children starting school had participated in ECE.

Virginia Oakly, an executive member of the NZEI teaching union, said if the maternity leave benefit was increased and parents were able to work more flexible hours, this hours spent in care wouldn't be rising.

"While it's not ideal, parents don't always have a choice - they need to make ends meet, especially in Auckland when you have housing problems and then the issue of travelling to work,"

There has been a major debate about the effects of long hours in care on children's development, says associate professor Helen Hedges, head of pedagogy at Auckland University.

"We now have a growing research evidence base internationally that affirms that children spending time in quality ECE centres has a positive effect on children's development, supports families in child rearing, and has good long-term academic and social outcomes for children.

"There is little evidence yet that tells us whether or not shorter or longer hours make any difference to this - it is the quality that matters," Hedges said.

She believed current government policy was focused on increasing participation, rather than quality.

Bob McCoskrie, National Director of Family First NZ, said the long hours were concerning.

"Babies are spending more time in daycare than primary age children are expected to spend at school when they first start," he said.

"With government spending on early childhood education being more than \$1.7 billion per annum, it is essential that the benefits of the investment in ECE are weighed against the real needs of very young children, babies and their families."

The Brainwave Trust, an independent thinktank, published a review in March this year finding that the new generation of babies placed in childcare face behavioural and health risks.

The review found kids who attended childcare were more likely to display aggression, hyperactivity, disobedience and problems with attachments. Health risks included higher rates of antibiotic use, respiratory illnesses and obesity.

Despite the trust's independent scientific credentials, the research was embraced by family values lobbyists, and condemned by the childcare industry as "scaremongering".

-reprinted from Stuff

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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