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Auckland early education manager warns small centres 'dying breed' [1]

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EXCERPTS

Mega-childcare centres boasting rolls of 150 children are popping up across the country in record numbers.

A childcare expert warns the rise of super-centres is creating a generation of "assembly-line children" who are at greater risk of long-term harm.

However, not everyone in the industry is convinced of a problem and say big centres are a financial reality and provide happy second-homes to children.

The latest Ministry of Education figures reveal more centres than ever are opening with licenses for 100 to 150 children.

The number of centres licensed for more than 100 children has doubled in five years, from 80 to 159, with two-thirds of the bigger centres in Auckland.

It comes after a 2011 law change allowed for childcare centres to license for 150 children, up from the previous 50.

ChildForum chief executive Sarah Alexander said traditionally children would be with kids of different ages, have the same teachers right through, and feel like they were in a family grouping.

However, the larger centres generally split age groups up and transition kids through up to five different rooms.

"Our worst fears of the sector have come true when you see the division of children into groups by age.

"We're creating a generation of assembly-line kids."

ChildForum, a national organisation promoting best practice early childhood education, advocates for greater regulation around centre and group sizes.

Alexander said research shows young children need consistent caregivers and social circles so they can learn about sharing, co-operating and family groupings.

This was not achieved in centres where children are in large groups or went through multiple transitions between rooms, she said.

"The biggest concern is to do with attachment. If they're not developing that attachment, that is going to lead to issues later, such as behavioural problems."

Children in larger groups display more aggression, have higher rates of sickness and end up being seen as just a number, she said.

BIG, NOT BAD

Early childhood education has undergone a big change in New Zealand over the past decade.

The number of licensed community-run childcare services has remained steady, while the number of privately-run services jumped 73% in the past 10 years.

Evolve Education Group own home-based care Porse and 120 early childhood centres, including both small centres and some of the largest in the country.

Chief operating officer Fay Amaral said the rising cost of property development created an incentive to establish larger centres.

"Some of those larger centres are becoming more viable than perhaps the smaller ones."

Evolve's larger centres are split by age group and are often run like four little centres in one, she said.

This has learning advantages as teachers can focus on a specific age group's development milestones, such as toilet training or school preparation.

The transition between groups is gradual, taking up to three months depending on a child's willingness.

"Children don't mind change, and in fact, they are more flexible than adults," she said.

"Criticism should be more levelled at how a transition is managed. If a child is simply whipped out of one room and stuck into another room that's clearly not going to be a positive experience at all."

Other large centre managers did not respond to requests for comment.

SMALL CENTRES SQUEEZED

Early childhood education centre manager Val Morrison said services like hers could no longer exist in 10 years.

Morrison's centre, Small is Beautiful, has a maximum roll of 20 children and is Devonport's longest running preschool service.

Increasing operational demands and decreasing financial support from the government has put a squeeze on small centres, she said.

"Small centres are a dying breed, weighed down by bureaucratic demands."

Research pointed to smaller centres having better outcomes for children. For under-fives to thrive a maximum group should be set at 25, she said.

"This allows for the development of elaborate play which is a rich foundation of future mental health, problem-solving, relating to peers, and using imagination to make sense of the world."

CHANGING INDUSTRY

The government increased the maximum license number for centres from 50 to 150 in 2011 to make it easier for early childhood services to comply with government regulations.

Since that law change, government figures show an increasing number of children attend centres catering for more than 100 children.

There are now 159 centres holding licenses for more than 100 children. The number of children attending is often higher than the license number once part-time children are accounted for.

Of these, 26 centres are licensed for 130-150 kids, up from 14 centres in 2012.

This means at least 16,680 preschoolers could be attending big centres, up from 8420 children in 2012.

FUTURE OF PRESCHOOL

Lollipops is a second-home to about 150 children.

Five rooms are split between two adjacent buildings at the early childhood education centre in Glen Eden, Auckland.

The youngest children, aged from three-months to two-years, are in two of these rooms. The eldest preschoolers, in another section, have access to carpentry and cooking facilities.

Amanda Heywood's eldest child, now 10-years-old, was one of the first to go through the centre while her four-year-old started when he turned one.

"I don't think of it as a big centre because of the distinctions between age groups.

"It's like a second family for us so we will be sad when my littlest starts school. We have seen our kids blossom there."

Heywood said you can't judge a centre by the number of children who attend - there are more important factors to consider.

"You've got to visit and see how the teachers relate to the children."

Many of the same teachers have remained at Lollipops since her eldest attended. It also has great teacher to child ratios which are better than government regulations.

When children move between the different age groups, it's a gradual shift which starts with short visits to ease the move.

The centre received the highest possible ERO rating, with the reviewer noting that children and families are well known to staff and it was a place where children were allowed to be children.

CARING FOR KIDS

Ministry of Education spokeswoman Katrina Casey said teachers are able to provide stimulating, responsive, warm, and supportive interactions, regardless of service size.

"Our youngest children and babies - in particular those under two - are at a delicate and crucial stage in terms of their development and learning needs.

"That's why regardless of service size, the design and layout of the premises need to be able to support different types of indoor and

outdoor experiences.

"This includes quiet spaces, areas for physically active play and space for individual and group learning that's appropriate to the number, ages and abilities of children attending."

New Zealand's early childhood education's licensing standards are among the highest in the world, she said.

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