

Ministry of Education withholding complaints about early childhood centres 'tarnishes' industry, organisation claims ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Hundreds of complaints of wrongdoing in early childcare centres have gone unreported by the Ministry of Education.

The failure to release information about complaints "tarnishes" the industry's reputation and puts children's safety at risk, according to early childhood education organisation ChildForum.

Its chief executive, Dr Sarah Alexander, said the ministry was yet to release information on complaints from 2016 at a time when the 2017 complaints should be available.

"They promised back in 2014 that they would be doing an annual report. That report is now two years behind," she said.

"For a Government department there is very little transparency. It continues to put commercial interests first and deny parents their right to be informed."

After initial indications the 2016 report would be released last month, ministry deputy secretary Katrina Casey said it would now be published this week. She offered no explanation as to why it was a year late.

Despite previously declining to release the names of the centres complained about to protect commercial sensitivities, Casey rejected suggestions the ministry prioritised commercial interests over child safety.

"Where a service falls short of the standards required of them we immediately impose conditions for improvement and, where necessary, will shut a service down."

Past reports highlighted concerning health and safety failures. Among 247 complaints received in 2012 – the first year for which information was released – were allegations of children being smacked, bitten, and locked in rooms alone.

Some children were also injured through negligence, and some centres failed to tell parents about injuries that needed medical attention.

The number of complaints rose in the following years to 360 in 2014, and 342 in 2015.

Alexander said it was likely the ministry's reports were not a true reflection of parents' concerns. About 10 families who asked ChildForum for advice about "serious" incidents each month indicated "nothing was to be gained by lodging a formal complaint".

"The cover-up of incidents tarnishes the good reputation of other services . . . the ministry should be sharing information in a timely manner to enable other services to check internal procedures and standards.

"Information is knowledge and that knowledge can make everyone safe."

Casey said the 2016 report would be the first to explain how different complaints had been addressed.

The report would provide parents with "transparency around the number and nature of the complaints" received, she said.

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