

Childcare workers deserve better pay – this is what I do all day^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At 32, I made the decision to move into early childhood education and care, for what I thought would be a career where I would be regarded as a professional, respected for the work I did and be able to make a difference in the lives of children.

I attained a diploma and advanced diploma in child care and worked my way through the ranks from assistant, to group leader and then to centre director. I have been a director for 13 years.

The poor award rates have impacted my life significantly.

As a single working mother of two, I have never been able to break into the property market.

I have rented all my life and due to this have had to move many times.

We're some of the lowest-paid professionals in Australia: some of my colleagues are paid as little as \$22 an hour (almost half the national average wage).

The government has little to no regard of early childhood education and early childhood educators.

High-quality education in the early years is critical to child development, but our work is being undervalued.

We deserve a better deal and to be paid fairly for the important work we do.

Take a look at my average day and judge for yourself:

8am: My juggling act starts. I help parents settle their upset children. I answer questions from parents about bookings, their account, Child Care Subsidy and "why won't my child sleep at night?" One mother comes in crying because she is stressed with life and I have to console her. And the phone starts ringing.

8.15am: I try to find an ever elusive casual staff member to replace an educator who has called in sick. The phone rings again.

8.30am: An unexpected tradesman turns up unannounced to complete a vaguely worded work order.

8.40am: I walk through and check that all children are present, teacher-children ratios are correct and the centre is compliant.

8.50am: I remind everyone to put hats on children!

9am: I empty the nappy bin for an overly stressed nursery educator who has been holding back tears all week.

9.30am: A family is visiting the centre after booking earlier in the week. I show them around. The phone rings again. Will someone please pick up the phone while I'm with this parent?

9.55am: I fix the jammed paper in the photocopier.

10am: I make sure the learning environments are purposeful and learning is visible. This is a key component of meeting the National Quality Standards, which rank every centre on steps between "working towards" and excellence". One of my team makes me a coffee knowing that I will still be trying to finish this at 4pm.

10.30am: Paperwork, and lots of it! I have a business plan, action plans, and sustainability plans. I need to update the Quality Improvement Plan. The phone hasn't stopped.

11am: I do some work on the improvement plan that sets out our commitment to meeting the National Quality Standards. Since 2012 a government agency has been overseeing the standards that aim to improve outcomes for children. The expectations imposed by the government have increased but the wages haven't, and neither has the professional profile in the community.

11.45am: I walk through the centre and help an educator with an upset child. I check educators' reflections on their work, and make sure their own professional development is being looked after.

12.30pm: More paperwork! Emails are answered and parent debts are checked and chased. I also review Storypark stories — the visual record for parents and educators of the children's day — and approve each one. I also check the payroll system for accuracy. That phone!!!

1pm: I talk through an aspect of the improvement plan with an educator. Almost all the educators at my centre are women in a profession where some educators' salaries are as low as \$22 an hour. The simple fact is an industry dominated by women is not receiving equal pay for equal work done in a comparable male-dominated industry.

1.30pm: I remind staff to put hats on children!

2.05pm: I need to pee. Maybe later.

2.15pm: I do more work on the improvement plan. In February, the National Quality Standards were changed, along with the assessment tool. It's moved the goalposts for "exceeding" and "excellence" ratings. The intention is to improve and ensure quality outcomes for children because of the huge importance of early years learning, which is great. But the increased focus on documentation is stressing out time-poor educators.

3.15pm: A child tells me the story of her day and we are interrupted by the phone.

3.25pm: A director from another centre I have been mentoring calls. She needs some advice on staffing issues. We talk through the challenges she is facing.

3.30pm: Parents start to arrive to pick up their children. A dad sticks his head in.

3.45pm: I talk to another parent, who thanks me for the work we are doing. It frustrates me that while parents recognise our hard work, we are still not recognised as education professionals — the government still sees us as babysitters being paid babysitter wages and unpaid work is expected.

4pm: I still need to pee. Maybe later.

4.15pm: I check a proof of a flyer I have been preparing to market my centre.

4.20pm: I commit to attending a community meeting about the importance of early childhood education.

4.25pm: A mum sticks her head in the office and talks about something that happened at home to her child that may have affected her mood.

4.30pm: I like this bit: two children run in for a hug and a kiss before they go home.

4.35pm: I prepare a folder of work I need to take home — yes, more paperwork — before the day ends.

4.45pm: The children are departing from the centre. Tired kids are led out by parents and I am quickly finishing the coffee made for me at 10am.

5pm: I struggle to the car with the folder of work from home and try to avoid the feeling that I have been chasing my tail all day. I still need to pee and I haven't had lunch. The phone rings as I am leaving; the casual booked to work tomorrow now can't do the shift. Back in I go...

Tracey Bell is an early childhood educator from the Gold Coast and is active in the Big Steps campaign for equal pay for early childhood educators, which is part of United Voice. Tracey will be walking off the job on September 5 in support of the campaign for equal pay.

Related link:

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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