

# Universal childcare? Exactly the kind of bold idea we need <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

"I remember how hard it was to find affordable and high-quality child care when I was a working mom with two little ones. I had a job teaching at a law school in Houston when the babysitter quit. Over the next few months I tried all sorts of child care options: another babysitter, a neighbour with kids, and a couple of daycare centers. One day I picked up my son Alex from daycare and found that he had been left in a dirty diaper for who knows how long.

At the end of my rope, I called my 78-year-old Aunt Bee in Oklahoma and broke down, telling her between tears that I couldn't make it work and had to quit my job.

Then Aunt Bee said eleven words that changed my life forever: "I can't get there tomorrow, but I can come on Thursday." Two days later, she arrived at the airport with seven suitcases and a Pekingese named Buddy – and stayed for 16 years.'

That was almost four decades ago but Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts says since then finding affordable and high-quality child care has not got easier: the truth is it's got harder.

"And not everyone is lucky enough to have an Aunt Bee of their own."

America has a childcare crisis and Senator Warren has proposed a bold solution to address it: a plan to make high-quality care affordable for everyone.

"In the wealthiest country on the planet, access to affordable and high-quality child care and early education should be a right, not a privilege reserved for the rich," she wrote in a blog announcing her proposal.

Warren, a Democratic presidential candidate, revealed a \$70 billion plan for universal child care which would mean no American family spends more than 7% of their income on childcare.

The Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act would create a network of government-funded care centres based partly on the existing network of centres and partnerships. Childcare would be free for families earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level, while families earning more than that would be charged on a sliding scale, up to a maximum of 7% of their income.

Senator Warren's proposed tax on households with more than \$50 million in assets would fund the plan.

As it stands in the US the average cost of child care for a single child can take up between 9% to 36% of a family's total income. Those percentages only grow for families with multiple children. For single parents, the costs can be even more overwhelming: nationally, the cost of centre-based infant care can take up between 27% to 91% of the average income of a single parent.

She says the childcare crisis matters not just because of the precarious financial situation it places families in but because of the benefits high quality early learning programs deliver.

"Every dollar spent on quality early education has been found to save seven dollars in the long run."

Here in Australia the picture around childcare is not dissimilar and no amount of 'tweaking' around the edges will solve it. The solution has to be bold.

On Thursday the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, an industry body that represents both private and not-for-profit daycare centres, community-based preschools and family daycare providers, will present a plan of its own at the National Press Club.

It wants every political party – at both state and federal level – to commit to funding two years of "play-based" early learning for every single Australian child before they get to school.

Most OECD nations offer subsidised early learning to three-year olds: Australia is an anomaly because we don't.

Providing three and four year olds with 15 hours a week of interaction with professionally supported teachers in either daycare or preschool is critical to develop foundational learning skills. Learning to pay attention, co-operate with others and problem-solve are skills

that help children transition to school effectively. It literally helps sets their education for life and the return on investment is manifold.

It is an election year in Australia and if a political party is looking to make a statement, why not take a leaf out of Elizabeth Warren's book and go bold?

Universal childcare that is affordable and high quality is a game changer.

**Related link:**

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[3]</sup>

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