

Not all Australian parents can access quality childcare and preschool – they can't just 'shop around' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Many providers of early childhood education and care are charging above the cap for government subsidies and parents are being forced to meet the additional costs. This is according to recently released data.

This has been the situation for some time. But the data confirms a trend and means parents are facing increasing costs for education and care.

And despite significant government investment in early learning, governments spend less than half the amount per child in early childhood education compared with what they spend per child in school. Parents are making up the difference.

Noting early childhood is a private market, education minister Dan Tehan encouraged parents to “shop around” to ensure they’re getting value for money. But many families already shop around and still face major barriers balancing care and work. And for others – especially those living in disadvantaged areas – shopping around is not a realistic option.

The illusion of choice

Some families are fortunate enough to secure places in high quality, early childhood services close to home, and can meet the cost of care. But many face the almost impossible challenge of finding close, available, quality, cost-efficient services.

Many families in rural and regional areas have their choice limited by having too few early education and care providers.

For metropolitan families, the choice can appear greater. However, according to the Australian government’s Child Care Finder website, a family living in Preston (Melbourne) requiring care five days a week for their two-year-old child could choose from 33 long day care centres.

Of these, 12 have adequate availability, but only nine meet or exceed the government’s National Quality Standard. Only three services with fees listed have availability, meet quality standards and charge below the government’s hourly rate cap of A\$11.77.

Of 24 centres available to a family living in Ascot, Queensland, only seven have adequate availability and only six of these meet quality standards. Only three services with fees listed have availability, meet quality standards and charge below the government’s hourly rate cap.

Unlike Australian schools and universities, which are not allowed to accumulate profits, childcare is delivered by a combination of private for-profit and not-for-profit providers. This means market drivers, like demand for places, have a large influence on the cost to parents.

A 2014 Senate inquiry into the future of Australia’s childcare sector found costs tend to be higher in communities with fewer vacancies and longer waiting lists.

In other words, the market drives costs up where it can, and families are unlikely to find much lower fees if they travel to the next suburb or town.

How to exercise choice, if you have any

Cost and location are important to parents, but they aren’t necessarily the most important for children’s learning and development. Choices can also include the type of care (long day care, family day care, occasional care), educational philosophy, facilities and educators’ skills and experience.

All government-registered services are assessed on a range of quality measures that rate how well they support children’s learning and development. These measures include relationships with children, health and well-being, educational programs and partnerships with families. Service ratings are published on the Australian government’s Child Care Finder website.

Research shows these quality indicators are important to a child’s learning and development and they impact a child’s outcomes in school

and later in life.

Research also shows the quality of adult-child engagements is the most important driver of overall quality. This means warm and responsive relationships with educators are particularly important for children's development.

Parents should check which quality standards the service has been rated on most highly. A service with a great educational program and relationships with children will deliver the best learning.

There is also no substitute to watching how educators talk and play with children, and how well they incorporate learning into everyday moments as they go about their daily work.

Less choice in disadvantaged areas

Research shows children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the most to gain from accessing quality early learning. But while many families on lower incomes can access higher levels of subsidies for early childhood education and care, their choices are often limited, and the quality of service provider may be lower than for those on higher incomes.

Our research shows children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to access high quality services compared with children from more advantaged backgrounds. Data shows services in the most disadvantaged areas are 10% less likely to meet quality standards compared with services in more advantaged areas.

Early childhood education and care is a vital stage of learning and can help reduce inequality. It provides a social hub not just for children, but also for parents and families, establishing lasting relationships and community connections.

Early childhood education and care also has long term benefits to the economy. Research from The Front Project and PwC has found for every dollar invested into preschool, the economy receives a return of A\$2. There is a clear rationale for ensuring every family can afford quality services.

The onus shouldn't be on parents to pay more, shop around and accept second best. Instead, it's the responsibility of all governments to work together to ensure families can access high quality services in their communities.

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