

If coronavirus forces childcare services to close for good, parents will be left stranded ^[1]

When health workers can't turn up to their jobs because they have no one to look after their children there will be an uproar – but it'll be too late

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EXCERPTS

Parents are withdrawing their children from education and care in droves. They are doing it because they are concerned for their children and because they are told to keep children home if possible. But mostly they are doing it because childcare is expensive. When families lose their income, childcare is an obvious place to cut.

But once families pull out, the government subsidies that fund wages and rent for childcare centres go, which forces our education and care centres to close their doors eventually.

They have been told they have to stay open to care for the children of essential workers and for children whose parents are working from home and can't work with a toddler underfoot. But the centres can no longer afford to stay open.

Northside Community Services runs five long day cares in Canberra. Their executive director, Anna Whitty, puts it this way:

As a provider of early education, we've never had to deal with a crisis like this. Families are concerned, and understandably have been ending their children's enrolments and keeping them at home. This has had an immediate and direct impact on our financial situation, which will only continue to get worse.

We've committed to doing everything we can to keep paying our incredible team of educators across our centres, but we can't keep that up forever – like every other early education provider we are facing incredibly difficult choices at the moment."

The ex-director of an out of school hours care service in Western Australia says:

We are community managed and operated out of a school site. The management committee decided to close the service because we only had a few children still coming. All our educators were casual. They were given the option of becoming permanent part-time last year but they couldn't afford to – the casual loading was what made their jobs possible. So they are now all gone."

Goodstart Early Learning, one of Australia's largest providers, had to lay off 4,000 casual educators last week.

Melinda Gambley is the director of a state-funded preschool in northern New South Wales.

She says:

As of now, we're still open, but we don't know when this could change. We went from 32 children attending, to just two by the end of last week.

Parents and staff are anxious about their children, their own health and passing the virus on to their families. Our children's families work in or own small businesses in tourism or hospitality. Many have

lost their jobs or businesses. All are worried about money.

Our staff keep showing up day after day, despite the risks to their own health, but they don't know if they will have jobs to return to after the Easter break. None are paid well enough to have money set aside for a rainy day.

And the children! Their routines have changed. They're confused and sad. For some of them, we are their first relationships outside of their immediate family. They miss their teachers and their friends. One little girl said this week: 'I'm really sad 'cause I've got no brothers and sisters to play with and now I've got no friends at preschool either'. We miss the ones that are at home and we worry about them. We hope they are all safe."

Unlike schools, childcare services are not actually government funded. Instead, parents pass on to centres the subsidies they receive and pay the gap fees.

On top of this convoluted method of funding, successive governments have increasingly privatised the whole gig. Our long day cares are now as likely to be run by large corporate providers and small businesses. Our out-of-school hours services are either owned by multinational private equity firms, or they are not-for-profit, or parent run. There is also no clear constitutional divide as to who should fund services either – the states or the commonwealth – which adds to the complexity.

The childcare subsidy is a dog's breakfast of rules and legislation. One of the last days that parliament sat, it passed changes to give the government some outs to this. But until services are actually closed, no funds are available. Services can't even remove the gap fees for parents without committing fraud. The government opened a small grant program and now has to process over 14,000 applications. This won't happen fast. There are ways for parents to claim higher subsidies, but these all involve myGov.

The educators and directors who are desperately trying to keep these services afloat are of the opinion that this is all barmy. The bureaucrats are so wedded to their complex funding models that they can't think outside those models.

There was \$8bn allocated to childcare in the last budget. All it would take to keep the sector running is to pay some of this money directly to each service, and bingo – we could continue to provide childcare to every child and family that needs it.

But unless this happen this week, services will close, and their educators will scatter.

When our nurses and doctors can't turn up to their jobs because they have no one to look after their children there will be an uproar.

By then it will be too late to re-open them.

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