

Living with universal childcare has shown me Australia's system is neither a luxury nor a right – it's a last resort ^[1]

Reforms in NSW and Victoria need to make early education financially viable for parents, especially mothers

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EXCERPTS:

I had reservations about sending my two-year-old daughter to childcare (“kita” for kindertagesstätte in German) in Berlin – cultural differences being the main sticking point, but also trusting other people with her care, Covid, generalised “mum” guilt.

Nevertheless, since the start of the year, she goes there, Monday to Friday from 9am to 3pm. And it's free, except for the €50 (A\$75) we pay every month that covers food and occasional extras like an ice-cream on a hot day. In a nursery group of seven, along with two carers, they go to playgrounds, gymnastics, theatre performances and community gardens. Lunch is catered every day, and when it's delivered, I'm told my daughter yells, “Essen!” (Food!), and runs to the door in her little felt hausschuhe (slippers).

It all sounds rather cute, but of course, utopia it's not. Like many other countries, early childhood educators are often low-income earners, and many centres are understaffed, often chronically so. In theory, however, since 2013 every child over the age of one in Berlin is entitled to subsidised care in the public system until they reach school age. The trouble is, it's not easy to find a kita spot (I contacted more than 30 when we started our search last year and received positive responses from just three) and harder still to find a multilingual centre (many have a years-long waiting list and aren't located in our neighbourhood). The discovery of all this shed some light on why so many people asked us if we'd started looking for a kita when my daughter was still in utero, despite a standard 12- to 14-month elternzeit (parental leave).

In the end it is often a matter of what you can find rather than what you might want for your child – a pedagogy (if there is one) you align with, for example, diversity within the centre and certain dietary preferences. Ultimately, we went with the first kita that offered us a spot, and while the group isn't as diverse as we were led to believe, and the lunch menu features beef gyros or a German version of rissoles every Tuesday, even though we were told the children ate a vegetarian menu, we are generally happy, as is my daughter, as long as we get her there on time (we don't dare to be late).

But I do have to squint my eyes to the small changes I've seen in my daughter since starting kita. She won't wear sandals without socks now (cliche but in our experience true), doesn't like to get dirty and hates getting her clothes wet, so much so that it took two weeks of gentle coaxing before she would get her swimsuit wet at the beach. Her favourite German song is about not putting your elbows on the table when you're eating. It all makes me wonder how much behavioural ironing out is necessary at such a young age.

When I pick her up, my daughter is happy to see me, somehow relieved, but she is also often reluctant to leave, an additional insult to the fact that she does for her carer many of the things that she won't do for me, including sit in the pram, clean her teeth, brush her long mane of hair. One day I commented on how nice her hair looked, and her carer replied, quite matter-of-factly, “Yes, we brush it”, as though it had never occurred to me to do the same. I tried to explain that I hadn't been able to brush her hair in months, but the staff are mostly uninterested in talking to me, and often don't acknowledge me at all when I am there – no hello, no chitchat about how the day went. Mostly it doesn't matter, the important things somehow get said, but it often makes me feel like a child myself. Like the time one of the carers asked me if I had read the latest email about testing for Covid. When I said that I had, she hinged forward slightly at the hip, and speaking loudly and clearly through her mask, said, “Und hast du es verstanden?” (And did you understand?)

While I don't connect with my daughter's carers, and there are things that I might do differently myself, I do trust them with her care – and I can see that my daughter feels bonded with them in community, even if I don't. If we were to return to Australia, as I hope that we one day do, the money I earn working part-time as a freelancer would not make this level of care financially viable. And so, despite my initial hesitations, perpetuated perhaps by how insular life has been the last two years, I realise now how incredibly lucky we are in Berlin to have universal childcare available to us. Not only am I able to work without the financial burden of childcare hanging over me, I am also able to take time out for myself if I need it.

Hopefully the early childhood education reforms announced by the New South Wales and Victorian governments last week might mean that more Australian parents – but especially mothers – are afforded the same basic right. I was tempted to call it a luxury but in a system

that leaves you no other choice, that's not really what it is.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: universal child care ^[4]

availability ^[5]

early childhood education ^[6]

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