

McKew attacks childcare staff ratio [AU] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

Kevin Rudd's handpicked adviser on childcare has attacked the current ratio of one carer to five babies as "not good enough" and warned the Government may link future funding to improved standards.

In the wake of celebrated children's author Mem Fox's claim that childcare for very young babies is "child abuse", parliamentary secretary for early education and childcare Maxine McKew said today that a better ratio might be closer to one carer to every three children under the age of two.

And she warned the current staffing levels were leaving babies and carers "stressed".

In an interview with The Australian Online, Ms McKew said Ms Fox's remarks amounted a "guilt trip" for parents, but warned there was a serious dimension to her comments. She said the current legal minimum demanded by the states of one carer for every five children was "not good enough."

"The dominant standard ratio for care around the country is one (carer) to five (children)," Ms McKew said.

"It's not best practice. It's highly stressful. And we know that where that is happening there is huge (staff) churn in those systems. Where you have got a stressed workforce you have got stressed children and that's bad for everyone.

"My view is up to this point the Commonwealth has been a very passive player.

"We have poured billions into the system and demanded very little in return. Well, that's over. We are raising the bar. We are wanting centres in receipt of that money to come to the party on qualifications and on better ratios. We are doing that in conjunction with the states and territories."

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In comments likely to be hotly contested by the for-profit providers, Ms McKew said she did not accept that higher staff ratios would automatically increase costs for parents, who already pay between \$70-100-a-day for childcare for under twos in most capital cities.

"We accept as a Government that quality costs, absolutely. (But) We are investing like we have never invested before," she said.

"If you look at those centres that are already doing it there fees are no higher than the crowd down the road. They can construct a business model that takes it into account. There are players out there that are already at one in three.

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Ms McKew said one of the biggest flaws in the current system was state licensing and national accreditation, a problem the Government was working to resolve through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) talks with the states.

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- reprinted from The Australian

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