

PM's 2020 pledge for every child [AU] ^[1]

The Nation, The Australian

Author: Karvelas, Patricia

Source: The Australian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Apr 2008

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Every child under five will have access to a cheap one-stop centre providing childcare, preschool and health services under a 12-year plan that Kevin Rudd will unveil at the 2020 Summit this weekend.

Echoing Bob Hawke's infamous "no child will live in poverty" pledge, the Prime Minister last night proposed the Government fund the low-fee early childhood centres throughout Australia.

The proposal has not yet been costed but the Prime Minister said that, under his idea, the centres would be offered at a low cost to all parents.

Mr Rudd's ambitious plan is aimed at battler families struggling to meet mortgage costs, as well as childcare and education expenses.

It continues his pitch to be Australia's "education" Prime Minister and furthers Labor's "education revolution" agenda.

"I believe such centres could offer real, practical assistance to working families under financial pressures struggling with the practical challenges of raising very young children," Mr Rudd told the Sydney Institute's annual dinner in Sydney last night.

Under the plan, all parents with children aged up to five would be able to access a one-stop early-childhood centre providing maternal and child health services such as baby health checks, baby weighing, feeding advice and vaccinations and long day care, including play-based activity for children whose parents were at work or studying.

The universality of Mr Rudd's proposal echoes similar big-picture proposals put by former prime ministers including Bob Hawke, who was dogged by his 1987 election campaign promise that no child should live in poverty by 1990.

Mr Rudd said his timetable for such a plan was by 2020, but the proposal may prove too bold and difficult to achieve as the Rudd Government is already finding it difficult to fulfil the current pledges it has made to families.

The Australian revealed in February that not one of the 260 new childcare centres promised by the Rudd Government would be built this year.

The Government said the approval and construction process meant that no centres could be built this year.

Under Mr Rudd's latest proposal, the new one-stop shops would also provide preschool and early learning, including age-appropriate play-based learning provided by a qualified teacher, as well as play groups and parental support to ensure non-working parents had a place to meet their peers and get access to advice while their children play.

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Mr Rudd said the model would require partnerships between federal, state and local governments as well as existing private and community service providers.

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"Access to these parent and child centres would be universal, but not compulsory, and the quality of service provided would be underpinned by strengthened national quality standards," he said.

Last night, the Prime Minister said some or all of the services offered in these centres could be supplied by the private sector and would be subject to competition between providers, helping to drive quality up and prices down.

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Other things he said the new centres would deliver included the provision of education, health and other support for children to make sure they were developing physically and intellectually.

Mr Rudd said it would make better use of early childhood resources, reducing duplication, which would mean more money for frontline

services.

It would also provide additional support to disadvantaged families to improve the life chances of their children.

"A little over a century ago, few would have dreamt that today we would have universal and affordable schooling for our children," he said.

"We have already set ourselves the goal of introducing universal preschool services for all four-year-olds by 2013.

"We should aim to take the next step and create universal Parent and Child Centres for all children aged 0-5 by 2020."

Mr Rudd said the proposal has not been costed at this stage, but had been put forward to be debated on its merits.

The all-inclusive childcare centre idea is part of the Rudd Government's "social inclusion agenda" which is focused on bringing the disadvantaged into the mainstream. A reminder of the institute's dry reputation was provided by Barclays Capital chief executive Nicholas Johnson, who in moving a vote of thanks said: "I thought he was meant to be an economic conservative, sounded like an old-fashion socialist to me".

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- reprinted from The Australian

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