

Making child care count is not just about cost [AU] ^[1]

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Source: Sydney Morning Herald

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Nov 2007

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Early childhood education and care in Australia is a fragmented mess that is falling way behind world's best practice, with public expenditure ranking second last in a recent league table measuring spending on early childhood services by developed economies. At a time of record public surpluses, Australia should be making a larger investment in children and their wellbeing.

Election campaign promises to increase child-care subsidies to parents (Labor) or pay the child-care rebate up front (Coalition) may win votes but will do nothing to ensure a top-quality child-care system. It is time to move the debate on from the obsession by parents and politicians with affordability, and begin to focus on promoting the wellbeing of children.

The fundamentals of a high-quality national early childhood education and care system have been well established by research here and internationally. It is not rocket science. But it does take resources and these resources need to be carefully targeted.

Research demonstrates that high-quality early childhood education and care is a function of high staff-to-child ratios, a high level of carer and teacher skills and qualifications, and a small care group size.

Public investment needs to reflect this. Staff/child ratios of at least one adult to three children for infants; one adult to four children aged one or two years; and at least one adult to eight children aged three to five years would go a long way to providing a high-quality system.

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The Government has a strategic role to play in developing a highly qualified and stable workforce and the major parties should contribute to boosting the quality of early childhood services in these ways.

This is not to say that measures to improve affordability are unimportant. They are important. But even on the affordability front, the policies advocated by both parties will not deliver sustained results.

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In a prosperous country such as Australia, the wellbeing of children must be front and centre of all policy developments. Increased public investment must be directed towards measures that promote a high-quality national system of early childhood education and care that is available to all children, and is not just an election sweetener for parents.

* Dr Elizabeth Hill is a lecturer in political economy at the University of Sydney and co-editor of Kids Count: Better Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia, which was launched yesterday.

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

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