

Child care chains damned - by insiders ^[1]

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Source: Sydney Morning Herald

Format: Article

Publication Date: 1 Apr 2006

EXCERPTS

One in five child-care workers employed by big corporate chains is so concerned about the quality that they would not send their children to those centres.

The damning view that the care provided by the big corporations is inferior - sometimes markedly so - to that of non-profit and small private centres has emerged from the first large survey of Australian child-care workers.

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The survey of 578 workers provides the first indication that the corporate ethos may have a detrimental influence on the quality of care - at least in the eyes of the people who work there.

Workers in corporate child-care consistently rate their centres lower on a range of measures than do their counterparts, suggesting the chains have poorer staff-to-child ratios, provide less nutritious food and less of it, and provide fewer activities and less variety of equipment.

The survey was conducted in October by The Australia Institute, a research centre in Canberra. The institute's director, Clive Hamilton, said the study did not set out to compare corporate child-care - where the parent company is listed on the stock exchange - with the other types, but to probe the views of child-care workers generally on the quality of care.

"But as the responses came in the differences were striking and could not be ignored," he said.

The results lend support to those who criticise corporate child-care for cutting costs to improve profits, says the report, Child Care Quality in Australia.

In non-profit centres 54 per cent of workers said they always had enough time to develop relationships with individual children, compared with 25 per cent of workers in corporate chains. In independent private centres, 49 per cent always had time.

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At the time of the survey there were four main corporate chains: ABC Learning Centres, by far the largest; Hutchison's Child Care Services; Childs Family Kindergartens, and Kids Campus, recently taken over by ABC.

A spokesman for ABC said it had "one of the highest staff retention rates of any child-care provider, which seems to indicate that staff are very happy".

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But the author of the study, Emma Rush, said: "Cost containment appears to be the major cause of the lower quality in corporate child care."

The generally high rating of independent private centres suggested profit status itself was not a problem, she said. But the corporate chains were legally obliged to act in the best interests of their shareholders. In a market with limited scope to raise prices without extra government subsidy, corporate providers had "little choice but to adopt a business orientation".

Surprisingly, given the emphasis of the chains on refurbishing and outfitting the centres they buy, only 34 per cent of their employees said their centre always provided a good variety of equipment, compared with 66 per cent of workers in non-profit centres.

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The results were based on questionnaires sent to the directors of a random sample of 482 child-care centres, who were asked to distribute copies to staff. They were tested against an independent sample of 66 child-care workers enrolled in TAFE courses.

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- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/06/04/child-care-chains-damned-insiders> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/privatization>