

Even failures marked fit for child care [AU] ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Parents are being misled about the quality of child care by an accreditation system that gives a tick to nearly every long-day-care centre it reviews.

Almost 97 per cent of the 4000 centres that went through a five-step accreditation process by June last year received a certificate to hang on their wall. But increasingly experts are questioning what the certificate means.

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Poorly performing child-care centres can be accredited though they fail 45 per cent of the principles against which they are judged in some measures of quality. And no poorly performing centre has ever been subject to the ultimate punishment of Federal Government financial sanctions.

Rather than indicating quality, child-care experts say, the high pass rate shows the system is not working and measures the wrong things. Frances Press, a former director of the Office of Childcare in NSW, now an academic, said: "A 96.5 per cent pass rate is a highly unbelievable figure in a field that is apparently full of staff shortages and high turnover."

Industry experts are calling for spot checks in child care, as happens with aged care.

A review into national standards ordered by the Government, still in draft form, found the quality assurance system was outdated and told parents too little. Collette Tayler, professor of early childhood at Queensland University of Technology, who led the review, said "whatever is being measured now must be low because everyone is achieving it". There was no point having "a big stick if it is never used".

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Fifty-five centres in NSW out of 1740 which undertook the process failed accreditation as of March 1, though all can be expected to be pulled across the line eventually.

Parents using the centres must be informed, though not the media. Parents can check a centre's status on the agency's website if they type in a specific centre's name or postcode.

Research consistently shows staff qualifications, low child-staff ratios and low staff turnover are critical to quality, but centres get no extra marks for operating above regulated requirements.

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After years of complaints about secrecy, since January the council has required centres to display a quality certificate - a bar chart showing how they rate in seven areas, from unsatisfactory to high standard. But most centres the Herald contacted did not know they had to display it.

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[2]

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