

Child care centres rejecting under-2s [AU] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care places for children under two will dry up unless there is an urgent injection of funding, the child care industry has warned the Government.

The child care industry says new centres are refusing to create places for children under two because it costs too much to care for younger children.

In a submission to a government inquiry, ABC Learning Centres argues that children aged between two and three years must be staffed at higher staff-to-child ratios than children between three and six.

"We do say, though, that it would be appropriate for parent subsidies to reflect those higher costs, based on the age of the child," the submission says.

Although it varies across states, on average one child care worker must be employed for every five children under two, while only one worker is employed for eight children over three years old.

Child care Associations Australia has written a submission to the federal inquiry into balancing work and family life demanding an increase to the child care subsidy to stem the decline in places.

Sally Anderson, who has worked at the Clovelly Child Care Centre in Sydney's east for the past 20 years, said demand for child care was far greater than supply, especially with the very young. "We have approximately 700 children on our waiting list and about 400 of those would be under two," Ms Anderson said.

"We might offer eight places out per year in our under-two group. We are a non-profit centre, so people tend to flock to us. But supply just doesn't meet demand."

About 22 per cent of children under two are in child care, according to last year's government figures.

The maximum rate of child care benefit is \$2.81 per hour, and applies to those with family incomes under \$32,485. A base rate of 47c per hour applies when family income exceeds \$92,919.

It costs between \$40 and \$80 a day to place youngsters in child care on average across Australia.

"Many services now in their planning phases are not planning spaces for the under-twos in their business development," said Jonathon Kruger, executive director of Child care Associations Australia.

"Anecdotally, we are hearing that new centres are choosing to create businesses that are purely for over-twos because of the high cost involved in providing good-quality care for children of that age." Mr Kruger said some centres were charging more for children under two, but the practice was uncommon.

Child care consultant Lisa Bryant said she was very concerned that ABC Learning Centres had asked the Government to increase the subsidy for children under two.

"ABC makes a large profit from taxpayer-funded subsidies already and to increase that profit means that more money goes to their shareholders rather than into the provision of child care," Ms Bryant said.

Labor's child care spokeswoman, Tanya Plibersek, said it was "plain" that it cost more to care for children under two.

"It is clear to me from the emails and letters I get that there is an enormous difficulty in finding care for under-twos and babies. That means that women in particular are being locked out of the workforce until their children are older," she said.

A spokeswoman for Family and Community Services Minister Kay Patterson said there were no plans to change the funding mix. "We provide the same support for all children in child care," she said.

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