

Caring more for children in child care [AU]^[1]

Editorial

Author: The Age

Source: The Age

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 May 2005

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Pledges to provide more child care places were again made in this week's budget. The bulk of the increase - 84,300 outside-school-hours places to be created over four years - are intended to provide extra assistance for single parents on welfare who, under new provisions, will be expected to return to the workforce when their children reach school age. But little extra is provided for preschool children in need of care: 2500 family day-care places and 1000 more in-home-care places. And then there is the curious plan to offer cash grants of \$1500 to unemployed parents to set up their own family day-care centres; an attempt to tackle the child care shortage while also providing work for the jobless.

What is missing is a vision for how to provide the best possible care for all those who want and need it. The Government's policy of paying child care subsidies to parents rather than direct subsidies to community child care centres has seen a huge rise in privately run facilities and concerns that the quality of care is being sacrificed in those centres that exist to make a profit.

The virtual privatisation of the sector has also led to uneven service provision: inner-city dwellers are more likely to face child care shortages than those in outlying areas because it is cheaper to build centres in the suburbs. Extraordinarily, the actual demand for child care places is unknown. This week, Labor child care spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek said Australians required more than twice as many out-of-school hours places as the budget provided for. Family and Community Services Minister Kay Patterson rejected this, but also said her office could not supply data on current and projected levels of demand. How then does it determine how much to spend on child care? Persistent complaints about the lack of child care places suggest that its present strategy of leaving supply to market forces is flawed.

Pediatrician Frank Oberklaid, the head of the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital, has pointed to another defect in the system as it stands. He believes the divide between child care and preschool should be removed and greater attention paid to a child's learning from birth. The idea has merit. Professor Oberklaid is rightly concerned at the rise of mental health and behavioural problems among children and believes better preschool care might prove an effective preventive measure. But his suggestion requires a willingness by both government and the community to invest more in the child care sector.

This week, child care workers in Victoria and the ACT received pay increases after two years of negotiation; salaries for workers with degrees will jump from about \$25,000 to \$33,000 a year. This increase will mean higher fees, and some child care centre employers have warned parents will be hard-pressed to afford them. Yet it is reasonable for trained child care workers to expect to be adequately rewarded for an important, if underrated job. We cannot demand quality care if we are not prepared to pay for it.

- reprinted from The Age

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