

# Child care is not the answer if we're working when we need family time [AU] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Well-educated, high-income women are the least likely to have children, or will have fewer children, says Anne Summers in her most recent book, *The End of Equality*. The reason, she suggests, is that the Federal Government has a policy agenda to send women back to the home. Underfunding of child care, the dismantling of organisations set up to promote equality between men and women in the workplace and a biased family payments system are all part of the problem. She's right there.

To simplify Summers's argument, the answer is to ensure good quality, affordable child care, provide paid maternity leave and get rid of government payments which favour stay-at-home mums no matter what their husbands earn.

The reality is more complex. If you offered the average parent 80 hours' free top-quality child care a week they wouldn't take it. There is an additional factor, which Summers touches on but does not explore adequately: we want time with our families.

The Federal Government made massive cuts to child care in its first two budgets. Estimates vary as to the extent of unmet demand in the community, but the ABS puts the shortage at 174,500 places. At the same time, changes to funding mean that many excellent services in poorer areas closed down. If you can find child care, it's expensive. Many children are on two-year waiting lists.

High-quality, affordable, accessible child care is an absolute necessity. Its absence is not the only thing stopping women having kids, though. Many women can't afford months off to have a baby. The high cost of living in Sydney means even parents (usually women) who want to take time off can't afford to. Paid maternity leave would ease some of this financial burden for a time. The ACTU and the ALP are arguing for 14 weeks' paid maternity leave.

Many women find that employers discriminate against them when they are pregnant. They are passed over for promotion, or return from leave to find they have been given lesser responsibilities.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, says women want to work part-time to care for their families, but this is increasingly difficult. Casualisation of part-time work severely limits the ability to plan child care or finances. Families are much more likely to "tag-team" care, thus placing another stress on family life. Part-time work is good for families only when it has decent pay, real career paths, security, regularity and fair conditions.

Employers who recognise the value of flexible work practices are seeing benefits, but they are the minority. We must institutionalise such arrangements, not continue the trend to deregulation and casualisation of the labour market that puts so much extra pressure on families.

Tanya Plibersek is the federal ALP member for Sydney.

- reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald

Region: Australia and New Zealand <sup>[2]</sup>

Tags: demand <sup>[3]</sup>

maternity and parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

mother's labour force participation <sup>[5]</sup>

work/life balance <sup>[6]</sup>

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/02/child-care-not-answer-if-were-working-when-we-need-family-time-au> [2]

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

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/maternity-and-parental-leave> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/5668>