

# Essential to know the pitfalls of childcare <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** The Sydney Morning Herald

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 23 Feb 2011

## EXCERPTS

A few years ago, when I was due to return to work just as my second child was turning one, I found myself with the common problem of having no organised child care. My son's name was inching up several long waiting lists when a gleaming new (and expensive) child-care centre opened next door to my four-year-old daughter's preschool. Signing up meant I would achieve the dream of every working parent - a common drop-off and pick-up point every day. I begged the manager for a place and my son was enrolled.

We went for two preliminary visits to help him settle in. What I observed set off alarm bells - disengaged staff, bored infants wandering aimlessly, a lack of attention and warmth from carers. Morning tea was distributed without a please or a thank-you.

Although the ratios of staff to children seemed to adhere to regulations, the supervision was laissez-faire with more concern shown to taking photos of the children to display on the afternoon slide show than engaging them in group play.

Through a window I watched an older group being hustled inside with the aid of Hi-5 playing on a giant TV screen. I was concerned but, like many parents with few options, I was forced to turn a blind eye and hope I was just witnessing an unusually bad day. Or two.

My son never made it past the first week. When I popped in on his third morning to check on him, I found him strapped in a pram asleep. He was hot and sweating and the air conditioning was turned off. The monitor was switched off and staff were a long way from his room. The manager tried to reassure me it would never happen again but, after observing my son's unusual distress over the following days, I never returned. I cobbled together a collection of family and paid carers and waited for a spot at the community childcare centre my daughter had attended. It has chipped paint and old play equipment but the staff treat the children with care and attention. When a spot came up, my son settled in without a problem.

Fortunately, I had the advantage of having seen the difference between good and bad care. But what of the parents who have no alternatives to judge by? Even if they had would they feel inclined to complain when there is such a shortage of places?

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Last year, only 363 people complained to the National Childcare Accreditation Council and fewer than a quarter of these lodged an actionable complaint in writing. The child-care centres in question were required to present evidence to the council that the matter had been resolved and that was the end of that.

Whether they were later subject to spot checks or other penalties, the council was unwilling to say and there is nothing on the public record. This means that parents assessing a potential child-care centre have no idea whether it has been the subject of no complaints or a dozen.

There are plenty of excellent child-care centres in NSW but when I related my experience to several workers in the industry they were not surprised. The centres with the worst reputations are those seeking big profits via a tighter-than-necessary budget.

Overworked and underpaid staff with few entitlements are more likely to let standards drop. With private child-care centres dominating the landscape, it is pertinent to ask: can Australia successfully balance a role for private enterprise with the need for quality, affordable care for all children? As my brief experience shows, it's quite possible for a centre to meet all the regulatory standards yet fail to provide a nurturing and educational environment.

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- reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald

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

**Tags:** quality <sup>[3]</sup>

staff <sup>[4]</sup>

privatization <sup>[5]</sup>

legislation and regulation <sup>[6]</sup>

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/02/essential-know-pitfalls-childcare> [2]  
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4]  
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/privatization> [6]  
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