

Cutting ratios no solution, says early years expert ^[1]

Author: Gaunt, Catherine

Source: Nursery World

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Jan 2013

EXCERPTS:

A leading academic has spoken out against Government plans to allow nursery staff and childminders to care for more children, warning that international evidence shows that relaxing ratios damages the quality of provision - even if staff are well-qualified.

Eva Lloyd, reader in Early Childhood at the University of East London, also said that any figures quoted by ministers regarding ratios in other countries should be treated with caution, as they often 'hide the details'.

An analysis of OECD data undertaken by Professor Helen Penn from the UEL to inform a comparative childcare costs report, due to be published by the DfE, does suggest that ratio relaxation is unlikely to lead to childcare cost reductions, but may well drive down childcare quality in this country.

Ms Lloyd told Nursery World, 'Our ratios are not that different from other OECD countries.'

For example, she said that a figure might quote the number of children that nurseries or childminders can typically care for. But these averages would tell you little about the way staff are deployed with different age groups within the nursery or nursery school. Or about the way ratios are calculated in relation to the qualification levels of staff and age range of the children present.

The following two examples are intended to illustrate this complexity.

In the Netherlands, from the start of this year, day nurseries must use a 'ready reckoner' designed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to calculate the number of qualified staff that must be present depending on the age mix of children within each group.

A French childminder can be registered to care for up to eight children, but may not look after more than four at any one time.

Ms Lloyd added, 'The fact that ratios for many OECD countries are fairly similar for birth to three and again for three to six, appears to suggest that there is quite close agreement between managers and practitioners in different countries that these are key indicators of quality provision.'

Nursery owners are concerned that any changes to ratios will compromise children's safety, particularly in the light of a Nursery World investigation that revealed this week that no official records are kept on the number of deaths, serious injuries and accidents that occur while children are in childcare settings.

In response, the Department for Education suggested that only settings that have highly qualified staff would be able to change ratios to enable them to care for more children.

A DfE spokesperson told Nursery World, 'Only nurseries which show a commitment to quality and workforce qualifications should be able to have greater staffing flexibility.'

However, Ms Lloyd pointed out that evidence from a longitudinal study of the quality of day nurseries in the Netherlands shows that since the relaxation of ratios and increases in group size allowed under the 2005 Dutch Childcare Act, the quality of staff/child interaction in day nurseries has suffered.

Ms Lloyd said, 'What appears to have happened is that day nurseries kept on the better qualified staff and let go the unqualified staff. The researchers concluded that the increased workload apparently interfered with the interaction between well qualified staff and the greater number of babies and toddlers they cared for.'

If changes to ratios are linked with staff qualifications, this suggests that in practice any changes to what really happens in a nursery setting will be dependent on where nurseries deploy their most well-qualified staff.

The evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund published by the DfE in 2011 found that most nurseries in the study did not deploy their Early Years Professionals and other graduate-level staff much in the baby and toddler rooms, but primarily with three- and four-year-olds. Significant indicators of quality provision for under-threes in this study turned out to be length of staff experience and high staff child ratios.

'Changing ratios will not reduce childcare costs'

Meanwhile, the Pre-School Learning Alliance has accused the Coalition Government of ignoring advice and warnings from the early years and childcare sector, which is overwhelmingly against plans to change ratios.

More than nine out of ten early years providers questioned in an Alliance survey last year said they were against the proposals.

The Alliance also said that it was unlikely that cutting ratios would lead to lower fees for parents. A key argument put forward by childcare and education minister Elizabeth Truss, who advocates relaxing ratios, is that it would cut childcare costs.

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said, 'We find it hard to understand the Government's desire to change ratios, whether for childminders or in group daycare settings when a survey we carried out last year found that 94 per cent of practitioners are against any such changes. They believe the quality of care would be compromised and they would be unable to maintain their current quality of service should staffing levels be reduced.'

'While we understand why the Government is looking at ways to reduce the cost of childcare to parents, changing ratios is not the way to approach this problem as it will not reduce childcare costs. Even though 70 per cent of group daycare costs are staff salaries, very few respondents indicated that they would adjust their charges accordingly, arguing that the additional revenue would go part-way to addressing the historic inadequacy of funding.'

'Such a move will also have insurance implications for all registered childcare providers. Already there are rumblings within the insurance market that premiums will have to increase should ratios change.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

Related link: Nurseries will be free to take more children to cut childcare costs [2]

Region: Europe [3]

Tags: legislation and regulation [4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/01/cutting-ratios-no-solution-says-early-years-expert>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/01/cutting-ratios-no-solution-says-early-years-expert> [2]

<http://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/01/nurseries-will-be-free-take-more-children-cut-childcare-costs> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>