

# High quality learning may mean more women working <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Warwick Daily News

**Source:** Warwick Daily News

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 30 Mar 2013

## EXCERPTS:

The childcare debate in Australia often centres on subsidising the service to boost the number of mums in the workforce or whether such concessions are simply "middle class welfare".

Then it moves to what is good for children, whether mothers should return to work or should stay home with the kids.

Goodstart Early Learning's chief believes access to "high-quality early learning" could be the key to reversing the dramatic drop-off in Australian women aged 25-44 in the workforce.

Julia Davison, who leads the not-for-profit organisation which took over the failed ABC Learning Centre network when it collapsed in 2008 with a \$2 billion debt, said providing educational childcare was good for the economy if women felt relatively guilt-free going back to work.

It was also giving children an early start on their education and could increase their success later in life too.

"Many other countries seem to have moved on. They have moved way beyond this (debate we have in Australia)," she said.

"The discussion is around high-quality early learning. These countries recognise that investment of public dollars in high-quality learning really makes a difference.

"This isn't just people who work in sectors like mine saying we do good. This is (an issue) where a whole range of researchers have all come together."

Ms Davison - who has more than 25 years experience in the health care and not-for-profit sector - was speaking in the Women in Leadership series for the Committee for Economic Development of Australia.

Since taking over in 2011, she has overhauled the once-troubled business to become the largest childcare operation in Australia.

Goodstart has more than 14,000 staff serving 70,000 children, with any generated surplus funnelled back into early learning initiatives.

Ms Davison said economists believed the return on investing in children's early years could be 17:1.

She said neuroscientists had been banging on about brain elasticity for the past 10 to 20 years, how important learning is from birth to age five, not just pre-school, where the focus of our education systems have been.

"We know most language development starts at age two and we know if the gap is established then, narrowing that gap later in life is very difficult," she said.

"So I feel very strongly that there is a new opportunity for children, women and our community, and that's with a provision of high-quality early learning for those children in that age group.

"I think that's a win-win-win. I think that helps support women who may well be in a dilemma as to whether or not to go back to work with a view they are making a good choice if their child is enrolled in high-quality early learning, as opposed to low-quality babysitting services.

"We know from all of the research that's been done that it makes a real difference to children's lives... particularly good for vulnerable children.

"At Goodstart... we're trying to take a network of childcare centres and strengthen them, ensure we're training our educators, improving our staffing ratio, making sure we have qualified people who understand education in those early years.

"We want to do that not just to improve lives of children in our centres but we want to do that to be able to demonstrate in Australia this can make a difference."

Four Australian charities established Goodstart to take over ABC, which Ms Davison said was in receivership for one of the longest periods in Australia's history at 18 months.

"I came in as the new chief executive with a job to take what can only be described as a failed for profit business and turn it into a successful social purpose organisation with a high-level aspirational vision for all Australia's children to have the best possible start in life," she said.

"Our mission at Goodstart is two-fold, it's about delivering that vision through... transforming our own centres to inclusive community connected, high-quality early learning centres, not babysitting centres.

"But also through having a strong advocacy role... around helping to raise awareness in Australia about the importance of the first five years."

Ms Davison said the dip in Australian women of child bearing age in the workforce showed up when ranked against labour force participation rates in 30 other OECD countries.

Australia was 22nd in the 25-34 age group and 21st for 35-44 women.

She said employment for Australian mothers with children less than five years of age was among the lowest in OECD countries, sitting only above Turkey, Malta and Japan.

Ms Davison said studies showed if Australia had the same number of women in the workforce as Canada, there could be as much as \$25 billion improvement in the country's GDP.

"It's not just a productivity issue, it's also an issue in terms of leadership and women in leadership," she said.

"(One of the) barriers for women in leadership positions is the fact there's a dramatic drop-off of women from the management path line, so at the age we often see people moving into management and leaderships roles, what's happening in Australia is a lot of women are actually leaving the workforce.

"What's good for childcare is good for women and could be an important key to ensuring more women in leadership positions in Australia."

-reprinted from Warwick Daily News

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

**Tags:** mother's labour force participation <sup>[3]</sup>

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