

Childcare benefits red tape putting off low income parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Low-income and disadvantaged families use fewer childcare and preschool services because they find applying for benefits "confusing and frustrating".

And some avoided services because they found providers ignored their needs, a national study has shown. These parents wanted providers to place more emphasis on learning that would better support their children when they started school.

The study by the University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre concluded that if the government accepted the draft recommendations of the Productivity Commission for a new "work or study test" then thousands of children whose parents were unemployed would be excluded from early childhood services.

While low-income families highly valued early childhood education, the commission draft report risked excluding them from services, the research argues.

Attention to children's learning was not enough: "Professional discourse can alienate families and stymie the flow of dialogue ... Families do not want a one-way flow of information. They want services to listen to them and respect them."

The study involved qualitative interviews with more than 130 parents across four states, as well as an analysis of statistical data and national and international policy.

"Holistic, integrated or wraparound services offer much broader resources than stand-alone care and education services. In this, they are a close match to the service and resource needs expressed by many of the most disadvantaged families in the study," the report says.

The research shows the commission's draft report, which proposed limiting access to childcare fee assistance to families where parents were working or studying less than 24 hours a fortnight, would exclude low-income families from accessing services.

"Many of the families who participated in the Families at the Centre study could not afford early childhood education and care if the fees were no longer subsidised," said lead researcher Deb Brennan. "If the government accepts the draft recommendations of the Productivity Commission, thousands of children whose parents are not employed will be excluded from early childhood services and these are precisely the children who would benefit from services the most."

The study showed that families found applying for the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate confusing and frustrating. It found that services needed to be more flexible for families who were also trying to find secure housing and employment.

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