

Could this spell the end of quality childcare in Australia? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you're a parent, can you remember that feeling of dropping your child off at childcare for the first time? The separation anxiety that builds up as you walk to the door is an almost universal experience, an unavoidable aspect of leaving your child in someone else's care for the first time.

Now imagine how much more intense that anxiety would be if our childcare educators weren't required to be as highly qualified and trained as they currently are.

How could you feel confident that your child will receive the quality education and care that they deserve?

It is now widely acknowledged that the first five years of a child's life create the foundation for them to accomplish key developmental milestones, both mentally and physically.

During these years a child's physical and mental growth rate is such that it is unequalled at any other stage of their lives.

Areas such as language and communication, motor development, social and emotional development and cognitive development are all critical aspects of growth.

The National Quality Framework ensures that the best qualified and experienced educators are engaged in providing care and education for this age group.

Last week, the Productivity Commission released its inquiry report into childcare and early childhood learning.

Among the recommendations was a call for the minimum qualification requirements for childcare educators to be wound back so that educators working with children three-years-old and under only require a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and are supported by a Diploma qualified educator rather than gaining the Diploma themselves.

This would mean lowering the qualification ratios within most ECEC services, and watering down the quality education that children receive.

As a leading provider of early childhood services in the ACT, YWCA Canberra sees daily the impact that ECEC qualifications have on both our educators, and the children in our care.

We recruit educators and provide ongoing training and professional development through our registered training organisation.

Educators feel empowered with the knowledge and skills to deliver robust, engaging and educational programs, and are able to support children with their individual learning journeys to make sure that every child is catered to.

However, diluting educator qualifications is just one of the concerning recommendations to come out of the Commission that could spell the end of quality early childhood education and care in Australia.

The Commission's stance on quality education and care provision has been erroneously informed by the inaccurate benchmarks for hourly rates as published in the report - \$7.41 per hour, per child for children under the age of 35 months is not reflective of the real costs associated with providing quality care.

YWCA Canberra would advise a more accurate benchmark of \$11, and strongly advocates for a flat rate for children both under and over 35 months of age, to ensure that services continue to provide care to children in the more 'expensive' age brackets.

Alarmingly, the Commission has recommended removing fringe benefits and introducing payroll tax for not-for-profit childcare providers.

As a not-for-profit organisation, YWCA Canberra, like many others, reinvests retained earnings from our childcare business to provide socially inclusive programs and services to the broader community.

This includes the provision of emergency food relief, education and training for young women, migrants, and recently settled refugees, affordable housing, and community development - vital programs which have sustained significant cuts in government funding in the past

18 months.

The implication of the Commission's recommendation is that not-for-profit childcare providers are somehow not providing bang for the Government's buck - that the benefits we receive do not meaningfully enhance our provision of childcare.

However, given that the Commission was tasked specifically with investigating the impact of childcare services on workforce participation, this seems short-sighted.

Workforce participation, especially for women with caring responsibilities, is linked not only to access to quality childcare services, but to safe and affordable housing, education and training, and freedom from domestic violence, amongst other factors.

Our work in the community bolsters women's ability to return to work, and complements our provision of affordable childcare to ensure that our programs are accessible to all.

As it currently stands, not-for-profit providers often operate services in low socio-economic areas at a loss, subsidising them with more successful programs in other areas to ensure that all families can access affordable ECEC services.

Without the benefits we receive as a not-for-profit provider, our childcare fees would be forced to increase, which would close the door on families and children in need.

In another demonstration of short-sightedness, the Commission has supported the proposal of extending government support to home-based care, such as subsidising nannies - without considering the impact this could have on the quality of care provided.

The report doesn't even mention the existing and effective family day care scheme that, when properly regulated, provides high quality care from qualified educators in a home setting.

Critically, family day care provides an avenue for workforce participation for women caring for their own children who are able to become educators.

The introduction of nannies could have significant detrimental impacts on family day care providers, and poach quality early childhood educators from existing services, without meaningfully offering an alternative quality mode of care.

In many ways, the proposed nanny scheme duplicates the family day care scheme, but without the stringent regulations and required qualifications that ensure that most family day care services are of a high standard.

In fact, in one of the Commission's recommendations it clearly recommends that the proposed Nanny Scheme would operate under the same ratios and administration model as current family day care services. That being the case, is the proposed inclusion of Nannies as a licensed scheme just another name for family day care?

I want to emphasise that there were some valuable recommendations made by the Commission - we particularly welcome the recommendation to review current qualifications and programming requirements in outside school care programs.

But taken as a whole, these recommendations could spell the end of quality early childhood education and care in Australia.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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