

Nanny pilot doesn't have to be bad news for childcare workers^[1]

Author: Adamson, Elizabeth

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EXCERPTS

A lot of the response to the government's proposed A\$246 million "nanny pilot" has focused on why public funding shouldn't be used to support unqualified caregivers or educators – particularly when educators in mainstream services such as Long Day Care are underpaid.

I agree 100% that educators should meet minimum qualifications – regardless of whether they work in a centre, educators' home, or child's home. However, not all of the commentary about the pilot has been fully informed.

More detail will become available when the government announces its Families Package, but so far we know the pilot should fund 4,000 nannies and 10,000 children for families with a combined income under A\$250,000.

The pilot is targeted to families working shift work, such as nurses and police officers, families in rural and regional areas, and those who have children with special needs, and should be considered within the context of existing early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

What's in place already

Subsidised in-home child care is not new in Australia. An existing In Home Care Program, introduced in 2000, provides just under 6,000 places for children who meet specific criteria. The criteria were established to recognise that some children – because of child or family characteristics – face barriers to accessing mainstream services.

The five groups of children and families eligible to access In Home Care are: children with a disability; a child in a family with a parent or caregiver who has a disability that reduces their capacity to care for the child; for families with three or more children under school age; children living in rural and remote areas; and children with parents working shift work that prevents them accessing mainstream services.

There is considerable crossover between the current In Home Care program and the groups targeted in the Nanny pilot – children living in rural and remote locations, children with parents working non-standard hours, and children with special needs.

The In Home Care Program is outside the scope of the National Quality Framework which means that carers are not required to hold a Certificate III. In practice, however, many provider organisations (including FDC schemes) ensure educators have a Certificate III. They also provide training and professional development. In Home Care offers an indispensable service for many families who would otherwise have no access to subsidised services.

These are not families that simply "choose" to have a nanny. It is still unclear how the existing In Home Care Program will be affected by the pilot.

Australia has made fundamental changes to the relevant policy over the past decade. The National Quality Framework established in 2012 requires all staff working in Long Day Care and Family Day Care to hold or be working towards a Certificate III, at least. It was not so long ago that many staff in these settings did not hold formal ECEC qualifications.

There is still a way to go to further improve the qualifications (some would argue all staff should have a Diploma) and, educators are still fighting for fairer remuneration that recognises their skills and experience. Nannies and in-home childcare educators should be required to have qualifications, and should be part of the ECEC sector's negotiations re higher wages and improved working conditions.

The international context

Australia is not the only country that funds and supports nannies. The proposed nanny pilot involves more regulation and oversight than similar schemes in some other countries (e.g. England), where nannies are registered (similar to DHS registered child care in Australia), and employed directly by families. Other countries, such as Canada, actively recruit nannies from overseas through migration, with minimal oversight by the government. Such countries can learn from Australia. However, other overseas models illustrate the potential for in-home child care to deliver flexible and affordable services to areas of need. Australia can learn from these.

An innovative UK service, “@HomeChildcare” ensures that adequate wages, working conditions and training is available to care workers, regardless of the income of the family for whom care is provided. In a typical market, nannies working for the highest income families would likely receive higher wages.

Under the @HomeChildcare model, care workers are contracted to the organisation for a fixed number of hours per week; these can be increased if there is demand from families. The care workers are trained appropriately and their wages reflect their qualifications and vary by the number of children cared for. The risk to workers of abuse or exploitation is minimised and families are assured workers are trained and monitored.

A similar model called “Flexible Childcare” operates in Scotland. Originally established to help single parents, the service targets vulnerable children and families, providing financial and logistical help with child care. Some children are cared for in their own homes early in the morning and late in the evenings, when parents are working; many attend centre-based care or care in the provider’s home during standard hours.

Nanny pilot is the first step

While important details of the government’s scheme are still unclear, the sector should build on some of the strengths of the pilot program: the fact that nannies are linked to service providers and that the program is targeted toward families that are unable to use mainstream services – not for all families. These elements are central to the program delivering equitable in-home child care to the families, and proper working conditions for nannies and in-home child care workers.

Long Day Care and Family Day Care services may not be well positioned to deliver non-standard hours care and care provided in rural and regional areas. And, of course, we cannot forget the huge gap in funding required to make these services accessible and affordable to all families. However the sector as a whole can be part of developing and supporting an in-home child care program that meets the needs of families that are currently unable to access quality, regulated child care. The nanny pilot has the potential to move the sector a step closer to achieving this for families currently unable to access mainstream services.

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