

Stay-at-home parents creching the daycare party ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Working families are struggling to find childcare, as new research reveals a third of stay-at-home parents send their kids to daycare.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has found that only two-thirds of parents use daycare for work-related reasons.

One in 10 families uses taxpayer-subsidised childcare to "give the parent a break" and nearly one in four sends children to daycare for education and socialisation.

Twelve per cent of babies and toddlers from jobless families - and 40 per cent of preschoolers aged three to five - are enrolled in daycare.

AIFS senior research fellow Jennifer Baxter said yesterday a third of Australian families struggled financially to pay for childcare, which will attract \$7.1 billion in taxpayer subsidies next financial year.

Nearly one in five families had trouble finding formal childcare to cover their hours of work.

"Many families rely on a combination of formal and informal childcare arrangements," Dr Baxter said yesterday.

"(They) fall back on a network not only of grandparents, but other relatives, older brothers and sisters, friends, neighbours and nannies."

Brisbane mother Louise Vale put her name on the waiting lists at 12 childcare centres when she was three months' pregnant with daughter Amelia, now two.

Even so, she had to wait nearly two years for a part-time place, three days a week, at a Goodstart Early Learning Centre.

Ms Vale relies on Amelia's grandparents to care for her two days a week, while she works full-time as a procurement officer for the Queensland Ambulance Service.

"I wanted care for her when she was 10 months old but I missed out at every single centre where I'd put her name down," Ms Vale said yesterday.

"I resorted to going to centres and just begging for a spot. I said I had to go back to work in January and if I didn't get daycare for my daughter I'd lose my job."

The AIFS research shows that half of babies and toddlers with working parents go to daycare, compared with 16 per cent of those with one parent working and the other at home.

Among children aged three to five, 36 per cent of those with working parents attend childcare, compared with 19 per cent with one breadwinner and 20 per cent from jobless families.

Children with working parents average 22 hours a week in childcare, compared with 15 hours for those children who have one or both parents at home.

The chief executive of advocacy group The Parenthood, Jo Briskey, called on the government to retain childcare subsidies for stay-at-home parents. "Childcare isn't just about mum and dad getting back to work," she said yesterday. "They should be allowing all kids to access quality early learning and care."

The Abbott government will increase childcare subsidies for working families from July 2017.

But it will also tighten the "activity test" by requiring both parents to work, study or volunteer for at least eight hours a fortnight to pocket taxpayer subsidies. Families earning less than \$65,000 a year - including those on welfare - will be able to access 12 hours a week of cheap childcare even if one or both parents stays home.

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