

International experts criticise Australian childcare plan ^[1]

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Source: The Sydney Morning Herald

Format: Article

Publication Date: 7 Jun 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

International childcare experts have criticised the Coalition's move to make parents work to get childcare funding, describing it as a "retrograde step" that will hurt vulnerable families who are most in need of early learning and care.

They have also questioned the government's focus on getting women into work as a "half a loaf" approach that ignores the importance of childcare for childhood development.

Oxford University professor Edward Melhuish, whose research has focused on long-term studies of child development, said the Australian system – even under the new childcare package – was "way behind" other developed countries.

Under the Coalition's new childcare package, announced in the May budget, parents will have to work at least eight hours a fortnight to qualify for up to 36 hours of childcare subsidy every two weeks. They will have to work at least 49 hours over the same period to get the full 100 hours per fortnight subsidy.

In the current system, many parents are able to access payments without working.

Professor Melhuish said Australia's new "activity tests" for parents would result in a substantial number of non-working poor families losing out.

"This seems to me a really retrograde step," he said. "The country as a whole is going to pay the cost of this in future years."

The best way to narrow the gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds – and ensure they went on to complete their education and get stable jobs – was to make sure they did not start school behind, he said.

The Oxford childcare expert, in Australia as a visiting professor at the University of Wollongong, said Australian politicians did not get the importance of childcare for childhood development.

"When you're talking to politicians, it seems to be like you're talking to a different race of people. There seems to be a lack of acknowledgement of the childcare development perspective."

University of Toronto professor Charles Pascal, who is a regular visitor to Australia, said the Abbott government's focus on the labour market was a "half a loaf" approach to childcare.

"I would raise the following question: while the mums are at work, how are the kids doing?"

Professor Pascal said while Australia had a national quality framework for early childhood education, it provided only a minimum standard.

"That's not going to get Australia closer to the top."

The criticism of professors Pascal and Melhuish came as leading Australian academic Deborah Brennan raised doubts about the new childcare package, which promises to pump an extra \$3.5 billion into the early-learning system.

The University of New South Wales social policy professor said by cracking down on the number of hours parents had to work the government was undermining an important safety net and two decades of "careful policy work".

"The package effectively punishes children whose parents aren't doing what the government wants them to do," she said.

She described the extra funding, which will not do anything specific to make long day care more flexible, as "not smart expenditure".

The Abbott government faces an uphill battle to get its childcare reforms through the Senate, because it has linked them to family tax benefit savings that are opposed by Labor, the Greens and much of the crossbench.

Social Services Minister Scott Morrison said the government had "brought down the largest single package of measures to increase child care and early childhood learning assistance".

"We are maintaining the quality framework and continue to implement it, as set down by the previous government."

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