

Feminist childcare fight comes full circle as job-based policy fails children's needs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the 1970s, feminists pushed for children's services that recognised the need for care for children whose mothers had jobs. In 2015, the situation has reversed. Feminists and others concerned about good social policies need to push the rights of children to funded children's services, regardless of whether the child's "primary" carer has job-related activities.

Oddly, this reversal has come from a Coalition government that used to defend the right of mothers to stay at home and not be pressured to find paid work. The government's current proposals will deny the children of these women access to subsidies for any form of care services, except for 15 hours of "preschool" per week in the year before school.

This shift revives the perceived tensions between "stay at home" mothers and "working" mothers, but in reverse – by enshrining policies that are designed to push more primary carers into paid work.

Won't improve care

The government's Child Care Subsidy – the A\$21 billion centrepiece of its "families' package" from the May budget – is a single payment based on family income that will start on July 1, 2017. It will provide assistance to meet the childcare costs of parents engaged in work, training, study or other recognised activities.

One in four parents currently using childcare services don't have work-related needs. This includes 156,000 stay-at-home parents with a provider partner, 63,000 single parents who are not in jobs and 15,000 non-employed families.

So, one-quarter of a million current or similar future users would have their access reduced, or cut out, under the government's changes.

As an advocate for job-related child care way back, I see this as a bizarre failure. It is a change that undermines the right of children to subsidised care services. The object of the changes, then and now, was based on a recognition that raising children requires "a village", which can be replaced and augmented by "kindergartens" offering access to other children, adults and skills that complement families.

The official justification for this current set of reforms is put in terms of increasing GDP. But this ignores other benefits of quality early care, which is more than just employed parents.

The complex, overly bureaucratic, new funding formula has three stages of hour-based core fee subsidies. Calculated entitlements are based purely on the paid work status of parents.

The extra special needs funding is also justified in terms of future GDP gains via more workers. Despite being touted as addressing disadvantaged needs, it is likely to fail because access to this funding involves extra verification, as well as stigmatising labelling – which deters possible users. This funding offers time-limited access to services, which takes up more time and effort by the services, so few will take it on.

Another flaw in this model results from individuated funding gradually replacing the budget-based funding that directly subsidises services, mainly Indigenous ones, that don't fit the workforce participation model. It is likely that this effective set of services will have to close, as the focus on funding individuals will undermine the secure funding a serious community service needs.

Won't make it easier to find work

This adds to the case for rejecting the individuated workplace support focus. It excludes families from subsidised child care where the "primary carer" is not in work-related activities. Families make decisions on how or when to get paid work on a range of factors that go well beyond the economic.

For many parents, finding jobs when you have young children requires having a place in an acceptable children's service before even

looking for jobs. ABS workforce data show women with preschoolers (41%) are less likely to be in the labour force than those with children aged five to nine (25%).

Once the kids are settled and the parent is comfortable, then they search for paid work that fits with available hours and other needs.

Therefore, many of those now using childcare services may well fail to find jobs if their care time is cut or they find they have no continuing access to care. Other parents who have irregular – maybe sporadic – workforce spells may find the new system hard to manage and could even give up paid jobs if they find the system of reporting too hard.

The services may also balk at the complexity of working out entitlements.

These current proposals are too complex and overly bureaucratic. The changes seem to be counterproductive in many ways and are likely to damage children, and so should not go ahead.

-reprinted from The Conversation

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