

# Maria Billias: It's time to pay our child carers more <sup>[1]</sup>

Opinion

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

AS Australia headed to the polls yesterday, many families were weighing up the respective childcare policies both sides spent insufferable campaign time selling.

Each has been spruiking their own as the policy to save the world. Or at least to replace the highly complicated rebate and benefit system in place right now.

Childcare is a polarising issue with families saying the expense and availability contributes to keeping women out of the workforce, and those without children often parroting the "why should we subsidise others' childcare".

It's campaign royalty because it's an issue that impacts a larger part of the population and something palatable for pollies to capitalise on.

But there is something both sides missed during their two month talkfest, and it's what should have been at the forefront of any discussion on family friendly policies.

It is the appalling rates of pay our childcare workers receive. If ever there was an industry where employees were undervalued it is indisputably those working in childcare.

Earlier this week, a Queensland study revealed that childcare workers were leaving their jobs in droves - usually within 12 months of starting - with poor pay and conditions cited as the reasons why.

As it stands, those you entrust to watch your children every day are probably earning around the same an hour as a Woolworths shelf stacker or McDonalds window server.

In fact, most childcare workers are earning less than half of what those who will be serving your drinks on Darwin Cup day are expected to get.

It's actually pretty damn ludicrous when you look at it that way.

These are the workers who spend more waking hours with the children of mums and dads that are doing the daily nine-to-five grind.

The workers who are your youngsters' first educators; the ones to soothe and comfort your babies when they cry; deal with sick kids because parents are faced with no other option but to drop them at childcare before blithely rushing off to work; toilet train toddlers and make sure their sunscreen and hats are religiously applied before outdoor play; feed, chase, teach and put our kids to sleep each lunch time; deal with specific dietary, medical and other requests of parents, no matter how inane; program meaningful lessons and activities every single day.

The ones on their feet from 7.30am to 6pm with a 45-minute lunch break thrown in between. These are the people who sit on around \$20 an hour.

It is by far the most undervalued, unappreciated profession, and when I say profession that is exactly what it is.

Because childcare has now moved away from being a basic 'babysitting' service and now falls in the realm of education. Most of those looking after your children are required to have some form of tertiary qualification.

They are not simply childcare workers, but educators tasked with teaching toddlers their basic learning tools prior to school entry. Both my daughters have attended childcare from about the age of eight months.

Both learnt to count to 10, spell out their names and their ABC's very early in their toddler years in the course of being cared for by the wonderful educators at the centre they were lucky enough to attend.

But it is so much more than education. Happy, well paid childcare workers lead to happy, well-adjusted children.

The study also found that children who attend centres where there is a high turnover of staff are more unsettled and stressed. That goes without saying, and in itself should be enough to push whoever forms Government after today to have a serious look at improving the wage structures and conditions of this industry.

Because while affordable and accessible childcare is paramount, so too is the wellbeing of those in an industry who have, unarguably, the most important job in the world.

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