

Submission

on the

Provision of Childcare

to the

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

**Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600**

Telephone: 02 6277 3521

Facsimile: 02 6277 5706

Email: eewr.sen@aph.gov.au

Website: www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/eet_ctte

by

FamilyVoice Australia

4th Floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000

Telephone: 1300 365 965

Facsimile: 08 8223 5850

Email: office@fava.org.au

Website: www.fava.org.au

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1. Introduction

The Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee is conducting an inquiry into:

- a. the financial, social and industry impact of the ABC Learning collapse on the provision of child care in Australia;
- b. alternative options and models for the provision of child care;
- c. the role of governments at all levels in:
 - i. funding for community, not-for-profit and independent service providers,
 - ii. consistent regulatory frameworks for child care across the country,
 - iii. licensing requirements to operate child care centres,
 - iv. nationally-consistent training and qualification requirements for child care workers, and
 - v. the collection, evaluation and publishing of reliable, up-to-date data on casual and permanent child care vacancies;
- d. the feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia; and
- e. other related matters.

The Committee has called for public submissions which are due by 30 January 2009.

2. Childcare: is it good for children?

Jay Belsky has reported the main findings from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care in America, in which over 1200 children from 10 communities were followed from birth through to starting school.¹

“Critics of earlier research had suggested the problem of day care was all to do with poor quality, but the new study found that even when controlling for the quality of care, the quantity of day care still mattered. Children who spent early, extensive and continuous time in the care of non-relatives were more likely to show later behavioural problems, such as aggressiveness and disobedience, as indicated by ratings from their caregivers, their mothers and eventually their teachers.

“The type of care mattered too. The study found children who spent more time in a child care centre (as opposed to in another person’s home with a non-relative, or in a home with a relative other than their mother) tended to show benefits in terms of their cognitive and linguistic development, but to also show more behavioural problems, being more aggressive and disobedient.

“Finally, and not surprisingly, the quality of care was also found to be relevant, in terms of how attentive and responsive carers were, and how stimulating the care environment was. Low quality care was particularly detrimental to the children of mothers who lacked sensitivity. High quality care on the other hand was associated with later superior cognitive-linguistic functioning.

“Given these results, and similar findings from British studies such as the EPPE Study,² Belsky concluded that policies should be introduced to discourage parents from putting their children into day care for too long, including the expansion of parental leave, and tax policies to reduce the economic factors that encourage parents to leave their children in the care of other people.”³

This evidence on the potential harms of long term day care should be taken into account in considering the role of government in the provision of childcare.

3. Quality childcare for under 3s: is it financially viable?

British childcare researcher Penelope Leach has observed that:

"It is fairly clear from data from different parts of the world that the less time children spend in group care before three years, the better. Infants spending as little as 12 hours a week in day nurseries - this is such a low threshold that it covers almost all infants in this childcare setting - showed slightly lower levels of social development and emotional regulation (less enthusiastic cooperation, concentration, social engagement and initiative) as toddlers.

"The tendency of government policy for more day-nursery provision to the exclusion of other types of childcare is extremely short-sighted; it's easier for an infant to catch up on cognitive skills later on, but they can't catch up on insecure attachment. The trend towards more day nurseries is out of kilter with what the research is finding.

"We know from research that staff in nurseries tend to be firstly, more detached - less sensitive and responsive - towards the children and there is more 'flatness of affect', a subtle but very important characteristic which means that there is no differentiation in response to a child, a sort of blandness.

"Somewhere after two years, as the children begin to relate more to each other than to the adult, then high-quality, group-based care becomes an unequivocal benefit. But for the first 18 months, all the international research shows us the importance of lots of attention from a carer who thinks the infant is the cat's whiskers. It may even be less important that those caring for the under two-year-olds are trained, as that they have the right attitude to children - that they are warm, responsive, talkative and funny."⁴

Leach concludes that while it might be possible to provide good-quality nursery care with well-paid, highly motivated staff for the under two-year-olds, it is very expensive because the ratio of carers to infants needs to be as close to one-on-one as possible.

Clearly only high income earners would be able to afford sufficiently high fees to cover good wages for excellent childcare staff at close to a "one-on-one" ratio. It also seems clear that any attempt by government to fund or heavily subsidise such a scheme is inherently unviable.

The recent UNICEF report card highlights the key concepts to emerge from recent neuroscientific research. "They include: the sequence of 'sensitive periods' in brain development; the importance of 'serve and return' relationships with carers; the role of love as a foundation for intellectual as well as emotional development; the fostering of the child's growing sense of agency; the ways in which the architecture of the developing brain can be disrupted by stress; and the critical importance of early interactions with family members and carers in the development of stress management systems."⁵

The report notes that "neuroscience is beginning to confirm and explain the inner workings of what social science and common experience have long maintained – that loving, stable, secure, stimulating and rewarding relationships with family and caregivers in the earliest months and years of life are critical for almost all aspects of a child's development."⁶

The report comments on staff-to-children ratios, confirming Penelope Leach's comments about 'one-on-one'.

"Acceptable staff-to-children ratios will, in practice, vary with circumstance, including the number of hours per day in child care. But the research shows overwhelmingly that young children need a great deal of one-to-one attention and support – relationships rather than group instruction. It is widely acknowledged that infants and very young children are not ready for group activities."⁷

The report proposes massive increases in government funding for childcare in countries like Australia. After noting that the cost of quality full day care school-year programmes for 4-5 year olds were as

high as \$9,000 (US\$) per year in the United States, the report comments that for “children younger than three years, requiring higher staff-to-children ratios, the costs will be greater still”.

This is surely an understatement.

The report card sets as its benchmark number 7 a staff-to-child ratio of 1:15 for four to five year olds.⁸ Oddly the report card sets a benchmark of government subsidised and regulated childcare for 25% of children under 3 years of age but fails to set any quality benchmarks for this care, including staff-to-child ratios.

The report comments favourably on a quality early childhood programme for under-3s conducted in North Carolina which had a staff-to-child ratio of 1:3 for infants and 2:7 for toddlers.⁹

This would suggest that the per child cost for quality childcare with a staff-to-child ratio of 1:3 for under 3s might be as high as \$45,000 (US\$) per child.

Sweden, which gets a perfect score on the UNICEF report card, spends four times what Australia currently spends on childcare, as a proportion of GDP.¹⁰

Recommendation 1:

In the light of:

- *the evidence from long term studies demonstrating adverse outcomes from day care for under three year olds;*
- *the neuroscientific research confirming the importance of one-on-one relationships based on love to the development of the child in its early years; and*
- *the very high costs of quality childcare for under 3s,*

it would be good public policy to withdraw all financial support for childcare for under-3s and to direct all savings to parental income support by tax rebates and/or transfers.

Those parents who choose to do so could still make use of childcare for their children under-3 but at their own expense and without apparent government endorsement for this practice.

4. Childcare for 4-5 year olds

The evidence for the benefits of childcare or early childhood education for 4-5 year olds is more mixed. However, government policy should not favour parents who choose to put their 4-5 year old children into childcare.

Recommendation 2:

All monies spent on childcare for 4-5 year olds should be equitably distributed by tax rebates and/or transfer payments to all parents of 4-5 year olds. Those who choose to do so could use their share of this money to subsidise the costs of child care. Others may use the money for home educational resources and/or as income supplements to enable one parent to remain at home as full or nearly full-time carer for preschool children.

5. Endnotes

1. Belsky, J., 2006, "Early child care and early child development: Major findings of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care", *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 3, 95-110.
2. <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/schools/ecpe/eppe/index.htm>.
3. "Is day care harmful to small children?", 2006, *Research digest blog*, British Psychological Society; <http://bps-research-digest.blogspot.com/2006/03/is-day-care-harmful-to-small-children.html>.
4. Bunting M., 'Nursery Tales', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2004; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2004/jul/08/schools.uk>.
5. UNICEF, *The child care transition, Innocenti Report Card 8*, 2008, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, p 5; http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc8_eng.pdf.
6. *Ibid.*, p 6.
7. *Ibid.*, p 27.
8. *Ibid.*, p 26.
9. *Ibid.*, p 8.
10. *Ibid.*, Figure 4, p 27.