



PLAY ENVIRONMENT
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**SUBMISSION TO SENATE EDUCATION,
EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE
RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF
CHILDCARE**

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Intent of submission

This submission focuses on the changed roles for levels of government which will advance the interests of the users of childcare centres.

The roles of governments are expressed through legislation, accreditation, subsidies, grants and staffing issues. To the extent that these are [poorly framed, or are perceived to be “stand alone” instruments/policies] then the potential exists for either individuals or organisations with limited perception of needs to lower the quality of facilities. The failure of ABC Learning is a tangible example of how weaknesses in government action can have unintended consequences.

Over the 20 years of my involvement with the child care sector (firstly as an educator, then as a freelance consultant and planner of facilities) I have had a unique range of exposure as to how government policies (etc.) impact on the operation of facilities. My strengths lie in the assessment of the settings (physical environments) and in how to deliver quality learning places despite financial constraints. My extensive practitioner experience in the field has provided me with insights to the inquiry issues which will not be derived from elsewhere (such as academic, top-down, and commercial visions).

I would stress that large corporatisation of childcare centres tends to accentuate the financial aspects of operation, which (too often) can be at the expense of the day-to-day operation and delivery of a developmentally-based program. In my view, this is something to be avoided for the sake of children.

1. The role of governments in funding community, not-for-profit and independent service providers

Economic research indicates that for every \$1 spent on quality childcare, \$17 is saved later in remedial programs. Using this as a baseline, governments (at all levels) will benefit by judicial funding of childcare centres which are community-supported.

There is a good deal of fuzzy thinking on the type of service providers. The assumption of profit/not-for-profit dichotomy can be misleading—since it is the distance between the decision-makers' objectives to that of the users which is the critical factor, not whether profit per se is involved.

The larger the organisation (particularly the corporate sector) the more emphasis is placed on cash-flows and the more corners can be cut by the organisations' managers (especially when tenders for bulk purchases are involved, like fixed equipment and food). This necessitates large organisations having to be carefully monitored and made accountable for quality.

However even small (community, independent providers and those providing extended services) are always in need of funding—usually from grants or community fundraising. Consideration should be given to:

- I. Any supplementary funding for upgrading an existing centre should be assessed in terms of the whole-of-site effectiveness (not piecemeal)—an inappropriate shade shelter can destroy the physical setting of a whole playground.
Consult early childhood-trained assessors (not generalists); ensure any proposal has accredited early childhood input.
- II. Start-up capital loans to communities could be provided at low interest rates if assessed viable in the long-term.
Involve the local government and community working in conjunction with early childhood professionals.
- III. Children with special needs (or cultural needs) often cannot draw on any other source except for government funding, but these clearly also need different designs and management practices to be effective. These need to be specifically funded—including funds for specific physical environment planning.
Fund planning phases as well as development.

2. The role of governments in consistent regulatory frameworks across the country.

Australia is a signatory to the UN Rights of the Child Convention, yet we are now assessed to be one of the lowest quality providers of childcare in the OECD. This suggests our system is failing. Why?

It is a characteristic of our current regulatory system that (a) the States operate independently, and (b) even within a State, regulatory responsibility has demarcation areas. This in Professor Fiona Stanley's words, is the "silo effect", and needs to be broken down by deliberate collaboration across professional disciplines, bureaucratic hierarchies and even within the sections the of early childhood field.

Sinclair¹ suggests that *leadership* is a way to break through old habits and old ways of thinking. In relation to the childcare sector, this inquiry is only phase 1 (reflection on existing situations). It needs to be followed up by fostering co-operation and interdisciplinary collaboration. Consideration needs to be given to:

- I. Early childhood issues need to be led by early childhood professionals (not generalists) but developed cooperatively in concepts.
Increase the number of early childhood professionals in policy-areas; check if a proposal has early childhood input.
- II. In developing regulatory frameworks, give equal weight to physical environment and social or health factors, recognising that shortfalls in one, significantly affect achievement in the other. A classic example is that of obesity; the health objective must be provided with an appropriate stimulating physical environment.
Build into each framework a physical environment component.
- III. Revisit earlier inquiries for different perspectives which have a bearing on current regulatory frameworks.
 - *Senate (1996). Childhood matters – Inquiry into early childhood education.*
 - *Parliament of NSW (2006). Inquiry into children, young people and the built environment.*
- IV. Community needs are changing. If the regulatory framework is always in catch-up, or simply copies other formats (do they have a research basis?), then they will continue to fail.
Set up:
 - *Monitoring systems so changes can be identified early (not catch-up).*
 - *Mechanisms whereby the results of [research, monitoring etc.] can be easily incorporated into policies and practices (so that regulations have up-to-date information).*
 - *Mechanisms to provide and/or foster early childhood input at different levels (eg. on-the-ground practitioners; early childhood professionals working in specialised areas, special needs, playground design; and academics).*

¹ Sinclair A (2007). *Leadership for the disillusioned*. Allen & Unwin, Australia, pp xv–xxii

3. The role of governments in licencing requirements to operate childcare centres.

In relation to delivery of childcare services, licencing requirements are significantly failing—and even worse, the shortfalls are being exploited by opportunistic proposals (as attested to by the increased legal challenges to local government objectives). In many states, there is a climate of “copying” substandard requirements without critical thought. Physical environment is virtually neglected within this field.

While the accreditation process is closely linked to Federal funding (and therefore can be improved through Federal decisions), the actual licencing requirements are set by the various State Governments. It is an increasingly common State practice to copy (or even plagiarise out of context) sets of requirements without critical thought; the result tends to be lowest-common-denominator practices. Assessment of all current requirements shows coverage to be:

OH&S>Social objectives>staffing ratios>>physical environments

This is a shocking imbalance, given that young children tend to learn through physical/sensory activities. This gap cannot be filled at local government level, since it is rare for them to have early childhood professionals on staff.

There is also an unwillingness to call in childhood expertise on early childhood issues at Local, State and even Federal levels—particularly where specialised knowledge is involved.

The result is that physical environments (the setting in which children spend the most formative years of their lives) continues to fall between bureaucratic gaps. It is a significant failure to support children’s development. It also creates stressful situations as teachers struggle to provide a stimulating, developmentally-based program in a restrictive physical environment.

For the well-intentioned operator of centres, there is no comprehensive, research-based guidance which sufficiently covers an early childhood developmentally-based perspective. How can they turn high-level aspirations (such as invitation to explore) into design? The current licencing requirements do not provide a design brief for Architects, nor inform centres how to create child-driven facilities with open-ended play opportunities. Childcare centres are places of learning, for young children during the most formative years of their life. They are not occasional-usage public parks or child-minding services, yet are often designed according to such inappropriate guidance.

If the licencing requirements are to be appropriate to 2009 expectations, then consideration should be given to raising the status of physical environments. It is a matter of leadership—and will affect all levels of government. The focus must be on the well-being of the children, not the convenience of administrators. Some of the measures which collectively can improve the system are:

- I. Set up a taskforce led by early childhood professionals to identify shortfalls in physical environment licencing requirements.
- II. Set up a different taskforce led by early childhood professionals to identify significant gaps in applied research (eg. causes of injury, spatial needs for

different child groups); then make recommendations as to how to meet these gaps.

- III. Set up a different taskforce led by early childhood professionals, working in conjunction with selected other professionals to develop Best Practice guidelines for physical environment; then make recommendations as to how this would be used within licensing requirements.
- IV. Take immediate steps to improve early childhood accreditation acknowledgement of physical environments based on play patterns and needs of these 0–5 year olds. Young children learn through play.

4. The role of governments in the feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the childcare industry in Australia.

Like any other sector in the modern world, there is a need for a central body to provide leadership in both big picture concepts and disseminate more technical information. Overgovernment and a reliance on “black print” are not desirable—a Federal co-operative instrument is however probably the only way forward. It is not whether there should be a national body, but what its role should be.

The current patchwork of bureaucratic systems is becoming dysfunctional—a long way behind the childcare delivery which existed under the Kindergarten movement of the 1950’s, despite years of input by administrators.

A national authority would provide leadership and a forum for new approaches. It would undoubtedly evolve overtime, but the critical first criteria is that there should be an early childhood voice at every level to assess the impact of proposals before they are put in place, or even submitted for funding. Otherwise the national authority will just be “more of the same”, and perpetuate current practices, current advice.

Consideration could be given to:

- I. A Federal/State Standing Committee on Early Childhood matters, meeting at least annually, which would have authority to agree on and fund proposals.
- II. A supportive set of technical committees on Early Childhood matters which would have interdisciplinary membership and be empowered to invite external expertise on issues.
- III. A central secretariat (Office of Early Childhood) comprising both administrative and technical divisions. The role of this body would be to:
 - provide administrative support for the overview committees (1 & 2 above), and for any national projects (or applied research) undertaken.
 - provide a forum for new information, with a [gather, collate, disseminate focus]; responsibility would be technical leadership and facilitation.

I would see such an “authority” as being able to develop new approaches, facilitate interdisciplinary cooperation and provide leadership appropriate to the new era of 2009. It should not perpetuate the current (dysfunctional) system.

Through its activities, I would hope that:

- there will be wider public engagement with the realities of childcare delivery
- there will be greater matching of funding and the intent of policies (etc.)
- there will be a diminution of the influence of commercial stakeholders in early childhood matters, including childcare.

If you wish clarification or expansion on any portions of this submission, I would be pleased to provide this. I have 20 years and over 2000 early childhood facilities to draw on for examples and case studies; these are in both for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. I am concerned that the children of Australia receive the best services possible.