

18/01/2009

**Family Daycare: Employment and Workplace Relations: Inquiry into the provision of childcare**

Dear Mr Carter,

I am an ex-Defence spouse who worked as a family daycare provider in 2 places (Qld and the ACT) and I am very concerned that this cheaper option for childcare is going to be regulated out of existence.

Daycare providers work out of their own homes and offer a more family based option for children whose parents need childcare. Most providers offer opportunities for children to experience a "normal" childhood not fettered by the 4 walls and fences of a childcare centre. Their homes are the children's home away from home. While scheduling varies according to the inclination of the provider and the regulations of the area in which she works, kids get to be kids rather than the economic units that they are for a business.

I know that most FDP are women from lower socio-economic groups. This is for many reasons. Defence spouses find it very hard to find work as a lot of places where the Army/Navy/Air Force have bases are smaller towns where the locals prefer to hire locals. Not just because they know them better but also because there is a perception that Defence families move on and therefore they do not make reliable employees. But that's another issue completely. When I lived in Canberra, 60% of all Family Daycare was being done by the wives of serving Defence personnel. These women mostly had children of their own and wanted to be home with their kids as their husbands were often absent for long periods or were shift workers. Over 90% of **all children of less than 12 months of age** were with family daycare workers, not placed in centres.

Our clients were not, on the whole, middle class mothers who preferred the shiny childcare centres that charged up to twice what was **set by FDC**. (Family Daycare Providers do not set their own rates. They are only allowed to charge what their sponsor group decides for them. It is usually the base child care rate covered by the CCB) Our clients were working women like nurses, shift workers, mothers of very young children who were concerned about the carer ratios in childcare centres, children with disabilities and women from lower socio-economic groups who worked in retail, hospitality, and hotels. Many of these women were single parents who, even with CCB cannot afford to use childcare centres as CCB has never actually covered what a centre charges per day.

We provided flexible care out of hours and children could be booked in for part-days where the parent only pays for the part day. This is usually not allowed in a centre. We provided a max ratio of 1:4 care for all children, and no one was allowed to have more than 2 children under 12 months of age in care at any one time. In other words, FDC covers the "hard stuff". The non-6am-6pm kids. I could list many examples of the kind of care only this industry can provide. Children whose mothers worked in cafes, truck stops and hotels and whose shifts began at 4am. Nurses could stay to do double shifts knowing their child would already be safely asleep in his/her own bed at the FDC provider's house. Mothers who worked shift in call centres and for the Defence Forces could rely on the same thing.

FDC often finds itself, these days, relying on immigrant women who want to stay home with their children. Often these trans-cultural homes offer experiences that otherwise children would never have. While I agree that all these homes need to be supervised to make sure that the standard of care is appropriate I am concerned that applying the same sort of standards that apply to centres is unrealistic and may lead to the complete loss of this service to the community.

Expecting, for instance that a FDC provider cleans her own home from top to bottom every night after her charges leave, assuming they do leave, is unrealistic. A centre closes at night and cleaners come through. A mother at home should only be expected to keep the house as

clean as is reasonable with emphasis on places like kitchens, toilets and Bathrooms. Where the children sleep need to be safe but expecting clean linen daily (unless it's a different kid each night) is unfair. These are homes not childcare centres.

You may say it's a working environment but at \$4-5 an hour (that usually means with a full home of 4 kids and therefore \$20 an hour) most FDC earn less than \$40,000 a year. Most houses **do not have** 4 full time kids so this sum is often much less. My best year I had 4-6 children on my books at all times, but only one was full time. I wasn't paid, for example, for when the preschoolers were in kindergarten. I made \$15, 000 before tax that year even though I provided school holiday care and before and after school care as well.

Please take in to account not only the childcare needs of families whose parents do not work any kind of 9-5 and therefore the need to keep this industry viable. Also the need to encourage women to work in it, by keeping the industry relatively easy to work in. Inflexible regulation of this industry will disadvantage those who can least afford to be penalised like this.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Rogers.