

# INQUIRY INTO BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

The Standing Committee on Family and Human Services  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra



## Childcare Queensland

Submission by: Gwynn Bridge  
President

Childcare Queensland supports this inquiry into balancing work and Family on the assumption that the Australian Government will take action on the information gathered, resulting in a child care and taxation system that is more acceptable, flexible and affordable for all families.

Childcare Queensland is the Peak Body representing around 600 child care services in Queensland. Childcare Queensland supports Licencees and staff to provide high quality childcare by providing current information on all child care issues, work shops, industrial advocates and by lobbying both Local, State and Federal governments on matters pertaining to children families, Licencees, staff and the community.

Over the past two decades, the landscape in the long day care sector has changed considerably in relation to work and families by -

- (a) The number of families now using part time care
- (b) Age groups of care – 0 to 3; 3 - 5
- (c) Recruitment and retention of qualified staff
- (d) Availability of child care places

**(a) The number of families now using part time care**

Families regularly tell us that it is not worth their while financially for both parents to work on a full time basis and place their children in care five days per week. Families are trying to balance their optimum earning point in relation to their income and costs incurred in obtaining that income. Child care costs, travel and taxation are all mentioned as a deterrent to full time employment. Many of the women who choose to go part time, often have to change their careers to obtain this status of employment and consequently do no longer seek their work following the career path that it did prior to having children. Working from home has become another option, but again this is difficult as the children become more demanding on the parent as they spend time on work in the home. These parents often have presented at child care centres more stressed than the part time worker who works away from the home.

## **(b) Age groups of care – 0 to3; 3 - 5**

Twenty years ago, babies were not provided in many long day care centres. Child care was for the families who did work and who did not have extended family or friends, and for a parent who needed time to shop, socialize and play sport etc on a very casual basis. There was no government assistance.

The introduction of Fee Relief in 1991 encouraged mothers to return to the work force and began to lift the profile of the long day care centre. Fee Relief was an enormous boost and a strong incentive for many parents, particular women, to re enter the workforce or to commence study.

This also assisted in recruitment of child care staff who were in huge demand as new centres were springing up around the country to meet the increased demand.

Rooms to provide care for babies were added as many women chose to return to work soon after the birth of their babies.

Today, whilst the demand for babies is still high, many parents choose to take the 12 months maternity leave offered to them through their employment. Parents, who are part time or casual workers, generally return to work earlier after the birth of their babies. Consequently instead of having babies in care for five days per week it is now more common to have a mix of babies attending from one day to five days.

Placing a baby in care, particularly a very young baby is, in most cases, an extremely traumatic experience for the mother. Society often points a condemning finger at mothers who place their child in to care at a young age, but they do not witness the absolute heart break as these mothers separate from their babies. In these instances it is usually a necessity for the mother to return to the workforce so soon after the birth.

Mothers with Post Natal Depression also present or are referred to child care centres and it can take quite a long time for the mother to adjust to her new situation with no consideration or ability to return to the workforce.

At the present time there is considerable media around the shortage of child care places, particularly for the 0 -3 age groups. As licensing regulations in each state, and particularly in Queensland, have restrictions on the group sizing for these age groups, centres are less inclined to provide care for above the minimum numbers.

In Queensland the group sizes are –

0-15m	8 with two staff –	1 Qualified	1 Assist qualified/studying
15m-2.5	10 with two staff -	“	“
2.5 – 3	16 with two staff -	“	“
3 – 5	24 with two staff -	“	“

It is common throughout Australia for child care services to be at occupancy capacity for the 0 – 3 age groups and have large vacancies in the 3 – 5 age groups. In Queensland, Legislation does not permit a group (apart from a family group of 21 which is almost impossible to staff according to regulations) to be above the designated number.

In other states – ACT for instance, group sizes have more flexibility -

0 – 3	1 qualified staff for each 5 children + an additional Qualified/unqualified for the next 5 children + an additional qualified for the next 5 children
3 – 5	1 qualified staff for each 11 children + an additional unqualified/qualified staff or the next 11 children

In the ACT – if the centre has the room – twenty babies can be cared for in one area with four staff. It is therefore easier to meet demand for a certain age group than it is in Queensland.

As Queensland regulations stipulate 2 staff to 8 babies as against 2 staff for 24 in the 3 – 5 year old children, combined with an extra two staff for two hours for each room with children under 2 for lunch relief, the cost of caring for babies is extremely high.

### **Example:**

Centre Gold Coast – 18 place dedicated baby centre – open 12 hours per day to cater for shift workers in the area.

4 permanent staff who each work 36 hours per week  
2 part time staff who make up the balance of hours  
and lunch relief – e.g. centre open 60 hours = 60  
hours additional

Cost of wages to turnover = 75 – 78% at 95 – 100% occupancy  
Fees - \$48 per day or \$44 per day for five days.

After covering additional operating costs, there is no incentive for this business to continue.

In this area parents cannot afford to pay additional fees to assist the viability of the service.

The solution would be for the Australian Government to increase the Rebateable Hourly Fee for children 0 – 3. This will not, in all areas, assist families to receive more affordable childcare but it will encourage Licencees to maintain this important level of care and consider changing rooms set for the 3 – 5 age groups into baby care groups. It may also solve the shortage of baby places in areas of high need.

### **(c) Recruitment and retention of qualified staff**

The child care sector is a female dominated sector. Over the past several years, the inability of services to recruit and retain qualified staff is threatening the operation of services. A Licencee cannot provide care for families if the staff are not available to meet licensing requirements. We are now aware of centres, primarily in rural areas, whose operational status is threatened by a shortage of qualified staff. The situation in city and suburban centres has reached a critical point as Licensees report that they have no replies to advertisements for qualified positions.

An incentive has been issued by the Australian Government to encourage women in the home to become Family Day Carers. The solution to ensure the continuance of care in rural areas and to stabilize care facilities throughout the sector would be to offer an incentive to all child care staff. This could be in the form of taxation relief and to attract more women into the workforce, also offer training incentives.

In Canberra the training colleges are not providing enough graduates to meet the needs of natural attrition in the sector. The Australian Government and developers are building centres in the A.C.T. and the staff to service these centres will have to be drawn from other centres in the area, adding to the already critical shortage and threatening quality of care.

### **(d) Availability of child care places**

The media regularly reports that a parent cannot return to work due to an inability to find a child care place.

Whilst there will be some areas in Australia that do not have vacancies, many centres are very concerned about low occupancy rates.

It is unreasonable to think that there will always be a child care place, particularly for a child 0 – 3 available at every centre on demand. As a child turns 3 years of age, they are able to be moved into the next age group which frees up a space for a younger child to be enrolled. Parents returning to the work force mid year must give the centre of their choice a long period of notice of when they require the child care position. The centre can then work towards making this position available. January and February are traditionally the high intake periods for all child care places.

A positive solution to this problem for families will be the newly announced Centrelink initiative whereby parents can telephone to a 1300 number to access vacancies in centres in their area. A method of culling the doubling up of bookings on waiting lists must be looked at in the future to ensure that all waiting lists are genuine.

### **Salary Sacrifice:**

It is unfortunate that salary sacrifice is few a select few. It is impossible for a small business to erect and maintain a child care facility whilst the Australian Government and other large groups, e.g. Banks, are able to fully sustain their own work based child care centre.

Information provided from people using these centres indicates that it is also less than ideal. Many parents wish to maintain their child in a service close to home but because of the benefits of salary sacrifice, move the child to the work based service.

Another problem area that has been discussed with work based services is that there is often conflict between adult employees of the company and this has caused problems in the child care service as to with whom their children are permitted to play.

It would be ideal if companies could purchase positions within child care centres, selected by families, so that families can exercise their choice of an early educational program for their children.

## **15 hour work test:**

This test will provide hardship to many families who work in casual or seasonal employment. Many conditions out of the control of the worker will determine whether their child can attend child care for the full week or for 24 hours (which in most centres is two days care).

Conditions such as rain, low tourist season and sickness are just a few of the problems that can occur at any time to cause a parent to lose child care hours.

This will prove very difficult for families who have to remove their child from care for three days in a week until their work hours return above the 15. Will they then be able to access the three days for their child at the centre of their choice? Parents will lose employment; the child is unsettled and will probably be removed from an early education setting totally.

It would be preferable that there be an annual balancing of the work test and that the fact that casual workers may work many hours one week and nothing other weeks, that it be aggregated over a 12 month period, not fortnightly.

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