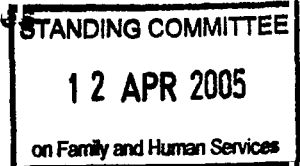




**Submission to the Commonwealth House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services  
Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family**



**8 April 2005**

The Benevolent Society welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family. The focus of this submission will be on 'making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce' (Inquiry Terms of Reference 2).

Balancing work and family has been defined as "the desire to have access to employment opportunities and earn an adequate income while at the same time looking after the caring responsibilities of family life (cf. Edgar, 1995, p. 10)."<sup>1</sup> The issue of making it easier for parents to return to the paid workforce can be discussed from myriad perspectives. In this submission we offer our experience and insights about the following:

- Realities of the childcare industry
- The need to create communities which are child friendly
- Our experience as an employer

### **1. Background: The Benevolent Society**

Established in 1813, The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest charity and has been a pioneer of social policy and innovative social programs. Our purpose is to create caring and inclusive communities and a just society. We are well placed to contribute to the Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family as a children's services provider and as an employer of 650 staff.

The Benevolent Society's work with children and families is central to the organisation's business. We offer services for children and families on the NSW Central Coast and across the Sydney basin. Our children's services aim to prevent abuse and build resilience in children, families and communities. We work with women antenatally and with children as infants until age 12.

### **2. Realities of the child care industry**

Our services include two child care centres in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs which have an average weekly enrolment of 220 children 5 years and younger. Both centres offer long day care on a full or part time basis. Priority for enrolment is given to children with working parents or those with additional stresses. Our child care centres provide quality educational programs and a caring routine designed to promote the unique development of each child.

There are three issues that most parents consider when choosing child care: affordability, quality and accessibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, Dr. Graeme and Bowman, Lyndy, 'Work and Family Current Thinking, Research and Practice', Macquarie University, Macquarie Research Limited. February 2000. Page 5.

## 2.1 Affordability

We are in agreement with the Taskforce on Care Costs that it is important to improve financial support for carers of children to give parents greater options and opportunity for returning to the paid workforce.<sup>2</sup> The Benevolent Society's fee structure for its childcare services varies depending on a family's eligibility for the government means tested childcare subsidy. However, due to the increasing gap between the government subsidy and the fees we must charge to provide quality services, we are not able to serve families on lower incomes. For example we now find that we need to set our fees for children under two years of age at \$75 - \$80 per day just to break even. This fee structure means that many families with low to average earning potential miss out on the quality care that our centre's offer.

This reality is documented in the paper "Lost Children: Condemning children to long-term disadvantage", a paper published by the Australia Institute. The paper discusses how childcare costs prevent parents on lower and middle incomes using services to the extent that they would like. According to the paper, 18% of low-income parents and 21% of middle income parents cite cost or expense as the main barrier to their use of additional child care, compared to 12.9 percent of high income parents. The paper concludes that "poorer parents are priced out of the care they need for their children, and parents in disadvantaged communities are more likely to find that no child care places are available."<sup>3</sup>

Cost prohibitive childcare has the double impact of preventing children from benefiting from the stimulation of quality early childhood care and perpetuating economic disadvantage by keeping parents out of the workforce assuming they are unable to access other forms of care. For example the Taskforce on Care Costs suggests that if care was more affordable 35% of working carers would increase their hours of work. "We can expect the same of carers who have already left the workforce." Juliet Bourke, Chair, *Taskforce on Care Costs*.

The Benevolent Society supports the Taskforce recommendations for parents who wish to return to the workforce including:

- drafting legislation for consultation to implement its promised 30% rebate for care costs;
- extending the 30% rebate to a more meaningful level (ie closer to a dollar for dollar rebate) and removing the proposed \$4,000 cap;
- introducing reforms to assist the cost of care in combination with a strategy to improve the accessibility and quality of care.

## 2.2 Quality

Quality child care services are essential to ensure that children have positive early childhood experiences while in care. This is particularly important given the impact of the early years on lifelong development. Second only to the immediate family, the child care environment is where early development unfolds, starting in infancy and continuing right through to school entry. These settings prepare children for school in the crucial early years, through early learning, language and social development. It is

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<sup>2</sup> Taskforce on Care Costs Policy Research Paper. Creating Choice: Employment and the cost of care. 24 February 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Flood, Michael, 'Lost Children: Condemning children to long-term disadvantage.' The Australia Institute. Discussion Paper Number 64, May 2004.

also the place where most young children learn to interact with other children and with adults other than their parents.

We have three points regarding the provision of quality childcare services. First, attracting and maintaining high quality staff is complicated by the inflexible nature of staffing childcare centres. It is difficult to accommodate employees who as parents are faced with family emergencies that call them away from work due to the need to maintain appropriate staffing levels. As an organisation that seeks to support its employees to find a balance between their work and family responsibilities, we are put in a challenging position due to our inability to provide enough flexibility to our childcare staff.

Those working in childcare are generally poorly paid. For example an unqualified child care worker is on the minimum wage. Qualified teachers are paid less in child care than they would be paid in the school system, consequently in our experience many leave for better paid jobs in schools. Low pay has fuelled both a staffing shortage and high turnover in the child care sector. This is of great concern as we now know how crucial the bonds between staff and children are to quality care.

We are concerned about the lack of regulation and accreditation in outside school hours care (OOSHC). The Benevolent Society values the impact on quality assurance that results from both regulation and accreditation in early childhood services (conducted by the National Childcare Accreditation Council). As a provider of vacation care, we believe that services for school age children should undergo similar regulation and accreditation process to ensure high quality experiences for children that access these services. Although many OOSHC services are outstanding, we know of some operating with unqualified staff, in cramped premises, with little programming and consequent lack of stimulation and supervision for children. This leaves working parents feeling anxious about leaving their children in substandard care.

### **2.3 Accessibility**

We would like to make four points regarding the accessibility of child care. First, parents on low incomes who move in and out of work struggle to maintain a place for their child in child care due to their inability to afford care while not in work. This creates an additional stress for parents struggling to balance finding or maintaining work while caring for their children. Helping these parents bridge their financial commitment to child care costs while not in work could help facilitate their ability to accept paid work without the complication of needing to find an available child care place once they are offered work.

Second, research in the United States shows that proximity of childcare to a family's home impacts on whether a mother leaves a job.<sup>4</sup> This highlights the importance of childcare services that are accessible for parents to balance their work and family responsibilities. Without this accessibility, mothers opt to stay home instead. Conducting a scan of child care services that considers geographic availability in relation to potential family demand (communities with families with young children)

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<sup>4</sup> Thornthwaite, Dr. Louise, 'Work-family balance: international research on employee preferences', Working Paper 79 from the Working Time Today Conference. University of Sydney: ACIRRT. September 2002, page 40.

would provide an indication of where additional child care services are needed to improve accessibility.

Third, research indicates that increasing caring options available to parents will help them balance family and work responsibilities. These options include:

- Fee relief
- 24-hour services
- flexibility in utilisation (not always having to lock into a particular pattern)
- occasional care (especially for shift workers)
- emergency care (when children or caregivers are sick)
- respite care
- back up care when work demands might change unexpectedly.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there is a significant shortage of child care spaces for children under two years of age. Many centres find this age group hard to cater to and they are more expensive rooms to run due to the staffing ratios. Consideration should be given to offering incentives for centres to cater for under twos or the situation is likely to continue to worsen. Both of The Benevolent Society's child care centres run rooms for children from six weeks of age. Our waiting lists for care of under twos means that for a possibility of securing a place, women need to get on the waiting list while pregnant and may still have to wait at least 18 months before that chance of securing a place.

### **3. The need for child friendly communities**

#### **3.1 Social capital**

We know that social capital is a critical factor in the well being of children and that children and their families need to live in communities where there are strong bonds and social connections. Our experience is that returning to the workforce is made easier when people trust their neighbours to share with caring tasks such as drop offs and pick ups from children's services and schools. Having this level of trust and reciprocity is dependent on well functioning neighbourhoods. It is our experience that many poor and isolated communities lack social capital making it harder for parents to find and trust formal and informal supports.

Discussion about how to help parents achieve work family balance and to support their entry into the paid workforce should also take account of the wider community beyond the home and work environment.

'Employees need to live in a "family-friendly" community, where services and resources support family life. Even the most family-friendly employer will have little impact on reducing parental or other family-related stress if the local community has few child care or elder care resources, if schools do not involve parents or offer after-school programs or counselling for problem students, and if there are few activities for teenagers or local support services for abuse victims, drug addicts and alcoholics.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Russell, Dr. Graeme and Bowman, Lyndy, 'Work and Family Current Thinking, Research and Practice', Macquarie University, Macquarie Research Limited. February 2000. Page 38.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, Dr. Graeme and Bowman, Lyndy, 'Work and Family Current Thinking, Research and Practice', Macquarie University, Macquarie Research Limited. February 2000. Page 38.

Many families using The Benevolent Society's services lack community support. They are often estranged or isolated from family and friends and in these situations, services are needed to families to build the supports that don't yet exist.

### **3.2 Working in partnership**

There is increasing interest in the importance of partnerships between organisations and the community as the most effective way to address the work and family needs of employers and employees.<sup>7</sup> Building child friendly communities will significantly increase parents' ability to return to the paid workforce while confidently knowing that their child is well cared for. Childcare centres have enormous potential to serve as hubs in child friendly communities, providing a range of services that strengthen children, their families and their communities.

Recent research by The Benevolent Society and the University of Sydney<sup>8</sup> showed that the links and partnerships between disadvantaged neighbourhoods and their nearest large centre or suburb has a big impact on the social capital of that neighbourhood. This new research illustrates the importance of linking small disadvantaged communities to key services and businesses if they are to develop and sustain social capital.

### **3.3 Children's participation in decision making processes**

In child friendly communities, the views of young children need to be heard so that the services and supports we design take seriously the impact of work/life balance on children themselves. There are a number of ways of directly involving young children in decision making processes. For example, story and role play can be used to find out what children like and don't like, so that children can have input into the design and environment of their centres. These techniques can also be used to help parents and carers understand what children like and don't like about children's services and this can help services to improve their programs. Recent practice research The Benevolent Society carried out with the University of Western Sydney helped us to develop clearer principles and practices for including children in decision making processes<sup>9</sup>.

### **3.4 Promising service models for child friendly communities**

The Standing Committee may be interested in some new models of service delivery that The Benevolent Society is implementing. Firstly the Partnerships in Early Childhood Program and secondly the Communities for Children initiative.

#### **3.4.1. Partnerships in Early Childhood**

The Benevolent Society has been working with early childhood services for a number of years to increase the support that such services can offer children and their

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<sup>7</sup> Russell, Dr. Graeme and Bowman, Lyndy, 'Work and Family Current Thinking, Research and Practice', Macquarie University, Macquarie Research Limited. February 2000. Page 41.

<sup>8</sup> Healy, Karen and Hampshire, Anne, 'Creating Social Capital: What are the Roles of Government, Business and Community Services?', University of Sydney and The Benevolent Society, April 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Mason, Jan and Michaux, Annette, 'Facilitating Children's Participation in Child Protection Processes: the *Starting Out with Scarba* Project', Social Justice Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney and the Benevolent Society, 2005.

families. We have been particularly interested in early intervention with vulnerable children but have found that our model has wider benefits as our experienced early intervention workers intensively support staff to build better relationships with the children in their care.

The success of this model was recently acknowledged when The Benevolent Society received FACS funding for its Partnerships in Early Childhood Program (PIEC). PIEC aims to support child friendly communities by placing childcare centres at the heart of the community. The PIEC Program builds on existing strengths and resources due to the significant role child care centres play in family and community life and as the first place families turn to when they need help. The Benevolent Society has developed the PIEC Model over 20 years, updating it to include latest research and results from earlier projects.

PIEC promotes strong, healthy relationships between children, staff, families and communities. Currently The Benevolent Society is implementing PIEC in Inner City and Eastern Sydney, South West Sydney and the Central Coast with a number of partner organisations including KU Children's Services, Lady Gowrie Child Centre and Wyong Shire Council.

Important aspects of the program that can help parents balance work and family demands include:

- Supported playgroups and Parents Connect groups in the local community open to families from the centre and also to families living locally whose children are not enrolled at the centre.
- Individual support and counselling for parents.
- Parenting mornings, focusing on the needs and strengths of parents
- Links with other local service providers, connecting families to services and other community supports.

This new model supports child friendly communities by:

- developing child care centres as community hubs and safe, non-threatening places to support vulnerable children and their families.
- increasing social and community connection
- promoting children's healthy emotional and social development
- improving the quality of children's early learning experiences
- improving family relationships
- increasing expertise of early childhood staff working with complex families.

#### *3.4.2. Communities for Children Initiative*

The Commonwealth Government through the FACS funded *Communities for Children* initiative has started to engage whole communities in efforts to build healthy communities for pre school children.

As the Facilitating Partner for the NSW Central Coast and Campbelltown *Communities for Children*, The Benevolent Society aims to:

- create a process for stakeholders to assist communities to develop a vision of a vibrant, healthy community where all children are safe and reach their capacity
- provide access to the latest research and expertise in an accessible way
- facilitate an understanding of existing services and service gaps

- facilitate real working partnerships between child and family services
- facilitate the development of partnerships between community, government and the business sector
- build on existing community strengths, and the existing infrastructures that incorporate community networks, non-government agencies, local Council and business
- create pathways to information, resources and opportunities for families.

This is a very promising initiative and will go some way to giving us much more information about how best to go about creating child friendly communities.

#### **4. Our experience as an employer**

As an employer of approximately 650 staff, The Benevolent Society has developed an extensive Work / Life Policy that aims to assist employees to achieve more effective management of their professional and private lives.<sup>10</sup> As an organisation we find that family friendly practices improve our performance. For example a number of our managers with young children work flexible hours. This has meant we are able to retain these valuable and experienced staff as they negotiate child care arrangements alongside work. Some work from home on certain days enabling them to attend school or early childhood commitments alongside their work responsibilities.

The Benevolent Society's Work / Life Policy includes:

- Parental leave
- Part time work
- Working from home
- Condensed working week
- Applying for flexible work options
- Implementing flexible work options – Guidelines for managers.

In 2003, The Benevolent Society conducted an organisation-wide Opinion Survey regarding employment issues staff face. Results from the survey reflect the positive impact of the organisation's Work/Life HR policies.

- 89% of respondents reported that their manager is supportive when they need to alter their working hours to cope with a personal situation
- 70% agreed that The Society is flexible in helping them balance their work and home life.
- 86% said that in general their work colleagues are supportive when a family or personal crisis occurs and they need to take time off work.
- 72% believe that the guidelines on flexibility are applied fairly in their work area.
- 79% agreed that there is sufficient give & take in their immediate work environment to allow them to manage work/life responsibilities.

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<sup>10</sup> The Benevolent Society's Policies and Procedures: Work/Life Policies 4.90.11 – 4.90.21

Other examples of how The Benevolent Society implements its Work / Life HR policies include:

- Several female managers have gone on parental leave to return to work on a part-time basis; some combine this with working from home one day a week.
- Priority access to our own child care services
- A staff member who is a sole parent has been approved to work from home one day per week to help manage parenting responsibilities.
- Two members of our executive team work adapted hours. One staff member has foregone her monthly Rostered Day Off in order to leave early on Fridays to spend time with her daughter. Another staff member works four days per week.

## **5. Summary**

The Benevolent Society believes that there is a pressing need to reform the child care system so that all working families can get access to high quality, affordable child care in close to work or close to home. We endorse the recommendations of the TOCC report and believe implementation of the recommendations would greatly assist the families we have to turn away from our services.

There are now a number of initiatives to support child friendly communities and we encourage the Inquiry to explore some of the promising models being implemented by The Benevolent Society and a number of other organisations. A number of more fundamental shifts need to be made before we will really see communities that put children at the centre and it is crucial that there is a coordinated and sustained effort to build social capital in disadvantaged communities.

Employers must be encouraged and supported to implement family friendly policies and employees should be encouraged to take advantage to those on offer. Showcasing and shaming excellent and poor practices respectively, may help shift cultural attitudes and the media has already played an important role in this.

Submission from The Benevolent Society

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