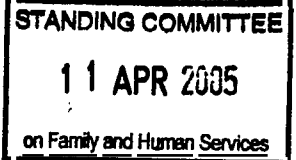


**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services  
Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family.**

**Submission from Early Childhood Australia**



Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is pleased to have this opportunity to raise a number of issues for consideration by the Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family. It is not our intention to fully canvass these issues here as we would like to request that ECA be invited to meet with the Committee to discuss the issues it has identified.

- Early Childhood Australia believes that children and their best interests must be an overriding consideration for this Inquiry and that the efficacy of all recommendations needs to be judged against this principle.
- Early Childhood Australia believes that the framework for the committees thinking must include consideration of the importance for children's long-term growth and development of stable, trusting, caring relationships with known adults. The emotional foundations for learning are laid in a child's earliest experiences. The findings of recent "Brain Research" verify this – much of which has been documented as part of the development of the Government's *National Agenda for Young Children*. This research indicates unequivocally that trusting, caring relationships with known adults generate the neurological activity, (connections) which are the foundation for all future growth and development and provide the backdrop for the social and emotional health of children throughout life. ECA is very strongly of the opinion that infants are best cared for by their own family and that they should be supported to do this.
- Early Childhood Australia believes parents return to work and ongoing participation in the workforce needs to be underwritten by family friendly, flexible work practices that include the provision of paid parental leave and other conditions that support them in their role as parents. Until such provisions are in place there is no real choice for parents to stay at home with their newborn child in its earliest months.
- One of the key factors that will influence a parent's capacity to return to and remain at work, if they have a young child, will be the availability of quality childcare. Currently there is pressure on both childcare places and real questions must be asked about the quality of what is provided given the current state of the childcare system in this country. Quality childcare depends on a number of key structural factors. These include:
  - Regulations, including staff: child ratios which ensure environments in which trusting caring relationships with carers can flourish;
  - The requirement that all staff who have direct responsibility for children have high level early childhood qualifications. (there are issues about the qualities such people should exhibit but these cannot mandated through regulation) and
  - A commitment to appropriate pay and conditions for people working in these services.
  - A robust quality assurance system which is structured so that it can truly be a litmus test of the quality of services, programs and practice
- Right now, across the country there is a chronic shortage, in all service types, of people willing to work in childcare services. It is difficult to get any staff, let alone qualified staff to work in childcare. This is a situation which has been well documented and, unless rectified will see a continuing diminution in the quality of childcare (with the consequent negative impacts on children and families) and further pressure on childcare places.

- There are particular issues for single parent families returning to work. They are about the need to support these parents who take the risk of re-entering the workforce to not put at risk their benefits if it doesn't work out. The fear of having to wait to have pensions or other benefits reinstated is a significant disincentive to workforce participation and a risk some single parents may not be willing to take. The work available to many single parents is not necessarily secure and ongoing. Indeed it is more likely to be casual, seasonal and intermittent.
- Many parents are worried about the supervision of their children who are over 12 years of age. Childcare assistance is not available for parents of children who are over 12 years of age. Many parents are legitimately concerned about leaving a child of this age unsupervised.

As said previously ECA would value the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Committee.

Pam Cahir  
National Director

7 April 2005