

THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

Child Care Quality in Australia

Emma Rush

Discussion Paper Number 84
April 2006

ISSN 1322-5421

© The Australia Institute

This work is copyright. It may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes only with the written permission of the Australia Institute. Such use must not be for the purposes of sale or commercial exploitation. Subject to the *Copyright Act* 1968, reproduction, storage in a retrieval system or transmission in any form by any means of any part of the work other than for the purposes above is not permitted without written permission. Requests and inquiries should be directed to The Australia Institute.

Table of Contents

Tables and Figures	iv
List of abbreviations	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
Summary	ix
1. Long day care in Australia	1
1.1 Child care in public debate	1
1.2 Long day care in Australia	1
2. Quality child care	7
2.1 The importance of quality care	7
2.2 Current child care quality assurance in Australia	8
2.3 The effect of ownership and management	15
3. Survey	17
3.1 Background	17
3.2 Survey method	17
3.3 Responses received	21
4. Survey results	29
5. Conclusion	57
References	63
Appendices	
Appendix 1 Staff-to-child ratios in different Australian states	
Appendix 2 Survey of staff in long day care centres	

Tables and Figures

Table 1	Outcome of follow-up telephone calls to long day care centres	21
Table 2	Respondents, by state, compared with all Australian long day care staff	22
Table 3	Centres in original sample, by centre type, compared with all Australian long day care centres	24
Table 4	Response rate, by centre type	24
Table 5	Respondents in final sample, by centre type, compared with all Australian long day care staff	25
Table 6	Responses on two key aspects of quality care, by source of respondent	28
Table 7	Staff have time to develop relationships with individual children, staff perceptions by centre type	30
Table 8	Centre program accommodates children's individual needs and interests, staff perceptions by centre type	32
Table 9	Centre provides a variety of equipment for children, staff perceptions by centre type	33
Table 10	Centre provides nutritious food for children, staff perceptions by centre type	35
Table 11	Centre provides enough food for children, staff perceptions by centre type	36
Table 12	Standard staff-to-child ratios, staff perceptions by centre type	37
Table 13	Frequency with which staff ratios drop below the legal minimum, staff perceptions by centre type	39
Table 14	Adequacy of legal minimum staff-to-child ratios for quality care, staff perceptions by centre type	40
Table 15	Adequacy of legal minimum staff-to-child ratios for quality care, staff perceptions by state	41
Table 16	Adequate staff-to-child ratios for children aged under 2, staff perceptions by state	42
Table 17	Adequate staff-to-child ratios for children aged 2-3, staff perceptions by state	42

Table 18	Adequate staff-to-child ratios for children aged 3-5, staff perceptions by state	43
Table 19	Effects of inadequate staff-to-child ratios on quality of care	44
Table 20	Effects of staff turnover on quality of care	46
Table 21	Single most important factor in providing quality care, staff perceptions by centre type	47
Table 22	Changes staff would make to improve the quality of care at their centre	49
Table 23	Responses to 'If you have or had your own children aged under two, would you be happy to enrol them at the centre where you work or one with comparable quality of care?' by centre type	50
Table 24	Other comments from staff	53
Figure 1	Commonwealth-supported long day care places, by sector and by state, 2004	3
Figure 2	Commonwealth-supported long day care places, by sector, 1991-2004	4
Figure 3	Percentage of staff who say they always or usually have time to develop relationships with individual children	31
Figure 4	Percentage of staff who say that the program at their centre always or usually accommodates children's individual needs and interests	32
Figure 5	Percentage of staff who say their centre provides a good variety of equipment for children	34
Figure 6	Percentage of staff who say that their centre always or usually provides nutritious food for children	35
Figure 7	Percentage of staff who say that their centre always or usually provides enough food for children	37
Figure 8	Percentage of staff who say the standard staff-to-child ratios at their centre are above legal minimum	38
Figure 9	Percentage of staff who say their centre always complies with the law on minimum staff-to-child ratios (their centre never drops below the legal minimum staff-to-child ratio)	39

List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ECA	Early Childhood Australia
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
FACS	Family and Community Services Commonwealth government department, now restructured as Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
NCAC	National Childcare Accreditation Council
QIAS	Quality Improvement and Assessment System

Acknowledgments

Many people have assisted in the preparation of this paper. Claire Barbato took a major role in designing the survey and preparing the questionnaire and the associated database. Alex Walton provided superb research assistance throughout, with help from Leah Purcell and Christian Downie. Andrew Macintosh gave thorough and detailed editorial advice. Clive Hamilton provided direction and support for the project at all times.

Invaluable assistance was provided by a range of people working in the child care industry, most notably Pam Cahir and Amanda McDonald from Early Childhood Australia, Barbara Romeril and Lauren Matthews from the National Association of Community Based Children's Services, and Lisa Bryant, child care consultant. Eleven lecturers from ten TAFE institutions around Australia must be acknowledged for their generosity in agreeing to distribute questionnaires to their child care students.

Particular appreciation is due to the hundreds of child care staff around Australia who took the time to fill out and return the questionnaire.

Field visits to a number of long day care centres, both community-based and privately provided, were carried out in late November 2005. These visits are not included in the data upon which this report is based, but they assisted in providing an experiential context for the survey data – a 'feel' for what happens on the ground in long day care. For facilitation of these field visits, thanks must go to the National Association of Community-Based Children's Services (NACBCS) and Child Care Centres Association of Victoria Inc. (CCCAV).

Finally, valuable comments on a draft of this paper were provided by both an expert in early childhood studies, and Professor Barbara Pocock of the Centre for Work and Life at the University of South Australia.

The author takes full responsibility for any errors, omissions and misinterpretations.

Summary

An excellent child care system is important to enable parents to balance work and family life, to encourage the workforce participation of parents, and to foster the development of Australian children. Recent public debate about the child care system in Australia has focused primarily on the *availability* and *affordability* of child care. This paper considers an aspect of child care that has received much less attention, that of the *quality* of the care provided.

Long day care is the most significant type of government-supported and regulated child care in Australia. Over a quarter of a million children below the age of six years attend long day care, and the number of children who attend is increasing each year. There are three distinct types of long day care providers: community-based (including all centres which are not for-profit); independent private (for-profit small businesses) and corporate chains (for-profit publicly listed corporations). State regulations specify minimum requirements, which providers must meet to be granted licenses to operate, and a national accreditation system aims to improve the quality of care.

In recent times, many anecdotes about poor quality care have been reported in the media. For this study, we undertook a national survey of long day care centre staff in order to ascertain to what degree such anecdotes reflect the quality of care Australia-wide. A detailed questionnaire was sent to a stratified random sample of child care centres across Australia. We received 578 valid responses from child care staff. The sample was broadly representative of child care staff by state, type of centre, and level of qualifications held by staff. Sample bias was also checked by an independent survey of child care staff enrolled in either 'Certificate III in Children's Services' or 'Diploma in Children's Services' at selected TAFE colleges around Australia.

The survey included a range of questions about key aspects of quality care: time available for staff to develop individual relationships with children; whether the centre's program accommodates children's individual needs and interests; the quality of the equipment provided for children; the quality and quantity of food provided; the staff turnover at the centre; and the staff-to-child ratios at the centre. Staff were also given an opportunity to comment in their own words in open-ended questions.

The survey confirmed that, in the view of child care staff, the quality of care provided around Australia is generally quite high. However, for all the aspects of quality care investigated, results show that community-based long day care centres offer the highest quality care. Independent private centres offer a quality of care that is usually similar to the high quality offered by community-based centres. Corporate chains offer the lowest quality of care on all aspects of quality surveyed, and in some cases it is markedly lower than that provided by community-based long day care centres.

The ability to develop relationships with children, and thus secure attachments, is perhaps the most important indicator of quality of care. On this criterion, community-based and independent private centres scored markedly better than corporate centres, with around half of child care staff from the former two types saying they always have time to develop individual relationships compared to only a quarter at corporate centres.

The latter type of centre also appear less able to accommodate children's individual needs and interests.

Corporate centres have a reputation for providing superior buildings and better equipment and the superior range and quality of equipment features prominently in advertising to parents. Surprisingly, this is not reflected in the perceptions of child care staff, with only 34 per cent of corporate chain staff describing the variety of activities and equipment provided at their centre as 'good', compared with 66 per cent of staff from community-based centres and 58 per cent at independent private centres.

The survey results lend support to the claims of those who criticise corporate child care for cutting costs to improve profits. The quality and quantity of food provided varies across centre types. Corporate centres appear much less likely than community-based and independent private centres to always provide nutritious food (46 per cent compared with 74 and 73 per cent respectively). According to staff, about half of corporate chain centres do not always provide nutritious food for their children, and a similar proportion do not always provide enough food. This compares unfavourably with community-based and independent private centres where much higher proportions of staff say children always receive enough food (80 per cent and 75 per cent respectively).

Staff-to-child ratios are at the core of the ability to provide quality care and a number of survey questions explored this issue. Irrespective of their type, centres rarely operate with less than the legal minimum of staff. However, the survey indicates that community-based centres are more likely to operate above the legal minimum than corporate centres (40 per cent of community-based centre staff say their standard staff-to-child ratios are above legal minimum, compared with 14 per cent of corporate centre staff). While very few centres operate permanently below the legal minimum, many drop below it temporarily due to staff absences. Once again, this appears to be much more common at corporate centres than at community-based and independent private centres.

When asked if they would be happy to send their own child aged under two to a child care centre of comparable quality to the one they work in, the majority of child care staff say they would. However, approximately five per cent of staff at community-based and independent private centres said they would not, due to concerns about the quality of care provided in the centre they worked in. Amongst corporate chain staff, 21 per cent said they would not send their own child aged under two to a centre of comparable quality to the one they worked in due to quality concerns.

Most child care workers believe that current legal minimum staff-to-child ratios are too low. That is, there should be fewer children under the care of each staff member. The majority of respondents identified lack of 'one-on-one' time with children as the most negative aspect of low staff-to-child ratios. Child care workers in Victoria are particularly dissatisfied, a sentiment that may be explained by the fact that Victoria has the poorest staff-to-child ratio in Australia for ages 3-5 years.

Responses to the open-ended questions indicate that good relationships with the children in their care are of the highest importance to child care staff. Child care workers are most concerned about the negative impact poor staff-to-child ratios have on

developing relationships with individual children. They are also concerned about the negative impact staff turnover has on children's need to form secure attachment relationships. When asked to identify the most important factor in providing quality care, 'warm staff personality' was most often selected, closely followed by 'well qualified staff'.

Just over a quarter of staff did not specify any changes they would make to their centre to improve the quality of care provided. A quarter said they would like higher staff-to-child ratios, and 22 per cent would like to improve the space or equipment provided for the children. Finally, the issue of poor pay for child care workers was mentioned by almost a quarter of respondents. A smaller proportion of respondents also mentioned poor working conditions.

The results of the survey are of concern given that the share of long day care centres owned by corporate chains has been rapidly increasing. The survey results support the distinction (made by Goodfellow) between two different orientations towards children – a business and a humanist orientation. The business orientation focuses on 'efficiency and production of measurable outputs' and 'considers parents to be the purchasers who are concerned with cost and affordability'. The humanist orientation, on the other hand, sees the 'care of children as personalised' rather than a product that can be standardised for all children. There are good grounds for believing that the lower quality of care revealed in this study is due to the very nature of the corporate enterprise. Managers of corporations are legally obliged to act in the best interests of their shareholders. In a market like child care where there is limited scope to raise prices without additional government subsidies, corporate chain providers often have little choice but to adopt a business orientation where humanist concerns are secondary to those regarding efficiency and cost containment.

The survey results indicated a consistent quality difference between independent private and corporate chain centres. This suggests that it is not 'for-profit' status itself which is the problem, but the pressure that corporate chains are under to pursue business objectives, even if it is at the expense of humanist concerns.

The paper concludes by recommending stronger state regulation as well as a much tighter national accreditation regime, including a willingness on the part of the regulator to close down centres that consistently fail to provide good quality care. More comprehensive and transparent reporting requirements are also urgently required. We also recommend the resumption of capital grants to community-based child care centres in areas of identified need with a view to increasing the proportion of community-based centres in the child care industry. The expansion of community-based child care should promote higher quality care and reduce the scope for the corporate ethos to undermine the objective of quality care.