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Children suffer when politicians put profit and populist policies first

Early childhood education and care in Australia is a fragmented mess that is falling way behind world's best practice, and election promises to increase subsidies to parents may win votes but will do nothing to ensure Australia has a top quality child care system, leading experts said today.

"Increasing rebates paid to parents will, in the short term, improve affordability. But in the medium- to long-term they will push up the cost of childcare", said the University of Sydney's Dr Elizabeth Hill, co-editor of *Kids Count: Better early childhood education and care in Australia*.

"Subsidies simply add to demand when the supply of child care places remains stable. Instead we should be putting substantial resources into building a high quality national system of early childhood education and care for all Australian children and their families. The policy focus needs to be on improving quality as well as affordability."

Kids Count, co-edited by Dr Hill with Professor Barbara Pocock and Dr Alison Elliot, brings together the latest national and international research on early childhood education and care. It will be launched today by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick.

"At a time of record public surpluses, we regret a larger investment is not being made so Australia can make a serious attempt at moving up from the bottom of the OECD league table that measures the investment countries make in children's earliest years," said Professor Pocock.

"It is now well established that devoting resources to children's first years is repaid many times over in individual education and employment prospects, as well as broader social and economic well-being."

The authors, including Professor Bettina Cass, Professor Gabrielle Meagher and Eva Cox, find that while demand for childcare has skyrocketed in recent years, funding has been diverted away from the non-profit sector to the commercial sector, particularly large chains.

"Research has shown that in the private sector, particularly large chains, the children's needs often come second to the need to make a profit. Standards of care, staff-child ratios, staff wages and conditions, and food and equipment can therefore suffer," said Professor Pocock.

"The fundamentals of a high quality national early childhood education and care system have been well established by research both here in Australia and internationally. It is not rocket science. But it does take resources, and these resources need to be carefully targeted," Dr Hill said.

Some of the book's findings

* Compared to other OECD countries Australia spends very little on childcare. A 2004 OECD assessment placed Australia second last out of 14 countries in terms of its expenditure on early childhood services. Australia spent less than 0.5% of GDP, Denmark spent 2% of GDP.

* Current research demonstrates that high quality early childhood education and care is a function of high staff/student staffing ratios, a high level of carer and teacher skills and qualifications, and a small care group size.

* Public investment in Australia needs to reflect international best practice. Staff/child ratios of at least one adult to three children for infants (1:3); at least one adult to four children in the one- to two-year-old age group (1:4); and at least one adult to eight children in the three- to five-year-old age group (1:8).

* Children and parents who use child care benefit from long-term care relationships. Stable care relationships require skilled teachers and carers who are appropriately trained, qualified and rewarded with decent rates of pay, conditions and career structures.

* Australia is not meeting its obligations under international treaties to provide high quality early childhood care.

* Private providers have overtaken non-profit providers as the largest source of centre-based long day care places in Australia, currently providing 70% of all places.

* A number of studies suggest parents tend to overestimate quality of care offered by their children's centres.

* Early childhood policy needs to pay particular attention to children from disadvantaged households, who often have least access to subsidised, high quality childcare, and who therefore can be doubly or triply disadvantaged.

* Low paid early childcare workers whose skills are comparable to pre-school teachers are subsidising childcare to the tune of at least 15%.

* While children in high quality childcare centres have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol compared to those in lower quality centres, teachers and carers in high quality centres have been found to have higher levels of cortisol by the end of the day compared to staff in centres that provide a lower quality of care.

Kids Count: Better early childhood education and care in Australia

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