



Family Research Pathways to Policy CONFERENCE

This is an edited version of the opening presentation to the Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference in Brisbane, in November 1996.

This is a critical time for child care services in Australia. In the Budget handed down last August (1996), the Federal Government announced proposals for quite radical changes to the funding of child care. These involve the elimination of the operational subsidy to the community child care sector; entitlement to child care assistance to be capped at 50 hours per week; and significant adjustments to be made to the payment of child care assistance and the child care cash rebate.

Some of these modifications to funding of child care had been foreshadowed in the Interim Report of the Economic Planning Advisory Commission Child Care Task Force (EPAC 1996a), in particular the elimination of the community child care operational subsidy. The final report of this task force has now been published and contains further far reaching recommendations (EPAC 1996b).

In addition, there is currently before government a report from the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism (1996) Small Business Deregulation Task Force. With respect to child care, this report contains the significant recommendation that the Australian Quality Improvement and Accreditation System, participation in which is a requirement for long day care providers wishing to benefit from Commonwealth subsidies, should be made voluntary and should be implemented primarily as an information service to parents, rather than serve a substantive quality assurance function.

This latter recommendation is in direct contradiction to the proposal in the EPAC report that the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System should be retained and extended in scope to include all forms of child care provision in return for payment.

Child Care in a Caring Society

Child care has been developed primarily as a service to meet the employment-related needs of parents.

In this discussion of the role of child care services in supporting families in their rearing of children in contemporary Australia, **HARRY MCGURK** argues that we need to balance this perspective by thinking of child care as an investment *in* children and *for* children.

The focus of child care should be on the creation of social environments and exchanges that secure the current happiness and wellbeing of all children and nurture their developmental futures.

In addition to the recommendations contained in the EPAC and small business task force reports, within the context of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), discussions are ongoing between the Commonwealth and the States concerning the distribution of responsibilities

between levels of government for the resourcing and administration of child care services.

These are therefore critical days for the future of day care provision in Australia. The decisions taken in response to these two reports and in the context of the



COAG discussions will determine the shape of child care provision in this country into the new millennium. It is important that there be extensive dialogue over the issues involved and debate about the kind of service that will best serve the needs and interests of the principal stakeholders in Australian child care – the children and their families themselves – as well as providers and society at large. This paper is intended as a contribution to that process.

Historical Context

There are two strands to the historical background to child care in Australia. One is rooted in pre-school education and has its origins in the German kindergarten movement. Kindergartens or preschools were first established in Australia during the late 1890s. They served primarily an educational function and were intended to prepare young children for regular school once they reached the age of five or six. Children attended kindergarten between 9am and 3pm each week day and had to be at least three years of age.

The second strand in the history of day care was more welfare oriented and philanthropic in nature. So-called day nurseries or creches began a little later than kindergartens, during the early 1900s. Their aim was to provide care and supervision for the children of mothers who were working outside the home whose needs for care and supervision could not be met within the program provided by the kindergartens. Priority of access to day nurseries was accorded to children of single working mothers. Care was provided for children aged between two weeks and three years of age, between 7am to 6:30pm daily. These service hours were adjusted to the needs of the working women.

Child care in day nurseries was provided by nursery nurses, assisted by volunteer helpers, and focused more upon children's physical wellbeing than upon their educational development. The aim of these services was to take care of children of working class background and to socialise them into becoming good future citizens (Jamrozik and Sweeney 1996).

The historical distinction between an *educational* service for children in the immediate preschool years and a *care* service provided for infants and toddlers is still maintained in some quarters today and is a matter of controversy. I will return to this controversy later, but will first discuss the nature of parenting and child rearing.

The Nature of Parenting

Entire volumes have been written on the topic of parenting. Here, however, I will try to encapsulate the process within a few sentences. Parenting, in brief, involves the creation of an environment of love and security of the kind that facilitates the emergence of the bonds of trust between child and carer that become, in

turn, the foundation for the development of the child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual competence and wellbeing.

Being a parent calls, in addition, for an unconditional, unqualified – what Urie Bronfenbrenner (1981) called 'unreasonable' – commitment to securing the wellbeing of one's children; every child needs at least one person in her or his environment who is so committed. In turn, there needs also to be persons and systems in the parental environment to support parents in the discharge of their roles.

Some of the most sensitive research on early parenting processes has been carried out in the United States and the United Kingdom by developmental psychologists like Kenneth Kaye, Rudolf Schaffer, Colwyn Trevarthen, Mary Ainsworth and others, all of whom have used naturalistic observation and recording strategies to carry out detailed analysis of the ways in which parents, in interaction with young infants, organise their own *intentional* behaviour around the *spontaneous* behaviour of their offspring, at once giving social



Where distributed parenting is necessitated as a consequence of economic conditions and social policy then it also becomes a responsibility for social policy to ensure that there are structures in place to support parents in their commitment to securing the wellbeing of their children.

meaning to the infant's behaviour and, thereby, integrating the infant into the social world.

In the following section, some brief examples from the UK and US research literature on early infancy are discussed.

Parenting Research

In an early study, Kaye (1983) described the way in which, during the first weeks and months of life mothers, when feeding their young infants, so organise their own behaviour, that, by capitalising on the spontaneous rhythm and timing of infant behaviour, they are able to create an exchange between them that has many of the qualities evident in turn-taking conversations between mature partners.

Consider the following illustration: When being fed, whether by breast or by bottle, infant ingestion of milk occurs in highly organised suck-pause episodes. Kaye has observed that while infants are sucking and swallowing, mothers hold the baby relatively still and are themselves quite still and passive. When the baby stops sucking, after a couple of seconds or so the mother becomes active, changing her posture, or that of the infant, or speaking to the infant, or changing the position of nipple or teat in the baby's mouth. When sucking is resumed the mother now becomes passive again and remains so until the next pause episode. Such cycles of turn-taking continue throughout the duration of the feed.

Kaye also observed that over the first two months or so changes occur in the relative time the infant spends in pause mode – the pauses get longer. What seems to be happening is that the infant's attention is attracted by the mother's activity during the pause and sucking ceases so that close attention can be paid. Interestingly, mothers will report that they intervene during pause episodes to get the baby started sucking again, but by careful analysis of the timing and duration of pauses and interventions Kaye was able to demonstrate that the pauses during which mothers intervened were much longer than those when the mother remained passive. This tended to confirm the interpretation that maternal intervention actually increases the duration of the infant's pause.

Kaye argued that what was happening during such feeding was functional with respect to more than mere feeding itself. After all, babies can be prop fed quite readily. Through their behaviour, mothers were recruiting infant feeding to a social purpose, embedding the baby's behaviour within turn-taking exchanges, with many of

the qualities of conversation: baby sucks, mother observes and remains passive; baby pauses, mother reacts, baby observes; baby resumes sucking, mother becomes passive again, awaiting the end of the infant's 'turn' before intervening again.

Colwyn Trevarthen (1979) has also drawn attention to how parents organise their exchanges with young infants, this time around infant vocal behaviour. A baby spontaneously vocalises or gurgles; the parent or other caretaker responds with verbal comment, monitoring the child closely until it seems to be about to vocalise again. The caretaker then pauses and allows the baby's turn to take place before engaging in another turn him or herself.

Trevarthen has called these exchanges 'proto-dialogues' since they have many of the qualities of genuine conversational dialogue, turn-taking in particular.

Rudolf Schaffer (1977, 1992) in the UK has drawn attention to other parent-infant exchanges with similar characteristics, this time observed in a quasi-experimental situation, between mothers and their one-year-old toddlers. Schaffer had his mother-toddler pairs sit together facing a table on which there were a number of brightly coloured objects located sufficiently far apart for an observer behind a one-way screen to be able to determine unambiguously at which object the child was looking at any moment in time. The looking, pointing and verbal behaviour of mother and toddler were recorded throughout the several minutes of the observational session.

What is impressive from Schaffer's recordings is the extent to which it was the infants who 'controlled' the behaviour of the mothers. Mothers would monitor their infants's direction of gaze or pointing, then look in the same direction themselves and provide verbal comment on the object which she inferred was the centre of the child's attention. When the infant's direction of gaze changed, so did the mother's attention. Schaffer describes how these exchanges also have many of the qualities of dialogue – because the parent or caretaker's behaviour endows them with such. It is as if the child's spontaneous behaviour establishes a topic for 'conversation' upon which the parent comments. The child's change of behaviour specifies a new topic on which the adult provides further comment, and so the process continues.

These are all illustrations of the ways in which ordinary parents use the opportunities afforded by ordinary care taking routines and encounters with young children to provide them with the experience of participating in social exchanges within which they are effective interacting partners. Kaye, Trevarthen and Schaffer alike all argue that the origins of social, communicative, emotional and intellectual competence are to be found in such experiences. Such interaction episodes, they argue, provide infants and toddlers with the experience of having an effect upon the world, of experiencing things happening in the world consequent upon their own behaviour. They argue that such experiences of effectiveness engage a competence motivation, encouraging the search for other opportunities to be effective, thus contributing to the enhancement of developmental progress.

Supportive evidence for such interpretations can be found in a longitudinal study conducted some time ago by Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues (1974). Ainsworth carried out monthly observations in the homes of a sample of infants over the first year of life. They observed the frequency of infant vocalisation, crying and other such signalling behaviours as well as the frequency with which mothers or other caretakers responded to these behaviours and the time that elapsed between the infant's signal and the caretaker's response.

Ainsworth and her colleagues found that those infants whose mothers responded to their vocalisations and crying reliably and with little delay during the early months of life subsequently tended to vocalise more and to cry less. At one year of age, infants who had experience of such sensitive care taking earlier in life, had more word-like utterances in their repertoire and more diverse communication skills than their counterparts who had experienced less sensitive parenting or care taking. Here again is evidence that contingent experience – experience of things happening contingently with or consequent upon

early behaviour – facilitated the emergence of increased competence later in infancy.

The final piece of evidence I want to refer to at this stage is the observation by Schaffer (1964), in his landmark naturalistic investigation of the development of infant–caretaker attachment during the first year of life, that infants positively seek the proximity of caretakers who offer sensitive interaction of the kind I have been describing, and that this seems to be the primary basis upon which infant–caretaker attachment bonds develop. It is important to note that Schaffer observed that where there were several persons in



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the child's environment who provided such interaction, multiple attachments were common and were modal by 18 months of age.

Let me summarise the story of parenting so far by saying that sensitive, contingent, joint interactive care taking experiences during infancy and early childhood not only provide for their physical wellbeing but afford infants and young children with the experience of their behaviour having reliable consequences upon the world around them. They afford the experience of being effective. Such experience of effectiveness in the context of early social interaction serves as the basis for attachments between infants, young children and their caretakers, thereby securing continuity in the experience of effectiveness, facilitating the emergence of a motivation for competence and the development of subsequent competence in social, emotional and communicative domains.

Corresponding evidence and similar analysis could be offered on the nature of parenting strategies and outcomes during toddlerhood and beyond. For example, during the second and third years of life, when language acquisition is developing apace, much parent–child interaction is characterised by similar parental support features to those evident in infancy, with the similar objectives of facilitating and extending the child's competence.

Consider the speech-related phenomenon of repetition with expansion. Early in the development of language skill, children make frequent utterances of only one or two words in length. The truncated statements, sometimes called telegraph speech, are then expanded by the parent, according to context, to clarify meaning and to make complete sentences. At table, a two-year-old exclaims, 'me some!' and the parents expands, 'Yes, I know that you would like some bread and I'll let you have it in a moment.' So doing, the parent is at once extending an utterance to confirm the child's meaning in context at the same

time as presenting the child with models of how to use speech more expansively.

Consider also the situation when parent and young child are engaged in play together with, say, a form board or simple jig-saw. What typically characterises such episodes is the extent to which the parent structures the situation so as to facilitate the child's completion of the task, helping to sort out the pieces and thereby enhance the probability of the child's achieving a match between space and form or to identify the correct location for a jigsaw piece.

Following the Russian developmentalist Vygotsky (1962), contemporary child

psychologists such as Kenneth Kaye, Jim Wertsch and Barbara Rogoff, liken these caretaker–child exchanges to those that occur between craftsman and apprentice. The experienced craftsman is sensitive to both the skills and the limitations of the apprentice. On this basis the craftsman organises tasks so as to afford the apprentice opportunities both to complete substantial chunks of the task by him or herself, as well as to exercise and expand his or her skill repertoire. In consequence, the apprentice achieves more and operates at a higher level of maturity when working alongside the craftsman than when working alone (Rogoff 1990).

This is what Vygotsky had in mind when he spoke of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), whereby the child in the company of an adult manifests a level of competence beyond what could be achieved by the child alone. Vygotsky encapsulated this notion when he spoke of every human capacity having an existence in the social plane before it exists on the personal plane. Expressed differently, what the child experiences socially in interaction with parents and other caregivers becomes internalised as personal competence and as motivation to expand that competence.

I said earlier that parenting involves the creation of an environment of love and security of a kind that facilitates the emergence of the bonds of trust between child and carer that become, in turn, the foundation for the development of the child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual competence and wellbeing. In these examples from the research literature on parenting during infancy and early childhood, I have tried to illustrate the operation of these processes.

Socially Distributed Parenting

Defining and illustrating parenting in the way I have here does not imply that parents must fulfil all of the functions of parenting by themselves; the fulfilling of these

functions can be socially distributed and parenting can be shared. Where such distributed parenting is necessitated as a consequence of economic conditions and social policy then it also becomes a responsibility for social policy to ensure that there are structures in place to support parents in their commitment to securing the wellbeing of their children.

The fact of the matter is that parents have never gone it entirely alone in the rearing of their children. In every known society, arrangements for the care and rearing of children have always been distributed between parents, primarily mothers, and other carers. Throughout most of history and for most children and families, these arrangements have been informal, the other, non-maternal carers typically being relatives, sometimes siblings, of the children involved. Shared care is normative and always has been; it is exclusive rearing by biological parents which is non-normative.

In traditional societies throughout the world, non-parental care for children has always been predominantly related to maternal employment; alternative child care arrangements have been necessary to 'free' mothers to work away from home and children, either on the land or in other ways, to provide for the material wellbeing of their children. Contemporary Western society is distinctive in that we are emerging from a *relatively brief* period in our development during which it was 'traditional' for child care and child rearing to be the primary responsibility of female parents not engaged in out of home employment. The provision of non-parental care for children of working parents is therefore nothing new (McGurk et al. 1993).

What is new is the extent to which, in Western societies, we are moving away from the use of informal networks for the non-parental care of children and increasing the extent to which we are reliant upon formal arrangements for distributing the care and rearing of young children between parents and others. This is not yet the modal form of shared care. However it is likely to become so because of the economic pressures on parents, mothers and fathers alike, to participate in the paid labour force, as well as the desire of women and men to combine the rewards of paid work and family life.

What I want to argue is that child care needs to be seen as a form of shared or socially distributed parenting and to examine the question: What implications would such a perspective on parenting and its sharing have in the context of current reviews of and debates about child care in Australia?

One implication is that child care cannot be simply a child minding or baby-sitting service, one that does no more than 'look after' children while parents are absent. Construed as distributed parenting, good child care performs some of the same functions as parents themselves – in

particular, the creation of the earlier mentioned environments 'of love and security, of a kind that facilitate the emergence of the bonds of trust between child and carer that become, in turn, the foundation for the development of children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual competence and wellbeing.'

Another implication of construing child care as distributed parenting is that care providers must work with parents to create partnerships to ensure, together, the creation of a genuinely family-centred service. Child care should neither attempt to substitute for parents nor to tell parents how to rear their children. Child care must become a service the primary objective of which is to support parents in their role of securing the wellbeing of their children; it is providers who have to meet the needs of parents and children, not the reverse.

Policy Implications

From the perspective of child care as shared parenting, there are a number of issues that have arisen in the context of the EPAC and small business task force reports and in the COAG discussions, referred to earlier, which are important for the development of a vision for child care as a service fit for its purpose of sharing in the parenting of the nation's children.

Care versus education

Consider first the care-education dichotomy: this issue was touched upon in the EPAC report but was neither fully analysed nor was any resolution proposed. Applied to the early years of life, the separation of care and education simply does not make sense. Virtually all of the parent-child interaction episodes discussed earlier occurred in routine care-taking contexts. However, as I emphasised, they all entailed the potential for influencing young children's skill and competence repertoires. Every encounter between a young child and a parent or other care giver has such potential, and it is when expression of that potential is consistently and sensitively facilitated that developmental progress is made. In this sense, care taking and early education are inseparably intertwined.

Whenever a distinction between 'care' and 'education' is insisted upon, it is almost invariably to the detriment of so-called care. For example, some day care providers advertise that they provide a kindergarten or preschool program as if thereby they were adding value to what was otherwise on offer and extending it beyond 'mere care'. That line of argument devalues what is left of child care when so-called education is removed; in terms of the case I have been making here, it also devalues the processes of parenting, and what parents and child care staff do.

In some Scandinavian countries, a distinction *is* maintained between care and education, but it is to the effect that if education is introduced too early children may be deprived of their childhood. How-

ever, when this distinction is made in Scandinavia it is between deliberate, didactic, intellectual instruction on the one hand and, on the other, the kind of incidental learning and expansion of social and personal skill and the growth of competence that occurs in the less formal settings of family or child care. Importantly, in Scandinavia, the staff of child care centres are all highly trained and qualified at tertiary level, just as primary teachers are.

Training for child carers

My next point is concerned with the issue of training for a career in child care. Providing care for other people's children of the quality I have been elaborating is a highly skilled process. Child care staff cannot be expected to bring to the job the 'unreasonable commitment' to their charges which characterises the disposition of most parents. What child care staff can be expected to bring to the task is a high degree of professional commitment backed by sound training and qualification in child care and child development. The present regulatory requirement that only a proportion of care staff should be qualified is quite inadequate.

The EPAC report addressed the training issue also but speaks mainly in vague, general terms of the need for all care staff to have some form of 'post-school' training. The child care research literature highlights training and qualification of staff as among the most powerful predictors of good outcomes for children. While it will not be achieved overnight, we need to be thinking ahead and to begin planning now for a medium-term objective of ensuring that all staff in formal child care settings – family day care and centre care alike – have tertiary training and qualification in child care and development. This should be one of the first objectives to be met by the new, single national child care council recommended by EPAC, should such a council be established. Alternatively, the task could be assigned to a specially commissioned working party comprising representatives of providers and trainers.

Staff-child ratios

Sensitive, dedicated, competence-promoting child care requires not only that staff should be highly trained. It requires also that individual staff members are assigned manageable numbers of children to work with. Good staff-child ratios are another powerful predictor of positive child care outcomes for children.

With the exception of Tasmania, staff-child ratios in Australia tend to be on the low side (that is, more children per staff member) by international standards (McGurk et al. 1995). For example, for infants under one year of age, Tasmania recommends a minimum ratio of one staff member for every three children; the modal ratio for other states and territories is 1:5, and the ration recommended by COAG as a national standard is 1:5.

Research evidence attests to the importance of consistent, contingent, care-taker-child interaction, of the kind I described earlier, for the development of child competence during the first year of life and beyond. It is not possible for one person unaided, across the duration of the child care day, to provide extended, contingent interaction sequences of the kind described earlier with five infants to care for. On the rare occasions when quintuplet births occur, most modern societies have provided mothers with additional assistance with child rearing, at least during the early years. A 1:5 ratio for infants under the age of one year is equivalent to putting care staff in the same position as a lone quintuplet parent!

Accordingly, the national staffing ratios for child care currently proposed by COAG may not be in the best interests of our children, young infants in particular, and should be reconsidered as a matter of urgency. This should be another priority for the proposed new national child care council.

Staff remuneration and conditions

Highly qualified staff working with improved staff-child ratios will go a considerable way towards the development of a high quality child care service. However, in order to ensure that trained staff stay in the job and provide children with the kind of continuity of care that promotes their development, it will be critical also to ensure that staff are appropriately remunerated and have acceptable conditions of work.

The EPAC final report attests to the extent to which current levels of remuneration and working conditions are leading to high levels of staff turnover. The report also acknowledges that quality of care for young children is being compromised by high levels of staff turnover.

Children prosper under care conditions where they have opportunities to develop warm, affectionate relationships with their carers. As we have seen, such relationships are influenced by the quality of the interactions between young children and their carers and are strongest when carers, through interaction, create the competence-promoting exchanges which I described earlier. For such relationships to emerge, however, there must not only be sensitivity on the part of the care giver, but also consistency and reliability – in other words, there must be stability of carer. Staff turnover compromises that stability (Clarke-Stewart 1990).

Although acknowledging that low staff morale and high staff turnover are serious problems for child care providers, the EPAC report has little to offer by way of solution. Instead, the report voices confidence that market forces will operate to provide a solution. The problems, the report says, will be self correcting in the longer term as employers offer better wages and conditions to attract or retain staff. At the same time, the hope is

expressed that: 'In an environment where families will have greater say on which services prosper [*this, it is assumed, will follow if subsidies are paid directly to parents rather than to providers*] and are better informed on what constitutes quality care, providers will have a strong commercial interest to retain quality staff.'

These are fond hopes indeed. There is no evidence from the United States, where a market in child care has existed for much longer than in Australia, that, left to its own devices, the market has operated to provide quality of care through improved staff conditions and remuneration. Nor, indeed, is there evidence that increased competition, say in parts of the State of Queensland where supply of child care is outstripping demand, is leading to improved pay and conditions for staff.

Experience from the United States and elsewhere suggests that it is through strict enforcement of quality criteria concerning training and qualification that reduced turnover will be achieved (Phillips 1992).

Quality Improvement and Accreditation

Let me turn, therefore, to consideration of Australia's Quality Improvement and Accreditation System, introduced by the Commonwealth government in 1993 to ensure the quality of child care in the long day care sector.

The Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) is administered by the National Childcare Accreditation Council, the members of which include parents, the community-based and private child care sectors, trainers and educators, trade unions, and government.

According to the National Child Care Accreditation Council (Tully 1993), the objectives of the accreditation system are as follows.

- Children in long day care should receive the high quality of care which is their right – stimulating, positive experiences and interactions which will foster all aspects of their development and support their families' efforts to help them become valuable members of society.
- Long day care centres should involve themselves, together with parents, in an ongoing process of self-evaluation and improvement in order to provide a service which best meets the needs of children and their families for good quality child care and the need for its staff for professional development and satisfaction.
- The broader community should learn about the work and worth of the child care professions through the centres' demonstrations of their expertise and their commitment to quality.

The spirit of these objectives is very much in keeping with the image of child care I

have been trying to develop in the earlier parts of this paper.

As a condition of eligibility for Commonwealth subsidies, all long day care centres are required to register with the National Child Care Accreditation Council and to follow the QIAS process.

The process for quality improvement is underpinned by 52 Principles and standards governing quality of care and covering, for example, health and safety, nutrition, relationships between staff and children and staff and parents and centre management.

Compliance with the Principles is determined by a combined process of self-study and external review. For example, an inspection and monitoring system is in place to ensure that the quality standards are maintained. Since the child care subsidies represent a significant portion of providers' income, they have a powerful motivation to comply with the requirements of QIAS, since otherwise they will not be eligible to receive subsidies. Depending upon the extent to which quality standards are met centres can be refused accreditation or be accredited for one to three years.

All eligible long day care centres in Australia are now registered under QIAS; a majority have been accredited and the accreditation process is well underway for the remainder. QIAS focuses on the standard of care and education that actually exists in every Australian long day care centre. By emphasising the quality of the experiences that children routinely enjoy, the system shifts the focus from the minimum acceptable regulatory standards for long day care towards the highest achievable levels of care.

There is considerable consensus that QIAS is serving to increase the quality of care in the long day care sector but there is clearly some way to go for the system to achieve its objectives in full. Currently the system is under review by the Minister for Family Services.

The EPAC report has recommended that the QIAS be retained and extended to incorporate all types of child care provision – formal and informal. It has also recommended that the link between receipt of child care subsidies and satisfaction of quality standards should be maintained.

By contrast, the report of the Small Business Deregulation Task Force has recommended that the link between funding for the child care sector and quality standards should be severed. It further recommends that participation in QIAS should become entirely voluntary and be available primarily as an information service to parents.

We have seen that even under QIAS as it stands at present there are difficulties over quality staffing standards. Evidence from the United States and elsewhere indicates that where there are no material incentives to maintaining, or where no penalty attaches to failing to maintain quality standards, compliance is minimal.

Further evidence attests to the fact that where quality criteria are high and where compliance is mandatory, then high quality child care is the outcome (Phillips 1992).

The lesson for Australia is clear. To the degree that it is being implemented, QIAS is contributing towards improved quality of care for our children. It must be retained and expanded, as EPAC has recommended. Implementation of the contrary recommendation from the Small Business Deregulation Task Force would result in an inferior service for our children and it should be rejected.

Child care as an investment

There are two final points which need to be made, however briefly. First, the recent expansion of child care in Australia has been in response to the increased participation of women in the paid labour force.



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Thus, child care has been developed primarily as a service to meet the employment-related needs of parents. In Australia, the Commonwealth government supports child care primarily as a component of its employment strategy – it supports child care because it is work related. In this sense, child care is construed primarily as a service for parents.

We need to modify this perspective and to begin to think of child care more directly as an investment in and for children. We need also to ensure that the return from that investment is the best possible in terms of the developmental outcomes for children. Many young children now pass a considerable portion of their waking hours in non-parental child care. It is possible for some children, for example, to spend up to 50 hours a week for 50 weeks a year in long day care during the first five years of their lives. That is longer than they will spend in school during the subsequent five years.

Under these circumstances, we need to be confident that the experiences we provide for young children in day care are such that they will promote good developmental outcomes.

Also, focusing on child care as an investment in and for children highlights its scope to enhance the lives of all children, not only those whose parents happen to be working. There are many children from deprived backgrounds who would benefit from exposure to child care of the quality we are discussing here, regardless of the employment status of their parents. Such exposure can serve important preventative functions and can prove to be highly efficient. However, under EPAC proposals, unless a special case is made, children

may be admitted to subsidised non-work related care for a maximum of eight hours per week. This could ultimately prove to be a false economy.

Finally, for the length of this paper I have been discussing child care in Australia without once having used the word 'industry'! This is no accident. Child care is not an industrial concept and there is no industrial process that has high quality child care as its product. Child care is about the creation, through sensitive and caring human interaction, of social environments and exchanges that secure the current happiness and wellbeing of children and nurture their developmental futures.

To speak of child care primarily as an industry, as does the EPAC report, is to draw attention away from these essentially humane and humanistic concepts and values and to legitimise instead an

almost exclusive concern with such economic issues as efficiency, unit cost, competition, contestability and the like.

The trouble with such an industrial approach to child care is that, combined with an approach which stresses child care as an employment-related service for parents, it draws attention away from children's developmental needs. Instead children come to be regarded merely as impediments to work, and the provision of child care as a commercial solution of the same order as providing car parks for employees.

It Takes a Village . . .

By presenting an image of child care in terms of the concept of shared, distributed parenting, I have been advancing a view of child care that is commensurate with the notion of the caring society. It is evident that we have reached a stage in our societal development where, at formal and informal levels, we are obliged to take seriously that it takes the whole village to rear a child (as Hillary Clinton (1996) reminded us in her recent anthology), and to put structures in place that ensure that the village does play its part. That used to happen spontaneously, informally. In contemporary times we can no longer rely entirely on informal systems and so we have created a formal child care service.

I have tried to outline a vision for an adequate, high quality, shared parenting child care service for Australia. Such a vision will not be cheaply achieved. In the long run, however, anything less may prove to have been too expensive for all concerned.

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