

Childcare

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN CHILDCARE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

The current early childhood education and care system is not working well. Public funding arrangements are too complex. Thousands of families cannot access or afford child care and preschool. Many children are under served or shunted between caregivers. Child care workers are poorly paid and only half of staff in child care services have formal qualifications and some states do not set maximum group sizes. Degree trained early childhood educators are as scarce as hen's teeth and despite national quality assurance processes there is huge variation within and between states in child care provision and quality. The Democrats plan substantially raises the quality of childcare, increases but contains the Commonwealth contribution to costs and simplifies the system of payments.

Our Action Plan

'Parents shouldn't be made to choose between "care" and "education" for their children. Access to a single, integrated service offering high quality care and education should be the right of every child.'

Dr Frank Oberklaid

- Substantially improve the **quality of childcare** through a national accreditation system for childcare by 2011 to deliver:
 - staff/child ratios of at least 1 adult to 3 children for infants, at least one adult to four children for one to two year olds and at least one adult to eight children for three to five year olds
 - at least two-year equivalent post-secondary qualifications in early childhood development for all child care workers
 - a doubling of the proportion of child care workers required to have early learning specialists degrees by 2012
 - standards for age-appropriate development programs and group sizes
 - clear and transparent sanctions for non-compliance with standards and more unannounced spot checks to strengthen accreditation
- **Standard childcare fees** set and the **Child Care Benefit** paid at 90% of that fee phased in for all families by 2011
- Childcare **Tax Rebate** increased to 50% of out of pocket childcare expenses
- **Free preschool** for all 3 and 4 year olds, jointly funded by Commonwealth and state governments
- A **national review** of early childhood care and education towards an integrated, holistic system that both optimizes early learning and development for under 5 year olds and provides care during parents' working hours
- A **national planning system** with local government given planning controls so centres and services are provided where needed, state governments to provide land and federal Government grants for capital costs

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- Targeted funding for a National **Indigenous Childcare** Strategy as recommended by the Commonwealth Child Care Reference Group
- Remove the cap on the **in-home care** programme to meet needs for those who work shift work, week-ends, or have children with special needs
- Incentives to provide extended hours child care and increased funding to out of school hours care and holiday programs for older children
- Additional funding for children with disabilities and special needs
- Expand the Job Education and Training childcare scheme for parents who are studying
- More training places for childcare workers with costs shared between the State and Commonwealth Governments
- Child care payments for in-home nannies who meet qualification and registration standards (other than carers who are relatives or friends)

Issue One: Quality

Quality childcare means qualified staff, high staff to child ratios, reasonable group sizes, and an appropriate curriculum. Wages are low, conditions poor and there is a lack of career opportunities for staff. The national quality standards for Long Day Care, Outside School Hours Care and Family Day Care Services are not mandatory and spot or random checks are very limited.

Issue Two: Shortages of places

Parents of more than 100,000 0-4 year olds are waiting for childcare places or more hours in childcare and an unknown number of 4 year olds in childcare do not receive formal preschool. Waiting lists for child care places of 18 months or more are commonly reported in some metropolitan areas, while other areas have an oversupply of unused places. Care for under two year olds and teenagers are particular problems. Parents who do shiftwork, work on weekends, work at night or who regularly work overtime have immense difficulties in accessing childcare. No level of government has responsibility for identifying which areas have the most severe shortages and planning to address these.

Issue Three: Fees

Many families struggle to afford childcare and costs often outweigh the net financial benefit to families for mothers to work. The Child Care Benefit made childcare more affordable temporarily. However the gains in the affordability of child care has been eroded by fee increases in excess of increases in the CCB which is linked to the CPI. The Child Care Tax Rebate only covers 30% of the out-of-pocket expenses for childcare ie total fees minus the Child Care Benefit and is capped at \$4000.

See also our family Friendly Work, Paid Maternity Leave and Work and Family Action Plans



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