



Tamika Hicks

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**Submission to the Select Committee on Autism:**

Cardinia Lakes Early Learning Centre is an integrated child care and funded kindergarten service located approximately 60kms south-east of Melbourne CBD. The centre has 191 children attend over the course of the week, attending from a ½ day to full time (5 days). ‘

We have over 53 professionals educating and caring for the children at the centre, with the qualifications of; Certificate 3 of Early Childhood Education, Diploma of Early Childhood Education, Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Psychology. All of our educators who hold a Certificate 3 are enrolled in upskilling to a Diploma of Early Childhood, as this is the minimum standard expected of our educators. My core leadership team each have between 15 – 25 years of early childhood experience.

Collectively over the years we have been working in the early childhood sector, we have seen an increase of children presenting with ASD behaviours. Whilst out of our scope to diagnose children, we have found it increasingly difficult for families to find services, and when they do face extensive wait list times delaying the early intervention process. Wait lists in Cardinia Shire and surrounds are roughly 6 months plus. Families are unable to afford private referrals and are often left with unmanageable and challenging behaviours that then affect their own mental health.

We have found that families are ill-informed on ASD and often seek support later, delaying vital early intervention. On average we have found families seeking supports towards the end of 4-year-old Kinder or find that at the start of Prep, Teachers are asking families to seek referrals for assessment. Early intervention is key and the need for pathways at the ages of 2 and 3 are vital to ensure optimal outcomes for children.

Early Childhood Educators are at the coal face of building relationships with families, and discussing these flagged behaviours can be quite challenging. Educators are ill equipped with a ‘tool box’ for answering questions, advising on pathways and providing assistance to children who need inclusion support in services. Conversations are difficult and are quite an emotional, stressful and at times

distressing for both the family and educators. Many conversations are met with push back and denial which can leave families distressed and educators quite frustrated knowing how important early intervention is.

Of our 191 children we have 7 formally diagnosed children, with another 26 showing behaviours with flags that effect their day to day life. Many of these children will go on to enter school without having sought support. Children in the December to April bracket are more often than not pushed into Prep early which adds to the difficulties these children go on to face. Pakenham has 2 red flagged educational domains, (as per AEDC data), being in the emotional and social domains which adds to the vulnerability of the lack of intervention.

MCH nurses need to be further supported to obtain Autism Training and to have direct contact with ECEC services to provide support to teachers and families and run family friendly sessions on ASD.

The Latrobe Uni program 'ASD Detect', has been trialled with great success. The need for this to be a nationwide app is vitally important. Furthermore, to extend this app for the use in early childhood services to gather information and support families with appropriate pathways. This app could interlink with a families account to provide a greater opportunity to gather information for professionals to access to gain a greater and wider range of observations of the child. Often children do not 'perform' when being seen to by a GP, psych or OT. Again, teachers and educators aren't medical professionals and it's beyond our scope, but the years of experience and the insight that we have when understanding behaviours, put us front and centre to know when there are flags of behaviour that need to be followed up.

ISF funding and KIS funding requirements need to be reviewed in terms of access. Too many children are falling through the cracks due to the criteria for funding and the amount of time it takes to access the funding. We need to look at the gaps and come up with some policy solutions. Multiple children in rooms, who need and access funding, need multiple staff. This currently isn't happening. Multiple children share a single additional staff member, this isn't always manageable, especially with high needs children. Again, placing stress on staff and delaying or stretching quality early intervention.

More specialist courses need to be accessible and funded for educators to upskill to have the appropriate knowledge of children with additional needs. An example of what this may look like is a Diploma of Inclusion Support. Whilst there are many short courses available a fully qualified funded course is needed for the early childhood sector to access.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this very important issue that need urgent solutions.

Kind regards,

Tamika Hicks

Manager