

Submission to the Education and Employment References Committee

Inquiry into the Quality and Safety of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System

From: Celeste Pater

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Introduction

I am a student and practitioner in early childhood education, and I am deeply invested in the quality, safety, and accessibility of Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. My professional experience in childcare services, alongside my personal experiences as a parent, has given me insight into how policies, workforce practices, and service environments affect both children and families.

I welcome this opportunity to provide feedback on the system and offer practical suggestions to improve safety, workforce support, transparency, and the overall experience of children and families.

1. Health and Safety of Children

Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children must always be the primary focus. From my placement and work experience, I have observed that:

- Safety procedures are generally strong, but policy implementation can sometimes inadvertently create challenges for families and staff.
- In some services, parents are restricted from bringing phones or other personal items into foyers or events. While this can protect privacy, it can also create practical and safety concerns -- for example, requiring parents to leave belongings in their cars, which may not always be secure.
- From my experience, parents do not pose a safety risk when phones are kept in pockets or left in secure offices. The concern about phones being used to take photos or videos is minimal, and policies should be based on observed risks rather than isolated or sensationalized incidents. Overly restrictive rules can create unnecessary stress for families, particularly in high-traffic or less secure locations, without meaningfully improving child safety.
- A more balanced approach could focus on safeguarding children in sensitive areas, such as change rooms or sleeping areas, rather than broadly limiting parent access.

2. Workforce Quality and Conditions

A skilled, supported, and well-compensated workforce is critical to both the safety and quality of care. From my experience:

- Staff pay and working conditions directly impact the ability to attract and retain qualified educators. High staff turnover affects continuity of care, familiarity with children, and overall quality.
- Male educators play a unique and positive role in children's development. Children respond well to

male staff, particularly in managing behaviour and engaging in play. Policies should ensure that male educators are present and supported, while limiting their access only in areas where privacy or safety concerns are legitimate.

- Professional development, mentoring, and reasonable workloads are essential to maintain high standards of care and compliance with regulations.

3. Transparency and Regulatory Compliance

Transparency and regulatory oversight ensure that services maintain quality and meet legislative requirements. My observations include:

- Parents benefit from accessible information on service policies, educator qualifications, compliance with quality standards, and workplace practices.
- Systems should be in place to clearly communicate how services meet safety and quality requirements without overwhelming families with technical or administrative information.
- Regulators and quality authorities should continue to ensure that private and for-profit incentives do not compromise safety or workforce wellbeing.

4. Family Experience and Access

Family experience and flexibility in care are critical to supporting child development and participation:

- Families must feel confident that their children are safe while having practical access to the service environment. Overly restrictive policies can create unnecessary stress for parents and reduce trust.
- Choice of care options, including flexible hours and part-time placements, must be supported by funding structures and service policies.
- Events and interactions should acknowledge the role of fathers and other caregivers while balancing child safety and privacy concerns.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that policies prioritize child safety without unnecessarily restricting parent or educator engagement.
2. Support workforce quality through fair pay, conditions, mentoring, and professional development.
3. Recognize and maintain the positive contributions of male educators, while limiting access to sensitive areas only where necessary.
4. Increase transparency for families and the public regarding compliance, staffing, and service quality, while keeping communications accessible and practical.
5. Provide flexible care options and ensure funding structures enable services to meet family needs effectively.

Closing

The quality and safety of Australia's ECEC system directly impacts children's development, family wellbeing, and workforce stability. Policies must strike a balance between safeguarding children, supporting educators, and providing families with flexibility, access, and confidence in the care provided. I encourage the Committee to consider feedback from those with both professional and personal experience in childcare when reviewing the system.

Sincerely,
Celeste Pater