**Giving parents the choice to care is key to easing early learning pressure**

Parents are calling on leaders at the Early Learning Summit to ease the pressure on early learning centres by improving access to parental caregivers for babies and young children.

According to the latest data from the national early childhood education regulator, 15% of long day care services in Australia hold a staffing waiver which allows them to operate even though they cannot meet the legal minimum staffing requirements.

Advocacy group Parents Work Collective is calling on government to implement a universal parenting payment which would subsidise either parental or institutional models of care for children under three years of age.

“When our early childhood educators aren’t being paid properly, when they are overworked and stressed, consistent and high-quality care cannot be guaranteed, through no fault of the educators themselves,” says Director, Virginia Tapscott.

“The early learning system is floundering. Improving the pay and status of care work and ensuring the attraction and retention of staff to meet the needs of families will take decades. Our babies and children cannot wait for the cultural shift that is required.”

Improving access to parental caregivers who are willing and capable is a crucial measure which will help deliver high quality care while also easing pressure on early learning facilities.

Research shows that consistently and adequately meeting a child’s needs in the first five years of life is of critical importance.

“I had experience of staff shortages in my own daughter’s childcare. This meant that she would arrive for the day and her usual educators wouldn’t be there, which was really unsettling for her. And we live in a well-resourced metropolitan area; there are many rural areas which are ‘childcare deserts’ with families not able to access childcare centres at all,” says Director Alannah Batho.

Universal parenting payments and tax relief for families with a parent in a caregiving role has been implemented in several OECD nations with great success.

Governments in Sweden and Denmark are signalling to families that their unpaid care work is valued and should be shared equally among men and women, with parent allowances for up to 480 days combined equally between both parents.

“Parents have become nothing but dollar signs to the Australian government,” Tapscott says.

“Families are financially stretched and stressed, but rather than actually valuing or supporting unpaid care work our government continues to ignore this critical labour and tells us simply to work longer hours. We’ve had enough – we want the choice to care for our babies and young children ourselves.”

“A lot has been said about giving children the best start in life but if we are serious we need to start asking ourselves some tough questions about what really is best for families, babies and young children.

“Is routine separation of parents and babies as young as 18 weeks appropriate? Is routinely contracting illness from group care really how families want to spend the first few years of their child’s life?

“At Parents Work Collective we believe gender equality is best achieved through both parents equally engaging in caregiving roles rather than equally disengaging, which is what the current workforce participation measure of gender equality encourages. We believe improving early learning models starts with acknowledging the value of unseen and unpaid labour.”

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