

FLEXIBILITY

in early childhood services

In March 2012, the then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott started a debate which has resonated with Australian families—the flexibility of early childhood education and care (ECEC). At that time, Mr Abbott promised to review further subsidies for in-home care services to address the inflexibility of existing ECEC services.

While the ensuing debate has largely concentrated on the role and cost of nannies, another important conversation has also begun about how existing early childhood services and service types are meeting the needs of families.

‘Parents with young kids don’t work the standard nine to five hours, five days a week, and the childcare sector still caters overwhelmingly to people in that position.’—The Hon. Tony Abbott, MP. (Peatling, 2012)

Families that lack flexibility at work or help from their wider family often rely on the provision of flexible early childhood services ‘to make things work’. For some families the existence of flexible ECEC means the difference between returning to work or staying home. This can be a difficult and sometimes impossible choice, particularly for single parents.

Existing early childhood services have been quick to point out the range of flexible services already being provided. Family day care services already work with families around their care needs, providing regulated care in a home environment; most long day care services also provide care well beyond the hours of nine to five, operating on a minimum 10-hour day; and outside school hours care services are flexible as well, bridging the gap between inflexible school and kindergarten/preschool opening times.

Yet, while many early childhood services are flexible, others remain unsure about flexibility—whether they could or should offer flexible services and what other services are doing to meet the needs of families. Early Childhood Australia (ECA) approached the government in mid-2013 with a proposal to document the variety of flexible practices that already exist across the ECEC sector. ECA was funded to identify best practice and provide useful information and resources to ECEC services that want to improve flexibility for families.



Progress thus far shows that there is a wide range of flexibility offered in some ECEC services which meet a range of different family needs. This includes any combination of extended hours and overnight care, flexible sessions and enrolment patterns, transport and mobile services, and services working with other ECEC services or family support services. In addition, some ECEC services may be flexible in one area and inflexible in another, or offer a complete service around the family.

Focus on flexibility—Western Australia

Western Australia was the focus of a tour of services in March, 2014. The conditions for flexible ECEC are unique in WA and a variety of approaches have been developed to meet the needs of families.

Nature Alliance Family Day Care—Dunsborough/Perth

Nature Alliance’s family day care educators offer overnight care and extended hours care for families including shift-workers. Educators work closely with child protection agencies and family support organisations with referrals.

Bright Futures In-Home Care/Family Day Care—Orelia

Bright Futures operates both an in-home care service and a family day care service. The in-home care service is often used by at-risk children for short and long periods including extended hours and overnight care. Some families transition to a flexible family day care service following the use of in-home care.

Wonderland Outside School Hours Care—Duncraig

Wonderland Outside School Hours Care offers flexible places for families with children in kindergarten and primary school. Transport for children is provided to and from seven schools in the surrounding area. Enrolment can be changed at short notice without any charge.

CSSU Early Learning Centre—Pannawonica

CSSU Pannawonica works closely with parents working at the nearby mines around their rotating rosters. Children may attend one day for one week and then attend four days the following week. Half-day sessions are also offered. Some children are picked up from the long day care centre by nannies employed by parents to care for the children until they have finished their shifts.

While there are a wide variety of flexible options that already exist, there are also many reported barriers to the provision of flexible services. Family day care educators are often required to apply for local council approval to run a service from their home, requiring car parking spaces and meeting other development controls. Long day care centres are often restricted from opening earlier or later than prescribed hours. Perhaps the greatest barrier is having flexible staff to meet these hours and ensuring they maintain appropriate work/life balance. The staffing costs of running a flexible service can be prohibitive, and if families do not use the flexibility offered by the service at a level that covers costs, it is unlikely to be maintained.

Flexibility is an issue that cuts across many aspects of care, with a direct relationship with the affordability, availability and quality of ECEC. For example, many services report that the flexibility of sessions and enrolment depends on whether they have available places for the child. Overnight care may be flexible but it can also be very expensive for parents.

An additional complexity for services is ensuring that the interests of children are a priority as flexible early childhood services are often characterised as being detrimental to children’s interests. The environment, consistency of the relationship with the primary caregiver and the intensity of hours used are all related to the quality of ECEC for children. However, flexible services can be delivered which balance the interests of children with their parents’ working needs. Flexible services may in fact benefit the child, particularly where parents’ participation in the workforce has a positive impact on the family’s situation.

Flexibility in early childhood services therefore poses a number of complex questions for services; is my service meeting the needs of families? How does my service compare with others? Can flexibility be improved and how would it impact on the children, staff and operating costs? ECA hopes to assist early childhood services to gain a better understanding of these issues over the coming months.

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Reference

Peatling, S. (2012, 25 March). Now for Abbott’s nanny state. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved 9 April, 2014, from: www.smh.com.au/national/now-for-abbotts-nanny-state-20120324-1vqwf.html.

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