

## **To the Productivity Commission**

### **Regarding Maternity Leave Provisions in Australia.**

Thankyou for the opportunity to make comment about the maternity leave provisions in Australia.

I have experience of three years in a professional capacity as an early childhood teacher in both preschool and centre based long day care and over 11 years in a private/volunteer community capacity working with and caring for my own and others young children. This has provided me with a rich, in depth view into the ordinary lives of working families and in particular the impact of types of care upon young children. Many of these families (including my own) have experienced extraordinary pressures to raise children under difficult financial and social conditions. I have seen these effects in many children compounded by long periods of group care from infancy.

There are already many excellent service provisions in Australia for families and young children. However I am concerned that the Rudd Government makes wise choices about how it will invest money in the early childhood domain. This domain is not principally a professional/public one but a private one. I would argue that a much greater slice of the tax revenue allocated for families should be funnelled directly into the hands of parents for the benefit of their children – and not into an expensive infrastructure of 'one size fits all' professional services. Carefully designed community specific support programs for young families are still valuable and needed however parents are best positioned to know who they need to access support from.

Simply building more, 'bigger and better' child and family centres is, to my mind, not going to resolve some of the critical parenting and social issues which are hurting young children. Why? Because the issues are complex and are closely connected to family upheaval and breakdown.

Also, we already have excellent, fully qualified, cost efficient, wise, experienced, passionately devoted child carers in the community – they are called – MOTHERS! We need to invest in parents (predominantly but not exclusively mums) by giving them the time, financial support and flexibility to stay at home and raise their children up until children reach school age. This can only be achieved by paid maternity leave which ensures that a mother is free to stay at home up until her children reach school age. Believe it or not even pre-school children need their mum or dad to be there to pick them up and share in their child's day, provide teaching and discipline.

Putting young babies into long day care as a valid alternative to the quality and specialised care that mothers bring to young children is selling Australian women short. It also denies the proven evidence of the critical importance of mother/child

attachment in the development of human cognition and psychological health. The extended parental/maternity leave provisions in Northern Europe – in particular France are nothing short of amazing in comparison to our own feeble, tokenistic gestures towards mothers who want to set aside paid employment for the critical job of nurturing new life.

I assume that the Productivity Commission has already undertaken research into the cost benefits of a healthy, well educated and skilled population. I believe an in depth analysis of the hidden economy of stay at home parents (predominantly mothers) is necessary to understand the full economic value of supporting mothers to care for their children at home. Especially the long term impacts of group care on the social and psychological health of children. I believe that the Commission has a duty to investigate the research which points (in other nations such as the US and UK) to the fact that group care for babies under three has severe and irreparable consequences for children's psychological and cognitive health. I hope that in the years to come the Australian government will not be called to compensate the children of yet another 'stolen' generation. This time stolen from their mothers under the guise of productivity.

Many would agree that time for relationships is at a premium in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I believe we are seeing a major shift in culture and attitudes toward children and family life in Australia. Reciprocity is a word used in much of the new early childhood educational talk – but I question how any relationships within families can be sustained under the constant pressures of the current economic climate. It really is critical for children's wellbeing that the economy begin to serve families and not the other way around.

The buffer of the private sphere, once so carefully maintained and cherished by stay at home mums is under great strain or at risk of being eroded altogether. Children are being exposed to greater and greater measures of stress from infancy. The prescription for more public/private centre based childcare is a recipe for toxic levels of stress in the birth to five years age group.

Daily I see children in my care begin at 7.30 am in the centre and leave at 5.30 – 6pm at night – even I don't put in the hours young children do in these centres. I have experienced exhausted, hyperactive, angry, emotionally disturbed and detached children who are bordering on being unteachable in the formal sense of schooling (remember I am talking about pre-school in LDC). Meanwhile more and more public money is being poured into so called 'professional intervention' for young children. This intervention – more often than not is a bandaid for much of the root issues around the birth and early rearing of infants. Many, many times I am encountering psycho-social problems in four to five year olds. These are directly related to the lack of cohesive support for the mum at home and the impact of long periods of group care as babies, creating issues of hypervigilance and detachment in four and five year olds.

A case:

One carer that I have worked with is a single parent. Her 3 year old son is in full time care at a corporate child care centre – while she works full time at a council run centre in the town. From the ridiculous to the sublime...! When her son becomes sick she has no alternative care arrangements so she is forced to take the day off. Her son has had many infections since the beginning of the year (the nature of the childcare environment) and my co-worker has missed so many days of work she has used up more than twice her allotted carer's leave and is at risk of losing her job. When I ask her how she feels about this she laughs with almost abandoned glee;

*'It would be sooo great – I'll just hang out at home with Dougie – maybe go casual somewhere... and leave him with my sister when I really have to. I can't stand the stress of this (ratty) group of children and the management here anyway.'*

Ann Manne's book – *Motherhood – how shall we care for our children?* – raises the critical issue of childcare and whether it really is good for children. I would argue that it should be the last resort for such a wealthy nation. I believe child care centres are really orphanages for children sacrificed by so-called economic imperatives. We are now conscripting many desperate mums against their will who are trying to juggle the fear of losing career prospects, caring for young families and sustaining marriage – into the workforce. Mothers are exceptionally good at managing and multi-tracking – but something has to give – usually the mother's health, sanity and quality of life – and consequently her children's'.

One grandmother who often cares for her granddaughter whilst her mother works and who is herself a self confessed career woman. says to me; *“If I had my time over again I wouldn't do it like this – trying to be superwoman – I've seen how my children have suffered and now (as adults) how their marriages and children are suffering.’*

Please, please make maternal leave provisions available to all mothers for a minimum of three years. I look forward to the day when mothers who want to stay home with their babies will never have to cry – *'but we can't afford to.'*