

The Health Benefits of Community Participation in Child Care, Lynn Wannan and Barbara Romeril

The National Association of Community Based Children's Services (NACBCS) is the national peak body representing the not-for-private-profit children's services sector. NACBCS came into being as part of the women's movement in the 70's as the importance of child care and support to women with children became major issues connected with the liberation of women.

Since then NACBCS has strongly advocated on behalf of children, families and local communities for high quality, responsive and accessible children's services that are managed and owned by the local people in the local community.

NACBCS' niche in the children's services sector is policy development.

Policy development requires us to:

- define what we want
- build the case
- develop the argument
- gain community support
- place our concerns within current Government policy and goals

We must be strategic, informed and supported. NACBCS must argue at the macro policy level – Why have child care? Why should Government fund it? What is it about for-profit commercial child care that should be of concern to government and parents? We must also argue at the micro level – what makes for quality child care? How can it be affordable and accessible? How do you have responsive programs and integrate services appropriately?

NACBCS has always been concerned with advocating that child care is of enormous value to both children and their families. NACBCS has also argued that child care has a valuable role in contributing to the nation's economic growth by enabling parents to participate in the paid workforce. This value is enhanced when parents feel good about the quality and the responsiveness of the service to their children's needs and to their needs. We have also argued that evidence supports this contention. Peter McDonald at the Australian National University has, for many years, argued that women are more likely to have children when they have publicly funded child care options. In the absence of child care he suggests many women will choose a career.

Recently scientists have produced evidence that the infant's brain experiences rapid development and that the right experiences in the early years will ensure children's potential brain development is fully realised. This has been used to argue for quality child care for Australia's young children.

There are many issues about the provision of child care that concern NACBCS now. These include:

- The demand for care is far greater than the supply. This is especially the case for children less than 2 years old and for certain population groups and certain geographic communities such as; aboriginal children, low income families, low income areas and isolated families.
- Accessibility depends to a large degree on capacity to pay and as fees are very high, low income parents cannot afford much child care
- Flexibility in relation to work requirements has always been difficult for the minority of parents. The cost of provision of quality child care is high and only affordable if shared by a number of families.
- Quality of care is being eroded as qualified staff leave the sector due to low wages and poor working conditions – a recent win by the ASU in Victoria has commenced the process of addressing this issue

- The recent rapid growth of the commercial sector has further distorted the provision of child care. This growth has increased the uncapped expenditure on federal government child care benefit enormously and yet has occurred with no planning by government to ensure high priority needs are met.

To address these issues properly public understanding and support is needed. This issue is one that divides people on strongly held ideological issues and beliefs such as should women work or stay home and care for children? Why should Governments pay? And why should the commercial sector (even while dependent of public funding for survival) have to be controlled by government?

The reality is that Australian families need child care as does the economy. There are many reasons for this. These include:

- to enable parents, especially women to undertake paid work
- to provide respite for children at risk
- to ensure children do have a range of quality developmentally challenging experiences
- to enable women to participate in their community

Much of these child care needs are met informally but for some families and their children formal child care services are needed.

Formal child care that is of high quality is expensive to provide and most families would have difficulty meeting this cost as most do paying private school fees. Government subsidy is critical to quality provision of affordable child care.

The Government is currently concerned about the future need for workers in Australia's workforce. It has concerns now about the need for population growth, women to work and people to be smart.

Voters are of concern to government too and thus gaining their support for continued and improved support for quality child care funded by government is critical.

NACBCS thus welcomes research that demonstrates:

- the importance of child care
- that the need will continue if our economy is to be strong
- that working parents will be less stressed if confident about the care of their children

Research is important for us because it provides the evidence we need. When we do our own research or provide anecdotes about the issues, we are dismissed as anecdotal and not informed.

Research is also important because it challenges us to be clear about what we say and argue for. It challenges us to ensure we reflect what our constituency really wants and needs.

Research is also important for us because it can prevent unfounded beliefs and ideological positions diverting government from the real need.

Advocacy bodies such as NACBCS have to be at the forefront of debates, we must be well informed and thus need research to add value and believability to our experience and understandings.

How can the NCEPH research project make a difference?

The NCEPH research project on Work, Health and Families has enormous potential to contribute to positive policy development. But in order to do that it must overtly address child care as a critical factor in ensuring the well being of children of working parents.

The NCEPH research framework includes the interaction between child health and development and:

- Parent working conditions
- Socio-economic status
- Parent resources and behaviour (such as time, money, mood and marital tension)

Other presenters at the forum pointed out the need to take into account the community in which a family operates. We urge the researchers to also explore the impact of access to formal and informal support structures such as extended family, friendship groups especially with other parents and access to high quality child care as key parts of the constellation of factors that impact on the well being of children of working parents.

Canadian research presented to the forum identified non-standard working hours as a factor in mothers' distress, reduced family functioning and increased marital tension, all of which reduce child well being. Clearly, reduced access to quality child care is another negative implication of non-standard working hours. The critical role of child care is recognised in most of the presentations and discussions at the forum – but it is not overt in the research design.

The research question can be expanded beyond the hypothesis:

- Do parent working conditions affect children's well being and
- Parent interpersonal and emotional resources protect child well being

The question can be expanded to also explore the **social resources** (identified by one participant as 'support services') as part of an exploration of what factors reduce the negative impacts on child well being of parental employment. We anticipate that such research will demonstrate that negative impacts are significantly reduced when parents have good social networks and access to high quality formal child care which is under the control of the parents, in other words, community owned child care.