

Should early education and childcare in Australia be free?

What they said...

'Evidence...shows the earlier children can access quality early childhood services, the better their longer-term learning outcomes are likely to be.'

Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University

'Now there is a growing collection of evidence that suggests just the opposite: that early childhood education actually harms children'

Cathy Gulli. Canadian educational journalist

The issue at a glance

On June 8, 2020, the federal government announced that it was moving forward the date on which it would cease to fund free childcare in Australia. Free access to childcare had been announced on April 2, 2020 and was originally intended to be in place for three months.

The program was prematurely ended on July 12, 2020.

The reason for the cessation of the program was that it was judged to have succeeded in its objectives. It had been put in place to support the childcare industry to survive the initial impact of COVID19.

Numbers of children attending childcare dropped significantly in the early stages of the pandemic. After free access had been in place for three months and with the virus deemed to be being brought under control, child numbers attending centres had grown to a point where the government no longer believed free childcare to be necessary.

The decision to end free childcare has met with a mixed response. Parents, some economists and many early childhood educators have seen it as a mistake, arguing that free access should remain in place for the benefit of children and parents. Childcare providers have largely welcomed the change as they considered the terms under which the government had funded fee-free childcare to be inadequate in the long-term.

<https://theconversation.com/free-childcare-ends-july-12-with-sector-losing-jobkeeper-but-receiving-temporary-payment-140253>

Background

(The description below of childcare services as they existed in Australia before the coronavirus-affected provision put in place was taken from the Wikipedia entry titled 'Child care'.

It can be accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_care)

Australia has a large childcare industry, however in many locations (especially in inner-city suburbs of large cities and in rural areas) the availability is limited, and the waiting periods can be up to several years. The Australian government's Child Care Subsidy scheme provides generous assistance with childcare costs, but this still leaves many families with a large out of pocket expense. The median weekly cost of centre-based long day care in 2013 was approximately \$364 which puts it out of the reach of lower income earners. Regulation is governed by the ACECQA, a federal government body, which acts as a central body for the state bodies.

Ratios of childcare educator to child are:

1:4 for infants,

1:5 for 2 – 3 years old (since 31/12/2015, when it was 1:8) and

1:11 for preschoolers (since 31/12/2015 when it was 1:10)

All childcare workers must have, or be undertaking, the minimum 'Certificate III in Children's Services' in order to work in a centre (Recognition of Prior Learning is available to help qualify staff with many years'

experience, but no qualifications). Common more advanced qualifications are 'Diploma of Children's Services' and an Early Childhood Education degree.

Rules differ between states regarding family day care in Australia. To start a Family Day Care business in Victoria, an educator should be either having "Certificate III in Children's Services" or be actively working towards the same. Additionally, Current Police check, Current First Aid training, Insurance (specifically for family day care) is necessary for starting a family day care. The house should be safe for children. A group of 15 educators works under one Supervisor who must have a 'Diploma in Children's Services'.

New childcare arrangements in response to COVID19

(The information below outlining the new childcare financial support made available to combat COVID19 was accessed from the federal Parliamentary Library. The full document can be found at https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2020/April/Coronavirus_response-Free_child_care)

On 2 April 2020, the Government announced new funding arrangements for the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its impact on childcare enrolments and attendance. The new arrangements make childcare services fee-free for families. The changes took effect on 6 April 2020 and remain in place until 28 June 2020. The main changes were made via a legislative instrument: the Child Care Subsidy Amendment (Coronavirus Response Measures No. 2) Minister's Rules 2020.

The new system will be reviewed after one month and an extension will be considered after three months.

Previous funding arrangements

Until 6 April 2020, the Australian Government provided both child care fee assistance to families and direct assistance to services. Most of the assistance was delivered through a fee assistance payment: the Child Care Subsidy (CCS).

The CCS was means tested with rates of payment based on family income, hours of care used, type of care used, and parents'/carers' level of work, training or study. Families received a percentage of the fees charged or the hourly fee cap (an amount set by the government)—whichever was lower. The percentage received was determined by the family's income and the hours subsidised determined by the parents'/carers' level of work, training or study.

The payment was paid directly to providers to be delivered to families in the form of a fee reduction.

In 2018–19, the Australian Government spent \$7.4 billion on the CCS. An additional \$268.5 million was spent on other programs to support childcare providers.

Changes to funding arrangements

Under the new funding arrangements, the CCS system is suspended and child care services will receive a weekly 'business continuity payment' equivalent to 50 per cent of fees charged (up to the CCS hourly fee cap) for sessions of care in the fortnight preceding 2 March 2020 (17 February 2020 to 28 February 2020). The payment for vacation care services will be based on the first fortnight of revenue in the school holidays between Term 3 and 4 of 2019. This will mean services can receive a payment worth up to half of their pre-pandemic fee revenue.

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment published the following example: if a service charged \$20,000 in fees for that fortnight (and charged fees at or under the hourly fee cap), then 50 per cent of their fee revenue for that fortnight is \$10,000 and the weekly payment from 6 April would be \$5,000.

In order to be eligible for this new payment, a childcare service must:

stay open with at least one child actively enrolled (except where the service is made to close on public health advice or for other health and safety reasons)

not charge families any fees

continue and prioritise care for essential workers, vulnerable and disadvantaged children and previously enrolled children

comply with other regulatory requirements under the National Quality Framework and the conditions for approval for the CCS.

Services will need to encourage families that recently ceased enrolment to re-enrol so that they will be eligible for the CCS when the free child care arrangements cease.

Internet information

On June 25, 2020, The Guardian published an article titled 'Extending free childcare could fuel huge boost to economy, report says'

The article examines a recently released report from the Australia Institute which argues that free childcare could result in major economic benefits for Australia.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/25/extending-free-childcare-could-fuel-huge-boost-to-economy-report-says>

On June 12, 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald published an article titled 'Free childcare "good for parents, but not good for us", workers say'. The article explains that the nature of the support given childcare centres to remain open during COVID19 did not contribute to secure employment for employees.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/free-childcare-good-for-parents-but-not-good-for-us-workers-say-20200609-p550t5.html>

On June 11, 2020, The New Daily published an analysis titled 'Why Australia has some of the highest child care costs in the world'

The article considered a number of factors, including the amount of government subsidies, which contribute to the high cost of childcare in this country.

The full text can be accessed at <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2020/06/11/australia-childcare-cost/>

On June 11, 2020, The Examiner published an article by June Vinall titled 'Childcare costs stop women working'. The article suggests the extent to which the cost of childcare impedes women's access to jobs.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.examiner.com.au/story/6789181/childcare-costs-stop-women-working/>

On June 10, 2020, Bounty published a comment by Fiona Wright titled '5 compelling reasons why ending the government's free childcare subsidy is disadvantaging women'. The article examines the negative impact that removing free childcare on many working women or those seeking employment.

The full article can be accessed at <https://www.bountyparents.com.au/expert-advice/ending-free-childcare-disadvantaging-women/>

On June 9, 2020, CityNews.com.au published a report by Michelle Grattan titled 'Free childcare's "done its job", says government'

The article presents the government's justification for ending the free childcare scheme.

The full text can be accessed at <https://citynews.com.au/2020/free-childcares-done-its-job-says-government/>

On June 8, 2020, The Conversation published an analysis by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra, titled 'Free childcare ends July 12, with sector losing JobKeeper but receiving temporary payment'

The article examines the reasons for the original suspension of fees and for their subsequent reimposition.

The full article can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/free-childcare-ends-july-12-with-sector-losing-jobkeeper-but-receiving-temporary-payment-140253>

On June 8, 2020, The Australian published an article titled ‘Coronavirus: Aid offered as free childcare ends’ The article outlines the supports being made available to childcare providers and families once childcare is no longer free in Australia.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/coronavirus-aid-offered-as-free-childcare-ends/news-story/6e3671d50b83d6b159d9ab292a12357c>

On June 4, 2019, The Conversation published an article by Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, titled ‘Preschool benefits all children, but not all children get it. Here’s what the government can do about that’

The article examines the importance of the subsidies governments make available in terms of determining which children can access childcare.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/preschool-benefits-all-children-but-not-all-children-get-it-heres-what-the-government-can-do-about-that-117660>

On June 4, 2020, The Daily Telegraph published an article titled ‘Kids at risk as childcare standards plunge’ which explains that the conditions being fostered in childcare centres struggling to cope under the fee-free system are harmful to children.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/kids-at-risk-as-childcare-standards-plunge/news-story/c7fb960d2c4ea752e40dacb71dd73fd6>

On May 22, 2020, The Conversation published an article by Kate Noble, Education Policy Fellow, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University; Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University and Sarah Pilcher, Policy Fellow, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, titled ‘Childcare is critical for COVID-19 recovery. We can’t just snap back to ‘normal’ funding arrangements’.

The article examines the importance place access to childcare will have in Australia’s post-COVID19 recovery and explains some of the steps the government might take to bring this about.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/childcare-is-critical-for-covid-19-recovery-we-cant-just-snap-back-to-normal-funding-arrangements-139027>

On May 18, 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald published an article titled ‘Childcare cost overhaul would be “kicker” for post-coronavirus recovery’. The article argues that reducing or eliminating the cost of childcare to parents would be a significant step toward boosting a post-COVID19 economic recovery in Australia.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/childcare-cost-overhaul-would-be-kicker-for-post-coronavirus-recovery-20200517-p54toc.html>

On April 11, 2019, The Conversation published an article by Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, and Kate Noble, Education Policy Fellow, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, titled ‘Both major parties are finally talking about the importance of preschool – here’s why it matters’

The article examines why government and opposition in Australia need to acknowledge the importance of early childhood education.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/both-major-parties-are-finally-talking-about-the-importance-of-preschool-heres-why-it-matters-114974>

On March 18, 2006, The Sydney Morning Herald published an article titled ‘Day care is bad for babies – Biddulph’. The article examines claims made in a book by Australian child psychologist Steve Biddulph that day care harms children socially and emotionally.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/day-care-is-bad-for-babies-biddulph-20060318-gdn6em.html>

Arguments in favour of early education and childcare being free

1. Early education is of great benefit to children

Among those who promote free childcare are those who argue that high quality early education is of vital importance for young children and should be regarded as a right in the same way as primary and secondary education is.

In an analysis published in The Conversation on April 11, 2019, and written by Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University and Kate Noble, Education Policy Fellow, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, it was noted, 'There is mounting evidence that two years of quality preschool sets up a child for success throughout their education journey and life. A wealth of international research shows children who attend high-quality early childhood programs not only perform better in learning, but also in skills such as social competence, vocabulary, and self-control. And these benefits are greatest for children from disadvantaged background.' <https://theconversation.com/both-major-parties-are-finally-talking-about-the-importance-of-preschool-heres-why-it-matters-114974>

The authors further commented, 'This is backed by research into early brain development, which shows the importance of laying foundations for learning early in life, while children's brains are most malleable. Economist James Heckman famously showed that investing in early learning and development has greater return on investment than addressing issues in later years.' <https://theconversation.com/both-major-parties-are-finally-talking-about-the-importance-of-preschool-heres-why-it-matters-114974>

Overseas research has demonstrated the enduring benefits of early education. In the United Kingdom, a large study that began in 1997 assessed more than 3,000 children at the age of three and followed them all the way up to 16. It found two or three years of quality preschool placed children nearly eight months ahead in their literacy at entry to school, compared to children with no preschool. At the age of 16, more months spent in preschool was associated with higher grades in English and Maths. <https://theconversation.com/both-major-parties-are-finally-talking-about-the-importance-of-preschool-heres-why-it-matters-114974>

The Early Years Education Program (EYEP), providing 145 vulnerable children with three years of tailored high-quality early childhood education and care has shown an impact on children's IQ. Children who attended EYEP had an estimated increase in IQ relative to the control group of about 4 points. On the scale used for measuring IQ, this is a relatively large increase, representing about one-quarter of a standard deviation in a norm population. For a normal distribution of IQ scores, this would imply that the mean IQ for children enrolled in EYEP is better than the outcomes of about 60 percent of the control group. https://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2781248/EYERP-Report-2-web.pdf

Those who stress the value of early education also note that not only does it lead to academic advantages, it offers many other benefits. Quality preschools run play-based learning programs in which children are encouraged to discover and explore. These play experiences provide opportunities for children to develop essential skills such as co-operation, concentration, problem-solving and self-control.

<https://theconversation.com/both-major-parties-are-finally-talking-about-the-importance-of-preschool-heres-why-it-matters-114974>

Jackson and Noble argue, 'Part of Australia's commitment needs to be secure, ongoing funding for quality [early education] service provision, as we have for schools.' <https://theconversation.com/both-major-parties-are-finally-talking-about-the-importance-of-preschool-heres-why-it-matters-114974>

Research has indicated that Australia's preschool provision needs to be developed and made more financially secure and accessible if the benefits it could provide are to be achieved.

In an article published in The Conversation on June 4, 2018, Jen Jackson further argued, 'Ongoing funding would...improve efficiency in preschool provision by allowing providers to plan ahead.

Evidence also shows the earlier children can access quality early childhood services; the better their longer-term learning outcomes are likely to be.' <https://theconversation.com/preschool-benefits-all-children-but-not-all-children-get-it-heres-what-the-government-can-do-about-that-117660>

Supporters of free early childhood education and childcare argue that these opportunities must be regarded as a right in the same manner that primary and secondary education are.

In an article published in *The Conversation* on July 15, 2019, Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, noted a recently released report which stated, 'The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia ratified in 1990, recognises children's right to education, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals recognise the importance of quality early childhood education and care in delivering that right to all children.

Governments willingly invest in school education, recognising the right to education means they have an obligation to their youngest citizens. Yet government investment in early childhood education in Australia still seems to depend heavily on economic arguments.' <https://theconversation.com/report-finds-every-1-australia-spends-on-preschool-will-return-2-but-this-wont-just-magically-happen-120217>

2. Early childhood education and childcare fees are outside the range of many families.

Early education and childcare costs in Australia are high by international standards. The standing Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy is means-tested. Even for a family getting the maximum subsidy (85 percent of costs for households with income less than A\$68,000) it costs about A\$9,000 a year to have two children in full-time care. For a family where each parent earns A\$80,000, the cost is about A\$26,000 a year.

Comparative studies have indicated that childcare and early education costs in Australia are among the highest in the world. Out-of-pocket childcare costs are greater in Australia than in the United States, United Kingdom and New Zealand. <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2020/06/11/australia-childcare-cost/>

Commenting in June 2020, Kate Griffiths of the Grattan Institute has stated, 'Childcare cost is the big constraint on Australian families. The fees are particularly higher than in comparable countries. Even though we do have a good subsidy scheme, it needed to be more generous even pre-crisis.

For low-income families, the cost is a huge factor. There is a higher subsidy for low-income families, but it tapers off as your income reduces. The taper rate is quite steep.'

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2020/06/11/australia-childcare-cost/>

Full-time net early education and childcare costs absorb about a quarter of household income for an average-earning couple with two young children in Australia. The OECD average is 11 percent. Almost half of Australian parents with children under five say they struggle with the cost.

<https://grattan.edu.au/news/childcare-wont-remain-free-after-the-pandemic-but-it-should-be-reformed/>

A recent Mitchell Institute report found some parents are spending more on day-care fees than they would on private schooling. <https://theconversation.com/forget-flowers-and-chocolates-for-mothers-day-keep-free-childcare-going-instead-137992>

In an article published in *The Conversation* on June 4, 2019, Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, noted, 'There is a widening gap in participation in early childhood services based on family income. Fewer than one-quarter (22.4 percent) of young children from low-income families used preschool or childcare services in 2017, with a steady decline over the last five years.'

<https://theconversation.com/preschool-benefits-all-children-but-not-all-children-get-it-heres-what-the-government-can-do-about-that-117660>

Australia has been criticised for its lower level of government funding for early childhood education and childcare. According to the OECD, Australia places 17th in the world for education spending on three to five-year-olds. <https://theconversation.com/forget-flowers-and-chocolates-for-mothers-day-keep-free-childcare-going-instead-137992>

A recent survey found more than 50 percent of mothers (of children of all ages) who responded agreed with the statement 'the federal government should provide free childcare for all citizens to make childcare affordable'. <https://theconversation.com/forget-flowers-and-chocolates-for-mothers-day-keep-free-childcare-going-instead-137992>

A Productivity Commission report released in February 2019 found the median weekly cost of full-time care was \$480 in 2018, or \$400 for family day care. This was an increase of 2.8 percent from the previous year - outstripping the overall inflation level for Australia which came in at 1.8 percent.

The Productivity Commission indicated that government subsidies had a greater impact for lower income families but these families still spent the highest proportion of their disposable income on childcare fees, nearly \$1 in every \$12 earned.

Almost one in six parents with kids under school age said they wanted more childcare hours each week. A third of these - 147,000 families - said they wanted the extra care for work-related reasons.

37 percent of parents who were not working indicated this was because childcare was too expensive to make it a viable option for them. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/childcare-fees-outpace-cost-of-living>

Parents unable to meet the cost of childcare have indicated that when fees are again charged they will be forced to withdraw their children. The childcare provider Uniting Vic and Tas has surveyed parents using its childcare services. Its survey has revealed that 64 percent of families are considering reducing days or removing their child from childcare when it was no longer free.

3. Government investment in early childhood education and childcare would be economically advantageous. It has been claimed that government investment in early childhood education and childcare would return major financial and social benefits to the country, boosting the social and educational competence of the nation's population and allow greater participation of women in the workforce.

In an article published in The Conversation on July 15, 2019, Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, noted a recently released report which stated, 'Quality preschool would deliver a two-for-one return on investment for Australia: that is, for every dollar governments invest in preschool, two dollars will be returned to the economy.' <https://theconversation.com/report-finds-every-1-australia-spends-on-preschool-will-return-2-but-this-wont-just-magically-happen-120217>

Jackson focused on lasting economic benefits revealed by international research that occur when governments fund high-quality early childhood education and childcare. She observed that the early advantages that children receive can be compounded and built upon as the child moves into adulthood and that this is of great benefit to the national economy. Jackson noted, 'if the child can sustain their learning advantage...economic benefits are delivered through their participation in tertiary education. To realise this benefit, there needs to be a place for them in university, or in quality vocational education and training. And finally, the full set of economic benefits are delivered when that child (now a young adult) takes their tertiary qualification into the labour market.' <https://theconversation.com/report-finds-every-1-australia-spends-on-preschool-will-return-2-but-this-wont-just-magically-happen-120217>

Jackson also noted that nation-wide economic advantages would occur through increased government expenditure on early childhood education and childcare because more women would be able to return to the workforce and utilise their skills there. Jackson noted, 'The economic benefits increase if the adults in the family decide to increase their hours of paid work while the child attends preschool.' <https://theconversation.com/report-finds-every-1-australia-spends-on-preschool-will-return-2-but-this-wont-just-magically-happen-120217>

Two economists from the progressive thinktank, the Australia Institute, have urged the government to scrap plans to reintroduce childcare fees. Matt Grudnoff and Richard Denniss have written a report arguing that free childcare would act as effective short-term stimulus as well as a long-run driver of economic growth. They have calculated that if Australia had the same average labour force participation rates as Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway, the economy would be \$60bn larger – a gain of about 3.2 percent of gross domestic product. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/25/extending-free-childcare-could-fuel-huge-boost-to-economy-report-says>

Ben Oquist, the executive director of the Australia Institute, has claimed that the report shows that free childcare has multiple benefits. He states, 'Not only is free childcare a form of fiscal stimulus, boosting consumer demand by increasing the disposable income of families with young children, but in the long run it will significantly grow GDP and make Australia a far more equitable country.' <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/25/extending-free-childcare-could-fuel-huge-boost-to-economy-report-says>

Oquist concluded, 'The empirical evidence makes clear that spending on services like childcare creates more jobs per \$1m spent than expenditure in areas like construction. The government's focus on stimulus

spending in male-dominated industries risks stymying economic recovery.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/25/extending-free-childcare-could-fuel-huge-boost-to-economy-report-says>

In a comment published in The Conversation on April 27, 2020, Danielle Wood, Program Director, Budget Policy and Institutional Reform, Grattan Institute; Kate Griffiths, Fellow, Grattan Institute; and Owain Emslie, Associate, Grattan Institute, summarised their support for the economic advantages of subsidised childcare. They stated, ‘Our modelling suggests a subsidy of 95% of child-care costs for low-income families, tapering down slowly to zero as family income increases, would cost taxpayers an additional A\$5 billion a year, compared with at least A\$14 billion more for a universal scheme.

It would enable many women who want to increase their paid work to do so, support the post-crisis recovery and boost GDP by about \$A11 billion a year in the medium term through higher workforce participation.’

<https://theconversation.com/permanently-raising-the-child-care-subsidy-is-an-economic-opportunity-too-good-to-miss-136856>

4. The cost of early childhood education and childcare discourages mothers from returning to the workforce. It has been argued that the high cost of early childhood education and childcare disadvantages women, prohibiting women either from returning to the workforce or from doing so as fully as they wish. This, it has been claimed, is financially disadvantageous to their families and robs the country of their skills and labour. It has been noted that women are more likely to be a family’s “second earner”, reducing their paid work hours to accommodate caring responsibilities. For many, early childhood education and childcare costs interact with other elements of Australia’s tax and benefit system to make extra hours of paid work financially unattractive. Increased taxation due to extra hours worked, together with increased childcare costs, seriously limits the number of hours a week women can work. <https://grattan.edu.au/news/childcare-wont-remain-free-after-the-pandemic-but-it-should-be-reformed/>

An opinion piece published by the Grattan Institute gave the following example: ‘Consider a household with two young children where both parents would earn A\$60,000 a year if they worked full-time. Dad works full-time and mum three days a week.

If mum decided to take on an extra day, she would lose more than 90 percent of the income for that fourth day in childcare costs, tax and reduced family payments...mum [is] working for about A\$2 an hour on her fourth day; and for nothing on her fifth day.’ <https://grattan.edu.au/news/childcare-wont-remain-free-after-the-pandemic-but-it-should-be-reformed/>

The Grattan Institute comment concluded, ‘The cost of childcare is the biggest contributor to...high workforce disincentive rates. Reducing that cost would do more than any other policy change to boost workforce participation for mothers of young children.’ <https://grattan.edu.au/news/childcare-wont-remain-free-after-the-pandemic-but-it-should-be-reformed/>

The childcare-related blocks to women’s full participation in the workforce has been linked to a larger picture of female disadvantage. In an article published in The Conversation on May 8, 2020, Leah Ruppner, Associate Professor in Sociology and Co-Director of The Policy Lab, University of Melbourne, and Andrea Carson, Associate Professor, Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy, La Trobe University, noted, ‘The amount of unpaid domestic work women do is unsustainable. Mothers do almost twice as much housework as fathers, even when they are earning most of the family income. And this comes at the expense of their time in employment, leisure and sleep.’ <https://theconversation.com/forget-flowers-and-chocolates-for-mothers-day-keep-free-childcare-going-instead-137992>

It has also been noted that increased Female participation in the workforce would greatly advantage the Australian economy. Grudnoff and Denniss, researchers for the private think tank, the Australia Institute, have released a report on the state of women’s workforce participation in Australia. They have unfavourably compared the situation here with that in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. They argued that subsidised, high-quality childcare is one way these Nordic countries have increased female participation rates.

The researchers note, ‘While Nordic countries have similar proportions of full-time to part-time work as Australia, they have much more generous childcare policies and much higher rates of female participation in

full-time work.’ Their research indicates that Australian women in their 20s have similar participation rates as women in Nordic countries but ‘a distinct change occurs with women aged in their early thirties’. At that point, Australia’s female participation rate falls before recovering and peaking with women in their 40s. However, women in Nordic countries see no decline in participation rates in their 30s.

Grudnoff and Denniss observe, ‘Compared to Nordic countries, Australia’s female participation rates fall significantly at the ages when the largest number of people are raising young families. Policies that make it easier for women to choose to go back to work, like the provision of free childcare, could mean that Australia reaps billions in benefits over the long run.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/25/extending-free-childcare-could-fuel-huge-boost-to-economy-report-says>

5. In the circumstances created by COVID19, free early childhood education and childcare is particularly necessary

Supporters of free early childhood education and childcare argue that this provision is even more important in the difficult circumstances created by COVID19 and that this will remain the case beyond June 2020.

It has been noted that in current conditions, many families will have no choice but to remove their children from childcare and early childhood education when fees are reintroduced. The childcare provider Uniting Vic and Tas has surveyed parents using its childcare services. Its survey has revealed that 64 percent of families are considering reducing days or removing their child from childcare when it was no longer free.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/free-childcare-good-for-parents-but-not-good-for-us-workers-say-20200609-p550t5.html>

In an article published in The Conversation on May 21, 2010, Kate Noble, Education Policy Fellow, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, Jen Jackson, Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, and Sarah Pilcher, Policy Fellow, Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, stated, ‘COVID-19 restrictions have resulted in skyrocketing unemployment and underemployment. For many families, the transition back to work may be irregular and unpredictable. A sharp ending of the emergency measures may leave many families unable to access care when they need to get back to work.

On top of this, children’s routines have been disrupted, increasing levels of isolation and anxiety. Many children not previously considered vulnerable will now fall into this category or become potentially vulnerable. High quality early childhood education can help reduce the risk of vulnerability.’

<https://theconversation.com/childcare-is-critical-for-covid-19-recovery-we-cant-just-snap-back-to-normal-funding-arrangements-139027>

In an article published in The Conversation on May 8, 2020, Leah Ruppner, Associate Professor in Sociology and Co-Director of The Policy Lab, University of Melbourne, and Andrea Carson, Associate Professor, Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy, La Trobe University, also argued for free provision in response to the demands of COVID19. They stated, ‘For some families, free childcare has produced an economic boon, expanding their bank accounts. This money will be essential as society opens back up and consumer confidence is necessary to keep the economic engines powered.

For others, free childcare provisions will become increasingly important for keeping families out of poverty. We know women’s employment has taken a harder hit during COVID-19 than men’s.’

<https://theconversation.com/forget-flowers-and-chocolates-for-mothers-day-keep-free-childcare-going-instead-137992>

The small business ombudsman, Kate Carnell, told the Senate’s Covid-19 committee that the government’s plan to reintroduce childcare fees from 13 July would have a ‘significant impact’ on small-business owners struggling to get ‘back up and running’ as restrictions ease. Carnell noted 40 percent of small businesses were owned by women. ‘Free childcare was a godsend for them – without it, they will struggle significantly.’ Similarly, Alexandra Hordern, a director of the Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, has stated that for small-business people working full time – or more – and paid only the \$1,500 JobKeeper rate, ‘the only affordable childcare is free childcare’.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/25/extending-free-childcare-could-fuel-huge-boost-to-economy-report-says>

In addition to the assistance that would be provided to families and the economy by keeping early childhood education and childcare free during this COVID19-affected period, it has been argued that childcare centres may need childcare to remain free if they are to continue to survive. Noble, Jackson and Pilcher have stated, 'Early childhood providers are navigating rapid changes to attendance, staffing, funding and revenue. Under current arrangements, they are managing a steady growth in demand and a known stream of income. Reverting to the previous system will introduce a high degree of uncertainty.'

<https://theconversation.com/childcare-is-critical-for-covid-19-recovery-we-cant-just-snap-back-to-normal-funding-arrangements-139027>

Noble, Jackson and Pilcher have also noted that those working in early childhood education face major employment uncertainty, made worse by COVID19. They argue, 'Early childhood educators are...in a tenuous position. They are among the lowest-paid Australians, with high levels of casual employment. Staff turnover is high, which undermines delivery of quality education, given the critical importance of secure relationships to children's early learning and development.

Funding certainty in the coming months will support job security, which benefits children as well as workers.' <https://theconversation.com/childcare-is-critical-for-covid-19-recovery-we-cant-just-snap-back-to-normal-funding-arrangements-139027>

Noble, Jackson and Pilcher concluded, 'We must also plan for longer-term reform to build a more stable and sustainable early childhood sector for all Australian children, which is less likely to need rescuing in the event of future shocks. With the rescue package generating calls to permanently remove fees for early childhood services, governments need to remain open to more ambitious reforms in future.'

<https://theconversation.com/childcare-is-critical-for-covid-19-recovery-we-cant-just-snap-back-to-normal-funding-arrangements-139027>

Arguments against early education and childcare being free

1. Many childcare providers have been disadvantaged by the removal of fees and the transfer to government funding

Those who oppose the continuation of the government's current scheme for supporting childcare and early childhood education argue that the federal fee payments are not sufficient to maintain the sector. They maintain that while parents might be satisfied with a system that frees them from the burden of childcare costs, the system that has been put in place is insufficient to keep centres operational. What this suggests is that to fund a properly sustainable childcare service without charging fees the government would have to supply far greater funding.

In an article published in The Australian on June 15, 2020, the owner of Kids Planet Academy, Alex Guan, that the arrangements under which the federal government had relieved parents of childcare fees had been very damaging for many childcare providers. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/centres-welcome-end-of-free-childcare/news-story/87621a43d3ff172126e264f576fe6dc7>

Under the relief scheme announced in April, centres were paid up to 50 per cent of their pre-coronavirus fee revenue by the federal government, in combination with JobKeeper wage sub-sidies, as part of a plan to provide nationwide free childcare throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This meant a substantial loss of revenue relative to the pre-COVID19 period for many centres. Alex Guan stated, 'We just can't wait for the subsidy to end so we can charge parents as normal... We're sitting at about 45 per cent of what we normally earn. JobKeeper was meant to subsidise our labour costs, but for us we have casuals who don't get JobKeeper. So, we haven't really benefited from it. We are actually a making a loss at this point.'

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/centres-welcome-end-of-free-childcare/news-story/87621a43d3ff172126e264f576fe6dc7>

Mr Guan further explained, 'Our numbers are now back to where we were before the pandemic in February ... (but) we do expect to lose some children when it's not free anymore — we're expecting about 15 per cent of children from families who have lost their jobs and reduce their days.

Even if we lose 15 per cent of our children, we still are better off. With free childcare, we weren't getting paid that much but still needed to retain the same amount of staff.'

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/centres-welcome-end-of-free-childcare/news-story/87621a43d3ff172126e264f576fe6dc7>

Veronica, who runs a day care service in regional Western Australia commented similarly. She stated, 'It was good for parents, but not good for us. We still had to pay for electricity, food and expenses.' Northern New South Wales family day care operator, Rebecca Gardner, stated she also welcomed the return to the old model, as she had been unable to pay her bills during the pandemic. Ms Gardner noted, 'Nowhere in Australia during this pandemic was another workforce asked to work the same hours and standards but required to work for free.

No one but the childcare industry was made to, or we would lose the little funding we got. I have been wondering, was this done to the childcare sector because we are a female-dominated sector. Would this have happened in a male dominated sector?' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/free-childcare-good-for-parents-but-not-good-for-us-workers-say-20200609-p550t5.html>

Owner of Little Zak's Academy, Carlos Zaki, claimed the changes have impacted small and large businesses alike, with some centres unable to function at all.

Mr Zaki stated, 'A lot of centres are incurring extra expenses and a lot of them have turned around and said "we're not going to take any new enrolments and we're not getting any extra money" because they can't afford the added pressure.' Mr Zaki explained that while the government measures functioned as a necessary support in the early stages of the pandemic, as child numbers have increased they are not sufficient to meet the costs of supplying childcare services. He explained, 'What they did helped the industry in general, and the industry suffered and took a hit, but the measures weren't designed for huge profits. [They were] designed to keep the industry alive which [they] did but it's not sustainable now that people are going back to childcare, it needs to be taken away.' <https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/australia/free-childcare-not-sustainable-for-many-aussie-providers/ar-BB14Q4Dr>

Opponents of government funded childcare argue that these complaints demonstrate that what the government had offered was only partially funded childcare. It has further been argued that childcare centres cannot be expected to meet the shortfall indefinitely. In order to meet the full cost of childcare the government would need to double its expenditure. It has been argued that the costs of this are unsustainable.

2. The government will be providing additional support for families and centres

The federal government announced that although childcare fees would return from July 13, 2020, a range of pre-existing and new supports would be put in place to assist both parents and childcare centres. Therefore, although there is no intention that childcare will remain free in Australia, the government will continue with and add to the supports that it made available before COVID19 affected the childcare industry.

Commenting on the range of supports made available by the federal government for families and childcare centres from July 13, the Education Minister, Dan Tehan, has stated, 'This package works to help and support those families but also to help and support the sector.'

<https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-australia-free-childcare-program-to-end-july-12/8f248f97-b5fd-49b0-a6b9-4aa778436f6a>

The Australian Government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment website states, 'As Australian families begin to return to school, the workplace, and re-open businesses, the Government has announced its plan to return to the Child Care Subsidy and Additional Child Care Subsidy to support families to access affordable child care from 13 July 2020.'

Government subsidies range between 20 per cent and 85 per cent of a baseline fee. A family on median income would pay \$23 a day for long day care plus any extra their centre charges above the baseline rate, which can be quite high in capital cities. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/australian-parents-to-pay-for-child-care-again-from-12-july>

The site further states, 'From 13 July 2020, Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) return, along with new transition measures to support the sector and parents as they move back to the subsidy...[T]he activity test requirements will be eased from 13 July 2020 for 12 weeks, for families impacted by COVID-19, who can no longer access the same number of hours as before. During this period, impacted families will be able to access up to 100 hours per fortnight of subsidised care. This will assist

families to return to the level of work, study or training they were doing before the COVID-19 crisis, or to do more than before.’ <https://www.education.gov.au/news/transition-arrangements-end-early-childhood-and-care-relief-package>

An additional link further explains the effect of relaxing the activity test requirements for parents. This measure recognises that parents’ work opportunities may have been reduced by COVID19 and easing the work requirements needed to access childcare allows them to look for additional work or take up further study. The government’s new provision states, ‘From 13 July 2020 until 4 October 2020, individuals who can no longer engage in the same number of hours of work, training, study or other activity recognised by the CCS activity test immediately prior to the COVID-19 crisis, can advise Centrelink they meet the requirements to access 100 hours of subsidised child care, per child, per fortnight for up to 12 weeks.’

<https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>

In addition, government support is also being made available to help childcare centres continue to operate during this difficult period. From 13 July 2020 all approved early childhood education and care services can receive a Transition Payment to help them transition to back to the CCS. The government’s information page states, ‘The Transition Payment will be made instead of the JobKeeper Payment, for the period 13 July 2020 to 27 September 2020. The Transition Payment is 25 per cent of fee revenue...The Transition Payment will be paid as a grant under the Community Child Care Fund.’ <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>

The cost to the government of this transition package to support childcare centres in the absence of JobKeeper is \$708 million. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/australian-parents-to-pay-for-child-care-again-from-12-july>

The Education Minister, Dan Tehan, has claimed that consultations with childcare providers had led the Government to believe support for the sector could be delivered more fairly by replacing JobKeeper with other payments. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-08/free-childcare-coronavirus-support-to-end-july/12332066> The Minister has stated, ‘We have consulted with the sector, listened to what they have said will be needed to make sure that demand will continue to grow and we think that we have a package that will work for families going forward.’ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/australian-parents-to-pay-for-child-care-again-from-12-july>

Australian Childcare Alliance vice-president, Nesha Hutchinson, has stated that service providers had been ‘shouldering the burden’ of keeping centres open through the pandemic. Ms Hutchinson has supported the new arrangements claiming, ‘For industry it is great that (the support) has been adjusted to allow us to remain viable.’ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/coronavirus-aid-offered-as-free-childcare-ends/news-story/6e3671d50b83d6b159d9ab292a12357c>

3. The advantages of early childhood education have been exaggerated

Those who argue that childcare and early childhood education do not warrant being government funded highlight research which disputes the educational and social benefits often claimed for these measures. American research has indicated that the impact of early childhood education on test-scores is subject to rapid fade-out, disappearing after a year or two. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-false-promise-of-universal-child-care>

The United States Department of Health and Human Services commissioned a massive study of Head Start, the nation’s flagship early childhood education program, and found ‘the benefits of access to Head Start at age four are largely absent by 1st grade for the program population as a whole.’

<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2018/10/16/17928164/early-childhood-education-doesnt-teach-kids-fund-it>

In the 2008 to 2009 school year, when the state of Tennessee had to assign spaces in their early childhood education program by lottery, it created the conditions for a natural experiment. Researchers found (rather than the anticipated benefits for those children who had been selected for the early childhood program): ‘the control children [those who had not received the formal pre-school education] caught up with the pre-k participants on [kindergarten and subsequent] tests and generally surpassed them.’

<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2018/10/16/17928164/early-childhood-education-doesnt-teach-kids-fund-it>

It has been claimed that, in general, education in kindergarten is not a good predictor of children's subsequent educational performance. American research conducted in 2007, looking at data from a large longitudinal study of kindergarteners, found 'no evidence that early-grade retention brings benefits to the retainees' reading and math learning toward the end of the elementary years.' <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2018/10/16/17928164/early-childhood-education-doesnt-teach-kids-fund-it>

Some studies have indicated that access to early childhood education may not only fail to confer lasting advantage, it may, in fact, have a harmful effect. Lilian G. Katz, professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of Illinois has claimed, 'While early formal instruction may appear to show good test results at first, in the long term, in follow-up studies, such children have had no advantage. On the contrary, especially in the case of boys, subjection to early formal instruction increases their tendency to distance themselves from the goals of schools, and to drop out of it, either mentally or physically.' <https://wehavekids.com/education/Early-Childhood-Education-5-Reasons-for-Not-Sending-Your-Youngster-to-Preschool>

Dr Peter Gray, writing for Psychology Today in May 2015 noted, 'The results are quite consistent from study to study: Early academic training somewhat increases children's immediate scores on the specific tests that the training is aimed at (no surprise), but these initial gains wash out within 1 to 3 years and, at least in some studies, are eventually reversed. Perhaps more tragic than the lack of long-term academic advantage of early academic instruction is evidence that such instruction can produce long-term harm, especially in the realms of social and emotional development.' <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/freedom-learn/201505/early-academic-training-produces-long-term-harm>

Critics have maintained that early childhood education with formal instructional goals can have damaging impacts on children, leading to anti-social behaviour and even, for some, criminality. The results of a large scale American study which looked at the impacts of direct educational instruction on preschool children found, 'Those in the Direct Instruction group had more instances of friction with other people, were more likely to have shown evidence of emotional impairment, were less likely to be married and living with their spouse, and were far more likely to have committed a crime...'
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/freedom-learn/201505/early-academic-training-produces-long-term-harm>

Similar concerns have been raised as a result of Canadian research. In 2007, Canadian educational journalist, Cathy Gulli, wrote, 'Now there is a growing collection of evidence that suggests just the opposite: that early childhood education actually harms children. Cognitive benefits are inconsistent at best. According to one surprising study, the more time spent in early learning facilities, the more likely that a child's social development will slow down. And mounting expectations for kids to achieve and succeed at younger and younger ages is being characterized as "white-collar child abuse" ...'
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/early-childhood-education-may-harm-children>

Australian child psychologist, Steve Biddulph, has claimed that childcare and early childhood education promote increased levels of stress among young children that lead to emotional damage. Cortisol studies which measure the presence of stress hormones in young babies have consistently found these levels to be higher in children in long day care. These have been linked with greater aggression and anxiety found in older children in long day care but are also known to affect the development of a range of neurotransmitters, whose pathways in the brain are still being built. These permanent brain changes are believed to affect the way the child will react to stress, anxiety and negative feelings in later life.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/day-care-is-bad-for-babies-biddulph-20060318-gdn6em.html>

Biddulph argues that rather than being a trend governments should promote and fund, childcare and early childhood education has potentially damaging consequences for young children and the adolescents they become. He writes, 'Society has become more materialist and fatally neglected the place of caring ... Governments have failed to protect families from corporate pressures and many people can no longer afford to care for their own children...the results of that experiment are now emerging and the worldwide epidemic of teenage depression, anxiety and substance abuse suggests all may not be well.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/day-care-is-bad-for-babies-biddulph-20060318-gdn6em.html>

4. The cost to the government of removing fees would be too great and the scheme was never intended to be permanent

The federal government has maintained that the cost of supplying childcare and early childhood education free to Australia's entire pre-school population would be too great an expense.

Education department figures provided to the Senate indicated that the temporary free childcare or universal childcare arrangement costs temporarily put in place to sustain childcare services during the period they were most affected by COVID19 have cost the government \$131m a week. This would be approximately \$6.8bn a year. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/31/how-much-would-it-cost-to-make-free-childcare-permanent-and-would-it-be-a-good-idea>

Commentators have further noted that this figure of nearly \$7bn does not cover what the centres had previously been receiving. It has been estimated that if this expenditure were doubled to pay centres 100 percent of their pre-coronavirus fees it would cost the government \$13.6bn a year, assuming no growth in demand for childcare services. It has further been predicted that the cost would probably be higher as an increase in usage could be expected. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/31/how-much-would-it-cost-to-make-free-childcare-permanent-and-would-it-be-a-good-idea>

According to unreleased modelling from the Grattan Institute, introducing a permanent universal childcare scheme could trigger a jump in demand, and the cost to the government could be at least \$12bn on top of the current cost, so about \$20bn or \$21bn. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/31/how-much-would-it-cost-to-make-free-childcare-permanent-and-would-it-be-a-good-idea>

The government has maintained that such expenditure was never intended to be maintained long-term. The government's aim was only ever to support childcare services through the temporary downturn that occurred when the community was first affected by the threat of COVID19. The Education Minister, Dan Tehan, has stated, 'What we have seen is demand grow and grow over the last few weeks so that we needed to change the system. This system was designed for when demand was falling. Now we are seeing demand increasing.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-08/free-childcare-coronavirus-support-to-end-july/12332066>

Morrison and Tehan indicated that financial support was a response to the enrolment and attendance crisis created by COVID19 and was meant as a way of ensuring the industry's survival. In a joint statement the Prime Minister and the Education Minister noted that the financial support would provide temporary 'planning certainty to early childhood education and care services at a time where enrolments and attendance are highly unpredictable.' <https://theconversation.com/free-child-care-to-help-nearly-one-million-families-especially-workers-in-essential-services-135439>

This support was only ever guaranteed for a three-month period. The government deems that the scheme has succeeded in its achieving its objective and can now be safely removed. The federal education minister, Dan Tehan, has revealed that a review of the child care relief package had 'found it had succeeded in its objective of keeping services open and viable, with 99 per cent of around 13,400 services operational' on May 27. <https://citynews.com.au/2020/free-childcares-done-its-job-says-government/>

The government has argued that Australia's success in combating COVID19 means that families and childcare centres no longer need the expense of childcare fees to be met by the taxpayer. Dan Tehan has stated, 'Because of our success at flattening the curve, Australia is re-opening for business and that means an increase in demand for childcare places, with attendance currently at 74 per cent of pre-COVID levels.' | <https://citynews.com.au/2020/free-childcares-done-its-job-says-government/>

The government also made it clear from the outset that it never intended to fund a universal free childcare service. On April 2, 2020, the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison announced that parents who were classed as 'essential workers' would temporarily receive free childcare during the coronavirus crisis.

The Prime Minister stated, 'Childcare and early childhood education is critical. Particularly for those Australians who rely on it so they can go to work every day, particularly those who are working in such critical areas.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-02/free-childcare-explainer-coronavirus-covid-19/12115062>

The education minister stated, 'There is a clear priority list that we want centres to take into account. The most important of those are those essential workers and the vulnerable children.'

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-02/free-childcare-explainer-coronavirus-covid-19/12115062>

5. Australia's childcare and early education services are not geared to cope with becoming free to all. Many of those involved within Australian childcare centres have argued that the system is already under unsustainable strain. They claim that if the numbers were to continue to climb in response to the free availability of care, then quality of service would be likely to fall.

On June 4, 2020, Clare Masters, National Education Editor, News Corp Australia Network, noted, 'Childcare centres are reporting children are at risk with many centres forced to breach the legal ratios and the quality of care slipping dramatically over the COVID-19 period.'

With attendance now rising as Australia opens back up, childcare workers say they cannot continue to look after children, perform extra cleaning and maintain safe ratios with dwindling income.'

Masters further wrote, 'Some centres...say they are over ratio with too many children and not enough staff. In many cases education programs have had to be dropped in the wake of the coronavirus crisis with educators forcing to choose between care and education or hygiene.'

Sandy, an educator from Queensland was reported to say, 'We are barely scraping in under the ratios, instead of focusing on delivering quality early education and care. We don't have the staff to pull off the floor to do the extra cleaning that we know we need to do.'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/kids-at-risk-as-childcare-standards-plunge/news-story/c7fb960d2c4ea752e40dadb71dd73fd6>

Helen Gibbons, the United Workers Union director of early learning, has claimed that the relaxing of ratios was worrying and comes as South Australia has officially moved to a one educator for 11 children ratio from one to 10. She said she was worried other states would follow and said it was 'incredibly bad timing to add to the stress and workload of educators when so much is at stake.'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/kids-at-risk-as-childcare-standards-plunge/news-story/c7fb960d2c4ea752e40dadb71dd73fd6>

Maixima Joblink reported on May 27 that many centres were advising parents not to send their children as the centres were unable to cope. The report stated, 'Angry parents have revealed that some childcare operators have told them to keep their kids at home until the current arrangements run out on June 28. The bizarre outcome means that thousands of parents are missing out on "free" childcare despite taxpayers pumping a stunning \$1.6 billion into the sector.' <https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/parents-denied-free-childcare-as-operators-warn-jobkeeper-workers-are-refusing-to-come-into-work/news-story/517385d98ceb27057ec9ac4f9f5e2f5f>

Early Childhood Australia chief executive officer, Sam Page, has stated, 'Some services are allocating lower hours to all parents. Other services have asked parents what job they do and whether they need to send kids to care.' <https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/parents-denied-free-childcare-as-operators-warn-jobkeeper-workers-are-refusing-to-come-into-work/news-story/517385d98ceb27057ec9ac4f9f5e2f5f>

SDN Children's Services, which operates 30 centres, has similarly asked parents to apply for bookings in advance so centres can prioritise families. The Services chief executive officer, Kay Turner, has stated, 'We need to reduce the number of children we can have attend each day so that we can continue to meet child [to] staff ratio requirements and continue to provide quality service.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/children-turned-away-from-childcare-under-new-free-scheme-20200421-p54lpk.html>

Further implications

COVID19 has had a dramatic effect on many social issues in Australia. Emergency measures designed to assist during the onset of the disease in this country have sparked debate regarding whether these measures should be continued into the future.

The question of whether childcare in Australia should be free or more heavily subsidised has been significantly contested prior to the pandemic. The issue revolved around two concerns – the first, the educational and social benefits potentially gained by a properly regulated childcare industry with a focus on

the child's intellectual and social wellbeing; and the second, how best to facilitate women's more equal participation in the workforce as a gender equity issue and a means of advancing the national economy. A major impetus toward using childcare as an opportunity for social, emotional, and intellectual development came with the Gillard government's Early Years Learning Framework introduced in 2010. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Years_Learning_Framework Together with the Framework outlining the program to be followed were requirements regarding staff qualifications and staff: children ratios.

Subsequent Liberal governments have modified these ratios requiring fewer highly qualified staff. Debate within Australia centring on early childhood education as a right in the same way as primary and secondary education are seen as rights has lost heat over the last ten years.

What has remained a live issue is the cost to parents of childcare in Australia and the impediment that this forms for women wishing to return to work after starting a family. The COVID19 period of free childcare has given further momentum to protests over the large expense that childcare represents for parents. The difficult conditions in which many families will find themselves as a result of the virus, with some parents suffering reduced working hours or reduced business profitability, means that families will be even more unable and unwilling to accept the high cost of childcare.

Many economists have suggested that keeping childcare free or dramatically increasing the amount of the childcare subsidy would be an important measure to help the country work its way out of the financial crisis caused by COVID19. It would act as an important means of allowing women to take up whatever employment was available to them and would significantly increase consumption.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/childcare-cost-overhaul-would-be-kicker-for-post-coronavirus-recovery-20200517-p54toc.html>

What the future holds is difficult to predict. The Morrison government only ever intended free childcare as a temporary support for the childcare industry and a means whereby as much of the workforce as possible could return to employment. The measure was entirely economically motivated as was its premature withdrawal after three and a half months when it was originally pledged for six. Its purpose was to prop up the childcare industry and so it was withdrawn as soon as that end was considered to have been achieved.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/08/australian-government-to-end-free-childcare-on-12-july-in-move-labor-says-will-snap-families>

What now remains to be seen is whether Australian parents will readily accept the withdrawal of free childcare. Normally voters make their displeasure at policy changes apparent at elections. In the complicated context of a pandemic, it is hard to determine what voters will consider a job well done. If COVID19 has been brought substantially under control by the time of the next election then voters may consider that sufficient to give the Morrison government another term without demanding more policy changes to support employment.

However, if economic hardship has come to seem as significant as the progress of the virus, then voters may well demand that either the current government or its replacement do more to support citizens' standard of living. If this is the case, then the question of childcare subsidies, if not a free service, will again have to be addressed as it forms a vital component of many families' capacity to survive financially.

Regrettably, while the debate is currently focused on the immediate economics of childcare, more significant questions about what types of childcare programs should be supplied and how they might be funded are being largely ignored.