

# APPENDIX 5

## The Institute of Early Childhood's Response to the *Draft Children's Services Regulation 2002*

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### Pages 4-6

#### Child to staff ratios

There is considerable research that child/staff ratios (the child–caregiver ratio) and group size are significant factors affecting children's development of social skills (Howes, Phillips and Whitebode, 1992). To a large degree this derives from the capacity of childcare workers to provide quality interaction with children (McCartney, *et al.*, 1997). For infants and toddlers, the number of children that a child care provider is responsible for appears to be particularly important in fostering developmentally supportive exchanges in all types of child care.

Wangmann (2001, cited in Standing Committee on Social Issues, 2002, p.25) states that “research recommends a ratio of 1:3 with [children below the age of three]...rather than 1:5, so certainly when you have more children to manage and work with and less adults to do that your ability to actually work effectively with these children is ...limited”.

Research on early childhood program practices has shown a relationship among the number of children assigned to a teacher, the degree to which children experience individual positive interactions and child development outcomes. The longitudinal research supports the view that small class sizes and low child to teacher ratios contribute to positive long term benefits for children (Frede, 1995). A recent study by the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2002) has used structural equation modelling to examine the paths linking child–staff ratios and child outcomes. They found empirical evidence for both caregiver training and child–staff ratios influencing quality of care giving in children's services. Quality and care giving in turn was linked to cognitive and social outcomes for children that could not be accounted for entirely by family variables. Their conclusion, based on the largest and most well-designed study of day care to date, was that their findings “provide empirical support for policies that improve state regulations for caregiver training and child–staff ratios” (p.199).

#### Staff turnover

Continuity of staff is one of the central components of good quality child care. If staff constantly change, the children suffer because they have to adjust to new carers. The US National Child Care Staffing Study (1989) found that children in centres with higher staff turnover rates spent less time engaged in social activities with peers and more time in aimless wandering. Other staff in the service suffer because of the disruption and management suffers because of the time and the cost involved in replacing and training staff. Parents (and governments) suffer because the cost of care increases. Current research on child care in NSW has found that parents report a high rate of change in caregivers in long day care and family day care services for children under 3 years of age (Bowes, Wise, Harrison, Sanson, Ungerer, Watson & Simpson, in press).

Research into staff turnover shows that this turnover compromises the quality of care and impacts negatively on child–staff interactions. Continuity of teaching staff is in the best interests of children and families, but also of the services themselves (Bowes, Sanson, Wise, Ungerer, Harrison, Watson & Simpson, 2002). Parents may find that staff turnover hinders the development of close ties between

parents and staff, making it harder to maintain necessary lines of communication. Staff in services can suffer from increasing stress because of the extra workload or from having to cope with fitting in with numerous relief staff. Management may have to spend a great deal of time and financial resources attempting to recruit, hire and orientate staff (Whelan, 1990).

High child/staff ratios can result in staff who are less satisfied in their work and this can then result in high staff turnover. Staff turnover rates are high in children's services and this turnover has a clear connection to quality of programs (Helburn, 1995; Whitebrook, Howes & Phillips, 1989). More qualified staff and staff working in more satisfactory conditions with smaller groups of children are less likely to leave children's services. The costs of staff turnover are borne by the community and will manifest in both reduced quality of services to children and their families and in direct costs to the early childhood sector (if staff leave permanently). The turnover rate represents a substantial financial cost to services, funding bodies and the community in general.

- For early childhood services less staff turnover means reduced costs. For this reason alone it is a false economy to argue that reducing ratios (lowering the number of staff to children) or reducing the requirement for qualified staff will lead to cost savings for services.

## Summary

As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia has an obligation to ensure in its legislation that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration. A compelling corpus of research has shown that the best outcomes for children result from quality children's services in the early years. Quality results from warm, responsive and informed interactions with caregivers who are educated in child development and education. The key factors in ensuring these quality interactions with children have been shown to be well-educated staff, lower staff-child ratios and lower staff turnover in services. The recommendations the IEC make for the Regulations are based on these research-based considerations.

## Extract Pages 8–9 Part 4, Division 4 Clause 44 (1)

### Staff to child ratios

While the IEC supports staff-child ratios of one adult to three children aged birth–12 months and one adult to five children aged 1–2 years, we applaud the move to 1:4 staff-child ratios for all children who are under the age of two years old. An improvement in the staff-child ratios (that is, fewer children per adult) offers more time for staff to spend in positive interactions with children. This can have the ability to reduce stress for both the child and the staff member and bring about increased job satisfaction and lower staff turnover.

This change to staff-child ratio as a requirement for licence purposes demonstrates forward thinking and understanding of the short and long-term impact of class sizes for children's learning. It is a reflection of the implementation and intent of the progressive NSW Government *Early Childhood Services Policy*. NSW is leading the other Australian states and territories with respect to regulation of children's services and should not relinquish the role of being a leader and advocate for children. Their demonstration of responsibility will impact on society's view of children if children are seen as important enough to make policy changes of this kind, it indicates that we value children as members of our society.

In subsequent reviews of the Regulations it would be seen as a positive step if the ratios for 2–3 year olds were also decreased as they are proposed for birth to two in the 2002 document.