



Nought to Five **The Daycare Experiment**

In December 2008, the Unicef Report on Early Childhood Education warned of a “high-stakes gamble” being undertaken by OECD nations – where for the first time the majority of children are spending a large part of their early lives in some form of out-of-home, non-parental childcare, in the absence of any adults who have any continuing commitment to them. In his response to the report, New Zealand paediatrician and former Children’s Commissioner Ian Hassall described the change as a “massive uncontrolled experiment”.

In New Zealand, childcare centres have sprung up alongside our traditional kindergartens and Playcentres – their signs proudly pronouncing, “From birth to age five”. Public debate over the benefits of “birth to five” daycare, however, has been muted.

In November, incoming Social Development Minister Paula Bennett dipped her toe into the childcare conundrum when she told the *New Zealand Herald*: “I don’t think we’ve had a debate... on what it means for parents to go back to work earlier and the length of time children are spending in early childhood education and daycare.”

A week after Bennett made her comments,



The daycare debate is invariably shut down before it starts because it’s seen as an attack on working mothers. But journalist

Peter Feeney and co-writer Lauren Porter, a clinical social worker, psychotherapist and executive member of the Infant Mental Health Association, believe parents aren’t being given the whole story on “early childhood education”. They argue subsidised daycare serves the childcare industry, Government and our GDP – not babies, and perhaps not even a majority of mothers.

PETER FEENEY AND LAUREN PORTER ARE CONTRIBUTING NORTH & SOUTH WRITERS.



GUY FREDERICK

“If you say a mother and a caregiver are interchangeable, what are you saying? You’re saying anyone can mother a baby and it’s cheap at the price. Well, I disagree. The cost in societal and ultimately in human terms is very high.”

Wellington psychotherapist and Infant Mental Health Association patron Elisabeth Muir

Wellington psychotherapist and Infant Mental Health Association patron Elisabeth Muir spoke at The Meaning of Motherhood conference in Auckland. She began her address by saying that in the past she’d felt constrained from speaking honestly out of the fear of offending working mothers. But not this day.

“In the current social climate, there’s a great deal of support and encouragement for mothers to put their baby in care and go to work. Mothering has been subsumed by the prevalence and even lauding of childcare and, in particular, early childhood education. If you say a mother and a caregiver are interchangeable, what are you saying? You’re

saying anyone can mother a baby and it’s cheap at the price. Well, I disagree. The cost in societal and ultimately in human terms is very high.”

Australian psychologist, author and parenting guru Steve Biddulph, read by more than four million parents worldwide, had already appeared on TVNZ’s *Close Up* the week Muir gave her talk, counselling against the use of group daycare for under-threes. Then in December the Unicef report – linking very young children’s long hours in daycare with behavioural problems, aggression and depression later in life – prompted a flurry of comment.

Why has it taken so long for us to talk about

this? How and why did childcare become so popular? What’s the impact of daycare on our children? And perhaps most important, is this what we actually want?

New Zealand’s daycare participation rates are now well above the OECD average of 25 per cent for under-threes. A third of our under-threes are now in daycare (double that of 1990) and recent growth has been almost exclusively in this age group. Childcare-centre rolls (97,756 in 2008) and home-based care (13,065) have increased by more than 20 per cent since 2004, while numbers at kindergartens, Playcentres and kohanga reo have been in decline.

There has been big growth in the use of all-day services too, so each child in daycare now attends for an average of 21 hours a week. There are long waiting lists at many daycare centres, in all age groups.

Soon, if current trends continue, one in five of all babies under one will be in out-of-home, non-parental care. Other countries have moved well beyond that: in the US, 50 per cent of under-ones attend some kind of daycare, three-quarters of them for 28 hours a week or longer.

In New Zealand, as Sue Kedgley outlined in her 1996 book *Mum’s the Word*, the 1970s were a battleground between advocates for childcare centres such as trade unionist and MP Sonja Davies and opponents such as American developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth and UK psychiatrist John Bowlby, who visited New Zealand in 1973. Ainsworth and Bowlby argued the pressures of modern life were pushing us towards “anxious attachment” between parent and child, with the unhappy consequences of psychological distress, discordant relationships and weakening social ties.

In 1974, the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists took the unusual step of issuing a statement expressing concern at the “large and increasing number of mothers with children under three” who were entering fulltime employment.

By 1980, there were still only 5420 childcare places available in New Zealand. But the parameters of the debate, largely unchanged till now, had been set: women’s freedom to work was firmly linked with increased childcare services, so any criticism of the daycare model has come to be seen as an attack on this hard-won right.

In the past 10 years, however, research

evidence has accumulated that flags a range of risks and consequences for very young children in daycare; even Sweden, a champion of the state-subsidised childcare model, is rethinking its policies, having clocked up some of the worst statistics among Scandinavian and EU countries since 1989 for psychological and behavioural problems among its youth.

A 2005 British study that tested for the stress hormone cortisol found 90 per cent of babies experienced a jump in cortisol levels when placed in even “high quality” daycare: their levels were between 75 to 100 per cent higher than when they were at home. After months in care, cortisol levels declined slightly, but remained high.

One of the most consistent results of many studies has been that children in group daycare situations are more likely to be aggressive. Research from the US National Institute of Child Health and Development has shown that the more time children spend in daycare up to four and a half years of age, the more aggression, disobedience and conflict with adults they show at age five.

UK childcare expert Dr Penelope Leach led a seven-year study, from 1998 to 2005, of 1200 young children; her research team reported those looked after by their mothers to the age of three did significantly better in developmental tests than those cared for by daycares, nannies or relatives. Leach cautioned, however, that not all babies and toddlers did well at home. Children of mothers suffering depression or having other priorities than motherhood fared better with child-minders and daycares.

Steve Biddulph agrees not every child will be affected in the same way by their childcare experience, and says some appear not to be affected adversely at all. Factors such as home life, temperament, gender and the total numbers of hours in out-of-home care combine to produce unpredictable individual outcomes.

But his general view of daycare for under-threes is unequivocal: “Group childcare makes kids more anxious, aggressive, stressed and sad. It’s worse for boys. It’s worse if kids start too young, for too long hours. It affects some kids much more than others. But for every child, it’s a second-rate childhood.”

Despite daycare’s association with statistically significant risk factors, the expansion of these services has proceeded with the active co-operation, not



GETTY

Children of mothers suffering depression or having other priorities than motherhood fared better with child-minders and daycare nurseries.

UK CHILDCARE EXPERT DR PENELOPE LEACH’S SEVEN-YEAR STUDY OF 1200 YOUNG CHILDREN

discouragement, of our Government. As the recent Unicef report points out, Governments have tended to support the childcare boom in large part because they are the economic beneficiaries of it in the form of higher GDP, higher tax revenues and reduced welfare bills.

The early childhood education (ECE) sector – comprising ECE faculties, teachers, lecturers and childcare businesses – received its initial impetus and much of its current authority from early research that showed lasting improvements in later school performance for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds who had been in nursery care. Other studies have shown at-risk children placed in high-quality care are less likely to offend as adults. Western Governments, including New Zealand, have embraced these findings and subsidised ECE as a cheap means to support women into paid work.

Australian author and social philosopher Anne Manne has assessed the research used to justify the expansion of early childhood education and identified several problem areas within these studies.

Some, such as the oft-cited 1972-1977 American Abecedarian Project, involved children

in poverty or from at-risk family situations. Yet Christchurch-based Miriam McCaleb, a former ECE lecturer, now kindergarten teacher, says: “Such research makes people assume – incorrectly – that if daycare makes risky children function at a higher level, it must catapult normally functioning children into brilliance.”

In the Canadian province of Quebec, a universal childcare programme was introduced in the late 1990s on the back of such findings. And yet in 2005, a study commissioned by the (Canadian) National Bureau of Economic Research found that overall child and maternal well-being in Quebec had deteriorated, based on a range of behavioural and health measurements.

Most, if not all, of the “positive” studies were carried out in high-quality, therefore high-cost, childcare environments. One of the less-publicised conclusions of the Abecedarian Project was that it was much more important for disadvantaged children than others to have daycare that was “individualised” and of the highest quality.

But are such high-quality daycare centres prevalent in Sydenham, Mangere or Otara? When we inquired of the University



“Saying you provide a ‘quality environment’ in your centre just doesn’t cut it any more. The provision of quality for a child now means a lot more than whether a centre is clean and stimulating.”

Dr Kimberley Powell (above) is an educator for early-years teachers at Massey University and president of the Infant Mental Health Association

of Auckland faculty of education about visiting quality centres in Auckland, we were directed to locations in Birkenhead, Browns Bay and Ponsonby – which are hardly hotbeds of under-privilege.

Other studies, such as the Perry Pre-school Project (which ran from 1962 to 1967 in the US) surveyed only children over three – but the results have been applied as if they were equally true for younger ages. The needs, abilities and brains of four- and five-year-olds are quite different from those of children under three.

Attachment specialist Richard Bowlby (John Bowlby’s son) says from birth to 30 months the right hemisphere of the brain – concerned with the emotional skills that are needed for relationships and empathy – develops rapidly. Babies learn these unconscious skills best by experiencing sensitive and responsive one-on-one care. From about 33 months, this growth spurt slows and by about 36 months the left side of the brain has become dominant. This promotes the development of complex speech and the ability to recall past events and anticipate future ones.

Early childhood education can help children older than 36 months develop cognitive and social skills, as well as emotional interdependence but, as Bowlby says: “Researchers have consistently found no real benefits for babies and toddlers younger than 24 months.”

Adds Biddulph: “I think the real problem is we hugely underestimated the importance of loving interaction between mother and baby or toddler in building the architecture of the brain. Somehow our society came to think that anyone could mind the baby. The neuroscience is dead clear: love is the heart of early learning and the brain is built through intimacy and tenderness, creating emotional regulation and a lively and empathic human being for life.”

Dr Kimberley Powell is an early-years-teacher educator at Massey University and president of the Infant Mental Health Association. She believes Biddulph’s observations are key to why New Zealand policy for children under four needs to change quickly and dramatically: “We currently have no national strategy on the provision of infant mental health. If we put the emotional

development of the infant and child at the centre of what we do, then everything we provide in early childhood education would require that we put the child first – not the ECE centre, not the teacher, not the funding and not the adults in society.”

In New Zealand, the mainstream thinking within ECE seems to be that if commercial childcare is here to stay, quality of delivery is the only discussion worth having.

“But saying you provide a ‘quality environment’ in your centre just doesn’t cut it any more,” says Powell. “The provision of quality for a child now means a lot more than whether a centre is clean and stimulating.”

Many cling to the “quality” mantra, however; a lecturer in ECE, who would not be named, acknowledged the “negative” research and deplored poorly resourced centres. But to her, age of entry was less important than the setting; a child would be better off in a “good” centre than with “bad” parents.

Daycare children still have to come home at night, however. If there’s dysfunction at home, asks Elisabeth Muir, shouldn’t we be putting our money into effective intervention to foster the ability of these parents? Dr Sarah Farquhar, Wellington-based CEO of the Early Childhood Council, which represents independent early childhood education centres, agrees. “Education and policy should be based on an understanding that the primary purpose of early childhood centres is to support parents and families and not to replace them.”

Powell maintains parents, for their own sanity, have to “buy in” to the ideals and methods of the childcare centre they select. She says they often, unknowingly, end up sending their children to centres that may be “actual nightmares”.

“Centres may assume what they’re doing is perfectly fine because the parents seem satisfied. But we know parents have difficulty understanding the parameters of quality. And if it’s the only centre a parent knows, but it’s a poor one and they need childcare, what are they to do?”

So what is high-quality childcare anyway? In a 1996 review for the Institute of Economic Affairs in London, family policy researcher Patricia Morgan defined it as including highly involved and trained staff, small group sizes, caregiver stability, and low infant-to-caregiver ratios. Meeting such criteria doesn’t come cheap (sought-after Auckland childcare centres charge parents up to \$80 a day for infants and toddlers, and

that's not counting the direct subsidy they receive from the Government).

Morgan's conclusion, given the cost and difficulties of providing quality care, was that affordable care is low-quality care: "Universally available high-quality care is achievable nowhere on Earth."

In New Zealand, staff turnover in early childhood services averages 20 per cent a year. The rate is probably considerably higher at poorly managed centres. We were told of many centres that were "running on relievers". Centres are often staffed at a ratio of four babies or toddlers to every caregiver, although many are not – one caregiver to five toddlers is the legal requirement (it jumps to 1:15 at age three).

Dr Nicola Atwool, principal adviser to the Office of the Children's Commissioner in Wellington, also told us it's "imperative" that each child under two have a designated carer. But this "primary care model", in which a baby can expect to be cared for by one consistent person, is hard to find in practice. An ECE graduate, applying for a job last year, was interviewed by 10 centres, none of which practised a primary care model.

Most centres pass babies from person to

person depending on who's on nappies, feeding or sleep that day. If one baby in the room needs to be bottle-fed, the ratio for the others drops to 7:1 – or even 9:1 in some cases. Powell says the idea that one adult should be able to care effectively for four young infants is "preposterous".

"Even the most creative and dedicated centres find it hard to roster their staff to get one-on-one care as much as possible. It's an expensive and logistical nightmare for ECE managers."

While the childcare industry is widely failing to attain even its self-prescribed quality standards, the quest itself is a distraction from the fundamental challenge at the heart of childcare research. This is the separation of babies or toddlers at a vulnerable time of life from the person they love the most, and their placement in the care of people who have no enduring relationship with them.

While the basic requirements of health, nutrition and sensory stimulation can be provided in a group-care setting, the more complex aspects of relationships, which make up what neuroscientists call our "social nutrition", are much harder to get right.

The critical ability to feel empathy, says

Miriam McCaleb, largely depends on whether anybody has taken the time to gaze into a child's eyes and explain whatever emotion is threatening to overtake him.

Several studies have examined this phenomenon in daycare centres through what are called joint or shared attention sequences – "those playful, intense and reassuring exchanges between mother and child that happen dozens of times a day", says Biddulph. They're the building blocks to forming a foundational, secure relationship, vital for future confidence.

Anne Manne explains: "You're with your baby and you follow their eye to an object and say, 'Oh, would you like that? Shall I get the teddy bear down? Shall we look at this storybook together?' And so on." It's a shared intimate moment, she says, when the attachment of the infant to the mother is reinforced, but also when learning takes place and the baby's world is expanded.

Manne says research carried out in Australian childcare centres "found almost none of these exchanges. A baby or toddler would make a bid for attention and would rarely be responded to. And when they were responded to, the sequence would be cur-

Small School. Big Results

The exceptional academic accomplishments achieved by a wide cross-section of Corran students in 2009, in testament to the outstanding success all students at Corran are achieving with Cambridge International examinations.

The majority of Corran's senior students achieved an A or A* pass (80% or higher) in at least one subject in the 2009 examinations:

- 76% of Corran IGCSE students (Year 11) achieved at least one A pass (80% or higher)
- 83% of Corran AS/A level students (Year 12/13) achieved at least one A pass (80% or higher)
- Three students achieved Top in New Zealand marks IGCSE Co-ordinated Sciences (Double Award), AS Level Thinking Skills and A level Art and Design – Photography

Corran, the only independent girls' school in Auckland offering the prestigious and globally recognised Cambridge International Examination programme, has also been awarded Top CIE School status for the 6th consecutive year.

Enrolments are being taken now for places in Year 1 to Year 13 in 2010 and 2011.

Places are available in some classes in 2009. For further information on an outstanding Corran education for your daughter please call Lyana Dedele på 520 8811 or email: 10004@corran.school.nz

Join us on Open Day Saturday March 20th
9:30am-12:30pm

Principal: Sally L. Deibel
MS&Mia(-)ns) BSc Dip(T&G)



Corran School

534 Bessacre Road,
Manurewa,
Auckland, 1541
P.O. Box 28-300,
Auckland, 1541
www.corran.school.nz

www.corran.school.nz

Who's Minding the Baby?

Besides daycare centres, what are your choices for early childcare? To rate the available options, we asked

Deborah Morris, advocacy manager for Barnardos and head of Every Child Counts; **Dr Sarah Farquhar**, CEO of the Early Childhood Council; **Dr Nicola Atwool**, principal adviser to the Office of the Children's Commissioner; and **Barbara Lambourn**, advocacy manager of Unicef NZ.

Parents at Home. This option gets the big tick from our experts – with comments such as the importance of “parents as first teachers” and the need for a child to be cared for by someone who is “besotted” with them. All recognised the benefit of children having a fulltime parent, especially for the first two to three years, who's there simply because they love the child.

Playcentre. Playcentre, which tends to go hand in hand with a parent who is home at least part-time, gets rave reviews. Available from birth to six, Playcentre is unique to New Zealand and offers a developmentally enriched early childhood environment that doesn't require parental separation yet allows for flexibility. And at an average cost of \$40 per family a term, it's still a bargain. Playcentre was hit hard by its exclusion from the 20-hours subsidy for three- and four-year-olds. Some state support – for example, a fulltime administrator-fundraiser for each centre – would help with the big commitment it requires from parents. Playcentre sessions are parent-led and parents have to participate in the Playcentre Early Childhood Education Diploma courses.

Kindergarten. Traditional kindergarten is typically defined as three-hour sessions between two and five times a week, beginning at age three or older. All our experts felt positively about this care option. This is where the positive research on early childhood education starts to shine, as kindy coincides with children's readiness to interact with peers and develop cognitive skills; it also helps prepare them for school. With the 20 Hours Free scheme, the costs are minimal. Early Childhood Council

chief Sarah Farquhar points out that the differences between kindergartens and daycares are fast disappearing: they're funded in the same way, have the same staff and regulation requirements, and are led by qualified teachers.

Kohanga Reo. Kohanga Reo, like Playcentre, has the benefit of parental involvement. In addition, it enhances cultural identity and fosters bilingual language development, with long-term benefits for children and their families. However, there has been both inconsistency in practice between individual centres and a steep decline in overall enrolments.

Home-based Group Care (eg Barnardos, Porse). Home-based care is seen by most as preferable to institutional or centre-based care because of the familiar environment, the low numbers (typically three to four children) and the consistent alternative caregiver. It's seen by many to have the potential for a child to form a secure attachment with their care provider. Unfortunately, cost can be an inhibitor, as centre-based care is almost always far cheaper.

One-on-one Nanny. Hiring a nanny is the most expensive option, but our experts all considered it a good one (when the nanny is well-trained, attuned and committed to the child for the long term); it can provide the one-on-one interactions babies and young children need. But parents have to accept that a nanny can become a very important person in their child's life; changing nannies can be a real wrench for young children.

Informal Networks. It's hard to judge how much informal networks of family and friends are used for childcare, but anecdotally, it's popular and mostly free. The involvement of grandparents, aunts and friends to help look after babies is seen by our experts as flexible and “familial”, but they added it's important these individuals are well-known to the parents and competent to care for a child. Unicef NZ advocacy manager Barbara Lambourn says it's vital there are good relationships between the adults involved, lots of trust and clarity about the child-minding arrangements.

tailed – maybe they'd have one turn and that would be the end of it, so no ongoing back-and-forth to lead to security and discovery.” This finding undermines the argument often made in favour of daycare for under-threes: that peer interaction can somehow compensate for skills like empathy, which mothers pass on to their babies, almost accidentally, in the course of their day.

The voices of dissent on childcare come mostly from individuals free of ECE institutional affiliations or financial ties; many individuals we approached were not prepared to speak on the record. In the UK, a large and confidential survey of infant mental health professionals by Penelope Leach found most believed infant care principally by the mother, especially for the first two years, was best for the child.

McCaleb believes in the good intentions of those presenting the “quality daycare” argument and feels “like an utter traitor for saying the research – and just plain common sense – tells us the greatest quality childcare in the world cannot compete with wrapping a child safely in the loving arms of a parent, of whanau”.

Invoked again and again to us were the sensibilities of parents – and particularly mothers, whose right to work is considered sacrosanct and whom no one wishes to burden with guilt. But the absence of public discussion surely benefits those who need it least, the childcare industry, at the cost of those who have no voice – our babies.

A common theme is that many mothers feel guilty anyway about going to work and not performing either role well – or staying home and not offering their kids the rich learning environment childcare is supposed to provide. Yet mothering is a rewarding, creative and highly demanding job, say others such as Muir: “There's so little recognition that a mother at home, a mother quietly attending to her own baby, is performing the most difficult, indispensable, vital and the most fulfilling function for the human species.”

Childcare at home does not count in our measure of economic activity, gross domestic product. However, childcare in a commercial centre does. And if mothers are in the paid workforce, paying others to provide childcare, then both are considered gainfully employed.

“Being a stay-at-home mother has a lower social status than that of a street-sweeper,” says British psychotherapist and author of

Affluenza Oliver James. “Career remains by far the most significant pillar of identity for both sexes in the English-speaking world.”

The prevailing attitude, which regards childcare as a *fait accompli*, has served to keep fresh ideas that might address such issues off our political and social agenda. Alternative policies might include educating men to play more of a role in child rearing, extending maternal leave, keeping jobs secure for longer, tax credits for single-income families, income-splitting, and more flexible work practices allowing women to combine work with parenting more easily.

It’s arguable that raising children is tougher than it used to be. Family support networks have unravelled in the face of our increased mobility and longer working lives; grandparents are often still in paid work when babies come along.

Alongside the loss of traditional networks has been an unprecedented rise in property prices in recent decades. Double-income couples have been able to outbid single-income families in home buying, which has helped push house prices far ahead of

growth in incomes. Property prices in New Zealand overall are now the second-highest in the English-speaking world (after Australia) relative to income. Material aspirations have spiralled upwards as well.

According to the Unicef report, among the low-paid in the OECD, a family of two adults and two children needs a minimum of one fulltime and one part-time job (at the minimum wage) – plus benefits – to stay above the poverty line.

It’s not surprising Kiwi couples are opting for smaller family sizes, or no children (the average size of the New Zealand household will be 2.4 people by 2021).

Across the income brackets, there’s increasing pressure on new mothers to keep earning. With our slow population growth and traditionally tiny increases in labour productivity, support for pressured parents is not defined as helping them to be with their young children. It has come to mean getting them back to work as soon as possible. And yet the available evidence is that parental preferences are not for childcare and an early return to the workforce.

Study after study, such as those cited in

the well-regarded *Little Britons* report published in the UK in 2005, find when parents are asked what they prefer “in the absence of financial need”, five per cent of mothers of preschoolers would choose to work fulltime; 75 per cent would prefer a part-time job and 20 per cent would prefer not to work at all.

An Australian Government report, *Growing Up in Australia* (ongoing since 2003), found only two per cent of mothers surveyed believed women with children under six should work fulltime.

Australian human rights lawyer Cathleen Sherry put it bluntly: “No one has an absolute right to a career – men or women. If you choose to have children, your major responsibility is to care for them properly, and if that affects your career, it affects your career.”

The *Little Britons* report concluded many parents weren’t, in fact, dedicated careerists: “It is clear that were they given greater choice than economic and even ideological circumstances often afford, they would opt to spend more time caring for their very young children rather than arranging for others to do so.”

Instead, economic policy trumps fam-

**Trek into an ancient ice-filled valley.
And be back in time for dinner.**

Enjoy one of the world's most spectacular destinations from just \$98 per night*

THE HERMITAGE HOTEL · MOTEL UNITS TO LUXURY ACCOMMODATION

A Kiwi icon since 1884, the Hermitage offers the complete year-round alpine holiday. The perfect base for your alpine adventure with breathtaking views of Aoraki Mount Cook and the Southern Alps and activities and tours for the whole family. The Sir Edmund Hillary Alpine Centre, Glacier Explorers (seasonal), and a number of dining options – all within a World Heritage Area. For more information contact our reservations team via email at enquiries@hermitage.co.nz

FREEPHONE: 0800 68 68 00 or visit our website: **www.hermitage.co.nz**

*Web Special - Minimum night stay applies. Rates are per room/per night, for 2 people. Subject to availability.



ily policy. Our Ministry of Education estimated it would spend \$893 million on ECE per year from 2008, triple the \$276 million spent in 2000. At the time of publication there were rumours of a blow-out even in this generous allocation, which is possibly another motivation for Paula Bennett's call for debate on alternatives to ECE.

The bulk of the current ECE budget goes towards non-parental commercial and community childcare centres for under-threes because that's where most toddlers are enrolled. (The 20 "free" hours policy, introduced in 2007 for three- and four-year-olds, was simply an increase in the existing Government subsidy. For some cheaper centres it covered the whole cost of a child's care, or significantly reduced fees charged to parents. But besides its budget-blowing potential, it's had unforeseen consequences such as forcing kindergartens to offer longer hours to qualify for the subsidy.)

Many parents paying daycare fees aren't aware of how Government subsidies are set. Using the July 2008 funding rate, the Government pays direct to ECE services (open full-day and teacher-led) \$245.80 for each child under two for a 20-hour week;

\$245.20 for each child between three and five years under the 20 Hours Free ECE scheme; and \$154.40 for children aged two but not old enough to be eligible for the 20 "free" hours. An 18-month-old in a licensed ECE centre with 100 per cent registered teachers, in care for 30 hours a week, would get \$349.20 in Ministry of Education subsidy, paid to the centre.

There's an argument that this money could be paid directly to parents of young children – to purchase childcare services, if they wished, and allow that parent to return to work, fulltime or part-time, or as a wage for childcare at home, or to be paid at the mother's discretion to relatives or a nanny.

Curiously, as Labour Governments in New Zealand and Britain were ramping up direct subsidies to childcare centres, countries such as Finland and Norway moved to policies of direct payments to mothers of young children, leaving the choice of care arrangements to parents.

But ECE is now big business in New Zealand. The number of fee-paying students for ECE tertiary courses almost doubled between 2002 and 2005: from 3860 to 6060. There are almost 2000 daycare centres, a

rise from 1673 in 2005. Any diminishment of their subsidies could drive these businesses to the wall.

An example of the difficulty of rolling back these policies was the backlash from one of the teacher unions, the New Zealand Educational Institute, in the 2005 election when the National Party put forward increasing the childcare tax rebate as an alternative to Labour's 20 Hours Free ECE scheme. The union, which represents ECE teachers, accused the National Party of supporting "backyard" care if it allowed parents to make their own childcare choices.

Miriam McCaleb believes we have to be more upfront with parents – and more supportive. She has found that most feel a sense of relief on hearing the basic message about what's best for their children: "A bunch of 'stuff' is not necessary," she says. "There's a reason children prefer the box to the gift. And you're the greatest thing in your child's universe. The early bits really, really matter. It's worth the time it takes early on."

Last year, Paula Bennett said: "We are going to talk about choice [in childcare] and we are going to mean it."

Wouldn't that be something? +

AFRICA SMALL GROUP ADVENTURES

Immerse yourself in the diversity of cultures, encounter prolific wildlife and explore the spectacular landscapes of the world's oldest inhabited continent.

Maximum of 15 like-minded travellers • Expert local leaders passionate about their homeland • Quality authentic accommodation
30 years' experience • Commitment to responsible travel

Essence of Tanzania

An 11-day private mobile camp journey into the wilderness of Tanzania from just \$6605.*

Kenya Lodge Safari

An 8-day classic safari covering three famous game parks in Kenya from just \$3755.*

Plus many other Peregrine adventures in 19 African countries and across all seven continents.

* Prices are land, park/wildlife fee and local flight (where applicable) only.

Call Adventure Travel on **0800 269 000**
for more information and competitive airfares.



